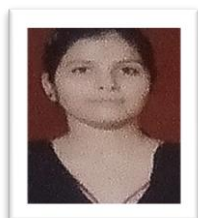


The Plight of Working Woman in a Traditional Joint Family: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Home*



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Abstract

The term 'working woman' is used in a very limited sense in the context of family and society. The fact is that every woman works and spends a lot of time on household work but it does not qualify her as a 'working woman' as her work is not remunerative. Only those women whose work earns remuneration are called 'working women'. Though the modern Corporate Houses have introduced the system of 'Work from Home' under which one can work from inside one's home remaining almost invisible and earn regular salary, yet most of the women have to go out to offices and shops for work under the prying eyes of the society in which the traditions allot gendered role –for women only household work. India has a tradition of joint family system in which a woman finds her career and her family incompatible. The women who want to assert their equality to male counterparts and wish to join certain job/work/profession of their choice to empower themselves have to take on the patriarchal set up in the society and face a long drawn struggle against the prevailing system to make their way as Nisha, the protagonist in Manju Kapur's 'The *Home*' has to do in order to establish herself as an entrepreneur in Karol Bagh, New Delhi.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Occupation, Joint-Family, Working-Woman, Business-Woman, Entrepreneur, Workshop, Traditional and Professional.

Introduction

Manju Kapur, whom Namita Gokhale introduces as 'an archivist of our troubled times', deals with the complexities of family life and the problems of women in traditional homes in urban India of the 20th century. In traditional Indian families, as presented in her novel *Home* (2006), a woman finds the career and the family almost incompatible. It is not possible for her to make and pursue a career and keep the family at the same time. She has to make a difficult choice between the two. Either because of the centuries of social conditioning or biological factor, women in traditional joint families are considered to be the primary care-giver of the family. They are supposed to shower their unconditional love and affection on their family members and keep their needs, particularly those of the old and the young, before their own. It is very hard for them to neglect their family without feeling the guilt of not meeting the needs of those whom they love. Those who really suffer are the very old and the very young because they need, above all, emotional care and concern for their happiness. Otherwise, they feel lost and alienated and suffer permanent damages even if their material want is fulfilled. The ideal career for them, therefore, is to join a good family through marriage and nourish it with their service and sacrifice. Educated and skilled women of modern India look beyond their home and hearth and aspire to make a career but even in progressive families, the aspirations of a young educated woman to make a career of her choice for seeking freedom and active life are not encouraged. Even if she prevails upon her parents and manages to have her way, her priorities often change with marriage and motherhood. Having a family and giving birth to children change her. In Indian joint families men generally do not handle kitchen and kids. So she gets no help and cooperation from her husband and hence pursuing a career which needs single-minded determination and an ability to ignore everything else to focus on the business becomes either very difficult or impossible for her.

Aim of the Study

Women constitute the half of human population and almost every woman works. Shobha De, a prominent Indian English Novelist, aptly asks,

"Show me a woman who does not work". But the term 'Working Woman' excludes the vast majority of women whose sincere work is not remunerative. Even the so called 'working women', particularly those of traditional joint families, have to face a lot of obstacles and restrictions in performing their work and pursuing their career. The modest aim of this paper is to consider this vital issue in its different aspects to create fresh perspective and offer relevant suggestion.

Review of Literature

Plight of working woman is an effect and extension of gender discrimination in a patriarchal Indian system of family and society and this subject has been dealt with extensively by various authors in their books and articles. A Bhskar Shukla's (2006) *Women on Women: A Feminist Study*, Vijay Kumar Roy's (2011) *Women's Voice in Indian Fiction in English*, Kalpana Rajput's (2012) *Remapping the Female Map: Jhumpa Lahiri and Manju Kapur*, Farzana S Ali's (2015) *Novels of Manju Kapur: A Critical Study*, Chandra Bhushan Singh's (2016) *Women's Perspectives in the Novels of Manju Kapur*, and Joel Kuortti's (2017) *Manju Kapur, the Novelist: A Bibliography* offer different perspective in respect of the issue at hand. Malti Agarwal's (2007) "Manju Kapur's *Home*: A Chronicle of Urban Middle Class in India", S Arthi's (2010) "A Feminist Analysis of Manju Kapur's Novel *Home*", Roman Motiram Janbandhu's (2014) "Feminism in the Novels of Manju Kapur", V Mahalakshamma's (2015) "Women in Manju Kapur's *Home*" Shruti Sangam and Sunita Tiwari's (2015) "Manju Kapur's *Home* : Nisha's Voice Among the Voiceless". Ajaz Ahmad Bhat's (2016) "Submissive and Rebellious Women in Manju Kapur's Novels *Difficult Daughters* and *Home*", Manju Rani's (2016) "Feminism in Manju Kapur's Novel *Home*", Punit Kaur's (2016) "Emancipation and Rehabilitation in Manju Kapur's *Home* : A Study of Family Values" and R Sridevi and Veena Selvam's (2018) "Voices of Feminism in Manju Kapur's *Home*" deal with various aspects of the predicaments of a working woman particularly in *Home* and explore the complexities and the possibilities in the context of the problem chosen for discussion.

