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FEMALE OBSTINACY: THE ASSERTIVE NATURE OF MANJU KAPUR'S WOMEN CHARACTERS

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Abstract

Women's writing became a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statements in the 20th century. Especially the last two decades witnessed phenomenal success in feminist writings of Indian English Literature. Manju Kapur, one of the glowing stars of Indo-Anglican fiction turned popular with a considerable impact on her writings. She has successfully experimented with and accomplished her creative art with her novels, short stories and poems. The novelist in her novels deals with the leading themes of that period where the descriptions of love, sex and marriage are very bold and rather unconventional.

Key Words: Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, *Home*, *Virmati*, *Nisha*, *Sona*, *Rupa*.

Literature is an expression of life through the medium of language. It is a record of what men have seen and experienced in life, and what they have thought and felt about it has the most immediate and enduring interest for all of us. The major impulses behind literature are the desire for self-expression and the interest in people and their doings.

Women's writing in Indian English Literature begins with Toru Dutt's *Bianca* or *The Young Spanish Maiden* in 1877. Women writers gave a new dimension to Indian Literature. It took many years and several distinguished personalities to bring the present status and distinction to Indian English Writing. Even before the rise of novels, many women writers composed songs, short stories and plays. They are considered the upholders of the rich Indian tradition of fables and storytelling. In their

writings, they incorporate the recurring female experiences, which soon affected the cultural and language patterns of Indian literature.

Women's writing became a powerful medium of modernism and feminist statements in the 20th century. Especially the last two decades witnessed phenomenal success in feminist writings of Indian English Literature. Their fiction constitutes a major segment of contemporary writing in English, which consists of the latest burning issues related to women as well as those issues that exist in society for long. They explore the unexplored female psyche, which has no accessibility. The majority of these novels depict the psychological suffering of frustrated housewives.

Women writers have tried their best to focus on various literary themes since the beginning.

They begin to investigate and acknowledge the position of women in a male-dominated society. Women are exploited and subjugated based on caste, class, creed and social patriarchal setup in India. Post-colonial women writers have added new dimensions to Indian English fiction with their exquisite perception of men and matters. Through their attempt to study the place and position of women in Indian society, they have analysed the socio-cultural modes and values that have given women their role and image in society.

Manju Kapur, one of the glowing stars of Indo-Anglican fiction turned popular with a considerable impact on her writings. She has successfully experimented with and accomplished her creative art with her novels, short stories and poems. Whatever the genre, it is the theme of her works that is concerned most for herself and her readers.

Manju Kapur is a post-colonial writer who intuitively perceives the position of women in a patriarchal society and deals with the problems of women. Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is the story of a young woman Virmati who falls in love with a married man, hitherto a condemned passion in her narrow social circle. It is not only about the difficult daughters but also as much about the difficult mothers of the changing times. Here the novelist deals with the leading themes of that period where the descriptions of love, sex and marriage are very bold and rather unconventional. The narrator, Ida, is a difficult daughter and she explores the life of her mother in the novel. Kapur uses three generations of daughters, who exhibit three sets of notions. The novel presents the paradigm of two mother-daughter relationships where the daughters differ from their mothers and never want to be like them but in the end, they cannot but identify with their mothers.

The novel *Home* presents Nisha, the protagonist as a bold, educated and balanced person. Her feminist sensibility has been suppressed to a great extent by patriarchy. Manju Kapur takes the readers through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations. It explores the complex terrain of the Indian family and reveals

many issues that are deeply rooted within the family. Nisha's marriage and her subsequent motherhood assert the fact that a woman's intellectual emancipation does not negate her biological stature in nurturing relationships. Kapur is not argumentatively vocal in pleading the fate of the contemporary woman rather she sympathetically paints a woman's struggle to find an identity. In all her novels, the readers get to experience the woman of the modern era, her problems and her desire to become independent. The husband-wife relationship has been taken up as a major theme in all her novels. She exposes the exploitative trends of the patriarchal society in which male plays the dominating role and portrays a woman who wants changes in the norms of traditions. This paper highlights her notable novels to demonstrate the distinct trends of their representations.

Manju Kapur's woman heroines are characters who do not want to remain silent and bear patiently each and everything that a male-dominated society does. The patriarchal set-up always enforces women to confine to their homes. But in the novels of Manju Kapur, they reaffirm their personality and desires through their intellectual merit. Manju Kapur unravels the issues of women and highlights that these issues are still prevalent in Indian society. Thereby readers can understand how far and difficult is for a woman to challenge old traditions of society and arrive at a state of peace and tranquility. She tried to present her views regarding the evolution of new women. Manju Kapur's all five novels have different themes but deal with the typical middle-class dreams, hopes and aspirations of female figures. The background of these novels is urban in nature and it catches the city life with ironic detachments.

Manju shows her deep insight into telling the tales of common people in daily life. There is a unique tone of experience in the so-called journey. Traditions, conventions and customs all these things are linked with a unique sense of freedom which has been recognized as the essence of modernity. Kapur's unique sense of feminism is well displayed outstandingly. She presents human beings in the context of conflict; especially family conflict. It has been reorganized as the core issue of her novels.

