

Portrayal of Indian Middle Class Women in Manju Kapur's Novels: Aspirations and Realities

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The purpose of this study is to analyze issues related to the middle class or upper middle class women. This study is based on three widely read novels of Manju Kapur entitled "Difficult Daughters", 'Married Woman', and 'Home'.

The women's question today is, therefore, no longer an issue confined to the position of women within the family or their rights to equality with men in different aspects of social life. It is part of the total, far broader question regarding the direction of

change that our society is taking - economic, social, political, and the intellectual perception and analysis of that process. It is in this context that the role of women is discussed in the novels of Manju Kapur.

The idea that all women were meant to get married and be submissive to their husbands was given a second look when we read the novels of Manju Kapur. While Manju Kapur's first novel is a family saga against the historical backdrop of partition, her second novel *A Married Woman* (2002) is a work of investigative reporting on the most controversial and political issue of the demolition of Babri Masjid and a woman's obsession with love and lesbianism. The novel is a kind of narrative on a woman's incompatible marriage and resultant frustration and the contemporary political turmoil in its historical context. Her third novel 'Home' explores the complex terrain of the Indian family and reveals many issues that are deep rooted within the family the revolt against the age-old traditions, quest for identity, the problems of marriage; and lastly the women's struggle for her survival.

In the first phase, the women's question emerged essentially in the context of the identity crisis of the new educated middle class. Manju Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individual caged with in the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunged into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds. The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as a woman caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day.

The writer addresses many issues that are related to the middle class women. Whether or not a girl has the right to make her own choices in life is an issue dragged this way and that, for a long time in our country. Facing equal assault from the chauvinists who declare that woman's place is inside the house, and the feminists who condemn the idea of taking the husband's surname after marriage, the idea finds a middle path here. There is after all a difference between possessing and protecting. The book deals with the idea of education for a girl for her sake, not just to enable her to land a suitable match. *Difficult Daughters* is the story of a freedom struggle. While India fights for freedom from the British Raj, Virmati fights for the freedom to live life on her terms. Like so many other Indian girls, she wants to decide what to study and where, whom to marry and when. In the end it appears that she might have achieved all that but it ceases to be important. For in the throes of the struggle, she loses a part of herself. She is torn in two halves, one of which is on the side she is fighting against. All this when India attains freedom. But at the cost of Partition. At the cost of losing half its soul. At the cost of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives, lost in the fire of communal hatred. India's hollow victory is mirrored in Virmati's. In all this the professor (fond of everything English) wields considerable influence, although in a catalytic sort of way. Just like Britain did in the tragedy of Partition.

Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and many others women writers as an individual rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the silence of suffering trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self. This woman is trying to be herself and yet does not wish to break up the family ties. Since many social reformer helped the women to cross the threshold of family life and move out into the outer world of freedom struggle and social reform, the woman is presented with varied opportunities not only today but also yesterday during freedom movement. Yet writing in 1998, Manju Kapur, in her novels presents women who try to establish their own identity. The women of India have indeed achieved their success in half a century of Independence, but if there is to be a true female, independence, much remains to be done. The fight for autonomy remains an unfinished combat. In her quest of identify, Virmati the central character of the novel *Difficult Daughters*, rebels against tradition. She is impelled by the inner need to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter.

I-‘Difficult Daughters’¹

Manju Kapoor’s *Difficult Daughters* is a feminist discourse not because she is a woman writing about women but because, as Jaidev puts it she “has understood a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible contexts”. 2. ‘*Difficult Daughters*’ is a skilful, enticing first novel by an Indian writer who prefers reality to magic realism. Manju Kapur’s sensuous pages re-create an intimate world where family groups sleep in the open air on the roof and wash themselves in the yard in the dewy cool of morning, where love-making is furtive and urgent because another wife may be listening, and women’s lives move to a complex choreography of cooking, washing, weaving and mending, growing, picking, chopping and blending. This book offers a completely imagined, aromatic, complex world, a rare thing in the first novel. Manju Kapur presents the yearning for autonomy and separate identity in her women protagonists in this post-modern novel in a traditional thread.

