

MANJU KAPUR AS A CHRONICLER OF UPPER MIDDLE CLASS FAMILIES AND HER NOVELS AS SAGAS OF FAMILIAL BONDS

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ABSTRACT

The literary gamut of Manju Kapur adds new feather to the cap of Indian English Literature. The cozy, unthreatening titles of her novels - *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *Immigrant*, *Custody* (Recent Novel), their linear plots and the stillness of her prose reveal an acute understanding of social hypocrisies. She sharply narrates about human foibles and daringly highlights the repressed state of Indian women. Her magnetic and conversation - driven narratives about joint families and her keen observation about the inconsistency of people and their relationship, as well as the subtler points of self-deception in a tradition - soaked society, are enough to drag the attention of the masses.

Key Words : Families, Novels, Bonds, Society, Women.

Introduction

Manju Kapur has emerged, in recent years as one of the most sensitive and versatile Indian woman writers. Her novels explore the psyche of the middle class Indian woman, focusing primarily on her dilemma at being caught between modernity which implies freedom, individuality and self-expression and the patriarchal and traditional values that continue to permeate contemporary Indian society.

The presentation of Indian middle class strata strongly urges to be coloured with a culture specific approach and this point has been firmly focused by Mrs. Kapur. In her novels she advocates a balance between a realistic perception of the contemporary social situation in India and the fundamental idea of feminism that a woman be recognized as an individual in her own right and not be restricted to the stereotypical roles and images like - daughter, wife and mother. To make it more clear, it can be said that feminism is the recognition of the 'Wholeness' of the existence that encompasses all of the three- body, mind and soul. Perhaps this was the reason that the women characters in her fictional works are entitled as "New Women" those who dare to smash the strict boundaries of conventions and try to grab their own world, and create a proper space for themselves. No doubt these women are struggling to achieve their individuality but they never desire to go far from their society or home in-search of existence. Through her versatile outlook Mrs. Kapur did tremendous justice to her craft by giving a powerful expression to the psychological, emotional and social concerns of women.

A recipient of numerous accolades Kapur was a professor of English Literature in the up market Miranda House - a prestigious college for girls in Delhi. She was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book (Eurasia Section) and has earned very substantial success, both commercially and critically, both in her nation and on the world market. Not only *'Difficult Daughters'* (1997) her first work, but her next creation - *'A Married Woman'* (2000) has

also added an exclusively glittering feather to her cap of success. Later on in the year 2006, Mrs. Kapur again tried to capture the eyes of people through her novel *'Home'* (2006) and it was proved to be the best example of her literary art. Kapur's next novel *'Immigrant'* (2009) is a milestone in the field of Indian English Literature which explores the immigrant experiences of Indians around the globe.

Her recent creation *'Custody'* (2011), elucidates the marital - conflicts that lead to divorce and finally a petition for having custody of children. Such works make Kapur renowned as an author, capable to look beneath the surface and skilled to present that on papers. In an interview with Jai Arjun Singh (Jabber work), published in Elle Magazine of 9th August, she expresses - "**In my work, I aim to show rather than tell.**" (www.jaiarjun.blogspot.in)

While talking about her creations, Mrs. Kapur tells Mr. Arjun that, "I took the rasta of not standing between the reader and the story - I wanted to make it as transparent and seamless as possible." (www.jaiarjun.blogspot.in) Further she expresses that whenever she thinks to write, a theme exists in her mind but not a story. She says, "The story takes shape gradually." (www.jaiarjun.blogspot.in)

It is really amazing to know that such a wonderful author prefers to be alone or to remain in solitariness. She avoids modern style of book - launch parties or over-showy gatherings. She hardly supports and attends social meetings because according to her these activities are a kind of obstacles in the way you write, she discloses this feeling in front of Mr. Arjun as, "**It's hard for me to see writing as a social stepping stone**". She adds, "**It's such a solitary activity, whereas being in society means being gregarious. Of course, younger people have more energy, and if they can party and write, good for them. But if it interferes with your writing I would say just don't do it. As a writer, you have to serve your art, old fashioned as it may sound and personally I do this by not meeting anyone!**" (www.jaiarjun.blogspot.in)

The novels of Manju Kapur provide a prismatic study of Indian Middle class and their tribulations. Choosing this section of Indian society to explore is really a tough and challenging task because this is the most struggling class of society. People living in this section are hyper-conscious about everything and they always try to grab the royalty and prestige as aristocratic strata enjoys. They never wish to be graded as lower classed and effort tooth and nail to cross the lines of poverty. To make this distinction of class more clear it is necessary to study their ways of living and behaving.

