

Empowering Women: Manju Kapur's Feminist Discourse in Contemporary

Indian Literature

Dr. K. Karuna Devi

Associate Professor of English

AMS Arts and Science College for Women, OU Campus, Hyderabad

Contemporary women, possessing a high level of education and a keen awareness of their entitlements, exhibit their resistance against their own societal exploitation. Manju Kapur's works delve into the multifaceted aspects of a woman's existence, examining the intricate interplay between cultural and societal norms, while also highlighting her arduous battle against the inequitable structures prevalent in a restrictive society. This study work presents a valid introduction to the feminist viewpoint on everyday life and the female psyche. It is substantiated by several notions such intimate labour, dual burdens, equal opportunities, and diverse social methods, among others. The novelist depicts her as a female character who is on the cusp of embarking on a journey of self-exploration, when she abruptly resolves to assume agency over her own existence. The objective of this study is to analyse the position of Manju Kapur as a feminist writer and to explore if her literary works offer a portrayal of feminist politics. The research endeavour will additionally aim to discern the distinct attributes of her literary works within the context of feminist fiction in India.

Keywords: interplay between society and culture, female psyche, dual burdens, self-exploration, societal exploitation

Introduction

Kapur's literary contributions enhance our understanding of the psychological state of an individual confined within a complex network of relationships, encompassing both self-imposed ties and those imposed upon her by external forces. The women in Indian society face a perplexing juxtaposition of convention and modernity, which highlights their internal struggle between fulfilling traditional roles as caretakers for their husbands and children, and their yearning to explore deeper avenues of personal fulfilment that lie beyond societal norms. Manju Kapur has adeptly depicted the intricacies of Indian culture and lifestyle in a highly accomplished manner. Simultaneously, she exhibits a

profound awareness of human nature and a comprehension of commonplace issues. The author's work encompasses a range of subjects, such as the tension between tradition and progress, the existential crisis faced by the protagonists, and the pursuit of independence by Indian women, among other topics.

The exploration of feminine identity, a prevailing societal phenomenon in India following its independence, serves as the primary focus in all of the author's writings. A range of subjects are also examined, such as the dynamics between men and women, human desires and longings, gender segregation, the act of reducing or diminishing, acts of resistance, and expressions of disagreement, among others. The male protagonists depicted in these novels exhibit dominant traits and exert a significant influence on the psychological well-being of the female characters, including Virmati, Astha, Nisha, Nina, and Shagun. Consequently, these female protagonists find themselves on the brink of retreating inwardly. Across her literary works, we see a protagonist who is idealised, as she attempts to liberate herself from the enduring weight of a burden she has carried for an extended duration.

Over time, the perception and portrayal of women undergoes transformation. The central character of the novelist's literary work diverges from conventional portrayals of femininity characterised by qualities such as generosity, endurance, humility, and composure. These portrayals depict persons who are assertive, emphatic, cultured, and ambitious, and who are actively promoting societal awareness of their demands while simultaneously asserting their identities to a global audience. (Naik 2010)

Exploration of Human Connections

Indian fiction, dating back over a century, has explored the theme of women in society. In recent decades, Indian writers, particularly female writers, have generated a substantial body of literary work, with a particular emphasis on exploring gender dynamics and the societal role of women. The authors engage in an exploration of human connections as they demonstrate a profound interest in the intricacies of the human psyche and emotions. The role of women's labour has served as a significant source of inspiration and a prominent subject matter within the realm of literature. (Mohanty 1991) The representation of women plays a crucial role in the examination of writing across the globe. Ultimately, she also functions as a writer and, as a result, a woman's

proficiency in writing is comprehensive. This assertion also holds true for Indian literature written in the English language. Literature serves as a documentation of human existence and the corresponding societal responses, encapsulated inside the author's artistic representation.

A study of the representation of women in literature allows for the assessment of the author's perception of them. In the transitional phase of our nation's history, characterised by the shift from traditional practises to technological progress, such an endeavour possesses inherent worth. In order to facilitate the progression of society in a seamless and genuinely significant manner, female authors have assumed the remarkable responsibility of spearheading a struggle against established traditions.

