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Re-Exploring Man-Woman Relationship: A Critical Study of The Novels of Manju Kapur

Dr. C. N Baby Maheswari
Associate Professor, Department of English
College of Arts, Hafer Al Batin University
Qaryat Al Olaya
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Rajeswari Sunder Rajan in her seminal text, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, culture and post-colonialism* contends feminist theory is by no means a single or homogeneous body of speculation. On the contrary it is a strident critique of the patriarchal modes of thinking and its political approach to literature. One of the major contributions of the feminist scholars has been the questioning of the absence of female authorial representation in the literary canon. With the upsurge of the feminist movement in the West, the women began to resist the oppressive gender arrangements in which they had an entity but no being. Opposed to which in India the image of Sita and Savitri proliferated in literature for a considerable span of time. The Indian fiction valorized the characters who were either dutiful daughters or self-negating mothers thus it was not easy for Indian women to revolt against the paradoxes of their lives. Since the writing tradition had been patriarchal in nature, for a woman to indulge in creative writing was considered as a deviation from the conventional roles assigned to her. The literary creations by Indian women writers were dismissed as sensational or plagiarized. Therefore, they had to conform to conventional themes like love, faith, motherhood etc. However, the twentieth century India saw a drastic rise in the number of women writers who grew intolerant of the patriarchal subjugation. There came a revolutionary transformation in the representation of women characters and writing style of women writers. They abandoned the stereotypical representation of women characters as mute spectators or tools for satisfaction of men. The women writers sensitively began to project the desires, expectations, refusals and longings peculiar to women. Thus women writing about women not only presented an authentic picture of the predicament of women but also became a political act. One of the major drawbacks of the feminisms before the post - colonial era was that it universalized the experiences of women, overlooking the social and political impact of colonialism. It also failed to take into account the social and cultural ideologies that shaped the Second and Third world countries. With Indian women writers writing in English this issue seem to have resolved.

The works of Manju Kapur does not simply voice the restrictions imposed upon a woman. She deals with a wide range of issues like identity crisis, personal fulfilment, inter and intrapersonal relationships. Manju Kapur is a critically acclaimed Indian novelist who has five novels to her credit, *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody*. She grapples with the intermingling of traditional and modern ethos. All women novelists base their fiction around the experiences that they have had in their personal lives and thus consciously or unconsciously dwell in the realm of feminist assertions of one or the other kind. The writings of Kapur constitute a discourse that does not simply aim at subverting the patriarchal notions governing a women's life but she also provides a deep insight into man-woman relationship. She offers a close view on the man-woman relationship enmeshed in forced arranged marriages, love affairs that are not accepted by the society (ranging from

extra marital affairs to homosexual relationships), infidelity, sexual dysfunction, adoption, divorce etc. The women protagonist or ‘female heroes’ of Kapur’s novels pass through these complicated relationships and evolve into independent and autonomous entities. Thus, the gender relation in a patriarchal society through man-woman relationship is one of the central thrusts in the novels of Manju Kapur. Kapur in an interview opined:

Well, I am very aware of feminist thinking. I have been deeply influenced by it, and I would call myself a feminist as well. I believe it is impossible to live in the world today as a thinking person and not be one, and this applies to both men and women. I don’t set out with a conscious feminist agenda, but in describing the relationships between men and women a feminist perspective is often inevitable- and this applies to books written well before the term was invented. i

Since the dawn of civilization man-woman relationship has played a pivotal role in the survival and perpetuation of the human race. In literature, which is often described as a reflection of the society man woman relationship has been delineated either as a chaste companionship between two individuals or as a gross requirement for sexual satisfaction. Traditionally the baggage of honour, chastity and austerity was conveniently laid on the shoulders of the wife while the husband relished the freedom of the outer world. Thus in literature too, women were portrayed as characters who were primarily preoccupied with ensuring domestic tranquillity. The writings offered no psychological details of the female characters and they were merely relative to men. However, with the growing awareness about gender discrimination, reproductive rights and empowerment of women, man-woman relationship underwent a complete metamorphosis. The male characters of Kapur’s novels affect the psychology of women but they do not fit in the mould of a hero. On the other hand, the women characters qualify as heroes because they directly or indirectly transcend the societal restrictions thrust upon them by the agents of patriarchy. Her women characters are thoroughly conscious of their position in family and society which leads to their quest for individuality and freedom. They are characters of flesh and blood who prefer to terminate loveless relationships with men and are ready to bear the weight of their ethical ambiguity and decisions. Men in her novels are represented as chauvinistic and uncompromising who are eternally bewildered by the rebellious attitude of the women. The concern of the protagonists of Kapur’s novels is not to seek equality with men but to reflect upon their situation essentially as women. Apart from man-woman relationship, the writer also focuses on mother daughter relationship, children parent relationship, relationships between women of the same family. Thus, different aspect of relationships is one of the central concerns of the novels of Manju Kapur.

