

Existentialism of Voiceless in the Select Novels of Manju Kapur – A Thematic Study

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Abstract

Manju Kapur's novels deal with the identity crisis of voiceless in the society by giving a detail description of their socio-economic conditions, humiliation, and physical torture. The resemblances and differences of their lifestyle, the struggle, the problems that they face and the solutions that they come out would be the main element of her writings. The study tries to show how Manju Kapur's handling of the themes is different from that of the other novelists to demonstrate her artistic merits. The hypothesis thus posited is validated on the basis of the textual evidence compiled from the selected novels of Kapur.

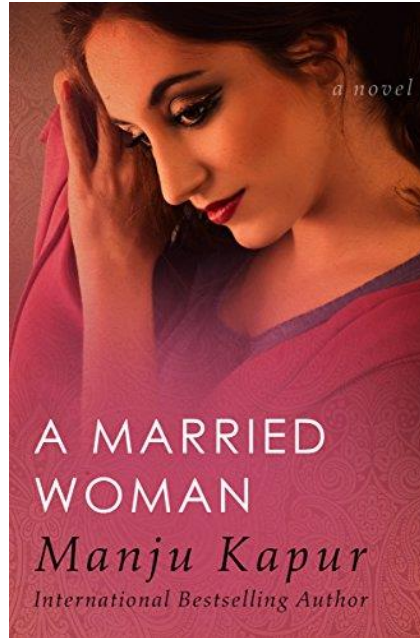
The way she presented women might be having resemblance with feminist theory, but it is not synonymous with feminist theory. In fact, it assumes that women have a distinct experience, which requires separate analytical tools to understand, and it is preoccupied with understanding how women's literature both expresses and shapes this experience. The review attempts to find out wretched and pitiable condition of women in post-independence India. It shows the gagging closeness and dangerous limits of Indian family esteems. The review centers on worries and struggles, to find a suitable place for themselves in the society from the people that are trying to dominate by all possible means.

Keywords: Manju Kapur novels, Humiliation, Subordination, Struggle, Patriarchy, Subjectivity, Resistance.

Introduction

A concept introduced by Elaine Showalter in *Towards a Feminist Poetics*, Gynocriticism refers to a kind of criticism with woman as writer/producer of textual meaning, as against woman as reader. Being concerned with the specificity of women's writings and women's experiences, it focuses on female subjectivity, female language, and female literary career, and attempts to construct a female framework for the analysis of literature. Gynocritics are primarily engaged in identifying distinctly feminine subject matter in the literature written by women, uncovering the history of female literary tradition, depicting that there is a feminine mode of experience and subjectivity in thinking and perceiving the self and the world, and specifying traits of "woman's language", a distinctively feminine style of speech and writing.

Manju Kapur is one of the Indian Writers from India and the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant effect. She is the most talked about and appreciated contemporary Indian English woman novelist. She has written five novels: *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2009), and *Custody* (2011). Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* received a great international acclaim. This novel was published in 1998. *Difficult Daughters* was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best first book (Eurasia) and was a number one best seller in India. In this novel the protagonist is trying to find a place for her in a world where her life is depicted by familiar duties and becomes embroiled in a forbidden affair while the seismic upheavals of the partition surround her.



Courtesy: www.amazon.com

Gynocritical Approach in the Novel *A Married Woman*

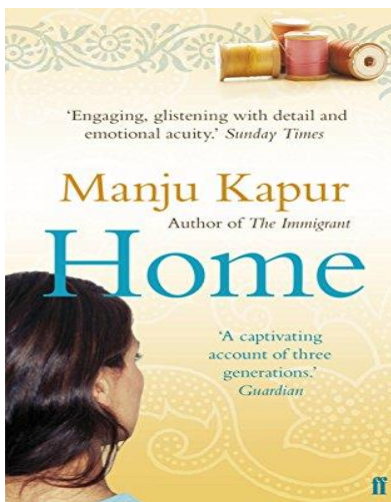
All the female characters of Manju Kapur are seen as women struggling against all odds. The strains of feminism are obvious in her writing. This is overtly seen in the struggle of her woman characters, their vulnerability, struggle for identity, liberating attitude, the female psyche and the female biological world. Her second novel *A Married Woman* published in 2002. Is seductive story of love, set at a time of political and religious upheaval- a struggle which still persists today, years after the 1992 destruction of the Babri Mosque – parallels Astha’s emotional turmoil, told with sympathy and intelligence. *A Married Woman* is the story of an artist whose canvas challenges the constraints of middle-class existence. Manju Kapur depicts the gripping political situation with the same fervor and graphic detail as she describes Astha’s actions and inner turmoil.

“Astha Vadera, a schoolteacher with an M. A. in English, lives a comfortable, conventional Delhi Hindu middle class life, within an arranged marriage with her businessman husband, a self-satisfied materialist who sells South Korean T.V. Sets, and their two children, until she meets Aijaz Khan a secular Muslim involved in a progressive

theatre group” (Rollason, 2009).

Only one thing is sure: beset by Hindus, pleading Muslims and crooked policemen, the mosque, like Astha’s marriage, will stand or fall depending on the courage and clout of those willing to fight the aggressors in the name of liberty and tolerance. The present novel is a feminocentric protest against the phallogocentric patriarchal culture. The male world imposes unlimited controls on women. Kapur however in this novel empowers her protagonist Astha to give a strong resistance to patriarchy by denouncing the prescribed norms of a society. Astha, resorting to a strange way of life, thus protested her subordination under patriarchy. By choosing this uncommon path, she survives and discovers herself. Through that, she is able to attain the psychological freedom and individual needs in her life. Manju Kapur depicts the character of Astha as a new woman who is conscious, introspective, educated and wants to carve a life for her to some extent. On the verge of retirement from the Indian civil service, Astha’s parents every suitor, until she meets Hemant, whose time at University in the States has turned him into a liberal thinker. Or so she hopes. This urge to be treated as an equal being is fully imbibed in as each of her remarks. It appears as if Manju Kapur through the medium of Astha demands the niche which is equal to man in a society.

Gynocritical Approach in the Novel *Home*



Courtesy: www.amazon.com

Home is a multi-generation family saga and was shortlisted for the Hutch Crossword Book Award in 2006. The novel is rather more domestic, the generation conflicts that bothers the sub-continent which provide the backdrop of Kapur's other novels. Manju Kapur has tried to put a lot of issues in this book which are commonly encountered in a joint family and are usually kept under the carpet to protect the family honor and name. A lot of scheming and bantering goes behind the curtains while maintaining the outer shame of a big happy family.

Manju Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individual caged within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunged into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds. The prevailing idea of the homogeneous space of home is contested as it becomes the arena of class, caste, and generational clashes as the old and the new generations struggle to exist within the common house.

In this novel, Manju Kapur takes us through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations. Banwari Lal comes to India after partition and, with the help of his wife's jewellery, carves out a sari business in Karol Bagh, Delhi. Success comes slowly, and in the early years he is forced to marry his daughter, Sunita, to a man of dubious credentials. Even as the family gets richer, Sunita is abused and then, perhaps, murdered by her husband - leaving behind a son, Vicky, to be brought up by the Banwari Lals. The author has tried to bring some of those issues to the fore and due to this *Home* does not remain a simple story of a Karol Baug sari seller but gets a more universal color and makes an invitatory family saga. Kapur presents Nisha, the protagonist, as bold, educated, and balanced and of course, both modern and Indian.

“Lala Banwari Lal dies and Yashpal takes back Nisha to please his mother.

Now there is less interest in school and Sona expects her in the kitchen all

the time. Nisha is horrified to discover that “her mother’s idea of a

daughter was one who helped her everybody ate.” Sona who is always

concerned with making her daughter homely and good wife says, “That Masi of yours as ruined your head. What does a girl need with saying? Cooking will be useful to her entire life” (Shriwastva, 2008)

Manju Kapur’s feminist sensibility has been suppressed to a great extent by patriarchy. Although Nisha undergoes a series of traumas, she finally succeeds to live like a free woman without resorting to any extreme step as in the case of Astha. She asserts her womanhood boldly because she is iconoclastic and modern in her approach to life.

Kapur portrays the picture of Nisha as a ‘new woman’. This is a fast-moving story of an ordinary middle class family’s life in Delhi. Banwarilal, the patriarch of a cloth business, lives in New Delhi neighborhood of Karol Bagh. Banwarilal believes in the old ways and is the firm believer of that man work out of the home, women within. Nisha passes in it and enters in college for getting higher education. She meets a boy and decides to marry him ignoring his cast and creed but fails in doing so and later on she has to wait for a long time in spite of all her physical and mental attainments due to astrological reasons. The fabric of the novel *Home* is constructed with the thread of familial relationship and the problem of marriage. In *The Immigrant* her feminist vision has taken a distinctive turn and she probe into feminine psyche not as a sentimental partaker of feminine mystique but as a rational councilor to probe how the balance in sexual relationship. The novels by Manju Kapur deal mostly with the women’s sensitive nature from early young adulthood through her early middle years.

Nisha in *Home* undergoes sexual assault as a child at the hands of her teenaged cousin Vicky. After the incidence Nisha is sent to her aunt Rupa Masi where she blossoms as good student. By horoscope Nisha is declared as **mangli**. This again is a torture by fate. Nisha is also forced to observe her first, *karva chouth* fast for her future husband even as a ten-year child.

A good example of the misuse of religion to downscale women is Sona’s narration of **Vat Savitri Katha** to Nisha and the other women in the family. Arthi S studies in this context “It highlights how the ideals of womanhood purveyed over and again, in the numerous myths and legends that form the Hindu collective unconscious insidiously enter, capture and mould the minds

of women in this country leaving them cocooned in ignorance and complacent in their secondary status.” Nisha falls in love with Suresh, but her dreams are smothered under the pressure of family. Nisha’s affair with Suresh tarnishes her image. She also loses one offer of marriage on this ground. Another trouble for her is her skin disease eczema. Having all these troubles at back, Nisha moves ahead with studies of her choice.

Home, however, carries the reader along with its tender humour, its sparing but effective use of Delhi middle-class English and its subtle retelling of the clichés of north Indian family life. Towards the end of the novel Nisha excels in establishing herself as a designer. However, she is married to a thirty-six-year-old widower who can hardly respond to her passions. It is in marriage and childbearing that she is forced to find ultimate happiness and fulfillment as the society refuses to give her achievement in profession, recognition, and identity. In depicting the inner subtlety of a woman's mind, Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female psyche.

Conclusion

As a writer of new generation in an atmosphere of the nation’s socio-political flux, Kapur has recorded the truth in her fictive narrative with Zeal to change the Indian make perception. She described the traumas of her female protagonists from which they suffer and perish in for their triumph. Unfolding the psyche, libidos, and desires of her women characters she presents how they struggle to break the age-old strictures of tradition with moral courage to combat life in their predicament. Most of all, Kapur manages to blend the personal with the external. She speaks as some-one who has lived through the unrest of the communal riots, which in some way affected the lives of all Indians. So, women were suffering from economic and socio-cultural disadvantages in the male governed society. The society was patronized by patriarchy. The women were silent and remained only as rubber dolls for others to move as they wanted. They had been deprived of their basic rights, their aspirations to their individuality and self-reliance. Manju Kapur is quite happy to be dubbed a ‘chronicler of Indian families,’ but do feel free to choose any label that will float your boat.

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