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From Being to Becoming: A Feminist Reading of Manju Kapur's Home

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Abstract

In Post-Independent India, the archetypal image of woman is changing rapidly and now she is trying to lay claims for more space within the familial bonds. Indian women novelists are gaining grounds worldwide and winning critical appraisal and international recognition. The glaring cause of their success as novelist lies in the fact that they are born story teller and they are endowed with the gift of delving deep into the workings of human mind and heart with sympathy, sensitivity and understanding. Among the prolific women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Jhumpa Lahiri; Manju Kapur is also a distinguished figure in the world of novels. These writers study the problems of women in a patriarchal structure where men are the dominant sex and the cultural construction and social mechanism perpetuate gender inequality. These writers reflect various facets of the struggle of woman's autonomy. Since Gandhiji helped the women to cross the threshold of family life and move out into the outer world of freedom struggle and social reform, the woman is presented with varied opportunities not only today but also yesterday during freedom movement. Yet writing in 1998, Manju Kapur, in her novels presents women who try to establish their own identity. The protagonists of Kapur try to struggle and liberate themselves from the clutches that subdue them. All her female characters Ida, Rupa, Nisha and Nina try to establish their own identity. Kapur's novel *Hone* portrays Nisha's quest for identity and survival.

Key Words: Appraisal, Patriarchal structure, Social mechanism, Autonomy, Gender inequality

Manju Kapur was born in Amritsar, Punjab. After completing her BA from Delhi University and MA in English from Dalhousie University in Canada, she went to do her M.Phil from Delhi University. She currently teaches English at Miranda House, a liberal Arts and Science College for Women at Delhi University. She is married to Gun Nidhi Dalmia, lives in New Delhi, and has four children. Till date, she has written four novels: i.e. *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006) and *The Immigrant* (2008). Her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*, was published in India by Penguin Books India Private Limited, in 1998. In the year 1999, *Difficult Daughters* won the Commonwealth Prize in the best first published book' cate-

gory for the Eurasia region. A detailed study of her novels reveals that Manju Kapur's women are of the ultramodern era who want their individual worth realized.

The women characters of Manju Kapur do not merely confirm to male expectations or conflict with male world. Manju Kapur's heroines negotiate for their independence and a respectable place in society. Manju Kapur's heroines are mentally advanced in the real sense of the world, whether she is Ida, Rupa, Nisha, Astha or Nina. Manju Kapur understands the importance of adjustments and compromises in a family. Almost all of her female characters: Virmati after marriage, Sona, Nisha, and Astha are negotiating here and there in life to make their own and their family members' life happy. The harmony in family relationships and their stability also depend on the behaviour and pent-agonic attitude of a woman as a wife, a mother, a sister, and a daughter. Society, morality, values are like bondage to them, so all of them are leading forward in an ambiguous manner in the midst of relentless urbanization and the far-reaching western influences. Dr. Ashok Kumar says aright:

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the women's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact (160)

Manju Kapur's *Home* explores the complex terrain of the Indian family and reveals many issues that are deep rooted within the family - the revolt against the age-old traditions, quest for identity, the problems of marriage; and lastly the woman's struggle for her survival. The present paper intends to study the protagonist Nisha's quest for identity and survival.

Nisha confuses to reconcile with the patriarchal and male governed society and tries to establish her own individual identity. Since the establishment of society, woman is stamped as the weaker sex, denied full justice, social security, economic liberation and political awareness.

The wave cry for identity also keeps on flowing in Manju Kapur's *Home* where Nisha, the single protagonist revolts against the old family system. But she never crosses the boundaries of morality and values. The large proportion of her life has passed under the shadow of her aunt Rupa. Rupa is also much conscious of her freedom and identity. The power struggle among minor characters like Suneeta, Sona and Puja can be glanced at many places but it is insignificant matter. First, Nisha has to fight against the notions of her mother who considers her daughter a mere helper in the kitchen. In the words of the Shilpi Rishi Shrivastava:

Lala Banwari Lal dies and Yashpal takes back Nisha to please his mother. Now there is less interest in school and Sona expects her in the Kitchen all time. Nisha is horrified to discover that "her mother's idea of a daughter was one who helped her every time anybody ate." Sona who is always concerned with making her daughter homely and Good wife says, "That Masi of yours has ruined your head What does a girl need with studying? Cooking will be useful to her entire life." (188)

Despite her unwillingness, Nisha has to participate in all Pujas. She has to learn the art of service and domesticity. When she is discovered manglik, she becomes an enigma to her parents. Sona makes her listen Savitri Katha and without marriage, she has to observe the Karava Chauth Vrat. She is not easily sent to do her English honours from Durga Bai College. From this stage her life changes to a great extent. She meets Suresh but she is a modern girl with traditional views. She maintains her chastity and never let Suresh violate her chastity. When her affair with Suresh comes to light she has to face many quarries and each member of the family looks her with suspicion. She becomes the prisoner in her

own house. Sona curses her:

This girl will be our death. My child, born after ten years, tortures me like this. Thanks God your grandfather is not alive. What face will I show upstairs? Vijay gets his wife from Fancy Furnishings while my daughter goes to the street for hers. (H 198)

Since then, day and night the issue of her marriage is discussed. She makes her uncle Prem Nath ready to meet Suresh and leave them to inquire themselves about him. But her misfortune does not let her do anything peacefully. Suresh also responds coldly on the issue of marriage and gives priority to the wishes of his family rather personal inclinations. She decides to kill herself in case Suresh doesn't marry her but he is not in a dying mood. She is badly cheated. She is conscious of the happenings around her. So, she adjusts herself to the situations:

After three years of thinking that Suresh was her future, Nisha had to adjust to the idea of another man in his place. A better man, according to her parents. Would he be able to gauge the extent to which she had been touched? (H 218)

Nisha turns into a business woman who deals in Salwar Suits. She decides to be successful in this business and feels:

She would be better than Pooja. She would not only be the daughter of a prosperous man, but be responsible for wealth herself. After all, her father's blood flowed in her, the blood of traders. (H 287)

Her father infuses much trust in her but her mother does not satisfy with her daughter's new turn. Her father encourages her and now she is free to decide on the issue of marriage. But she consents to the match with a family who will let her work. She marries thirty-four years manglik widower, Arvind. She is also much conscious about her business and future identity. So, she does not give up her business, she bears the four-fold responsibilities of being wife, daughter in law, mother and business - woman. When she becomes pregnant, her mother takes a good care of her and do not let

her go for the business. This disturbs her equilibrium and nobody comes to help her. She does not like too much concern of Arvind for his mother:

Anger began to tremble below her considerate exchanges. Why did he have to marry if he was to treat his wife to indifferent looks, she thought, sweeping aside the tenderness he showed at night. She wanted something in the day as well. Not this preoccupation, not this looking through, not this ignoring of their coming child. If he felt so little for her, she should go home to her tailors, why enact this farce here? Mohseen Bhai would love it, though no doubt he would refuse to let go of his transportation allowance. (H 329)

She feels that Arvind does not love her. She says:

If you are never going to talk or share things with me, why don't you take me back to my mother's house? You have done your duty, married and made me pregnant. When the baby is born you can collect it.' 'Why are you talking such rubbish?' (H 330)

When she gives birth to twins, one girl and one boy, she looks satisfied with her role as mother and daughter in law. Ultimately she realizes the satiety of family and says:

Surrounding her were friends, relatives, husband, babies.

All mine, she thought, all mine. (H 337)

Although, the quest for self, especially in the life of woman has become a much debatable phenomena, as long as this term is growing old, it is losing its authenticity. It is occasionally misinterpreted by the world. No one can deny the fact that women are treated as no entity several times in their life, their sentiments and emotions are mostly ignored but as far as their honesty to themselves is concerned they must be vigilant for their chastity and responsibilities. Poojatolani says:

Even today, thousands of girls sit within the four walls of their houses and wonder why they do not have the right to close their own lives, decide for themselves whether they want

to be homemakers or move. Marriage is still the reason for their birth. Freedom is more than just being aloud out for a pizza with friends. (132)

The novels of Manju Kapur voice well the sentiments of women and their self-introspections. The women in the novels of Manju Kapur seem to be the personification of new women who have been carrying the burden of inhibition since ages and want to be free now. The writer clearly shows the added responsibility of being mothers to members of their own sex. 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. Manju Kapur succeeds in presenting the real picture of women in a male dominated society. Her female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individual caged within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking, for which their family and society become intolerant towards them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. They are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented.

All protagonists know they can not depend on others to sort out the domestic situation and proceed to tackle it on their own. But do these heroines blossom into new women in the real sense? Though they dare to cross one patriarchal threshold, they are caught into another, where their free spirits are curbed and all they do is 'adjust, compromise and adapt'. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunge into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds. 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.

Manju Kapur's *Home* encapsulates the idea of women's liberation and the protagonist Nisha

emerges as a new woman, a more assertive, self-assured; and confident one in the novel. By equally footing with men, she proclaims her womanhood in a bold manner. It is necessary to note that she belongs to middle class family in metropolis, is born and brought up in India, where social and cultural scenario is different than that of western countries. Her quest for self-identity, struggle for economic independent existence, and her equality with men depend upon Indian social ethos. The novelist wants to have complete liberation to new woman in socio-cultural India. As she, herself studied in Halifax for few years in the early 1970's, presents the portrayal of new woman and honours Indian tradition very well. She maintains the character of Nisha, to create awareness of women's liberation and equality along with men, not fully bloomed but at least up to mark.

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