

# STRUGGLE FOR SPACE: WOMEN IN MANJU KAPUR'S FICTION

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## ABSTRACT

India is a multicultural postcolonial nation. In a nation like India, culture manifests itself within the multiple contexts of caste, religion and class. Postcolonial literature has its impact on every aspect of literature, theme, characterization, language and so on. It can be identified by its discussion of cultural identity. The mutual interaction of gender identity and national identity is the central idea of postcolonial women's writings. Women desire to create some space in alien places and carve out an identity for themselves. In postcolonial literature space and place occupy a vital role in the society for women.

The present paper intends to explore the feminine psyche of Manju Kapur's four women protagonists from her novels - *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home* and *The Immigrant*. It reveals the sentiments of women and their self-introspections. The self - identity and feminist views emerge from different aspects of women characters. Their lives become more dark and clouded for them. They trample and defy the patriarchal constraints and expectations to assert their identity and achieve self- satisfaction and self - fulfillment in their lives.

India is a multicultural postcolonial nation. In a nation like India, culture manifests itself within the multiple contexts of caste, religion and class. Postcolonial literature has its impact on every aspect of literature, theme, characterization, language and so on. It can be identified by its discussion of cultural identity. The mutual interaction of gender identity and national identity is the central idea of postcolonial women's writings. It's feminist criticism is extensive and valuable. Many women writers

express their feministic inclinations in their works. No culture or state can ever go forward without a dynamic involvement of women in terms of development.

Space and place occupy a vital role in postcolonial literature. Women desire to create spaces in alien places and carve out an identity for themselves. In India women must necessarily be honest, innocent, obedient, homely and very much devoted to her relatives as she is well thought-out to be an embodiment of sacrifices, silent suffering, devotion and acquaintance.

The Indian English novel has secured a place of prestige mainly as a result of the memorable contribution of the leading writers both men and women. In the first decades of 20<sup>th</sup> century, the male writers of Indian English Fiction focussed only on the men's world where the presence of women was only incidental. Women appear in the literature of this time only as a necessary tool to be used by men. Writers like R.K.Narayana, Raja Rao and Mulk Raj Anand have presented women characters in their writings, but the portrayal is not authentic. The above writers chose women as protagonists for their novels, but their portrayal of them was too romanticized to compare with the real women. The suffering and sacrificing wives or the weeping widows were the only images found in their fiction. The above writers showed women in some of their novels as rebels revolting against the patriarchal domination. While *Nayantara Saghal* depicts deified women, her *Contemporary Anita Desai* comes out with women who are completely different from those of Saghal but both speak of the women of the same place and the same period. The portrayal of women in Indian English Fiction as the silent sufferer and upholder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone a tremendous change in course of time and is no longer presented as a passive character. Kamala Markandaya and Shashi Deshpande and many other women novelists have presented woman as an individual rebelling against the traditional role breaking the silence of suffering, trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self. Manju Kapur has carried the fight of women from colonial era to new battlefields with the possible consequences of unfettering the chains of tradition. More than half of the population of the world is made of woman, but she is not treated on par with man despite innumerable evolutions and revolutions. In such conditions, the question of searching her identity is justified. She lives for others and breathes for others.

The present paper intends to explore the feminine psyche of Manju Kapur's four women protagonists from her novels - *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home* and *The Immigrant*. In all her novels male characters dominate but they do not come in the definition of a hero. They affect the psycho of women to such an extent that all the major women characters whether they are Virmati, Astha, Nina and Nisha, all are on the verge of secluding themselves from the company of men. These four major women characters search a place for themselves in the male - dominated society. Morality, society, values are like bondage to them. So all lead forward in an ambiguous manner in the midst of relentless and urbanization and the far reaching western influences.

*Difficult Daughters* is a strange story of mother - daughter bonds. Kasturi does not appropriate the freedom that her daughter Virmati demands. She is the eldest daughter of Kasturi and has to look after eleven siblings. She has to take care of her mother Kasturi and a new born baby at the age of seventeen. These works prevent Virmati's childhood happiness, etc. She suffers for her own identity in her home. Virmati's longing for education helps her to learn well in this limitless burden. Virmati's character is a complex one because she loves and decides to marry a man with a wife and children which is a clear defiance of the conventions of the society. Her life becomes a series of perpetual struggle against all odds as she happens to be a second wife of a professor.

