

A Critical Analysis of the Women characters in the Novels of Manju Kapur

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Abstract: Manju Kapur has projected the middle class family in her novels to which she herself belongs to. She does not intend to present herself as radical feminist whose only business is to project the conflict based on gender discrimination. The main objective of this paper is to show the predicaments of women's lives where some struggle against oppressive patriarchy. Kapur has established herself as different writer in Indian English fiction. Kapur's women characters cross the patriarchal threshold only as a means of protest to create their identity and space. In Manju Kapur's novels, we meet the women of the modern age- her problems and desire to become independent. She knows a new vision of Indian woman in her fiction. Kapur's characters can be characterized into three types- conventional, orthodox women and the emancipated women - the category to which most of her protagonists fall into. The various protagonists Virmati, Kesturi, Astha and Sakuntala react to various challenges and predicaments and probe into the self and discover their strength.

Key Words: Patriarchy, identity, struggle, emancipation, protagonist.

1. INTRODUCTION:

Manju Kapur, in her novels, has projected three generations of women and highlighted how first generation of women solidify the foundation of patriarchy in order to make it strong because it ensures their place and provides their identity as housewife, mother, daughter and daughter-in-law. They demand limited space. But the second generation of women is different from the first one. Due to influence of modern education and Gandhian thought, they demand self identity and independent place which are vehemently denied by patriarchal system. To establish their identity, they struggle against the existing culture, social limitation and prevailing morality. In the process, some women succeed and some become failure but they create the base for the next generation to bring a commendable change in patriarchal process which values their struggle.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW:

Manju Kapur's novels have been widely reviewed and greatly admired by various scholars and critics throughout the world. Alka Singh analyzes *Difficult Daughters* in an article entitled "Exploring Possibilities beyond Traditions: Manju Kapur's *Difficult daughters*", and writes: Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* makes and absorbing reading and pushes the reader to break through the silence of suffering Virmati, who is seen struggling with her desires for education and illicit love in the face of hardship that threaten to destroy her inner self. (Singh 133). J.V.N.L. Mythili examines Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* in his article "Conflict and Modernity: Delineation of Man in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*" and states that: Perfectly set around the times of independence and partition, this novel clearly explains, that the concept of modernity involves partition. It relates the story of a young woman, Virmati... towards a married English Professor, Harish. (Mythili 156). Indira Bhatt has analysed this novel in her article "Marriage- the Summum Bonum of Woman's Life: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*" as, "Manju Kapur, yet writing in 1998, presents a woman who considers marriage as the journey's end of her life- marriage and her place in the master bed room" (124). She again comments that "Manju Kapur does not effectively perceive the realities of the protagonist's existence from the inside, her dependence, her own created captivity" (Bhatt 130).

3. METHOD:

Subject matter of the paper is descriptive, analytical and exploratory in nature. Postcolonial feminist theory has been used to justify the content of the paper. The paper is a literary work using primary and secondary sources. The secondary sources are based on library resources like reference books, scholarly journal.

4. DISCUSSION:

If the novels of Kapur are studied in respect of identity, a thing that draws reader's attention is that some female protagonists are found to be patriarchal supporters. They are not interested to cross the boundary constructed for them. They have been identified as domestic women. Women like Kasturi, Ganga and Lajwanti from *Difficult Daughters*

belong to this category. They are not supportive and are found to be barriers in the struggle of second generation of women to break the dominance of patriarchy. This conflict creates much of the problems of women described in the novels. The clash between two generations raises a serious gap.

From the critical analysis of Kapur's novels, it is observed that women of the second generation and third generation are increasingly conscious of their individuality and struggling for their self identity. It is also found that some women become the victims of patriarchy and they try to break the shackle of patriarchy but eventually they surrender to their fate. Ganga from *Difficult Daughters* belongs to this category.

The characters like Virmati and Lajwanti belong to the second generation of women. They become rebels and fight against the patriarchal system to create their space and identity. Though Ganga belongs to the same generation but becomes helpless to fight against patriarchy. Shankuntala and Swarnalata are also the women of second generation but they come out strongly as feminist voice. They keep up their struggle and eventually secure their individuality and identity. Patriarchal influence cannot divert them from their firm determination. Virmati's daughter Ida belongs to the third generation of women. She has rejuvenated the journey left by her mother and completed the revolution of feminist journey. The third generation of women has been shown with complete modern ideas and thoughts with full emancipation.

