



**UNDERSTANDING THE INNER INTERWOVEN WORLD OF INDIAN WOMEN THROUGH THE CHARACTERS OF MANJU KAPUR’S SELECTED NOVELS**

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**Abstract:**

*Women living in India or Indian women living abroad are still the victims of sub ordination. Many Indian women novelists have shown the sufferings of women in the country as well as in the world. In spite of the great achievements women have marked in the history they are still under the domination of men. A woman may be highly qualified, well – trained in her profession but still she is absolutely considered a zero in her own abode. The sufferings of women are still continued though she is challenging the men abroad earning at par. Manju Kapur, one of the best feminist writers in India shows the suppression of women through her novels. The present article focuses on the role of women in traditional families oppressed under the matriarchal or patriarchal cultures. It’s not only that she is shown as dominated by men but also by women. Difficult Daughters, A Married woman and Home are the three novels which sensibly show the position of women in North Indian culture, gender discrimination imposed by her own families and her struggle for self- existence in this vast universe.*

**Key words:** Inner world, suffering women, matriarchal and patriarchal social fabric and cultures, gender discrimination, self-existence etc.

Why are Indian women the way they are? Why, despite everything do we find so much of ourselves mysterious? Where does the dependence, the longing for intimacy, the passivity come from? Does a woman’s relationship with her mother-that first binding relationship with her mother-becomes the model for so much of our adult relationships with men-create fetters,

constrain our sexuality, our independence, our very self-hood? India has witnessed a great number of versatile geniuses in the field of literature. It includes both men and a handful of women. Manju Kapur, a retired professor at Miranda House, New Delhi is the one of the best feminine writers. She bagged Common Wealth Prize for her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* and her fourth



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novel *The Immigrant* was shortlisted for the DSC prize for South Asian Literature and Indian Plaza Golden Quill Award. Manju Kapur has penned her initial novel in 1998, followed by the second novel in 2003 and continued to publish her third novel in 2006 with different dimensions in feminine roles. She has shifted her writing from Indian women living in India to India women migrating to alien lands and brought it out in the year 2008 and continued her theme focusing on a new subject of women's liberation in her fifth novel which set its path in the year 2011.

The present article focuses the status of women in her three novels namely *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman* and *Home*. The three protagonists Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, Astha in *A Married Woman* and Nisha in *Home* are the true representatives of oppression which women are facing in the world even today. Virmati, Astha and Nisha are educated, have great potentialities either as a teacher or painter or a fashion designer. But unfortunately their talents are not appreciated and they had to remain behind the doors. If they wanted to prove themselves they had to fight a battle to come out of their cages. A bird never likes

to be caged; it always waits for its turn to be liberated. Once it is free from the cage it never tries to go back. The three protagonists have the same ideology but are bound by their families.

Virmati, the protagonist of *Difficult Daughters* is born in a traditional family in Amritsar. The family is governed by the patriarch, Lala Diwan Chand her grandfather. Virmati the daughter of Surya Prakash and Kasturi suffers as a surrogated mother of her ten siblings. She misses her childhood care and love from her mother. She was forced to look after the necessities of her sisters and brothers rather than her own needs. Her parents fail to understand her as her father was busy with his business and mother was sick with the continuous child bearing. In spite of her impediments at household activities she tried to excel in education. She could recognize her aim only when she met her cousin Shakuntala in the hilly area, where she accompanied her sick mother and her sister for a change. May be the liberal status of Shakuntala at Lahore had a great impact on her mind. She found that her happiness lay outside her domicile: "To education, freedom and the bright lights of Lahore colleges." (15). When the two



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brothers Surya Prakash and Chandra Prakash were separated. Virmati's fate was turned. Kasturi being too conventional wanted Virmati also to be a good wife and mother like her in future. She never had an idea of her daughter's emotional conflicts. The affection between the mother and daughter were just paining.

