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Dr M. Chandrasena Rajeswaran, HoD, English

Identity Empowerment as Feminist Assertion in Manju Kapur's
Home

D. Deepa, M.A., M.Phil.

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Dr. MGR Educational and Research Institute (*University with Graded Autonomy Status*), Chennai

ABSTRACT

Feminist theory has become a way of looking at the social world through the lens of gender inequality. One of the significant focuses in feminist philosophical work on the self has been reclamations of female identities. Empowerment presents the transition from a state of powerlessness to more control in life and as a change in both human activity and the social structure. Women empowerment may be considered as a personal process and identity as an essential component in asserting the self. Losing one's identity in any of the domain that a woman may be seriously engaged in creates a sense of disempowerment. The majority of novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated women. Although Manju Kapur has written six full length novels to this date, this paper aims at analyzing one of her novels, *Home* (2006). The present paper aims to make an analysis of the female characters and their experiences on the basis of *Identity Empowerment as a Feminist assertion*.

Keywords: Manju Kapur, *Home*, Identity, Women Empowerment, Feminist Assertion,

Marriage, Motherhood.

Introduction

Feminism had its beginnings in England and has now become more or less a worldwide phenomenon. In its course, feminism has taken on, so many political, cultural and deeply personal meanings. As a result feminism may be defined in many ways but the most common understanding of the term is that it denotes emancipation of women, politically economically and socially.

Empowerment has become an essential part of feminist theory and, as such, seeks to increase the personal, interpersonal and political power of oppressed and marginalized populations for individual and collective transformation.

Identity Empowerment

Identity empowerment theory is a recently developed clinical sociological theory that has been built on documented patterns and predictabilities in interpersonal, family, and group behavior (Hall, 1990). It describes and begins to explain critical clinical and social processes that increase the probabilities and possibilities of women's well-being and optimal functioning. The theory is grounded in the assumption that empowered women make meaningful commitments and undertake effective, goal-oriented activities that they choose for themselves.

Identity empowerment can be initiated in many different ways. Women heighten their awareness of how values and goals influence their lives at varied level of experience and interaction. Identity empowerment enhances women's capacities to take value stands in their own interests in personal and public negotiation. Women are able to scrutinize the impact of social structures and other social influence on their self-concepts and life experiences by deliberately focusing on each concept of Identity empowerment theory. The structure of this frame of reference allows women to reflect on their lives more objectively than free-wheeling discussion allows, and the end-product—their identity empowerment—is a clarification and strengthening of their perceptions of themselves and society.

Modern Indian Women's Writing

A major development in modern Indian fiction is the growth of a feminist or women centered approach, that seeks to project and interpret experience, from the point of a feminine consciousness and sensibility. Many Indian women novelists have explored female subjectivity in order to establish an identity. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring self-sacrificing women, towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity; no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status.

The majority of novels written by Indian women writers depict the psychological sufferings of the frustrated homemakers. This subject matter is often considered superficial compared to the depiction of the replaced and oppressed lives of women. Indian women writers like Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Das, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Bharati Mukherjee, Shobha De, Namita Gokhle, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Anita Nair, Manju Kapur and others have chosen the problems and issues faced by the women as their main thematic concerns.

Manju Kapur and Her Novel *Home*

Manju Kapur is a contemporary novelist having six novels to her credit with a high

degree of both critical as well as popular success the world over. She is one of the most admired novelists of Indian writing in English. She is one of the prolific women writers today, whose realistic and remarkable images of the urban middle class women has thrown light upon an emerging class of women who are eventually taking charge of their lives.

“*Home*” (2006) is her third contribution was described as glistening with details and emotional acuity in “The Sunday Times”. Home is a story of a family tied up in the busy schedule of the metros. The traditional Delhi based cloth merchant Banwari Lal. With the advent of technology, contemporary fashion becomes the in thing and the old trend is left far behind.

Thus, Home is not only the story of Banwari Lal family, it seems to be the most common and wonderful tale of many homes altogether. This is not an imaginative story. It has the real incidents of human life, human relationships and human experiences. Love, life, marriage and conflicts travels together in the novel with humour, pathos and compassion. Tradition, convention, culture and human values are observed here with human feelings and human experience.

There are eight marriages in the novel belonging to three generations. There are more than twenty people living together with their different ideologies, different ambitions and different dreams. They all aspire towards a common motto. That is happiness. Lala Banwari Lal, his wife, his two sons—Yashpal and Pyarelal, two daughters-in-law—Sona and Sushila, three grandsons—Ajay and Vijay by Pyarelal and Raju by Yashpal, only one grand-daughter Nisha by Yashpal—all share the values of the joint family although there are some conflicts among them.

Manju Kapur seems outstanding in terms of portraying female characters. There are many female characters in the novel—Sona, Sushila, Rupa, Rekha, Pooja, Nisha, Asha, etc.—all these female characters maintain their individual identity in the novel without any sense of repetition. All of them understand the values of joint family also. They know how to sacrifice individual interest for the sake of family in which people belonging to many generations live together.

In her novel Home, Manju Kapur tries to represent Nisha in the context of modern generation in which each and everything has been viewed in different modern perspectives. Nisha is a typical product of modern generation for whom liberty and freedom is everything. The real meaning of education in her life is to achieve liberty and freedom.

