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Feminism in India and Manju Kapur's Fiction

Sushila Chaudhary, M.A.
Usha Sharma, M.A.



Manju Kapur

Defining Feminism

Feminism is the belief that all people should be treated equally in legal, economic and social arenas- regardless of gender, religion, sexual orientation, ethnicity and other similar pre-dominant identifying traits. Feminism includes the idea that a person's gender does not define who they are or their worth; that being a woman (or a man) should not put a person at an overall- and especially institutionalized- disadvantage.

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Feminism as a social movement sought to redress the imbalance in society by providing women with same rights and opportunities as men, in order to be able to take their rightful place in the world. After the feminist re-awakening in the 1970's feminist began to realize that equal rights alone cannot free women from sexual and social subordination. Intellectual starvation, economic expression, commercial exploitation, domestic domination, physical abuse, sexual harassment and lack of personal freedom continued to affect the lives of women in spite of laws to the contrary. Hence, Western feminist writers and critics were forced to re-analyze and re-access the socio-cultural setup looking for clues to explain the mechanism of patriarchy that contrived to keep women eternally subjugated.

The Focus of This Paper

The paper "Feminism in India and the Fiction of Manju Kapur" involves a basic definition of feminism and what it means in the Indian context. It specifies the direction in which feminism in Indian English fiction has evolved and the kind of feminism Kapur adopts to scrutinize the problems besetting the Indian woman. It discusses why Western theories on feminism cannot be blindly applied to analyze feminist issues in India and how important it is for us to evolve our understanding of feminism to tackle problems unique to the Indian situation.

The Female Characters of Manju Kapur

The female characters created by Kapur are characterized by the adoption of a critical and reflexive attitude that question their position and as a consequence attempt to redefine cultural and social stereotypes and values in order to create a space of their own, which brings a redefinition of their identity as well as a controversy and confrontation to the social context and a prevalent and powerful patriarchal ideology.

Kapur highlights the factors which curbs the freedom of the female to live, grow and actualize herself the way men do. The manner in which religion, tradition and myth are misused to condition women into an acceptance of their secondary status causing them to lead claustrophobic and circumscribed lives. The female protagonist resist and overcome the ideological suppression and reshape ideals and existing value systems to re-invent themselves in a meaningful way. In this sense, her novels are a significant contribution towards the realm of Indian English fiction and feminist psycho analysis in India.

Origin of the Term

The term 'feminism' has its origin from the Latin 'femina' meaning 'woman' and thereby refers to the advocacy of women's rights, status and power at par with men on the grounds of 'equality of sexes'. The term became popular from the early twentieth century struggles for securing women's suffrage in the Western countries and the later well-

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organized socio-political movement for women's emancipation from patriarchal oppression. The political scope of feminism has been broadened by the impact of Marxist ideology that made feminist challenge sexism along with capitalism, for both encouraged the patriarchal setup.

Feminism, besides being a political crusade, attempts to study and solve the various gender-based problems. It questions the pre-conceived assumptions about the roles that men and women should have in life. In literary text, feminism brings to scrutiny the portrayals of gender roles, which tend to impose social norms, customs, conventions, laws and expectations on the grounds of gender discrimination. It throws a challenge on the age-long tradition of gender differentiation and attempts to explore and find a new social order. Feminism, with its thrust on gender and sexuality, has played a vital role in studying the construction of masculine and feminine identities and the construction of heterogeneous sexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality and the erotic sensuality.

Feminism in India

Feminism in India has been a long, unsettled debate which is still persistently prevalent in various forms. Indian feminist researchers have not yet been able to define "Indian Feminism". As Feminism is a Western notion, an import, feminists "naturally" are to be condemned.

For most Indians, the term "feminism" means nothing, if anything; the term has acquired many negative connotations in recent years. There is a general skepticism about its usefulness. "Patriarchal religious traditions and overt or covert conservative super structures have kept it from becoming widely apprehended phenomena" (Nabar, 7).

A Variety of Responses

Among the urban literate, the awareness of feminism is largely confined to what is perceived of as the moral corruption of women abroad, a result of their outlandish freedom to think and say, and choose what they want out of life.

The conservative structures and Indian panorama of seeing things have not so far allowed it to become a widely apprehended phenomenon.