The people belonging to lower strata of society accept their poor conditions as fate or destiny. If these people desire to upgrade their status, absence of means stop their efforts and again they remain bound to live in their pre-defined situations. People of this section of society never feel odd to collect money through unfair means or foul activities. Perhaps because they know it well that none is going to be affected by their dire-offences. They live a life full of uncertainties and parish like fallen leaves of tress. The females of this strata are usually of shy nature, homely and under the control of the male members of the family. They are used as objects and drop their individual existence as sugar in the tea. In other words they are hardly noticed in front of their male counterparts while on the other hand people from aristocratic society enjoy perfect freedom, freedom to act, to assert, to choose etc. They can get what they desire in a flicker of eye and they remain aware of the power of money. They are untouched by problems and struggles of life and the single target in their mind is - to be more rich and prosperous than they were before. Women belonging to upper class are of free-spirit. They don't care for the strict barriers of conventions and traditions. Their rules and regulations are made by their own hands. They never follow what the unwritten codes of culture say, so in a way enjoy perfect liberty. If something illegal happens, such matters are also tackled through money-power. Such women are unaware of the happenings around them and they are hardly familiar with the trials and tribulations of the struggling and deprived sections of society. Their entire world remains around coffee parlours, pubs, restaurants, romantic literature, fashionable costumes and accessories etc.

But the people of middle class or upper middle class in India are the most struggling, hard working, sacrificing and floundering ones. This layer always strive to achieve their goals. Like ant, they remain active throughout the day and effort strictly to expand their range. This class is really sensitive to assimilate as much values of Indian culture and tradition as possible.

They strictly adhere to the unwritten codes and conducts of the society. No doubt they struggle hard from birth till death, but even then problems run after them like their own shadow. This class values relation, but the women are always in puzzled state. They are asked to maintain a balance and harmony in the family at any rate. Whether she is working or non - working, she is to perform her domestic

duties along with her job. It gives her causes of emotional unrest. She remains a divided self. This tormenting situation is very beautifully woven by Manju Kapur in her works. She has selected to discuss the plight of upper middle class because this section is packed with a number of issues that need an urgent attention of the masses.

People of middle class or upper middle class are highly ambitious and great dreamers too. But their dreams are connected to, and inspired by the realities of life, not by fantasies. Women belonging to this echelon are educated but frustrated. They are bitterly stricken with the feeling of displacement and they desire to have a place and recognition - not as a passive entity but as "Women".

Kapur has interlaced various issues of middle class families in her works. The problems like marginalization of woman, mother-daughter nexus, marital - disharmony, brother - sister relationship, father - daughter relationships, illegal relationship, problem of child-sexual abuse, problem of childlessness, the problem of suitors for aging daughters, the problem of immigration etc. are dealt with a deep penetration. A close analysis of her works will establish Kapur as a chronicler of upper middle class families and show how right from her maiden creation 'Difficult Daughters' to her latest work 'Custody', she is a craft narrator of the sagas of familial bonds.

Manju Kapur elucidated the relationship of mother and daughter which is full of questions in all her works. It is clearly seen when Ida, the narrator, in the very beginning of the novel '*Difficult Daughters*' says, "**The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother**". (1) When her mother dies, seeing the epitaphs of the graveyard filled with memorial inscriptions, she thought about her dead mother and said, "**I stared again at my mother's ashes and wondered what memorial I could give her. She, who had not wanted to be mourned in anyway,**"(1)