Hypothesis

The basic concept is that the desire to work in chosen field and scale the ladders of success transcends gender and family/social status. But Indian women, particularly those of the urban middle class joint family are conditioned for their domestic role and deprived of education and training for a career. But even many such women have ambition and courage to rise above their family oriented responsibilities and restrictions and carve out a place for themselves in the male dominated areas of operation.

Discussion

The novels of Manju Kapur preceding *Home* (2006) show concerns with plight of working women in traditional joint families. In *Difficult Daughters* (1998) Viramati's mother never thinks of her daughter's higher education and job prospects. She does not like Shakuntala's (her niece) life style of rejecting marriage and staying away from home for the sake of

a job. She is also opposed to her daughter's going away from home to work in a school. In *A Married Woman* (2002) Astha has to face resentments of her husband and in-laws when she decides to join a school. In *the immigrant* (2008) Nina has to leave her job of lectureship in a prestigious college in Delhi and go to Canada after her marriage. Even in *Custody* (2011) written after *Home*, the protagonist Shagun's mother, Mrs. Sabharwal is strongly opposed to her daughter having a career that would allow all kinds of lechery near her lovely daughter. Just after finishing her education, Shagun is married off to Raman whose only expectation from her was that she would look after home and children. But this has been dealt with in detail and all seriousness in Manju Kapur's *Home*.

Though there are three working women in *Home*-Rupa, Nisha and Pooja- the focus of the novel is on the plight of Nisha, the protagonist. Since her childhood, she had been staying with Rupa Masi (her mother's sister), who had been running a cottage industry of making and selling pickles, and she thought that she too could do her own business when she grew up. But her Masi knew that Nisha's traditional joint family would not allow her to do business under conventional situations.

In traditional Indian joint family, girls are hardly ever educated and trained for a career or vocation. In *Home*, Sunita is married at the age of 18 and when Nisha joins XI class, Rupa wonders over the purpose of education: "God knew what use an education would be to a girl from a trader family, one who was only going to marry and produce children (125)". The grandmother would pat Nisha's head and bless, "Live forever, bloom, be fruitful, have sons and grandsons (129)". A mother is not supposed to do any other work except looking after children and make their future comfortable in home. When Nisha has nothing to do, she wants to work out side just like her brothers. But her idea is not well received. She finds herself as the victim of gender discrimination when she feels that "she cannot work outside like her brothers" (145). Her humble but emotional appeal to her father, "If only you could take me with you. Papaji ... (268)" falls flat.

When Nisha tries to seek her father's favour for starting her business citing his helping hand extended to Rupa Masi, her father replies, "Rupa Masi does not have children. In business one has to "work, work, all the time, all the time (287)". Rupa has the same view as she reflects, "Nisha must understand that women's work is allowable only in unconventional situations (no children) and respectability demanded it be avoided as much as possible (212)".

Nisha, the most important female character in *Home* had never envisioned for her a traditional arranged marriage and her role as a house-wife in the family. Since her college life, she has been planning a love-marriage with Suresh. She had never imagined of her husband as the chief bread-winner and her relationship with him as a provider-dependent one. She believed in equal relationship. She wanted to marry him and work together to earn their living. She tells her Rupa Masi, "We can both work after we marry. We are not asking anybody to support

us.”(212) And her stay with Rupa Masi for a long time had filled her with such ideas. She tells her, “Masi, if you do business, so can I?”(211) But her Masi points out the limitations for her. Her Masi was in the business because she was childless; she belonged to a small family; and her husband, Prem Nath, a big hearted man, encouraged her to keep herself occupied. It was not the same with Nisha. She belonged to joint family. She needs to understand it and keep mum.

Nisha’s mother, Sona, cannot imagine any occupation for a woman other than the traditional occupation of washing and cooking for the family. When Nisha suffers from eczema and the doctor advises her to keep away from washing and cooking, it sounds unnatural to Sona. She feels horrified at this attempt to wrest a woman’s occupation away from her. She intervenes and tells the doctor, “But doctor, there is nothing wrong with her hands...(239)The novelist, Manju Kapur, comments on the lot of woman in a traditional family: “the woman had always done the personal clothing. It was their duty and their joy to precede every bath by washing for the family- scrape, scrub, beat and wring the dirt out of the garments of their loved ones.”(240) Obviously, she was not supposed to get her mother’s consent for and co-operation in starting a business.

