

Reflections of Changes in Society through the Fiction of Manju Kapur

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Abstract: Manju Kapur is a name in the realm of modern feminist fiction which needs no introduction. She is an author who has given a new direction to the feminism through her novels. In this paper there is a discussion about the four novels of Manju Kapur, in the perspective of the changing mode of Indian society. These four novels are *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home* and *Custody*. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* is set in the time when India was struggling for freedom and at the time of partition. The protagonist of this novel Virmati, takes part in this struggle as well as in her personal life also, she tries to break the shackles of the womanhood, thrust upon her on the name of being a daughter, sister, lover and wife. The second novel *A Married Woman* narrates the struggle of a woman who tries to prove her own independent existence in her house through her art. The third novel *Home* is centered around the character of Nisha who proves to be successful business woman. Manju Kapur's fourth novel *Custody* depicts the growing hollowness in marital relations whether it is on the name of infertility or the status. So these four novels cover a large period of changing mode of society in themselves.

Key words- Feminism, Womanhood, Infertility, Status etc.

I. INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur is a name which needs no introduction in modern feminism. She is an author who has discussed feminism on the basis of equality between men and women in each aspect of life whether it is social, financial, psychological, emotional and physical or mental ability. She is well known for her four novels that is *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home* and *Custody*. Though Manju Kapur has written total five novels till now and her fifth novel is *Brothers* which has been published recently but in this paper the concentration is focused on the first four novels. As the title of this paper is Reflections of Changes in Society Through the Fiction of Manju Kapur, these four novels cover a wide spread range of time period from pre-independence to the time of liberalization and globalization in Indian economy. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* gives an account of the three female generations. Though the protagonist of this novel is Virmati, yet her mother Kasturi and her daughter Ida also have a great importance in order to understand drastic change in society during the living time of these three characters. In the novel Kasturi appears before us as a mother of eleven children. Her health is badly shattered because of constant breeding of children. She is not willing to give birth to her eleventh child as she is not sure about her life and says, "I am going to die, Maji, this time. I know it." (*Difficult Daughters* P.8)

She tries to abort this child with the help of 'dai' but could not get success and is compelled to give birth to her eleventh child who is a girl (Parvati). Due to extreme physical weakness doctor recommends a long holiday for her on a hill station otherwise her death was certain. This constant breeding made a victim of humiliation also when Lajwanti says, "Breeding

like dogs and cats. Harvesting time again." (*Difficult Daughters* P. 7)

At the time of her marriage she was not aware of anything about Suraj Prakash. Her married life was just a starting of breeding for her which continued for more than the half of her life. Even she started to think about this blessing of motherhood from nature as a curse for herself and began to pray for her death. 'Why should she look after her body? Had not it made her life wretched enough?' (*Difficult daughters* P. 9). Still she never thinks of raising any question against this destiny decided for her by the male-dominated society where she had no control over her power of generating.

Virmati, the daughter of Kasturi, is the eldest one with her ten siblings. Her life is the another name of responsibilities as her mother Kasturi is always engaged in child bearing and birth giving and she has to play the role of mother for her younger sisters and brothers. But there is a difference between the character of Kasturi and Virmati. While Kasturi is always dumb in her life for her pitiful condition, Virmati has a lot to say about her desires and dreams. Though Kasturi was also a little educated but Virmati is not satisfied with her just school education. She wants to get higher education and struggles for that. Moreover she marries a person of her own choice without caring for the rules set by the society for a daughter. She takes part actively in freedom struggle of India and during partition also she becomes a part of social upheaval rather than just being a mute witness or victim. As Dr. Ruby Milhoutra says aright in *Exixtential Images of Women in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters*:

"It is only Virmati who is the difficult daughter in the prosperous merchant family of Lala Diwan Chand. While in the generation of Kasturi, woman's role was confined to childbearing and kitchen work, the generation of Virmati took

some bold and radical steps in joining the political movement for India's freedom, asserted the need for women education and independence. As a non-chalant representative of the middle generation, Virmati breaks away from the tradition bound limits of Indian women."

Ida, daughter of Virmati, is far ahead from the character of Virmati. Though she appears in the novel occasionally yet she is representative of modern generation who believe to break the relation rather than to continue it as a burden in case of dissatisfaction. Though she gets her child aborted under the pressure of her husband but she gets divorce also after it. She has a feeling of hatred also for her mother as Virmati's life was mystery for her and after her death Ida was determined to solve that mystery.

The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she was gone and I stared at the fire that rose from her shrivelled body, dry-eyed, leaden, half dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept." (Difficult Daughters P. 1)

II. DISCUSSION

The second novel of Manju Kapur is *A Married Woman*. Astha, the protagonist of this novel, belongs to a middle class family. In her adolescent age, she enjoys her relationship with Rohan. Like a common girl, she also wants to get married to a handsome young man. She gets married to Hemant who is handsome and smart enough. But after a few years of life, she is trapped in never ending responsibilities which are shared by none. In one of her interviews Kapur states-"I am a feminist. And what is a feminist? I mean I believe in the rights of women to express themselves in the rights of women to work. I believe in equality, you know domestic equality, legal equality. I, believe in all that. And the thing is that women don't really have that- you know even educated women, working women. There is a trapping of equality but you scratch the surface and it is not really equal." Even after the birth of her first girl child she is expected to give birth to a male child, though she has nothing to do in this. But it was decided that she has to continue this birth giving until a male child is born. As Hemant says, "Of course we will have a son, and if we don't we needn't stop at two." (A Married Woman P.61. Her life is compared with the life of her sinter-in-law Sangeeta who has some problems with her husband and in-laws. Astha is expected to thank to everyone for her better life and to remain silent as Sangeeta does. As her mother-in-law says,

