



INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Manju Kapur and Jhumpa Lahiri in Harmony

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Raipur C.G. 492010

Abstract

More or less all stories are similar in one aspect, that is, they talk about human life. All that makes them different is the 'perspective.' The culture, times, social platform, economic status, the people in the family, the parenting, the education, personal temperament, attitude and psychological and emotional involvement makes a character different. A novel deal with the characters in details and while reading, a reader does not realize when he starts living within the character. At the end, he finds that a bond is built! This happens with several stories and several characters. This happens because there are certain qualities and virtues that are loved by everyone in the world, no matter how different are the ways of life, or the backgrounds. The human heart and its emotions are universally common and speak only one language.

Though Manju Kapur belongs to Delhi, in her novels we find glimpses of Punjab and near- by cities and she has set both her novels in either Punjab or Delhi and its near-by cities like Ayodhya. Indian culture, of Calcutta can be found in Jhumpa Lahiri's work because she belongs to Bengali background and her parents belong to Calcutta therefore Bengali culture appears in both her works even though she lives in America and sets her works in America. This paper deals with the similarities in both the writers' works, a reader recognizes and finds that they share the same platform of being basically Indian. Though they deal with different themes, a reader finds many similarities between them. Both are women writers and their sensibilities are feminine. Both are feminist in their attitude.

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A novel deal with the characters in details and while reading, a reader does not realize when he starts living within the character. He loves the people he loves; he feels his pains, he is happy when he comes across something good, he agrees and disagrees as he does and so on. Writers belong to myriad backgrounds and they express their views as a human being through their works. Therefore, the differences in attitude, approach, mindsets, view-points and leaning of people can be found in their works. Though the writers deal their opinion in different ways, the human heart and its feeling are common and they talk about human life. Whether we take Manju Kapur and Jhumpa Lahiri, or any other two novelists, we can find several similarities, that lie in their style of narration and language, but also some major harmonies can be seen in the depiction of characters. The similarities between these two writers are their base that a reader can find in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *Interpreter of Maladies* and *The Namesake*.

Kapur is based in India and is living with the Indian Scenario. Her everyday encounters are absolutely based in India while Lahiri is based in America, but the Indian (Bengali) culture appears in her works because she belongs to Bengali background and her parents belong to Calcutta. Having dealt with different themes a reader can find many similarities between them.

Kapur in her *Difficult Daughters* uses Hindi words to make the readers feel comfortable with her truly Indian characters. The impact of Punjabi can also be seen in some of her Hindi words, Phenji, Kismet, Raunaq. She has also used the terms, Shaan, Beti, Pitaji, Pakora, Aaloo ki sabzi which would not have created the impact they do on the reader's mind if they would not have been transliterated, but translated to English. Relationship words bring and convey warmth Kapur uses these words freely. In the Indian scenario, the use of daddy, or daughter would have been glaringly unnatural.

In *A Married Woman* she has used Hindi words like Sari palla, Gol gappa, Chat, Dadi, to show the realistic and homely touch to the novel. Lahiri, like Kapur uses Hindi words such as annaprashan, Dida, Jhalmuri, these words along with Indianness portray the homesickness of the immigrants.

Extra marital affairs play a very significant role in the stories of Manju Kapur and Jhumpa Lahiri. The Professor's affair with Virmati is the turning point and the sole cause of Virmati's fall which creates the novel *Difficult Daughters*.

Astha in *A Married Woman* searches for her identity within a few months after her marriage. In Astha and Pipee's relationship there is the "...pleasure of an intimacy that was complete and absolute, expressed through the minds as much as bodies"(Kapur, 231)

Astha rebels against the hostile domestic environment. Relationship with Pipee rejuvenates and enriches her life and she attains great fulfillment. She crosses the boundary of her womanhood. Lesbianism promotes Astha's 'self-consciousnesses. The lesbian love between Astha and Pipee affirms the value of femaleness, women's bodies, women's sexuality and women's language. Finally, migration of Pipee abroad for further study makes Astha return to her married life.

In *The Namesake*, Moushumi's affair with Dimitri does not occupy much space, but it gives a direction to the story. After this affair, Gogol returns to his mother and a major change of heart takes place. Lahiri's story 'Sexy' is based on extra-marital affairs. Lahiri deals with two such affairs in this story. Dev develops an affair with Miranda who realizes the futility of this relationship when a seven-year-old, calls her sexy. Another affair is of Laxmi's cousin's husband. It is used by Lahiri to make Miranda feel some guilt in breaking up a marriage.