Kapur's perceptions of women's liberation and autonomy are deeply stretched within the social-cultural and economic spaces and paradigms of the country. Her works stress not any joint social efforts to safeguard the individuals but insist on every woman's self-development for the betterment of her society. Her novels are therefore a story of the struggle for freedom and search for existence at various levels.

The women in the novels of Manju Kapur seem to be the personification of new women who have been carrying the burden of inhibition for ages and want to be free now. In the traditional social milieu of the novel where mothers and daughters exist, marriage is regarded as the ultimate goal and destiny from which these women cannot escape. The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as women caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and the yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. Manju Kapur says that writing in India tends to involve the family and community to a far greater extent than in the West. Here, women are often defined in terms of their roles. The tension between these notions of identity and the desire for personal fulfillment forms much of sub continental literature.

Women protagonists of Kapur are a personification of a new woman who struggles to throw off the burden of inhibitions she has carried for ages. They crave self-sufficiency and a separate identity. Trapped in the passion themselves, they also yearn to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. Kapur's protagonists are mostly educated. Their education leads to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. Their struggle between tradition and modernity, encourage them to plunge into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as ideal woman.

Most Indians believe in traditional values and they are deep-rooted in Indian society. Still today, Indian society is organized around gender bias and it gives more importance and space to male dominance. It begins with the birth of a baby. If it is a 'boy', it is given more importance than a 'girl'. It mostly begins with the marriage, the bride's

incorporation into the family. She is trained and taught the lifestyle of her husband's family. Despite doing all the efforts to devote herself sincerely to the uplifting of her family, she is considered an outsider and treated accordingly as well. Her opinions are hardly given any weight despite her good education and intelligence. She does not feel as part of her own family as she does in her father's, because she is alienated. But when she becomes mother-in-law and has a protest voice, particularly on the daughters and daughters-in-law, she does not become an advocate but the custodian of the same tradition. We can examine this through the close study of Manju Kapur's female protagonists. She discusses the view that when an Indian woman has all the values like education, status and intelligence, she tries to marry off her own choice and spoils her life between two sides; the one that she revolts against and the other she will live in.

Difficult Daughters is the first novel by Kapur the story of a woman split between family duty, desire for education and illicit love. Set around the turbulent years of World War Two and the partition of India, the novel depicts the women of three generations focusing on Virmati, the difficult daughter of the second generation. Ida is Virmati's only daughter, a childless divorcee, unable to develop an understanding with her mother during her lifetime and after Virmati's death, this realization engulfs her as guilt. Ida sets out on a journey into her mother's past by putting together fragments of memory. Virmathi, the eldest of eleven children, is burdened with family duties at a very young age itself due to her mother's incessant pregnancies. She grows upon the belief that every girl has to get married and fulfill her familial duties and commitments. However seeds of aspiration are planted in Virmati's mind when she sees Shakuntala, her cousin, tasting the wine of freedom and leading an independent life as a college student. But there arises a love affair between her and a married professor. On knowing the professor's intimacy with his first wife, she decides to shun him once and for all. She asserts her individuality and aspires for self-reliance through education. Yet the professor's unavoidable visits make her pregnant and of which she forces him to marry her. She is given only a mean

status at his home and faces exclusion from all. Though she dares to cross that patriarchal threshold, she caught into another. The novel *Difficult Daughters* has portrayed finding space in the world of patriarchal supremacy, where female marginality and centrality of the stereotypical definition of women are defined well.

Home, the third novel of Manju Kapur is a story of an ordinary middle-class family. The novel unravels the life of an ordinary middle-class joint family in Delhi. It brings light to the prevalent parochial attitudes towards the upbringing of the girl child in India. *Home* is a brilliantly woven story of two Meerut-born sisters, Sona and Rupa, closely studying the attitudes of the daughter Nisha. The novel begins with the contrasting predicaments of the two sisters, both childless. Sona is the daughter-in-law in the joint family of the Banwari Lal, while Rupa is married to an impecunious government servant. Sona enjoys all the material comforts and the support structure of the extended business family, and Rupa is the independent woman in a nuclear family emerging with her pickle marketing, without being taunted about her childless state. Shamed by years of barrenness, Sona finally is blessed with her girl Nisha and boy Raju. As Nisha shows signs of emotional distress at the trauma of secret sexual abuse, she grows up under the care of her aunt Rupa at her house during her tender years. Nisha grows up to be a rebel. The novel then focuses on her failed college romance, the growth of poor skin condition, affected beauty, delayed marriage, and the desperate loneliness that triggers her venture into entrepreneurship and equally the pressures of marriage and motherhood later.

