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The Emergence Of A Modern Woman In Manju Kapur's Home

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Abstract: Manju Kapur, a prominent contemporary Indian novelist, is widely recognized for her feminist narratives that explore the intricate layers of womanhood within the socio-cultural landscape of India. Kapur foregrounds the concerns of middle-class Indian women who strive to redefine their roles beyond patriarchal expectations. These texts become significant cultural documents that trace the transitions in the position of Indian women from the pre-Independence period to post-liberalization India.

Kapur's fiction resonates with feminist theorists such as Shulamith Firestone, Kate Millett, and Betty Friedan, whose perspectives illuminate gendered oppression in domestic, social, and reproductive spheres. Firestone's critique of biological determinism and Millett's analysis of patriarchal conditioning find reflection in Kapur's depiction of women denied bodily autonomy, continuously pregnant, or burdened with childcare and household duties. Kapur critiques the romanticized ideals of motherhood, revealing its toll on women's bodies and identities, while simultaneously arguing for shared domestic responsibilities. Through characters like Hemant, who insists that childcare is solely a woman's role, Kapur highlights the superficiality of modernity in Indian households where women's employment is accepted but not supported. Kapur also acknowledges the role of progressive men in women's emancipation, contesting a rigid binary of male oppressor and female victim. Nevertheless, she emphasizes the continuing imbalance, where women who cross social thresholds face ostracism more severely than men.

Index Terms -Feminism, Post-feminism, Patriarchy, Female identity, Domesticity, Women's empowerment, Social conditioning.

INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur is a renowned Indian author known for her feminist writing, which explores the complexities of women's lives, identities, and struggles within the context of Indian society. Her works showcase the emergence of the modern woman in Indian society, highlighting themes of liberation, empowerment, and self-discovery. Her novels, such as "Difficult Daughters" "Home" and "A Married Woman", feature strong female protagonists who challenge traditional societal norms and expectations. These characters are often well-educated, independent, and determined to forge their own paths in life.

MANJU KAPUR: HOME – WORK PROGRESSIONS:

Manju Kapur shows the trials and tribulations of her women protagonists, their daily lives, their aspirations and quests, their struggle for emancipation and the resistance that family, tradition and society offer. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* is set in pre-independence times, whereas, *A Married Woman* and *Home* are set respectively around the 1980s and 90s. Kapur reveals that the norms of 'ideal' female behaviour remain the same in society and despite many legal and social reforms women continue to experience subtle forms of oppression which restrict their growth as human beings. In these three novels the issues of education and work for women are given considerable importance. Virmati, Astha, and Nisha, the protagonists of the three novels, show an inclination towards education, but their families consider education unimportant for women as they believe that a woman's destiny is decided not by the education she receives but by her marriage. Their own mothers become mediums of social and cultural conditioning and they seek to ensure that their daughters conform to the patriarchal norms.

In her novel *Home*, Kapur shows that discrimination against girls within the family, their continuous conditioning to conform to the feminine mystique, negligence of their education, providing for their dowry, preference for a male child, child sexual abuse, emphasis on physical beauty and chastity, and marriage as the sole pursuit, are the things women are conditioned to since childhood. Nisha experiences all this in her life but despite all these influences she creates a world for herself where work is the most important thing. She makes a place for herself in the excessive demanding competitive sphere of business and takes pride and pleasure in her work. Here, we find that feminine qualities of nurturing and care are given an important place along with search for self-realization through work. This is an important element of post feminism that it brings the feminine back into women's sense of identity while rejecting the patriarchal structure of society. Nisha finds a balance between work and family and shows that a woman needs both.

Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectics of Sex* states that patriarchy is rooted in the biological inequality of the sexes concerning reproduction. Firestone demands women's control over reproduction, "not only the full restoration to women of ownership of their bodies, but also their (temporary) seizure of control of human fertility the new population biology as well as all the social institutions of childbearing and childrearing" (qtd. in Gruss 9). Kapur deplores the physical harm caused to women due to continuous pregnancies and their helplessness having no control over their bodies, "Her back curved into wards the base of her spine, and carrying her children was a strain, even when they were very young. Her hair barely snaked down to mid-back, its length and thickness gone with her babies. Her teeth bleed when she chewed her morning neem twigs and she could feel some of them shaking" (7). She knows that with another child there will be nothing left of her, so she prays for a miscarriage. Feminists have raised the issue of control of women on their bodies which is a primary requisite to overcome the dominance of male sexuality.

Kapur points at the attitude of society towards the issue of education and work for women through the opinion of Kasturi about her niece Shakuntala, "A woman's shaan is in her home. Now you have studied and worked enough. Shaadi.' Here Kasturi glistened with emotion" (16). Kasturi thinks that a woman should use her education only for the benefit of the family and not for being independent and self-reliant.

Kapur shows the gulf between the thinking of women of the previous generation and women of the next generation, who are educated. Educated women learn the importance of independence and their right to it. That is why education is viewed with suspicion by women like Kasturi and Lajwanti who think that education spoils women and turns them away from marriage. In the pre-independence times society was prejudiced against the educated and working women who exhibited little docility and submissiveness required for making them suitable marriage material. Shakuntala is, "an epitome of the 'new' woman" (Bande 58). Shakuntala rides horses, smokes, plays cards and badminton, acts without her mother's advice, buys anything she wants and casually visits all the family acquaintances.

