

Different Shades of New Women in the Novels of Manju Kapur

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Abstract

Empowered women will not only help in bringing gender equality but these women will also help the society to lay a necessary foundation for a healthy, peaceful, prosperous and equitable world. Manju Kapur's novels present an urgent manifesto for an egalitarian society where women are respected and recognised in all spheres of life. Women need to be freed of the limits set by the patriarchal societies. The patriarchal paternalistic and moralistic laws and policies are responsible for the secondary status of a woman in the society. This paper explores the intriguing distinct pattern of evolution of 'New Woman' presented in the novels of Manju Kapur. Her protagonists stoically fight against the patriarchal system, breaking the stereotypical image of a docile wife, sacrificing mother, and holy woman. Her female characters speak their mind to break the pseudo-moral system of male-dominated society.

Keywords:- Quest, Marriage, New Woman, Patriarchy, Egalitarian, Self-actualisation, Equitable, Feminism.

Introduction

Women have always been conditioned to adopt socially preferred ways of living but education has aroused in them a desire to seek self-fulfillment through self realisation. Manju Kapur's novels demonstrate that many women now prefer to choose their own path guided by their own sense of self-regard. These new women have to bear the sufferings as a price of their freedom and individuality in the male dominated society. The greatest feminist of all time, Simone de Beauvoir had fairly highlighted the plight of a woman in a patriarchal setup. "At the moment that women are beginning to share in the making of the world, this world still belongs to men: men have no doubt about this, and women barely doubt it. Refusing to be the Other, refusing complicity with man, would mean renouncing all the advantages an alliance with the superior caste confers on them" (Beauvoir 13). The women protagonists of Kapur's novels are the embodiment of social change. The theme of woman's quest for individuality has continued in all her works – *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant*, *Custody* and *Brothers*. Her female characters show signs of social and political awakening with their new thinking which is independent of their social conditioning. The female protagonists of her novels are presented with deep yearning to fulfill their emotional and spiritual needs. Their pursuit for autonomy made them look beyond their domestic domain. Her female leads always look for companionship based on understanding and these women do not get satisfied in the pseudo security, comfort and respectability provided to them for being a docile female in the male dominated social structures rather seek liberation in true sense at any price. Thus, these women fall in the category of 'New Women'.

The Birth of A New Woman

The idea of 'New Woman' surfaced in the late 19th century. The term "New Woman" was first used by an Irish writer named Sarah Grand in her famous article "The New Aspect of the Woman Question" published in March 1894 in the *North American Review*. 'New women' in her article referred to independent women who exerted their autonomy in the domestic and private spheres of life. After that this term has been used for a woman who fights oppressive social conventions to gain autonomy and self-fulfillment. Menon rightly states, "Feminism is not about that final triumph, but about the gradual transformation of the social field so decisively that old makers shift forever" (Menon 222). Similarly, 'New woman' also represents a woman who is trying to bring in equality in a society which has been male centered and male dominated. For a long time females have been made to work for males gratification. This inequality is so deeply ingrained that we are just able to



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scratch the surface. Still a very small fraction of women in the society have truly accessed power to be independent of male domination. Transition in the status of women in society can be viewed by looking back in the time when no woman got access to the world outside the domain of household. All women who have taken a step to claim their righteous position are viewed as "New Women". These women have multiple facets to their characteristics. As societal norms change, so is the face of a new woman. Vijayalakshmi Seshadri writes about the new women's fiction, "Women have to their credit a whole series of literary achievements over the last ten to twelve years, and the fact that these creative activities have extended to the urban middle class will hopefully result in an increased literary output. However, it is even more important that they should entail corresponding changes in the audience and the critical scene so that the new woman and her portrayal in literature will find adequate acceptance" (Seshadri 180). We can see confidence in contemporary women to strive for success regardless of any challenges that they may face due to guardians of patriarchy.

