

**PSYCHE OF MANJU KAPUR'S WOMEN PROTAGONISTS –THEIR REVOLT  
AND SELF IDENTITY**

**By**

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**THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY IN ENGLISH  
ANDHRA UNIVERSITY, Visakhapatnam  
ANDHRA PRADESH, INDIA  
MARCH, 2018**

## **CHAPTER VII**

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### CONCLUSION

Indian women novelists writing in English have shown their creativity especially in the genre fiction writing since 1956 when Kamala Markendaya published her first novel under the title of *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954) which attracted the attention of many critics of the first order. She is, undoubtedly, the first great name among the Indian women novelists writing in English. Her novels deal with the bleak economic conditions of the rural population of South India, although she deals with different other themes, feminism is not her major concern in her novels.

As English education has spread, new ideas and concepts were imported into India through the west. Indian women writers writing in English have become enlightened and exposed themselves to these new concepts. One such important concept is feminism, which inspires these educated women writers to take up the cause of the women suppressed and oppressed by tradition in general and the educated urban middle class families in particular. In other words, a new awareness or consciousness has been created among this particular class of educated middle class women. Some distinguished Indian women novelists writing in English like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy and Manju Kapur to mention a few have made it their main concern to highlight this particular aspect of feminism in all their novels.

‘Feminism’ has had its roots in the west since the last decade of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, when Mary Wollstonecraft had published her famous book *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*. But ‘feminism’ has become a subject of hot debate both in Europe and America

since 1960. But here in the Indian context, the connotation of the term feminism widely differs from the basic concept of feminism as used in the west. The socio-political-cultural background in India is entirely different from the western society. Feminism as is understood in the Indian context is chiefly concerned with the liberation of the women from the hard clutches of the tradition which does not recognize woman as an active member of the society. Literally, she has been relegated to the background and reduced to a mere shadow. It is a big paradox. Home has no meaning without woman. She is almost the very soul of it, but she does not play any significant role except as a child bearing machine and living the life of servitude discharging the burdensome household chores like an unpaid drudge. That has been the general plight of women in Indian society.

The gender bias that a woman is decidedly inferior to man is deep rooted in the man-dominated society. Tradition, whose two massive pillars are patriarchy and male chauvinism, has been a formidable force that oppresses and suppresses woman. It is against this background that the present day women fight tooth and nail to liberate themselves from the oppressive burden of tradition. This is the short and long of the whole problem that may be summed up in the telling phrase 'tradition versus modernity'.

Kapur, with her six novels, has become the most prominent Indian women novelists writing in English. Her latest novel, *Brothers* has been published recently and it is being out of the purview of my thesis. Only the first five novels in their chronological order have been critically discussed in my thesis. And her five novels, namely, *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2003), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008), *Custody* (2011). The author takes a broader canvas of the middle class society from which her women protagonists hail.

The postmodern sensibility is well revealed in all her novels and it is, no doubt, is the result of new socio- cultural and political situation that has brought the women very justly to the centre from the erstwhile marginal stage.

Kapur's efforts as a staunch feminist are well revealed in all her five novels. Certain unique features and outstanding traits characterize all her protagonists. Such as are not to be found anywhere in the traditional women, render them (protagonists) as modern or post-modern women. A brief critical survey of the characters of her protagonists, in their chronological order, will not only reveal the essential stuff that each of them is made up of but also it justifies the title of my thesis.

Virmati is the protagonist of Manju Kapur's debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*. Actually the novel is the biography of Virmati as narrated by her daughter, Ida who belongs to third generation of her family. She wants to reconstruct her mother's life, after her death so that she could gather some understanding of her own life. Virmati is the first child of her mother's eleven children. Virmati has to look after the welfare of her ten siblings since her mother Kasturi, has become almost sick owing to her series of deliveries. As such, Virmati has become the mother substitute for her siblings. It is, indeed, her misfortune that she has never enjoyed her mother's love and affection. Being a very traditional family, her mother, Kasturi, wants her daughter, Virmati to get married and settle in life, since the first priority that traditional mothers give is the marriage of their daughters as soon as they attain the stage of puberty. So Virmati has been betrothed to a canal engineer of a respectable family. It is against this background, Virmati has determined to pursue her education, especially, when she is inspired by her first cousin, Shakuntala who is educated and leads economically independent life as a teacher. She

refuses to get married until she becomes an educated, independent woman and at the same time Virmati comes under the influence of a foreign returned English professor and falls in love with him. There has been a conflict between her traditionally- minded mother and herself who, at any cost, would pursue higher studies and lead an economically independent life. She refuses to marry the canal engineer. The act of renegeing on the promise of marrying the canal engineer is deemed in traditional society as a death blow to the family prestige.

