

MANJU KAPUR'S SEARCH FOR HOME : A SHUTTLE FROM DIFFICULT

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Manju Kapur , a professor at Miranda House for English in Delhi, has recently emerged as a new novelist in the world of Indian English Fiction. Her first novel, *Difficult Daughters* published in 1998 received the Commonwealth Award for the Eurasian region. She has vividly painted the inner turmoil of her female protagonists in her two novels, *Difficult Daughters* and *Home*. Manju Kapur has indeed created sensation in the literary world by voicing the inner tribulations of her protagonists in an emphatic manner. Though much has been spoken about her feministic concern and treatment of gender issues in her novels. My paper throws light on the shuttle of her female protagonists from a feeling of homelessness to a home.

Manju Kapur's two novels, *Difficult Daughters* and *Home* present the dilemma of women protagonist. Virmati, the main character of *difficult daughters* finds her 'home' in the next novel. She is born in a joint family of Amritsar. The protagonist being born in a family of high repute leads life with high morals. However the course of her life changes from the moment she comes in contact with Professor. Professor is a man already married and lives as a tenant in their house. Virmati falls prey to his charms and charismatic persona. Professor though married , is deeply attracted towards Virmati and motivates her to pursue studies. Virmati is torn between the family pressure and her love. She is unable to comprehend her longing for professor. The family coaxes her to get married and settle down. But Virmati badly in love goes against the wishes of her family and shifts to Lahore. She does try to distant herself from Professor but fails. Throughout the novel Virmati leads a homeless life . her journey though starts from Amritsar, but shuttles between Lahore , Nahan and Amritsar . Virmati is never able to settle down and fix her roots at one place.

Her episode of love with Professor unsettles her and drives her to move to Lahore. The events in Lahore and her continuing love with Professor torment her, faltering her. Professor's intermittent visits to Lahore does not let Virmati snap her relationship with him. Virmati longs for her due status and social recognition in the society. Professor however fails to accept her socially and continues his illicit love. The desire to be acknowledged as Professor's wife tortures Virmati driving her to take refuge in Shanti Niketan. Professor recognises the need of the hour and marries her in a haste. Virmati dresses herself up as a bride :

“ The only thing she said she wanted were the red ivory bangles that the women of her family wore when they married’(186).

Marriage, a social commitment between husband and wife which must put all emotions and desires at rest does not prove of any solution for Virmati. Her marriage with Professor, for which she forever desired leaves her more disturbed and perplexed. “ Though married, she was dispossessed. Well so be it. She would walk tight-lipped, mute, on the path her destiny had carved out for her”(196).

Virmati overcomes all her anxieties and marries professor but the married life again makes her restless and dislocates her. She feels homeless regardless of being married. She resists living in the new home which constantly reminds her of Geeta's presence, Professor's first wife. Virmati on mention of coming to home from Amritsar admits her dislike for home to Professor: “ I don't mind going on a holiday with you, but I will not come home”(236) Manju Kapur in the end of the novel highlights the state of homelessness of Virmati . “ She didn't care if she never had a home, children,if she cut off her nose to spite her face. Right now, everything about her was aching so much,”(242)

Manju kapur is essentially known for highlighting the predicament of women characters through her writings . Shakuntala's words reiterate the atrocities forced upon women: “Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else”(15). Virmati the female protagonist of the novel is antagonist to the future planned by her family members specially her mother, for her. She is highly inspired by her cousin Shakuntala, and endeavours to do attain education and success in her life. “ it seemed to Virmati that her

family could talk of nothing else but her wedding. Every word they said had so little relation to her inner life that she felt fraudulent even listening to them, passively, immorally silent.”(64).

Professor too acts in an chivalric manner. He is madly in love with virmati and desires to possess her wholly. Though he wants her to pursue higher studies but still ,as a true male, dislikes her mingling with other persons. “ Getting involved with Swarna Lata, with Leela, with Kiran, with anybody and everybody except your husband” (241).

