

Manju Kapur's *Home*: Journey towards Autonomous Self

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Abstract. The present paper intends to explore the identity crisis and growing need and desire of being self-dependent by women in the urban upper middle classes through Manju Kapur's novel *Home*. The author has depicted through the character of Nisha, that it is not an easy task for a woman to choose the profession of her own choice. In order to do so, she has to struggle a lot in her life. She has to fight back the society which holds her by chains just because she is a woman. Tradition bound society has made restrictions and laws which she is not allowed to cross over. The protagonist rises in stature and moves towards attaining and experiencing an individual domain that has traditionally been related to men. She slowly becomes a beacon light for others in the family to follow in her footsteps. Money is no longer a means of survival, it is about one's self-respect, vitality and means to prove the calibre. Gone are the days when family business was run by the male members of the hierarchy. Along with in literature, we see many otherwise situations in the society. No doubt, Nisha starts up her own enterprise, but her father emerges as one of the strongest supporters for her venture. This depicts the changing mind-set of patriarchal society.

Key words : Identity; self-dependency; autonomy; entrepreneurship; patriarchy; upper middle class; business-families.

Manju Kapur's *Home* narrates the story of a woman, an entrepreneur in making who makes her own way out of her conservative business family line. Nisha, the protagonist of the novel, is the daughter of a merchant family in Karol Bagh. She is bold and daring and has a strong desire to carve her own path, leaving behind traditional set-up and established norms. She lives in a joint family, with grandparents, aunts, uncles and cousins. Having been betrayed by her lover Suresh, she joins a Play-Way school in order to use her time and energy in an intellectually satisfying manner. Nisha's mother, Sona, is an emblematic woman belonging to joint family's old-fashioned traditions, who lays down a set of strict rules and conduct for Nisha, "This is the life of a woman to look after her home, her husband, her children and give them food she has cooked with her own hands. (Kapur 127) She feels that the art of service and domesticity should shine in her daughter so brightly that she would overcome her negative Karma to be, "a beacon in her married home". (129) For Sona, the true happiness for a girl lies in her own family. She states, "What is there in happiness? A girl has to be happy everywhere...her real education is in kitchen." (134) But, Nisha is not the kind of girl who could sit at home and wait for marriage. Her marriage is delayed for two major reasons. The first reason is a failed love-affair with Suresh who was a low-caste boy and Nisha's family convinced him

to move out of her life. Nisha felt betrayed by Suresh and her own family. Secondly, she is a manglik and according to the customs of Hindu community, only a manglik boy would be a suitable match. Her mother, Sona, is against any idea of Nisha joining a job or doing business like her aunt Rupa. She tells Nisha categorically, "when you marry, you can do anything that your husband permits." (266)

But Yashpal, the father has more understanding than the mother and it is he who searches for a school, where Nisha can have a sense of fulfillment and her mind be occupied with something positive. As the days progressed, "Nisha found teaching gave structure to her days. She experienced the pleasure of being with the colleagues who did not know her problems...they were united in supporting her job a stop-gap measure till better things came along". (272) Nisha's school job occupied her till noon only. With the energy that she had, "she wanted something more, more. The men were occupied from morning till night. She needed an equally absorbing occupation." (277)

She often pondered that there must be other things in the world where her energy, zeal and stamina would find better reflection. When one of her colleagues, Mrs. Tyagi, brought suits stitched by her sister, Nisha saw an opportunity of doing business, as business was in her blood. She reflected, "she had the background, she had the resources, it would be far more satisfying than teaching nursery children". (284) In the evening, when her father, Yashpal, returned from the shop, she conveyed her wish to start her own business. Till then none of the women of the house had entered this arena, so Yashpal tried to dissuade her from doing business as it required lot of planning and mettle and also women of the times had not entered this occupation. Nisha was not happy inside the walls of the home. She found the home atmosphere charged with petty jealousies and meanness. It suffocated her liberated spirit. She requested her father to take her along in the shop, "If only you could take me with you, Papaji... I have seen girls working in shops. Why should it be only Ajay, Vijay and Raju?" (267) Nisha persisted with her endearments every evening when Yashpal returned from shop. He was hesitant but Nisha pleaded, "Please, Papaji... I'll do anything you say, please, please. If it doesn't succeed I will go back to teaching. I promise. Only give me a year." (285) This shows her strong determination to enter the uncharted terrains and live life on her own terms. From that very moment Nisha dreamed of running a boutique, with the idea of doing business in bridal shalwar- suits and she saw herself, "the maker and seller of suits". (284) She argued, begged with her father to give her the chance to prove herself:

'Give me a chance to show you what I can do...'

'Beti let me think. I will discuss it with your uncle.'

