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Repression and Resistance: Feminist Approaches in the Novels of Manju Kapur

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Abstract:

The modern woman, educated and conscious of her rights, protests against her social exploitations. Manju Kapur's novels focus on the complexities of the woman's life through different cultural and social values, and her struggle under the unfair mechanism of a bolted society. This research paper provides a valid introduction to the feminist viewpoint of a family life, feminine psyche using concepts of conjugal roles, dual burden, equal opportunities and different social policies as evident to support the feminist viewpoint. The novelist portrays a woman on the threshold of a self-discovery and suddenly decides to take her life into her own hands. She is the woman, searching for power and freedom, and focusing on the inner strength possessed by her as the human being. Kapur's works support our understanding of the psyche of a woman, who is trapped in the web of relationships, partly made by her, and partly made for her. The female protagonists of Kapur exemplify a mystery of convention and modernity often faced by them in Indian society; their inner struggle between the desire to take care of their husbands and children and the desire to discover deeper modes of fulfillment that fall outside the conventional social norms. Manju Kapur has successfully and proficiently captured the Indian ethos. At the same time, she shows their deep insight into human nature and their understanding of everyday problems. She deals with the various themes of the clash between tradition and modernity, the identity crisis of their protagonists, Indian woman's quest for freedom etc. The quest for feminine identity, a dominant Post-Independence social phenomenon in India, forms the central theme of her novels. They also weigh with different subjects like the man-woman relationship, human desire, longing, gender discrimination, marginalization, rebellion and protest. The male characters in all these novels are dominating and extremely affect the psyche of women to such an extent that all the main women characters- Virmati, Astha, Nisha, Nina and Shagun - are on the verge of seclusion. In her novels, we see the glorified woman trying to

throw off the burden that she has been carrying for a long time. The image of a woman is changing with the passage of time. The protagonist, portrayed by the novelist is away from the traditional portrayals of the self-sacrificing, enduring, humble and quiet woman. They are the modern portrayals of self-confident, assertive, cultured, protesting and ambitious ones making society alert of their requirements and proving their identities.

Keywords: Modern woman, Feminine psyche, Social, Convention, Modernity, Human nature, Tradition, Conjugal roles, Identity, Social exploitations.

Indian fiction, since its origin more than a hundred years ago, has dealt with the position of women in society. Indian writers especially women writers in the recent decades have produced plentiful literary output, their focus of writing being in gender and the role of women in society. These writers inquire into human relationships since they are closely concerned with the mind and heart. Woman has inspired literature and has been its essential theme too. The image of woman is central to the study of literature all over the world. She herself is also a creator of literature and therefore a woman's presence in literature is all pervading. This is true of Indian Literature in English too. Literature records life and society's reaction to it which is embodied in the author's image portrayed in her creation. An exploration of the representation of woman in literature enables one to assess the writer's vision of them. In a transitional state of our country's history when society is changing from tradition to modernity, such an exercise has its own worth. In order to make the process of change smooth and really significant, women writers have taken upon themselves this great task of their crusade against established traditions. As we all know that repression and resistance have always been important issues in any society, but they are of great significance in the postcolonial era. These issues are of the greatest concern in the novels under this research paper. Repression is the exercise of authority or power in a troublesome, cruel, or unfair manner. It is a state of being oppressed, and the feeling of being heavily troubled, mentally or physically, by troubles, unfavorable conditions, and nervousness. It is socially supported mistreatment and exploitation of a group, category, or team of people by anyone. Resistance is understood as the refusal to accept or comply with something; the attempt to prevent something by action or argument. It aims to resist, analyze and counter repression in general. The researcher hopes to elaborate these conceptual terms further with the help of contemporary theorization of repression and resistance in feminist scholarship as well as in other fields. The problem addressed in this study is how the novels of Manju Kapur represent the issues of repression of women and what structures of resistance are made visible in them.

The study will aim at examining the status of Manju Kapur as a feminist writer and will try to investigate whether her works present a literary representation of feminist politics. The study will also try to identify the specific character of her works within the tradition of feminist fiction in India.

