

A Reading on the Portrayal of the Female Tragic Fate in Manju Kapur's Selected Fiction

Anusha Mathew, M.A., Ph.D. Research Scholar
Dr. Narasingaram Jayashree, Ph.D.

Abstract

Manju Kapur in her works, *Difficult Daughters*, *Home*, *A Married Woman* and *Immigrant* vividly portrays how gender operates within the framework of traditional family disturbing it to its roots. A detailed reading of Kapur's novels make us aware that through the story of her female protagonists, she projects the view, when an Indian woman, in spite of her education, status and intelligence, tries to marry according to her own choice, is likely to spoil her prospects in both the worlds- the one that she revolts against and the other she embraces. The daring step is severely condemned and rejected. Such marriage is quite likely to prove disastrous dragging the couple to melancholy, depression and despair. The first novel *Difficult Daughters*, pictures the event during the turbulent years of Indian freedom movement and the partition of the country. It presents the life of Virmati through various ups and downs, with her dreams, desires, longings and aspirations but ultimately ending with a lot of compromises in her life. *A Married Woman*, traces the life of Astha from her childhood to her forties through various desires and despairs, complements and rejections, and recognitions and frustrations. Nisha in *Home* quite successfully represent the victimization of female in many joint families behind the veneer of relations. *Immigrant* focuses on Nina who struggles to break the shackles of the patriarchy and is in a search for the meaning of her life opposing the dogmas of cultural and social critical thinking.

Key words: Identity, patriarchy, feminism, lesbian.

Feminism and Creative Writing in India

Feminism as a movement attained a tremendous momentum in the latter half of the twentieth century and women throughout the world have seriously taken their efforts to

deconstruct the social creations of gender in all areas of life. Women are deeply aware of their own rights and claims and they feel that there is no excuse for keeping women down anymore, anywhere. They reject the male construct of sexual difference as political difference and man's freedom and women's subjection as an accepted natural phenomenon. As an opposition to their widely accepted 'object' roles, they try to lift themselves to the role and status of 'subject'. They discard male defined feminine type and demand greater autonomy in their lives.

The feminist movements, resulted in a drastic change to accommodate women in all areas of life including politics, commerce, science, administration, etc., and it is quite natural that the resonance of this universal phenomenon of feminism becomes audible in all branches of literature. Many women writers have come forward to project the real portraits of womanhood and some of them like Simone de Beauvoir, Betty Friedan and Kate Millet try to theorize female experiences.

Initially, the area of literature had been monopolized by male writers. Very few women writers had the courage and caliber to use their pen for creative writing even under pseudonyms. In the aspects of male supremacy, reproduction was considered the most important and the greatest productive activity of women. Due to its impact, women faced a lot of hurdles to prove their potential and creativity. They faced their exclusion from the literary canon due to their nonproductive status in the world of writing.

Even though a lot of works had been produced on women's lives by both men and women, it failed to project the genuine realities of womanhood. They carried out the image of 'the true and ideal' womanhood widely accepted and propagated by patriarchy through centuries. It's substantiated in Sharma's words, "psychologists affirm that female identity varies in many ways from the male identity. Therefore, women alone can convey their experience honestly and authentically" (21). Women's writings and literature underwent great changes by the end of the nineteenth century and the number of women writers increased due to an awakening of the feminist consciousness. By the end of the twentieth century, feminism attained importance and its impart was very visible in all realms of literature. Consequently, for the first time women's true feelings, real reflexes and deeper experiences became the subject matter of different literary

genres. In woman's writing, the writers simultaneously takes the role of 'self' and 'other' or in other words the writer herself is the subject and the object.

Manju Kapur's Works

Among the recognized Indian women novelists, Manju Kapur is noted for her maiden venture, *Difficult Daughter's* (1998) that bagged her Common Wealth writer's Prize for The First Book. It is then followed by three full length novels viz., *A Married Woman* (2003), *Home* (2006) and *Immigrant* (2008). Kapur pictures her women with their yearning struggle to establish their identity. Her protagonists from Virmati to Nina have chosen their independent course of life in a male dominated world. In her fiction, every shade of feminism from passive and submissive to rebel feminism has been presented. This particular paper tries to analyse the tragic plights and incidents that passes through the life of protagonists making her modified to face life all alone.