'Papaji, if you are with me, he won't say no,' insisted Nisha

'I want to do something of value...' (287)

Kapur's protagonist Nisha, thus, becomes a beacon light for others in the family to follow in her footsteps as does Pooja, her sister-in-law. Nisha's mind is completely occupied and she assures herself that when the business is established, "she would be better than Pooja. She would not only be the daughter of a prosperous man, but be responsible for worth herself." (286) Nisha draws inspiration from her Masi Rupa, who was running her business in pickle making. Nisha has been influenced by her aunt's modern thinking and thus, required her insight in the tricks of business. Rupa showers her advice and blessings on Nisha. With tears in her eyes, she thought, "Her poor Nisha, forced to hew her own path in life, what kind of Karma had the girl come with?". To Rupa her niece looked, "more alive since the Suresh days." (287) Rupa asked her:

'What does your mother say...?'

'These things I decide with Papaji.' (288)

The above dialogues are explicitly indicative of the social practices of the time, that the patriarch had the authority of ultimate decision. Sona could only fret about the money being wasted as finally Nisha has to be married off and the money was required to be given as dowry. Here one can see the positive side of the patriarch who is for the progress and happiness of her daughter. He considers it his duty to see her daughter contented. Kapur is here bringing to the surface what she thinks is good in the patriarchy. Yashpal hands over Nisha a sum of twenty thousand rupees to start off with the business and even guides her through the basics of a business. She was overwhelmed, "He was trusting her as he would have trusted a son." (290) Yashpal also agreed to take the first order of twenty five suits but with quality. A strong sense of gratitude runs through her veins and she, "felt like giving it to her father in blood that he would be satisfied with her quality." (291) And it was decided that her boutique would be called Nisha's Creation, very symbolic of the inner fire of doing something of her own. Apart from the money, she needed a place to work from. This too, was also arranged by her father. Nisha's Creations was launched from the basement. She erected the partitions, the larger space going to the tailors, equipment and the display. She herself occupied a smaller space, which served as her office. The next step for the work to begin was the search for a master tailor and his team. Nisha walked down the Ajmal Khan road with her aunt Rupa who was helpful as she was skilled in accosting people and telling them, "Madam was establishing a business, she needed a Masterji and some tailors." (291) Address of Nisha's Creations was written on a slip of paper and was handed over to different boutiques. The search was ultimately fruitful and Mohseen Khan, the master tailor was appointed for five thousand rupees a month and his helps were appointed for rupees three thousand. Her father suggested making labels for her work and together, they decided it was to be Nisha's Creations. At first she ordered five hundred labels.

Now Nisha was the employer of six men, including the errand boy. She brought a display frame with protective plastic covers for the suits, and two sewing machines costing two and four thousand to be used for ordinary stitching and embroidery. As pointed by Mohseen Khan, she searched the bookshops of Karol Bagh for stylish design magazines. For the dress material, she could depend upon her father's shop, where she was provided material at the cost price. She searched various shops in Sadar Bazar, for buttons, laces, threads and other raw material, to keep her margins low. Her mother objected to her going alone and she was accompanied either by her brother Raju or the salesperson spared from her father's shop. This, she felt is a deterrent to her dreams and growth. Next time she went alone, even not telling the family members because she felt that, "her business was not to be run standing on the shoulders of others." (292) She spent her time and energy in perfecting her sense of colour and design with the result that she was able to sketch variations on the existing patterns. Mohseen Masterji became the man in her life. His expertise covered market trends, cutting corners in business. His expert advice in the intricacies of the business were followed by Nisha and she soared to new heights in few months into the business. She made it sure that Masterji cut five suits a day, so that she could deliver the goods in time. Masterji brought her three tailors, which included the embroider and errand boy, made her the employer of six.

Moreover, Nisha honed her business genes and kept a meticulous record of every expense that was incurred on salaries, rent, sewing machines, tea and snacks, scooter fares etc. She was quick at planning too. When she found that there were electricity cuts, she immediately could see the necessity of an inverter and invested rupees thousand as she had the foresight, otherwise her business might have dwindled. Her work occupied her from morning till evening and she had no time to pay attention to the riff-raff inside the home. She was contented, confident and lively. Nisha was particular about the delivery of the suits in time and even confronted her mother once, whose supervision in her absence had annoyed Masterji. As a result he did not turn up for work for two days and she had to go and convince him. She tells her mother :

Mummy, what have you done?...even if he sleeps
he never cuts less than five suits a day. I promised
Gyan's twenty suits by day after, if he does not come
my reputation will be spoilt. Do you know how
competitive the market is?" (293)

This anxiety on Nisha's part reflects her sincerity towards her employee and her customers. This is what is expected of a businesswoman. Nisha's suits were in great demand, because of the personal attention she paid to each task. She managed all her work by herself, purchasing of the raw materials and tagging the price. Nisha returned the money invested by her family and she had no time or interest in the

happenings inside the home. Now “her spirits rose and felt with the levels of the profit”. (293) Nisha’s success at business lured her sister-in-law Pooja, the same woman who used to show so much indifference towards Nisha, the unmarried girl of the house. Pooja’s circle of acquaintance showed strong liking for Nisha’s Creations as compared to Deepson’s from where they bought bridal suits earlier. Nisha having business acumen attracted these potential customers by reducing the cost price by one-third. Her younger brother, Raju’s attitude towards Nisha also underwent a sea-change and he told her that Pooja’s circle wanted more goods from her. Nisha was also prudent enough not to take revenge and to smile accordingly but made it clear by saying, “Gyan was asking me the other day whether I could increase the number to a hundred a month. I said, I do not know. Family comes first, but I have to see to the outside market as well”. (294) A few days later Pooja offered her services when she was flipping through the design magazines. Nisha was unsure about initiating Pooja in the business but she knew she would prove to be more effective than her mother. Even Yashpal noticed that, “she was more intelligent, methodical and independent than Raju.”(295)