Kapur highlights the historical fact that men have played an important role in women's emancipation and have advocated many social reforms. Post feminism takes into account the role of men in bringing about change in women's condition in society and does not view them always as the oppressors. As a writer of the post feminist era, Kapur readily acknowledges the efforts of progressive men who supported the equal rights for women.

Kapur attacks the belief system of patriarchal society which presupposes that a woman needs to learn only to cook and to look after her children and home. Compatibility and development of the mind and the finer faculties of women are not considered necessary. Susan E. Babbitt writes, "In situations involving ideological oppression, an individual may fail to possess preferences and desires that adequately reflect an interest in her own human flourishing because she has been beaten down by the circumstances of her situation" (370). Ganga is a victim of the patriarchal ideology. Though she is groomed to be beautiful and competent housewife, the Professor finds her inadequate and frustrating. Foreeducated men, marriage in the absence of such complementarity may lead to disappointment and dissatisfaction. Thus, the women are doubly jeopardized first, by being denied proper education and then, by being rejected by their husbands for the lack of it.

Kate Millett contends that women are oppressed by the patriarchal institution of family, through patriarchal economic hold over women and through education: "Implicit in all the gender identity development which takes place through childhood is the sum total of the parents', the peers', and the culture's notion of what is appropriate to each gender by way of temperament, character, interest, status, worth, gesture, and expression" (qtd. in Gruss 10). They are inspired to think only of a prospective husband and marriage.

Women are conditioned to believe that marriage is something that alone can bring happiness to them and can give meaning to their lives. When this illusion is shattered, women find their lives empty and meaningless. This kind of thinking puts unrealistic demands on marriage and when these aspirations are not fulfilled the result is frustration and endless wandering from one relationship to another, in search of peace and love. This is the reason why many women feel dissatisfied within their marriages and remain unhappy as they are never taught that marriage is an important part of life but to develop as a complete individual they need to grow in other directions as well. When men have to choose a career such constraints do not restrict their choice. Women have entered the public realm but they have limited choices when it comes to work at home and children remain women's primary responsibility. This is superficial liberalism and modernity which restricts women's capacity to realize their true potential

Hemant firmly. 'Hire somebody to help you, or quit your job.'" (70). This brings out the unfair and unjust orthodox viewpoint that looking after children is solely a woman's job. Children can receive care from a man and "the simplistic notion that there is some inherent glue that unites mother and child and forms the crucial basis for later relationship simplifies, depoliticizes, and removes from historical review the exploitative and oppressive conditions.

Kapur shows that traditional feminine traits should not be rejected to conform to a feminist model. She celebrates individuality and freedom to choose, rather than following rigid rules and regulations. Postfeminism gives space to women to choose their identity rather than prescribing it for them. Nisha's choice is the choice of the new woman who seeks as much fulfilment in work as in the home, relationships and motherhood.

Kapur deplores the evil of child marriage then prevalent in Indian society. Harish was married off at the age of three. His wife Ganga was younger than him. Both of them were small children at the time of their marriage. Kapur reveals that though women were granted education, yet, they were expected to justify the indulgence by not showing independence and by conforming to elders and traditions. The gender inequality posited in patriarchy is once again patently on display as she is imprisoned but Harish, "continues to participate in family gatherings and social functions though he claims to be deeply depressed over his

separation from Virmati" (Chauhan151). The novel shows how women were coming out of their homes to actively participate in political agitations and social movements. When she hears the women leaders in Punjab Women's Student Conference, Virmati is forced to think, "Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is being spent in love. Wasting it. Well, not wasting time, no, ofcourse not, but then how come I never have a moment for anything else?" (142). Kapur shows that education and independence should not be restricted to choosing partner only, but should be utilized in other spheres of life also. Virmati is amazed to see that these women around her have strong opinions about political and social issues.

She must be satisfied with that" (144). Virmati exhibits her inherent femininity when she looks for the meaning of life in her relationship with the Professor. It is the result of continuous social conditioning that women desire and find satisfaction in things which strengthen their subjugation in society. Susan E. Babbitt explains this phenomenon, "The effect of oppression may be such that people are psychologically damaged, possessing interests and desires that reflect their subservient social status.

When a woman crosses 'the threshold,' her life becomes very difficult. She has to pay the price for expanding her vision and territory and she faces alienation and rejection of her own family as well as of society. Furthermore, men are often forgiven for transgressing the norms but women remain outcasts forever.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, Kapur's novels challenge readers to rethink the definitions of femininity, success, and fulfillment. By offering nuanced portrayals of women's aspirations and dilemmas, she contributes significantly to feminist literary tradition and contemporary social thought. Her protagonists may not dismantle patriarchy entirely, but they redefine womanhood by asserting intellectual agency, demanding respect, and pursuing personal growth. Kapur's fiction, therefore, becomes a voice for countless women navigating similar complexities, serving both as social critique and a hopeful testament to the enduring resilience of the Indian woman. Her works affirm that the journey toward equality is ongoing, yet each step taken by women in pursuit of selfhood marks a powerful shift in the collective consciousness of society.

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