

The Independent Prisoners: Women in Manju Kapur's Novels

By

Abhabya Ratnam

M.A., NET

Abstract

*Manju Kapur is considered to be one of the most prominent names among the Indian women novelists and is a right representative of the Women's Liberation Movement because her fictional female characters have shown the ongoing trend of being a rebel against the existing patriarchal norms often discarding the very idea of being a submissive, suffering and sacrificing individuals. Her heroines appear to be thinking individuals living in the contemporary social, political, cultural and economic context. These Indian women have not only shown their own simmering discontent but they have also portrayed their own willingness to look for alternative modes of living life to its fullest. That is why, it is considered that the heroines in the novels of Manju Kapur are not merely a body but a living soul and a thinking individual. It is not for nothing that we can consider almost all of Kapoor's fictional works as projects depicting the feminist concern. Whether it is Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*; Astha in *A Married Woman*; Nisha in *Home*; Neena in the immigrant or *Shagun* and *Ishita* in *Custody*, almost all her female characters are Indian women who are born and brought up in middle class surroundings. Even after attaining proper education all of them are seen to be struggling in order to establish themselves with their own independent identities in the prevalent patriarchal setup of which they are part and parcel. The present paper deals with the portrayal of women characters in the novels of Manju Kapur and also on the aspects of women being independent individuals while leading life in a patriarchal setup. The paper predominantly entails my personal analysis. However, at times it is aided by critical books. All such resources have been cited.*

Keywords: Women's Liberation Movement, patriarchal norms, contemporary social context, feminist concern, middle class, independent identities, patriarchal setup.

Imtiaz Dhankar has very aptly observed the changing face of women in today's India:

Women are a huge power house in today's India. Look around you. There are women racing in all kinds of fields...finance, literature, broadcasting, IT, art, design, law, science, medicine, education and are a huge power house in today's India, true. And yet this is a power house with over 90% of the power switched off. These are women who don't even know they have choices.

This is something that Manju Kapoor also seems to be suggesting. However, one should try to understand the very basic concept of feminism in order to understand the different patterns of feminism which have been reflected in Manju Kapoor's writings. Talking about the background and origin of feminism one cannot neglect the importance of writers like Mary Wollstonecraft who published her *A Vindication of the Rights of women* in 1792. Similarly J.S. Mill in 1869 published *The Subjection of Women* in which he asserted that the society as a whole needs to rethink the role of women and the kinds of innumerable social oppressions meted to them. In the 20th century writers like Virginia Woolf and later on Simone De Beauvoir raised the gender question and had brilliantly tried to explore issues like education, marriage, economics, sensuality and morals related to women. If we talk in the political terms, feminism is based on a fundamental premise that inequality between the sexes is not the result of biological necessity but it is produced by the cultural construction of gender differences. It was something that had been put forward by Pam Morris who also discussed that gender difference is the foundation of a structural inequality between women and men which results in women suffering through a systematic social injustice. Keeping aside the political perception, sex and gender are fundamentally of different nature. While gender encompasses the

<https://www.researchreviewonline.com/issues/volume-7-issue-91-november-2020/RRJ255570>

cultural nuances attached to sexual identity, sex means the determining of identity on the basis of biological category. Thus, gender is nothing but an indirect product of a type of cultural conditioning. As far as literary criticism is concerned, the term feminism is linked to the political movement for equality of sexes and eradication of the existing discrimination against women. Thus, the arena of feminist criticism gets related to the reading of literary texts in order to uncover the latent ideology of a patriarchal society and how women are represented in such a biased socio-political scenario. As the Women's Movement became a major political force, the literary critics also got influenced and hence they accepted it as a new project to combat patriarchy. Here is an observation by Pramod K. Nayar:

This included re-reading the Canon of English literature to expose the patriarchal ideology that informed the construction of the Canon in the first place and which made male-centred writing possible. (82)

A similar observation has been made by B.K. Das:

The social roles of wife, mother, housewife assigned to women go hand in hand with a division into the public and private domains, the first being the sphere considered proper to men, second to women. Women became 'the second sex' in Simone De Beauvoir's Telling Phrase. (144)

Manju Kapur seems to be agreeing to the fact stated by Simone De Beauvoir that "one is not born but becomes a woman."(273) That's why, the novels of Kapur revolve around the stereotypes set by the society to understand the man's world and to change it to the advantage of women. Kapoor seems to understand that "the world that is essentially masculine on the whole, and those who fashion it, ruled it and still dominate it today are men."(298)

The age-old prejudice against women which considers them to be weaker than men in all respects is also reflected in the language system. Even in the English language it can be noticed very clearly that the pronouns are largely male oriented. Thus, it comes to the fore that the feminist movement is nothing but an earnest attempt to disrupt all these social malpractices which lead to the victimization of women. In the words of Shirin Kudchedkar:

It disputes the conflation of sex and gender categories and releases women from confinement to gender roles. It aims at making women the subject of her own story and not the object of male desire and male satisfaction or a whipping block for male frustration. Women come to realise the inauthenticity of the lives they lead and struggle to discover for themselves their own impulses, reactions, desires and needs. Their quest is for self knowledge and self realisation which can in turn lead to relationship based on mutual understanding and respect. Individual change and social change, both are desired goals, together with an eventual change in male perceptions and attitudes. (34)

After going through her works, one comes to realise that the novels so brilliantly authored by Manju Kapur are nothing but an honest attempt to make the world better not just for women but for men as well.

Kapoor's first novel *Difficult Daughters* was published in 1998. It is the story of a young woman's struggle for establishing her identity against the ideology of domestication which was dominant at the time of partition. The novel highlights the plight of the protagonist and also raises the issue of patriarchy which deprived the women of their voice and freedom. The whole story is knitted and knotted around *Virmati* who is born in a joint Punjabi family in Amritsar. The family has a high reputation and she is the eldest of all her 11 siblings. As a result and as per the fashion of those times, burden of household responsibility fell upon her frail shoulders and her studies get hampered. Whole day long she is busy in performing her tiresome duties but she gets no affection from anyone in the family. Even her mother, *Kasturi*, seems unattached to the poor little girl. However, as she grows

up, her life takes a romantic turn and she comes in the contact of a professor. This man, the Professor, is already married and has come to live as a tenant in Virmati's house. A mutual attraction grows between the Professor and Virmati. He motivates her to pursue higher studies. Eventually she falls in love with the married Professor and the situation gets complicated as she can not disclose her secret love affair to her parents. She is unable to bear the mental pressure and frustration. She attempts suicide but is saved in time. The mental trauma is caused partly because of her oppressive family members who have prohibited her from imagining a life of her own choice with the man of her dreams and partly because of the Professor's indifference which is totally unexpected. She has to face a thousand turmoils before she is able to marry the Professor and secure a job. Later on, she begins to lead her life with dignity and pride. History gets repeated when her own daughter stands before her and announces to lead the life of her own choice. The novel, *Difficult Daughters*, appears to be a story of three generations in which women are seen to be struggling to lead a life of their own choice. Ida (Virmati's daughter) is a divorcee and functions as the narrator of the novel. The novel happens to be the story of a daughter's painful journey back into her mother's turbulent past. Virmati finds her escape in the form of advanced education and anyhow bears with a mother-in-law, co-wife and step-children. Kasturi, who is the least educated among the three central characters, comes to terms with her difficult daughter who marries a married man for love! This is the time when India attained freedom. India's hollow victory gets mirrored in Virmati's seemingly free but hollow life. This is what makes *Difficult Daughters* an exceptionally readable novel as it tells the woeful tale of women who appear free on surface but are shackled deep within.