But starting some business and making a career stares in Nisha’s face when she finds herself alienated in the family after the marriage of her younger brother, Raju. Initially she wants to help her Masi with her pickle business but her mother silences her saying, “When you marry, you can do anything your husband permits.”(267) Then she wants her father to let her work in his shop and gain some experience. She tells him, “I have seen girls working in shops. Why should it be only Ajay, Vijay and Raju? There must be something I too can do.”(268) but she cannot work in the shop as her brothers or servants do. Her father knew that retailing was strictly man’s business, talking to strangers, cajoling customers, showing them wares, negotiating with buyers, travelling, etc. that was not considered to be a good profession for a woman. He thought that Nisha would fit nowhere. He was aware that in some shops selling readymade garments in Karol Bagh, girls were employed in the Ladies’ Section but he could not allow his own daughter to stand along with them for eight long hours. So, he persuades Nisha to join a children academy as a teacher as it would be a good time pass-the work is demanding and the children are interesting. Nisha joins the school in her neighbourhood and breaks the tradition of her family: “The woman of the house had never worked. Not one. And here he was sending his beloved daughter out in the world because she did not have her own home to occupy herself with.”(270)

But Nisha was not satisfied with her routine work in the school. She complains, “Why should I sit at home and wait for proposals?(226)”. She wanted economic independence, emancipation and empowerment. She wanted to work and achieve. She had the metals of an entrepreneur in her and she wanted to start her own business. The mounting

tension in her life owing to her family shifting all attention to Pooja and her baby necessitated an all absorbing occupation to keep her busy from morning to night just like the men in the house. She wants to cross the gender barrier and work like men and take risk. So, she took a cue from her school colleague, Mrs. Tyagi, and decided to start the business of making salwar and suits. She knew she had the background and the resources. But the women in the family resented her starting her own business. Sona asked, “She is going to get married, why waste time and money in all this?”(290) Her Sushila Aunty had her own reservations regarding the idea of a woman starting a business. She asked, “And what about the money? Would what she earned be her own or go back to the family, as in the case of the sons?”(290) But fortunately for Nisha, as the tradition battles with transition, shops becomes showrooms with mirrors and home is fragmented into flats, she is allowed to venture into business. The men in the family decided to help her and let her stand on her own feet. She did not want any gift but a loan from her father as a start up capital. Her father was trusting with his help and support and a loan of Rs. 25000. She resigned from the school and started ‘Nisha Collections’ in the basement of the house. It was her first step towards her empowerment. First time she feels proud of her to find that “Her father trusted her as he would have trusted a son (291)”.

Nisha’s venture, once started, receives help and co-operation from the women of the family. Her mother supervised in the basement in her absence. Her business takes off and its size begins to expand gradually. She becomes an entrepreneur and a responsible business woman. In the Boutique she takes proper care of her workers, raw materials and the quality and pricing of the finished products. She earns well and repays half the amount of Rs. 25000 loan to her father. Whenever she is absent, she deposes her mother to look after the Boutique and the Workshop reminding her, “My reputation will be spoilt. Do you know how competitive the market is? (294)”.

Though her imminent marriage posed a threat to her business, yet she had her priority fixed: “She would only consent to a match with a family who let her work.”(297) Her mother opposed such conditions. According to her: “Families wanted a daughter-in-law, wife and mother; husbands were not looking for business women.”(297) But her father stood by her saying, “If she wants to work, she would be allowed to. My first duty is to her, not to her future family.”(297) Sona considers her husband’s view insane but Yashpal was firm. R. Sridevi and Veena Selvem makes an important observation about Nisha’s success in her business venture:

“She defies the social structure; she receives good orders in business by which she becomes a successful business woman. Her economic emancipation makes her discard the social codes and invigorates her to display her talents (2018:1740)”.

Malti Agarwal echoes the same sentiment when she observes about the protagonist, Nisha, “Manju Kapur’s depiction of her heroine, her travelling the labyrinth of rules and regulations of traditional

middle class milieu and stepping out to start earning for her existence are superb (2007: 73)"

Nisha's business prospect was taken care of when her marriage was finally negotiated with Arvind. His was a small family-he had only an old mother. He had also agreed to let Nisha come to Karol Bagh to supervise her business till he found a suitable place and shifted he Boutique nearer to their home in Daryaganj. But after marriage, his words proved to be mere lip services and Nisha came to realise what half of the female population in the house entailed-a woman may be as professional as a man but she is never seen just as a professional but as a woman. Though Nisha's new family was a small family of three people, she was sucked in the family: "Her mother-in-law claimed her attention morning, noon and night, in the kitchen, in the bedroom, in drawing-room, theirs and others. She received and gave attention, care, concern and food, with little time left over for anything else."(323) Nisha could hardly find time to attend to her work. She needed to work hard at workshop to prove her worth. In relationship, she needed to work harder to keep her husband and mother-in-law pleased. It was just impossible.

