



## The Image Flux of Women in Manju Kapoor's Novels

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### ABSTRACT:

*Women are an essential part of human society, but, unfortunately, some cultures disregard this significant fact. Although the position of women varies from culture to culture, women have never been considered equal to man. The present paper aims to scrutinize the works of Manju Kapoor to explore her treatment of the image flux of woman in the modern and the postmodern era. Tradition, transition and modernity are the stages through which Kapoor's women pass. She is the epitome of the 'new' woman who is aware of her quest, identity and individuality.*

### 1. Introduction

Women are an integral part of human society. No society or country can ever progress without an active participation of women in its overall development. Although the place of women in society has differed from culture to culture as well as age to age, one fact common to all societies is that woman has never been considered equal to man. Since time immemorial, her status depends solely on the simple fact that she is the bearer of children whose care is her responsibility along with taking care of household work. Woman has been the victim of male domination, discrimination and oppression and has been treated like a beast of burden or an object of pleasure. *The Bible* clearly instructs women, "Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands as to the lord." Similarly, *The Hindu Moral Code* known as *The Laws of Manu* denies woman an existence apart from that of her husband or his family.

Our study aims to scrutinize the works of Manju Kapoor to examine her

handling of the changing image of woman in the modern and the postmodern era in her novels. Tradition, transition and modernity are the stages through which the woman in Kapoor's novels is passing. We note a remarkable change and a certain degree of confidence in her walking, talking, working and in almost everything she does or feels. She seems to be the personification of a 'new' woman who is aware of the stirring of her conscience, her quest, her identity, her individuality, her place and role in the family and society. This remarkable changing image of woman to support the feminist viewpoint runs as an undercurrent in all the three novels of Manju Kapoor: '*Difficult Daughters*', '*A Married Woman*' and '*Home*'. Now the question before us is whether we should reject and condemn her or we should encourage and co-operate with her in her efforts to establish a new image of woman.

Betty Freidan in her book *The Feminine Mystique* declares that, "A woman can find fulfillment only in a creative work of her own" and today, their



creativity has unleashed in many a novel. Manju Kapur is one of those modern-day women authors like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, Mridula Garg, Anita Nair or Shobha Dé on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact. She invigorated English language to suit representations and narration of what they felt about their women and their lives in postmodern India. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas, and marital bliss and the woman's role at home is a central focus, Mrs. Kapoor's phenomenal work acquires a significant new meaning when read in the point of view of crisscross dogmas of cultural critical thinking. Using the guiding principles provided by major thinkers, the current paper attempts to locate Kapoor's work in the changed exemplar of cultural encounters. This provides a valid introduction to the feminist perspective on family life, using concepts of conjugal roles, dual-burdens, equal opportunities, and various social policies as evidence to support the feminist viewpoint.

Kapoor's '*Difficult Daughters*' (published in 1998 and recipient of the Common Wealth Writers' prize for the Best First Book, Eurasia region) depicts women of three generations, focusing on Virmati, the daughter of the second generation. Belonging to a deeply traditional Punjabi family, Virmati grows up with the conditioning that the duty of every girl 'is to get married' and a woman's "shaan" is in performing her duties in her home and not in doing a job. She is already engaged to Inderjeet, a canal engineer. However, she secretly nurtures the desire of being independent and leading a life of her own. Defying the

patriarchal notions that enforce a woman towards domesticity, she asserts her individuality and joins A.S. College 'the bastion of male learning.' It is here that she is caught in the whirlpool of misplaced passion towards the Oxford-returned and already married professor Harish. For the sake of their love, she has the temerity to spurn marriage, attempts suicide and bears confinement but soon she realizes the hopelessness of her illicit love when she learns about the pregnancy of the professor's wife. At this juncture, in Virmati we see the budding of a 'new woman' who is bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. Very coolly and confidently she manages to leave home to study in Lahore and spread her wings in the new horizon.

