

Re-Exploring Gender and Identity Perspectives in the Novels of Manju Kapur

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ABSTRACT:

Indian writing in English is a comparatively new occurrence. While the origins of such authors in India may be traced back a century, but they have gained prominence only in the last few decades. Certain authors have attained global renown, while others have gained national recognition, and a few may have to settle for a more limited audience. The precise meaning of the term Indian in this context is unclear. Women writers such as Kamala Das, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Sashi Deshpande, Bharathi Mukherjee, Manju Kapur, Gita Hariharan, and others have astutely recognised the gender issues that trouble women and portrayed them as individuals who resist and challenge the subjugation and domination imposed by the patriarchy. This paper examines the patriarchal conventions that women characters in Manju Kapur's books encounter. Kapur has shown the women of the 1940s, a time when women lacked the ability to defend their rights, particularly via the voice of the main character. She vociferously opposes male chauvinism in order to assert her right to economic autonomy. Kapur portrays the women as a revered character who challenges taboos, societal and familial limitations, and the patriarchal norms entrenched in the tradition. Women were prohibited from advocating for their rights, demonstrating against unfairness, or challenging established beliefs, traditions, rituals, and superstitions. They must just endure the patriarchal system. Women are expected to exhibit obedience, silence, submissiveness, and passivity, refraining from asserting their rights as both women and human beings. The earlier Indian women novelists have depicted women as silent victims, upholders of traditional values and ethics, strict adherents to social taboos, embodiments of tolerance and patience, role models for future generations, individuals with no personal space, women without their own identity (instead identified as subordinate to men), worshippers of their male counterparts, unfortunate and unaware of their rights as human beings, and so forth. The female heroines in all of Manju Kapur's works are shown as resilient individuals facing several challenges. Manju Kapur always strives to portray the profound depths of women's sorrow in her works. During the twentieth century, India had a significant increase in the number of female authors who were more resistant to the oppressive dominance of the patriarchy. Women authors brought about a dramatic transition in the way women characters were portrayed and in their literary style. They rejected the conventional portrayal of female characters as silent observers or objects only for the gratification of males. The female authors adeptly started portraying the unique needs, expectations, rejections, and yearnings exclusive to women.

Manju Kapur has joined the burgeoning cohort of contemporary Indian women authors who have made substantial contributions to the advancement of Indian literature. Kapur is a postcolonial writer who has a keen instinctive understanding of the role of women in a culture dominated by

males, and she addresses the challenges faced by women. Her writings depict the arduous endeavour of women to build their own distinct identity. She has attempted to carve out a niche for women inside household partnerships. Manju Kapur has shown the ladies of the 1940s and their experiences against the background of Indian Independence in a vibrant and detailed manner. The advancement of women's liberation may be at its peak now, but during the pre-independence period, the struggle for independence and autonomy was still in its nascent phase. The woman's attempt to establish herself is commendable, despite her failure, since she made an effort. She not only appreciates education and the more profound parts of life, but also acknowledges the more negative sides of existence. The constant fluctuations and changes in life have contributed to her development into a mature women. She challenges and rejects the limitations and societal norms imposed by the patriarchy in order to establish her own sense of self and attain personal contentment and happiness.

Manju Kapur's books take on a profound new significance when examined through the lens of intersecting ideologies of cultural critical analysis. Manju Kapur's works exemplify a wide spectrum of perspectives on the adoption of traditional customs. Nevertheless, Mrs. Kapur acknowledges that the women of India have made significant progress in the sixty years since freedom. However, she emphasises that there is still more work to be done in order to attain full female freedom. The ongoing struggle for autonomy and distinct identity remains an unresolved problem. Women who were under the influence and control of a patriarchal society had a greater burden and experienced social exclusion. They experienced discrimination and bigotry based on their gender. The books of Manju Kapur depict the experiences and challenges faced by women who lived and struggled within the confines of a repressive societal structure. Considering the intricate nature of life, diverse histories, civilizations, and varying value systems, it is necessary to address the issue of women's rights in connection to the socio-cultural context. The influence of patriarchy on Indian society differs from that in Western societies. Manju Kapur has distinct worries, interests, and approaches to address the problem faced by her female heroines. The representation of women in Indian English literature as the stoic bearer and preserver of familial and societal traditions and ideals has seen a significant transformation and is no longer shown as a passive figure. Kamala Das, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and several more women have emerged as individuals who struggle against conventional gender roles. They courageously speak out against their suffering, striving to escape from their confined lives and proclaim their distinct identities. This woman is striving to maintain her individuality while yet wanting to preserve the bonds within her family. Thanks to Gandhiji's efforts, women were able to break free from the confines of home life and actively participate in the independence fight and social change. As a result, women have been provided with many possibilities, both in the past during the freedom movement and in the current day. In her books written in 1998, Manju Kapur portrays women who strive to build their own individuality. The women of India have undoubtedly accomplished significant achievements in the span of fifty years since gaining independence. However, in order to really attain complete female freedom, there are still many tasks that need to be accomplished. The struggle for autonomy continues to be an unresolved battle.

