



The concept of New Woman in the Novels of Manju Kapur

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Abstract:

The woman can be free and yet good at the same time is not acceptable. Manju Kapur has broken a new ground. It can be seen through her novels that a woman is not a mere goddess or a lifeless engine or propaganda. The need for self-discovery and self-understanding is emphasized. Virmatimust fight against the power of the mother as well as the oppressive forces of patriarchy indicated by motherhood. Astha is portrayed as a sensitive woman who quests for identity and tends voice to their frustrations, disappointment, and alienation in a patriarchal world. Nisha's identity is hidden behind the mask of dedication and dependence. Nina is financially strong still the so-called ideological and typical Indian mindset of considering a daughter, a burden of liability, a responsibility of the mother makes her life burdensome. Shagun is something different from the other protagonists of Manju Kapur. She is quite naturally having materialistic pursuits. On the contrary, Ishita's life explores the shallowness of marital life where a woman is denounced because of her infertility.

Keywords: Feminism, Self-discovery, Patriarchy

Women's role in Indian life as well as Indian fiction has remained multifarious. Her corporal nature has indeed endowed her with certain specific indebtedness. Her status is bound up with the traditional wife and mother. She should be ideal and virtually molded in the same fashion.

Service, sacrifice, submissiveness, and tolerance are the traits that should come to them naturally. There is endless excessive endurance and the list of compromises she makes. She should be faithful and obedient. These are the norms that are made by men, they are endowed in women, otherwise, they are considered as rebellious and are denied acceptance by society. Manju Kapur's women refused to be taken for granted and complained about this condition. As Purnima Mehta observes,

They exemplify self-transcendence through self-effacement.....Indo-Anglian writer touches other spheres of activity for woman. (Mehta 145)



The new woman in the works of Manju Kapur tries to protest but the psychological odds against which they fight are peculiar. The woman can be free and yet good at the same time is not acceptable. But when it is said and done the question arises whether these women are simple straw figures idealized and created only to project the Indian image. As Purnima further says,

The confused, contradictory state of affairs brings.....such stock situations with puppet feminine characters. (Mehta 146)

Manju Kapur has broken new ground. In her novels, woman is not mere goddess or a lifeless engine or propaganda. They pass through a process of transmutation which intends for than a change from bondage of freedom, from indecision to self-affirmation, and from weakness to strength. The need for self-discovery and self-understanding is emphasized. Manju Kapur's novels feature women protagonists who are caught up in personal turmoil and on the verge of profound change. They seem to be the personification of new women who have been tracing the burden of inhibition for ages and want to break those norms of silence now. In the social norms of her novels, she shows the existence of mothers and daughters, and in the same society, marriage is regarded as the ultimate goal and destiny from which no woman can get away. Her female protagonists from Virmati to Shagun are the representatives of the female folk who belong to be liberal from the dusty social customs and traditions but are never permitted. All the protagonists are highly educated from time to time and they lead towards the free-thinking for which their family and society become intolerant towards them. Tradition versus modernity indicates their struggle with family and society through which they plunge into a dedication and try to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds.

As Simone de Beauvoir quotes,

Woman herself recognizes that the world is masculinegods with human faces who set goals and establish values.(Beauvoir 609)

Apart from that Manju Kapur's female protagonists become independent but the result is rather different than what of it should be. They have to accept the reality and have to return to their morals and values. Manju Kapur has displayed a mature understanding of the female psyche and the inner subtlety of a woman's psychology. She has been highly disturbed by the perseverance and meaningless living of the female folk in the traditional society, but the stoic woman in her constantly tries to set her female protagonists liberal and their meaningless existence hence we find them continuously struggling against the odds of social and familial system. Though some of them are married, they suffer from the alienation and frustration. There is some fear hidden in them because they are not violently come out from their grief



but tolerate every social norm which goes beyond their expected life. We think that Virmati has succeeded in breaking all manmade boundaries but somewhere she feels alienation. She becomes the pollard and has to accept either maiden or her in laws. She grows up from a native girl to a women matured b suffering and through experience. She finds in the quest for true love, freedom and the realization of the self throughout the whole novel, but the quest does not stop. She needs motherly affection in her childhood, manly affections in her adultery, social love by her relations. She fights again and again to gain what she desires, but in the process of struggle to express herself she loses a significant part of herself and feels insignificance of things. Virmati is a progressive woman who could not forsake her desire to require a higher education in life. Manju Kapur seems to convey the message through the characters of Virmati of right to love and choose her mate. Ida tells about her mother desires in the beginning of the novel:

I stared again at my mother's ashes and wondered..... I want no one called, no one informed. (DD 1)

Virmatihas to fight against the power of the mother as well as the oppressive forces of patriarchy indicated by motherhood. The rebel in Virmati's mind might have considered as the exchange of slavery for another. Once she succeeds in marrying Professor, she gains her husband by herself, her daughter, the rapprochement with her family. Marriage is defines in a patriarchal Indian society, a deliverance from being socially condemned and it relieves a women from sense of insecurity and uncertainty. Kasturi and Ganga seeks pleasure in domestic siblings, but Virmati struggles between physical and moral, the head and the heart. Virmati dares patriarchy and suffers from evildoing. In this novel women are departed into two categories. Kasturi, Lajwanti and Ganga are fitted in the first category who accept a subdued and submissiveness for whjom life is a simple arithmetic – marry, sustain and never question male perception who thinks “a woman's shaan is in her home.” (DD, 16)and marriage is the constant goal to achieve that if a girl is sending her time in studying then “she should have been a man.” (DD, 16) The second category meets to new women –Virmati, Shakuntala and Swarnlata. Of course, they are motivated by the freedom struggle. Shakuntala prepares Virmati for further studieswho has her own independent thoughts. Virmati has been inspired to fight for her freedom through her life. She always tolerates her mother's pregnancies because they bring sarcastic remarks from lajwanti and others which embarrassing her. It was not an easy proposition for Kasturi to bring up eleven children, so the as a eldest daughter of Kasturi the burden of younger brothers and sisters' sibling would be carried by Virmati. Kasturi cannot talk it over with her husband due to socio-cultural tradition.



Encounter to patriarchy begins with Virmati's insistence on education, her rejection of the idea as preposterous and Virmati's fight to get her right. She should take advantage of the time –

Most families look upon the marriage of a daughter as a sacred duty – or sacred burden. We are lucky we're living in times when woman can do something else. Even in Europe women gain more respect during wartime. And here we have that war, and our satyagraha as well. (DD 152)

It is well expressed in the words of Dr. Archan and Sweta Nigam

Virmati from the very beginning of the novel stands against patriarchy and assertingstructure mutely Virmati shows the courage to question it. (Dr. Archana and Nigam 110)

She accepts the traditional marriage and the fact that reverses the paradigm of revolt it started with. The Professor symbolizes the patriarchal power structure that has always obscured woman's requirement. The story explores the problem of woman centered resistance to patriarchy and colonialism and in the process the novel symbolizes that it would be the story of the recovery of female power and voices instead, what happens to Virmati yields to the pressure not only from the dominant discourse but from her internalized value system also.

Astha is portrayed as a sensitive woman who quest for identity and lends a voice to their frustrations, disappointment, alienation in a patriarchal world. Astha is led by her middle class values where she wants to uplift herself to upper class and always be afraid of failing down to lower class. Her encounters with Bunty and Rohan and fails because of her middle class status and she accepts her fate and goes for arranged marriage where she plays a role of typical Indian housewife and gets frustrated in waiting for the complements from her husband, even after the households and taking care of children and in-laws. Astha's parents have a middle class moras and ethics who believe in that. Her mother often tells her the real meaning and worth of a woman lies in getting married and having children and serving husband is a pious duty. She declares Astha:

“When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?” (AMW 1)



It is noted that Manju Kapur permitted the patriarchy to operate through the mother. Apart from her mother, her father desires his daughter to have a successful career and to be free. He worries –

The girl was good, only she got into these moods sometimes..... Frowns mislead people about one's inner nature. (AMW 3)

