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Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur

B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D.

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Indian English and Indian English Literature

Wanted own business, graduate, *manglik* boy, over 1.65, from *kaiyasth* community, own property, for only *manglik* daughter, UP *kaiyasth*, migrated from Lahore, graduate from a prestigious woman's college, extremely fair, beautiful, homely, 1.60, 20 years. Early marriage. Horoscope must. Send details with recent colour returnable photograph (must) to Box ... - The *Hindustan Times*. (Home, 225)

Indian writing in English has now grown up into Indian English Literature. With its new face, it represents in its fullness all major aspects of Indian-ness. 'Now that Indian fiction has become well entrenched within the larger gamut of Indian English literature, feminist fiction has occupied the centre stage as the most powerful and characteristic form of literary expression. Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande, Mahashweta Devi, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, et al. have made the Indian novels in English the world's best sellers'. (Prasad and Malik, 226)

Manju Kapur and Her Works

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D. and R.S. Nitonde, Ph.D. Candidate.

Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur



Manju Kapur

With thanks to www.independent.co.uk

Manju Kapur is a contemporary Indian novelist in English who has established herself with her first novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998), which won her prestigious Commonwealth Writers' Prize (Urasia Section) in 1998. She has also written best seller novels such as *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008) and *Custody* (2011). Her books have been translated into many languages both in India and outside.

Feminist Concerns

Though Manju Kapur hates to be called as a feminist writer, through all her fictional works she projects the feminist concerns. The entire scenario in her novels is feminine. Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*; Astha in *A Married Woman*; Nisha in *Home*; Nina in *The Immigrant*; and Shagun and Ishita in *Custody* are all middle-class educated urban Indian women struggling to establish themselves with their own independent identities in the patriarchal setup of which they are part and parcel.

Marriage Concerns

'One of the main problems for educated women is marriage. Most of their problems are related to marriage' (Manohar, xiii). Marriage is one of the tools for a creative writer to depict the cultural ethos representing Indian-ness. Manju Kapur has both opted for it and also cashed it. Marriage is a central theme in all her fictional works. Kapur's every novel opens with a live discussion on marriage - the topmost significant issue in the life of the female protagonist.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D. and R.S. Nitonde, Ph.D. Candidate.

Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur

According to Lisa E. J. Lau (2011), Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters* depicts the life of Virmati who got education and a career despite the constraints of being a woman and became the second wife of a Professor.

Kapur's second novel *A Married Woman* has a protagonist, who, despite an initially happy arranged marriage and satisfying sexual life, drifts into a lack of marital and familial contentment; and involves herself in politics where she meets a woman, who ultimately becomes her lover.

Kapur's next novel, *Home* is about Nisha who longs for a meaningful career, but is forced into waiting for marriage.

Kapur's fourth novel, *The Immigrant* has Nina as a protagonist. She goes to Canada in an arranged marriage. She cheats on her husband and engages herself in extra marital relationship with a male classmate.

In Kapur's latest novel *Custody*, Shagun - the protagonist leaves her husband and in due course divorces him. She abandons her family life, marries her love and moves to New York. Then Raman remarries with Ishita, another divorcee and overcomes the difficult situation in his life. Thus all these marriages are in a way different from each other.

The Focus of This Paper

The present paper aims at an in-depth inquiry into the matrimonial discourse that comes in the novels of Manju Kapur.

Discourse 1 - Story of an Exploiter and an Exploited



Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D. and R.S. Nitonde, Ph.D. Candidate.

Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur

Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* learns that in her family there is only marriage for girls. Even she perpetually recalls what her mother taught her to remember that ‘Still, it is the duty of every girl to get married’ (15). Kapur’s women are completely compelled to think of nothing but marriage as ‘It seemed to Virmati that her family could talk of nothing else but her wedding. Every word they said had so little relation to her inner life that she felt fraudulent even listening to them, passively, immorally silent’ (69-70).

In case of Kasturi, the first generation woman in *Difficult Daughters*, marriage was to please one’s in-laws.

During Kasturi’s formal schooling it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued at home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by impeccable nature of her daughter’s qualifications. She was going to please her in-laws. (62)

For Virmati’s family, marriage is for the parental pleasure and family prestige:

Shakuntala Pehnji did not have five sisters waiting to get married either. And do you think it makes her mother happy to have her daughter unmarried? She may say what she likes about jobs and modern women, but I know how hard she still tries to find a husband for Shaku, and how bad she feels. You want to do the same to me? To your father and grandfather? (58).

While commenting on her parental expectations, Virmati says that ‘They want nothing from me but an agreement to marry’ (100). When Virmati succeeds in getting married with her love – the Professor, her feeling is not of joy and happiness but of being relieved of a guilty conscience.