In beginning phase, woman in novels of Indian English authors was depicted as a victim and was exploited and oppressed however with the passage of time, the past tradition is transformed. The woman depicted by these authors is self dependent, free and liberal and can take every decision of her life. She is not now a toy of enjoyment and sex. V. T. Girdhari Says:

The male, as representative of the patriarchal society has at last been jerked off the centre of women's gravitation woman is preparing now to be her own gravitational force beyond the pull of patriarchy (Girdhari 2002: 78).

In post-Independence period, we can see multiple of women writers with prolific and innovative mentality came into existence. Their style writing, depiction of woman and portrayal of social issues are completely notable. They are inculcating the women character in their works in an excellent way. They have uncovered the sufferings, torment and oppression of woman characters in an exceptional way. In the nineteen eighties, we can easily see rise of new young, creative women novelists who consulted their message that their work are universally praised. At the very early, Indian English novels were having male supremacy for some time but after the arrival of women writers in post-Independence era contributed a lot in the realms of Indian literature. They include writers like Anita Desai, Shashi Deashpande, Kamala Markandya, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala, Nergis Dalal, Namita Gohkale, Shobha De, Githa Hariharan, Arundhati Rao, Githa Mehta, Manju Kapur etc all being creative brains to deal every situation appropriately. After reading works of these writers, we can simply see that the Indian woman has, for years, been a silent victim. They have been continuously struggling to find a significant and respectable position for themselves. Undoubtedly, everyday speech and expressive language and literature help to establish these ideologies of gender. A picture of changing images of Indian women who are under a journey struggling to find their identity is exhibited by Nayantara Sehgal's *Riches like us*, Anita Desai *Cry, the Peacock, Where Shall We Go This Summer? Voices in the City*, Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Ruth Prawar Jhabvala's *To Whom She will*, Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*, Kamala Markandya's *Two Virgins* and Santha Rama Rau's *Remember the House*. These are some examples which emphasize the status of a woman in Indian societies. Among these Indo English novelists, the novels of Manju Kapur oscillate between the imitation and protest

stage, and reaching lastly to the self-discovery. Nayantara Sehgal, Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and many other women writers' rebel against the traditional role, breaking the silence of misery, trying to move out of the imprisoned existence and asserting the individual self. Since many social reformers helped the women to cross the threshold of family life and move out into the external world of liberty struggle and social reform, the woman is presented with diverse opportunities not only today but also yesterday during freedom movement. The women of India have indeed achieved their victory in half a century of Independence, but if there is to be a true female, independence, much remains to be done. The struggle for autonomy remains an unfinished combat. Yet writing in 1998, Manju Kapur, in her novels presents women who try to establish their own identity. In her search of identify, she can safely be called one of the most influential chroniclers of the modern Indian family.

In her first novel *Difficult Daughters* Kapur emerges as a feminist author basing the entire work of fiction on the interwoven lives of women characters Kasturi, Virmati, Ida, Ganga, Shakuntala and Swarnalata. The novel revolves around the aspirations and attempts of women characters like Virmati, Ida, Shakuntala and Swarnalata who break free from the traditional roles of motherhood and homemaker and assert their individualities in their due roles in the social and political upheavals of the times. Each of these women characters through their defiance of tradition and assertion of human requirements represents generations of difficult daughters. The challenges they face from the family and society and in turn the challenges they throw to family and society becomes a saga of struggle creating an irrevocable line of pain that pervades three generations of motherhood. While at a micro-level these trials and tribulations stand for an entire nation's struggle for freedom, at an individual level they symbolize the emergence of feminine assertiveness in a patriarchal society. Ironically the rebellious Virmati as a mother tried to imbibe the values of compromise, adaption and adjustment. Her father on the other hand, attached significance to her appearance and artistic pursuit of music, dance, literature and academics. Ida is the daughter of the intellectual professor who was known for his deep knowledge, intelligence and position in the field of academics expected his daughter to follow his path and prove herself in studies. But there were no signs of intellectual brilliance in her. Ida rebelled against her mother's restrictions and father's implorations and decided to live all by herself. She didn't want to follow anybody, didn't want to live life designed by others, wanted to live her life as her own wish, in her own designed ways, free from the dominance of anybody else, even her own parents. She was not convinced to sacrifice herself and her happiness to please her

parents. In the factual sense of the term, she was an independent woman. Ida is again a 'difficult daughter' like her mother. The defiance is unmistakably hereditary. Ida always used to protest against her mother. There was an opposition in the opinions of the defying daughter Ida and her mother Virmati:

'There are other things in life,' she told her mother... You mean living only for yourself. You are disappointing your father. Why is it so important to please him?... She wanted to please herself sometimes....I grew up struggling to be the model daughter. Pressure to perform day and night....looking pretty, neat,...do well in school, learn classical music, take dance lessons, read literature,...As a result, I am constantly looking for escape routes (Kapur 1998: 279).