The first Novel, *Difficult Daughters*, was situated within the historical context of India's division. This is the tale of a youthful women who develops romantic feelings for a married guy, an illicit desire that is frowned upon in her limited social group. The book *Difficult Daughters* takes place

during the political turmoil of the partition. The book starts with an unreserved proclamation made by Ida, a divorced woman without children, stating, "My utmost desire was to avoid becoming similar to my mother." The narrative centres on Virmati, a young woman who is born into a traditional household. As the oldest daughter of the home, she is unable to avoid the weight of familial obligations. The owners of patriarchy squash her will to learn and promptly begin a hunt for a good marriage for her. Virmati strongly opposes the concept of arranged marriage because of her secret connection with Harish, a married professor. Harish openly declares his love for Virmati, but declines to get into matrimony with her due to apprehensions about the societal backlash it might provoke. He has any emotional connection to his wife Ganga, who is illiterate, yet he does not have the bravery to leave her. Virmati's escalating concern over her connection with the professor leads her to attempt suicide, but she is saved in time. Upon being questioned by her family, she reveals her want to further her studies. Ultimately, the challenging daughter Virmati is sent to Lahore to further her education. She seeks to distance herself from the professor, but his persistent efforts to reconcile with her result in sexual closeness, ultimately resulting in Virmati being pregnant. Virmati, who is left to fend for herself, has an abortion procedure for the baby. This occurrence exacerbates her anguish as she yearns to do something significant in life but finds herself torn between her pragmatism and her reliance on Harish. She really wants to actively engage in the fight for freedom, similar to other woman, but she is unable to sever her connections with the professor. She had a sense of alienation, being an outsider amid all these ladies. She contemplated Harish, who harboured affection for her. She must be content with it. These expansive areas were not intended for her. She had a sense of being an imposter while sitting in the hall. Once again, images from her personal life appeared involuntarily in her mind.

Upon finishing her Bachelor of Technology degree. She assumes the position as headmistress at a college in Nahan, signifying the beginning of independence in her personality. Subsequently, she is dismissed from the institution due to Lalaji discovering her illegal relationship with the professor. However, she remains optimistic and resolves to attend Shantiniketan. Harish pursues her to that location and ultimately consents to marry her. Despite experiencing familial ostracism and being cognizant of the need to vie for her husband's attention, Virmati chooses to wed the professor. She appropriately endures the professor's first wife's scathing words and is also disallowed any involvement in the domestic tasks. The stagnation of her wedded relationship may be attributed to societal criticism, a lack of affection in Harish's family, and a miscarriage. The one solace she receives is the opportunity to resume her studies in Lahore. However, she is compelled to retreat because to the political turmoil caused by the split. Virmati is compelled to acclimatise and accommodate herself inside the oppressive limitations of her husband's home. She gives birth to a daughter and dies in a manner that is virtually unimportant. The narrative takes place during the partition, which is figuratively reflected in Virmati's life as well. She fiercely fights for autonomy against her family and society, while simultaneously attempting to resist her attraction to a married guy. However, she ultimately fails and ends up isolating herself. Throughout her life, she faces criticism for her association with Harish because to its inappropriateness in a country where patriarchy is highly ingrained. The society only supports relationships that conform to its established limits. In contemporary India, weddings are still influenced by societal factors such as caste, financial position, and family reputation. Therefore,

the novel's powerful revolutionary potential is somewhat diminished by the artistic portrayal of a woman's reliance on a male.

