

THE POSTMODERN SENSIBILITY IN THE NOVELS OF MANJU KAPUR

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The gender bias that a woman is decidedly inferior to man is deep rooted in the man-dominated society. Tradition, whose two massive pillars are patriarchy and male chauvinism, has been a formidable force that oppresses and suppresses woman. It is against this background that the present day women fight tooth and nail to liberate themselves from the oppressive burden of tradition. This is the short and long of the whole problem that may be summed up in the telling phrase 'tradition versus modernity'.

Manju Kapur, with her six novels, has become the most prominent Indian women novelists writing in English. Her latest novel, 'Brothers' has been published recently and it is being out of the purview of my thesis. Only the first five novels in their chronological order have been critically discussed in my thesis. And her five novels, namely, 'Difficult Daughters' (1998), 'A Married Woman' (2003), 'Home' (2006), 'The Immigrant' (2008), 'Custody' (2011). The author takes a broader canvas of the middle class society from which her women protagonists hail.

The postmodern sensibility is well revealed in all her novels and it is, no doubt, is the result of new socio-cultural and political situation that has brought the women very justly to the centre from the erstwhile marginal stage.

ManjuKapur's efforts as a staunch feminist are well revealed in all her five novels. Certain unique features and outstanding traits characterize all her protagonists. Such as are not to be found anywhere in the traditional women, render them (protagonists) as modern or post-modern women. A brief critical survey of the characters of her protagonists ,in their chronological order, will not only reveal the essential stuff that each of them is made up of but also it justifies the title of, my thesis.

Virmati is the protagonist of ManjuKapur's debut novel, 'Difficult Daughters'. Actually the novel is the biography of Virmati as narrated by her daughter, Ida who belongs to third generation of her family. She wants to reconstruct her mother's life, after her death so that she could gather some understanding of her own life. Virmati is the first child of her mother's eleven children. Virmati has to look after the welfare of her ten siblings since her mother; Kasturi, has become almost sickly owing to her series of deliveries. As such, Virmati has become the mother substitute for her siblings. It is, indeed, her misfortune that she has never enjoyed her mother's love and affection. Being a very traditional family, her mother, Kasturi, wants her daughter, Virmati to get married and settle in life, since the first priority that traditional mothers give is the marriage of their daughters as soon as they attain the stage of puberty. So Virmati has been

betrothed to a canal engineer of a respectable family. It is against this background, Virmati has determined to pursue her education, especially, when she is inspired by her first cousin, Shakuntala who is educated and leads economically independent life as a teacher. She refuses to get married until she becomes an educated, independent woman and at the same time Virmaticomes under the influence of a foreign returned English professor and falls in love with him. There has been a conflict between her traditionally- minded mother and herself who, at any cost, would pursue higher studies and lead an economically independent life. She refuses to marry the canal engineer. The act of renegeing on the promise of marring the canal engineer is deemed in traditional society as a death blow to the family prestige.

Christopher Rollason remarks:

“The pages of *Difficult Daughters* speak not only of Virmati, but of other ‘*Difficult Daughters*’, who succeed better than she did in their parallel troubles for independence in their lives. At the center of the narrative, we are confronted with a woman who fights and falls by the way side; but at its edges, as no doubtless representative but still symbolic figures, we encounter- as will be seen below- other women, whose relative success points the way to the future.” (Rollason 3)

Thus, Virmati, fighting against the traditional values and pursuing her higher ideals of education and life of independence, emerges as a modern woman. Although a greater part of Virmati’s life is tragic, Virmati has been steadfast to the last and ultimately she succeeds in realizing her goal, namely, of marring the professor. Thus, the message given by Manju Kapur without seeming to preach, is that a woman has right to love and choose her partner which can’t be questioned. One notices an unmistakable trait of modernity in Virmati when she says that she is much against much against the observance of the traditional rituals of obsequies in connection with the death of a person; and, like a very advanced modern woman, she declares that after her death, her bodily organs may be donated to those that are in need of them.

ManjuKapur’s second novel is ‘*A Married Woman*’ and its protagonist is Astha who hails from a traditional middle class urban society. Her mother, Sita, is steeped in tradition and wants her daughter to get married. Her father wants his daughter to go for higher studies so that her education would stand in goodstead for her in future and would enable her to lead economically independent life. She exhibits romantic tendencies as early as her late teens and finally, she has been married to an American returned MBA who seems to have broader views about life. Initially her married life was very comfortable and she became the mother of two children. But in the course of time, she became suffocated with her domestic life since her husband; Hemanth, started neglecting his wife and children as he devoted much of the time to his business. At one stage, she comes out of her domesticity and sought a teacher’s job much against the inclination of her husband. Once she came out into the open world of activity, she came in contact with a young secular Muslim, Aijaz, who was very active with his Street Theatre. As a secularist, he was striving for the unity between the Hindus and the Muslims. Aijaz liked Astha very much since she had the talents of a good artist and gradually the intimacy between them had developed into a liking for each other. The Babri masjid tragic incident was there in the background and it seemed that some Hindu fanatics burnt the van in which Aijaz and his troupe were travelling and they were burnt alive. Aijaz left behind his young Brahmin wife a widow by name, Pipeelika. Subsequently, Astha and Pipeelika became very intimate friends and that friendship developed into lesbianism.

