



Quest for Identity in the Fiction of Manju Kapur-A Critical Study

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Abstract

The writings of Indian female writers and their portrayal of women characters in their work depends or is tied up with a number of factors i.e. the situation of the female, within the historical and regional background. The traditions are so deeply rooted that women in spite of their success in attaining professional and financial independence find that paths are still beset with peculiar difficulties of one kind or another. In fact traditions and patriarchy have reconciled to woman's subordinate position. Simone de Beauvoir hence rightly points out that one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman. It is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine. Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and many others women writers as an individual are rebelling against the traditional role. breaking the silence of suffering trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self. This woman is trying to be herself and yet does not wish to break up the family ties. The present paper will focus on the works of Manju Kapur. In her novels, she presents women who try to establish their own identity. Manju Kapur novels are a feminist discourse not because she is a woman writing about women but because, as Jaidev puts it she has understood a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible contexts.

Keywords:- Identity Crisis, Gender Discrimination, Feminism, Protest, Empowerment

This study is based on three widely read novels of Manju Kapur entitled *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman* and *Home*. While Manju Kapur's first novel is a family saga against the historical backdrop of partition. Her second novel *A Married Woman* (2002) is a work investigative reporting on the most controversial and political issue of the demolition of Babri Masjid and a woman's obsession with love and lesbianism. The novel is a kind of narrative on a woman's incompatible marriage and resultant frustration and the contemporary political turmoil in its historical context. Her third novel *Home* explores the complex terrain of the Indian family and reveals many issues that are deep rooted within the family the revolt against the age-old traditions, quest for identity, the problems of marriage; and lastly the women's struggle for her survival.

Manju Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individual caged within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunged into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds. The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as a woman caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a feminist discourse not because she is a woman writing about women but because, as Jaidev puts it she has understood a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible contexts. *Difficult Daughters* is a skillful, enticing first novel by an Indian writer who prefers reality to magic realism. Manju Kapur's presents a complex choreography of cooking, washing, weaving and mending, growing, picking, chopping and blending. Manju Kapur presents the yearning for autonomy and separate identity in her women protagonists in this post-modern novel in a traditional thread. It is impossible for Virmati to accept a physical relationship. She is haunted by a deep sense of guilt.

The formal marriage, a social and public statement, is a must for her. It is this, which will establish her identity even if it is as the professor's second wife. Marriage thus for her means deliverance from the fear of being socially condemned, a possibility which will perhaps bring her back into the fold and relieve her from the sense of insecurity and uncertainty. The earlier generation of her mother saw no reason to rebel. There was complete acceptance in life. Kasturi is an example of the typical feminine attitude to procreate in order to bring about life and pleasure. To run her home, first a joint family and later her own, is happiness for her. Like Kasturi, for Ganga the Professor's wife, marriage is a religious and a social institution, where love is not the basis of marriage. She too has a superb domestic sensibility. Her cooking is enjoyed by her educated husband anglicized to a point, and who is otherwise very aloof. Just living with him, and bearing his children is enough for her. However, in Virmati, there is a struggle between the head and the heart, the physical and moral. Virmati gives way to her heart and body.

Virmati's daughter Ida, who belongs to the post independence generation, is strong and clearheaded. She breaks up her marriage as she is denied maternity by her husband. The forced abortion is also the termination of her marriage. Ida by severing the marriage bond frees herself from male domination and power and also from conventional social structures which bind woman. She has that strength which Virmati lacks. Swarna Lata, Virmati's friend, is also a clearheaded, strong woman. She too experiences tension with her parents over the issue of marriage but unlike Virmati she channelizes her energy into a new direction which gives her a sense of group identity. It also breeds ideas of radicalism and militancy but what is admirable is the fact that she can build these ideas of independence into her marriage without destroying the structure of the family. Her marriage rests on the condition that it would not hamper her work.

The fight for autonomy and separate identity remains an unfinished combat and a million dollar question.

Throughout this novel Ida's declaration echoes that she doesn't want to be like her mother and wants to assert her autonomy and separate identity. Ida wants liberty and doesn't want to compromise as did her mother. This idea of the novel can be summed up in the utterance of angry Ida "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word-brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it. Mama and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore." Perhaps it is this inability of Virmati to strike independent roots and grow that makes Ida remark like this. The search is that of Virmati's daughter, Ida, as she seeks to reconstitute her mother's history. Ida, an educated woman, divorced and childless, apparently leads a freer life than her mother's in external

terms; yet inside her she feels, even if not quite so acutely, some of the same anxieties as had plagued her mother: 'No matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately. Trampling patriarchal norms, Virmati defies societal expectation to assert her individuality and hopes to achieve self fulfillment. But what does she really get? She is a loser whose acts totally alienate her from her own family and she fails to create a space for herself for which she had been striving all along.