Difficult Daughters

The initial work of Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* is written against the historical background of the Indian Freedom Movement. The protagonist Virmati does not act as a revolutionary woman who fights for her right to educate herself but as one who fearlessly manages her own life in the moments of crisis as mentioned by the pioneer feminist, Simone de Beauvoir, the two prerequisites for women's freedom are "economic independence and liberation from orthodox traditions of society" (126). The struggle for freedom from British the quest for identity and the sense of oppression has become a shared experience both for the nation and for women in India.

Kapur in a realistic manner depicts women from three generations, particularly focusing on Viramti, the Difficult Daughters of the second generation. The very opening lines of the novel gives a shock to the readers, "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother" (1). The mysterious comment is made by Ida, Virmati's only daughter, a childless divorce. She failed to establish an understanding with her mother, Virmati during her lifetime but after her death, this awareness pricks her with guilt. She begins to travel back to her mother's life fixing together the fragments of memories in search of a woman she could know and understand. During her lifetime, Ida could know only a bit about her mother's life and she wishes to fill the gap. In

accordance with Ida's visit to different places and meetings with her mother's relatives and acquaintances, the narration shuttles between the present and the past.

The search for identity for a woman is the first step towards her becoming human. Amidst her burdened childhood and thirst for learning, Virmati is actually searching for her role and tries to find her space in her own life and society.

Virmati is the first born of eleven children, the daughter of Kasturi and Suraj Prakash. She being the eldest is burdened with family duties because of her mother's incessant pregnancies. Due to her busy routine of house work and caring for her siblings, she cannot do justice to her studies. After her matriculation, she is trained to stitching, embroidery and other domestic chores that are unavoidable pre-requisite of an Indian marriageable girl in a traditional family. According to her mother Virmati's education is practically over and now she should be married off.

Meanwhile her cousin Shakuntala, who wears one gold bangle in only one hand and a male wrist watch on the other, talks freely of her free social intercourse even with male, arranges seminars and reads papers, guides students and participates in Gandhian freedom movement, become a source of inspiration to her. Virmati also wants to be independent so as to enable herself to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond husband and children.

When she completes her F.A and succeeds in seeking admission to A.S college, the quest for knowledge was burning in her. There she becomes the target of the attraction of the professor who taught her English Literature. Most of the time in the class, his eyes remain fixed at Viru. He appreciates her intelligence and capability to understand the things in their right perspective. Their mutual attraction, reciprocative feeling develop into romantic love. Professor's wife is very devoted to him and caters to all his needs but not a perfect intellectual match. He feels an emptiness in his mind and it led to a lot of space for another woman. Being a tenant of Virmati's uncle, it gives them ample chance to meet and appreciate each other.

Meanwhile Virmati rejects the marriage proposal arranged by the family and attempts to commit suicide in the canal, being perplexed in making decision over her life. Through all these acts, she becomes the bringer of disgrace to the family. The relationship between Harish, the

professor and Virmati deepens that end up with the pregnancy of Virmati. It becomes a shattering blow to her and the most ironical is that he is not with her at the crucial moments of the termination of her pregnancy.

Another episode opens in her life when she joins as the principal of Pritabha Kanya Vidyalaya in Himachal Pradesh. At this particular stage of her life, similar to the spinster lecturer Bimala in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day*, Virmati too is forced to exercise her responsibilities entirely by herself. But the professor's night visits and stays with her spoils her career and she is compelled to resign. He has always been evading the question of marriage. Virmati is forced by the situation to go to Shantiniketan and forget Harish for the rest of her life. But she meets with the one of his friends at Delhi who comes to know about everything and compels the professor to marry her. Thus she becomes his second wife.