The novel, *Difficult Daughters* is set against the political upheaval of partition. The novel begins with an unabashed declaration by Ida, a childless divorcee, “The one thing I wanted was not to be like my mother.” The novel revolves around a young woman Virmati who is born into an orthodox family. Being the eldest daughter of the household, she fails to escape the burden of family responsibilities. Her desire to study is crushed by the proprietors of patriarchy and they soon begin to search a suitable match for her. Virmati vehemently opposes the idea of arranged marriage, owing to her clandestine relationship with Harish, a married professor. Harish confesses his love for Virmati but disagrees to marry her, fearing the criticism it would attract from the society. He feels no attachment towards his illiterate wife Ganga but lacks the courage to desert her. The soaring anxiety in Virmati’s mind regarding her relationship with the professor prompts her to commit suicide but she is rescued within time. When her family inquires the reason of her action she confides in them her desire to pursue her education. Finally, the difficult daughter Virmati is sent to Lahore for further studies. She tries to alienate herself from the professor but his constant attempts at reconciliation leads to physical intimacy between them and the aftermath of it is Virmati getting pregnant. Virmati who is left alone to fend for her gets the baby aborted. This incident

further aggravates her agony because she wants to achieve something meaningful in life but hopelessly wavers between her practicality and emotional dependence on Harish. She ardently wishes to actively participate in the freedom struggle like other women but is unable to snap her ties from the professor. Kapur writes thus:

She felt out of place, an outcaste amongst all these women. She thought of Harish who loved her. She must be satisfied with that. These larger spaces were not for her. She felt an impostor sitting in the hall. Again, scenes from her private life came unbidden before her eyes. (DD 144) ii

After completing her B.T. she becomes the headmistress of a college in Nahan which marks the beginning of autonomy in her character. Later she is expelled from the institute because Lalaji comes to know about her illicit association with the professor but she does not lose hope and decides to go to Shantiniketan. Harish follows her there and finally agrees to marry her. Despite being ostracized by her family and being aware that she would have to compete for her husband's affection, Virmati marries the professor. She quite understandably has to put up with caustic remarks of professor's first wife and is also denied any participation in the household chores. Her conjugal life seems to stagnate because of disapproval from the society, lack of warmth in Harish's household and a miscarriage. The only consolation that she gets is a chance to study in Lahore again but she is forced to return back due to the political unrest of partition. Virmati is left with no option but to adapt and adjust in the stifling confines of her husband's house. She begets him a daughter and dies an almost insignificant death. The novel is set against the backdrop of partition which can be metaphorically seen in Virmati's life too. She battles for independence against her family, society and also tries to resist her inclination towards a married man but she miserably creates lines of partition around her. Throughout her life she is reprimanded for her relationship with Harish because it is inappropriate in a society where patriarchy is so deeply entrenched. The society promotes only those bonds that befit the boundaries defined by it. Even today marriages in India are augmented keeping social issues like caste, financial status, family reputation etc., in mind. Thus, the strong radical potential of the novel is somehow affected by aesthetics of dependence of a woman on man.