Arvind's hypocrisy makes Nisha almost helpless in pursuing her venture. Though her working for her 'Nisha Creations' was laid down as a condition of her marriage, she could see the condition melting into nothing before her eyes. Arvind does not ask her directly to stop her business but he always brings his mother between them whenever Nisha seeks his permission to visit her workshop. He thinks that looking after his mother was the exclusive duty of his wife. Without his full support, she did not feel comfortable and secure. Her going gets tough and to keep her business going, she had to delegate a part of her work to Pooja.

Nisha's management of her business suffered further setback within two months of her marriage when she discovered that she was pregnant. But she visits her shop even during her pregnancy. Now her mother-in-law had got another stick to wield against her. Nisha cannot go to Karol Bagh without leaving her mother-in-law worried. The old woman was very insistent about rest. She hovered round Nisha anxiously telling her, "No going here and there. It is a big strain, something might happen, then you will regret it for the rest of your life."(225)Arvind also favours his mother saying, "She has waited so long; it is natural."(225) Her parents could not intervene because "it was a question of someone else's child."(226) Rupa Masi, the business woman, also favours her stopping work and says, "Now is the time for you to have children and enjoy them (226)". Her family members assured her that she was clever enough to start her business again after meeting family obligations. V Mahalakshamma comments on her situation:

"Therefore, we can say that marriage, the promised end in a traditional society, becomes an enclosure that restricts a woman's movement. Nisha was like a flying bird that has been prisoner in the cage of social norms (2015:146)".

Finding no support from any quarter, Nisha desperately tried to run 'Nisha Creations' from her Daryaganj home but it only multiplied her problem as everybody wanted to take advantage of her weak position. Her only arrangement to run her business and sustain its growth failed and she had to handover the responsibilities to Pooja and let it be 'Pooja Creations'. She gives birth to twins-a boy and a girl-and becomes a woman of the world. Her motherhood puts a final seal on her any prospect of business. Even Rupa Masi tells her, "You know, beti; you can always start a business you have shown a flair for it. But this time with your baby, this will not come again (334)". R M Janbandhu Comments on the predicament of Nisha: "It is a marriage and childbearing that she is forced to ultimate happiness and fulfilment as the society refuses to give her achievement in profession, recognition and identity (2014:101)".

Findings

It is obvious that Nisha's hard-earned success as a woman entrepreneur does not buy her peace and satisfaction. Rather it threatens her future prospect as a wife and she has to give it up to make way for her mother-in-law and children in her life and submit herself to the wheels of patriarchy. Manju Kapur shows that Indian women are perhaps the most plastic personalities in the world ever-ready to reconcile themselves to their situations and, to know their place which is in homes and to devote themselves to their husbands, children and in-laws rather than risk a broken-home, divorce, etc. Making a choice between the career and the family is very delicate as the women are unable to make the necessary shift in their thinking to set things right. Regarding either career or family as all important is an extreme view and it reflects sentimentality at best or losers at worst. There is need to strike a balance between the two by seeking the co-operation of the members of their family who press for the traditional division of work and claim undivided attention, and urge them to subdue their ego to put someone ahead of them-who had got it right. Hiring domestic helps from the extra money generated by the job or business may also help. In such dealings, however, the relationship should reflect not power but love. It seems good that Nisha's venture is taken over by Pooja, another woman as it shows Manju Kapur's defiance of patriarchy and its agencies.

Conclusion

Like other novels of Manju Kapur, her *Home* also deals with the emotional and intellectual upheavals of Indian women in a traditional joint family with a patriarchal set up but it is the women who hold the centre stage in the family in their various roles such as mother, wife, lover, daughter etc. The males are simply pushed to the background as passive spectators of the events around them. However, the male superiority in the family persists as it operates through the agency of women who have been conditioned for ages to perpetuate the patriarchal set up by treating their daughters as second class citizens and always acknowledging the superiority of male sex as shown in their preference for male child and

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preferential treatment to male children or adults. So the plight of women in the family is their own making though society and tradition have also their effective role in it. On the surface level, Manju Kapur seems to reconcile with the predicament of Indian women but at deeper level, there is an imminent solution, a new way.

Suggestion

As the environment in the traditional joint family and the society is still not congenial for working women, there is need of making vigorous efforts to improve it and to create proper space for working women. Both men and women are responsible for gender equality in the family and society, so both of them should work in coordination for this purpose. It needs to be understood that a working woman is ever an asset and never a liability and her work will improve the standard of living and sweeten the general stream of life.

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