The Portrayal of Women characters in Manju Kapur’s Novel

Manju Kapur is successful in portraying her females as absolute rebel to that of timid, oppressed and suppressed women. Her women characters are awakened souls who know how to lead their life on their own terms. She never blamed her female characters nor did she portray them in a meek circumstance. Although they had to compromise to a great deal, but it was by their choice and not by force either of the family or of the society. All her women characters are trend setters in almost all fields, be it education, their free lifestyle, their choice of life partner or even their extra-marital affairs. A very revolutionary image of women has been portrayed by Manju Kapur in the setting of pre- and post-independence, a time when women were not allowed even to cross the threshold of their houses or even raise no voice of their own. She dares to make them more vociferous to find their own grounds. When asked in an interview

by *Random Reads*, about her characters, she said,

“These are the lives I observe around me. Women’s lives - at least here – I can’t really speak with authority about other places – are complicated and a source of endless interest. In Indian women are often caught between the traditional and the modern, caught between the family and their individual desires. As a novelist this is where I place my stories” (*Random Reads*).

Her female characters are always caught in between the traditional and the modern, their personal desires as well as their familial expectations. Manju Kapur in almost all her novels has tried to bring forth one or the other female-centric issue although she had never acclaimed to be a feminist writer but feministic tradition is very much apparent. She, through her female protagonists has tried to unfold the hidden secrets which only a woman can probably find affinity to, which these traits normally do not find easy acceptability.

Motherhood in *Home*

Manju Kapur takes us through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations of the Banwaris, a typical north Indian joint family. It may be pointed out that the entire premise of the novel is based on a woman’s fertility to bear a child, preferably a male child and each daughter-in-law of the Banwari family finds an identity in the family only according to her status in fulfilling this requirement.

One of the main concerns of the female world is the curse of barrenness. Here the curse of barrenness initially overtakes both Sona and Rupa (real sisters). Atharva vedha says: “Woman’s main occupation is to procreate. Therefore, an infertile woman is an object of contempt” (G. Sharma, 52). Thus the concept of womanhood in Indian society is inseparable from motherhood and the responsibility and honour that follows it, is entirely hers. The cultural construct promotes a feminine mystique which associates women’s identity with her maternal role.

Motherhood is traditionally venerated in the Indian culture. It is perceived that motherhood is the main purpose of women’s lives. In such a scenario, Rupa epitomises a break from the old traditional myths regarding motherhood. Through Rupa, Kapur portrays the change that is seeping in our social and familial values. Barring indications of slight prick and passing pain, Rupa as well as her husband have no regrets for not having children, nor do they feel themselves misfits in a society which treats women with hostility for being childless. Through Rupa’s character Kapur portrays the emergence of new woman in her novel.

Identity Empowerment in *Home*

Nisha, in the novel says that she wants to study fashion designing because she doesn’t want to stay at home being an English graduate. Now she wants to find a new identity as an independent individual woman and so, she thinks about career-oriented courses. By this time, she suffers from the problem of skin eczema. Her skin disease brings to light her inner tremors which splits her personality and blemishes her fair skin.

Loneliness compels Nisha to feel that she would go mad sitting inside the house. She wants to work in a shop like her brothers. So she requests her father Yashpal, “If only you could take with you, Papaji”, she pleaded in a rush; “I have seen girls working in shops. Why should it be only Ajay, Vijay and Raju? There must be something I too can do” (268). This

reveals her inner quest for independent existence. It also seeks equality of sex, that is Nisha and her brothers belong to different genders.

Nisha feels lost in her own home and her search for home doesn't end till the end of the novel. Meantime she gets an idea to start business of salwar suits. She demands a year from her father to prove her ability with this innovative idea. She pleads him, "Give me a chance to show you what I can do" (287). In her life, "A journey of businesswoman begins from this point" (Ashok Kumar, 82). This behaviour reveals her inner quest for independent existence. It also seeks for equality of sex.

Manju Kapur wants to have a complete liberation and identity to woman in socio-cultural India. In India, 'home' is the center of every family, and the importance of home cannot be neglected. But home is the site where conflicts take place. A lot of women accept these conflicts, compromise with the situation only because the idea of going against the family is unheard of and this influences women's silence. Though Kapur has portrayed the character of Nisha as an educated, confident, self-assured, bold and independent new woman, she, pays honour to the Indian tradition, like Ezekiel, who believes 'Home is where one has to gather grace'.

Conclusion

Manju Kapur's *Home* explores the complex terrain of the Indian family and reveals many issues that are deep rooted within the family viz. revolt against the old traditions, struggle for survival, quest for identity and of course woman's unending struggle to survive and to break the silence against her own suppression.

Manju Kapur narrates important issues of women in her novels and conveys that it is only through self-assertion that a woman can empower her identity or regain her lost identity. Manju Kapur's *Home* encapsulates the idea of women's identity empowerment and liberation and the protagonist Nisha, connects them to the emerging sense of female identity. Manju Kapur's protagonist in the present novel lives within the sphere of reality and successfully finds her 'Home'.

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