



Submissive And Rebellious Women: A Study of Manju Kapur's Novels "Difficult Daughters" And "Home"

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ABSTRACT: In the first decade of the twenty-first century, there are many transformations noticed, especially in the field of the questions related to the consolidation of woman's position in the fast-growing and fast-changing society. The society was patronized by patriarchy. The women were silent and remained only as rubber dolls for others to move as they wanted. They had been deprived of their basic rights, their aspirations to their individuality and self-reliance. The present paper studies both the submissive and rebellious women covering Manju Kapur's two novels 'Difficult Daughters' and 'Home'. It explains Kapur's indubitable ability to explore the psyche of the present day urban, educated middle-class woman who is trapped in the midway between tradition and modernity. It is an attempt to study Kapur's women characters, as portrayed by her in her novels, with a view to understand and appreciate their trials and tribulations under the impact of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity. In Indian English fiction there emerged a group of Indian women novelists who raised many issues in their novels. Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Gita Hariharan, Nayantara Sehgal, Manju Kapur etc. are some of Indian women novelists who have handled the intimate life of women in a new light with extra-ordinary boldness and frankness. All these writers have narrated their views and experience about women and their lives in the post modern India. Indian culture is one where the woman's role at home and her marital bliss remains centrally in focus and individualism and protest are looked down as alien ideas. The protagonists in the novels of Manju Kapur express their resistance in many ways and thus they try to challenge the existing codes.

Keywords: Male dominance, Marriage, Search of identity, Tradition

I. INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur addresses many issues in her novels which are related to the middle class women. She tries to put women equal to men in each and every regard. She thinks that girls should have equal rights in making their free choices in their lives. Her novels primarily deal with the education of women which might bring real independence in their life. A major Preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the women's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement.

In this context, Indian women novelists are gaining grounds worldwide and winning critical appraisal and international recognition. Now their work is no more considered as something derogatory, melodramatic or sub-stuff. The glaring cause of their success as novelist lies in the fact that they are born story-teller and they are endowed with the gift of delving deep into the workings of human mind and heart with sympathy, sensitivity and understanding. Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Jhumpa Lahiri and many other woman writers as individuals are rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the silence of suffering, trying to move out from the imprisonment and existence asserting the individual self. Since many social reformers help the women to cross the threshold of family life and move out in the outer freedom of struggle and social reform, the women is present with a varied opportunities not only today but also yesterday during freedom struggle.

In her novels Manju Kapur presents women who try to establish their own identity. The displacement that they suffer and the suffocation that they face in the traditional limits of marriage and family is clearly brought out by the novelist. In this regard Manju Kapur asserts; "I am interested in the lives of women whether

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in the political arena or in the domestic spaces. One of the main pre-occupations in all my books is how women manage to negotiate both the inner and the outer spaces in their lives. What sacrifices do they have to make in order to keep the home fires burning and at what cost to their personal lives do they find some kind of fulfilment outside the home.¹

The novel depicts two types of Indian women: The first are traditional types of women who are firmly adhered to the age old values and feels that life is incomplete without marriage. Such women feel that the institution of marriage can guarantee safety, security and fulfilment despite its negligible hardships and constraints. Ganga and Kasturi represent this class. To be a house wife is sometimes a curse in India. Women that do not go out to work are always devalued. Sacred to get out of Family relationships they are literally trapped in their own family. Passivity is so deeply ingrained in them that all their decisions are made for them by other people. The professor's wife, Ganga is one such example. She prays to God everyday that her house should be free from evil; outside influences till her children were grown up and settled. Then she would resign herself to what was in store for her. When her husband remarries, it is as if her life is over but rebellion or opposition is not an option that is open to her. She accepts it as her fate.²

Virmati's mother Kasturi is a traditional woman who has spent all her life in obeying others. She spends the entire life either cooking in the kitchen or performing religious rites. She feels that there is no future for her other than being a wife and a mother. She is silent sufferer in the joint family of Lala Diwan Chand. Most of the time she has to do things against her will. Her life is trapped in the patriarchal world around her. Motherhood is one such trap. She has to give birth to eleven children. Every time she conceived, life became burden and body so difficult to carry. Kasturi thinks that nature has trapped women. Her sister-in-law teases her by calling her pregnancy as the 'harvest time'. She believes that her daughter would also live like that. So Virmati is trained in housekeeping at the early age of ten. She being the eldest in the family of eleven children is asked to play a second mother to her siblings. In her family education is important only from the matrimonial point of view. Ruby Milhoutra observes, "Kasturi's repeated pregnancies made her sickly, resulting in her total dependence on Virmati to manage her household. As a natural consequence her unique position in the home is lost which she has to yield to her daughter quite unwillingly. Virmati thus becomes a 'substitute' and not the double that every mother wants her daughter to be. As a consequence the relationship assumes hostile dimension".³