Does Virmati really blossom into a 'new woman' in the real sense? Seemingly no. In spite of her initial revolt against the family and firm stand against the professor, she succumbs to his implorations and gets involved in a useless love, doubtful marriage and unwed pregnancy. She is being used and the Professor enjoys the best of the two worlds. Even when he marries her reluctantly, she wilts under the implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband's first wife and loses all sense of identity. She is given a 'pariah' status and is forced to live in a cramped space. Professor's attitude towards her is patronizing and demeaning and all she does is "adjust, compromise and adapt."

Finally, Virmati is entrapped by her own sensuality as much as lured by the seductive promises of the Professor. Passion transforms her so much that she fails to see things in the right perspective. Trampling patriarchal norms, she defies societal expectations to assert her individuality and hopes to achieve self-



fulfilment but what does she really get? Totally alienated from her own family, she fails to create a space for herself for which she had been striving all along. What happens to Virmati is unfortunately the most representative destiny of the Indian woman even if she is highly educated.

Virmati's tale is seen through the eyes of her daughter Ida, from a present-day perspective. The opening statement of the novel made by Ida, "the one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother," gives a jolt to the reader. It is possible to trace the feminism implicit in Ida's edginess towards her mother's weaknesses. Virmati's unwed pregnancy, its heartless termination, disregard for filial duties and the way she usurps Ganga's rights is unpalatable to Ida. Though Ida does not have the heart to reject Virmati as her mother but head rejects her as a woman after having an insight into her mother's past. Apparently educated and childless Ida leads a freer life than her mother's in external terms and succeeds in breaking out of an unsuccessful marriage and staying single. Yet inside her she feels some of the same anxieties as had plagued her mother. "I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately", says Ida, who has achieved more than her mother and much more than her grandmother but still feels alienated from everything around her.

Manju Kapoor's *A Married Woman* published in 2002 deals with the crisis of Astha Vadera, a middle-class woman from Delhi caught in an unhappy marriage. Like any average Indian parents, her parents get worried about her marriage as soon as she enters her teens. She rebelliously refuses every suitor, until she meets the US returned Hemant. Astha enters the marital phase of her life like any female, not

knowing what to expect and dutifully moulds herself to the needs of her husband and family.

As time goes by, the marriage shows signs of waning interest in love and sex. She gives birth to a baby girl and when she is pregnant again, she notices a difference in her life. Her liberal husband suddenly wants a baby boy only and she has to go through various rituals, as suggested by her mom to be successful in this mission. After fruitfully bearing a son for the family, her life comes to a stand still. Her once contemporary and always ready to help husband suddenly becomes a not so involved father. As we delve into Astha's adult life, we find a free spirit trapped in a suffocating traditional society whose restrictions belie the fact that we are fast approaching the 21st century.

Initially she pushes her frustrations aside, and focuses on her duties as a mother, a wife and a daughter. She starts teaching in a school to pass her time and also tries to seek love by indulging in hobbies like painting and art. But the tensions continue to simmer, surfacing from time to time as paralyzing migraines and an internal rebellion. In this way, their marriage falls apart because of differences that somehow can't be bridged. Gradually Astha becomes involved with a theatre troupe run by Aijaz, a local political activist. But after Aijaz's murder due to some political rivalry, Astha is once again lonely and lost. She longed for companionship and ethereal love. Then, she meets Pipeelika, Aijaz's widow. Hemant allows her to cultivate the friendship. He thinks that Pipeelika keeps his wife busy therefore she seems to have fewer headaches nowadays. A rapport is quickly established between them. Against all social norms, the friendship between the two women develops. The intimacy



and comfort she receives from this affair, contrasts strongly with the distance she feels in her rigidly defined role as wife and mother.

Now Astha becomes caught in a terrible dilemma; should she stay within the safe bonds of family, or make a run for her freedom and an unthinkable love? The novel depicts all her struggles to stand up on her own. Finally, we find that Astha feels morally responsible and emotionally attached to her husband and children. She prioritizes her family over the family which Pipee suggests: a union of two women. Their relationship breaks up. Pipee leaves for the US to study for a doctorate and Astha- confused and semi-repentant- returns emotionally to her marriage to Hemanta, stricken down with jaundice and having to bear her relatives' reproaches: "This is what happens when you leave your home."