For most Indian males feminism has contained to be an "obnoxious" word, which they feel have tremendous negative effects on the minds of Indian females. Since the Indian female has always been a considerably more conditioned product; totally custom-made and usually coerced into a mindless acceptance of male diktat, the possibility of a reasoned, open-minded approach to the concept of feminism has been at its best sporadic.

Indian Patriarchy

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In India patriarchy is just one of the hierarchies which keep females down, oppressed by the traditional system. Arranged marriages are always preferred and love marriages are viewed as a social sin and are regarded with shame. Many Indians contend that arranged marriages are more successful than marriages in the West, where staggering divorce rates are the rule. Unwed mothers, separated, single or unfaithful women are considered outcasts. Living out of wedlock with a partner is still virtually unheard of. An unmarried daughter -- seen as a spinster even in her late twenties -- brings shame upon her parents, and is a burden. But once married, she is considered the property of her in-laws. The marriage of the bride and groom requires the bride's father to pay dowries to the bridegroom. In India, as there is the custom and tradition of joint family, a bride has to face her tyrannical in-laws, and traditional Hindu society still rejects divorcees.

Curtailed Rights

In financial matters, although women are permitted to work outside the home, their rights on any household matters have always been denied. A woman has to take charge of the kitchen, even if she is a wage-earning member of the household and holds a job outside of the home. Legally, although the court recognizes that sons and daughters have equal rights regarding patriarchal property, those rights are never exercised; today as in generations past, ownership changes hands from father to husband to son and the rights of a daughter or a daughter-in-law are denied.

To Cultivate Support for Female Cause

Since the situation of women in India is quite miserable and a great deal needs to be done on their behalf, it is important that Indian feminists understand the Indian context thoroughly. The need of this hour is to rise above the limitations and to deconstruct patriarchal structures through individual questionings. Only through this process of reinterpretation and interrogation new images will be created and new histories written.

In order to gain massive support for the “women’s cause”, Indian feminists need to phrase and frame their criticisms, their arguments and their demands keeping in mind the sensitive issues and sentiments related to the Indian society. Thus our priorities should be to “uplift” the women’s issues and maintain a balance within the socio-economic and political scenario of India. To end discrimination and move forward with visions of a better life where both men and women will live as liberated human beings.

Indian Women Authors

In the past, the work by the Indian women authors has always been undervalued because of some patriarchal assumptions. The Indian women novelists, particularly of the 1980’s onward have gained worldwide recognition. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women toward conflicted female

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characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. In contrast to earlier novels, female characters from the 1980s onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood.

Modern women writers have articulated woman's aspirations, her professional endeavours, her newly formed relationship with man and the changed perceptions of sexuality in their novels. Authors such as Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Namita Gokhle, Gita Hariharan, Shobha De and even the diasporic writers like Bharti Mukherjee, Shona Ramaya and others have presented various modes of resistance to patriarchal norms.

Manju Kapur and Her Works

Manju Kapur is a famous Indian English novelist whose writings reflect man– woman relationship, human desire, longing, body, gender discrimination, marginalization, rebellion and protest. Implicit in it is Kapur's critique of the widely contested site of socio-cultural life in modern, urban, postcolonial India.

Manju Kapur's perceptions of women's liberation and autonomy are deeply entrenched in the Indian women's situatedness within the socio-cultural and economic spaces and paradigms of the country. The protagonists in Manju Kapur's novels are caught in the continuous dichotomy between the personal needs and the institutional and social obligations and responsibilities. They challenge the male domination and patriarchal mechanisms of surveillance and control over women's body.

Till date she has written five novels i.e. *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008) and *The Custody* (2011). Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* has won the Commonwealth Prize for first novels (Eurasia section) and was a number one bestseller in India. *The Immigrant* has been long listed for the DSC Prize for South-Asian literature

Difficult Daughters



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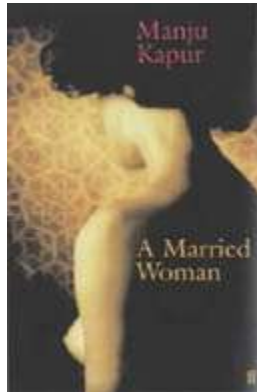
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Manju Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughters* is a tale of protagonist's struggle for career and identity against the dominant ideology of domesticity. Set around the turbulent years of World War II and the partition of India, she realistically depicts women of three generations focusing on Virmati, the difficult daughter of the second generation. The novel is the story of a woman torn between family duty, the desire for education and illicit love. The search for control over one's destiny is the key theme. While India fights for freedom from the British Raj, Virmati fights for the freedom to live life on her terms. The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as women caught between the passion of the flesh and a yearning to be part of political and intellectual movements.