The other type is that of women who are modern in their perspective. Virmati, Shakuntala and Swarnalata are the exemplary of this ideology in the novel. They challenge the idea of traditional womanhood. Virmati, like many other Indian girls, is expected to accept arranged marriage. However, she rejects it and decides to continue her studies. Joya Chakravarty observes that "the dismal state of Virmati's mind cannot be fathomed by her people"⁴ Virmati refuses to marry Inderjit. This bold step by Virmati upsets everybody in her family. They feel that she has disgraced the family and ruined her sister's chances of marriage. After the denial of the marriage proposal, her condition gets critical. The novelist profoundly delivers the issue of woman inadequacy. She defines that the position of degraded due to dependability. She has no right to take her own decision. The male supremacy creates hurdle in their lives. Maria Elena Martos Hues points out that "Virmati's quest for freedom from the patriarchal moulds of tradition casts upon her eventually proves an erratic one, for she gets caught in the net of allocated female role that she was trying to evade"⁵

In the novel, there is a constant struggle between traditional approach of Kasturi and modern views of Virmati. While Virmati appreciates Shakuntala for her independence that she achieved with her education Kasturi bitterly criticizes her. Shakuntala becomes a model for Virmati to follow. Virmati learns from Shakuntala that it is of no use to search for answers to her problem inside the home. And she must learn to look outside. She concentrates on education and freedom at Lahore College as her destination. As the images of Shakuntala keep floating through her she thinks that it is possible to be something other than a wife. Virmati had to fight against the power of the mother as well as the oppressive forces of patriarchy symbolized by the mother figure. The rebel in Virmati might have actually exchanged one kind of slavery for the other. But towards the end she became free, free even from the oppressive love of her husband. Instead of waiting for true love, Virmati took the responsibility of leading her own life and became economically independent. Virmati realizes that life was really not worth all the struggle. Things are not always as they appear or seem. Throughout Virmati fights to get what she wants? She lives life on her own terms and conditions; but in the process she loses a significant part of herself and realizes the insignificance of things.

The women in the novels of Manju Kapur seem to be the personification of new women who have been carrying the burden of inhibition since ages and want to be free now. The writer clearly shows the dilemma of women who carry the burden of being female as well as the added responsibility of being mothers to members of their own sex. In the traditional social milieu of the novel where mothers and daughters exist, marriage is regarded as the ultimate goal and destiny from which these women cannot escape.

Virmati's cousin Shakuntala is a modern type of girl. She is disregarded in family for her bold behaviour. Marriage is the hackneyed territory for her. Her mother complains of her manly behaviour.

Shakuntala thinks beyond being a house wife. Her life style is glamorous. Shakuntala is advanced and educated. She is aware about her duties. Virmati and Shakuntala always involve in discussion on the issue of education and freedom. Shakuntala's visit planted seeds of aspiration in Virmati. It was possible to be something other than a wife. Images of Shakuntala Pehnji kept floating through her head, Shakuntala Pehnji who having done her M.Sc. in Chemistry, had gone about tasting the wine of freedom. (Difficult Daughters, p.10)

Shakuntala comments on it – 'These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else.' (Difficult Daughters, p.17)

In Lahore, Virmati is exposed to Swarnalata, an active activist for women's liberation and freedom struggle movement. She is a modern woman with her own views and opinions. She wants to do something more than just marrying. Swarnalata is the only female who gets out of life what she wants, without compromising too much. Swarnalata has political concerns and she becomes a powerful figure in the nationalist movement. She participates in the political activities like organising women's meeting. She advises Virmati logically, "Marriage is not the only thing in life: there are other important things for women to do". "The war – the satyagrah movement-because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, and going to jail. Wake up from your stale dreams." (Difficult Daughters, p.151)

Woman in contemporary society have become aware of the fact that the inferior position accorded to them is not pre-ordained. Women are trying to emancipate themselves from subordination. In this rapidly progressing world they are redefining their proper place. They have revolted against their exploitation, victimization and marginalization. They are questioning the sexual politics in which they are always victimized. They are busy reshaping themselves in a more humanistic mould, emphasizing thereby the need for a thorough re-examination in depth of marriage and man-woman relationship for a better understanding and sharing of mutual love and respect.

Manju Kapur's *Home* (2006) explores the complex topography of the Indian family and exposes many questions that are embedded within the family- the revolt against the ancient traditions, quest for identity, the problems of marriage; and last but not the least, a women's struggle for her survival. The novel projects deep understanding of human nature and shows Kapur's maturity as a novelist. Anupama Chowdhury observes, "Home reveals a disturbing home truth that joint families can both destroy and preserve our maturity, individuality and mental progress"⁷

In India, besides several restraints of gender, tradition and orthodoxy of religion, women are still the victims of crimes like physical and mental torture, sexual harassment, rape and dowry killing etc. Clara Nubile in the *Danger of Gender* observes, "In modern India the situation is still far from an ideal, liberated, democratic model. Indian women keep on struggling against the burden of tradition, against the legacy of the past and the orthodoxy of patriarchal system."⁸

