

## Politics Of Gender In The Novels Of Manju Kapur

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### Abstract

The concept of gender relates to the relationships between men and women, and to the way members of society are divided into the two groups based on their assigned biological sex at birth. These groups are allocated different gendered attributes and which affect all features of social life. The interpretation of gender embodies cultural trace and definition is related to masculinity and femininity as well as the sexual division of labour. Encyclopedia Britannica notes that gender identity is –

"As individual self conception as being male or female as distinguished from actual biological sex. For most persons gender identity and biological characteristics are the same. There are, however, circumstances in which an individual experience little or no connection between sex and gender"<sup>1</sup>

Gender thus refers to cultural specific patterns of behaviour which are identified as masculine or feminine. Children and member of a society, learn what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman from an early age. Through inherent beliefs boys are praised for male achievements and girls for girlness, to the extent and Language also become more masculine or feminine. Gendered influences ways in which male and female behave, feel, think, play and dress. Gendered expectations are subsequently fulfilled. The gendered nature of individual is further intensified by social institutions such as family, education system and the work place.

**Keywords:** Prejudicial discrimination, politics of gender, complexity of social and political life

The distinctive attitude based upon prejudicial discrimination between man and woman is known as gender conflict and it has its impact on the governance of state, thus is born the word, politics of gender, which, determine what place should be assigned to a woman and what is her role and participation in domestic, municipal, state and national administration of a country in particular and world in general.

My attempt in this paper is to show the 'politics of gender' in the novels of Manju Kapur, The novelist has examined the politics through the lens of gender – hierarchy, masculinity and femininity which are shaped by interacting economic, political and ideological practices. Gender is hierarchical binary opposition of males and females, its intersection with power relations, understood as an expression of politics creates an opposition between the two sexes. Gender examines the phenomenon and the nature of politics or activity of power – relations for it shapes and tells who we are, how we think and act and what realities we create.

A critical evaluation of Manju Kapur's novels show that society welcomes boys and girls differently; some middle class Indian women go through the traumas of amniocentesis and abortion in request for male child, the gender roles change overtime and differ from culture to culture, the tidal pull of their and history. The major component in the novels of Manju Kapur is the politics of Gender.

Manju Kapur bloomed as a writer in 1998 by presenting *Difficult Daughters*. The work was appreciated for its novelty and rightfully bagged the commonwealth prize for best first book in Eurasia region. The novel set around restless years of world war II and partition of India mainly portrays the women characters, centralizing Virmati, the difficult daughter in the novel. The female characters of the novel are in quest of their own range and their horizon and that they are not without endurance and stability which the male characters have. Kapur offer an interesting insight in to a pre-partition, middle class Punjabi family, their agonies and hardships as their eldest daughter (Virmati) dares to defy convention and falls in love with a married professor. Persuaded by passion for the already married man, she has the boldness to scout pre-arranged marriage, attempts suicide and suffers confinement in the other four walls of storehouse. In spite of going against – her family for this man, she does realize the despair of her illegitimate relationship when she gets the news that professor's wife is pregnant. At this point she feels deceived and is shocked that on one had he is professing his love for her and on the other hand making his wife pregnant. "You think you can do what you like so long as you go on saying you love".<sup>1</sup>

Having decided to part her ways with the professor, she defies patriarchal constraints and asserts herself to attain self reliance by studying B.T. course in Lahore. She pushed herself, to be "Strong to bear the pain silently, without anyone knowing"<sup>2</sup>. Despite her determination to forget the professor, She yields to his pleadings. She finds hard to stand against the professor and finds in him the only well wisher. She eventually go physically involved with Harish. Her mental dilemma and agony has been described by Kapur :

She felt out of place, on outcome amongst all these women. She thought of Harish who loved her she must be satisfied with that.<sup>3</sup>

The power game going between, Harish & Virmati has been well described in Kate Millet's politics"<sup>4</sup> in which she examined how power relations work and how men manipulate and perpetuate male dominance over women. She describes sexual politics as the method by which one sex seeks to maintain and extend its power over the other for subordination.

Even after, Virmati has married the man of her choice life is not bed of roses for her. Her suppressed position comes in light when she suggest the name Bharti for their newly born daughter. The name is rejected by so called modem man as inappropriate. Virmati is not allowed to put her reasons where as Harish gives complete reasons. She is not even paid attention to. Vandita Mishra has pointed out :

Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power or freedom. Because even as breaks free from old prisons, she is locked in to newer ones. Her relationship with the professor for instance. While it does provide an escape from a loveless arranged marriage, it is itself furtive and claustrophobic, offering only a stolen togetherness behind curtained windows. Even years of studying and working alone don't give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow. She hovers uncertainly at the edge of each new world, never entering, least the professor should call and not find her near. Eventually, marriage to the man of her choice, is not triumph either. As second wife she must fight social ostracism outside the house, and compete for the kitchen and conjugal bed with Ganga, the first wife, inside it.<sup>3</sup>

