

Manju Kapur's Home and the Immigrant: A Saga of Feministic Study



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Abstract

Indian women novelists can be said to be highly conscious of the women's liberation movement and they have portrayed women and their stories with consciousness of the injustice meted out to women by society. Manju Kapur is also one such novelist whose novels have a feminist undercurrent. A large number of her fictional female characters have shown the latest trend of rebelling against the existing patriarchal social set up. They discard the idea of being submissive, suffering and sacrificing.

Manju Kapur, as a novelist, stand in the middle of the two generations of Indian women writers i.e. the Earlier Generation (Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal) and the New Generation (Shashi Deshpandey, Bharti Mukherjee, Gita Mehta, Arundhati Roy etc.) Manju Kapur, however, makes a study of women who sometimes feel compelled to conform to the existing moral codes and social norms, and she has portrayed even those women also who are non-conformist protesting against unequal treatment and unjust impositions. In the narrative strategy of Manju Kapur, her characters adopt various approaches as per their convenience.

Keywords: Manju Kapur, Feminism, Consciousness, Patriarchal Indian Society, Identity Crisis

Introduction

Manju Kapur emerged in the Indian English scenario as one such writer whose novels revealed the true state of Indian society and its treatment of women. Her novels tell us about the plight of women in contemporary Indian society and depict the emergence of "new woman" (Singh, 35) who tries to break free the shackles of patriarchy and speaks of love and sex frankly and boldly. "After *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*, in her third novel *Home*, Manju Kapur catches a glimpse of the process of woman in the making" (Ali, 2). Ms. Kapur traces the whole process of the making of woman through various generations in her novel. Virtually, *Home* captures the struggle of a small girl in the process of woman-to-be.

From the beginning of the novel the writer consciously shows how the women who subject their next generation to mental anguish, are themselves equally tortured by their previous generations and thus the treatment which they meet out to their daughters or daughters-in-law, is nothing but 'a duplication of past'. This handing over of the emotion at negligence and maltreatment of women could be shown through a joint family system only, where generations of women live together under the same roof. The present novel *Home* begins with a sort of prologue to "the joint family tradition" (Op. Cit., 84) of our society and this sets the tone of the novel. Set in Delhi's Karol Bagh, it presents a simple story of a "Banwari Lal joint-family" running a business in cloth marketing. Ms. Kapur takes us through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations. After partition Banwarilal comes to India and with the help of his wife's jewellery, starts a small saree shop in Karol Bagh, Delhi. The two sons of Banwari Lal also follow the patriarchal norms but the two daughters-in-law gradually pull themselves out of patriarchal leadership of Banwari Lal which results in the split of the joint family.

The story of the novel takes a turn when Banwari Lal's daughter Sunita is burnt by her drunk and abusive husband and his family. Sunita died leaving her ten year son Vicky behind. There is a matter of astonishment that in the name of family honour, nobody from Banwari Lal's house registered a complaint to the police or filed a court case. The supposed dowry murder of Sunita, which the whole family intentionally accepted as death by accident, disturbed Sona very much. But strangely, even the death of the only daughter could not melt the heart of Sona's mother-in-law. Even while grieving she did not forget to comment on Sona's barrenness. When Sona tried to console the old lady :

Sleep now, Maji, sleep – you will make yourself ill if you cry like this, and it will not bring her back. (18)

The old woman glared at Sona and spat out :

You think sleep is possible? What can you know of a mother's feeling? All you do is enjoy life, no children, no sorrow, only a husband to dance around you. (18)

Sona was dumbfounded, but "the bitter comment of her mother-in-law continuously kept on hammering her head" (Singh, 67). She lost her sleep, lost her appetite. Many nights were spent sleepless. Sona's problem increases when Vicky the only child of Sunita is imposed on her. Though she did not want to pour her motherly emotions on him because he was not her own blood, but there was no other way. Sona was childless and Vicky was now motherless. So this was considered to be the best option to oblige Sona with a 10 year orphan boy. Sona was not ready to believe that God had rewarded her devotion in this strange way. But we never found Sona arguing with her mother-in-law. She is not supposed to question the family's decision whether she likes it or not. Siman De Beauvoir rightly holds the view :

She must try to please. She must make herself object; she should therefore renounce her autonomy. She is treated like a live doll and is refused liberty. Thus a vicious circle is formed; for the less she exercises her freedom to understand, to grasp and discover the world about her, the less resources will she find within herself, the less will she dare to affirm herself as subject. (308)

Traditionality in her would not let her accept someone else's child as her own. However, whether she likes or not, she has to take care of Vicky because her husband and his family

wished so. Well, soon after Vicky's arrival Sona discovered that she had conceived and blessed with a girl child. The family named the baby Nisha (the protagonist of the novel). After Nisha she gave birth to a boy (Raju). With the appearance of little Raju she felt her real existence.

