

MANJU KAPUR'S *HOME*: MIRROR OF A WOMAN IN INDIAN SOCIETY

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Fiction writing is the most dominant form in the twentieth century. Manju Kapur along with the contemporary writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Shobha De, R. P. Jhabwala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharti Mukherjee captures the Indian ethos very successfully and skilfully. At the same time they show their deep insight into human nature and their understanding of day-to-day problems. Love, war, politics, economics and social tension, legendary, history and even spirituality are popular themes with the contemporary novelists. (IWE, 12)

Manju Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female psyche. Striking a balance between a natural co-existence and unfettered freedom and space Kapur's eloquent narration of women's issues is nevertheless both Indian and universal. Kapur mostly writes about women. She finds women's life fascinating; the way they have to negotiate public and private space. They have to do many things, they have to play so many roles, there's a lot of stuff to say about women. Manju Kapur always says that today is not the day following yesterday. Things might have changed but how much really? Even today, thousands of girls sit within the four walls of their houses and wonder why they do not have the right to choose their own lives, self decision whether they want to be Home makers or more. Marriage is still the reason for their birth. Freedom is more than just being allowed out for a pizza with friends.

Manju Kapur comments about the space which women occupy in domestic relationships. It is the world which she knows and understands. The mother-daughter nexus is only one of the many manifestations of Indian Woman's role. She is a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law in fact; there are so many aspects of a woman's life she still need to write about that. Manju Kapur tells about herself that she was nothing; husbandless, childless. She felt herself hovering like pencil notation on the margins of the society.

Manju Kapur gets the idea of *Home* from her real life. Kapur says, "I teach in a girl's college (Miranda House). Home was first conceived in response to the Home situations of some of my students who came from conservative background. The family, I write about has had to rebuild its prosperity, having lost everything in the partition. This makes them especially vigilant that much of the family ethos is dominated by the market place." (The Hindu, Jan 5, 2003)

Home is the third novel of Manju Kapur. About the title of the novel Manju Kapur writes that literature by women, about families always has these considerations. With years of studying texts, it becomes almost second nature to look beneath the surface- at social and

economic forces, gender relationships and how they are played out in an arena that, in my writing, happens to be the *Home*. Manju Kapur's *Home* is a masterful novel of the acts of kindness, compromise, and secrecy that lie at the heart of every family. *Home* is a story about an Indian family; Manju Kapur weaves universal truths about the complexities of extended families and the pull of tradition against modernity. Kapur's ability to chart sexual abuse and disease in the same detached style in which she narrates daily adventures is remarkable.

The patriarch of the family is Banwari Lal, a cloth merchant who lives with his family in Karol Bagh, New Delhi. The Banwari Lal family belongs to a class whose skills have been honed over generations to ensure prosperity in market place. From an early age children are trained to maintain the foundation on which these homes rested. The education they received, the values they imbibed, the alliances they made has everything to do with protecting the steady stream of gold and silver that burnished their lives. Banwari Lal is believer of older ways. Men work out at home, women within. His two sons unquestioningly follow their father in business and in life but their wives do not. Neither does his granddaughter who makes choices considered unavailable to the women of the family.

Banwari Lal has two sons, Yaspal and Pyare Lal and one daughter, Sunita. Sunita is already married to a person named Murali before the beginning of the novel. Sona Lal wife of Yaspal, and Rupa Gupta both sisters are childless. Mother-in-law of Sona always scolds her for it. Yaspal consoles Sona saying that when we have children, mother will forget all it. By the time Pyare Lal is also married to Sushila who gives birth to a boy within one year of the marriage. During this period Yaspal's sister burns herself and dies. As the family receives the news, they leave for Bareilly. Here Sona's mother-in-law mourns; Sona tries to console her. Thus:

“Sleep now Maji, sleep, you will make yourself ill if you cry like this, and it will not bring her back.” The old woman glared at Sona and speak, “You think sleep is possible? What can you know of a mother's feelings? All you do is enjoying life, no children, no sorrow, only a husband to dance around you.” (Home, 22)

Sona is already mentally disturbed to hear the taunt of her. At the same time her father-in-law comes back with a ten years old boy, Vicky. Sona has to take care of that boy. Yaspal feels that Sona is not feeling well, so he makes a plan to visit the shrine of Chitai, near Almora. The Devi of these hills is said to have miraculous powers. After two months Sona discovers that she is pregnant. Sona feels that all it is because of Devi. Few months later she gives birth to a daughter, Nisha. But Nisha is declared as Mangli. After Nisha, Sona gives birth to a boy, Raju. Now Vicky starts going to shop and there is some relax for Sona who does not like Vicky's activities. By the time Vicky is fifteen, he begins to take interest in Nisha. Nisha can't understand his intention. Nisha becomes mentally disturbed and nobody could understand why she is not eating and sleeping. So she is sent to Rupa's Home for a change. Rupa and her husband, Premnath, understand all, that there is a hand of Vicky behind Nisha's miserable condition.

