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Projection of Feminine Self in Manju Kapur's Novels

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Abstract

Women writers in India are moving forward with their strong and sure strides, matching with the pace of the world. They are recognized for their originality, resourcefulness and the indigenous flavour of the soil that is reflected in their works. Manju Kapur occupies a significant place among the contemporary women novelists who concern themselves with the problems of women and their quest for identity. Her protagonists are modern, educated young women, crushed under the weight of a male-dominated and tradition-bound society. Her attempt to give an honest portrayal of their feelings, disappointments and frustrations makes her novels susceptible to treatment from the feminist angle.

Keywords

Manju Kapur; *Difficult Daughters*; *A Married Woman*; *Home*; *The Immigrant*.

Manju Kapur, the most recent Indian woman novelist of repute, was introduced to the literary world through the publication of her first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, in the late nineties, and she has carved a niche for herself. Kapur portrays the transformation of the conventional women into progressive women due to their quest for identity and independence. Kapur, she depicts both the types of women in her novels: the conventional and the unconventional. Manju Kapur writes about the social complexities of contemporary India mainly focusing on the predicaments of New Woman. A study of the position of women in relation to the Indian classical literature, history and the contemporary society gives us a proper knowledge of the images of women in various eras.

Through Virmati, the protagonist of the novel *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur portrays the rejection of the conventional, orthodox values. She is the eldest daughter of a Punjabi family. She revolts against the time-honoured traditions and aspires to be modern and independent. She is bold enough to reject her traditional, orthodox family in order to marry the married Professor, Harish Chandra. She is the first girl in Kapur's novel and also in her family to go out and continue her studies further in Lahore. As P. Sudhashri aptly says,

Virmati the protagonist, rebels against tradition. Yet she is filled with self-doubt. She pleads for studying further and postponement of her marriage. She attempts suicide, when faced with prospect of marrying the canal engineer. The family brands her 'to be restless, sick and selfish' and locks her up. (165)

She wants to live her life differently with complete freedom and independence, with in this regard Poojatolani writes,

While India fights for freedom, from the British Raj, Virmati fights for freedom to live life on her terms. Like so many other Indian girls, she wants to decide what to study and where, whom to marry and when. In the end, it appears that she might have achieved all that but it ceases to be important. For in the throes of struggle, she loses a part of herself. She is torn into halves, one of which on the side she is fighting against. (87)

Virmati stands for a new class of unregimented Indian woman, who are no longer prepared to be demoralized and exposed by society, but wrestle to affirm their rights and privileges.

Ganga, the professor's wife, is a complement to Virmati. She is perfectly dependent on her husband and can never be autonomous and authoritative. Ganga takes care of all the daily needs of the professor and also does the familial errands like cleaning, washing and cooking. She is possessive when Virmati enters the house as his second wife, but she is powerless to do any harm to Virmati and therefore, she keeps doing her everyday chores after undergoing a lot of hardships and disillusionments also. Ganga is so traditional that she never questions her husband but Virmati was once conventional and was abiding by the norms of the family, but later turned to be an unconventional woman going against the traditions of the family.

In *A Married Woman*, Astha, the audacious heroine is born in a middle class family. She is married to Hemant and has been happy during the early years of her married life. Possessing a free spirit, she is trapped in a traditional, middle class society and focuses on her role as a mother, daughter, wife and daughter-in-law until she meets Pipeelika who makes her realize her passions. Rita Felski describes the predicaments of Astha trapped between conventional and unconventional as follows:

A negative model, an image of female alienation... Women's confinement to the familial circle denies them the potential for

autonomous, self-fulfilling activity while trapping them into a relationship of psychological or economic dependence upon a lover who is unable to validate woman other than in relation to his own emotional... interests. (129)

To some extent even her marriage becomes questionable because she seriously involves herself in the outer world, that is, with the political and social problems.

Manju Kapur's *Home* portrays a traditional joint family, where Nisha, the protagonist is the granddaughter of Banwari Lal. From her childhood itself she is brought up in an orthodox manner. Nisha is full of vigour and spirit of independence, and enjoys the fruit of modern education, and yet she is enclosed in an orthodox, Hindu society which does not allow her to give a free vent to her emotion and thus making her a slave to the modern social taboos of Indian society. Thus Nisha has the image of a modern independent girl forced to conform to the norms of the Hindu society to fulfill the roles of a daughter, wife, daughter-in-law and mother.

Nina, in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* is an unmarried thirty year old protagonist who believes that economic independence alone leads to liberation and freedom in women like Labanya. She dislikes the traditional codes and morals that guide the women of the society and yet she is led by tradition. In "Embodiment: Eassy on Gender and Identity", Thapan writes about Nina's experience:

A woman's experience of her body is largely that of shame as she is seen a sansgressing family and social moral norms in one way or another. The moral domain for woman is therefore always defined and policed by the other. In a sense woman's body is often no longer her body but has been taken over by community of both men and women, to establish and legitimize its image in society. (51)

Nina who is married to Ananda, an immigrant of Canada, cannot tolerate his hypocritical complexities and therefore, comes out of his home to manoeuvre her own destiny. She finds liberation and independence in the western world.

In Kapur's *Custody*, the protagonist Ishita, an infertile divorcee, on the other hand, who is bound to traditional bond, marries Raman to fulfill his familial needs. Through Astha and Ishita, Kapur portrays the mature understanding of the female consciousness and the realization of their conventional roles where they find love and freedom while caring for the family.

Urmimala is a western educated young woman who flirts with her brother-in-law Sasanka and is affianced to Dr. Nirad Mukherjee. When she comes to her sister's house, she transforms the house into a place of vitality and vigour. But in the later part of the novella when she realizes the consequences of her flirtation, she repents and pleads Sarmila to forgive her. Both Pipeelika and Urmimala go abroad to continue their studies further leaving the conventional roles behind them.

All the heroines of Kapur, in their individual struggles are trapped between tradition and modernity searching for independence and freedom. On the one hand, some of these heroines are cultured, intellectual, refined, intrepid and self-assured who crave to carve a niche for themselves. On the other hand, some are archetypal with full of modesty, reticence, meekness and self-sacrifice. All these images of women emerge in the novels of Manju Kapur are from various perspectives and at different depths of meaning.

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