Astha resists the grinding mill of patriarchy and tries to forge a new identity. Besieged by her job, small children, husband and household responsibilities, she sometimes thinks – “her salary meant she did not have to ask Hemant for every little rupee she spent.” (AMW 72) Since the woman is economically dependent on the man, her psyche moves towards subservience. In this contemporary period, woman becomes economically independent but the tendency of subjugation in a male dominated society continues without apparent changes. And Astha's education gives her the wings to question such a system, to want to be treated as an equal by her husband, she realizes her plight as “a willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth.” (AMW 231) The conflict between her roles as a wife, mother, daughter-in-law and that of a lover continues and she tore between her desire for freedom and duty towards her family. Pipee dominates Astha committed to her but she wants to sail in both ships keeping these two important parts of her life separate from each other. She wants to be free like Pipee –

She returned home in a daze. As she neared her house, she succumbed to panic, she was a mother, nothing should disturb that. For a brief and guilty moment she wished she was like Pipee, alone and free, but she checked herself. A large part of her belonged to her children, that was how she lived her life. She couldn't imagine any other way. (AMW 231)

And she realizes and thinks that –

If husband and wife are one person, then Pipee and she were even more so. She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her. But this was not the time to say these things. (AMW 243)

If Kapur displays Astha's growing and evolving at various stages through various relationships and she becomes the first Indian novelist who highlights lesbian relationship. For highlighting this matter Km. Kavita puts her remarks –



The roots of tradition, living up to the benchmark of the ideal Indian woman..... to develop, to enter socially forbidden relationships.(Km. Kavita 186)

The complex terrain of the Indian family is explored through *Home* and it presents many issues that are deep rooted within the family like revolt against the old tradition, perseverance for survival, quest for individuality and of course woman's unending struggle to survive and to collapse the silence against her own suppression. The silence breaks its tradition because of having struggled a lot, one's mind divert towards rebelliousness. Nisha in the due course of her struggle for identity and survival denies harmonizing with the patriarchal and male dominated society. She, as a new woman appears before us more assertive, self-secured, and confident one. She acclaims her womanhood by parallel footing with man in a bold manner. The novel takes us through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations – the first generation of Lala Banwari Lal, the second of his two sons, and the third is of their grand children. Among them Nisha is the only girl child who does not accept the traditions as they are. She expects a separate room for herself in the home and society. Nisha fights for her happiness. As an educated girl, she has a modern approach toward life and relationships. The other female characters like Sunita, Sona, and Rupa also become the victims of the circumstances. Despite taking blessings from the Babaji, she meets with a tragic end of her life burnt alive in the kitchen and becomes the victim of not bringing dowry. Sona's infertility for ten years of her marriage results in perseverance and Rupa is not as beautiful and rich as Sona, though she lives peacefully and runs her small business for increasing financial assistance. They solved their problems one and another way, but the issue stopped on Nisha. As a child, she was victimized by exploitation by Vicky and the seeds of inept were sown in the family. Kapur highlights how the politics of gender is being run in a joint family between the relationships. Nisha steals the limelight in the end. Her incomplete love affair gives her painful moments and shame –

Her father sighed again, and Nisha's heart went out to him. She didn't want to make her father unhappy, she wished she could be the daughter he deserved. 'Just send me away, Papaji,' she said again. If he could not see her, he would not grieve over her. (Home 283)

Nisha's identity is hidden behind the mask of dedication and dependence. Her voice is so dumb to the world. But she began to shake the traditions of dependence. She is prepared to undergo the most challenging journey of self discovery to make everybody recognize her. She is ever reminded that she is a girl and her fate lies in getting married and leaves the house. And as a result, she as an educated and spirited woman, determinates to deny to be treated as an object instead that tried to maintain her own identity. She doesn't want to trap her entire life into home like her brothers, but to work in shop. She often requests her father



but Sona refused and disagree with Nisha and she is not pleased at this new development in Nisha's life. Her behavior reveals her inner quest for independent existence. As a business woman, Nisha works for which brings to her sense of achievement in life helping her to create her own identity, her own voice, and her own place in the society and in home.