Thus, Virmati, fighting against the traditional values and pursuing her higher ideals of education and life of independence, emerges as a modern woman. Although a greater part of Virmati's life is tragic, Virmati has been steadfast to the last and ultimately she succeeds in realizing her goal, namely, of marrying the professor. Thus, the message given by Manju Kapur without seeming to preach, is that a woman has right to love and choose her partner which can't be questioned. One notices an unmistakable trait of modernity in Virmati when she says that she is much against much against the observance of the traditional rituals of obsequies in connection with the death of a person; and, like a very advanced modern woman, she declares that after her death, her bodily organs may be donated to those that are in need of them.

Manju Kapur's second novel is *A Married Woman* and its protagonist is Astha who hails from a traditional middle class urban society. Her mother, Sita, is steeped in tradition and wants her daughter to get married. Her father wants his daughter to go for higher studies so that her education would stand in good stead for her in future and would enable her to lead economically independent life. She exhibits romantic tendencies as early as her late teens and finally, she has been married to an American returned MBA

who seems to have broader views about life. Initially her married life was very comfortable and she became the mother of two children. But in the course of time, she became suffocated with her domestic life since her husband, Hemant, started neglecting his wife and children as he devoted much of the time to his business. At one stage, she comes out of her domesticity and sought a teacher's job much against the inclination of her husband. Once she came out into the open world of activity, she came in contact with a young secular Muslim, Aijaz, who was very active with his Street Theatre. As a secularist, he was striving for the unity between the Hindus and the Muslims. Aijaz liked Astha very much since she had the talents of a good artist and gradually the intimacy between them had developed into a liking for each other. The Babri masjid tragic incident was there in the background and it seemed that some Hindu fanatics burnt the van in which Aijaz and his troupe were travelling and they were burnt alive. Aijaz left behind his young Brahmin wife a widow by name, Pipeelika. Subsequently, Astha and Pipeelika became very intimate friends and that friendship developed into lesbianism.

Kapur seems to be the very first Indo Anglian novelist to have dealt with the theme of lesbianism. Although this episode of lesbianism between them did not add much to the plot, it did certainly reveal the characters of both of them very vividly as women of different attitudes towards life. When Pipeelika insisted that Astha should follow her to America, the latter bluntly refused, in no unequivocal terms. Pipeelika left for America to do her PhD degree and Astha returned home joined her husband and children and there was a visible change for good in Hemant and they led a happy married life.

The author creates a very modern woman in Astha for coming out of her home and going in quest of her own identity as an individual in society. Some critics are of

opinion that Astha's returning home to live with her husband and children might render her traditional. As a modern woman, she should have followed her own career giving no second thoughts to her family. One might say that these critics are grossly mistaken of Kapur's real concept of a modern woman. Some readers and critics are under a mistaken idea that to be a modern woman, she must abandon her home, husband and children as in the case of Shagun, the protagonist of *Custody*. The author very sensibly delineates the limits of modernity which, under no circumstances, should be destructive to the basic pattern of the institution of marriage and the family set up. In the case of Astha, she was, in thought and deed, was a modern woman before she returns to join her family.

In the novel, *Home* Manju Kapur deals with the same theme, namely, tradition versus modernity. Nisha, the protagonist of this novel, possesses all the traits of a post-modern woman although she was born in a very traditional family of Banwarlals. Her mother, Sona has been very traditional to her backbone. The author, with her insightful understanding of a joint family, observes that certain untoward incidents take place and they remain as family secrets. One such incident is that Vicky, as a young boy of seventeen commits an act of sexual abuse when she is a little girl and she knows something happened to her but she is too innocent to know the nature of that act. It has left an indelible scar on her mind and she has been ever since in a disturbed state of mind. The family has wisely shifted Nisha to her aunt, Rupa's house and Nisha has been brought up under the meticulous care of her aunt for eleven years and then she has been brought to her own house. Kapur believes that any mental disturbance in person is likely to manifest itself in a physical disorder. Nisha has been suffered from skin disease as a result of her mental disturbance. After a lapse of time, she has been cured of it.