Just like an Indian mother, Kasturi always desired to see Virmati busy in keeping house well or doing some womanly task like sewing, dancing, cooking, knitting etc. She wanted to make Virmati a "*Sarwa-guna-sampanna*" kind of girl but while doing all these Virmati lost her childhood and became a child-mother. Virmati felt trapped, Kapur writes, "**The language of feeling had never flowed between them, and this threat was meant to express all her thwarted yearnings.**"(11) Virmati said to herself, "**Why was saying anything to her mother so difficult? May be it was best to keep silent**"(11) Shashi Deshpande also ponders over this indifference in the attitudes of mothers and discusses this fact in her work '*Telling Our Own Stories*' as, "**When I became a mother, I found such a discrepancy between what I was told about how mothers felt and what I really felt, that I was deeply disturbed. It was only as a writer that I could get across this disturbing split and approach reality. And I realized that motherhood does not turn you overnight into a different person, it does not make you a nobler, stronger, more loving and lovable individual. You are**

the same person; except for the enormous bond that suddenly appears between you and the newborn. In fact we know that mothers can be cruel." (Telling Our Own Stories, 97) Not only this but in some of her stories, she describes the tie of familial bonds that were stronger between father and daughter than they were between mother & daughter. In the story 'Why A Robin' daughter feels her mother unable to help her in many things and she is quite sure that her father will help her in every problem. When mother is failed to help her in writing an essay on Robin, the girl turns her back to mother and goes to father. She says, **"I will ask Papa. He's sure to know, he'll help me."**(46) Instead of helping her, mother insisted on writing an essay on Peacock.

Such statements signify that mother-daughter clashes are quite common in middle class families and Mrs. Kapur tries to record the psychic reactions of her protagonists. She herself quotes, **"Conflict between daughter and mother is inevitable and I supposed I was a difficult - daughter."** (www.languageinindia.com) The same issue is discussed in her other creations also as in 'A Married Woman', Kapur mentions the agonized state of a daughter who is a grown up child and not ready to accept any restrictions, posed by her mother who often declares, **"When you are married, our responsibilities will be over..."** (1), as if she was a burden on her family.

In her work 'Home' the same issue occupied a prominent place till the end of the novel. It started when a mother objected to her daughter's playing-outside like her brother. She says, **"It is better for girls to remain inside..... how can you be like me if you get dirty and black playing in the sun?who will want to marry you?"** (53)

Manju Kapur laid emphasis in depicting men-women relationships like an iconoclast in all her creations. She seems to break the multicoloured glass of this cherished Indian bond

which, in reality, is packed with nothing but hollowness. The very first novel by Kapur, 'Difficult Daughters' indicates this aspect prominently because here the story revolves around an unmarried girl and her married lover, a professor of English Literature. Perhaps the work was named so because here a daughter was trying to get solace and affinity not in her parents' house but in the arms of a married man. The whole novel is packed with examples and illustrations depicting how a married man can mesmerize a virgin to believe in his love, how a man, being in love of a new-one, considers his first wife as a worthless creature in the family. He belittles her every time saying, **"I don't want a washerwoman. I want a companion....."** (201) Uma Vasudev once said, **"Even the poorest Indian male is fortunate in having opportunities for releasing his impulse to domination and the fury of his frustrated ego because he always has a wife whom he can treat as an inferior."** (Vasudev,62)

While talking about men-women relationship or husband-wife relationship the eminent writer Kamala Das, once

remarked in her work 'A Feminist's Lament' **"An ideal woman, they said, was but a masochist, trained from infancy to wear the flannels of cowardice next to her skin, trained to be inert under a male....."**(160)

Manju Kapur further dealt with this issue in her next work 'A Married Woman'. Astha, the protagonist, faces bitter results of her marriage with Hemant, when his real-self, a typical Indian husband's outlook, was revealed. At every step she went through subjugation and was asked to feel herself a "woman" something inferior to man.

The marginal standing of Indian women has been portrayed by Kapur in a skilled manner. In an interview she once remarked, **"Women have a lot of things to say but unfortunately not much is given to them-however, there is a lot of interests in what women have to say- and many, specially the regional women writers ,write under tremendous personal pressures..."** (www.4to40.com)

Kapur describes Kasturi, mother of Virmati ,in 'Difficult Daughters' as a marginal creature who was being treated as a child-producing machine. Kapur elaborated her situation as, **"her life seemed such a burden, her body so difficult to carry. Her sister-in-law's words echoed in her ears, 'breeding like cats and dogs, harvest time again' "** (7)

Gender discrimination is widely discussed issue in the works of Kapur. In 'Difficult Daughters' the mental setup of a conservative mother Kasturi was beautifully narrated when her daughter, Virmati, was going to be admitted to a co-ed college. She spoke, **"Virmati will be among so many of them? So few girls to so many boys? I do not feel easy."** (42) In 'A Married Woman' when Astha was expected for the first time, her mother said to Hemant, her husband, **"May it be a boy and carry your name forever. A great son of a great father."**(57)

Kapur discussed the problem of child-sexual-abuse through the episode of Vicky and Nisha in her famous work 'Home'. This issue is prevalent in Indian middle strata at a high rate. Even the widening impact of it is seen in the television serials also. For example in 'Satyameva Jayate' (2012) where Amir Khan, the great Indian actor discussed the issue in detail and made people aware of the atrocities done to children. Very often such problems are caused by our own, on whom we rely so much.

