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An Inner Voyage for Existence: An Introspection of Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman and The Immigrant*

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Abstract:

In the present scenario women characters have been playing major role in the writings of many acclaimed writers of India. Women were and still are in the centre of any tradition and modernity. Many women writers have written on various shades of women but some of them are noteworthy to describe like Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee Shobhaa De, Ruchira Mukherjee etc. It is Manju Kapur who keeps her significant place on the literary platform of women writings. Since her debut novel she has got worldwide acclaim for her women narratives. All her novels *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006) *The Immigrant* (2008), and the most recent *Custody* (2011) is the exploration of constant struggle for raging the desire and ambition at the conscious level of the soul. If we examine critically the novels of Manju Kapur we find her women characters fighting with their conflicting dreams. The aim of the present paper is to bring forward the voices of women characters with their inner experiences of life and desire to be a part of life according to their own will. The study will chiefly focus on how women are cognizant enough for their position in the society and in finding their identity as an independent human being. So the present paper will throw light on women protagonists from the select novels *A Married Woman* and *The Immigrant* on the above discussed point of view.

Keywords: Tradition, Modernity, Identity, Cognizant, Independent, Narrative, Struggle and Dreams.

An awareness of identity and womanhood has made women able to overcome inferiority, which was an outcome of patriarchy and parental dominance, which gave birth to feminist literature with an identity crisis and this has led women to a negotiating position. Such an attitude is a consequence of feminism, which is hailed as an end to sexism; hence it becomes an expression of resentment and revolt. An understanding of Manju Kapur's world of affairs and world of creation is essential to trace out the instinct of negotiation pervading the literary output brought forward by her. Indeed she has acquired a deep understanding about the affairs of the world we live in. Manju Kapur being an academic figure turned into becoming a writer has a deep insight

in the portrayal of women characters. Her choice of subjects brought a new set of thinking about the presence of women characters in the whole range of Indian writings in English. She tries to put the contemporary reality about the different expressions of women, their sense of choice and about the way of life they want to live in the present scenario. Her novels portray female autonomy which is the sole of women as complete human beings to uplift their self-image. Once in an interview with Deepa Diddi she has mentioned that:

Yes. I am a feminist writer in the sense that my works are woman-centric. My novels focus on the needs and desire of women from different backgrounds and in different situations. Women yearn for recognition for their work, particularly since domestic labour so often goes unappreciated. They want concern and a sharing of responsibilities. (159)

Her women characters lead their life with an assertion to be treated as a subject at large. Yashika Chandna in her article 'Quest for Identity' by "her" in the novels of Manju Kapur- *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*' states that "Manju Kapur's novels present the changing image of women; moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring women, self-sacrificing women towards self-assured, assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands and in this way providing a medium of self-expression." (87) Again she says:

The Indian woman is caught in flux of tradition and modernity saddled with burden of the past to cast off her aspirations. In the novels of Kapur the woman goes through transitional phase where they become different from traditional women and want to tread new paths. The modern woman does not find any sense in such self-sacrifice and yearns for self-expression, individuality, and self-identity. A woman is never regarded as an autonomous being since she has always been assigned a subordinate and a relative position. (89)

The protagonists of Manju Kapur's novels are generally well-educated. It is their education that helped them most in finding their true 'self' amid patriarchal society. Through their education they become able to build their career at their desired place. As aptly quoted by Poonam Rani Gupta:

They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunge into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless background. (11)

A Married Woman is the narrative of Indian womanhood in which protagonist Astha struggles to achieve breathing space in life amid socio-cultural domains. Being a middle-class sophisticated married woman she has a continuous search of her individuality in opposition to the present patriarchal surroundings and appears as self-determining woman. However, the setting of the novel is during the devastation of the Babri Masjid but the centre of the whole story is Astha and her ambition for individuality. Manju Kapur has portrayed Astha who has everything that a married woman desires to have in life like children, a loving husband and all the comfort of life but there was something missing in her life. Aptly said by Alka Singh:

Her transition from one role model to another had been easy-baby daughter to adolescence, to womanhood, to motherhood and in to the experience of a new life but this alien experience leaves her dissatisfied...maintaining the semblance of a stable home and at the same time sustaining her own sense of loss and anxiety. (167)