The protagonist of the novel, Nisha lives the life in the shackles of responsibilities. The novelist not only describes the plight of woman in the joint family, but their sacrifices for the family. Thus, it is a novel about the quest of identity of three women, especially Nisha, who struggles against the conventional tradition of family. Her family is conventional and traditional. It never adopts the new idea and gives up the old one. Two sisters Rupa and Sona, have different opinions on the topics of education and career. Sona is a traditional woman who believes in the duty to the family. She is committed to her family. And this commitment is everything for her. Nisha's mother Sona considers marriage as the ultimate destination for her daughter. And she also wants her daughter to follow her. She believes in the false ideas like that people are suspicious of brides that are very educated. Rupa think that girls should be educated so that they can be individuals. Rupa tells that her husband says that a good degree gives you something to fall back on your own feet. Rupa succeeds in convincing her to send Nisha to Durga Bai College. It was a girl's college and a nice place for a girl waiting to get married. Thus, Nisha is sent to the college not to get any new idea or pursue her studies but to pass her time till she gets married. Nisha is exposed to the outside world as she enters the college. In college she compares herself with her other classmates. She also wants to be like them. On her way to college, Nisha falls in love with a boy named Suresh. He is a student of nearby Khalsa College of Engineering. After many meetings Nisha boldly wanders here and there; roaming on the university lawns with Suresh. With the apparent progress in the affair Nisha becomes self assertive and this boldness in Nisha is reflected in her changed costumes. She tries to project herself as a modern or forward girl. She knows that her conventional family setup will not accept her modernity but still she decides to cut her hair. Kapur catches this sense of adaptability. Along with Suresh, Nisha went to the beauty parlour, cut her hair in open style. She looked extremely charming and beautiful. Suresh also appreciated it. Symbolically, she became independent. Still, she was afraid of forthcoming consequences. She was worried how she faced her parents in home. It seems to be a sense of revolt for her. She went home in dilemma:

'It greeted her as she walked through the front door. Who gave you permission to cut your hair, suddenly you have become so independent, you decide things on your own, where did you find the money, the time, the beauty parlour, where did you find all these things?(Home, p. 149-150)

Soon her family discovers Nisha's affair. She faces many difficulties. She is literally made a prisoner in her own house, even not allowed to go alone anywhere. Nisha refuses to follow the traditional arranged marriage. The novelist expresses how in Indian family that a girl has no right to take decision for herself. She has to sacrifice all her wishes for the sake of her family. Nisha fed up with the loneliness, decides to engage herself in some work. Nisha begins to work in a nearby playschool. She worked in school from eight-thirty to twelve- thirty. As it was not enough to pass her day she wanted something more. She considers the possibility of doing other things in the world. She wanted to open her own business in order to establish herself in terms of corporate life. Since she was the daughter of a businessman it was not difficult for her to go through the acid test of the business life. She thought herself to be better than pooja:

'She would be better than Pooja. She would not only be the daughter of a prosperous man, but be responsible for wealth herself. After all, her father's blood flowed in her, the of blood traders'. (Home, p.286)

Thus Nisha's Creations was started by Nisha herself. She took twenty-five thousand from her father. She promised him to pay every rupee within time. She learnt the graphs of the market carefully. She managed the market with her full insight. She valued her credentials well. Nisha succeeded in her business. She understood the different shades of complications in the business. She paid half of the twenty-five thousand which she had taken to start the business. Gradually, she learnt the value of life. Now, she was on her own feet: 'She had paid half the twenty-five thousand loan. With your blessings, papaji, you will get the other half by next year, she laughed, almost recapturing the liveliness that had been hers in college. (Home, p. 295)

As a mother, Sonu was conscious about her marriage. She supported the business life of Nisha, but she was extremely conscious of Nisha's future life as a married woman. For her, girl should have been familiar with cooking, nourishing children, feeding them and managing the household affairs. On the one hand, Nisha's business was flowering day by day, and on the other, family was curious about Nisha's marriage. Finally, they approached a widower in the shape of her bridegroom. Family had to compromise because of Nisha's fate, otherwise they did not agree at all.

Though Nisha is born and brought up in a metropolitan Indian middle-class family, she tries to build her own independent identity. She could have easily followed the convention and lived happily. But she was destined to show her skill and ability to work equally. Her purpose behind establishing her Nisha's Creations is not merely to pass time. It indicates her desire to be financially independent. This is how Manju Kapur explains the route of complete equality, struggle for economic independent existence, and her equality with men shows her marching towards modernity.

II. CONCLUSION

After going through the novels of Manju Kapur's 'Difficult Daughters' and 'Home', we find that Manju Kapur is much interested to present the questions and problems related to women in a larger perspective. She has applied her own logic and reason in order to highlight the problems of women in detail. In her novels, the women's questions have emerged essentially in the context of the identity of the new educated middle class. Manju Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated. They are strong individuals but imprisoned within the boundary of conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerable to them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. A well known feminist critic R.R. Prasad writes: "The female protagonists of her novels protest against male dominated and the marginalization of women. Man has subjugated women to her will, used to promote his sexual gratification but never has he desired to elevate her to genuine rank. He has done all he could do to depress and enslave her mind".¹⁰

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