In *A Married Woman* is situated in the time of socio-religious flux of the country. The novel unravels the developments in the life of the protagonist, Astha who was "brought up properly, as befits a woman with large supplements of fear." (MW 1)iii Being the only child, Astha's parents are the prime decision making authority in her life. Kapur beautifully captures Astha's fantasy as a teenage girl about a "romantic somewhat shadowy man holding her in his manly embrace." (MW 1) Her first encounter with a boy is in her adolescence which soon ends due to the interruption of her strict mother. In her prime youth, Astha gets involved in another romantic affair with Rohan. She surrenders herself emotionally and physically hoping to get married to him. However, she is disillusioned when Rohan clearly states his plan to go to Oxford for higher studies. On the other hand, Astha's parents who are on the brink of retirement are desperate to see their daughter married and settled. Astha eventually succumbs to her parent's protestations and agrees to marry Hemant who seems more assuring than the other suitors on account of his education in the United States and a bureaucrat family background. As the author explicates the married life of Astha, the reader becomes aware that she feels trapped in the claustrophobic environment comprising of a passionless marriage, responsibilities of motherhood, overarching in laws and an ever interfering mother. Hemant seems to disagree with everything that Astha wishes to undertake further widening the chasm of temperamental incompatibility between the two. Despite the objection from Hemant and her parents, Astha decides to teach in a public school. During her time in the school she participates in a theatre workshop where she meets a prolific street theatre artist named Aijaz Akhtar Khan. Astha is deeply unsettled when she reads the tragic news of Aijaz's assassination during Hindu

Muslim riots. Hemant castigates his wife for showing more than required interest in the death of Aijaz which makes Astha even more distanced from him. In due course of time, Astha comes in contact with Aijaz's widow, Peeplika Khan and finds an outlet of her repressed emotions. She embarks upon a lesbian relationship with Peeplika Khan which provides her tranquility like never before. In this respect Kapur asserts, "There was no aphrodisiac more powerful than talking, no seduction more effective than curiosity." Peeplika Khan compels Astha to desert her seemingly happy marriage and live with her but Astha decides to bear the vagaries of her marriage and continue living with Hemant. The communal tension in the backdrop of the novel serves as an exposition of the inner turmoil of Astha. She understands that the status of a married woman in a patriarchal household, especially in Hemant's household is merely of a "willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth." (MW 231) Despite this she lacks the courage to embrace an unconventional relationship over the miseries of the relationship with her husband. Kapur in an interview said:

All the novels explore the difficulties of reconciling the devotion to family expected of middle class Indian women with their aspirations and desires for a life outside. As she said "I am interested in the lives of women whether in the political arena or in domestic spaces. One of the main preoccupation in all my books is how women manage to negotiate both inner and outer spaces in their lives- what sacrifices do they make in order to keep the home burning – and at what cost to their personal lives, do they find some kind of fulfillment outside the home. iv

Dealing with two controversial political and social issues of demolition of Babri Masjid and homosexuality, *A Married Woman* is an honest exploration of the psyche of an Indian woman who like Astha is caught in the mundane and frustrating atmosphere of marriage. Woman has been treated with prejudice ever since Eve tasted the forbidden fruit. All the dimensions of man-woman relationship have been prescribed by men in whose making women had a negligible or no part at all. Astha tries to salvage herself and reclaim her lost identity in the company of Peeplika Khan but the presence of her husband in an inseparable part of not only her life but her psyche also which like Virmati handicaps her direct access to the problem. As the societal norms dictate, she again proceeds to put up a façade of happy marriage with Hemant and her love for Peeplika and last hope for liberation remains unrequited.

A house is a physical structure which is used as a dwelling or accommodating place by the people but a house can be called as a home only when it encompasses unconditional attachment, attention, support, nurturing and protection of family members towards each other. Manju Kapur in her third novel, *Home* deals with myriads of connotations that this word can have. The novel is set amid the hustle bustle of the Banwari Lal cloth shop where from an early age the children are guided to preserve the traditional value of the household. In the novel the men perform stereotypical role of bread winners while the women are preoccupied with making food and emotional comfort available to their male counterparts. All the marriages are negotiated keeping in mind the hefty amount of dowry that the bride would fetch. However, the turning point in the novel comes when the elder son, Yashpal defies the prevalent mode of wife selection and admits his love for Sona, a girl from an ordinary family. After much ado both are married but Sona's mother-in-law target repartees at her for she fails to bear a child. Meanwhile, Banwari Lal's married daughter, Sunita passes away under mysterious circumstances and the responsibility of her orphaned son Vicky is handed over to Sona on account of her being childless. After a series of fasting and visit to holy shrines, Sona gives birth to a daughter, Nisha and a son, Raju. Vicky who by now gets fifteen years of age seduces the young Nisha due to which she becomes psychologically estranged with her family and surroundings. Her sense of home as a site of warmth and care is distorted because of the sexual assault by her cousin on her. Nisha's younger brothers are married before her because she her horoscope declares her as mangli. Sona desires, "the art of service and domesticity should shine on her daughter so brightly that she would overcome her negative karma to be a beacon in her married home."