In her married life with the professor, she has to face the hostile gestures and gibes of all the family members. Even Harish turns a deaf ear towards her complaints and diverts her attention by complementing her as his learned companion. Harish's supremacy and dominating attitude to Virmati is proved when he decides to send her to Lahore to do M.A according to Virmati is dull, abstract and meaningless. "She wished Harish had thought another subject suitable for her. She also wished it was not such an uphill task, being worthy of him" (237). But she succumbs to the situation to make him happy. "A woman's happiness lies in giving her husband happiness" (210).

When on the one hand, Virmati tries to cross the patriarchal threshold, she is caught into another. It might have lead her daughter Ida to crack the cryptic comment in the beginning. The novel covers three generations of daughters starting from Virmati's mother, Kasturi, Virmati and ending with Ida. All these female characters never share a completely happy relationship with their respective mothers, tries to remain alienated and resolve their own tragic fates. As Elleke Boehmer observes: "By thus probing the daughter-family relations, Virmati's story refracts the divisions between mothers and daughters as correlates for political partition in the country at large" (57).

A Married Woman

A Married Woman is the second novel of Kapur that has a setting in Delhi against the backdrop of communal unrest centered on the controversial Ram Janam Bhoomi-Babri Masjid. The story of the novel moves around the life of Astha, the protagonist right from her childhood to her forties through various desires and despairs, complements and rejections, and recognitions and frustrations. The novel also deals with the extra-marital affairs of the protagonist. Initially, Astha, who lives with middle class values, feels the marital bliss of her blessed family life. Slowly she starts to feel that something is lacking in her life. The feel of alienation and the need to love, to be loved and accepted and understood, rushes into her heart. She finds the alternatives but it is also hollow from within and fails to comfort her ultimately compelling her to be back to her family.

Astha is born into a traditional middle class family. Her mother instill in her tradition, religious piety through proper rituals. Apart from Astha's mother, her father is also concerned with her education and wants to inculcate in her good habits, tastes and manners. During her teenage, she develops a liking for Bunty, an Army cadet at NDA. But the relation comes to an end by her mother's interference.

During her final years of graduation, she indulges in a relationship with Rohan. Their relation is mixed with the passion of youth and like the hungry haste of the river, she is ready to throw all conventions to gratify her body. "All she wants was for him to start so that the world could fall away and she be lost. This is love, she told herself no wonder they talk much about it." (24). But the relationship with Rohan also comes to an abrupt end with his departure to oxford.

As the wish of Astha's father, before he gets retired, she gets married to an MBA holder serving as an Assistant Manager in a bank in Delhi. The beginning of their married life is pervaded with bounds of happiness. Hemanth calls her "my baby" and expresses the usual Indian traditional husband's attitudes of patronizing, caring and considerate. As the time moves Astha's life slips from the palace of illusion to the ground of realism. After the birth of the first child, Hemanth altogether changes from an all American father into an all Indian one. Hemanth becomes hectic and with the patriarchal tone wants for a baby boy. Fortunately the second child is a boy.

Astha also becomes busy with her two kids and her school job that she does not like very much in the beginning. She found this soothing, and later scolded herself for being so demanding. Hemant was building their future, she had to adjust and suppress her frustrations and tried to focus on her duties as a mother, wife and daughter-in-law. She perfectly fits into all roles. Still, she feels a vacuum among these. Her children, husband, parents in law and increasingly passionless marital sex takes up most of her life. She finds herself trapped in a suffocating, traditional society.

Astha has everything that a woman could ask for—a dutiful husband children and a nice surrounding in the heart of India’s capital, Delhi. But her thirst is to assert her identity and search for her own space. Astha prefers to carry on with her school job for there she gets appreciations and valued for one tenth of her work she does at home. “--- between her marriage and the birth of her children, she too had changed from being a woman who only wanted love, to a woman who valued independence. Besides, there was the pleasure of interacting with minds instead of needs” (71-72).

Astha wishes to spend more time with her children to compensate her husband’s lack of time. But children are already involved with their grandparents. Astha feels herself quite lonely, isolate and alienated at home. Her feel of alienation and meaninglessness of life intensifies when her mother hands over the money to Hemant to be safely invested for his children. To overcome all these, Astha starts to give more time to her school, poetry and painting. She soothes herself through voicing her painful feelings through her art. About the family life of Astha, Christopher Rollason points out: “Astha Vadera, a school teacher 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”(41).