Virmati ,in love with Professor, refuses to marry Inderjit and resorts to end her life by drowning. Her family does not acknowledge her feelings towards her love . This compels Virmati to end her life as she cannot accept another man as her husband. Even under such circumstance, Professor does not openly acknowledge his love and acts meekly. Virmati in an defiant way acts against her family reputation. Her love and involvement with Professor is known by Prime Minister of the school administration. He politely asks Virmati to leave the school premises. Virmati besides carrying her luggage only takes “ the packet of Harish’s letters” which she attaches to herself(182). All the attempts by Virmati to elude her marriage is resented: “ Virmati’s year at Lahore ended much as it had begun, with the displeasure of her elders gathered thick around her head. This time, though she found it harder to accept their disapproval without question” (161). Virmati’s independence is loathed and looked down with indignation . Her decision to pursue education and remain single is criticised and brings her disrespect from her family members. Manju Kapur brings forth the era when women were born to be married. They were taught the ways of family life including cooking, stitching, embroiding etc . The novel explores the contrast between the non acceptance of women freedom when the whole nation was united together to fight for independence. The novelist hints at the attitude and moral fibre of the Indian society that attaches women’s role only for family purposes.

The ‘ homelessness’ mentioned by Manju Kapur in *Difficult Daughters* is dealt in the next novel. The protagonist Nisha finds her home in the next novel. Born and brought up in the traditional family who attaches extreme importance to marriage at the right time.

Manju Kapur voices concern for her female characters who essentially long for family ties but do not lose hold of their individuality also. Nisha , in *Home* is in contrast with Virmati in

Difficult Daughters for she does not succumb to being stereotyped by the values of a middle class joint family. Nisha acts as a rebel and takes up the path of economic independence which she is sure will lead to her liberation and assertion of her individuality. Nisha , the female protagonist is in search of a real ‘home’ . A home in true sense is a place that provides comfort relaxation and a sense of security to its inhabitants.

The novel resonates with the theme of economic independence of women who act against the traditional joint value system. Generally families adhering to the conventional values objected against women folk stepping out of the houses and confined them inside. Nisha keen to uplift herself and to establish her identity and individuality gets educated to establish her own business.

The ‘ Home’ like *Difficult Daughters* is set against the background of partition. She comments in the very beginning of the novel : “ The Banwari Lal family belonged to a class whose skills had been honed over generations to ensure prosperity in the market place. Their marriages augmented , their habits conserved. From an early age children were trained to maintain the foundation on which these homes rested. The education they received, the values they imbibed, the alliances they made had everything to do with protecting the steady stream of gold and silver that burnished their lives. Those who fell against the grain found in their homes knives that wounded , and once the damage had been done, gestures that reconciled” (1).

The whole narration attempts to establish the safe and secure values of traditional set up. When Yashpal, the elder son of Lala Banwari Lal falls in love with a girl of ordinary family. The boy’s mother creates hue and cry and calls the girl a witch. She recounts: “ The bride had to bring a dowry, come from the same background and understand the value of togetherness” (4).

Lala Banwari Lal, a pragmatic head of the family, soon approves of his son’s choice for he knows” This was not a democracy, in which freewheeling individualism could be allowed to wreck what was being so carefully built. United we stand, divided energy, time and money are squandered”(7). Sona the wedded wife of elder son is inflicted with numerous taunts from her mother-in-law as she is unable to bear any child for the family. She relentlessly prays to god:” Please, I am growing old , bless us with a child, girl or boy, I do not care, but I cannot bear the emptiness in my heart” (20).

Lala Banwari Lal is a strong believer of traditional family values and strives to keep the whole family together. He disapproves of letting his younger daughter-in-law to cook separately because he believes that “ separate kitchens led to a sense of mine and yours, dissatisfaction , emotional division, and an eventual parting of the ways”(13). He voices his notion of joint family “ If families did not even eat together, what was the point of living as a unit? You might as well emigrate, pursuing your autonomy in lonely isolation”(13). The story of the novel takes a turn when Banwari Lal’s daughter married to ---- dies and he is forced to bring her ten year old son, Vicky with him in Delhi. Since Sona is childless, Vicky is pushed towards her . The unwillingness of Sona to look after Vicky highlights the agony of women in joint families wherein their liking and disliking are not asked and catered to.