It is impossible for Virmati to accept a physical relationship. She is haunted by a deep sense of guilt. The formal marriage, a social and public statement, is a must for her. It is this which will establish her identity even if it is as the professor’s second wife. Marriage thus for her means deliverance from the fear of being socially condemned, a possibility which will perhaps bring her back into the fold and relieve her from the sense of insecurity and uncertainty. The earlier generation of her mother saw no reason to rebel. There was complete acceptance in life. Kasturi is an example of the typical feminine attitude—to procreate in order to bring about life and pleasure. To run her home, first a joint family and later her own, is happiness for her. Like Kasturi, for Ganga the Professor’s wife, marriage is a religious and a social institution, where love is not the basis of marriage. She too has a superb domestic sensibility. Her cooking is enjoyed by her educated husband anglicized to a point, and who is otherwise very aloof. Just living with him, and bearing his children is enough for her. However in Virmati, there is a struggle between the head and the heart, the physical and moral; Virmati gives way to her heart and body.

Virmati’s daughter Ida, who belongs to the post independence generation, is strong and clearheaded. She breaks up her marriage as she is denied maternity by her husband. The forced abortion is also the termination of her marriage. Ida by severing the marriage bond frees herself from male domination and power and also from conventional social structures which bind women. She has that strength which Virmati lacks. Swarna Lata, Virmati’s friend, is also a clearheaded, strong woman. She too experiences tension with her parents over the issue of marriage but unlike Virmati she channelizes her energy into a new direction which gives her a sense of group identity. It also breeds ideas of radicalism and militancy but what is admirable is

the fact that she can build these ideas of independence into her marriage without destroying the structure of the family. Her marriage rests on the condition that it would not hamper her work.

The fight for autonomy and separate identity remains an unfinished combat and a million dollar question. Throughout this novel ida's declaration echoes that she doesn't want to be like her mother and wants to assert her autonomy and separate identity. Ida wants liberty and doesn't want to compromise as did her mother. This idea of the novel can be summed up in the utterance of angry Ida :“This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word-brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore.”³ Perhaps it is this inability of Virmati to strike independent roots and grow that makes Ida remark like this. The search is that of Virmati's daughter, Ida, as she seeks to reconstitute her mother's history. Ida, an educated woman, divorced and childless, apparently leads a freer life than her mother's in external terms; yet inside her she feels, even if not quite so acutely, some of the same anxieties as had plagued her mother: 'No matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately'⁴.

Trampling patriarchal norms, Virmati defies societal expectation to assert her individuality and hopes to achieve self fulfillment. But what does she really get? She is a loser whose acts totally alienate her from her own family and she fails to create a space for herself for which she had been striving all along. Rollason (2004) comments, “In the micro-state to which her destiny leads her, she has no family or close friends. She attains a near-exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, Virginia Woolf's famous 'room of one's own': and yet she falls”.⁵

Today is but 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, decides for themselves whether they want to be homemakers or more. Marriage is still the reason for their birth. Freedom is more than just being aloud out for shopping with friends. Manju Kapur presented women's emancipation and striving for some space in such a manner that we read not just with our eyes but also with our heart. “Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power of freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones. Her relationship with the professor, for instance.Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike

independent roots and grow.... Eventually, marriage to the man of her choice in no triumphs either...”⁶

II- ‘A Married Woman’⁷

In her novel ‘A Married Woman’ Manju Kapur has taken writing as a protest, a way of mapping from the point of a woman’s experience. Kapur negotiates different issues emerging out of a socio-political upheaval in her country. The novel is a sincere confession of a woman about her personality cult in the personal allegory of a bad marriage. In a realistic way, she has described the Indian male perception of woman as a holy cow even though women are not very interested in history and those in power trying to twist and turn historical facts to serve their own purposes. As a writer of new generation in an atmosphere of the nation’s socio –political flux, Kapur has recorded the truth in her fictive narrative. With zeal to change the Indian male perception, she describes the traumas of her female protagonists from which they suffer, and perish in for their triumph.