(Home 129) On the contrary Nisha feels that a girl should be contend everywhere provided she is allowed to give a direction to her aspirations. Nisha proceeds to peruse a degree in English where she meets and courts Suresh. Her affair generates restlessness in the household because according to Nisha's family since Suresh belongs to a low caste he is in no way eligible to marry her. Nisha defends Suresh and rebels by saying, "Who cares about castes these days? What you really want is to sell me in the market." (Home 200) However all her efforts are in vain and finally the episode of Suresh is never discussed again. Compelled by her loneliness and ardent sense of becoming independent Nisha becomes an entrepreneur. She feels alienated in her family because being a thinking woman she has no patience with typical code of conduct which force a woman to resort to dependence on man. The family's search for a groom whose horoscope matches with hers finally settles on a widower, Arvind. When Nisha meets Arvind she does not present herself as an anxious female but as a bold individual for whom her work is her identity. She says, "I work." To which Arvind calmly replies, "I know." After she marries him, Arvind welcomes her with the words "Now you are home." (Home 322) In Home the man-woman relationship operates primarily on the level of economic considerations and social demands. The novel divides the men and women in the binary opposites of providers and nurtures thus it does not rise much above a domestic fiction. Here it is apt to quote the words of N.S Warake:

Though Manju Kapur has portrayed the character of Nisha as an educated, confident, self-assured, bold and independent, high spirited new woman, paying honour to Indian tradition, like Ezekiel believes 'Home is where we have to gather grace.' (Warake 277)

'The Immigrant' is the novel by Kapur which delves so deep on man-woman relationship that it can almost be read as a psychological document presenting the intricacies of human bonds. Nina, the central character of the novel is a lecturer in Miranda House who is financially independent and self-reliant. She lives with her widowed mother who is extremely perturbed by the fact that Nina is not married even in her prime thirties. Nina's first mature love affair begins with Rahul, a professor fifteen years elder to her. Like Virmati, Nina too devotes herself both emotionally and physically to him hoping that their relationship would sprout into something more tangible. Ironically, the professor abandons her without any shred of guilt, "But Rahul had always made it clear that he wanted to have his cake and eat it too. Like all cakes this one was chewed, mashed into pulp and swallowed" (TI 6) and she is forced to compromise with her circumstances. However, a marriage proposal from Ananda Sharma, a dentist in Halifax, Canada puts Nina's mother at ease. The initial correspondence between Nina and Ananda takes place through the exchange of letters. Though Nina is apprehensive as to why an Indian living in Canada for seven years would want to marry an Indian woman yet after a prolonged deliberation she decides to marry him. Nina attracted by "a future, laced with choices, edged with beautiful snowflakes that glittered through the distance" (TI 78) agrees to "join legions of women who crossed the seas to marry men living in unseen lands." (TI 78) After their marriage the setting of the novel changes from India to Canada. Kapur handles the relationship between Nina and Ananda on two levels Physical (Sexual) and Psychological (Emotional). Kapur gives voice to the libido of the married couple, which is generally a tabooed topic in the fiction created by women writers. There is no restraint or self-consciousness in the relationship of Nina and Ananda, their first physical encounter is captured thus, "She pressed herself closer. Gone was the awkwardness of words. With his free hand he turned her face towards him and nuzzled her lips. Her mouth opened, his tongue slipped in to meet in eagerness by her own." (TI 76) However after sexual intimacy, Nina is largely disappointed because of Ananda's selfishness of being concerned about himself alone. He conveniently overlooks the demands of gratification of his wife which involuntarily prompts Nina to compare Ananda with Rahul. Anand's sexual dysfunction is not very disturbing for Nina as is evident when "she lay in bed she tried to transform reality into a scenario that would not confuse or upset her. Togetherness was the important thing. To be critical of how it was