Repression and resistance have consistently held significant relevance within societal contexts, with particular salience observed in the postcolonial epoch. The novels examined in this study prioritise these concerns as the most significant areas of concern. Suppression refers to the use of power or force in a manner that is burdensome, ruthless, or undeserved. The aforementioned phenomenon represents a state that is inadequately addressed, when individuals experience intense distress, both mentally and physically, due to adversity and unfavourable circumstances.

Self-reliance and Autonomy in Female Characters of Indian Novelists

The present study aims to critically analyse the novel *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur, focusing on the theme of resistance. This narrative explores the complexities of societal norms and the resulting anxiety experienced by the characters. Socially sanctioned abuse and exploitation of a collective, such as a gathering, class, or group of individuals, perpetrated by any individual.

In the novels of Indian English authors, the portrayal of women initially depicted them as victims subjected to exploitation and oppression. However, through time, this traditional representation has undergone transformation. The female figure portrayed by these authors has traits of self-reliance, autonomy, and a progressive mindset, enabling her to exercise agency in all aspects of her life. She should not be objectified or treated solely as a source of pleasure and sexual gratification. According to V. T. Girdhari (2002), the male, who represents a culture centred around men, has finally been removed from the centre of women's attractiveness. As a result, women are now preparing to become their own gravitational force, independent from the influence of a society centred around men. (78)

During the period following Independence, a notable emergence of female writers characterised by their creative and innovative mindset can be observed. The author's writing style, portrayal of women, and exploration of social concerns are all commendable. The authors demonstrate a commendable ability to imbue and cultivate female characters within their literary creations. The authors have adeptly exposed the anguish, torment, and subjugation experienced by the female characters in a remarkable manner. The emergence of a group of young, innovative female novelists in the 1980s is readily apparent, as they assert that their literary contributions have garnered widespread acclaim. During a certain period, there was a prevailing dominance of male-centric perspectives in Indian English novels. However, subsequent to the emergence of women writers in the post-Independence era, their contributions significantly impacted the landscape of Indian literature. (Dhawan 2008)

The aforementioned writers, such as Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandya, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nergis Dalal, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Rao, Githa Mehta, and Manju Kapur, possess innovative minds that enable them to effectively address various situations. Upon careful examination of the literary works authored by these writers, it becomes evident that *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur serves as a narrative of resistance. This critical study sheds light on the longstanding plight of Indian women who have endured a history of oppression and remained voiceless. Without a doubt, it can be argued that ordinary speech, as well as expressive language and literature, have a significant role in shaping and reinforcing gender beliefs.

Nayantara Sehgal's novel *Rich Like Us* portrays the evolving representations of Indian women as they navigate a challenging quest for self-discovery. Anita Desai's novels, *Where Will We Go This Summer* and *Voices in the City*, Githa Hariharan's novel, *The Thousand Faces of Night*, The works of Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Rama Mehta, Kamala Markandya, and Santha Rama Rau, namely *To Whom She Wills*, *Inside the Haveli*, *Two Virgins*, and *Recollect the House*, respectively serve as notable examples that provide light on the societal position of women in India. Within the realm of Indo-English writers, the literary works of Manju Kapur exhibit a dynamic interplay between the elements of imitation and protest, ultimately culminating in a profound journey of self-discovery. Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, and various other female

authors defy traditional gender roles, seeking to disrupt the silence of suffering, striving to escape from a constrained existence, and proclaiming their individual identities. Numerous social reformers have played a pivotal role in facilitating women's transition into and participation in the realm of liberation struggle and social transformation. As a result, women have been afforded a diverse range of opportunities both in the present day and in the past, throughout the age of progressive development.

Over the course of fifty years since gaining independence, Indian women have achieved significant progress, although there are still substantial challenges that need to be addressed in order to achieve true gender equality. The struggle for autonomy remains an unresolved conflict. In her novels written in 1998, Manju Kapur portrays female characters that seek to establish their own individuality. In her quest for self-identification, she can arguably be regarded as one of the most captivating writers within the contemporary Indian familial context.

Familial Ties and Societal Norms in *Difficult Daughters*

In her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur establishes herself as a feminist writer by constructing the narrative around the interconnected lives of the female protagonists, including Kasturi, Virmati, Ida, Ganga, Shakuntala, and Swarnalata. The central focus of the work pertains to the ambitions and endeavours of female protagonists such as Virmati, Ida, Shakuntala, and Swarnalata. These characters defy conventional expectations associated with motherhood and domesticity, instead asserting their own identities within the context of societal and political transformations occurring during the period. (Nabar 1995) Each of these female characters symbolises generations of challenging daughters by defying traditional norms and asserting their own human needs. They encounter various problems emanating from their familial and societal contexts, while also presenting challenges to their families and societies. These collective struggles culminate in a protracted narrative of hardship, leading to an enduring lineage of suffering that extends across three generations of maternal experiences.