In the evening the wedding ceremony proceeded smoothly. The poet’s parents did the *kanya-daan*, the seven *phas* were taken, the couple pronounced man and wife. As Virmati rubbed her eyes, watering from the smoke, she knew, rather than felt, that the burden of the past five years had lifted. (202)

Manju Verma has aptly pointed out that, “The relationship between the two could have been an ideal between a man and a woman but unfortunately it becomes a story of an exploiter and an exploited, a union of un-equals, and an unusual tale of male chauvinism and woman’s total submission” (171).

Going through the novel, it becomes clear that ‘Virmati had achieved through Harish, education, work, marriage and suffering’ (253). And the lesson is ‘Adjust, compromise, adapt.’ (256)

A Conflict of Woman versus Woman

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D. and R.S. Nitonde, Ph.D. Candidate.

Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur

It seems a conflict of woman versus woman where a mother is reluctant to educate her daughter. Swarna Lata undergoes such sort of an experience.

‘You look too nice for anybody to be cross with,’ she probed. ‘I wish my mother thought so,’ Swarna licked her fingers. ‘It’s only because of my father I am here. My mother wanted me to marry. She said I had done my BA and that was enough. Where was all this study going to end?’ (117)

Virmati’s daughter is quite different from her. In Chakravarty’s words, “Ida is strong and clear headed. She terminates her marriage when she is denied maternity by her husband. She breaks free of the nuptial ties.” (98)

Discourse 2 – Marriage as Sacred Duty and Miscalculations



In *A Married Woman* (2002) marriage of a daughter is considered as a sacred duty of the parents, and according to the *shastras* performing it will lead them to salvation. We have a typical declaration by the mother:

When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the *shastras* say, ‘if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?’ (1)

Proper Age

The novel throws some light on the proper age of marriage for girls. Astha’s mother uses fruit image to describe the maturity of her daughter. Here is a brief dialogue between Astha’s parents:

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D. and R.S. Nitonde, Ph.D. Candidate.

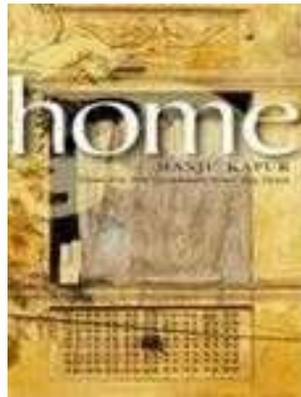
Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur

‘There is a time for everything,’ went on the mother. ‘The girl is blossoming now. When the fruit is ripe it has to be picked. Later she might get into the wrong company and we will be left wringing our hands. If she marries at this age, she will have no problem adjusting. We too are not so young that we can afford to wait. (20)

Thus, when Astha was in final year she was married to Hemant, a MBA son of a bureaucrat family living in Delhi’s Lodhi Colony. Initially she thinks that she is enjoying the bliss of married life as she becomes a mother of two children –Anuradha and Himanshu. But soon her subservient position at home makes her restless and she finds a friend to discover ‘the usual female trap, its all right, you are not alone, we all experience it in one way or another’ (217). When Astha knows ‘A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day’ are the prerequisites of a wife for Hemant, she loses her sense for home, duty, wifedom and motherhood.

Thus, the novel ends up with Astha as a dissatisfied married woman. According to Bhagabat Nayak, “Astha’s marriage to a Pan American and Pan Indian husband in her parents’ choice is a miscalculation”. (225).

Discourse 3 – Arranged and Love Marriages



Manju Kapur’s third novel, *Home* opens with the description of two sisters – Sona and Rupa. Their marriages are simply described as arranged and love marriage. In the succeeding pages it narrates the economics and politics of arranged marriages in joint family.

In order to remain financially secure, and ensure the family harmony that underpinned that security, marriages were arranged with great care. The bride had to bring a dowry, come from the same background, and understand the value of togetherness. (3)

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D. and R.S. Nitonde, Ph.D. Candidate.

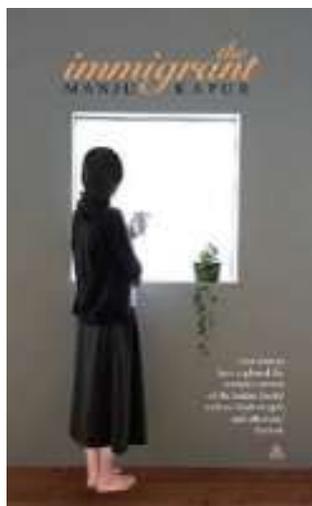
Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur

Initially both the sisters suffer of barrenness which makes them vulnerable. But soon they are blessed with children they desired.