Dowry is again a curse to our society. Nalini Singh in an online article, 'Dowry System a curse on Indian Society' says that **"woman has 'Zero political status' in family. They are considered of less productive value than man. So dowry is considered to be a compensation for that 'worth-deficiency'"**. (www.newstrackindia.com) Kapur dealt with this issue like a perfectionist. Her novel 'Home' gives references to Sunita, mother of Vicky, portraying those brides who are burnt like corns just for the sake of money.

Kapur touched the psychological problems of a childless woman in her other novels also like 'Difficult Daughters', 'Immigrant' and 'Custody'. 'Custody' shows a pictorial

description of how a barren lady, Ishita, was being treated brutally by her in-laws and asked to leave her sasural at once. Mark the lines, **“staying was not easy. The mother began to call her shameless, the sisters refused to talk to her, the father and S.K. (her husband) avoided her. She only saw her husband at the dining table-a place to which she now seldom came.”**(72)

The problem of aging daughters is also a very vital issue that grips the readers' attention. From *'Difficult Daughters'* to *'Custody'* one may find the traces of this issue in abundance. Our society plays the role of Satan and ever aggravates the situation. *'Immigrant'* presents the best example of it where the starting of the work deals with the 29th birthday of Nina, the protagonist. The opening of the novel reveals, **“Nina was almost thirty. Friend and colleague consoled her by remarking on her radiant complexion.**

Another important aspect one may note in the life style of middle class society is *'Son Syndrom'*. Right from *'Difficult Daughters'* to *'Custody'*, the desperation for a baby-boy has not seen any hurdle in its way. All the works of Kapur manifest the creator's concern over this issue, as for example ,in *'A Married Woman'* when Astha was pregnant and Hemant gave this good news to his mother-in-law, she replied, **“May it be a boy and carry your name forever, a great son of a great father...”** (57)

Manju Kapur visualized mother-in-law and daughter-in-law syndrom in her prestigious novels, where the expectation-factor played the role of hub while handling relations. *'Difficult Daughters'* presents healthy relations between Kasturi, bearing eleven children and her mother-in-law, the older woman, who after the birth of eleventh child consoled Kasturi in a traditional tone , **“God has favoured you.”**(7)

Not only these but some other bold and significant issues ,that reflect the mind-set of people, belonging to middle layer of society are drawn with greater introspection as in *'Difficult Daughters'* Kapur spell out extra-marital love affairs of Virmati and the professor Harish, which is totally out of social norms. In *'A Married Woman'* Kapur unzip the world of lesbian lovers through the scandalous relationship of Astha and Pipeelika Khan, a Muslim lady protester.

'Home' in a different tone gets across the intense affairs of Nisha and her lover, a low-caste boy, before marriage. Again it was something unethical in Indian context. In *'Immigrant'* personal problems of a married couple is discussed and *'Custody'* not only focuses the problem of custody of kids asked by a woman but also tells about her filthy relations with her husband's boss that later converts her into a rebel towards her hubby, her mother and of course society. But even then, Kapur presents Indian motherhood over-powering every other bond on earth.

Thus the whole gamut of the works of Mrs. Manju Kapur presents a complete picture gallery of issues ,prevalent in Indian Middle class families and try to make the public aware that such issues need a keen penetration and if one tries, one can change the situation a bit.

To sum up in the words of Malti Agarwal, **“Manju Kapur's depiction of her heroine, her traversing the labyrinth of rules and regulations of traditional middle class milieu and stepping out to start earning for her existence are superb. A girl in Indian family is whining under the burden of patriarchy. She while living in her home feels herself homeless-shelterless. She strives to explore space for herself. She tries to be self-reliant in order to survive.”** (29)

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