

Search for Self : A Study in Manju Kapur's Major Novels

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Indian fiction, which portrayed the evils of child marriage and dowry system during pre-independence period, has now come to witness the emergence of a new woman and a new female consciousness in the present decade. It has given up the old patriarchal system with submissive heroines as passive sufferers.

In the 1970's and 1980's Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Manju Kapur fought to erase the passive victimised women model. They revolted against oppression, suppression, infliction and torture caused by a male dominated world. Their women protagonists revolt against arranged marriages and exercise their free will in choosing their own mates as the right choice. They seek relief in taking recourse to love marriages and premarital affairs. Their self-emancipation, self-expression, self-fulfilment and self-actualization is realised in terms of walking out of marriage and indulging in extra-marital affairs as a means of escapism temporarily from the stifling atmosphere encapsulated within the institution of marriage. This leads to irretrievable break-down of marriages, separations, divorces, re-marriages, even neuroticism or lesbianism. The women writers who have the strongest sympathy for their protagonists strive to restore their life through their writings.

Manju Kapur is an emerging writer whose novels deal with women's problems in a different dimension. Her *Difficult Daughters* is about education, *A Married Woman* about friendship between women, *Home* about how families both sustain and destroy, *The Immigrant* about the phenomenon of NRI marriages. And her last novel *Custody* is about an adopted child with themes of custody, blood and non- blood relations.

The search for control over one's destiny is the key theme of *Difficult Daughters*. The novel is set in an upper-middle class urban Arya Samaj Punjabi family in Amritsar. The action takes place in 1940, a conservative period when women had no voice to assert their rights. The woman protagonist, Virmati is the eldest of the eleven children in her family that believes in Swami Dayanand Saraswati's ideology and women's education. Virmati's tale is told from a present-day perspective by Ida, her only daughter who seeks to reconstruct her mother's life story against the background of cruel division by fateful partition. The pages of *Difficult*

Daughters speak not only of Virmati, but of other difficult daughters, Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin and Swarnalatha, Virmati's room-mate in the hostel, an activist in the cause of freedom movement. They succeed better than she did in their parallel struggle for independence in their lives.

In Indian society, woman is unconditionally obliged to marry and once married, she loses her identity. Whatever identity she has in her father's family, she loses it and is unable to make space for herself on her own. Though marriage seems an adventure, she finds herself entrapped in an illusory biological trap and finally evolves as a mature woman or at least realises her innate potentialities to fight against oppression.

Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* seeks human relations that will allow her to be herself and to exercise a degree of control over her life which as an educated woman, she deserves. This aspiration is condemned to failure. Her work as the headmistress of a girl's school in Nahan, the capital of Sirmour, gives her female autonomy to discharge her responsibilities, entirely by herself. But she makes a wrong choice which brings her suffering. Her pre-marital affair, the repeated, clandestine visits of Professor Harish makes her lose the employer's confidence and she is obliged to quit her school, house and employment.

Virmati's married life with the Professor turns out to be a disaster. She suffers under the hostile Ganga, her husband's first wife. She loses all sense of identity, the culmination of her education in philosophy. In the end, her individual history disappears and becomes irrelevant, swallowed up in the greater collective tragedy of partition, when Shakuntala and Swarnalatha succeed in their lives as educated and emancipated women, Viramti is psychologically annihilated at the hands of her own family and her husband's. She herself recognises :

I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organising, participating in conferences, being politically alive, while my time is spent being in love. (*Difficult Daughters* 142)

What happens to Virmati, is no doubt, the most common destiny of Indian women, even if educated, in general. Manju Kapur shows that other paths also exist but the choices are by no means simple. "Still it is the duty of every girl to get married", remarked Kasturi, mother of Virmati. Manju Kapur portrays three generations of women at different points of time – Kasturi represents complete acceptance, Virmati, adjustment after

compromise and conflict, Ida, complete non-adjustment.

Manju Kapur's second novel *A Married Woman* focuses on the relationship between the two women – Astha, the sensitive daughter of an enlightened father and orthodox mother from a middle class educated family in South Delhi, the wife of Hemant, the rich man and Pipeelika, a Professor's daughter, a muslim's (Aijaz) wife, a Hindu Brahmin girl. Manju Kapur describes the women protagonists as the victims of biology, gender and domestic violence. She thinks that there is man within every woman and woman in everyman when manhood is questioned and womanhood is fragmented.

Astha's marriage to Hemant, based on Hemant's foreign education, banking profession and money minting is her parents' choice. Her job as a teacher, the birth of her two children – Anuradha and Himanshu – fulfils her commitment both to her family and career. She feels :

A willing body at night, willing pair of
hand and feet in the day is necessary for a
married woman... and a marriage is just
sex rather than togetherness and respect .
(*A Married Woman* 218)

Astha is attracted to Pipeelika, a widow in suffering against male tyranny. As pleasure is an important element in sexual activity, Astha justifies lesbianism as a component of larger human urges. Both forgetting their personal anguish and agony, gain inner strength from women's liberation and fulfil female bonding in passionate fantasies and love making. Bhagwat Nayak in "Feminine Assertions in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*: A Socio-Ethical Perspective" points out that Astha prefers lesbianism as an antidote to masochism :

Marriage is a noun while sex is a verb
in her lesbophobic imagination and
she accepts it for lasting human
relationship and happiness.(IJES 128)

Lesbian attempt drags Pipeelika to forgetfulness and for Astha, it is a sweet revenge on her husband and she becomes a new woman.

Manju Kapur has exhibited the new facets of married women, Astha and Pipeelika are disillusioned in life with their suspicion of male integrity. Both fail to reach the climax of their emotional and physical passion due

to socio-political understanding and misfortune. Pipeelika is desexualised in her widowhood. Astha desires to be loved and respected and revitalised in the deep recesses of her mind. She knows that sex suffers if marriage suffers and leads people to seek solace beyond marriage :

When she was with Hemant, she felt like
a woman of straw, her inner life dead, with
a man who noticed nothing. She accepted
the misery of this dislocation as her due
for being a faithless wife. (*A Married
Woman* 287)

Both women embark on a powerful relationship and refresh their lives. In the end Pipeelika leaves for U.S.A to do her Ph. D. whereas Astha lives again mechanically in an emotional vacuum as if,

her mind, heart and body felt numb. She
felt stretched thin... thin across the globe.
(307)

Manju Kapur's novels are set against the background of sociopolitical upheavals coupled with physical and psychological frustrations of woman. She tries to point out that the complexity of woman's life has to be tackled in relation to the socio-cultural situation. Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individuals. But they are caged within the confines of a conservative society. They struggle between tradition and modernity. They develop awareness of the new woman with a voice revolting against the institution of marriage.

Works Cited

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