However, *Home* mainly describes the growth of Sona's daughter Nisha as an individual. In her early childhood she is sexually harassed by her own cousin Vicky. When she is in her B.A. final, her parents begin the search for a groom. Then she declares her love for Suresh, her *Paswan* boyfriend. But she is not allowed to follow her senses even though the boy was ready to accept her despite her being a *mangali*. In the *Home* we find that the people believed that a girl's beauty was her fate and a place to live with comfort was the only condition for a girl to marry with someone. Nisha was so pretty and also from a well-to-do family. Her parents also wanted to marry off their daughter into a family where she could live comfortably for the rest of her life. But Nisha who is in love with a poor fellow, becomes restless. The process of marriage is hastened by her family and Nisha becomes the first woman from the Banwari Lal family to be advertised for marriage. Her family's consideration for the prerequisites of caste, community, and like-mindedness becomes evident over here.

Being a *manglik* girl, Nisha's marriage gets delayed. She becomes a business woman by establishing Nisha's Creations. It brightens her future and she is married to Arvind. The purpose of this marriage for him was neither love nor any personal intention but rather a compulsion. "Arvind must marry, the old mother must have someone to look after her, it is not right, the place is so empty, son is busy in the shop, someone should be there to see, notice, care, and where are the children going to come from?" (322). Ten months after marriage, Nisha gives birth to twins accomplishing the purpose behind the marriage. But contrary to it, she loses both her status as a decision maker and also her economic freedom along with her own Nisha's Creations. A. N. Dwivedi, commenting on this marriage, aptly remarks that: "Nisha has to sacrifice her genuine, pure love for false family honours" (68).

Discourse 4 – The Immigrant



The Immigrant opens with the wailing of Nina, a thirty year woman waiting for marriage. Everybody around her and every part of her feminine body- her womb, her ovaries, her uterus, the unfertilized eggs that expelled every month remind her of her unmarried status.

The major topic of conversation in the last eight years had been Nina's marriage – who, when, where, how? The hopes each conversation generated gradually lost their luster as the years went by and nothing changed. From where could fresh possibilities be unearthed on the eve of her thirtieth birthday? (3)

Tired of the task of searching a groom for her daughter, Nina's mother visits an astrologer. She declares that the day Nina gets married, she will pay him one hundred rupees and in addition to it one hundred at the *Katyayani mandir*. When a proposal came from an NRI named Ananda living in Canada, her mother prayed that it would result in a home and happiness for her daughter. 'To see her well settled was her only wish' (61). Because she has learnt from her own experience that it was necessary to have a man to protect one from the vicissitudes of life.

The Wedding Function

The concept of the wedding function in this novel is real and practical one as 'Ananda and Nina wanted a court marriage – less trouble, less expense' (81). Thus, Nina's fantasy of being mistress of her future, her life, her happiness comes to reality. But it proved to be short lived, as she finds her husband asleep before she came out of bathroom for first night of their marital life. And even in the succeeding nights at Canada he continues to take deep sleeps and can not please her. Ananda's impotence is the main cause for Nina's marital agony. Nina becomes lonely at a place 10,000 miles away from her mother and ex-colleagues in Miranda House.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

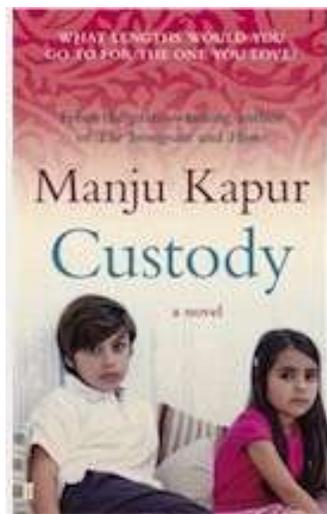
B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D. and R.S. Nitonde, Ph.D. Candidate.

Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur

It suggested that security was not happiness, and that neither depended on fertility or a husband's sexuality. Late, late, she retired to bed, alone with herself, her future still as unclear as on the day she has wed. (227)

Though reluctant at the beginning, Nina finds her carnal bliss with Anton, her Library Science Course classmate in Halifax. This is how she renounces both the Indian institution of family and marriage. In *The Immigrant* Nisha's dream of a happy married life ends with a sour note and she is surging ahead with the hope of establishing herself independently on her own foot in an alien country. (Kumar, 68)

Discourse 5 – Effects of Divorce



Custody presents the devastating effects of divorce on different stakeholders of a family – the wife, husband, children and in-laws. It opens with the description of the arranged marriage between Shagun and Raman: ‘Raman and Shagun’s marriage had been arranged along standard lines, she the beauty, he the one with brilliant prospects’ (14). Raman worked hard to give her a good life. She had two lovely children and everything she wanted. In spite of all this, Raman was denied the central position in his family. She was searching for something like passion. She falls in love with Ashok, Raman’s boss in the beverage company. Only to marry with him she wants divorce from Raman, and when it is denied she kidnaps the children. The battle runs to the court of justice where it is further delayed only to be settled by mutual understanding. Meanwhile, Arjun and Roohi - children of Shagun and Raman, suffer for no fault of theirs. “Roohi’s crying fits, Arjun’s traumas and sleepovers at friends’ houses, Raman coming home late, late, late, this was the norm.” (105)

Problems of Infertility in Married Life

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D. and R.S. Nitonde, Ph.D. Candidate.

Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur

There is another marriage in *Custody* between Ishita and Suryakanta, which fails because of Ishita's infertility. However the most interesting thing is Kapur's idea of bringing together two divorcees, Ishita and Raman as a successful couple. In this novel we find Kapur's own definition of marriage:

Marriage is when two people decide to live together for ever. Should they change their minds they go to court and get marriage cancelled. Finished. Divorced. They become strangers; sometimes they never see each other again. (341)

According to Mithu Banerji (2011), "Kapur's book reveals the unimagined uncertainties of matrimony. The wife's sense of suffocation, the husband's fear of loneliness and the constant shifting of the children, like commodities, from one home to the other, are evoked with painstaking sincerity."

Discourse 6 – Marriage Reforms and Reasons to Marry

Kapur in her fictional works has caught the flux of a representative group of middle-class Indian women trapped in wed locks in different types of families. Her *Difficult Daughters* presents live discussions on wedding in an Arya Samaji agrarian joint family of Lala Diwan Chand. *A Married Woman* is about the marriage and married life of Astha, a Delhi based middle class Indian woman from a bureaucrat family. The *Home* describes the marriages in Delhi's mercantile family of Banwari Lal. *The Immigrant* is the projection of an NRI arranged marriage. Her most recent novel, *Custody* deals with the theme of failure of arranged marriage resulting into divorce and remarriage among the two divorcees.

Kapur has clearly stated all possible reasons to marry through her protagonists. In *Difficult Daughters*, for Kasturi it is the responsibility, for Virmati it is to love and attachment, and for Ida it is to carry the line. In *A Married Woman*, Astha's parents want to marry her because they consider it as their duty. In *Home*, Nisha is married with Arvind only to serve his family. In *The Immigrant*, Nina's mother wants to marry her daughter so that she can get security and stability. And in *Custody*, for Shagun and Raman it is the standard line of beauty and brain, for Ishita and Suryakanta to be happy, for Shagun and Ashok to follow the passion, lastly to Raman and Ishita it is the adjustment.

Varying Results of Marriage and the Roots of Suffering and Happiness

The results of marriages in Kapur's fiction are not all the same. In *Difficult Daughters*, Kasturi becomes a passive sufferer being exploited in a patriarchal family, Virmati is alienated, and Ida is single and childless. In *A Married Woman*, Astha in her restlessness turns into a lesbian and becomes irresponsible with everything including her children and her husband, and Peepalika a lesbian widow. In *Home* Nisha loses her economic freedom

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D. and R.S. Nitonde, Ph.D. Candidate.

Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur

and independent identity. In *The Immigrant*, Nina being dishonest to her husband feels alienated in an alien land. In *Custody*, Shagun having everything from first marriage asks for divorce to run after her passion, and Ishita is divorced for her barrenness.

The roots of the sufferings of these difficult lives in the fictional works of Manju Kapur are varied in nature. In *Difficult Daughters*, the problem with Kasturi is the socio-cultural background at her times, Virmati is in the dilemma, and Ida is too radical. In *A Married Woman*, Astha suffers because of her husband's negligence to her, and Peepalika's suffering can be traced back to her psychological weakness of being a single parent child. In *Home*, Nisha suffers of the gender inequality in the patriarchal setup. In *The Immigrant* Nina suffers because of her husband's sexual impotence. In *Custody*, Shagun and Ishita both suffer for biological reasons- one for passion and the other for barrenness.

Thus, Manju Kapur has become the first and foremost Indian English writer to explore the theme of marriage to its fullest extent in the context of contemporary global Indian society and culture.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

11 : 8 August 2011

B.S. Jadhav, Ph.D. and R.S. Nitonde, Ph.D. Candidate.
Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur