

NOVELS OF MANJU KAPUR: A THEMATIC STUDY

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Simone De Beauvoir has briefly displayed the condition of woman in her most famous book *The Second Sex*. The plight position of women all over the world inspired the women of talent like Virginia Woolf to do something in this field and the result was the emergence of Feminism, a great movement in the Western countries in 1960. This movement is for the emancipation of women and their fight for equal rights. Their identity remains invisible, potentially unrealized and talent unacknowledged. Their story keeps silent in obscurity. Marital bliss and the woman's role at home is a central focus, to see the emergence of not just an essential sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Manju Kapur is one of the Indian Writers from India and the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant effect. She is the most talked about and appreciated contemporary Indian English woman novelist.

Like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Gita Hariharan, Anita Nair, Shobha De; Manju Kapur is one of the growing Indian woman writers in English who live and write in India itself.

“Manju Kapur like Roy, experiments with new themes such as gratification of sex from Women's point of view along with the politics of the day. Feminism and contemporary history go hand in hand to give new dimensions to their fiction.” (Mohandas: 2009)

Manju Kapur was born in 1948 in Amritsar, a city familiar with sectarian conflict. She has lived through turbulent times in India. She graduated from the Miranda House University College for women and went on to take an M.A. at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia and an M.Phil. from Delhi University. She teaches English literature at Miranda House, Delhi University. She is married to Gun Nidhi Dalmia and lives in New Delhi. She has three daughters named Amba, Maya, Katyayani and a son Agastya. She has written five novels: *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2009), and *Custody* (2011). Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* received a great international acclaim. This novel was published in 1998. *Difficult Daughters* was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best first book (Eurasia) and was a number one best seller in India. In this novel the protagonist is trying to find a place for her in a world where her life is depicted by familiar duties and becomes embroiled in a forbidden affair while the seismic upheavals of the partition surround her.

Difficult Daughters is set during India's independence struggle and is partially based on the life of Kapur's own mother, Virmati.

“... Virmati, the protagonist rebels against tradition. Yet she is filled with self doubt. She pleads for studying further and postponement of her

marriage. She attempts suicide, when faced with prospect of marrying the canal engineer. The family brands her ‘to be restless, sick and selfish’ and locks her up.” (P. Sudhashri, 2005)

She enters into a scandalous relationship with her married neighbor, the Professor. The relationship parallels India’s battle for freedom, and eventually Virmati becomes the Professor’s second wife. The book is set mostly in Amritsar and Lahore. Although *Difficult Daughters* is set in a socio-political framework with reference to the turbulent events of pre-independent India in the 1940s, the main concern of Kapur is to present the readers the character of Virmati, an assertive and bold woman based on patriarchal culture. Kapur focuses on the fact that although Virmati is educated and financially independent, she still suffers by being the second wife to the Professor. The life of Virmati 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.

Manju Kapur’s Virmati and Astha are the two protagonists who are the reflections of a new woman. Manju Kapur’s basic approach to woman’s life is to liberate them from the oppressive measures of patriarchy. Virmati is Manju Kapur’s ‘new woman’ born in Amritsar into an austere and high minded family. The story tells how she is torn between family duties, the desire for education and illicit love. She is the eldest daughters of her parents. The whole burden of household work increases over Virmati, being the eldest daughter. Due to her busy routine she does not do well in her study fails. She falls in love with Harish, a professor who is already married. She is inspired by Shakuntala, her first cousin’s liberal views of marriage and education. Virmati’s initial rebellion against her very traditional Arya Samaj family consisting of her parents, her paternal grandfather and aunt in first postponing her marriage and then refusing to marry the person she was engaged to constitutes a radical rebellious act which predicts an individual who would go on to carve out a niche for herself. Thus, the novelist has shown Virmati bravely fighting against the old traditional, hackneyed values which attempt to oppress the free spirit of women. When Virmati comes to Amritsar and gets the desired space with the professor all alone at his home first time after marriage. Her mother gives a helping hand to Virmati and takes her to her home. Now Virmati gives birth to her daughter Ida. She now completes a full circle and gets her long cherished freedom. The life of Virmati shows that mere education and economic independence are not to break the patriarchal norms. What is necessary is the determination and strong will power to assert one’s self-identity.

Her second novel *A Married Woman* published in 2002. Is seductive story of love, set at a time of political and religious upheaval- a struggle which still persists today, years after the 1992 destruction of the Babri Mosque – parallels Astha’s emotional turmoil, told with sympathy and intelligence. *A Married Woman* is the story of an artist whose canvas challenges the constraints of middle-class existence. Manju Kapur depicts the gripping political situation with the same fervor and graphic detail as she describes Astha’s actions and inner turmoil.