While her first novel reads like a family saga set against the historical event of partition, Kapoor's second novel *A Married Woman* (2002) revolves around lesbianism and a woman's obsession with the idea of love. The burning issue of lesbianism is perfectly set against an equally burning contemporary backdrop i.e. demolition of Babri Masjid. Astha, the protagonist, is the only child of an upper middle-class couple and possesses a romantic temperament. Her arranged marriage with America-returned Hemant soon turns into the usual typical monotonous Indian marriage. Eventually after the birth of two children, Astha's womanly feelings, her passionate emotions and expectations all go down the drain as Hemant becomes more neglecting with each passing day. As she continues playing the role of a wife, mother, daughter-in-law and teacher, Astha's discontentment leads her to defiance and restlessness. However, she never vocally complains and keeps on leading her life in utter misery. Her chance meeting with Aizaz and the latter's brutal murder in the Hindu-Muslim riots changes her life forever as she meets Peepilika, Aizaz's widow who is a confident woman unlike herself. As both the women start spending time with each other, a deep emotional bond develops between them. With the aid of Pipeelika's love, Astha comes to terms with herself and realizes her "self-hood" for the first time. However, this relationship appears more like a revenge on Hemant and soon she withdraws herself. She wants freedom but not at the price of her identity as a married woman. She wants to remain accepted in the society and hence leaves her one true love, Pipeelika, forever and returns back to her life of pretence and falsehood. Kapoor's *married woman* is strong-willed yet self-controlled and chooses to remain an independent prisoner for the days to come!

The third novel of Manju Kapur, *Home* (2006), is an engrossing tale of Nisha and her emergence as a self-dependent complete woman. From being a sexually-molested teenager at the hands of her own cousin to breaking all the patriarchal barriers of her joint family led by men, Nisha covers the journey of a lifetime. Unlike her mother Sona who finds solace in bearing a child and following the rules set by men silently, little Nisha appears more closer to her Rupa Masi and establishes a successful business. Both Rupa and Nisha dream of an updated lifestyle and then work hard for it to happen. Nisha gets married only after she becomes economically independent and then gives birth

to twins. And thus, lastly gets the certificate of being a complete woman as per the norms of the Indian society. As Clara Nubile observes:

Marriage must be followed by motherhood. (24)

In *Home*, too, seemingly independent Nisha ultimately caves in for marriage and motherhood while seeking validation in the society. Thus, another protagonist of Kapur becomes an independent prisoner.

Like her three previous novels, Kapur's fourth novel also deals with the life of an educated woman who faces double challenge coping with both individual and immigrant identities. In the immigrant (2008), the protagonist is a thirty year old unmarried professor of English literature who lives in Delhi with her widowed mother. Nina, the professor, gets married to Ananda and shifts to Canada leaving both her mother and her job behind. A little of her individual identity also remains behind in India. The story, as the very title suggests, revolves around themes like fragmentation of identity, geographical dislocation, emotional and cultural raptures etc. In a fashion similar to diasporic writers like Salman Rushdie, Jhumpa Lahiri etc. Kapur too effortlessly portrays the situation of Indian immigrants who are the proud owners of NRI status but actually possess fragmented identities and tormented souls. The erstwhile confident Nina has to fight a long battle to prove herself as an individual and a worthy citizen as well. From the very moment she sets feet on the foreign soil her eternal trial begins. The situation worsens furthermore when she comes to learn about Ananda's sexual weakness disguised and perfectly wrapped beneath layers of hypocritical male ego. Eventually she falls into an extramarital affair and feels liberated as if she has avenged Ananda's disloyalty. However, when raped by the same lover she once surrendered to voluntarily, she feels broke and shattered within. All her decisions as a woman proved to be wrong and she finds herself at the threshold again. This time, however, she chooses the path of self-discovery and sets herself free from all sorts of emotional bonds. Leaving behind Ananda this time, she begins the quest for her own home where she is no longer a guest or an immigrant:

When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. (330)