Astha’s life takes a new turning when she gets acquainted with Aijaz, a lecturer in history and more a theatre personality who organizes street plays to strengthen communal harmony in the country. While interacting with him, Astha feels that he is the only one who can really understand, appreciate and value her. She stares at him when he was on stage. But it do not

prolong for long, and he becomes a prey of the communal violence. Being inspired by Aijaz, Astha attends meeting and gatherings against the issues of Bhabri Masjid. There she comes to know Pipeelika, the wife of dead Aijaz.

Pipeelika is another modern woman who moves against tradition. She works in an NGO. She also has get attracted towards Aijaz by his personality. Their mutual likeness and proximity strengthens their passion for each other and despite all opposition from both the families they get married. The bond between Pipeelika and Astha strengthens and along with her, she also joins the strikes and dharnas organized by Sampradayakta Mukti Manch. She becomes more politically active. Now Astha starts to find her position or role in the society. She finds a world or her own space beyond family and husband. She receives recognitions and earns money through an exhibition of her paintings organized by the Manch.

Meanwhile she continues to get deep hurts and injuries in mind through the behaviours of Hemanth. His domineering attitude, arrogant superior wisdom and lack of interest in her achievement completely freeze in her the channels of bliss of married life. To get a solace from the mental agony and discomfort, Astha finds shelter in Pipee's relationship. Similarity of the situations and the like mindedness bring Astha and Pipee closer. They both understand each other, feel for each other and develop even a lesbian relationship. Both receive the required amount of consideration and sympathy from each other. Kapur stands as the first Indian feminist writer who presents her protagonist resolve into a lesbian relationship. In an interview with Ira Pandey, Kapur opens up about the introduction of this plot. "This relationship suggested itself to me as an interesting means of making Astha mature and change. An affair with a man would have been the classic cliché and so I ruled it out and tried out a same sex affair, I don't know how successful. I have been nor is this based on any real life relationship. It is as I said a writers experiment with a lot."

Pipee even tries to brainwash Astha by stating that true love cannot be felt at bodily level only but it should ensure union of souls, emotions and ideologies. Because the presence of Pipee strengthens Astha, she somehow or the other arranges various instances to be with Pipee. In spite of all oppositions, she leaves her children and family and goes on the Ekta Yatra from Kashmir to Kanyakumari for the only reason to be with Pipee. The Yatra makes them closer and Astha

comes to know more about the past life of Pipee. Pipee's demanding passion and the revelation of her past lesbian relationship with Smeera and Neeraj, feels her as trapped in a dilemma whether to stay in the protected domain of traditional family or should move out to find her space for her freedom and unquenchable love. She stands before tradition versus no tradition, permanent versus temporary, moral versus amoral, usual sex to unusual sex, factual history versus imaginary history and religion versus inhumanism. "I love you, you know how much you mean to me, I try and prove it every moment we have together, but I can't abandon my family, I can't. May be I should not have looked for happiness, but I couldn't help myself. I suppose you think I should not be in a relationship, but I had not foreseen" (242).

Home

Kapur's third novel *Home* is set in the busy Karol Bagh area of Delhi. It is the story of a middle class joint family running their cloth business. The protagonist Nisha is the granddaughter of Banwari Lal, the successful cloth merchant. Right from the time of her birth, she is cared a lot because her birth as a 'mangli'. In the Indian tradition, a mangali is considered inauspicious and very difficult to marry off. From childhood itself, she is forced to take care of her fair complexion which is considered as an essential pre-requisite of a prospective bride in the traditional Indian mind set. The seeds of discrimination are sowed into her innocent mind right from beginning.