Virmati crosses the patriarchal threshold. She asserts her individuality and aspires self reliance through education. She knows she cannot depend upon the professor to sort out the domestic situation and proceeds to tackle it on her own. Gur Pyari Jandial correctly points out, it would be a mistake to devalue Virmati's struggle because she failed, for what mattered was to have made the attempt: "What is necessary is to break the patriarchal mould, and for Virmati to have tried to do that in the forties was a great achievement"(11). After sometime Virmati gets pregnant and is blessed with a child. Virmati's different identities as a sister, as a daughter, as a co-wife, all are failures. She is alienated from her roots and this is the cause of her identity crisis. In her conflict with traditional values, Virmati lost much more than she gained. Virmati's life shows that mere education and economic independence are not enough to break the patriarchal norms. What is necessary is the determination and strong will power to assert one's self-identity.

Ida, an educated woman, divorced and childless, apparently leads a freer life than her mother's in external terms. But her inner thoughts are of same as her mother's. Ida says, "No matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately"(3). Ida explains about her mother's wish to defy the rituals of the society. This can also be taken as a feminine assertion of individual identity that refuses to submit to the dictates of the male- dominant society. Not only Virmati, but her daughter Ida also protests against the male chauvinism.

Astha, a married woman of a middle class family does not face so many challenges as Virmati has faced, her life becomes a black cave when she desires to write poetry, make sketches and participate in Ayodhya movement. At her young age Astha falls in love with Bunty and Rohan, and with Aijaz after marriage. After much resistance from her husband and in-laws she starts teaching in St. Antony's school and she plays twin roles as a home maker and a working woman. As the time changes women became economically independent but the tendency of subordination in a male- dominated society continued without apparent changes. Astha gets a chance to meet Aijaz in the school where she works. Aijaz comes to the same school for a vacation training for children. He encourages Astha's desire to write poetry etc. which Hemant, husband of Astha never likes. Gradually Astha's desire of fulfillment recedes. She feels cold, dreary and distanced from her husband. He is a destroyer of her anticipation who ruins her happiness. In fact, Hemant finds no place in her life. His condition is worse than that of rubber stamp because whether Hemant permits or not, if she decides to go, she goes irrespective of her husband, children or mother-in-law's bothering about her.

Actually, Astha reaches the turning point of her life when she meets Aijaz. During a communal riot her friend Aijaz Khan dies. After his death, she meets his widow wife Pipeelika who becomes again the source of delight to her. In the company of Pipeelika she also realizes the national issues and participates in Ram Mandir and Babri Masjid issue. The conflict between her roles of wife, mother, and that of a lover continues and she finds herself torn between her desire for freedom and duty towards her family. Astha's protest against her husband's sexual demands and control over her body is the result of frustration and disgust that she has been experiencing due to fixed identity and role as a wife. Manju Kapur is the first Indian Feminist to introduce lesbian love as an important question to be discussed by the

advocacy of women rights. Kapur's assertion of sexuality in the form of lesbian relationship may created much hue and cry. She told in an interview to Ira Pandey :

This relationship suggested itself to me as an interesting means of making Astha mature and change. An affair with a man would have been the classic clinche and so I ruled it out and tried out a same sex affair, I don't know how successful. I have been nor is this based on any real life relationship. It is as I said a responsibilities. She wishes writers experiment with a lot.(9)

Astha needs Pipeelika's relationship as a support to her new -found independence. Pipeelika needs to find her self. Lesbian attempts drag Pipeelika to forgetfulness and for Astha it is a sweet revenge on her husband and she becomes a new woman. Pipeelika goes to U.S.A. in connection with her Ph.D. Astha returns to her family to lead the life of slavery in a patriarchal set up. she compromises to the fact that a woman's real position lies within the family unit which she must sustain and protect and not ignore or neglect due to the false notion of being liberated.

The wave of cry for identity also keeps on flowing in *Home* where Nisha, the single protagonist revolts against the traditional family. But she never crosses the boundaries of morality and values. The large portion of her life has passed under the shadow of her aunt Rupa where she enjoys her freedom and identity. Nisha has to fight against the notions of her mother who considers her a mere helper in the kitchen. In the words Shilpi Rishi Shrivastava:

Lal Banwari Lal dies and Yashpal takes back Nisha to please his mother. Now there is less interest in school and Sona experts her in kitchen all time. Nisha is horrified to discover that her mother's idea of a daughter was one who helped her everytime anybody ate. Sona who is always concerned with making her daughter homely and good wife says, "That Masi of yours has ruined your head. What does a girl need with studying? Cooking will be useful to her entire life.(188)