Within a year of her business, Nisha increased the number of tailors, bought an ‘ari’ machine for ‘zardozi’. She also got a wooden frame installed permanently in the basement for sequins and beadwork. She repaid half of the loan extended by her father and promised him to pay the other half by next year. Her father noted that, “her daughter was growing, not in the way he anticipated but growing.”(295) Nisha’s success as an entrepreneur is well noted by Maneeta Kahlon when she says, “Nisha proves to be responsible working businesswoman” (Kahlon 8) But Yashpal, the father, contemplated, “it was his duty to see that she married. Her fulfilment lay there, no matter how successful her business was.”(295) Such notions as expressed by Yashpal, will perhaps take a longer span to be totally wiped out from the social system. Search for a suitable match for Nisha was speeding up. As far as Nisha was concerned, she made it clear that, “she would only consent to a match with a family who would let her work”.(296) Sona, the mother, objected to such conditions put forward by her daughter but Nisha was determined. Sona had her own notions of business and work. She considered these as pastime till the girl is settled in her marital home. We see the father supporting her daughter when he says, “My first duty is to her, not to her future family.”(296) He ignored his wife’s dissent and Kapur writes, “nobody who was privy to her account books could call her Creations a mere pastime.”(296) Offer of a widower in his early thirties, with no issues, and living with his old mother, was considered by the family. Sona was happy but soon she saw weal on Nisha’s elbows, reflecting Nisha’s anxiety. Both of them had an argument and Nisha leaves for the shop and discusses designs with Mohseen, and the tumult in her mind dies down. She decided for herself, “no matter who she married, she was going to come here every single day; she too had something to say to the groom.”(298). The day for the meeting was fixed and Nisha clearly tells the

would-be husband that she would like to continue with her business even after marriage. When Nisha learnt from her aunt that, Arvind, the man to be in her life, runs an upholstery shop, her immediate concern was for her business expansion. She pondered and asked her aunt if he would help increase her sale to retail outlets. This reflects her determination and strong urge to be autonomous. Family made preparations for the marriage. For the cloth-owning family, Nisha became the material around which all members join together :

She, was the warp to be woven into the weft of a cloth-owning family in Daryaganj, but in her case she was bringing her own fabric, her own tailors, her own business. (306)

Nisha's Creations was the centre of attraction by the cousins who appreciated her efforts and told her how convenient it was for them to have a boutique at home, so that they get the well-priced suits. Nisha did the pricing of her suits meticulously, "Every figure attached to a suit proved she was a businesswoman, making profits, and she hugged this precious feeling to her heart. No matter who helped her, the final act of control had to be in her hands." (308)

Thus, Nisha attained autonomy, which is still a far-fetched dream for many other women. She was indeed, an entrepreneur in making. Maneeta Kahlon rightly observes:

Nisha, the main protagonist and daughter of Yashpal and Sona, emerges as a self-dependent woman in the novel. She refuses to reconcile with the patriarchal and male dominated family structure and tries to make her own individual identity. (Kahlon 5)

Nisha as an individual could create a separate room for herself in home and society. She is an educated and spirited new woman, who refused to follow the traditional set-up and instead carved out her own identity. It is necessary to note that she belongs to a middle class family in metropolis, is born and brought up in India, where social and cultural scenario is different from that of Western countries. Her quest for self-identity, struggle for economic independent existence, and her equality in the context of Indian social ethos is a significant expression of Manju Kapur's feminist concern.

The author has depicted through the character of Nisha, that it is not an easy task for a woman to choose the profession of her own choice. In order to do so, she has to struggle a lot in her life. She has to fight back the society which holds her by chains just because she is a woman. Tradition bound society has made restrictions and laws which she is not allowed to cross over. And running a shop is not considered

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to be a good profession for a woman of the times because, “since the establishment of the society, woman is stamped as the weaker sex, denied full justice, social security, economic liberation and political awareness”. (Huse 6) Malti Agarwal’s observation is prudent when she writes:

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.

Her autonomous self finds apt representation when Shivani Vashist says:

Nisha snaps off all familial relation after her love ends with Suresh. Nisha strives to establish her individuality and becomes an entrepreneur. She starts her own business of garment stitching. The work started by Nisha soon starts flourishing and gaining recognition. (Vashist 2)

Thus, Kapur’s protagonist, Nisha, rises in stature and moves towards attaining and experiencing an individual domain that has traditionally been related to men. The novel beautifully depicts the writer’s focus on the gradual emergence of a woman of modern consciousness through shifts in relationships and power struggle within family.

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