Meanwhile, Vicky, the grandson of Banwari Lal who has been brought up by this family after his mother's death, sexually abuses the innocent child Nisha. Completely neglected and alienated right from the beginning, Vicky continues to be a rogue in the family. Initially, his evil influence is not noticed by anyone. More than two times he forces the infant Nisha to grab his black erect organ with her delicate hand. Nisha is threatened and does not reveal this secret to anyone. The child's psyche is brutally bruised. She loses her appetite and becomes gloomy and frightened. The event's influence is to that extent that she starts to scream during her sleep. Everyone comes to know that something had made her frighten but no one suspects Vicky's role in it and she is sent to Rupa, her aunt's house for a change. Rupa and her husband understand that Vicky is responsible for Nisha's miserable condition, but they could do nothing but only

sympathize. Aunt's love and uncle's care improves her mental state and even influences her to shape her individuality.

After the death of Banwari Lal, Nisha is brought back to share the family's responsibilities to look after the old grandmother. Along with rendering her service to the family, she joins Durga Bai College. There she meets an ambitious girl, Prabitha who wants to create her own identity and an independent existence in the economic field. Nisha and Prabitha become best friends. She also gets indulge in a relationship with Suresh. In her quest to establish her own and separate identity, she becomes more adventurous in her clothing, alternating her salwar Kamees with jeans and T-shirts. In her appearance and temperament, she becomes a forward girl. But her first love Suresh turns out to be weak and their plans to get married fails under family pressure. She succumbs to accept a groom of the family member's choice. But her first proposal fails as they come to know about the relation with Suresh and the second one fails because the boy turns out to be a eunuch. By these misfortunes in her life, she is considered as an outcaste and untouchable in the family especially by her sisters-in-law.

At this point, she met with a teacher who shows her an embroidered suit that her sister made at home. Nisha being mentally isolated at home urges to establish her own identity. With the help of the father, she establishes a business of readymade ladies suits. Oppositions storm in the family before accepting a woman stepping into the field of business. Because of Nisha's strong decisions, her father helps her to start a business in the rented basement of their flat. She successfully climbs the initial steps of business and establish herself in the field. Meanwhile she gets another proposal from a widower. She consents to get married when she receives the permission to carry on with her prestigious carrier. At this point of her life, she is not ready to compromise her business with her personal life. She needs to retain her individuality, freedom and confidence. For Nisha, the marriage is only a committal in her life.

Even though it is her first marriage, she fails to feel the real excitement involved in a married life. Similar to a modern woman trying to extend her horizon beyond the boundaries of traditional family setup, Nisha also wishes for the support from her husband. But Aravind fails to quench her thirst. She says: "If you are never going to talk or share things with me, why don't

you take me back to my mother's house? You have done your duty, married and made me pregnant. When the baby is born you can collect it." (330)

A traditional Indian woman's life is complete only when the marriage is followed by motherhood. After ten months of her marriage, Nisha delivers twins-one girl and one boy. Amidst her responsibilities to her family in her own name, she gets engaged in the roles of daughter-in-law, wife and mother that consequently pulls her into the pool of happiness and satisfaction. Through Nisha's story of tragic affair, her own struggle for empowerment, her frustration and finally getting moulded into the traditional mode of life, the novelist has shown that it is too much for a delicate girl to go beyond the values of a family life.

The Immigrant, the fourth novel of Kapur shows a marked departure from her three preceding works of fictions by shifting the locale mostly to Canada. It focuses more on the problems of the immigrants in adjusting to the radically different lifestyle in Canada than exploring the complexities of Indian life. The major thread of the story moves around the thirty year unmarried English professor, Nina and a recently immigrated dentist, Ananda.

The novel opens with the description of Nina's life with her widowed mother in a shabby flat at Jangpura in New Delhi. She is working as a lecturer at Miranda House where she has studied. She feels frustrated with the incomplete life she is leading. Like all Indian mothers, Nina's mother also gets worried to marry her off to a respectable boy and feels jubilant to get Ananda as her son-in-law. Alka, Ananda's sister, also thinks Nina as the right choice for her NRI-dentist brother.