Nisha now finds herself in an atmosphere which is very different from the one she had lived in. As the only child she is in the centre of interest. She passes all week with her aunt and uncle. Here Nisha flourishes as the most beautiful girl. Here at Nisha's Home Banwari Lal dies after a long illness. So being the elder one, the whole burden of the family comes to Yaspal. Nisha also returns her Home to accompany her grand mother.

Nisha was a *Mangli*. A *Mangli* can't marry until a similar *mangli* boy could be found, with a similar fate and horoscope. Family understands that search of a boy will take time so they send

Nisha into a college. Nisha enters in Durgaa Bai College for doing English Honours. Soon Nisha meets a boy Suresh who was studying in Khalsa College of Engineering. Both fall in love and wandered here and there in each others company. She is now totally changed. The family questions her on her change of behaviour, “Who gave you permission to cut your hair, suddenly you have become so independent, you decide things of your own, where did you find the money, the time, the beauty parlour, where did you find all these things?”(150)

By the time Pyare Lal feels uncomfortable in the house. So he consults his brother to reconstruct the home again. Yaspal says nothing at the moment. Her wife also does not like the reconstruction of home. Yaspal says-‘It was not his fault. He was the youngest, what could he do by himself? Now he had sons, daughter-in-law and grand children, now he was a patriarch in his own right.’(170) So they all move out of the house to Hotel Palace Heights in Karol Bagh. By now Nisha is in her third year. Nisha enjoys the company of Suresh. He takes her to a room in Vijay Nagar where he tries to make sexual relation with her but could not succeed.

But towards the end of Nisha’s third year her parents receive a letter from the college authorities. Their daughter was short of attendance, and will not be allowed to sit for exams. Now parents enquire the reason, but Nisha does not tell directly and sends Suresh to meet her father at the shop. All things have become clear and Yaspal enquires all things. After enquiring all these things he found that Suresh is unfit for Nisha. When Nisha heard this news, all day she remained in the house, a prisoner of her deeds, a prisoner of their words. She badly suffers from eczema. This disease affects her a lot.

This condition of Nisha remains the same for a long time. Parents have been worrying, daughter getting older with the passing of time, son’s future blocked because of this. One day a proposal comes from a richer family for the marriage of Raju. Pyare Lal tells his brother that this type of proposal does not come daily, so without delay he should make up his mind. So all they go to Babaji. Babaji tells, “I have good news” continued Babaji, “The boy and the girl’s horoscope are perfectly matched. This girl will be good for the family and even Nisha’s future will open after her sister-in-law comes to the house.”(248)

So marriage is performed and Raju and Pooja go for honeymoon in Europe. They return after one month, and the behaviour of Pooja was quite changed at this time. Sona complains to Raju that Pooja is not behaving like a daughter-in-law. Pooja spends no time with Nisha and the rest of the family. Raju responses on it, “Pooja is right: you don’t like her, why did you marry me to her, then? Was I in such a hurry? Snapped Raju like this before returning to his lair, leaving Sona and Nisha alone.”(259) Sona thinks that her son has become the slave of his wife and is bent on stabbing his mother in heart. Condition of the family is getting worse day by day and there is a great dispute among the family. Pooja goes and comes without anyone’s permission. Parents think that it is very bad for Nisha to remain at home all the time. So they forced her to join a school so that she may feel better. She starts going to school to teach. By the time Pooja gives birth to a boy.

Parents are continuously searching a *mangli* boy for Nisha, but they are not getting success in it. Soon Nisha gets fed up with the teaching of job and plans to start a business. She consults her father. Yaspal at the time of dinner says to Nisha, ‘Beti’ he started, ‘business is not an easy thing. I will help you in the beginning, but the responsibility, profit and loss all are yours. In teaching no matter what you do, but you get your salary. This is different.’(291) Nisha starts cloth business and it flourishes day by day. Demands of suits increase in the market. During this time Yaspal finds a mangali boy for Nisha. Although the boy is a widower but he agrees on Nisha’s

condition. Nisha replies on the matter of business, “I cannot give it up, this was the only thing she could visualise in any marriage that she had to come to the basement everyday.”(303)