There have ever been many conflicts between Sona, her mother and Nisha, her daughter. Even from girlhood, Nisha used to oppose her mother's traditional way of thinking and doing things. For instance, Nisha did not have any faith in the traditional values. She has been, since her childhood, a rationalist. Much against the will of her mother, she pursued her college higher studies and during this period, she fell in love with an engineering student named Suresh who happened to be of a lower caste. Naturally, her traditionally minded parents strongly opposed to Nisha's proposal to marry that boy.

Nisha wanted to undertake their traditional cloth business. And the members of her family were very much disinclined to accept her proposal. But she believed that she had that grit and gumption to manage her cloth business very skillfully and she succeeds in convincing her father, Yashpal who gave her twenty five thousand rupees by way of her initial investment for her new business. Even a period of one year, Nisha proved to be a very prosperous in her business and repaid the amount she borrowed from her father. Nisha, unfortunately, was born as 'a Mangli' and those who were born under the ominous sign of 'Mangli' would not be married by any young man except one who happened to have been born 'a Mangli'. As fate would have it, Nisha had to marry a thirty four year old widower who was living with his mother. But Nisha was not really happy with him since he devoted all his time to the welfare of his mother to the total neglect of his wife and the twins.

Kapur creates the image of a new woman through the character of Nisha. A young woman, brought up in a society of traditional values, can hardly dare fight tradition and emerge as a modern woman. But Nisha's life has been a constant struggle

against all that is traditional; and she has faced many odds before she emerged herself as a modern woman. And ultimately, she has fulfilled her duties as a wife and as a mother and, above all, as a woman with modern views.

The author very beautifully sums up Nisha's sense of thorough contentment and fulfillment through Nisha's own words that conclude the novel. "These are- relatives and friends- these are mine, these are all mine."

Manju Kapur's fourth novel is *The Immigrant* published in 2008. It is the story of a young educated woman, Nina belonging to an urban upper middle class family. The theme of the novel is a little different from the theme of her previous novels. The theme of this novel is not tradition versus modernity. Although the protagonist's mother, Mrs. Batra is very much traditional in her attitude to life, her influence on her daughter is conspicuously little. Nina's father is an IFS officer who spends much of the time in Europe and Nina as a young girl has had her education there in Basils and Nina has been exposed to western civilization but Nina has been very much unfortunate in having lost her father when he was in forty fifth year having left nothing in the form of property for his widow and his unfortunate daughter, Nina to fall back on. The widow, Mrs. Batra and her daughter, Nina have left for her parent- in-law's house in Lucknow but Nina accustomed to a decent life of independence could hardly adjust herself in the new environment and so they came back to Delhi where they lived in a small house since they have no source of income except the petty family pension granted to her by the government. Naturally, they find it very difficult to make both ends meet in a metropolitan city like Delhi. Meanwhile, Nina completed her M.A and joined as a lecturer of English where she studied, namely, Miranda college. Only recently Nina has

celebrated her 30<sup>th</sup> birthday and by force of circumstances, Nina has learnt to be very practical to cut her coat according to the cloth. Unfortunately, during her period of lectureship, she has fallen in love with another teacher by name, Rahul who is senior to her by fifteen years.

Kapur says that the unscrupulous man, somewhere, resembles Nina's father and it is this that has fascinated her towards him and this affair has continued for eight years and Nina finds thoroughly deceived by that man. This premarital experience of hers has been kept a secret from her mother and she has been naturally frustrated. This sad experience makes her cynical and sceptical and so she keeps aloof from her colleagues. Nina's mother, being traditional, has been very much worried to see her daughter still unmarried although she crossed thirty years of age. She observes fasts and prays to God for the marriage of her daughter. A suitable match for Nina has been brought by an officer –cum- astrologer and the prospective bridegroom, Ananda, happens to be a dentist doctor belonging to an ordinary middle class family and his parents have died in an accident leaving him and his elder sister behind.