**The Female Figures in
Manju Kapur's Fiction:
The Beginning of a
New Lineage**

Manju Kapur has articulated emotions, apparent trepidation and subjugation of women in her novels. 'Difficult Daughters' shows how daughters are more progressive than their mothers and instead of walking on old terrain, they make their own path. Mothers hold fast to their traditions and daughters who take to modern ways of life are labeled difficult by society. Kasturi has followed the traditional norms of the society and has often guided Virmati to follow her footsteps but her yearning for self-autonomy and individual identity makes her a rebellion. She fights for her right to education and individual space. Kasturi who lost her identity and joys of life in fulfilling the demands of her family, tries to suffocate the innocent desires and aspirations of her daughter. The lack of understanding between mother and daughter is also evident even in the next generation when Ida is seen reconstructing her dead mother's past to know her. Virmati who broke many traditional ties to be independent, fails to understand the pain of her daughter in her married life. Harish did not provide her fulfilling life but she failed to break the tie of traditional bond of marriage but Ida moved a step further from her mother to claim autonomy and refused to lead an unsatisfied married life. She took divorce whereas Virmati even after years of financial independence could not gather courage to make her new independent world. She became a puppet in the hands of the professor. Arpita rightly mentioned, "Feminism seeks to address the inequalities that exist between men and women in a society. Feminists refuse to accept these disparities as natural and seek to examine the material reality of the lives of women to understand and explain the pedagogy of oppression" (Mukhopadhyay 11). For the harmonious existence of human beings, Kapur emphasises on making a more egalitarian, fair, pragmatic and balanced gender relationships in a society.

Manju Kapur's second novel "A Married Woman" is based on the life of an educated, upper middle-class working woman, Astha. Kapur has presented different facets of a married woman through the female characters of Astha and Pipilika. Pipilika refuses to lead the wretched life of widows enforced on her by patriarchal society. Margaret Walter writes that according to John Stuart Mill, "What we presently call womanliness is something artificial, 'the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulations in others'" (Walter 47). Hence, we find the true representation of 'New Woman' in the writings of Manju Kapur.

Trampling the archaic patriarchal norms, Astha defies societal expectations to attain autonomy. She is denied the right to manage her own finances, freedom to act and choose on her own. Hence, she rebels against the falsification of male chauvinism. Kapur shows Astha taking sweet revenge from her husband by exploring sexual relationship with Peeplika. Her presentation of lesbianism is about choice and resistance to male supremacy and an outright rejection of hierarchy which validates male chauvinistic approach in the patriarchal society. Kapur deeply probes the psyche of her own characters and insightfully analyses their relationship with the society at large. She sensitively discerns the taboo realm of lesbianism and extra-marital relationships. Moreover, she does not adopt the Western model of co-existence outside marriage and reaffirms the faith in the institution of marriage.

Manju Kapur's 'Home' exhibits the idea of women's emancipation through the protagonist, Nisha who emerges as a 'New Woman'. She finds herself caught in a dichotomy between her individuality and the societal obligations. Manju Kapur not only presents a feminist view that breaks the archaic model of male dominated society, but also recommends to create a harmonious balance between tradition and modernity for a contemporary woman. She reveals the bitter truth of the patriarchal society where women are not safe even in their homes. Nisha is sexually abused by her own cousin Vicky and her family decides to send her away to her aunt's house which seems to be a punishment to an innocent girl for a crime which was perpetrated on her. Vicky is rather protected and sheltered in the same home to guard the family's honour in the society and justice to poor Nisha is denied. She had to fight for her right of education. She was not even given permission to marry Suresh. As a result of suppressed anxiety and emotions, Nisha suffered from a skin disease, eczema. She refused to bow down when the obstacles posed before her during her quest to independence. She worked hard for her financial independence and finally succeeded in making her own boutique 'Nisha's Creation'. She proved that a daughter can be a better heir than sons as it is about talent and not gender. Women are pushed to domesticity under the pressure of patriarchal ideas and controls. Through Nisha's character, Kapur highlights the importance of self-fulfillment, independence, individuality, and self-actualisation for a contemporary woman.

