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The Portrait of the ‘New Woman’ in Shobha De’s *Sisters* and Manju Kapur’s *Home*

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Abstract:

Indian English Literature is remarkable in the contributions made by its women writers. Shobha De and Manju Kapur are among them who attempt to portray the conditions of the Indian women who encounter various trials and tribulations due to the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity. They present the tormented consciousness of the urban middle class women who in search of their own identity changes from a silent sufferer to a complete rebel moving against the age old traditions, ethics and restrictions of the male dominated society. This sort of self-assertion is reflected in Manju Kapur’s *Home* and Shobha de’s *Sisters*. Both works set in a business background, present the central protagonists Mikki and Nisha as women who bravely face and struggle against the bounds of being ‘a woman’ and finally achieve their ardent quest towards being themselves. They affirm the capacity of the new educated Indian women to determine their priorities for self-discovery in emerging as a ‘new woman’.

Keywords: Patriarchy, traditional societal pattern, oppression, new woman, self-identity.

The term “Indo-Anglian” originally refers to the authentic creative writing in English by the Indians whose mother tongue is other than the universal language, English. In a historical aspect, Indian English Literature has undergone several stages like Indo-Anglian, Indo-English, Indian Writing in English and recently Indian English Literature. Now it is deemed as a part of Common Wealth Literature in English.

Fiction is a commonly accepted genre in Indian English Literature. Mulk Raj Anand, R.K Narayan, Raja Rao, Kamala Markandaya, Arun Joshi, Anitha Desai are a few who made tremendous contributions to it. Another development in the area of Indian English fiction is the remarkable involvement of women writers. Many Indian women novelists successfully attempt to portray the condition of the Indian women who encounter various trials and tribulations because of the conflicting influence of tradition and modernity. Similar to many other women writers like Anitha Nair, Anitha Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharathi Mukherjee, Manju Kapur and Shobha De proficiently capture the Indian ethos. Through their works, they display a mature understanding of the female psyche. These women writers revolt against the dated traditions of

the patriarchal society. They reveal the real experience of women. They present the tormented consciousness of the urban middle class woman who in-search of her own identity changes from a silent sufferer to a complete rebel moving against the age old traditions, ethics and restrictions of the male dominated society.

The rebellion plotted by woman may take the extreme forms of sexual indifference or extra-marital relations through which she tries to affirm her identity in search of her 'self'. This sort of self-assertion becomes the central theme of Manju Kapur's and Shobha De's third novels *Home* (1998) and *Sisters* (1992). The present paper attempts a study on the emergence of the new woman passing through the ordeal of self-assertion and attaining the realization of her freedom-a freedom to lead a life of her own choice from the background of the novels *Home* and *Sisters*. Shobha De's *Sisters* and Manju Kapur's *Home* deal with the psychic conflict in the minds of such liberated women protagonists who are trapped between a 'personal self' and a 'societal self'.

Due to the presence of 'hot sex' sequences in her novels, critics failed to accept Shobha De as a writer with feminist inclination. But, De through her writings attempts to create a space for feminine reality. She does not avoid what is called a 'taboo subject' in her works. She acknowledges: "It is important for women to talk about it. Our mothers endured it silently because it was a taboo subject. Nobody was interested in women's views on sex. Whether it was erotic poetry or prose, the perspective was always that of a man. It is only now that women are expressing what they feel about this most elementary... aspect of conjugal life. It is a kind of catharsis."

Shobha De (1948), a Maharashtrian is a noted novelist in the Indian literary scene. She excels not only as a mere writer but also as a super model, celebrity journalist, magazine editor, columnist, wife, mother, social commentator and TV script writer. Within a short span of time she produced seven novels. *Socialite Evenings* (1989), *Starry Nights*(1992), *Sisters* (1992), *Strange Obsession*(1992), *Sultry Days*(1994), *Snap Shorts*(1995) and *Second Thoughts*(1996). Apart from these novels, her writings consists of stories, letters, essay and an autobiography. Through all these, she discusses the very sensitive aspects involved in a man-woman relationship. Shobha De's novels mark her sense of empathy towards the women, who in search of their identity bounds back the strings of domesticity and marriage.