Apart from Nisha, Nina is financial strong still the typical Indian mind set of considering a daughter, a burden of liability, a responsibility of the mother makes Nina's life burdensome. Her father died in her earlier days and her mother is the only shelter over her head. She also became a cake for Rahul who "eats it too like all cakes this one one was chewed mashed into pulp and swallowed." (The Immigrant, 6) At her thirties she has less hope of finding a groom yet nurtures a faint hope of a better tomorrow. After a brief courtship and much doubt, Nina finally succumbed to rosy picture of her life abroad. Nina is confronted with a choice of acquiring Western clothing to facilitate integration, convenience and conformity. She finds the experience deeply satisfying and experiences like exercising her right in West, where citizen "regarded sex as then inalienable right." (The Immigrant, 263) She searches her experience quite empowering and it makes her feel a globalized citizen and enables her to transcend the barriers to her autonomous selfhood:

For the first time she had a sense of her own self, entirely separate from other people, autonomous, independent. So strange that the sex did not make her feel guilty, not beyond the initial shock. Easy, she was amazed it was that easy. Her first lover had taken her virginity and her hopes, her second lover had been her husband, her third had made her international. (The Immigrant 264)

She feels difficult to picture herself as a traditional devout Hindu, after having sex with Anton. On the other hand, Ananda in his sexually intimate relationship with manly explores "her generous, white, uninhibited body, besides he feels happy at finally having an entrance to an unexposed country." (The Immigrant, 284) Nina wants to explore herself by her excellent academic record and encouraging responses. It is well described in the words of Sailendra P. Singh.

Financial self-sacrificing, rental ease and social acceptability of a single woman were at her command in Canada and she looks forward to the independence that living alone, separated from her husband would bring. She is also aware of the difficulties, the loneliness and the solitude without a husband. (Singh 173)

Through Nina Manju Kapur describes failure is merely a signal to move on, as any one thing might not be steady enough to stay attached for the entire life.



Sentimentality is being concerned to Ishita somewhat. But Shagun is something different from the other protagonists of Manju Kapur. She is quite naturally having materialistic pursuits. The novel portrays insurrection against the orthodox traditions without being partial to anybody. Shagun and Ishita are most mostly facing the issues relating to infidelity and infertility respectively. Shagun's rebellious attitude exasperated as a result of the oppression and suppression of the patriarchy since her childhood. Shagun rebels as Ishita suffers. Infidelity of Shagun may not be the cause of suffering. No doubt, suffering lies in the departure of children, and any mother cannot bear it but her rebellious nature against society creates a disaster and the whole family disturbs. In fact, Shagun becomes the victim of alienation and frustration as Astha experience but Shagun didn't come back. Ishita disturbs because of her infertility, and id deprived of her rights. Her life explores the shallowness of marital life where a woman is denounced because of her infertility and the fact is that she can't carry forward the family name. She is emancipated by her in-laws. Her frustration can be seen in the novel even after five years of her divorce –

How she hated every narrow-minded conservative individual around her. Swarg Nivas indeed, who thought she was any kind of game, easy or otherwise.(Custody 296)

In this novel the system exposes the set up where a woman dominates another. Through the character of Ishita, Kapur tries to expose the fact of how a daughter-in-law is discarded from the household and the family for anyone reason. Ishita has to pay the price of her infertility. Mostly women have to tolerate the burden of a alienation in life. As Simone de Beauvoir concludes the whole matter in a single line

“One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.”(Beauvoir293)

In all her novels, Manju Kapur highlights on how women are grieving of proper education in the name of patriarchy or tradition in the Indian society. Kapur raises the germinal issues of women in a very befitting manner and delineates the sick and pathetic reality of Indian women. The double standard patriarchy plays in the educational system can be described in Millet's observations:

As patriarchy enforces a temperamental imbalance of personality traits between the sexes..... both divisions of learning (science and the humanities) reflect this imbalance.

.....



In keeping with the inferior sphere of culturein preparation for the marriage market.(Millet 42-43)

In the novels of Manju Kapur, Mother Patriarchy is more responsible than that of fathers. Virmati is pressured to do the household domains than her study by Kasturi. Her father inspired and even fulfilled her desires for studying further. Astha's mother forced her to marry and even after settling her family, she has more confidence on Hemant than Astha. Nisha's disaster is the cause of Sona's less attention towards her Nina is brought up hardly by her mother as a widow. So there is no any one behind her for Nina in this world. And Shagun denies accepting anything from her mother in the matter regarding her marriage. Ishita follows her mother in marrying Suryakanta, but reject her ideas of living with her after torturing her for her infertility. Every decision are taken from the mother's side in the matter of marriage of the protagonists. Simone de Beauvoir puts her remarks,

Frequently the oldest girl, her father's favorite,become really her double, a substitute for herself.
(Beauvoir534-535)

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