In her second work, "A Married Woman" (2002), Manju Kapur candidly portrays a romantic connection between two women. However, the historical and political backdrop in which this relationship unfolds has received comparatively little scrutiny. This narrative delves into the intricate dynamics of personal relationships in a traditionalist India transitioning into the era of globalisation. It highlights how these relationships are influenced by broader historical factors and, in turn, have the potential to shape the course of history. This exploration hints at the possibility of new and varied forms of human connection, offering a glimpse of a potentially utopian future, albeit one that may be incomplete and fleeting.

A Married Woman is set at a period of socio-religious upheaval in the country. The story explores the unfolding events in the life of the main character, Astha, who was raised in a manner that is appropriate for a woman, with a significant amount of dread. As the only child, Astha's parents have the ultimate power in making decisions for her. Kapur skilfully portrays Astha's adolescent yearning for a "romantic, enigmatic man enveloping her in a strong embrace." Her first interaction with a boy occurs during her teenage years, but is abruptly terminated by the interference of her authoritarian mother. Astha, at the peak of her youth, engages in another love relationship with Rohan. She relinquishes both her emotional and physical self, with the expectation of marrying him. Nevertheless, she becomes disenchanted when Rohan explicitly declares his intention to pursue further education at Oxford. However, Astha's parents, who are nearing retirement, are eager for their daughter to be married and establish a stable life. Astha ultimately yields to her parents' objections and consents to marry Hemant, who seems more reassuring than the other suitors due to his schooling in the United States and his family experience in bureaucracy. As the author examines Astha's married life, it becomes evident that she feels confined in a suffocating atmosphere characterised by a loveless marriage, the burdens of motherhood, controlling in-laws, and an incessantly meddling mother. Hemant has a tendency to oppose any endeavour that Astha intends to pursue, so exacerbating the existing gap in their temperamental compatibility. Ignoring Hemant's and her parents' objections, Astha makes the decision to teach at a public school. While attending the school, she engages in a drama class where she encounters Aijaz Akhtar Khan, a highly accomplished street theatre performer. Astha is profoundly disturbed upon reading the awful news of Aijaz's killing during the Hindu-Muslim clashes. Hemant reproaches his wife for displaying excessive curiosity on the demise of Aijaz, causing Astha to become even more distant from him. Eventually, Astha encounters Peeplika Khan, the widow of Aijaz, and finds a means to express her suppressed feelings. She enters into a lesbian relationship with Peeplika Khan, which brings her a sense of calmness that she has never experienced before. Kapur argues that conversation is an extremely potent aphrodisiac and curiosity is an incredibly effective form of seduction. Peeplika Khan persuades Astha to abandon her apparently content marriage and move in with her, but Astha chooses to endure the uncertainties of her marriage and remain with Hemant. The community conflict shown in the story acts as a means of revealing the personal agony experienced by Astha. She comprehends that, within a patriarchal household like Hemant's, the role of a married woman is limited to being a compliant physical presence at night, a compliant worker during the day, and an obedient speaker. However, despite this understanding, she lacks the bravery to choose an unconventional relationship over the hardships of her current marriage.

A Married Woman is a candid examination of the mindset of an Indian woman, similar to Astha, who finds herself trapped in the monotonous and exasperating environment of marriage. This inquiry delves into two contentious political and social matters: the destruction of Babri Masjid and homosexuality. Women have faced discrimination from the time of Eve's consumption of the cursed fruit. Men, who excluded women from the process, have determined all aspects of the man-woman relationship. Astha tries to restore herself and regain her lost sense of self in the company of Peeplika Khan. However, the constant presence of her husband is not only an integral part of her existence, but also deeply ingrained in her mentality. This, similar to Virmati, hinders her ability to directly address the matter. Conforming to conventional conventions, she once again pretends to have a blissful marriage with Hemant, but her love for Peeplika and her final chance for freedom remain unreciprocated.