De's *Sisters* has a background of a corrupt world of big business and narrates the life of two wealthy and socialite women, lead by ardent desire, lust and an abiding rivalry. Both the novelists have portrayed the central protagonists Mikki and Nisha as women who boldly struggle against the bounds of being women and finally achieve their ardent quest towards being themselves.

Sisters opens when the central protagonist Mikki is forced to return from her studies at US due to the unexpected death of her parents in an air-crash. The Hiralal Industry almost at the

verge of bankrupt becomes Mikki's whole responsibility. In reality she is unprepared to take over the responsibility that deprives her of her personal freedom. Mikki is unwilling to lose the colourful life in America. "Given the choice, Mikki wanted this nightmare to end now. Her parents were dead. There was nobody whom she cared for. And nobody who cared for her... Her life in India ...was over"(9). But without any other alternative, Mikki resolves to lead the struggling industries. At once, completely devoted to her duties, she gets involved in the matters of business, and begins to show her managerial skills.

The existence of Alisha, Mikki's half-sister gives her a sense of solace in the loneliness she feels after the demise of her parents. It is not Alisha's wealth that draws Mikki towards her, but her trust in human values that inspires her to establish a relationship with Alisha.

In the story, a number of men of all ages aspire to get married to Mikki including Binny Malhotra who wins her and gains the entire proprietorship of Hiralal Industry. Unlike Shobha De's other female protagonists who generally wish to free themselves from the bonds of married life, Mikki intentionally walks into it. Initially in the presence of Binny, Mikki not only gets an insight into her 'self' but also feels a sense of security and becomes proud of being his wife. "She felt liberated, uninhibited and aroused to the point of primitive abandon... And he was finally hers."(109)

Binny, a womanizer begins to reveal his real oppressive nature as the days go on. She is denied of motherhood and her individual freedom. He mercilessly affirms that he needs a wife "who stays at home and looks after me... our women stay at home and make sure the place is perfectly run. They fulfil their husband's every need and look good when their men get home in the evening. No office going."(109) Even though Mikki fails to find in Binny a man with whom she could share her life, she is "willing to compromise her own life if it means he'd notice her, listen to her, acknowledge her existence."(140). Despite her total submission to Binny, his suspicion of her chastity shatters the golden days of Mikki's married life. When he leads her out of his home, helplessly she pleads: "Binny... I love you. Only you... I can't live without you."(141). Her disillusionment heightens when he goes in for a divorce devastating her efforts to live with him. Mikki can no more tolerate Binny's indifference to her. She finds her suitor impudent and is forced to move away from him.

Apart from the painful experience that Mikki receives from Binny, her relationship with him boosted in her an insight into her own 'being' as a woman and as an individual. Mikki resolves to retain her industries with which she identifies herself. Even before Mikki takes any further actions, the unexpected death of Binny along with his illegitimate family brings her back all the assets.

Now Mikki is a changed woman powerful enough to deal with the realities of life. She gets transformed from a mere social butterfly to a mature, sturdy woman and later to a kind mother-figure concerned about her alienated half-sister Alisha. Throughout the novel, Alisha

stands as a contrast to the character of Mikki. Mikki's encounter with different men assists her to empower herself into an independent-minded woman whereas, Alisha fails to learn from her experience and becomes an introvert. The novel deals with the rivalry and at the same time emotional bond between two half-sisters.

Through the portrayal of Nisha and Mikki, both the authors very successfully throw light on the harsh realities of the patriarchal society. It also hints about the growing awareness among the women who wake from their ignorance and inaction. Mikki's pitiable life with Binny strengthens her innate desire for freedom.

Different from Shobha De's other female characters, who wish to have a liberated life, Mikki never thinks of a life beyond marital bonds and she tries to become an ideal wife and a responsible social being providing a moral dimension for the novel. Mikki considers the materialistic pleasure without freedom of the self as meaningless. As an empowered woman she turns rebellious when she is denied her personal freedom. As Shobha De observes: "It is not enough to have a mind of your own. If you don't have an income to match... With this economic freedom has come assertiveness, confidence and refused to be treated as doormats."

The authors Manju Kapur and Shobha De try to highlight the changes in attitude of both high society and middle class society towards the institution of marriage. They are concerned about the new facts of marriage like the trend to live single or without getting married.