Mrs. Das in "Interpreter of Maladies" gets one of her sons from her husband's friend. She tells this secret to Mr.Kapasi searching for a remedy. But Mr.Kapasi being an interpreter of malady has no remedy for Mrs.Das. Mrs.Das is also steeped in her guilt.

Kapur uses historical events in both her novels and these events play a very important role. They bring drastic changes in the story. The episode of partition plays an important role in *Difficult Daughters*. The story is set in Amritsar and Lahore at the time of partition and the war of partition had a great impact in both these areas. There was political tension in the land. Swarnalata expresses the view of the people of the time. The tragic event of Ram Janm Bhoomi - Babri Majzid is the background of *A Married Woman*, Kapur was deeply moved by this event. She says in an interview with Ira, her friend and a news reporter to whom Kapur has dedicated her novel: "I have used the Babri Majzid episode in this novel partly because it is an episode that I feel very strongly about and partly because it gives the story a body that I felt it otherwise lacked."

These two events in the two novels play a vital role and prove to be the turning points. Astha was given an opportunity to join politics and this involvement brings total change in her life. This gives her confidence to cope up with her unsatisfactory married life.

Lahiri has also used a historical event, but she has used it only once in her story, 'When Mr. Pirzada Came To Dine'. She depicts the tragic suffering of Mr. Pirzada whose family was caught in the war of India and Pakistan, on account of East Pakistan's demand for sovereignty.

Why do people want their name to be heard in the world? The answer is simple: they want to be known; they want to be identified. It is but a form of quest for identity. From time immemorial, man yearns for self-identity in the world in which he lives.

There are striking resemblances in the themes of self-identity and the crisis of identity in the works of both Jhumpa Lahiri and Manju Kapur. Manju Kapur. They have the identity of woman as the central theme. The protagonist of *A Married Woman*, Astha comes across several relationships with different people in search of a true soulful companion. She finds herself incomplete all the time. Her soul could not flutter free like a leaf, but suffers like a crushed ball of paper. She wants to share her life with someone dear. Her quest for identity is a "whole new look at woman- not as the property of father, husband or son, and dependent on their bounty, but as valuable human material to be brought to full flower and full participation in her life and events". (Sahgal)

Before marriage she happens to form some temporary bonds with her boyfriends and after marriage, she tries to find a loving friend in her husband, but she is disappointed everywhere. Meanwhile, she tries to find some solace for the soul by expression through painting. This does not help to quench her thirst for 'self-identity'. Finally, her striving leads her to a woman whom she can identify herself with- Peepilika.

To some extent Astha's story resembles Virmati's life in *Difficult Daughters*. Virmati suffers throughout in order to find her love, the professor. In the earlier phase of her life, she struggles to be educated and wishes not to suffer like her mother and wants to become self-dependent and have a personal identity.

Just like Astha in *A Married Woman* who searches for a true home in her father's and husband's home. Ashoke and Ashima from Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Namesake*, try to make 'America' their true home, far away from home. All of them try to live, and belong to their respective worlds. The central characters of Manju Kapur are females and they first have to wrestle to get themselves registered and felt in the society and family. They need to achieve importance and establish their presence, and later create their identity. They try to be treated as equals in the all-male world.

With Gogol in *The Namesake* there is no such exercise. He simply dislikes his name and finds it to be childish and funny. As he grows up, he feels that his name lacks masculinity and wonders why did he

have such a name. He feels the American way of life to be superior to the Indian ways. He appreciates the parents of his American friends and wishes as to why his parents are not like them. He gets lost between Indianism and Americanism. He was born and brought up on U.S. soil with Indian parenting.

The contrast between his and his friends' lives bewilders him and he develops psychological imbalance to the extent that he could not keep up normal relationships with the women in his life and they all leave him, one after the other.

The two Indian woman novelists, Manju Kapur and Jhumpa Lahiri have many similarities in their writing as well as in their personal lives. Kapur and Lahiri both have used mostly female protagonists in their works such as Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* and Astha in *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur and mostly female protagonists in Lahiri's short stories are found like Shoba, Miranda, Twinkle, Boori ma, Mrs.Das, Mrs.Sen, Bibi, Mrs.Croft, and Ashima an important female protagonist in *The Namesake*. The women characters in both Lahiri and Kapur are the most memorable. In *The Namesake*, Gogol is the protagonist, but Ashima's character controls the plot significantly throughout the novel. Readers cannot ignore Ashima.