A Married Woman deals with women’s issues in the present context. It is an honest and seductive story of love, passion and attachment set at the time of political and religious turmoil in India. Driven by a powerful physical relationship with a much younger woman, the main character of the novel risks losing the acquisitions of her conventional marriage and safe family. The novel raises the controversial issue of homosexual relationship in a challenging way. After all gay and lesbian relationships are not mere fancies. This is getting more and more visible in modern societies though we may or may not accept it.

As a married woman Astha, the protagonist, becomes an enduring wife and sacrificing mother. Her temperamental incompatibility with her corporate thinking husband compels her to play the role of "mother and father" for her children. This denies her self fulfillment and leads to the collapse of the institution of marriage. Discontentment leads her to defiance and restlessness. Her anxiety, discomfort, loneliness and isolation do not encourage her to give voice to her unhappiness over her troubled relationship, rather it prompts her to develop the feelings of guilt, negativity and lack of self- esteem in facing the challenges of her life. Restlessness drives her to enjoy absolute loneliness, a sort of entrapment by the family, its commitments, its subtle oppression and she yearns for freedom. In the midst of a family and its vast minefield of income, expenditure, rights, responsibilities, knowledge, discontent, restlessness and dependency, Astha enjoys the fate of the poorest. She is suffocated with the growing needs of her family and "always adjusting to everybody's needs". (227) Astha understands a married woman's place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and

economic death in her Indian status. She feels for herself that "A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth", (231) are the necessary prerequisites of a married woman. She contemplates marriage a terrible decision as it puts her in a lot to enjoy bouts of rage, pain and indecision. Judging the male impression of woman she thinks that a married woman is an object of "mind fucking". (218) She does not think "marriage is just sex" (275) rather it provides interest, togetherness and respect. Being torn between her duty and responsibility, faith and fact, public ethos and personal ethics she thinks "a tired woman cannot make good wives", (154) and struggles for an emotional freedom from the scourge of the nation.

In *A Married Woman* (2002), the second of her three novels, Manju Kapur frankly depicts the love affair between two women, but less attention has been paid to the historical and political context in which that relationship develops. The tale that thus unfolds powerfully explores how, in a still-traditionalist India entering the age of globalization, evolving personal relations on the micro social level are shaped by wider historical forces, yet can in their turn reshape that same history in an adumbration, potentially utopian even if partial and temporary, of new and more diverse forms of human relationship.

In her interview with Nivedita Mukherjee, Kapur says, "it is an attempt to inject an element of artistic and emotional coherence. Actually a relationship with a woman does not threaten a marriage as much as a relationship with a man."⁸ The novel exposes the domestic relationship. Kapur has remained very truthful in presenting the women and the challenges they face in their personal, professional, religious and socio-political levels.

Manju Kapur present in her novel the changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self sacrificing women towards self assured assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands and in this way providing a medium for self expression.

III- 'Home'⁹

'Home' quite fascinatingly, if not very eloquently, shows the choking closeness and destructive limitations of Indian family values. It is a closet dark world where any hint of individual expression is swiftly trampled to death, to be substituted with deadened conformity. This novel is about the family of Banwari Lal. The shop owner Banwari Lal, his sons Yashpal and Pyarelal and their wives and children and it explores the world of joint families. This world of joint families is not the large happy make believe families of films. It is a world trying to grapple with complexities of adjusting your aspirations and individualities with those of the

others inside closed walls of the house, facing challenges of generational changes, trying to accommodate growing children in narrow personal spaces and even narrower working spaces. This world of joint families does have altruistic, elders, a mutual support system and intimacy that makes joint family living such a pleasure and pain, but the novel does not dwell much on these aspects, it rather focuses on tensions and rivalries, almost a Darwinian struggle of finding your own space for catching the sunlight and growing up, escaping the shadows of the others, who came before you or who have more rights than you.