“Astha Vadera, a school teacher with an M. A. in English, lives a comfortable, conventional Delhi Hindu middle class life, within an arranged marriage with her businessman husband, a self-satisfied materialist who sells South Korean T.V. Sets, and their two children, until she meets Aijaz Khan a secular Muslim involved in a progressive theatre group” (Rollason, 2009)

Only one thing is sure: beset by Hindus, pleading Muslims and crooked policemen, the mosque, like Astha's marriage, will stand or fall depending on the courage and clout of those willing to fight the aggressors in the name of liberty and tolerance. The present novel is a feminocentric protest against the phallogocentric patriarchal culture. The male world imposes unlimited controls on women. Kapur however in this novel empowers her protagonist Astha to give a strong resistance to patriarchy by denouncing the prescribed norms of a society. Astha, resorting to a strange way of life, thus protested against her subordination under patriarchy. By choosing this uncommon path, she survives and discovers herself. Through that, she is able to attain the psychological freedom and individual needs in her life. Manju Kapur depicts the character of Astha as a new woman who is conscious, introspective, educated and wants to carve a life for her to some extent. On the verge of retirement from the Indian civil service, Astha's parents every suitor, until she meets Hemant, whose time at University in the States has turned him into a liberal thinker. Or so she hopes. This urge to be treated as an equal being is fully imbibed in as each of her remarks. It appears as if Manju Kapur through the medium of Astha demands the niche which is equal to man in a society.

Home is a multi-generation family saga, and was shortlisted for the Hutch Crossword Book Award in 2006. The novel is rather more domestic, the generation conflicts that bothers the sub-continent which provide the back drop of Kapur's other novels. Manju Kapur has tried to put a lot of issues in this book which are commonly encountered in a joint family and are usually kept under the carpet to protect the family honor and name. A lot of scheming and bantering goes behind the curtains while maintaining the outer shame of a big happy family. The author has tried to bring some of those issues to the fore and due to this *Home* does not remain a simple story of a Karol Bagh sari seller, but gets a more universal color and makes an invitatory family saga. Kapur presents Nisha, the protagonist, as bold, educated and balanced and of course, both modern and Indian.

“Lala Banwarilal dies and Yashpal takes back Nisha to please his mother. Now there is less interest in school and Sona expects her in the kitchen all the time. Nisha is horrified to discover that “her mother's idea of a daughter was one who helped her everybody 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 saying? Cooking will be useful to her entire life” (Shriwastva, 2008)

Manju Kapur's feminist sensibility has been suppressed to a great extent by patriarchy. Although Nisha undergoes a series of traumas, she finally succeeds to live like a free woman without resorting to any extreme step as in the case of Astha. She asserts her womanhood boldly because she is iconoclastic and modern in her approach to life. Kapur portrays the picture of Nisha as a 'new woman'. This is a fast moving story of an ordinary middle class family's life in Delhi. Banwarilal, the patriarch of a cloth business, lives in new Delhi neighborhood of Karol Bagh. Banwarilal believes in the old ways and is the firm believer of that man work out of the home, women within. Nisha passes in it and enters in college for getting higher education. She meets a boy and decides to marry him ignoring his cast and creed but fails in doing so and later on she has to wait for a long time in spite of all her physical and mental attainments due to astrological reasons. The fabric of the novel *Home* is constructed with the thread of familial relationship and the problem of marriage. In *The Immigrant* her feminist vision has taken a distinctive turn and she probe into feminine psyche not as a sentimental partaker of feminine

mystique but as a rational councilor to probe how the balance in sexual relationship. The novels by Manju Kapur deal mostly with the women's sensitive nature from early young adulthood through her early middle years.

Her fourth novel *The Immigrant* (2009) suffers from a jerky narrative, predictable plot, and dialogues as flat as two-day-old beer. Just occasionally, there are scenes of brilliance but they are too few, too far apart to make any substantive difference. Nina is a thirty-year-old English lecturer in New Delhi, living with her widowed mother and frustrated by how little life has to offer. Ananda has recently immigrated to Halifax, Canada: having spent his twenties painstakingly building his career, he searches for something to complete his new life. When an arranged marriage is proposed, Nina is uncertain: can she really give up her home and her country to build a new life with a husband she barely knows? The consequences of change are far greater than she could have imagined. As the two of them struggle to adapt to married life, Nina's whole world is thrown into question. And as certain truths threaten the marriage; her fragile new life in Canada begins to unravel.