The young dentist doctor has been there in Halifax in his uncle's house for seven years. Nina at first feels reluctant to be married since her widowed mother will be left alone in India if she leaves for Canada after marriage. Nina's mother, though knows that she would be left lonely in India, feels extremely happy at the prospect of her daughter's marriage. Nina's marriage has been celebrated with the doctor in Delhi in a very grand scale. Ananda is happily prepared to bear the all expenses connected with the marriage. But Nina's sense of self respect and dignity did not like that her marriage to be performed as a charity case. Nina gets her money from her provident fund to meet the expenses.

This attitude of Nina reveals that she is a woman of self-respect with an individuality of her own. Everything has gone well so far and Nina leaves for Halifax to join her doctor husband. The novel *The Immigrant* is different from any of Kapur's previous novels. In that, the protagonist of this novel becomes diaspora and settles there in an alien country as an immigrant.

But one must observe that the novel, *The Immigrant* is not so much about the immigrant's experiences of trials and tribulations on an alien soil as about the man-woman relationships. At first instance, the reader naturally feels that it is about the experiences of the protagonist as an immigrant. For instance, Kiran Desai's Booker prize winning novel, *The Inheritance of Loss* mainly deals with the theme of the frustrating experiences of the immigrants in the States. But Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* deals mainly with the incompatibility in the married life of Nina and her husband, Ananada. There has been an unbridgeable gulf resulting from the mental incompatibility between the wife and husband that ultimately ends in the protagonist's leaving her traditionally minded husband with a view to discovering her self-identity.

Nina, the protagonist, perceives in her doctor-husband, a traditionalist of an average middle class member of the society, beneath the gloss and veneer of the glitter of the western civilization. There is little wisdom in the doctor's quixotic efforts to transform himself into a Canadian. The western culture and the Indian culture will ever remain immiscible. Some critics argue that it would be quite difficult for Nina to survive in the tumultuous world without the support of a man.

But Kapur hints to the grasp of the reader's understanding that Nina as an educated woman is thoroughly equipped with such virtues as supreme self-confidence and unflinching determination to face odds of any description. These qualities such as Nina possesses, will go into the making of a modern or post-modern woman.

The last but one novel of Manju Kapur is *Custody*, the latest being 'Brothers' published in 2017. One can perceive some evolutionary development in the protagonist of Manju Kapur from Virmati to Shagun. Kapur very subtly creates her protagonists distinctively different from one another by throwing them against different socio political background.

The protagonist of the *Custody* is Shagun, an educated young woman who happens to be the only daughter of her widowed mother. Shagun, beyond all doubt, is the paragon of beauty. She is married to a young, prospering business executive by name, Raman. For about twelve years, she has lead a very happy married life with her husband and two children- Arjun, fourteen year young boy and Roohi, eight year old daughter.

Shagun feels suffocated and bored with the tedious routine life as Raman, her husband used to go on long tours in connection with his business. It was at this time, Shagun fell in love with Ashok Khanna, a young, charismatic, unmarried boss of her husband. Subsequently, she leaves her husband and children and marries the man whom she so madly loved and Ashok Khanna also loved her no less. After the divorce between Raman and Shagun, Ishita, a childless divorcee, living in the same lane, has been introduced. The divorce between Raman and Shagun gives rise to serious problem of the custody of the children.

Both the parties claim the custody of the children and finally, the court has passed its verdict but their son, Arjun must be in the custody of his mother, Shagun and Roohi, a little daughter must be under the custody of Raman.

Shagun, as a protagonist, is different from the protagonist of Manju Kapur's other novels. In the very first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur makes a married professor with two children run after an educated unmarried young woman, namely, Virmati but in the last but one novel, *Custody*, she makes a married woman with two children run after an unmarried man. In none of Kapur's previous novels a family has never been devastated and disintegrated as in this novel under discussion. And, moreover, in no previous novel of hers, there has been so much of domestic disharmony almost to the point of disintegration. Shagun stands apart from the other protagonists of Kapur in taking a bold drastic step leaving her husband for someone else. One may recall Nina who leaves her husband and goes out in quest of her self-identity but not for another man.

It is really amazing to see how subtly Kapur brings about a strikingly conspicuous transformation in her protagonists from the raw, innocent stage in the last vestiges of tradition, into a confident, enlightened and modern woman.