Astha was the woman who carves her identity by trying her hand in different fields out of annoyance, anguish, isolation and loneliness in orthodox family. Astha tries to find her space by writing poems, but that became the subject of Hemant's scrutiny. She writes, "Change The eventual release of pain In the tearing restless separation....darkness grows silently. To hide me in the Break of day" (*A Married Woman* 80-81). Astha doesn't leave her pursuit of individuality here. She starts finding her expression in painting. Her paintings gave her the voice to be herself to frame a separate individuality from her husband and family. She becomes independent through the big selling of her paintings. Not only this, she made herself busy in writing script of Babri Masjid- Ram Janmabhoomi controversy. According to Alka Singh, "The silent negation on Hemant's part made her stand up in self-defense for she was not ready to submit to ignorance." (169)

The novelist has presented her protagonist as an individual and self-governing human being. Her character Astha grooms her personality by making her active presence not only in writing script but in political rallies too. She actively participates in the Demonstrations outside Rastrapati Bhawan to commemorate Aijaz's death ceremony. She didn't feel to ask for Hemant's permission to join the demonstration because she was the obstinate sophisticated woman. She raises her voice of protest to draw the public attention towards the murder of innocent people who were brutally killed. Where are you going? Hemant repeated. "To a demonstration outside Rashtrapati Bhawan. It is the anniversary of the massacre". "You seem to forget that your place as a decent family woman is in the home, and not on the streets? You also forget that this New Year's Eve, and we are going out" (172). "As my wife, you think it proper to run around, abandoning home, leaving the children to servants?" Astha went in to familiar distress. As his wife? Was that all she was? (188) Astha goes for Ayodhya Yatra and then comes to Red Fort and shouts:

"Sampradayakta
 Down down
 Down Down
 Communalism
 Will not succeed
 Will not succeed
 The Street Theatre Group
 Martyrs All
 Aijaz Akhtar
 Remembered Forever" (143).

When we consider the case of Kapur's women we are reminded of Dr. Ashok Kumar's statement when he says:

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the women's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact. (48)

The responsiveness of political matters gave Astha way in to the outer world of autonomy by which she forgets to confine the patriarchal norms and she started struggling with her mounting solitude. Astha re-creates her identity by moving according to her own inclination. She doesn't submit herself only to the conventional roles assigned to a woman for leading a mechanical life. Dr. Satendra Kumar explains –

A Married Woman (2002) was the second novel by Manju Kapur once again underlining and articulating the central concerns of Indian woman. In this novel Astha, the young heroine, is the representative of the woman striving to gain their space in life and socio-cultural domains. (32)

Like Astha, the protagonist Nina from the novel *The Immigrant* is highly learned woman. She is an independent woman who works as a lecturer at Miranda House in Delhi. After her marriage with an NRI she moves for Canada. After some time her status of being isolated and immigrated started haunting her. Her identity was nothing but associated with the name of her husband Ananda. Her teaching degree was insufficient to get her a job in a foreign country. She started feeling forlorn and homesick. She felt that she has been cheated there. Nina tries to adopt the ethnicity and traits of that country to find her space and belongingness. She broods:

To stop finding little things strange and confusing, laughable and inappropriate. Wear the shoe on the other foot, sister, brother. They think the same of you. Get rid of the schism, become enough like them to be comfortable, more and mingle...forget the smells, sights, sounds you were used to, forget them or you will not survive. There is new stuff around, make it your own, you have to. (*The Immigrant* 121)

However, Nina manages to get a job in a library to avoid the boredom of her conjugal relationship. She thinks that "work is an easy way to integrate. Work engages the mind and prevents it from brooding over the respective merits of what has been lost and gained" (121). The time she started spending in library brought her the sense of liberation from her image of house wife. She finds the way to express herself, her desire, her feelings and of course her state of autonomy.

"Feverishly she scanned the titles. European, English classics, American, Canadian fiction-authors she had never heard of...Each day now had its purpose enshrined in the Halifax Memorial Library. It was amazing how direction appeared in her life with just compelling destination...As she walked the swung her tote bag in a simulacrum of carefree gaiety" (142).