The Immigrant

Manju Kapur's next work which we are going to analyse is 'The Immigrant'. It appeared on the literary horizon as Kapur's fourth novel and was warmly received as "a beautifully written, astute tale" (Man's World), "an absorbing, often surprising novel of character" (TLS) and "an intimate portrayal of an arranged marriage" (New Woman). With such and many more accolades Manju Kapur certainly stands up to her already established credentials compelling her reviewers to eulogize with 'full throated ease' :

Kapur excels in bringing the small moments alive –Outlook.

A writer whose books are enjoyed for their aftertaste Tehulka.

Kapur's central women characters, Virmati, Astha, Nisha and Nina, though placed in different situations, hailing from different family backgrounds and tied in different modes of marriage, have to confront the same basic problem that is of 'identity & crisis' both in their natal and marital homes. They all grow up with an idea of themselves, an image of their own, and spend their lives trying to live up to it. The women in every novel of Kapur grow up intellectually and psychologically. The movement is always forward it is from self denial to self acceptance, from woman fulfilling social roles to self-fulfilling individual. In her fourth novel *The Immigrant*, Kapur makes her woman protagonist Nina's life begin exactly from the place where the already developed woman like Astha and Nisha end their journey towards emancipation.

Primarily, *The Immigrant* is a mesmerizing saga about the complexities of arranged marriage and NRI life. But on the broader level, it deals with the issues of expatriation, migration, transformational on one hand and patriarchal constraints and search for self identity on the other. Through this novel, Manju Kapur once again proves that she is a master delineator of the complex Indian family life. She has already achieved a high degree of both critical and popular success in India and abroad as an admired exponent of Indian writings in English with her three previous novels. *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), and *Home* (2006). *The Immigrant* (2008), her fourth novel, in some ways observes continuity with its predecessors and in other ways breaks new ground.

The novel opens with a description of the daily life of Nina. A thirty year old spinster Nina works as a lecturer in Miranda House College to sustain her own and her widowed mother's life in Delhi. After doing graduating from Miranda House she presently works as a lecturer in her alma mater. The traditional societal expectation of a girl to be married before she reaches her thirties has left a mark on Nina's mind too. She has her job and her mother, yet the loneliness in her life in the absence of a man is very well described by the author in the following lines :

Her spirit felt sixty as she walked from the bus stop to the single room where she lived with her mother. Her heart felt a hundred as it surveyed the many years of hopeless longing it had known. (*The Immigrant, 1*)

The only thing that occupied Nina's mind from her adolescence was education and job. She is very different from Kapur's other women characters, like Virmati, Astha or Nisha.

Education and career was the priority of her life. She never wished to get married at the cost of her education. As the writer says :

Education was a gift and she would not exchange the life of the mind for any humdrum marriage. If she was going to settle, she would have settled long ago for one of the men her mother kept dredging up with desperate hope from marriage advertisements. (3)

Our Indian society generally does not permit the marriageable age beyond thirty nor our Indian mothers. The greatest “concern of Nina’s mother is the same. She wants to see her daughter well settled, dreams of her daughters’ marriage day and night, worships Gods and Goddesses, does fasts on Tuesday, and frequently visists the condition of the stars” (Singh, 95). Manju Kapur also concerns to the view prevailing in Indian society:

We are conditioned to think a woman’s fulfilment lies in birth and motherhood, just as we are conditioned to feel failures if we don’t marry. (230)

Here we find a kind of similarity among all the mother of Kapur’s protagonists. They all are concerned for their daughter’s marriage. Whether she is Virmati’s mother Katuri in *Difficult Daughter*; or Astha’s mother in *A Married Woman*; or Nisha’s mother Sona in *Home*, they all want their daughters get married and be settled at a proper age. We witness Ashta’s mother saying :

When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their *daughters married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?* (*A Married Woman*, 1)

Almost all the mothers in our society think in the same way. Somehow, Ananda comes before them as Nina’s suitor. Ananda arrives in Canada before Nina enters his life, and the novel thus narrates two overlapping processes of adaptation, his followed by hers. ‘Ananda is Canadian of Indian origin’, an NRI dentist settled in Halifax. On his sister’s insistence Ananda comes to meet Nina. But Nina cannot easily say ‘Yes’ to Ananda. Manju Kapur presents Nina as a modern woman- a woman of the world. She is a mature working woman and she knows that the decision regarding marriage should not be taken in a hurry. Nothing could convince her easily. She needed her own time. However, after some thought, Nina marries Ananda.

Conclusion

In all her novels, Kapur has tried to show that the change in attitude towards marriage is a big step forward towards the emotional emancipation of women. All her women are presented by Ms. Kapur as a woman full of self- dignity and self respect. Here, Manju Kapur has presented Nina as an independent woman who ‘did not want to start married life as a charity case’. She was determined to pay for her own wedding. It was certainly not surrendering themselves to a patriarchal life completely dependent on their husband’s money and mercy. But it is interesting to note here that apart from all their freedom, independence and maturity, they are women after all.

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