Manju Kapur presented women's emancipation and striving for some space in such a manner that we read not just with our eyes but also with our heart. In her novel *A Married Woman* Manju Kapur has taken writing as a protest, a way of mapping from the point of a woman's experience. *A Married Woman* deals with women's issues in the present context. It is an honest and seductive story of love, passion and attachment set at the time of political and religious turmoil in India. The novel raises the controversial issue of homosexual relationship in a challenging way. After all gay and lesbian relationships are not mere fancies.

This is getting more and more visible in modern societies though we may or may not accept it.

As a married woman Astha, the protagonist, becomes an enduring wife and sacrificing mother.

Her temperamental incompatibility with her corporate thinking husband compels her to play the role of "mother and father" for her children. This denies her self- fulfillment and leads to the collapse of the institution of marriage. Discontentment leads her to defiance and restlessness. Her anxiety, discomfort, loneliness and isolation do not encourage her to give voice to her unhappiness over her troubled relationship, rather it prompts her to develop the feelings of guilt, negativity and lack of self-esteem in facing the challenges of her life. Restlessness drives her to enjoy absolute loneliness, a sort of entrapment by the family, its commitments, its subtle oppression and she yearns for freedom. In the midst of a family and its vast minefield of income, expenditure, rights, responsibilities, knowledge, discontent, restlessness and dependency, Astha enjoys the fate of the poorest. She is suffocated with the growing needs of her family and "always adjusting to everybody's needs". (227) Astha understands a married woman's place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death in her Indian status. She contemplates marriage a terrible decision as it puts her in a lot to enjoy bouts of rage, pain and indecision. Judging the male impression of woman she thinks that a married woman is an object of "mind fucking". (218) Being torn between her duty and responsibility, faith and fact, public ethos and personal ethics she thinks "a tired woman cannot make good wives", (154) and struggles for an emotional freedom from the scourge of the nation. In *A Married Woman* (2002), Manju Kapur frankly depicts the love affair between two women, but less attention has been paid to the historical and political context in which that relationship develops. The tale that thus unfolds powerfully explores how, in a still-traditionalist India entering the age of globalization. The novel exposes the domestic relationship. Kapur has remained very truthful in presenting the women and the challenges they face in their personal, professional, religious and socio-political levels. Manju Kapur present in her novel the changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self sacrificing women towards self assured assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands and in this way providing a medium for self expression. Home quite fascinatingly, if not very eloquently, shows the choking closeness and destructive limitations of Indian family values. It is a closet dark world where any hint of individual expression is swiftly trampled to death, to be substituted with deadened conformity. This novel is about the family of Banwari Lal. The shop owner Banwari Lal, his sons Yashpal and Pyarelal and their wives and children and it explores the world of joint families. This world of joint families is not the large happy make believe families of films. It is a world trying to grapple with complexities of adjusting their aspirations and individualities with those of the other inside closed walls of the house, facing challenges of generational changes, trying to accommodate growing children in narrow personal spaces and even

narrower working spaces. This world of joint families does have altruistic, elders, a mutual support system and intimacy that makes joint family living such a pleasure and pain, but the novel does not dwell much on these aspects, it rather focuses on tensions and rivalries, almost a Darwinian struggle of finding your own space for catching the sunlight and growing up, escaping the shadows of the others, who came before you or who have more rights than you. The story that had started with the tale of Sona and Rupa finally finds its calling in Nisha-Sona's daughter who spends her childhood, scarred by incestuous abuse, at auntie Rupa's home. But it is her later pursuit in life-studying English literature in a university, falling in love with a low-caste-boy, forcefully standing up to her conservative family, despairing at being jilted by the lover, her courage in struggling with the meanness of life, her attempts at finding her place in an uninformed society that refuses to recognize the promise of her merits, her petty jealousies, unarticulated complaints and simmering frustrations that inevitably accompanies a life riddled with disappointments- that become central to the concern of the readers. In all the three novels, cited above, various female characters of Manju Kapur, Virmati, Astha and Nisha move into this forbidden territory. It is ironical that Virmati has to face rejection first at the hand of her mother and later from her own daughter. Astha is disillusioned with her rich family setup and find solace in the company of another woman while Nisha has to wait for a very long time in spite of all her physical and mental attainments due to astrological reasons. Manju Kapur, being a novelist primarily concerned with the problems of the newly emerging urban middle class -The female protagonists of her novels protest against male domination and the marginalization of woman. However, Mrs. Kapur seems aware of the fact that the women of India have indeed achieved their success in sixty years of independence, but if there is to be a true female independence, too much remains to be done. We see the emergence of new women in Manju Kapur's heroines, who do not want to be rubber dolls for others to move as they will. Defying patriarchal notions that enforce women towards domesticity, they assert their individuality and aspire self reliance through education. They nurture the desire of being independent and leading lives of their own. They want to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond a husband and children. They are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action oriented. All protagonists know they cannot depend on others to sort out the domestic situation and proceed to tackle it on their own. In spite of getting education and freedom the women protagonists of Manju Kapur's novels does not blossom into new woman in the real sense. Though they dare to cross one patriarchal threshold, they are caught into another, where their free spirits are curbed and all they do is adjust, compromise and adapt."

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