The fourth novel 'Immigrant' highlights the struggle of Nina who marries a dentist, Ananda and the couple immigrates to Canada. It discusses the Indian Diaspora in Canada. They face a dilemma to retain their culture or for the sake of survival adopt the new environment. Nina emerges as a 'New Woman' who differs from the existing archetypal women. She looks for new ways of seeking individuality and awakens a new social and moral awareness which helps her survive on a foreign land independently. For a woman immigration is more difficult because not only the dynamics of the home changes but also the new outer world poses a challenge. Women are attached to tradition and culture more passionately than men do. For a long time, Nina retained her cultural identity whereas Ananda adopted the host culture. However, they would never be accepted as a Canadian nor can they retain their Indian personality. Ananda proves to be a womaniser and she tries to find her own roots on a foreign land. Nina breaks the social and moral barriers to be independent. She indulges in extra marital relations for self gratification as Ananda suffers from sexual disorders and hides this from Nina for a long period. She abides by the societal norms till they are not a hindrance to her self-accomplishment. "Culture does not make people. People make culture. If it is true that the full humanity of women is not our culture, then we can and must make it our culture" (Adichie 46). Kapur writes with Indian sensibility and insightfully deals with the issues of moral and individual identity and highlights the different aspects of female emancipation.

The Novel 'Custody' by Manju Kapur is a story of emotional fallout and divorce between Raman, a marketing executive at a global drinks company and Shagun who is an astonishingly beautiful woman. A perfect family with all comforts of life breaks due to Shagun's extra marital affair with her husband's dashing new boss, Ashok. Shagun looks for independence outside the narrow domain of a married life. The couple has two endearing children, Arjun, an eight year old boy who looks just like his mother and two year old Roohi, who looks just like her father. Shagun seeks divorce from Raman and both of them indulge in an ugly legal battle over their two children's custody. Ishita who is divorced for being childless, deeply yearns for embracing motherhood. Custody is the intriguing tale of how Shagun and Ishita find ways to exert their womanhood despite being tied with the fetters of patriarchal norms. Different facets of New Woman are highlighted in the novel through their journey of emancipation. Manju Kapur deftly tries to show implications of family disintegration that leads to fragmented lives of its members, lost childhood and adult's obsession to possess children, body and soul lead to insecurity and emotional crisis in children who have impressionable minds.

Manju Kapur's most recent novel 'Brothers' shows the unending struggle of the protagonist, Tapti Gaina who tries to establish her position in the male dominated society. She exposes ugly face of the society where a woman pays

the price of her aspiration to have an autonomous social image. She shows how all the social and moral regulations become redundant to Tapti when she finds herself caught in a completely meaningless marriage. Tapti finds her marriage suppressor and hindrance in self-actualization, she starts disregarding the moral limitations posed on her being a married woman. She tries to search herself in an extra-marital and promiscuous relationship with her brother-in-law, Himmat Singh Ghana. Kapur presents a picture of a new woman who finds herself trapped in the domestic terrain but fights for her rights of equality and sovereignty. Her husband, Mangal is brought up with male pride and self-importance and he has seen complete disregard of women in his family. Patriarchal norms promote such men to inflict pain and suffering on the women of the family. Females are treated as possessions and personal assets by men like him. Tapti Ghana is ceaselessly torn between family obligations, and self-fulfilment. Ultimately she becomes the reason for conflict between the two brothers due to her illicit relationship with her husband's elder brother which eventually leads to fratricide. All virtues and vices are gender neutral and can be found in anyone - male or female. It is essential to look at them in total objectivity to create a virtuous world. It would be right to highlight Mary Wollstonecraft's words- "Women as well as men ought to have the common appetites and passions of their nature, they are only brutal when unchecked by reason: but the obligation to check them is the duty of mankind, not a sexual duty" (Wollstonecraft 60).

Aim of the Study

The primary objective of the study is to understand Manju Kapur's novels through a critical analysis of its female protagonists. It will highlight the changing image of a woman and representation of women in a patriarchal society. The female characters in the novels of Manju Kapur show a distinct pattern of evolution.

Conclusion

Kapur shows her central female characters trying to achieve their goal of self-realisation by defying the patriarchal norms of the society. These characters are shown struggling to take their destiny into their own hands. These new women are not only emancipated but also seen committed to their value-system. For a 'new woman', success cannot be measured in terms of worldly possessions or gains; it can only be achieved through self-fulfillment.

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