Being women, they both can feel the condition and position of woman in society and both the writers have depicted problems and difficulties that women face in society. They focus and understand the role of women in society and try for their betterment as a whole. There is no matter where a woman lives, all women are the same and their struggles are the same. They struggle as women and as human beings too. This is beautifully illustrated by both the novelists. Showalter quotes Gerda Lerner:

It is important to understand that "woman's culture" is not and should not be seen as a sub-culture... Women live their social existence within the general culture and, whenever they are confined by patriarchal restraint or segregation into separateness (which always has subordination as its purpose), they transform this restraint into complementarity (asserting the importance of women's function, even its superiority) and redefine it. Thus, women live a duality- as members of the general culture and as partakers of women's culture. (322)

In the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Manju Kapur the women characters are depicted not only as women but also as human beings- complex and confused and struggling to scrutinize and decode the

unyielding mysteries of existence. It is the existential and metaphysical anxiety that sufficiently distinguishes characters like Shoba, Mrs. Das and Virmati.

Thus, in the works of Jhumpa Lahiri and Manju Kapur a subtle but sufficiently explicit manifestation of the human dilemma of choice, struggle and survival provides to these writers an elevated pedestal from where they communicate the reality that transcends the parochial walls of gender.

We cannot shy away from the fact that Lahiri and Kapur want to portray the feelings of women, clearly and boldly, so the number of women characters is more than the male. The characters exert their independence, and want a hearing. One cannot blame them for it, nor can they then be contemptibly labeled feminists. This term is elusive. A quote from Wilfred L Guerin edited *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* underlines this sentiment:

“I have never been able to find out precisely what feminism is,’ British author and critic Rebecca West remarks, “I only know that other people call me a feminist whenever I express sentiments that differentiate me from a doormat or prostitute.” (222)

The personal life of Jhumpa Lahiri is the very prototype of diasporic culture. She has spent more than thirty years in the United States, but she still feels ‘a bit of an outsider’: She has confessed in an interview with Vibhuti Patel “I didn’t grow up there, I wasn’t a part of everything. We visited often but we didn’t have a home. We were clutching at a world that was never fully with us”.

Her days in India are ‘a sort of parenthesis’ in her life, but she is at heart an Indian. The feminist perspective is prominent in both Lahiri and Kapur. They both use feminist narratology and prove the claim of gynocritics true, as they use language in a feminine manner to convey the complex sensibilities that are peculiar to women. Showalter quotes Helene Cixous from “The Laugh of the Medusa”:

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an impossibility that will remain, for this practice will never be theorized, enclosed, encoded- which doesn’t mean that it doesn’t exist. (311)

Women writers are many a time very difficult to capture in theory. So, though we can feel the feminine practices of writing in both Lahiri and Kapur, it is maddening to capture the subtleties. This can be declared as the hallmark of women’s writing.

Sherry Ruth Anderson and Patricia Hopkins have written a wonderful book, *The Feminine Face of God*, which makes us understand the sexuality, family, community, and intimacy, love that makes women, and ultimately leads them to understand the supreme power. They show the path into the Sacred Garden:

An image comes to mind: the gates of thousands upon thousands of sacred gardens are flung open from within, accompanied by laughter that cannot be contained. And with the laughter comes speech, because in our exuberance we are no longer able to silence ourselves. (224)

Speaking of Lahiri and Kapur, this laughter and speech that come out of sheer joy at a discovery of the self, gains weight. Both have painted their characters ultimately finding a voice of peace, discovering them and coming to terms with themselves, as themselves. The above concept of the sacred garden and joy holds true of Lahiri and Kapur too. They enjoy the joy of creation. Patricia Waugh tries to come to a solution:

With her highly influential book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), the gender theorist Judith Butler took de Beauvoir's idea of self and other, along with the statement "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman", and developed an argument about the fluidity of gender. Butler argued that masculine and feminine, as two opposing and mutually defining positions, were artificial constructs supported by imposed heterosexuality. By subverting gender norms, and by refusing the characteristics socially assigned to a particular biological sex, binary gender categories could be deconstructed. (338)

Lahiri and Kapur's works can rise above the gender issue as they are basically into an analysis of human beings placed in certain situations. The human condition is their chief concern.

Both the novelists try to delve deep into the psychology of the characters. The final closing scenes of works by both the authors are deeply satisfying and uncontroversial. There is an aura of peace at the end, as all the conflicts have been resolved. Lahiri and Kapur are in complete harmony, as women and above all as human beings. They seem to have come to a superior position where smaller issues fail to disturb them.

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