It is not a woman's place to think of these things. If you were living in the conditions Sangeeta is, you would better value what you have. I hope you never regret this." (A Married Woman P. 187)

But in all these problems of her life she has keen desire to prove her self-independent existence. She takes part in the social movements related to Babri Masjid and Ram Mandir dispute. She delivers speeches in public rallies and moulds the psychology of mob. When she is not satisfied in her married

relation with Hemant, she seeks shelter in lesbian relationship with Pipeelika. She makes her career as an artist and achieves recognition in the society. She is successful in making her family realize that she is much more in herself just than a house wife who is destined to fulfill others' needs. As Roopali writes in her essay *A Married Woman: A Saga of Post-Modernistic Ethics* that-

"A post-modernistic ethic has spread its wings everywhere. *A Married Woman* deals with tradition *versus* no tradition, permanent *versus* temporary, moral *versus* immoral, usual sex to unusual sex, factual history *versus* imaginary history and religion *versus* in-humanism. The life in the novel presents contradictions, paradoxes, illusions and fantasies."

The third novel to be considered in this paper is *Home*. The protagonist of this novel is Nisha who is born in a strict patriarchal family. She is the first child of her mother Sona after a long period of married life of ten years and she is the only girl child in her house with her four brothers. Like a strict patriarchal family, Nisha has a lot of boundations on herself as she can not go outside the house to play like her brothers, she has to look beautiful always etc. As Simone de Beauvoir has pointed out in her *'The Second Sex'*-

"One is not born, but rather becomes woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the female presents in a society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature... which is described as feminine."

But despite of all these restriction s Nisha is physically exploited in the four walls of her house by her cousin Vicky in her early childhood. This was a terrible shock for her child psychology and she was sent to her aunt Rupa's house to recover from this. The atmosphere of Nisha's own house and Rupa's house is totally different. Here she shines like a star for being the only centre of concentration as Rupa is also childless. But coming back to her home was the starting of a struggle for her.

'After eleven years Nisha returned home to assume her place as daughter of the house, to learn the difference between weekend visits and full time stay. Now there was less interest in her school, no pampering, and long hours expected in the kitchen.' (Home P. 125)

But still she makes efforts and expresses her desires at each step of life. She wants to marry a person of her own choice but after rejection of her family, she does not waste her life only in waiting for suitable match for marriage as she is Manglik. She sets up her business of stitching garments and becomes a successful business woman. She breaks the tradition of her family where women are confined to live within the four walls of home. She gets married to Arvind and gives birth to twins, a boy and a girl. She enjoys all the happiness in her life.

The last novel to be considered in this novel is *Custody* which is regarded as a great success for the author Manju Kapur. Unlike the former three novels, Custody has two female protagonists, Shagun and Ishita. The novel is set in the time when Indian economy was entering into the age of liberalization and globalization. This was the time for every efficient person to boom financially and socially. But this

financial dominance in society shattered the moral values and ethics of the common people. The divorce of Raman and Shagun is the example of the hollowness in modern marriage and the divorce of Ishita and Suryakanta is the example of degraded moral values in the society. As Mithu Banerjee writes, in *A Review of Custody by Manju Kapur*:

“Although marriage is well-trodden territory for Kapur, here her possession of the subject is complete. In the accumulation of detail, and her tone of emotional restraint, *Custody* becomes something more than just a social commentary, but a novel that is true to the universal angst of modern marriage, with its burden of individualism.”

Shagun gets divorce from Raman because she wants to live a life which is full of glamour and free from responsibilities. Even she does not care for her children Roohi and Arjun and use them as a tool for getting divorce from Raman. On the other side divorce of Ishita and Suryakanta takes place because of the infertility of Ishita. These both divorces reveal the shallowness of marital relation in the modern world. The behavior of the adults towards the minors is also heart rending as Roohi and Arjun has to suffer a lot because of the disputes among their elders. As Swapna Raghu Sanand says, “This is not merely a story. It is a battlefield of sorts that tears your heart and soul apart because of its masterful narrative and honesty. Read it but be ready to cry.”

III. CONCLUSION

So the above description of the first four novels of Manju Kapur reveals clearly that her novels are the living pictures of the changing mode of society. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* comprises the character of Kasturi, when women accepted all the agonies of their life as their destiny without asking any question. But Ida the grand-daughter of Kasturi gets divorce from her husband and dares to live alone in the society. In her second novel *A Married Woman* Astha enjoys her life and gives it a meaning other than just being a wife or a mother by indulging in other occupations and becomes successful also. Nisha in *Home* is the example of women's beginning in business world with great success. Her fourth novel *Custody* is the mirror of changed materialistic society where everyone has to fight for one's existence. All these four novel provide a vivid picture of the drastic change in society and this change is reflected through the fiction of Manju Kapur.

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