De's novels present a new hybrid culture that blends the western style, ideas and values with the Indian traditional pattern. Through the heroines who take central narratives De delves deep into the psyche of her woman characters. She asserts "I did write with a great deal of empathy towards woman. Without waving the feminist flag, I feel very strongly about women's situation". By exploring the world of urban woman in India, De tries to shatter the patriarchal hegemony. While her protagonists urge to have more or less equal footing relationship with men, she tries to question the patriarchal stereotype. *Sisters* very well exposes the moral degradation of modern society and depicts the heroine as one who attains success to an extent in gaining freedom from social bondage but never reaching self-actualization.

The era of twentieth Century began to witness the rise of the new woman as an impact of modern feminism. The New woman liberates herself from the conventional constraints, demands women's rights and changes the concepts of marriage system and sexuality. The New woman deviates from the age old practices of existing traditions and are 'new' in their approach. The novels *Home* and *Sisters* of Manju Kapur and Shobha De caricature two new women, Nisha and Mikki who valiantly face the harsh realities of their lives.

Manju Kapur, one among the Indian prominent writers who speaks for the middle-class women has published five novels *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2003), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2009) and *Custody* (2011). She had been acknowledged by The

Commonwealth Writer's Prize for her debut novel. She chose the aspects and prospects of feminine life in a male-dominated society.

Kapur's third novel *Home* takes us through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations of Banwari Lal's family. In an interview Kapur accounts that: "Literature by women, about families, always has these larger considerations, with years of studying texts, it becomes almost second nature to look beneath the surface at social and economic forces, gender relationships and how they are played out in an arena that, in my writing happens to be the home. But then, all sort of things happening outside do affect what is happening inside the home."

The novel revolves around the family members of Lala Banwari Lal, a patriarch who has faith in living in a joint family. He is the head of the family and runs a sari shop in Karol Bagh assisted by his two sons, Yashpal and Pyarelal. As the story unfolds, Nisha the daughter of Yashpal and Sona emerges as a self-dependent empowered woman in the novel.

Banwari Lal's family is rooted in traditional and patriarchal norms. They practice the pattern of men working out of the house and women within. But the new woman Nisha refuses to reconcile with the patriarchal and male dominated family structure and tries to make her own individual identity. She leads a suffocating childhood where she is never permitted to go outside and play with her brothers. She is provided with nice dresses and everything else yet, unfortunately her outfits did not match her inclinations, "I want to play in the park,' she whined periodically." (53)

The nightmarish episode of Vicky's sexual abuse of Nisha leads to a turning point in her life. The psychologically and mentally affected Nisha is sent to her aunt Rupa's house and there she enjoys the complete care and attention of Rupa and her husband Prem Nath. As a contrast to the traditional approach towards girl's education, Rupa and Prem Nath promote Nisha to excel in her studies. Nisha is highly influenced by the thoughts of Rupa and starts to deviate from the paradigm. "There is always time to learn cooking, but only one time to study." (125)

Nisha's stay with Rupa modifies her mind according to the ways of her uncle and aunt. She gets highly influenced by Rupa, who runs a pickle business and wants to lead a life like her. Sona fails to accept the change in her daughter and tries to reorient her towards the traditional pattern of their family. "We are traditional people. Tradition is strong with us. So is duty." (123).

Through the novel *Home*, Kapur tries to plot some disturbing home truths that still exist in our society. She reveals in an interview that, "I teach in an all girls college and *Home* was first conceived in response to the home situations of some of my students who came from conservative backgrounds."

The thoughts of emancipation strongly stuck on Nisha when her three years long love affair with Suresh gets destructed. The end of the affair was an end of her love and hopes. Nisha starts her journey towards empowerment and she wishes to do something valuable in her life.

She desires to study fashion designing and to be economically independent. It is her first attempt towards empowerment that is obviously opposed by her traditionally rooted mother.

She pleads to her father, “If only you could take me with you, Papaji,” she carries on, “I have seen girls working in shops. Why should it be Ajay, Vijay and Raju? There must be something I too can do.”(268). This reveals her deeper quest for independent existence and selfhood. In her mind she denies the patriarchal system and considers herself equal as her brothers. Considering her request, her father permits her to join a play way school near her home instead of going to the shop and attending the customers. Frustrated with the sort of job, within no time she quits it. Through this Kapur needs to highlight the struggle faced by a woman to adopt the profession of her own choices. She reveals that it is not easy for a woman to choose the profession of her own choice. In order to achieve her mission, she needs to struggle a lot and cross over the tradition bound restrictions and laws erected by the society.