There is no escape for a girl from her mother's shadow. Nisha fights for her higher education and achieves it. The opportunity to go to college to do her English honours and taste of freedom opens out a

new world to her. She is caught between her emancipation which education assures and tradition represented by family around her. She ventures into the unknown territory, meeting a boy Suresh, belonging to wrong caste and going out with him. Finally, Suresh declares that he cannot marry her and leaves under the pressure of Banwari Lal family. Nisha has also sacrificed her genuine pure love to keep up her family prestige and affection towards her family members. She asserts her independence and boldness by chopping off her locks of hair in modern style. Nisha starts a bridal suits shop called "Nisha's Creations" and shows her managing capacity in her business. Through this she achieves great confidence to lead a life of freedom. She is much conscious about her business and future identity. So she does not give up business. Being a business woman Nisha takes every problem as hers. Though Nisha takes the help of Pooja and mother to administer her shop, she does not allow them to interfere in her decision. According to the pioneer feminist Simone de Beauvoir, the two prerequisites for women's freedom are : "economic independence and liberation from orthodox traditions of society"(5).

Meanwhile, she gets marriage proposal from a widower namely Arvind. Her request for self – identity, struggle for economic independent, existence and her equality with men depend upon Indian social ethics. She wants to retain her space, freedom and confidence. Arvind accepts her proposal and wants a register marriage. She gets married. In the time of pregnancy Nisha hands over her establishment to Pooja. Nisha gives birth to twins.

Nisha bears the four fold responsibilities of being wife, daughter-in-law, mother and business woman. Nisha, as an individual could create a separate room for herself in home and society. She as an educated and spirited new woman could refuse to be treated as an object and follow the trend to establish her own space in society.

Nina, thirty years of age, who is an English Lecturer, struggles to make herself settled in a cramped Delhi apartment but like Virmati, Astha and Nisha, Nina's delayed marriage creates a stressful living for her mother. Suddenly a marriage proposal from Ananda, a dentist in Canada comes to her. She does not wish to leave her long attained career. But under the compulsion of her mother and relatives, she has to marry Ananda. She sacrifices her job of a lecturer which in reality is her loss of identity.

In Canada, she does not prefer to sit idly at home. Her habit of reading gives her some relief from isolation and boredom. A feeling of estrangement and distance fills her mind making her aware of the

wide gap between her lives at home and abroad. Though she tries to change with regard to food, clothing etc, her life becomes a question as she discovers Ananda's sexual inadequacy and he suffers due to premature ejaculation. She also comes to know about the sexual and emotional truth about her husband, his sexual therapy and his affair with the surrogate. She feels the ugliness of her new life beginning to unravel. Nina feels lonely, isolated, jobless, sexually frustrated and her childless life is filled with great sadness. After finding that her husband is sexually incompetent, she again searches for her identity as wife and mother. Finally both partners, each unknown to the other, find themselves sucked into extramarital liaisons. Nina gets a white male partner Anton, a co-student of Library Science and Ananda gets a white lady of Mandy. Both betray and deceive each other. Both psychological, and ideological factors remain on the fringe while sexual factor remain at the centre.

Again Nina seems badly hurt when she returns to Canada after performing the last rites of her mother in India, she finds a wavy blond hair next to her pillow in the morning. This incident distances her from Ananda with silence and frustration. Sushila Singh in her review says, "Their marriage ends for Nina in going away from her husband. She needed to be herself. With her mother dead. She had nothing tying her down anywhere. Nina lives her life in parts willing to belong but everything she experiences is temporary(337)". She gathers her determination to re-establish herself independently throwing away the yoke of marriage. At the moment of crises, she overpowers the disturbances of mind. Nina repositions her perspective on her immigrant status. Her tragedy which has resulted in displacement and alienation becomes her strength.

Nina decides to be separated from her husband and chooses her independent life and career. She goes to appear in an interview at the University of New Brunswick with the hope she would get a job. Nina once again tries to find a foothold now in an alien country. Instead, she is left alone searching for her identity in an alien country and thinks that some Indians become immigrants slowly. She tries to break the silence of suffering and assert her individual self. Christopher Rollason aptly asserts that there is hardly any doubt in the fact that Kapur's woman from Virmati to Nina strive hard to check out their space through their independent course of action. Nina, the protagonist of ManjuKapur's Novel *The Immigrant* is an extension of Nina in so far as she refuses to submit herself to the patriarchal notions of her husband Ananda, and maintains her own individuality and struggles to carve out of her own identity.

To conclude, the novels of ManjuKapur reveal the sentiments of women and their self-introspections. Virmati, Astha, Nisha and Nina all search for their grounds interestingly from a wrong threshold. The self - identity and feminist views emerge from different aspects of women characters. Their lives become more dark and clouded for them. Their quest for identity has been the dominant preoccupation in their mind and they try to articulate their cry for existential equality. They trample and defy the patriarchal constraints and expectations to assert their identity and achieve self- satisfaction and self- fulfillment in their lives.

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