The story that had started with the tale of Sona and Rupa finally finds its calling in Nisha-Sona's daughter who spends her childhood, scarred by incestuous abuse, at auntie Rupa's home. But it is her later pursuit in life-studying English literature in a university, falling in love with a low-caste boy, forcefully standing up to her conservative family, despairing at being jilted by the lover, her courage in struggling with the meanness of life, her attempts at finding her place in an uninformed society that refuses to recognize the promise of her merits, her petty jealousies, unarticulated complaints and simmering frustrations that inevitably accompanies a life riddled with disappointments- that become central to the concern of the readers.

In all the three novels, cited above, we notice that a woman's first encounter with her body becomes a significant point of departure for her. The female body is always at a disadvantage. The woman is either silent about her sexuality as in 'Home' or defiant as in 'Difficult Daughters' or rebel as in 'A Married Woman'. For a woman, sexuality is a domain of restriction, danger and repression. It can also be argued that sexuality becomes of a site woman's oppression.

Grounded in cultural, religious and social traditions a woman's body is pure as long as it is untouched by man. Elements of feminism occur when one has experienced sex. But loss of virginity has multiple implications in women's life. This may happen in marriage or outside marriage. This inflicts a shame in their lives. What is pleasure for a man is a sin for a woman, what is desire for one is a disgrace for the other, what is fun for one is a scandal for other. Various female characters of Manju Kapur , Virmati, Astha and Nisha too move into this forbidden territory. It is ironical that Virmati has to face rejection first at the hand of her mother and later from her own daughter. Astha is disillusioned with her rich family setup and find solace in the company of another woman while Nisha has to wait for a very long time in spite of all her physical and mental attainments due to astrological reasons.

It is the Voice of Jane Eyre hunting through the passage of ‘Difficult Daughters:’ ‘I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen: that then I desired more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character, than was here within my reach’ (Bronte, 110). When we Compare it with the desire of Virmati : ‘It was useless looking for answers inside home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom and the bright lights of Lahore Colleges’. (22)

Manju Kapur , being a novelist primarily concerned with the problems of the newly emerging urban middle class “The female protagonists of her novels protest against male domination and the marginalization of woman. Man has subjugated woman to his will, used to promote his sexual gratification but never has he desired to elevate her to her genuine rank. He has done all he could do to database and enslave her mind.”¹⁰

A woman is a woman, and a woman she must remain but not a ‘man’s shadow self’, ‘an appendage’, ‘an auxiliary’ and the ‘unwanted and neglected other’. A woman is held to represent the ‘othernesses of man, his negative. Vandita Mishra comments in *The Pioneer*: “Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power of freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones. Her relationship with

the professor, for instance.Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow.... Eventually, marriage to the man of her choice in no triumph either...”

Simon de Beauvoir finds man –woman nexus quite unsymmetrical and uncomplimentary for – “man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined criteria, without reciprocity.” Manju Kapur supported this idea that a woman is never regarded as an autonomous being since she has always been assigned a subordinate and relative position in our society. “Man can think of himself without woman. She can not think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees.....she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex.....absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental the inessential as opposed to the essential.”¹¹

The portrayal of woman in Indian English fiction as the silent victim and up holder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone a tremendous change and is no longer presented as a passive character. However, Mrs. Kapur seems aware of the fact that the women of India have indeed achieved their success in sixty years of independence, but if there is to be a true female independence, too much remains to be done. We see the emergence of new women in Manju Kapur's heroines, who do not want to be rubber dolls for others to move as they will. Defying patriarchal notions that enforce women towards domesticity, they assert their individuality and aspire self reliance through education. They nurture the desire of being independent and leading lives of their own. They want to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond a husband and children. They are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action oriented. All protagonists know they can not depend on others to sort out the domestic situation and proceed to tackle it on their own. In spite of getting education and freedom the women protagonists of Manju Kapur's novels does not blossom into new woman in the real sense. Though they dare to cross one patriarchal threshold, they are caught into another, where their free spirits are curbed and all they do is 'adjust compromise and adapt.'

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