After a long struggle to belong by rejecting the cultural hegemony Nina lies in the process of adjustment as a 'subject' in the foreign land. She succeeds in acquiring the sense of autonomy which was the spring of life for her. She rejects the proposal of her husband to have a baby by saying, "you were right- it's so soon. I have to find my feet" (236). Like Astha, she was so independent in her thought that she doesn't pay any attention towards the lost values of her nuptial bond with her husband. Her independent decisions and thinking brought her retribution and self-recognition through which she decides not to go back to India but desires to ascertain her identity away from the shadow of her husband. She asserts:

I need to be myself,' she clarified. 'Away from me. Why don't you say it?' 'yes, away from you.(329)

Kapur's fiction stresses on the woman's need for self-fulfillment, sovereignty, self-realization, self-determination, distinctiveness and self-actualization. According to Malti Agarwal:

Like many other Indian women writers, she voices the trials and tribulations of her female characters who, no doubt, recognize the primal essence of family bond but are conscious of their individuality. While living in the suffocating atmosphere of the traditional values of middleclass constraints, Kapur's heroines strive to assert themselves. (26)

Soon after her constant struggle Nina gets a final call from the University of New Brunswick and she prepares herself for a venture on a new path without Ananda.

The things that might have made separation in India difficult for Nina were hers to command in Canada. Financial self-sufficiency, rental ease, social acceptability. She hoped independence would facilitate her thought process. She looked down the path on which there would be no husband and saw the difficulties, the pain, the solitude. Nevertheless treading it was not unimaginable. (329)

The function of women has undergone a considerable shift in the post-colonial time, as they now have extra power and control over their bodies and autonomy in expressions of choice making. Manju Kapur strappingly believes this transformation in the images of women has made a powerful impact on Indian womanhood where the tormented but stoic woman ultimately breaks conventional boundaries to carve a position for herself. The development of the adolescent mind into its adulthood is well experimented in the existence of her female characters. Kapur creates consciousness and at the same time insists on the position of women as an individual. Her female protagonists do not impound themselves to that of male prospect or difference with male world largely, but they confer for their autonomy and a reputable position in society. This is an age of liberation for the Indian Women where they have amplified opportunities and a more vibrant contribution in the social and rational life of the country. As aptly stated by Priyanka Mahajan:

This evolving new image of women has created a crisis in family and society and has shaken the foundations of age-old institutions like marriage and motherhood. Pre-marital sex, fornication, extra-marital relations or divorce are no longer considered to be a taboo. The concept of ideal Indian woman has become outdated. A modern woman is career-oriented because she knows that it is her

economic dependence which empowers a male to dominate his wife and subject her to physical and mental torture. (202)

All the two above discussed female characters tries to establish themselves as an individual and 'subject' in the society ' Thus according to Sunita Sinha:

Discovery of one's self is the key theme of the novel and refers to the aspiration for freedom and liberty achieved by an individual as well as by a woman dwelling in between family and self is primarily considered in Kapur's novel....She is feminist in the sense that she is intensely concerned with the issues related to woman. Kapur's fiction stresses on the woman's need for self fulfillment, autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, and self actualization. (160)

Towards the conclusion it is apt discussing that both of the female protagonists of Manju Kapur reject the hegemonic shadow of a dutiful wife and grasps a life as an individual who can live and thrive all around the world. The women like Astha and Nina who were bound in Indian culture and ethos makes their path from east to west apart from the complications of life. Manju Kapur makes her women to peep into the deft of their ultimate soul where Astha acquires effectiveness of her individuality that deters her from receding to a conformist Indian society and Nina decides her route of action as well as intervention through western feminist emancipation. In the tainted edifying situation, Manju Kapur's women do not basically become the sufferers of their male counterparts of conventional patriarchal social order but they are made known with new possibilities, equal opportunities and voice of individuality and self-determination. Through the protagonist Astha and Nina Kapur delineates responsive women who pursue for their 'self' out of aggravation, agony, alienation and isolation in male dominating cultural society. When we critically examine both of the novels we find that novelist Manju Kapur has made us to think of her perceptions of female's autonomy and self-determination within the socio-cultural paradigms and spaces in India.

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