A Married Woman



A Married Woman explores Astha's longing for a purpose in her life other than being a wife and mother against a vividly realized backdrop of Indian sectarian politics. It presents an interesting collage of the problems, insecurities and unrest faced by middle class woman and nation both at the verge of transition. The author presents a lesbian relationship between Astha and Pipeelika but in the end regularity norms are set in play to confine women's sexuality within the framework of heteronormativity- i.e. relationship that are monogamous, within marriage and often with opposite sex.

Home



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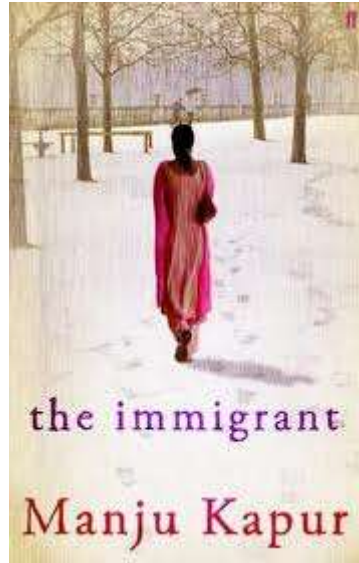
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The novel *Home* exposes the still prevalent parochial attitudes towards the upbringing of the girl child in India. She traces the painful voyage of the heroine Nisha from childhood into adulthood in the form of buildingsroman. *Home* details Nisha's search for a home i.e. search for a place of shelter and security. Unfortunately to women in India, home is not a place of comfort and relaxation and it does not ensure them any emotional security, nonetheless, it sometimes does not provide them any physical security. The novel unravels the story of an ordinary middle class joint family's life in Delhi.

The Immigrant



In the novel *The Immigrant* Kapur explores the special challenges facing immigrant wives, the way a young woman's life already pressured in professional and reproductive terms becomes an even more impossible balancing act inside a foreign culture. Nina finds she is not only ill-prepared for the cultural gulf she encounters but also the gaping distances (intellectual, emotional and physical) in her barren relationship. Sexual inadequacy turns into security and then infidelity. Kapur explores the adjustments and frustrations of a modern marriage.

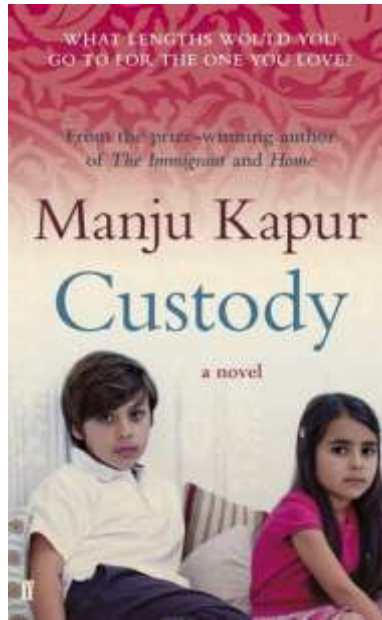
Custody

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Manju Kapur's fifth novel *Custody* is not just a social commentary, but a novel that is true to the universal angst of modern marriage, with its burden of individualism. It is set in the thriving, upper middle class colonies of Delhi in the mid-nineties, against the backdrop of the initial surge of foreign investment in India. Shagun is a modern woman who fulfills her individual dreams instead of familial fulfillment. Shagun is an ambitious woman who is over-ridden by individualism and her own well-being.

The novel charts the life of a changing woman in a time of increased globalization. It chronicles the various intricacies around the dissolution of marriage and a family in modern India. The novel shows that a childless marriage is despised. The *blame* is attributed to the female. Female infertility is recognised as ground of divorce.

Highlighting Endemic Issues

Kapur highlights those issues of feminism that are endemic to the situation in India in order to help us understand how difficult it is for women here to arrive at an evolved state of mind being trapped within the matrix of religion and tradition . Her novels manifest women's struggle for emancipation from economic, political and social bondages. She has tried to evolve her own stream of emergence of new women grounded in reality. Kapur's novels significantly add to the growing tradition of Indian women's literature in English.

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