The marriage of Nina and Ananda takes place and Nina returns to college as the term begins and Ananda leaves to Canada. After six months, Nina leaves to Canada. Nina also passes through the same uncertainty that Ananda felt when he landed in the new immigrant country, Canada. She senses an alienation, isolation and complete uncertainty about her identity. Her processes of adjustment remains confined to the superficial level of dress and food. The thing that shocks her more is her gradual discovery of her physical and mental distance from Ananda who loses interest in sexual consummation because of his sexual problems. Nina spends sleepless nights thinking of her uncertain future. She misses her mother and her friends at Miranda House. The people she meets, particularly Ananda's uncle, aunt and their children,

increases the feel of her alienation as they lack the warmth that she wishes for. A feeling of estrangement and distance fills her mind making her aware of the wide gap between her life at home and abroad. Nina feels imprisoned by the stress and tries to make Ananda aware that there are many other things besides sex in marriage and wishes to develop an intimate relationship with him that she fails to.

Ananda on the other side, instead of strengthening his marital bond, he shows interest in his regular visit to his mistress and later to girls in the bars. Nina's life also changes when she starts her two year library science course that would make her easy to get a job in Canada. She slips into a sexual relationship with her classmate Anton from New York. She even gets raped by him during a fieldtrip to New York. This event drives a severe blow to her mind and reinforces her estrangement and frustration. It follows the heart breaking news of her mother's death. During her visit to India to observe rituals she comes to the realization that her bond with her own country to which she clings so long is now permanently broken. She is forced to make her dependent on Ananda, believing him when he says, "I missed you" (327).

This reliability fades at the moment when Nina discovers a wavy blond hair next to her pillow while making up the bed in the morning after her return on the preceding night. "with it still in her hand she sat on the bed. The hair explained much-the distance, the silence, the ticket for two months in India, his strange indifference interspersed with tenderness, the shifty look that skittered about her" (324).

In her book, Betty Friedan talks of a need for a "life plan", "open to change, as new possibilities open in society and in one-self" (330). Nina decides to move from Halifax when she gets an interview at the University of Brunswick as she gains confidence in getting a job. She reveals her plan to Ananda to which he reacts: "he had anticipated the answer, but not the pain" (329).

At the end, we meet a strong will power Nina who remarks: "when something failed it was a signal to move on. For an immigrant there was no going back...she too was heading towards fresh territories..." (333-334). The novel ends with a positive note where Kapur shatters the traditional concept of an Indian girl and builds a strong lady who reinvents herself.

Caught Up between the Concept of Tradition and Modernity

All female protagonist that we went through, Virmati, Astha, Nisha and Nina are all caught up between the concept of tradition and modernity in their middle class status. In their own social background, they appear educated, modern, intelligent, sophisticated, bold and assertive. They all moves out of the patriarchy created traditional boundaries of the family and even society. They crave for their own space in the society. It leads them to transcend the widely accepted social norms. All these plunges make their life into misery and shoot up their tragic plight. The work of Manju Kapur does not seem to profess or propagate a feminist outlook but can sense an undercurrent feminine point of view, that gives a serious touch to the story. Vandita Mishra rightly argues, “Kapur never permits the female protagonists any assertion of power of freedom. Because even they breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones.” Virmati’s flight from one mode of life and thrusting into another of premarital sex, abortion and marriage with a married man is certainly tragic. Similarly, Asthas’s efforts to seek fulfillment through lesbian relations, Nisha’s dreams of romantic love and marriage and consequent frustrations and Nina’s fate to search for her own existence in an immigrant country leaving behind her husband are all tragic flights of the Kapur’s female protagonists. Most of the protagonists except Nina finally willingly or unwillingly returns to the concept of traditional mode of life seeking their role where they are assigned to.

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Anusha Mathew, M.A.
 Ph.D. Research Scholar
 Sree Narayana Guru College
 K G Chavadi
 Coimbatore-641105
 Tamilnadu
 India
rosemathew001@yahoo.co.in

Dr. Narasingaram Jayashree, Ph.D.
 Assistant Professor
 PSGR Krishnamal College
 Coimbatore-641004
 Tamilnadu
 India
jayashreegayathri@gmail.com