The novel, *Home* exposes the prevalent stereotypical attitude towards the upbringing of a girl child in India. Kapur traces the painful journey of the protagonist, Nisha, from childhood to adulthood in search of her self-identity. Nisha's search for a home which is the search for a place of shelter and security leads her into chaos. The writer says that in India *Home* is not a place of comfort and relaxation and it does not ensure them any emotional security, nonetheless, it does not provide them with any physical security. The physical abuse of children, at the hands of their relatives, is also discussed through

Nisha's sexual abuse by her cousin, Vicky. A girl is considered an object of sexual arousal everywhere in the world. Thus it is expected that she should take care of her physical appearance, to be able to grab the attention of people. Nisha's mother, Sona, always shoves her to be neat and well-dressed like a princess. She does not allow her to play in parks with other children because her complexion may become dark.

The emergence of new women in the realm of social, economic, cultural and racial aspects will also be exposed in the novels of Manju Kapur. The concept of new women in Indian society varies from the one in the west therefore Manju Kapur has tried to evolve in her stream of new women in literature. She has her concerns, and priorities as well as her ways. Her novels make a significant contribution in this direction. Women under patriarchal pressure and control are subjected to much more burns and social ostracism. The lives women live and the struggle under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society are reflected through the writings of Manju Kapur. We see the budding of new women in Manju Kapur's heroines, who do not want to be rubber dolls for others. Defying patriarchal notions that enforce women's domesticity, they assert their individuality and aspire to self-reliance through education. They nurture their desire for being independent and lead lives of their own. They want to shoulder responsibilities. They are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. Kapur's heroines are new females who strongly stand against the evils of society. They take a definite step to break the tradition of silence and suffering.

The traditional concern of marriage is the real issue faced by every girl in India. It is an important part of Indian culture. In India, the birth of a girl child is like a burden to the parents. Her upcoming marriage becomes their only dream and they feel fully satisfied when their daughter is married off. But the problem does not end there. As soon as the bride begins her wifely duties, she is expected to become a mother soon and the whole family awaits her pregnancy. They all unanimously wish the child to be a male. The great Indian psyche is at work while expecting a male child. The woman

suffers if she fails to attain motherhood and soon starts feeling useless. Even though she is not responsible for this state of happenings, some old conservative and patriarchal myths throw blame her. This is evident in every part of Indian society. Women should be submissive in their married life which is the supreme quality ascribed by society. She is always compared to other women who are blessed with children. In India, society has always tried to keep women within the periphery of domestic life and tried to ignore their interest in worldly activities. Women have always been marginalized. They have been confined to their homes and kitchens. As a result, they are unable to reach out to the space beyond their families. The woman is always found to be caught in her emotional life and the complicated fabric of human relationships.

The novel *Home* is about the family of Banwari Lal. The shop owner Banwari Lal, his sons Yashpal and Pyarelal and their wives and children explore the world of joint families. This world is not like the large happy families we have seen in films. It is a world which is trying to cope with the complications of managing their aspirations and individualities with those of the others inside the closed walls of the house, facing challenges of generational gaps, trying to accommodate growing children in narrow personal spaces and even narrower working spaces. This world does have altruistic elders, mutual support systems and intimacy that makes the joint family more comfortable, but the novel does not dwell much on these aspects, it rather focuses on tensions and rivalries, almost a Darwinian struggle of finding our own space for catching the sunlight and growing up, escaping the shadows of the others, who came before you or who have more rights than you. Kapur has given a quite fresh change in the thought of household circle throughout this novel which reveals the customary narrow-minded approaches towards the upbringing of the girl child in India. She traces the painful journey of the protagonist, Nisha, from childhood into adulthood. *Home* deals with Nisha's search for her own home, search for a place of shelter and security. Unluckily for the women in India, the home is not a place of comfort and

recreation. It does not make them surety of any emotional security and physical protection.

Manju Kapur is talented with a fine quality of creative perception. The pragmatic presentation of life in all her novels impresses everyone. She plays the role of a natural observer in her works. She highlights the negative aspect and behaviour of existing society. Through her novels, she conveys the message that people should rise from the petty manmade barriers of caste, religion and culture and should imbibe the spirit of love and fraternity. She attempts to show her concerns at the growing tendency of unrest in our society caused by man's attempt to exploit man for selfish gains and motives. Her investigation and presentation of human consciousness are directed toward an objective account of human emotions assessing Indian confrontation with reality. Her novels are not a part of any propaganda for reforms but they represent the ambivalent attitude of the writer. To give a realistic touch to her observation, Kapur does not idealize or glorify but presents life as it is, with its variegated canvas.

Through her artistic creativity, she presents new insight into the ambivalent attitude of women and men. She is convinced that freedom is deeply connected to the abolition of poverty. Kapur is brilliantly realistic because of her marvelous association with the rural and urban life of India, particularly the Southern part of India. It is admirable that in the broad range of her novels, she has effectively presented most of the significant features and different colours of Indian receptivity. She knows the real content of truth and how this truth would be reflected through the medium of art. Her proficient and attractive depiction of the outer and inner world of reality is come out of her artistic sensibility. Kapur's presentation of the household life of traditional society is ample and different. It contains all types of household burdens. The author also presents how men and women execute their responsibilities, carry out family duties, and experience home delight. Manju Kapur's narration of society is graphic and evident. The characters shaped by Kapur are from the adoption of a serious and impulsive approach that questions their

existence in current society and confronts cultural and social stereotypes.

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