achieved was against the spirit of marriage.” (TI 91) but it is his oblivion towards the emotional needs of Nina in a distant land, garrulous discourse on importance of money, drawbacks in India as a country and bragging about his success that agitates her the most. Nina regrets her only identity being Anand’s wife, she remonstrates, “The immigrant who comes as a wife has more difficult time... At present all she is, is a wife and a wife is alone for many, many hours.” (TI 124) Nina here reiterates the predicament of innumerable wives in India and abroad who are homemakers and pine for the time and attention of their husband. Ananda only focuses on the act of sex with Nina in order to establish himself as a virile man which makes it a mechanical and futile exercise resulting in Nina feeling even more forlorn. On the other hand in order to satiate his male ego and overcome the distress of his physical inadequacies, Ananda seeks pleasure with many women. He feels, “what kind of a man would make him, with his masculinity so limited?” (TI 151) Nina desperately longs for motherhood which does not materialize with Ananda. Thus Nina’s marriage with Ananda is on the verge of breaking down. Gradually Nina’s frantic desire to bear a child changes into her want to be self-dependent and she enrolls herself in a library degree course where she meets Anton. In the company of Anton Nina transcends all the boundaries that are the part of the grooming process of an Indian woman. She eats meat, smokes, consumes liquor, has sex and finally feels liberated and free from the shackles of conventions. Both Ananda and Nina continue to indulge in extramarital relationship as they believe that extramarital relationship is not a kind of infidelity but “purely meeting of the bodies; a healthy give and take.” (TI 269) However, Nina is jolted out of her complicity and feels shattered that even after surrendering herself completely to Anton, he remains committed to his wife. With time she realizes that it is inappropriate for a woman to search happiness in the company of her husband or seek refuge in the arms of a lover. Nina leaves Halifax and heads “towards fresh territories a different set of circumstances, a floating resident of the western world. When one is reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home.” (TI 330) The novel traces Nina’s relationship in her pre-marital, marital and extra-marital phase but like Virmati, Astha and Nisha she finds solace only when she decides to move beyond the everyday existence centered on the experiences of marriage and family life by bursting the cultural constructs of virginity, daughterhood, wifehood, motherhood etc. As Betty Friedan observes in the *Feminine Mystique*: (Friedan.1963:31)

It is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife the continual demands on her time. But the chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off. How can any woman see the whole truth within the bounds of her own life? How can she believe that voice inside herself, when it denies the conventional, accepted truths by which she has been living?

Manju Kapur is highly skilled in dealing with the domestic issues. The female heroes of her novels risk the safety of marriage, family and household in the quest of autonomy which is smothered by the burden of phallogentrism in society and plethora of family duties. However, one characteristic that remains intact in every novel of Kapur is her foregrounding of vivid shades of man-woman relationships. All her women character undergoes various dilemmas regarding their relationship with their male counterparts and are bound to negotiate with this transition in their own ways. Some of them abandon their relationship with their lovers or husbands while the others succumb to the cultural trap of honour and acceptance in the society. Kapur is sometimes labelled as the “chronicler of Indian families” to which she replies, “My own feeling is, describe me in any way you like, as long as I am relevant, as long as I am read, I don’t really care... Families reflect all society-social mores, cultural trends, gender relations, class equation-all of them are seen brilliantly in my novels”. An alternative ideology on the issue of degrading family relations is not shown by Manju Kapur. Kapur brings forth the element of dissent between the

husband and wife in a vivid manner, but she failed to show a solution to it. Few female characters adjust with the traditions inside the family and few female heroes revolt against these traditions. Revolution can be taken for grant, but few female protagonists never think of changing their husbands. They instead follow the same path of infidelity. To appease oneself from this type burden, it is not correct to follow the same path of the husband. The protagonists can try to change the character of their husbands. But Kapur is more interested in showing the female characters has modern feminists. Through other characters, she exposes the traditional aspects. It is an open secret that there is a tussle between tradition and modernity. Those traditional characters are always a slave in the hands of their husband.

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Notes:

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