Manju Kapur seems to be the very first Indo Anglian novelist to have dealt with the theme of lesbianism. Although this episode of lesbianism between them did not add much to the plot, it did certainly reveal the characters of both of them very vividly as women of different attitudes towards life. When Pipeelika insisted that Astha should follow her to America, the latter bluntly refused, in no unequivocal terms. Pipeelika left for America to do her PhD degree and Astha returned home joined her husband and children and there was a visible change for good in Hemant and they led a happy married life.

‘A few months and dullness began to taint Astha’s new life. What was she to do while waiting for Hemant to come home? Her in-laws were not demanding, for the house work they had help, and supervision, no matter how painstaking, still left her with enough free time to be restless in.’ (Kapur 46)

Manju Kapur creates a very modern woman in Astha for coming out of her home and going in quest of her own identity as an individual in society. Some critics are of opinion that Astha’s returning home to live with her husband and children might render her traditional. As a modern woman, she should have followed her own career giving no second thoughts to her family. One might say that these critics are grossly mistaken of ManjuKapur’s real concept of a modern woman. Some readers and critics are under a mistaken idea that to be a modern woman, she must abandon her home, husband and children as in the case of Shagun, the protagonist of ‘Custody’. The author very sensibly delineates the limits of modernity which, under no circumstances, should be destructive to the basic pattern of the institution of marriage and the family set up. In the case of Astha, she was, in thought and deed, was a modern woman before she returns to join her family.

In the novel, ‘Home’ Manju Kapur deals with the same theme, namely, tradition versus modernity. Nisha, the protagonist of this novel, possesses all the traits of a post-modern woman although she was born in a very traditional family of Banwarlals. Her mother, Sona has been very traditional to her backbone. The author, with her insightful understanding of a joint family, observes that certain untoward incidents take place and they remain as family secrets. One such incident is that Vicky, as a young boy of seventeen commits an act of sexual abuse when she is a little girl and she knows something happened to her but she is too innocent to know the nature of that act. It has left an indelible scar on her mind and she has been ever since in a disturbed state of mind. The family has wisely shifted Nisha to her aunt, Rupa’s house and Nisha has been brought up under the meticulous care of her aunt for eleven years and then she has been brought to her own house. Manju Kapur believes that any mental disturbance in person is likely to manifest itself in a physical disorder. Nisha has been suffered from skin disease as a result of her mental disturbance. After a lapse of time, she has been cured of it.

In this context, it is appropriate to quote, AnupamaChowdhury:

“Home reveals a disturbing home truth that joint families can both destroy and preserve our maturity, individuality and mental progress”
(Chowdhury 8)

There have ever been many conflicts between Sona, her mother and Nisha, her daughter. Even from girlhood, Nisha used to oppose her mother’s traditional way of thinking and doing things. For instance, Nisha did not have any faith in the traditional values. She has been, since her childhood, a rationalist. Much against the will of her mother, she pursued her college higher studies and during this period, she fell in love with an engineering student named Suresh who happened to be of a lower caste. Naturally, her traditionally minded parents strongly opposed to

Nisha's proposal to marry that boy. Nisha wanted to undertake their traditional cloth business. And the members of her family were very much disinclined to accept her proposal. But she believed that she had that grit and gumption to manage her cloth business very skilfully and she succeeds in convincing her father, yashpal who gave her twenty five thousand rupees by way of her initial investment for her new business. Even a period of one year, Nisha proved to be a very prosperous in her business and repaid the amount she borrowed from her father. Nisha, unfortunately, was born as 'a Mangli' and those who were born under the ominous sign of 'Mangli' would not be married by any young man except one who happened to have been born 'a Mangli'. As fate would have it, Nisha had to marry a thirty four year old widower who was living with his mother. But Nisha was not really happy with him since he devoted all his time to the welfare of his mother to the total neglect of his wife and the twins.

Manju Kapur creates the image of a new woman through the character of Nisha. A young woman, brought up in a society of traditional values, can hardly dare fight tradition and emerge as a modern woman. But Nisha's life has been a constant struggle against all that is traditional; and she has faced many odds before she emerged herself as a modern woman. And ultimately, she has fulfilled her duties as a wife and as a mother and, above all, as a woman with modern views.

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