Pertaining to the realities of life Kapur presents the changes in the moral foundations of the Banwari Lal’s family. Nisha reluctant to dance to the tunes of conventions and wishes to live a carefree life. She commences her own business with the support of her father, a boutique, named ‘Nisha’s Creations.’ This increases her confidence for now “Her father trusted her as he would have trusted a son.”(291)

Nisha borrows money from her father and makes all arrangements for her business like hiring the tailors on monthly pay and collecting the material from her father’s shop. Nisha’s customers like her suits and dresses thus paves way for heavy orders and she becomes a successful and acknowledged ‘business woman’. In her field, she proves to be a responsible working business woman. Within a short period of time she returns half the money of loan to her father. She keenly invigilates her workers and in an exuberant manner ensures the smooth functioning of her enterprise. She fails to accept any negligence in her work. “My reputation will be spoilt. Do you know how competitive the market is?”(294)

Even when Nisha successfully exerts her identity through her entrepreneurship, her family wants her to be settled in a traditional pattern of family. They manage to arrange a marriage for Nisha with Arwind, a widower. As Clara Nublie comments: “Being a woman in modern India means to be entrapped into the inescapable cage of, ‘being woman-wife-mother.’ ” (Clara 12)

Just after Nisha is pulled into the institution of marriage, her fate begins to change. She is entrapped inside the four walls of the house looking after the needs of her husband and in-laws. Her dream of emancipation shatters when she confirms her pregnancy within a month of her marriage. After her marriage Nisha feels like a flying bird entrapped in a cage of traditional patriarchal social norms. Her family life moves mechanically and her husband never shares anything, personal or professional with her. He fails to understand her desires and wishes.

During her pregnancy period, Rupa's husband, her mother-in-law and even her modern aunt Rupa do not appreciate her idea of going out to take care of her business. Rupa consoles her: "You know beti; you can always start a business you have shown a flair for it. But this time with your baby, this will not come again."(334) As per the traditional patriarchal outlook, a marriage is complete only if it is followed by motherhood. Nisha gives birth to twins -one girl and one boy elevating herself as a complete blessed woman from the aspect of the traditional society. Completely engaged with the obligations towards her family, Nisha handover her own business to Pooja, her sister-in-law.

As Malti Agarwal observes about Nisha in his work, "Manju Kapur's depiction of her heroine, her travelling the labyrinth of rules and regulations of traditional middle class milieu and stepping out to start earning for her existence are superb. A girl in Indian family is whining under the burden of patriarchy. She while living in her home feels herself homeless-shelterless. She strives to explore space for herself. She tries to be self-reliant in order to survive" but fails to escape from holds of traditional patriarchal norms.

Both these writers assert that now a days, every man-woman relationship is by power struggle. They very well explicate the troubles of modern woman who tries to balance her career and marriage in a male-dominated society. The protagonists, Nisha and Mikki try to assert their individuality by attaining economic self-sufficiency. Through this they try to emphasize the value of equivalence of power. Their views on marriage stress on the inability of men in understanding the psyche of women and their emotional needs. According to Cora Kaplan, "The psychic fragmentation expressed,through female characters in women's writings is seen as the most important sign of their sexual subordination more interesting and ultimately more meaningful than their social oppression."(152)

Manju Kapur and Shobha De through their novels *Home* and *Sisters* exemplify a women's innate desire for love, dependency, sense of belonging and the physical and emotional contentment. These novels give an indepth analysis of the modern Indian society in which woman is torn between her individuality and her obligations. Similar to Shobha De's heroine Mikki, Nisha also succeeds to a certain limit in attaining self-identity but fails to reach the culmination of self actualization.Kapur and De through their protagonists Nisha and Mikki affirm the capacity of the new educated Indian women to determine their priorities for self-discovery. Therefore, Nisha and Mikki stand out as women of strong determination to an extent breaking the shackles of male dominated society in quest of their self-identity.

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