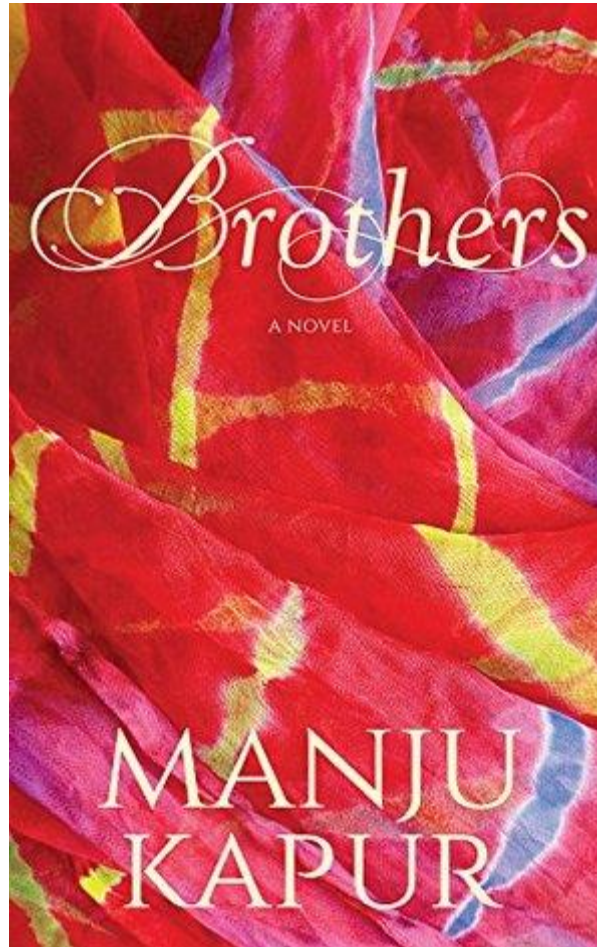


Reflections of Women's Movements in Manju Kapur's *Brothers*

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Abstract

Women around the world share a sisterhood that binds them together in a perennial relation despite their cultural, moral or territorial differences. They are different yet the same as far as their experiences as women are concerned. Though entitled *Brothers*, Manju Kapur's latest novel gives ample space to sisters who maintain a close-knit bond in the face of patriarchal constructs. No doubt, with time women's condition is getting better but still there is a long road for them to travel to arrive at a "promised land" where they can share an equal status with men. Set in the pink city, Jaipur, the novel revolves around the political career of two brothers. Along with that there are women characters in the book who maintain a parallel development with women's movements in India. The novel through the lives of its characters depicts how sati,

widowhood, widow remarriage and motherhood have been ameliorated by women empowerment campaigns. But patriarchal hold on women's sexuality still persists and mars women's choices. What instantly holds a scholar's attention is the response of the novelist to women's movements in India expressed through her characters and the choices they make. Thus, the novel offers a wide variety of women related sensitive issues which demand a thorough inquiry into women's condition in our modern India.

Key words: Manju Kapur, *Brothers*, Women, Gender, Patriarchy, Consciousness, Sisterhood

Sisters and Brothers

The word 'Sisters' can be used as a metaphor for all those women who struggle for their equal position in the society. Their very existence, choices and behavior are challenged by every now and then, and moreover they are made to feel at margins. Alladi Uma observes, "Sisters in distress, the women are able to relate to each other by sharing experiences and discussing their problems" (79). The feminist call for essentialism, though debated by post-modern scholars, was perhaps for uniting women around the world in a universal sisterhood from where they can raise their voice despite existing differences. The theoretical premise of gender studies sets up a viable platform for examining women's issues embedded in the narratives of Indian English women novelists. Their sole approach is not to make the reader conscious of women's question but also to bring about an understanding of women in question. Though patriarchal mores have been losing their hold on the Indian social fabric in the wake of education and women empowerment campaigns yet the same constructs are still at work on a larger scale. There has been a strong call for a better status of women raised by women's movements in India. The purpose of this paper is to trace the progress of women's movements in India with reference to the advances made by the women characters in Manju Kapur's present novel. The study also reveals how much has been achieved so far by 'sisters' in the world reserved for their 'brothers' and how much is still left to be worked upon.