Arvind lives in Daryaganj and have a business there. He accepts that Nisha need not stop her business and he will hire a room near Karol Bagh. So that she will not feel a problem to continue it. There is only one thing that Arvind wants was an arranged marriage. All agree and the preparation of marriage begins after a long period. In front of the magistrate Arvind and Nisha sign their names at several places. Pooja takes out a box from her hand bag and unwraps the paper covering to reveal fat white squares of cashew barfi. She firmly holds a piece out to Arvind. ‘Now you are married: She says laughing, ‘You should be the first to sweeten the mouth of your bride.’ (306)

Next morning Arvind takes Nisha to his home and they pass their time happily. Nisha continues her business and comes regularly to see the work of tailors. This routine does not continue for long due to the pregnancy of Nisha. Her mother-in-law advises her not to go daily otherwise it will create a big problem. After passing ten months she gives birth to a twin: one girl and one boy. The marital home and the bed that she seems to have craved for years, she is ready to renounce and look for an opening. She displays a prodigious strength of mind to culminate her dejection. After she dares to cross the patriarchal threshold, she finds her free spirit curtailed and chopped.

The book has a large set of characters, the patriarch, his wife, two sons, their wives and children. The first part of the book focuses especially on Sona, married to the elder son Yaspal, and his sister Rupa, married to a teacher Premnath. In terms of the characterisation, Kapur paints it with her imagination. Except for Sona and Rupa, and to a lesser extent, Vicky, Yaspal and Banwari Lal, all other characters in the first part of the book remain shadowy figures. For example, Pyare Lal and his wife Sushila, are cardboard characters, there is nothing distinctive about them that one can remember after finishing reading the book. In the same way, the second half of the book concentrates on Nisha, excluding almost everyone else.

Manju Kapur’s novels show the condition of women in our society. Though the girl or woman is from a respectable family, good looking, well educated, yet she has to suffer. She remains in the society like a puppet whose strings are in the hands of their destiny. Character in Manju Kapur’s novels tries to liberate themselves from the pangs of orthodoxy, but they are unable to come out of their family, whether it is their paternal home or in-law home, condition remains the same. They have to be dependent on others. They can’t take decisions of their own but the decisions of others are enforced on these characters. The entire female characters rebel against the society or patriarchal norms to make their own destiny but unfortunately, the condition becomes worse for them.

The themes of Manju Kapur are not new. Whatever she portrayed in her novels has been depicted earlier in her contemporary writers but every writer, poet or author has its own style and perception to view something. What pleases is that she has analysed her each and every character with proper understanding. The characters are simple and lifelike. They belong usually to middle class family. Not only the protagonist but the major and minor characters of the novel are also portrayed with sharp sensibility. Kapur makes fun of her own novel that she laughed reading the novels but she smiled a good deal, she smiled remembering it.

Indian woman have mastered anything and everything which a woman can dream of. But she still has to go a long way to achieve equal status in the minds of Indian men. The desire of Indian women can be best summed up in the following lines:

I have only one request.
I do not ask for money.
Although I have need of it,
I do not ask for meat....
I have only one request,
And all I ask is
That you remove
The road block
From my path. (Song of Lawino, 120)

Kapur's fiction stresses the women's need for self-fulfilment autonomy, self-realization, and a fight for her own destiny, independence, individuality and self-actualization. The age-old respect for the Laws of Manu still dictates the position of woman within the family. The Popular saying: "Woman derives their status from their husbands and power from their sons" has its full meaning. It is the narrow margin that separates the grand mother, regarded as a saint by the whole joint family of which she has eventually become the spiritual leader from an ordinary woman who, throughout her life, willingly slaved for men. Since her very position within the family makes her pillar of the society. The central part played by women in traditional India cannot be challenged. Questioning the position of women comes to the questioning the structure of Indian society.

India owed its spiritual eminence to the fact that people here realized that a woman's primary duty was being a wife and a mother. Nisha leaves her business to fulfil her duties as a good wife, a daughter-in-law and mother. In our society, a woman on her way, cannot survive outside the system in which a place has been assigned to her, a woman can not manage. Indian society does not tolerate individualism, except in the case of Sanyasihood. Feminine individualism is not acceptable. Here we can have an example of Nisha. It has become clear what would be the result of women's education in the society where individual freedom is strictly limited. Education contributes to the social promotion of a girl only in as much as it allows her family to find her a better husband. Education is not an end in itself but a long term investment. This is what Manju Kapur has depicted in her novels.

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