Manjnu Kapur has strong convictions about feminism. Aprt from her belief in the equality of the gender and in the right of both the genders to live their lives the way they want, she shows through *Difficult Daughters* that suffering and sacrifice are the characteristics of women community. Analyzing her protagonists, she proves it. Kasturi and Lajwanit are child rearing and house-keepers. Shakuntala, Virmati, Swarnlata, Chhhoti and

Ida raise their voices in the wake of freedom. All of these ladies have their lives full of despair because of their ambitions. Shakuntala presents herself as a career girl none can deny the emptiness in her life. Chhoti clears the IAS test but decided to remain single. Ida marries but only to be divorced in the initial years of her relationship.

Like *Difficult Daughters* (1998), Manju Kapur's second novel *Married woman* (2002) also shares the theme of patriarchal bondage which runs deep in the story. Kapur once again underlines and articulates the major concerns of Indian woman. The young protagonists Astha is the representative of the woman striving to gain their space in life and society.

Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear one slip might find her alone, vulnerable and unprotected. The infinite ways in which she could be harmed, were not specified, but Astha observed them through the skin, and even after was drawn to the safe and secure.<sup>6</sup>

Manju Kapur in her novel explores the complexity and subtlety of Indian Society and shows how her woman characters are in conflict with a parochial society. Through her woman characters, she exposes those half-truths, the depression related with the marriage. The females in her novels show that all is not well in their world and a damage has already been done because they have to constantly undergo agonizing conflicts within themselves.

Kapur not only treats marriage as a theme, but she also reveals on going attempt to renegotiate the female elements that made the marriage plot seem so attractive and so inevitable. Promoting the interest of women, these novels work to remake marriage a framework shaping many women's live, into a fictiona structure and an institution that would give women power, control authority, security and respect. But she also points out that people start taking their married lives for granted and it is hardly seen for what it is being overladen with cultural norms and what's more pinching is that people involved perceive it differently.

There are two types of situations which are discussed in her novels-place of woman in Indian Society before marriage and Place of woman in Indian Society after marriage.

She admits that a woman gives her everything in a marriage in return for the status of being happily married. She is also interested in exploring the subtle naunces of change in her status. Kapur accepts in an interview with Ira Pande that she wishes to explore the space that women occupy in domestic relationship.<sup>7</sup>

Kapur has exposed the question of feminism in *A married woman*, by portraying Astha when like all traditional marriages she was wedded to Hemant. She completely let

herself, her desire merged with Hemant to come out as "Woman of the world". I haven't really lived, thought Astha, till now I did not know what life as all about.<sup>8</sup>

Being married and with lots of responsibilities as a patriarchal wife, Astha could not deceive herself for long. She wanted independence of thought and action. She felt neglected and distanced from him. She had nothing to do the whole day except waiting for him and thinking of their being together. Despite Hemant's acerbity to her it's she who rectified her relationship. He on the other hand engrossed himself more in finding the ways of minting money.

Her subservient position struck her. She had no business kneeling, taking off his shoes, pulling off his socks, feeling ecstatic about the smell of his feet.<sup>9</sup>

Hemant's discouraging attitude towards Astha's accomplishments and his commanding conduct deprived her of a married woman's joy. His only concern was playing with Astha's body every night exploited her anticipation and gave her perpetual headache.

'She was his wife. Still she looked, feeling exposed in her this ..... nightie she was tried, her feet were telling her, and tired women cannot make good wives'.<sup>10</sup>

Astha was shocked when she was informed by Hemant that she will be funding the Goa trip. He entertained his kids but did not fulfil Astha's desire to be antique silver box. She cries silently as Kapur pens down : -

'She was an earning woman, why couldn't she have a say in how some of their money was spent? she never said anything when we chose to squander money on airline tickets, why could not she buy a box she like'?<sup>11</sup>

So, Manju Kapur has commented on the depth, richness and complexity of social and political life, human nature and the peculiar conditions of Indian women in society. Virmati's total surrenders to Harish and Astha's struggle to live creatively, reconciling with her married life are very much a part of the politics of gender. Thus, Manju Kapur herself has strong convictions about feminism. Apart from her belief in the equality of the gender and in the rights of both the gender to live their lives the ways they want. She seems to be in total agreement with the feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir where she fulminates :

'We open factories, the offer the facilities to women but we continues to held that marriage is for her a most honourable career freeing her from her need of any other participation in the collective life.'<sup>12</sup>

## References

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3. p. 144
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8. *A Married Woman*, 2002, p. 46
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11. p. 165
12. Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, Penguin Books, 1986, p. 167