Study of Gender Discrimination

Under the aegis of feminism, gender studies looks for ways through which discrimination in the name of gender can be highlighted, brought to the forefront and thus exposed in the literary texts which however seem to propagate it through stories of glorifying masculinity against under-nourished femininity. In this context, the famous African proverb stands true that until the lion learns how to write, every story will glorify the hunter. Thus the first foundational achievement of feminism world over is women's participation in creative writings. It is from her pen that narrative about her are being expressed through *écriture féminine* – a phrase coined by Helene Cixous. Following this call for exclusive feminine writing, women around the world reveal how they think about the nature of world, masculinity and their own selves. The echoes of this call do reach to women in India and result in a large corpus of writings defining existing life and ideas from their perspective. What is remarkable about Indian women writing in English is that they have expressed themselves largely in poetry and fiction. Drama has been a less explored territory for them. It seems they are more comfortable in either meditating in poetry or creating large spaces for themselves in fiction. The fictional narratives based upon their personal experiences as 'female' form the very heart of Indian English women's fiction. The depth and

element of truth they hold is a direct outcome of their personal struggle to accept themselves as creative writers.

Brothers

If looked from this standpoint, Manju Kapur's latest novel, *Brothers*, appears to be a significant part of this large tradition of women's writings bent on raising gender sensitive issues through their creative voices. However on the surface level, *Brothers* seems to be a tale of two brothers, their political quest and family disputes. In this regard, Rosalyn D'Mello in reviewing *Brothers* describes it, "a predictable tragedy of two small town men with larger-than-life dreams and the women they confine to margins" (n. pag.). But Kapur has created a haven for women of the house too where they move towards self-actualization generation after generation. Striking a deeper note, Dhamini Ratnam observes in her review of the novel, "The title of the book may well be *Brothers* but make no mistake, this book is about a woman, and it is the lives of women, especially the unnamed ones who serve as silent, veiled foils to their husbands and sons, that remain with you long after you have finished reading" (n.pag). Thus, being apparently a text concerned with two brothers and their journey to achieve selfhood, this novel also embarks upon a journey of several sisters struggling against their own gender consciousness. But Kapur has very adroitly traced the changing contours of their lives and behavior along the lines of women's movements in India.

Main Thread - The Protagonist Tapti Gaina

The protagonist, Tapti Gaina, is the main thread around which the whole story of women's discriminated lives is knitted. Through her character, the novelist features an educated, beautiful, modern and working woman who suffers from guilt-consciousness. This hints towards a crucial point that these external social factors cannot fully contribute to a woman's emancipation. Something from inside must be transformed in her. The narrative of the novel covers a large span of time from 1930s to 2010 and thus provides a complete view of woman's changing condition in these formative years. This was the time when Indian social reformers were devoted to the cause of eradicating the evils of child marriage, widow remarriage and *purdah* system. In the first generation, Mithari has to face the evil of child marriage rampant at that time of Indian society:

Virpal and Mithari, both children of village sarpanches, had been six and five when they married. Immediately after the ceremony the bride returned to her parent's home to wait out the years until puberty. (72)

The same generation features Gulabi, wife of Dhanpal who scared of his participation in World War II asks him a promise not to leave her a widow. Dhanpal retorts:

'You have a woman's brain,' he says. 'What do you understand, that you ask for such promises? This is a war, there will be fighting. The only thing I can promise is that I will dishonor neither my caste nor my name.' (79)

Exploring the Concept of Widowhood

Thus the narrative also explores the concept of widowhood that Gulabi has been so scared of. Virpal's son Kishen Singh dies after a few months of his marriage. His widow without a fault on her part suffers an isolated existence and becomes an easy prey for Himmat, son of Dhanpal, "In her shapelessness she was no different from the covered figures in his village, yet she managed to move him in unfamiliar ways" (123). Widowhood has been shaped as a vulnerable stage where a woman is made to think herself ruined. After the death of Kishen Singh, it is stated:

As for the young wife, she lay paralysed by desolation. From now she would be deprived of the protective presence that stood between her and the world. Her life was over, they said. Where does one go, how does one behave if one's life is over? This was the lesson she had to learn. (114)

But with time, widowhood loosens some of its ties. The mother of Tapti, Mrs Ahlawat, is also a widow but her status in the house is completely different from Kishen Singh's widow. Women's movement in India has done a great deal in prohibiting child marriages from the social arena. But this marriage is important from various standpoints. Vina Mazumdar sums up the new trends within the women's movements in the late 1970s and emphasizes its embryonic relationship with gender studies:

The revival of the women's movement in the late 1970s brought new dynamism and directions to women studies. Issues of violence – domestic and social, sexual exploitation in old and new forms, identification of complex structures of domination and their reassertion in new forms. (44)

Love-cum-Arranged Marriage

Himmat's marriage to Sonal is an example of love-cum-arranged marriage. But the narrative makes it clear that his marriage to Sonal proves to be a building block in his political career. His act of imposing divorce on his child bride and marrying Sonal is the example of old and new forms of exploitation. This can be figured out from Sonal's character that is not much developed in the novel. She remains a politician's daughter and a minister's wife instead of growing as an individual. The irritation she expresses towards Tapti may be the result of her tamed life at home. Though she belongs to an upper-class political family yet her womanly self remains enclosed within the gender-specific roles very aptly defined by Tennyson in the Victorian age:

Man for the field and woman for the hearth:
Man is for the sword and for the needle she:
Man with the head and woman with the heart:
Man to command and woman to obey;
All else confusion. (427-431)

She neither has a public life for herself nor does she share her husband's. Her character is tightly struck within the patriarchal mores of domesticity and modesty. Thus it stands true in

Sonal's case that an individual alone is responsible for the life that she crafts and leads – there is no pre-determined structure or constrained. This existentialist approach of Sonal is transformed in the next phase into a radical feminist approach of Tapti.

Feminism Portrayed in the Novel

In the 1990s feminism of the liberal equal rights variety consciously tried to move away from the images of the oppressed woman to that of the woman with initiative and agency. Whereas in the 1960s and 1970s, the entire focus of women's movements in India has been on the public sphere, by the 1990s there is a realization that the public sphere cannot be changed without addressing the private. Women's private domain opens spaces for debates on motherhood, contraceptive technology and of course her control over her sexuality. It is in fact Tapti who shows the real growth of women's empowerment in the last decades of the previous century. Himmat arranges her marriage with his younger brother, Mangal, with Tapti and keeps an eye on her throughout life. She receives many favours from him before noticing that there has been a secret liking at work whatever he has done for her. No doubt, Tapti is the emblem of an educated, assertive and working woman who defines the boundaries of her motherhood. After giving birth to two daughters, she clearly shakes off the responsibility to produce a male heir to her husband's family. She makes use of contraceptives without sharing with her partner and brings fulfillment to herself living independently:

She needed space to distance herself from Mangal's desires. Like an oyster reacting to a grain of sand, she vowed to establish a professional life, become someone who could not even remotely be construed as a stay-at-home breeder of male children. (266)

Her individualistic approach is a significant initiative towards valuing her own life and growing as an individual. Kapur has made it clear emphatically that women like Tapti have been successful in transcending the gender-specific boundaries in matters of education and employment but their control over their motherhood and body is yet to be achieved. The narrator describes:

Tears gathered in Tapti's eyes. What was she, a machine that would go on producing children until he got a son? At twenty-four she felt there was nothing left of her youth, so swallowed up by babies was she, and it hurt her that he saw nothing of how she was feeling, his main concern not her, but his seed, his line, his name. (268)

Control over Sexuality

What is still left for Tapti's daughters to achieve is their control over their sexuality. Despite overcoming struggles of women's gender related roles in the family structure, Tapti is still chained into the male structured boundaries of sexuality. She does not have a choice over her body and pleasures that it produces in the sexual bliss. While both Himmat and Mangal have stepped outside the threshold of their virginity, that too before and after marriage, for Tapti her fulfillment proves to be a stumbling block. Her husband Mangal commits adultery many times in his life but no one raises a question on his loyalty. At the end the novel it is explained why

Mangal has shot his brother dead. Himmat and Tapti's secret love life is exposed to him and it questions his masculinity. His fury is directed more towards Himmat than to his wife, Tapti.

Sisters- A Parallel to Women's Movement in India

On the basis of this analysis, it can be said that undoubtedly Manju Kapur's present novel draws a parallel to women's movement in India by invoking the lives of sisters portrayed in the story. What is left to be probed further is that women united to seek self-knowledge and freedom to their sexuality is a far reaching dream for them even today. But history of their struggle shows that much has been achieved yet much has still been left. Their creativity is submerged under the load of traditional social roles. Once they are awoken to their own being, it would not take much time for women like Tapti to arrive at self-realization where their body would pave way for their spiritual regeneration.

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