In her fifth novel, *Custody* (2011), Kapur presents a totally different shade of womanhood. This time her protagonist (Shagun) is an ambitious woman stuck in the complexities of traditional matrimony. Shagun advocates individual freedom and happiness and is somewhat aggressive when it comes to her feminist ideas. She wants to lead a happy life and achieving her goals is her only dream. She is ready to sacrifice her familial fulfilment for the sake of her individual dreams. And that is why she is ready to end her eleven years old marriage with Raman as she starts falling for his boss, Ashok. Ashok is bold just like Shagun and hence, the woman finds a strange satisfaction in his company. She divorces Raman and now both of them start fighting for the custody of their children, Arjun and Roohi. As Shagun moves to abroad with Ashok, Raman meets Ishita. Ishita herself is a divorcee as she is unable to bear a child. The two frustrated divorcees find comfort in each-other's company. However, the children are the worst casualty in this case as their innocent heart is torn between two sets of parents. Kapur seems to be defining the modern concept of marriage in the novel:

Marriage is when two people decide to live together forever. Should they change their minds they go to court and get their marriage cancelled. Finished. Divorced. They become strangers; sometimes they never see each other again. (326)

Once again, the women in this novel also appear partly independent as they are not ready to sacrifice their dreams and desires; but are dependent on a male companion to lead a life of fulfilment. Their idea of a complete life hangs on the male companionship of their choice. As per Mithu Banerji:

Kapur's book reveals the unimagined uncertainties of matrimony. The wife's sense of suffocation, the husband's fear of loneliness and the constant shifting of children, like commodities, from one home to the other, are evoked with painstaking sincerity.

In all her novels, Manju Kapur seems to highlight how the double-standard patriarchy in the Indian society keeps the women in check. In the name of tradition and culture women are often deprived of fundamental human rights like education and freedom of speech. And in cases where women get education, some way or the other there is always a male guidance controlling their decisions and actions. They are conditioned to be a daughter, a wife, a mother and many such things but never an independent individual. Their very basic training is programmed in such a way that they feel guilty most of the times whenever their personal choices are concerned. They happily put their men and family in the first place and smilingly accept their second-grade status in the society. The most surprising fact is that it is often the eldest woman of the family who unknowingly becomes a male prototype and keeps the women in the family under the rules set by the men in the family. In some cases, even the own mother is seen to be training the daughters for becoming another version of her own meek self. The art of adjustment (to whatever situations one is put into) is a speciality which percolates through generations of women in the Indian society regardless of caste, class, sect or religion. Thus, like a caged bird singing, most of Kapur's protagonists are seen struggling with the prevalent patriarchal norms and rules. Most of them get what their heart truly desires. Almost all of them become independent at one point or the other in their life. However, this independence is only surface deep. True freedom remains a mirage for them and they keep on being what they are best at; passive-aggressive receivers. At best, it seems, they are nothing but independent prisoners.

References:

- Banerji, Mithu. Custody:Review. The Observer. Feb 27,2011.
- Beauvoir, de, Simon. The Second Sex (Trans.). 1953.
- Das, B.K. Twentieth Century Literary Criticism. Atlantic Publishers. New Delhi.1998.
- Dharkar, Intiaz. Women Shining? Verveonline. 1st Quarter. 2004.
- Kapur, Manju. Difficult Daughters. 1998. Penguin Books. India. Print.
- ...A Married Woman. Faber and Faber. London. 2003. Print.
- ...Home. Random House Publishers. New Delhi. 2006. Print.
- ...the immigrant. Random House Publishers. New Delhi. 2008. Print.
- ...Custody. Random House Publishers. New Delhi. 2011. Print.
- Morris, Pam. Literature and Feminism:An Introduction. Oxford:Blackwell. 1993.
- Nayar, Pramod K. Literary Theory Today. Prestige. New Delhi. 2002.
- Nubile, Clara. The Danger of Gender: Caste, Class and Gender in Contemporary Indian Women's Writing. Sarup Book Publishers. New Delhi.