While the novel represents the collective struggle for independence of an entire nation, it also portrays the individual emergence of feminine assertiveness within a patriarchal system. Paradoxically, Virmati, in her role as a mother, endeavoured to instill the principles of compromise, adaptation, and adjustment. In contrast, her father placed importance on her physical attractiveness

as well as her engagement in artistic endeavours like as music, dance, and literature. Ida is the offspring of a highly learned professor renowned for their profound expertise, cognitive abilities, and esteemed standing within the realm of academia. The father held the expectation that his daughter will emulate his footsteps and demonstrate her academic prowess. However, she did not possess any brilliance. Ida exhibited defiance towards her mother's imposed limitations and her father's directives, ultimately opting to reside independently.

Ida exhibited a strong aversion towards being influenced or guided by external forces, instead preferring to lead a life that was shaped by her own volition. She sought to assert her independence and autonomy, ensuring that her choices and actions were not subject to the control or supremacy of others, even her parents. She harboured doubts over the necessity of sacrificing her own well-being and personal fulfilment in order to satisfy the expectations of her parents. In the factual sense of the term, she was an independent woman. Ida exhibits same challenging behaviour as her mother, thereby earning the label of a "difficult daughter" once again.

The inheritance of defiance is certainly evident. Ida consistently engaged in acts of protest against her mother. A divergence in viewpoints arose between Ida, the rebellious daughter, and her mother, Virmati, as Ida expressed,

My mom spent the period after my separation covering the air I inhaled with trouble and objection. 'What will befall you after I'm gone?' was her number one mourn... For long periods, I was engulfed by melancholy, depression, and despair.... Presently her shadow no longer compromises me. Without the obstruction of her quality, I could sink into her past and make it mine. In look for a lady I could know, I have sorted out material from recollections that were jumbled, fractional and conflicting.... This book weaves an association between my mom and me, each word a block in a manor I made with my head and heart. Presently live in it, Mother, and leave me be. Try not to frequent me any longer (Kapur 279).

The revelation of her mother's actual identity, resulting in a transformed Virmati, emancipates Ida from her personal psychological burdens, as she no longer perceives her mother's shadow as a source of threat. Ida's emotional reconstruction of her parents' relationship enables her to get insight into the challenges her mother likely encountered on her journey towards her ultimate goal.

Ida's voyage of exploration builds a profound psychological bond between the two distinct daughters. The individual envisions a grand residence within her innermost being, constructed using literary expressions as the fundamental building blocks, intended to serve as a dwelling for her recently found maternal figure. Ida will no longer be haunted by the memory of her tumultuous connection with her mother. Ida exhibits a distinct sense of freedom, coherence, and lucidity in her cognitive processes and behaviours, distinguishing her from her mother. She is not ensnared inside the intricate network of her own desires, a patriarchal societal framework, and romantic affection. It is imperative for her to persist in leading a life characterised by liberty, ultimately attaining it.

The dissolution of her marriage occurs as a result of her husband's refusal to acknowledge and accommodate her aspirations and entitlement to motherhood. The narrative concludes by recognising Ida's progression towards self-reliance and the development of her character. The individual opted for a technique that was beyond the capability of her mother.

In the examination of the portrayal of marriage in Kapur's books, a significant focus is placed on the themes of restraint and opposition experienced by the female characters. It becomes evident that the author considers the depiction of these female characters within the institution of marriage to be of utmost importance. The causes might be social, strict or even status linked with preserve the family from outside inspection for not getting hitched 'at the best opportunity'. Manju Kapur's literary works encapsulate the fundamental essence of the subject matter. The manner in which a mother addresses inquiries regarding marriage is a commonplace matter within households that have young girls who have reached a suitable age for marriage. The subsequent instances illustrate how young women are evaluated with distinct enthusiasm in relation to their marital status.