Virmati was engaged to Inderjeet, but unfortunately she falls in love with the father of a girl, Professor Harish Chandra a tenant of her aunt whose influence made her to drown herself instead of marrying the man whom her parents had chosen for her. Her quest for love gave her more strength so she was more influenced by the Professor's letter than her would-be husband's letter. She mutely faced the humiliation and her mother's anger. May be if her parents could understand her, and helped her to come out of the situation, her life would have been entirely different. But she was caged like a culprit and her psychological disturbances mushroomed. She was only comforted by the secret letters she received from the Professor. Later it was decided to send her to Lahore for higher studies. She meets Swarna Latha, a social activist, once again her thoughts of independence uproot in her

mind. But the professor doesn't leave her and she again gets attached to him and becomes pregnant and boldly faces the situation by having an abortion with the help of Swarna Latha.

Virmati becomes a principal in a school but her thoughts and love for Harish never dies. She was sent away from school and with the help of Syed Hussain, the friend of the professor she marries him. Now she is free from her family domination but her agonies are continued in the professor's house with his wife, mother, sister and children. Virmati's story is run parallel to India's freedom struggle. Virmati struggles like India's struggle for independence and finally attains freedom but was never in a position to tell her reminiscences to her daughter, Ida. The novel opens with the enigmatic statement of Ida: "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother." (1) She finds all the incidents related to her parents from her uncles, aunts and friends after her mother's death. The book also ends as it has begun with the cryptic statement of Ida's comment: "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live



in it Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore.” ( 258-259)

This novel clearly points out the women’s sub-ordination and dampening which even education and social independence cannot wipe out. The reason for this can rightly be the psychological perspectives that parents build up for the female child to be locked inside the doors. The novel could win the award as the autobiographical element could touch the hearts of the readers. She says Virmati’s character is her own mother’s story who had married a man who was already married. Manju Kapur says about her characters in an interview to Deepa Diddi, Maitreyi College, University of Delhi :

DD: How do you conceive characters?

MK: My characters evolve as the writing goes on. I do not have a pre-conceived character. I like to create characters who behave consistently and plausibly in the given circumstances. I think of the theme first and then create the characters. (159)

This novel clearly shows the gender discrimination between a man and a woman. Virmati is ostracized by the society as she enters into a marital relation with a married man. On the other hand Professor Harish is accepted by both the families. Either his mother, his wife or Virmati’s family do not turn him out of the house. Virmati was not allowed by her mother when her father dies, but Harish, who was the real cause for their daughter’s distress was allowed.

The second novel *A Married Woman* is also set with the blend of a historical concept to social background. Astha, the protagonist of the novel is a single child brought by her working parents in Delhi. The father being a bureaucrat plans a bright future for his daughter without recognizing the inner potentialities in her. Astha’s mother though educated and employed is a good example of a good traditionalist. Her only aim is to see her daughter well-settled in a reputed family. Astha grows as a normal child, but her mother spies her when she attains teenage making her feel uncomfortable. At last Astha completes her post graduation and is married to Hemanth, a foreign returned MBA graduate. Astha and Hemanth enjoy their married life and are



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blessed with two kids Anuradha and Himanshu. Astha is a painter and she also teaches for the class 12 students. Hemanth resigns to his bank job and turns to a business man. As both of them were busy they miss their leisure. Astha was asked to lead the theatre group headed by Aizaj Akthar Khan, a lecturer and a social activist. Realizing Astha's prospectives he encourages her to write dialogues for their stage art on Babri Masjid. Astha gets involved in it and Hemanth starts to find fault at her involvement. Astha finds after a few days that Aijaz was assassinated in a bomb blast. Hemanth does not like her mourning on Aijaz's death.

Astha turns her attention towards the Manch activities, which was formed after the death of Aijaz. Her talent as a painter comes out as she starts painting for the Manch. She starts involving more in the Manch activities neglecting her husband and children. Even Hemanth becomes busy in establishing his business and travels more, but he tries to enjoy with his family members. She leaves her children and goes to Ayodhya where she meets Pipeelika Khan, wife of late Aijaz Akthar Khan. A relation develops between them which emotionally turn them into

lesbians. Two women fall in love with each other. "Pipee stretched out her palm for Asth's hand. Gently she held it, fingering her thumbnail. Round and round the stubby nail of Pipee's finger went, lightly tracing the pink part, the white part, the skin part. Astha looked at teir two hands together, and inched a little closer to the woman on her bed." (222).

Astha was not given much importance in her maternal home as well as her paternal home. Here importance relates to her self-recognition. Both the families adored her, but considered her as dependent. They could not treat her as an independent trait. When Astha's father dies and her mother turns to spirtuality and moves to ashram, she sells her property and hands over the money to Hemanth assuming him the right person to handle it. Astha feels bad that she was not even consulted in this matter. She feels women are also capable of handling monetary funds. She was hurt as her mother and Hemanth consider her as incapable to handle or double the amount. She finds a condom in Hemanth's suitcase after his journey and Hemanth pacifies her saying that he was offered by the parties but he rejected it. Astha's paintings won good reputation, so



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she continues to paint despite her frequent headaches but Hemanth doesn't encourage as she expects from him.

Astha finds everything in Pipee and even the society doesn't doubt the relation between women. She gives importance to her feelings rather than the feelings of her family members. She devotes her entire time to Pipee. She even struggles between Hemanth and Pipee. But she feels her place in home is just of a wife who is, "A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in day and an obedient mouth." (231). Hemanth tries to reunite the loss of relationship between them as he plans a tour for abroad. Of course this was successful to some extent. After their return Pipee realizes that she cannot continue her long relation with Astha, and Pipee plans to do her Ph.D at abroad and Astha returns to her family with a broken heart.

Astha's agony to be independent is shown in a moving way. She says, "Please, Hemanth. I am thirty-six. I need to be independent. I am always adjusting to everybody else's needs." (227) She feels hurt when she her earnings were not recognized. May be they were meager but she is also a bread winner. She feels when she wants to

buy an article at Goa, Hemanth refuses. She says, "I also earn!" to which Hemanth snorts, "What you earn, now that is really something, yes, that will pay for the holiday." (165)

Manju Kapur has rightly focused on the suppression that women face in their daily life. The readers feel Astha has a secured and economically stable life, but what she misses is her identification. As an educated and employed women she feels she has competence to compete with others and prove her status in the society. Unfortunately her parents or Hemanth had not given her a chance. She feels happy when she earns through her paintings. May be her frustration made her not to listen to her mother-in-law whose was humble towards her. Her mother-in-law tries to stop her saying: "I am glad my daughter-in-law does not feel she has to sit at home. Till I have the use of my hands and feet I will help you, but it is my duty to point that you are going too far". (187)

Virginia Woolf's suggestion is apt in connection with the situations prevailing around educated women. She says, 'But it is not education only that is needed. It is that women should have liberty of experience,



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that they should differ from men without fear and express those differences openly..... be encouraged to think, invent, imagine and create as freely as men do.” (33). If Astha was a boy may be her parents could have given her the freedom she aimed for and she could have been even given the power to handle her parent’s property. She was influenced by the matriarchal elements before her marriage and patriarchal elements after her marriage. But in case of Astha the matriarchal pressure was more when compared to patriarchal powers.

The third novel *Home* clearly depicts the characters of conservative family systems where women lose their voice. Nisha the protagonist is born in a family which had migrated from Pakistan after the partition. The head of the family Lala Banwari Lal moved to Delhi with his carrying wife, elder son Yashpal and daughter Sunita. As they were back to square one, Banwarilals started their business in the Karol Bagh area. They crossed the stumbling blocks by moving the earth and heaven and settled successfully as one of the famous traders. Yashpal fell into the cunning trap of Sona’s mother and refused to marry any other woman other than Sona. The patriarch Lala Banwari Lal was

intelligent and married his son according to his will. Lady Banwari Lal couldn’t accept Sona but was happy when PyareLal, their second son married according to their will a girl from their community. Sona’s life became painful when Sushila had given birth to sons. Unfortunately Sona had not conceived for a long time. She fasted and prayed to god by making many sacrifices. Her prayers were answered in indirect form making Sona the mother of Vicky, Sunita’s son. Sunita was another victim of the atrocities against women.

Sona was not happy to accept Vicky as her son, but in a joint family it was highly difficult for her to pour out her inner interwoven feelings. The only relief she had was the succor from her sister Rupa, who was the wife of a badly paid pen pusher. Rupa, who lived near to was quite opposite to her sister Sona. While Sona was beautiful, had a loving husband, good family she was always unhappy. On the other hand Rupa was not beautiful as her sister or had money or children but she was happy. May be her self-employment and independent status gave her the spirit which she had possessed. Sona’s dependent nature made Sona to feel insecure. Sona could become a mother after a long



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time for Nisha and Raju. After Raju's birth Sona started to show the gender discrimination and left Nisha caring more for Raju. The neglected Vicky started to harass Nisha sexually. Unable to tell what is happening to her, Nisha developed nightmares.

Rupa took Nisha to her house and realized that the girl was harassed by Vicky. Rupa and her husband Premnath made the girl normal and concentrated on her education. She visited her parents only in the weekends and Yashpal took care that Vicky is away from her. Nisha was brought by the modern ideologists who gave importance to her ideas and education. But after her grandfather's death Nisha was forced to return to look after her grandmother. She was considered as unfit by Sona as Rupa didn't teach her any culinary arts or spiritual matters. Sona's feeling was that a girl's ultimate destination was marriage, children and kitchen. She started blaming Rupa for not educating Nisha in the manner which she expected.

Nisha's education was not given any importance and she falls in love with Suresh, a low caste boy and knowing this the family members cage her inside the house. Suresh

was offered a large sum to leave Nisha. Sona starts humiliating Nisha and sensitive Nisha develops eczema. Being a mangli and having the skin disease her marriage gets postponed. Raju gets married to Pooja and Nisha's sufferings increase making her worse and worse. Nisha was not allowed to touch Shuchi, her brother's daughter and her mother as usual supports her son and daughter-in-law. Nisha has only Rupa to confront her situation and Rupa urges her sister to send her to her house. But Sona was reluctant to leave her daughter at her sister's house. Nisha joins as a teacher in a play school. But the job couldn't give her any satisfaction. She wanted to work in the shop like her brothers. She requests her father, "If only you could take with you, Papaji" she pleaded in a rush, "I have seen girls working in shops. Why should it be only Ajay, Vijay and Raju? There must be something I too can do." (267). This reveals her inner expedition for independent status and self-reliance. She realized the creativeness in her and urged her family members to allow her to start Nisha creations. At last Nisha became a successful trader but ultimately she had to give it up after her marriage to look after her husband and kids.



The gender discrimination is shown very clearly between Raju and Nisha. Though Raju was not good as Nisha in education he was treated well and Nisha was not cared much. The discrimination started right when she was a kid. Her mother didn't allow her to go out and play with her brothers in the park. There is no doubt that Nisha and Raju were not neck and neck in the eyes of their mother. In spite of the discrimination shown by their mother, Nisha was successful than her brother either in education or business. Raju has not achieved anything individually like his sister other than following the footsteps of his father. Manju Kapur has shown Nisha as an influential, educated, self-assured, valiant and self-determining new woman.

All the three protagonists of Manju Kapur could prove themselves though had many hindrances for their progress. Virmati, Astha and Nisha had to struggle to prove themselves as they were surrounded by the powerful conformists. Manju Kapur had shown the three protagonists as educated women in the same literature field in which the writer herself had excelled in. She feels education brings about many changes in the life of women which attains them an autonomous status. All her protagonists are

employed and not confined to household work. They come from well-established families but strive for their own self –identity which is must for every individual. The titles are apt for the characters. It is true that women can be superior beings though the society, patriarchs, matriarchs and gender discrimination encumbers their progress.

As Simon De Beavoir says, “When a boy revolts against his father, against the world, his violence is effective; he picks up a quarrel with a comrade, he fights, he affirms his standing as subject with his fists: in a word, he imposes himself upon the world, he transcends it. But it is not for the adolescent girl to affirm or impose herself, and this is what fills her heart with revolt: she may hope neither to change the world nor to transcend it; she knows, or at least believes, that she is fettered – and perhaps she even wants to be; she can only destroy.” (377). I think it's the right time for every individual irrespective of sex to treat both the male and female child are indistinguishable. A family can be at cloud nine if there is no gender discrimination.



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