Through her novels, Kapur has touched upon every aspect of women's issues. Marriage is one of the prominent issues. Many of the women's problems originate from marriage. Basically, the concept of getting married and surrendering to their spouses is given second look when we read the novels of Manu Kapur. When Virmati is told to accept an arranged marriage she does not hesitate to reject it for her own benefits and becomes successful in going to Lahore to pursue higher study.

Manju Kapur has given much importance to education through her novels. Education empowers the protagonists of her novels to start a new journey of life. Virmati belongs to a family where women have no access to higher education. She has great interest for education from her early life and so she protests against her family and social customs for the sake of education. She is inspired by her cousin sister Shakuntala who possesses the qualities of 'New Woman' through her higher education. She also encourages Virmati thus: "It's important that our voice be heard, Viru, some men are planning to demonstrate against it. Won't you add your strength to ours?" (251-252). Astha from *A Married Woman* becomes disappointed and subjugated by her husband Hemant. To remove her stress and loneliness, she joins a school where she engages completely. She gets there the opportunity to revive herself by composing poems and drawing sketches. Education provides her the reason to emerge in a new way.

Kapur has shown her prowess by exploring human psyche in *A Married Woman*. The protagonist Astha gets emotionally and physically involved with Pipeelika and this close relationship provides her mental satisfaction. She does not deviate from family responsibilities in spite of having a lesbian relationship with Pipeelika. Astha breaks her close proximity with Pipeelika when Pipeelika asks Astha to leave her husband and live with her along with the children. Astha rejects Pipeelika's offer and consequently Pipeelika leaves for America for higher studies. Though Astha becomes devastated for time being but she remains firm in her decision: "What would it like to be painfully separated having known togetherness? How would she live? But she had to go, she had that rock of stability women had, her husband and her children" (285). Kapur does not want her protagonists to break the family traditions and values.

Kapur has been continuously trying to make her female characters assertive and courageous. It is observed that though all the women characters have not been successful but some of them have succeeded and become the symbols of inspiration in their struggle for identity. In *A Married Woman*, Astha is acknowledged as a pointer but her relationship with Pipeelika remains incomplete. Same thing happens in *Difficult Daughters* so far Virmati's journey is concerned. But we find others characters such as Shakuntala and Swarnalata who are women of strong vision and come out successful in their struggle for identity and space. The strength of Kapur is that she has been able to discover the psyche of her women characters in order to describe the struggle for their identity. Kapur has always been in search for meaning and essence of life in terms of individual existence while telling about the struggle of women characters.

Kapur chooses the urban middle class Indian women who represent the majority of the population. They show the identity of joint family structure in her novels. The protagonists of the novels of Kapur are seen as women struggling against all odds. She has always tried to depict the picture of the sufferings of women. Feminism is a broad socio-political movement specifically advocating women's welfare in the society. Deriving upon this philosophy many women writers, thinkers and critics have formulated a school of thought that searches for such instances in literature.

The strains of feminism are obvious in Kapur's writings. This is overtly seen in the struggle of her women characters, their vulnerability, and struggle for identity, liberating attitude, the female psyche and the female biological world. Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* is betrayed by the strong bars of traditional patriarchal norms. She rebels and insists on her rights to higher education. She is aware of her emotional and psychological necessity. She rejects the established social orders. Virmati asserts, feels liberated and makes no compromise in materializing her path and resolving the conflict. The protagonist of *A Married Woman*, Astha shows the forte of a liberating soul. She constantly struggles for recognition and a social cause. Her married life offers her sumptuous smoothening through conjugal bliss

but slowly she feels the pangs of alienation and dissatisfaction. Her husband, Hemant has little time to share Astha's feelings and her daily routine matters. Astha develops an affair with a woman Pipeelika which offers her much comfort. She is trapped in an inescapable situation. Astha tries to bring everything she experienced on the canvas of painting.

5. SUMMARY:

In her novels, Kapur touches upon larger themes like corruption, dowry, religion and superstition. She deals boldly with taboo issues like female sexuality, lesbianism, sexual abuses of both men and women and frustration. For the first time, she projects the controversial subject of lesbianism in Indian English fiction. Her intention is not to highlight obscenity. Lesbianism is not accepted by Indian patriarchal system. Kapur's women characters cross the patriarchal threshold only as a means of protest to create their identity and space. Particularly she is more concerned with the affects of both men and women in the family. Women are stepping out of the rigid sex roles assigned to them traditionally to bring about equality. Kapur has been successful to portray the conflict of tradition and modernity in her protagonists. The highlights of her female characters are that they are involved in clash against male-dominated traditional world but they have also suffered this conflict in the form of generation gap.

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