Nina in *The Immigrant* is taken as a new woman. Nina sees herself as increasingly off the shelf-after all what prospects would an impoverished girl have without a father to marry her off? Then, Ananda is a dentist in Halifax, Canada. He has spent his twenties painstakingly building his career, and has had no time to get married. The two start to write each other, then talk on the phone, and finally Ananda arrives in New Delhi to propose. At first uncertain, Nina eventually agrees. When the two marry, she leaves her home and her country to build a new life with her husband. But there is always more to marriage than courtship. And as Nina discovers truths about her husband – both sexual and emotional. A middling kind of person is likely to belong to the middle classes, so in such a novel we forgo the glamour of the very rich and the very poor to muddle along with dentists and librarians. As most people live lives they believe to be ordinary, so the India and the Indians we meet in *The Immigrant* are not perceived as, and are not exotic. *Immigrant* involves compromise, and sometimes it is the obvious – almost clichéd – cultural differences in food and clothing that Kapur focuses on. At other times she teases out the subtler signs of adjustment, as when Nina objects to Ananda's friends calling him Andy, noting the telling difference between the injunctions, "Call me Andy and the untruth, "My name is Andy". Andy, Nina insists, is not a Hindu name. Kapur explores the special challenges facing immigrant wives: the way a young woman's life, already so pressured in professional and reproductive terms, becomes an even more impossible balancing act inside a foreign culture.

"The influence of progressive assimilation of western standards, of culture on the ethos of the urban community, especially at the higher levels of society, has given a possible thrust to the liberation of women from the shackles of tradition as reflected in the contemporary Indian English fiction. But a mere imitation of the West in this regard is bound to lack vitality and power, if it does not draw its life force from the main stream of our own culture."(John E. Abraham, 1996)

Manju Kapur's fifth novel *Custody* (2011) follows her previous novels which are acclaimed works such as *Difficult Daughters* and *The Immigrant*. This story is largely set in thriving upper-middle class colonies of Delhi in the mid 90s against the backdrop of the initial surge of foreign investment in India. The novel presents the uncertainty of matrimony, which cannot be imagined. We are introduced to the central couple just as their troubles begin. Raman is a fast rising marketing executive at a global drinks company. Shagun is his extraordinarily

beautiful wife with his glittering future, her vivid beauty, and their two adorable children – eight year old Arjun who looks just like her and two year old Roohi who looks just like him – the pair appears to have everything. Then Shagun meets Raman’s dynamic new boss Ashok and everything changes. Once lovers and companions, husband and wife become enemies looked in an ugly legal battle over their two children. Caught in their midst is the childless Ishita who is in love with the idea of motherhood. *Custody* is the riveting story of how family love can disintegrate into an obsession to possess children, body and soul, as well as a chilling critique of the Indian judicial system. Told with nuance, sympathy, and clear-sightedness, it confirms Manju Kapur’s reputation as the great chronicler of the modern Indian family. *Custody* becomes something more than just a social commentary, but a novel that is true to the universal angst of modern marriage, with its burden of individualism. The novel is impressive in its skill and heartrending in its honesty. Manju Kapur’s *Custody* will have heartstrings twanging away with its wrenching moments and stories of love, loss and betrayal. It’s a simple enough cast of characters – people who could be your next-door neighbors, Raman and Shagun seem like the couple who have everything. He’s the hard-working ‘good man’ who holds a high paying, high pressure marketing job; she’s the gorgeous wife who dutifully produces a boy, Arjun, and a girl, Roohi and accompanies him to office parties. In another part of the city is Ishita, whose marriage runs into trouble and finally breaks up when her in-laws realize she can’t have children. Kapur addresses the gendered nature of custody battles in India – men often refuge to grant divorce while women usually have greater claim to the children – but she refuses to generalize or moralize. The legal process is rotten in different ways for both parties. Neither does she spend too long on whether Shagun’s infidelity scandalizes society, but focuses on how it affects her characters. The concept of family shame and social propriety is firmly in the background. Shagun in *Custody* portrays as a ‘new woman’. Kapur is well established as a thoughtful and entertaining chronicler of the Indian middle classes. Torn between their countries’ traditional values and the more Western aspirations that have come with new prosperity, these people are a gift to any novelist – and once again, Kapur takes full advantage. In some ways, the plot here is almost Victorian, as the beautiful Shagun tires of her dependable, unexciting husband Raman and has her head turned by the modern Indian equivalent of the local mill-owner: an executive in a global corporation. Amid the demands and hysterics of the four grown-ups in this tale of broken marriages, the children remain quietly in the background until the novel’s second half. It is then that we begin to see the disastrous side-effects of the bitter fight for their custody, the “tyranny of blood”, and their trauma, “torn between two mothers, two homes, and two countries”.

In *Custody* Kapur depicts the gendered nature of custody which is battled in India. Generally men refuse to grant divorce while women usually have greater claim to the children but she refuses to do so. Both the parties counsel the legal advice. The battle lines are drawn early and both parties fight to its end. The cycle of rage between Shagun and Raman not only fuels itself but is complicated by the new stepmothers and fathers acquired through second marriages. Kapur is adept at dealing with this complicated family configuration, and the insecurity it brings to the step-parents as well as children. In Ishita’s plight, as see the second wife’s desperate struggle to replace the biological mother, while Ashok presents a more ambiguous kind of care. Neither does she spend too long on whether Shagun’s infidelity scandalizes society, but focuses on how it affects her characters. The concept of family shame and social propriety is firmly in the background.