In her third Novel, "Home," Manju Kapur explores the numerous implications associated with this term. The story takes place in the lively atmosphere of the Banwarilal textile store, where the children are taught from a young age to uphold the traditional values of their family. In the story, the male characters fulfil the traditional duty of providing financial support, while the female characters are mostly focused on preparing meals and offering emotional support to their male counterparts. Marriages are arranged with consideration for the substantial dowry that the bride is expected to provide. Nevertheless, the pivotal moment in the narrative occurs when the older son, Yashpal, challenges the prevailing practice of choosing a bride and openly declares his love for Sona, a girl from a humble background. After a lot of commotion, both individuals get married. However, Sona's mother-in-law directs sarcastic remarks at her since she is unable to conceive a kid. Meanwhile, Sunita, the married daughter of Banwari Lal, dies under enigmatic circumstances. As a result, the burden of her orphaned son Vicky is entrusted to Sona due to her inability to conceive. Following a sequence of periods of abstaining from food and visiting sacred places, Sona delivers a daughter named Nisha and a boy named Raju. Vicky, who is now fifteen years old, entices the young Nisha, resulting in her experiencing psychological alienation from her family and surroundings. The sexual assault by her cousin has warped her perception of home as a place of love and caring. Nisha's younger brothers got married before her since her horoscope indicates that she is a manglik. Sona aspires for her daughter to possess such exceptional skills in serving and managing a household that she would surpass the effects of her bad karma and become a guiding light in her married life.

In contrast, Nisha believes that a girl should be satisfied in whatever situation as long as she is given the opportunity to pursue her objectives. Nisha enrolls in an English degree programme, where she encounters and develops a romantic relationship with Suresh. The romance causes unease in the home since Nisha's family believes that Suresh, being from a lower caste, is not suitable to marry her. Nisha supports Suresh and challenges the relevance of castes in contemporary times. The protagonist's attempts to persuade me to be sold at the market prove to be fruitless, and the incident with Suresh is ultimately never mentioned again. Driven by her profound solitude and strong desire for autonomy, Nisha embarks on the path of entrepreneurship. She has a sense of isolation within her family due to her intellectual nature, since she lacks tolerance for societal expectations that require women to rely on men. The family's quest for a prospective husband whose horoscope aligns with hers ultimately concludes with the selection of Arvind, a widower. When Nisha encounters Arvind, she does not portray herself as a nervous woman, but rather as a confident person who identifies herself via her

profession. In the dialogue, the woman states that she is employed, to which Arvind responds calmly by acknowledging his awareness of this fact. After their marriage, Arvind greets her by expressing that she has finally found her place of belonging. This interaction in the novel "Home" illustrates that the connection between the man and woman is largely influenced by economic factors and societal expectations. The book categorises men and women into distinct roles as providers and nurturers, limiting its scope to domestic themes and preventing it from reaching greater heights.

Indian women authors are now gaining prominence globally and receiving both critical acclaim and international recognition. Now their art is no longer seen as disparaging, melodramatic, or inferior. The primary reason for their success as novelists is from their innate ability to tell stories and their exceptional talent for exploring the intricacies of the human mind and heart with empathy, perceptiveness, and comprehension. However, there is also a prevalent occurrence of clashes in values and confrontations between contrasting lifestyles. While the pursuit of self-discovery, particularly in the lives of women, has become a highly debated topic, the concept itself is gradually losing its originality as time passes. It is sometimes misunderstood by intellectuals throughout the globe. It is certain that women are often disregarded and their feelings are overlooked throughout their lives. However, they should prioritise their integrity and obligations by being watchful about their chastity and duties.

Manju Kapur's works adeptly articulate the emotions and introspective thoughts of women. Virmati, the protagonist of "Difficult Daughters," Astha from "A Married Woman," and Nisha from "Home" are all embarking on a quest for their identity, but they are starting from an incorrect starting point. Each of them experiences love before embarking on the quest for self-identity, which becomes a secondary concern. The facts presented by Manju Kapur are deserving of further investigation and examination. Through the characters of Nisha, Shakuntala, and Rupa, she portrays women who, although facing many challenges, retain their purity and compassion, and never abandon those in need. In her work *Difficult Daughters*, the main character has a sense of betrayal due to the oppressive constraints imposed by old patriarchal ideals. The presence of Sona in her home may be likened to that of a confined bird. Astha feels the distress of being alienated deep inside her heart. Nisha is compelled to yield her desires due to familial pressure, while Nina experiences feelings of isolation, emptiness, and sexual discontentment. Virmati was raised in a home where women lack personal identity and are denied access to higher education. She aspires to pursue academic studies and establish a professional career, but her ambitions are hindered by the prevailing social norms and customs of her specific period and location. She defies authority and firmly asserts her entitlement to pursue further education.

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