According to Kapur (1998), Kasturi, the mother of Virmati, holds the belief that it is incumbent upon every young woman to enter into matrimony. (15) In Manju Kapur's renowned novel *A Married Woman*, (2003) the character of Astha's mother also possesses a similar experience to convey. She informs Astha that after she is married, their responsibilities would come to an end. According to Kapur (1), the Shastras state that parents who pass away without arranging their daughter's marriage will be subjected to continuous reincarnation. In Manju Kapur's novel *Home*, the characters Sona and Rupa both enter into matrimonial alliances with families of contrasting socio-economic backgrounds, one belonging to a prosperous business elite and the other to a

working-class milieu. Similarly, inside her latest literary work, *Custody*(2011)the protagonist's mother, Shagun's mother, experiences anxiety regarding her daughter's impending marriage and imparts the following advice:

"Pursue your personal desires once you are wedded". (11)

The mothers depicted in the novels exhibit a strong desire for their daughters to get into matrimony, as they perceive it as their responsibility and in accordance with prevailing expectations within Indian culture and society.

Marriage can be seen as a form of recompense for women, granting them the ability to express themselves and exercise authority. Manju Kapur demonstrates an understanding of this prevailing sentiment, allowing the female characters to navigate within the confines of their conventional domestic setting and lead their lives within very restrained boundaries. The concept of "union with" this particular set of characters encompasses a range of interpretations.

The books of Manju Kapur offer an insightful exploration of how the institution of marriage facilitates the exercise of restraint. The increasing prevalence of violence against women serves as evidence for the normalisation of victimisation. The individuals who have experienced violence do not seek compassion, but rather anticipate decisive measures to be taken against the perpetrators. In the novel *Difficult Daughters*, the character Ida is portrayed as a victim who does not receive any assistance or support from others. Nisha, residing in her residence, is yet another individual who finds herself lacking any empathetic companions. The parents of Ida disapprove of her romantic involvement with a young man due to his Paswan background. The parents bestow their beloved daughter in matrimony onto a widower who regards his second union as a temporary measure. He possessed no knowledge regarding Nisha's authentic character. Kapur, in her feminist perspective, criticises a society that readily diminishes anticipated marriages to simply contractual contracts without any moral reservations. The presence of controversial elements within her literary works gives rise to the interpretation that her fiction serves as an expression of a feminist critique. She endeavours to dismantle a civilization rooted in superstition with the intention of constructing a novel societal framework. According to Ida, a transformation can only be achieved by a favourable shift in societal attitudes. The novels authored by her do not stem from a sceptical standpoint; rather, they serve as a manifestation of hope. She conceives of a future society in which women assume more significant roles.

Now, let us examine the narrative of the novel titled *The Immigrant* (2008). The narrative chronicles the odyssey of a female protagonist who endeavours to establish an autonomous sense of self. Throughout her travels, she encounters various limitations, instances of prejudice, obligations, and societal norms that define her lived experience. The character Nina is consistently faced with a variety of challenges in each new circumstance she encounters, and she actively seeks to adapt and integrate into the altered surroundings as quickly as possible. Nina exemplifies the challenges faced by the average Indian lady who experiences ongoing immigration across multiple dimensions.

As an individual who has migrated to a different country, there is an inherent expectation for her to adapt, accommodate, engage in compromise, and make sacrifices in order to gain acceptance within her new environment or situation. In order to establish their individuality within societal constructs, women are compelled to adhere to patriarchal rules that have been created by males. In the context of the liberal Western societies, immigrant women encounter discrimination on the basis of their gender, colour, and race. The excursion serves as a transformative experience for Nina, leading to her profound realisation that she is entitled to have happiness. Nina embraces and incorporates the Western ideology of individualism, which prioritises self-fulfillment over familial and societal responsibilities. This comprehension emancipates her from the constraints to which she had been restricted, inside the confines of customary practises. She attains enlightenment and afterwards resolves to pursue happiness according to her own terms and also acknowledges the acceptance of change as a perpetual and unavoidable presence, shown by the experience of immigration that she was required to undergo.