Thus the novel explores the life of Astha from her young adulthood through her early middle years. Her character has been modelled on an average Indian girl. In the process she marries, discovers the joys of intimacy with her husband, grows distant from him, struggles to become a painter, becomes a social activist, falls in love with a woman, and returns emotionally to her marriage.

Manju Kapoor's third novel '*Home*' (2006) too unwaveringly spotlights the women in the tale. The novelist takes us through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations. It basically has three female characters – Sona, her sister Rupa and Sona's daughter Nisha – who claim their voice in their own ways. Sona doesn't have a 'say' in the family as she is childless but she feels love, as the story progresses, and she gives birth to a daughter and thereafter a son, that she is no less important to the family. She is not

just a daughter-in-law who is said to be like a showpiece in the drawing room but now becomes a soul to the family which she not only runs but also gives life to. The other female character to be thrown light upon is Rupa who is of belief that economic independence and creativity of one's own can fill the gap of any shortcoming in life. She is the one without child and less money till the end, but she does not seem to feel this absence.

However, the protagonist of the novel appears to be Nisha, who is the girl of the new generation. The story that had started with the tale of Sona and Rupa finally finds its calling in Nisha. Kapoor determines through various instances that she is the girl caught up in the flux of tradition and modernity, custom and fashion. She claims to become a woman of today who has her own vital role to play in the family and not one who is subjected to obey. She does not want to be part and parcel of the kind of institution of marriage where things are simply imposed upon the girl and not desired by her. She loves Suresh and strongly believes to settle down with him and love him forever and ever. She is not even scared of her conservative and orthodox family. She tries to convince him. To quote, "Don't be afraid of my family-once my exams are over, we will talk to them, fight them, run away if necessary." This statement shows that she is not only rebellious but is also assertive and ready to put her words in action.

But to a woman, revolt does not come easily as her psyche is structured around different principles. One of these principles, as Jean Baker has put forward, is that "women exist to serve other person's needs." In *Home*, Nisha is no exception. She creates her own business but her creativity is tolerable as long as she



is unmarried. After marriage, her husband and his family do not allow her to continue her work. Whatever she seems to be in the beginning seems deceptive at the end. She finds herself nothing but a marginalized woman seeking ordinary social levels and emotions. Nothing better could have been offered by Kapoor when in the end she writes about Nisha who has recently given birth to a baby girl and some post-delivery rituals are followed, “Nisha clutched her daughter tightly to her breast. The milk began to spurt and stain her blouse. She quickly adjusted her palla and looked up. Surrounding her were friends, husband, babies. All mine, she thought, all mine.” Thus in the end Indian household is intact.

This is the irony of Manju Kapoor’s women. There comes a transitional phase in their life and they tend to become different from a traditional woman and want to break out into new paths. However, the change is more of theoretical in nature, when it comes to offer boldness in reality. It is then they lack courage and resume to patriarchal hegemony. What happens to Virmati, Astha and Nisha is no doubt the most representative destiny of the Indian woman even if educated. We all know about women’s emancipation today, but the day before yesterday things might have changed, but how much really? Even today, thousands of girls sit within the four walls of their houses and wonder why they do not have the right to choose their own lives, decide for themselves whether they want to be homemakers or more. Marriage is still the reason for their birth.

When once asked if this examination of women’s histories was a persistent theme, Kapoor replied:

One of the main occupations in all my books is how women manage to negotiate

both the private and public spaces in their lives-what sacrifices do they have to make in order to keep the home fires burning-and at what cost to their personal lives do they find some kind of fulfillment outside the home. They have to do many things, they have to play so many roles, and there is a lot of stuff to say about women. And it is also what I know.

With these considerations in mind, and taking Manju Kapoors’s novels as a background, our paper is an attempt to study the changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of endurance and self-sacrifice towards self-assurance, assertiveness and ambition, making society aware of their demands. However, coming to the plane of mundane reality, as one can also see in Kapoor’s novels, women are suppressing the individuality and making day-to-day compromises. Perhaps this is their way towards peaceful co-existence.

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