Sona’s life drags on till she joyfully discovers that she has conceived. Sona gives birth to a daughter, Nisha and then proudly becomes mother of a son who shall carry forward the name of the family.

Nisha is the female character around which the whole novel revolves. She is the one who is in constant search for a real home. From her childhood itself she has to face discrimination observed against females:”Nisha set up a wail.’ I want to go too’. ‘ You can’t ‘, said her mother shortly. ‘ Why ? Why can’t I ? ‘ ‘ It is better for girls to remain inside’. ‘ You will get black and dirty’. ‘ So what? Raju is black. Blacker than Vicky’(52). Nisha’s mother is typical woman belonging to joint family conservative traditions reiterates the ways of working for Nisha:”This is the life of a woman to look after her home, her husband, her children and give them food she has cooked with her own hands” (127). She propounds Nisha of “ the art of service and domesticity should shine in her daughter so brightly that she would overcome her negative karma to be a beacon in her married home”(129). For Sona, the true happiness for a girl lies in her own family. She states : “ What is there in happiness? A girl has to be happy everywhere.”(135)

The notion of ‘Home sweet home’ is shattered for Nisha in her own house. She is sexually abused by her own cousin brother, Vicky. Such is the impact and emotional pressure on Nisha that she begins to have nightmares. The peaceful and serene atmosphere one longs for in home is smashed for Nisha. The home becomes her home of nightmares- terrifying and intimidating her.

“ From being a child who went to sleep the minute her head hit the pillow, she refused to lie down or close her eyes”(64).Nisha to escape torment of every night , shifts to her aunt’s home. Aunt Rupa takes care of Nisha and she is able to overcome the anguish of nightmares. Uncle too , enjoys her company and fully supports her in her education. Nisha gradually starts feeling comfortable and homely in the new protective environment of her aunt’s home. “ How well Nisha is settling down...” admits Rupa(72).

Slowly years roll by and Nisha falls in love with a boy during her college life. But Manju Kapur again brings forth the stifling confines of traditional joint families. Nisha is forbidden to marry the boy as he belongs to a lower caste and is considered unsuitable for her. Nisha’s inner tribulations are expressed through her skin. Her skin gets discoloured and tarnished as she cannot control her life as per her wish. “ Nisha’s nights were now ones of restlessness. As she tossed and turned on her bed, her hands absently crept around the itchy patches on her skin.....Rub, rub, but the skin refused to be satisfied”(217). Nisha snaps off all familial relation after her love ends with Suresh. Nisha strives to establish her individuality and becomes an entrepreneur. She starts her own business of garment stitching . The work started by Nisha soon starts flourishing and gaining recognition. “ She learned to be meticulous in keeping track of every expense. What did it cost to make one suit? Salaries, rent, sewing machines and their depreciation, tea, cloth, hangers, plastic covers, scooter fares, threads, laces, hooks, scissors etc etc-nothing was too small to take into account.”(293-294). Nisha is married to a widower, Arvind who takes her to her real home. “ ‘ Now you are home,’ said Arvind as they climbed the stairs, he carrying her suitcase, she following on gold high heels. Home. “(322).

Though even after marriage she attempts to take care of her business and makes frequent visit to the shop. But her role now defined as of a daughter-in-law does not let her move out frequently. Soon Nisha conceives and later on gives birth to twins. “Ten months after Nisha’s marriage, twins were born. One girl, one boy. Her duty was over- God had been kind, however hard it was to believe”(336). Finally the homelessness experienced by Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* is not experienced by Nisha as she settles down in her life . Nisha with her initial struggle later on finds herself a home-possesses a family –husband and two children. She achieves contentment and experiences fulfilment of her role.

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