According to Kapur (2008), the immigrants have persistent internal conflicts. On the surface, they exhibit adaptability. The individuals who are educated and fluent in English may inadvertently harbour false assumptions regarding a solitary heart. (120) There is a discernible shift in the mindset of the empowerment and freedom of women, which is evident among contemporary literary artists, particularly those who identify as women. The majority of authors exhibit a keen sense of social consciousness in their selection of themes and portrayal of people, with a particular emphasis on the latter. By doing so, individuals demonstrate an inherent recognition that acts deemed as morally incorrect should be addressed in a manner that aligns with the empathetic and compassionate nature of human beings. The primary rationale for women authors, whether writing in regional languages

or English, embracing women's empowerment and emancipation as the central topics of their creative works is the fundamental factor.

The pervasive nature of gender discrimination across all domains has prompted an increased focus on this issue within literary works, particularly novels, across a range of genres. These works demonstrate a heightened level of determination and passion in addressing themes related to the prejudice faced by women. An analysis of the female protagonists depicted in the literary works of Manju Kapur reveals the pressing need for a societal shift in attitudes towards the objectification and subjugation of women. It is imperative for society to embrace gender equality by affording women equal status and treating them with the respect they deserve. It is crucial to refrain from perceiving women solely as vessels for childbirth.

Virmati, Astha, and Nisha can be characterised as contemporary women. Despite their education and economic autonomy, these women are unwilling to surpass the boundaries of tradition due to the deep-rooted influence of traditional values on their mindset. Conversely, Ida, Nina, and Shagun, who can be classified as progressive women, are prepared to challenge the conventional notions and beliefs of a patriarchal society in their quest for self-discovery.

Given the prevalence of violence against women, it is imperative that we refrain from regarding it as a mere societal norm. The significance of feminist awareness is of utmost importance and should not be underestimated. It is imperative that every individual, regardless of gender, regards the pursuit of feminist consciousness as a solemn obligation. Contemporary female authors employ their creative pursuits in the form of their literary works to achieve this same objective. The argument put up by the author, asserting that women ultimately bear the greatest negative consequences, cannot be easily disregarded as a simple rhetorical device. (Prasad 2006) The fervent pursuit of social justice is rooted in truth. Kapur's portrayal of women in her novels offers a captivating exploration of the contrasting emotions of ecstasy and misery that women endure. The institution of marriage is a product of continuous adaptations and concessions undertaken by the figurative domestic caretaker. The resilience and cohesion of a family can be attributed to the patience and wisdom of women, as they navigate through many challenges and adversities. However, it should be noted that Indian males, often exhibiting a chauvinistic mindset, tend to be reluctant in granting women equal opportunities and places.

Conclusion

Based on the narrative depicted in the novels, it can be observed that not all women universally aspire for equality with males. However, they do desire to be acknowledged as autonomous individuals, and the concept of subjectivity holds distinct connotations for each individual, varying in accordance with their unique perspectives and experiences. The influence of internalised patriarchal values is of considerable importance on the experiences of women. If women commence to manifest these ideals, they will be capable of advancing on their journey towards independence.

An evident observation derived from the analysis of the novels is that women possess inherent strength; nonetheless, they often become entangled in the intricate network of patriarchal systems, leading to a disregard for their own capabilities. Individuals must strive to achieve self-realization; nevertheless, the manner in which this process unfolds varies among them.

References

- Kapur, Manju. *Difficult Daughters*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1998. Print.
- Mohanty, Chandra Talpade, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres, ed. *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991. Print.
- Nabar, Vrinda. *Caste As Woman*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1995. Print.
- Dhawan, R.K. *Feminism and Recent Indian literature*. Volume 1. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2008. Print.
- Jain, Jasbir. *Writing Women Across Cultures*. New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2002. Print.
- Kapur, Manju. *A Married Woman*. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 2003. Print.
- Kapur, Manju. *Custody*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House, India, 2011. Print.
- Kapur, Manju. *Difficult Daughters*. London: Faber and Faber, 1998. Print.
- Kapur, Manju. *Home*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House, India, 2006. Print.
- Kapur, Manju. *The Immigrant*. New Delhi: Penguin Random House India, 2008. Print.
- Naik, M.K. *A History of Indian English Literature*. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2010. Print.
- Prasad, Amar Nath. *Indian Writing in English: Critical Ruminations*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2006. Print.
- V.T, Girdhari. —*Contemporary Indian English Novel: Feministic concerns, Male Anxieties*, In *Modern Indian English Fiction* Ed. T.S. Anand. New Delhi: Nice printing press, 2002. Print.