This discovery of her mother's true self which presents a new Virmati liberates Ida from her own psychological baggage as she doesn't feel threatened by her mother's shadow anymore. When Ida emotionally reconstructs her parents' relationship, she is able to see and visualize the tribulations that her mother must have undergone in order to reach her final destination. Ida's journey of discovery establishes a deep psychological connect between the two different daughters. She conjures up a mansion in her heart with words of the book as bricks, for her new found mother to live in. The memories of her uneasy relationship with her mother will cease to hunt Ida anymore. She finally expresses:

My mother spent the period after my divorce coating the air I breathed with sadness and disapproval. 'What will happen to you after I am gone?' was her favorite lament....For long periods I was engulfed by melancholy, depression, and despair....Now her shadow no longer threatens me. Without the hindrance of her presence, I can sink into her past and make it mine. In search for a woman I could know, I have pieced together material from memories that were muddled, partial and contradictory....This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore (Kapur 1998: 279).

Ida is truly free, solid, and clear in her thoughts and activity, not the same as her mother. She isn't trapped in the web of the desires of her mind, male controlled society and love. She needs to carry on with a free life lastly accomplished it. She ends her marriage when she is denied the right and desire of motherhood by her husband. Ida's journey for self-

sufficiency and character is acknowledged at the end of the narrative. She selects the way strikingly which her mother could not.

Examining the theme of 'marriage' for the study of repression and resistance of women characters through the institution of marriage in Kapur's novels, it is noticed that for the author, marrying off her female characters is of the greatest importance. The reasons can be social, religious or even status related to save the family from external criticism for not getting married 'at the right time'. Manju Kapur's writing highlights the very crux of the problem. How a mother reacts to the matter of marriage is a very common issue in the families where there are daughters of marriageable age. The ensuing instances project how the girls are assessed with detached passion when it comes to their marriage. Kasturi, mother of Virmati, feels, "it is the duty of every girl to get married" (Kapur 1998: 15). Astha's mother in Manju Kapur's novel *A Married Woman*, also has something similar to share. She tells Astha,

When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the Shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth (Kapur 2003: 1).

Nina's mother in Manju Kapur's novel *The Immigrant* also wants a husband for her educated daughter.

The major topic of conversation in the last eight years had been Nina's marriage- who, whom, where, how? From where could fresh possibilities be unearthed on the eve of her thirtieth birthday? The lack of these, reflected in her mother's dull, mournful eyes, was what she was going home to (Kapur 2008: 3).

Sona and Rupa of Manju Kapur's novel *Home*, also get married into a rich business family and a middle-class family respectively. Also in her latest novel *Custody*, the mother of beautiful Shagun is worried about the marriage of her daughter and instructs her: "Do what you like after you marry" (Kapur 2011: 11). 'Mothers' in all her novels are eager to get their daughters married, as for them, it is their responsibility and that is what is expected in Indian culture and society. Marriage in a way is the compensation for a woman for what she does not possess, that is power to assert and rule. Manju Kapur is also aware of this undercurrent; hence, the female characters are allowed to breathe in the cliched domestic atmosphere and live the life within traditionally conservative limits. 'Marriage' to all these characters, therefore, has different meanings. It is interesting to find out how repression takes place through the institution of marriage in the novels of Manju Kapur.

The rising violence against women is nothing but a testimony to the normalization of victimization. The victims of violence never yearn for sympathy but they do wait for a strong action against the offenders. Kapur explains how the victims remain unprotected in the unsafe land, India. Ida in *Difficult Daughters* is a victim - but nobody ever bothers to help her. Nisha in *Home* is yet another victim who has nobody to empathize with her. Her parents reject the boy with whom she has fallen in love because he is a paswan. They give their dear daughter in marriage to a widower who treats his second marriage as a stop-gap arrangement. He has no idea about the real personality of Nisha. Kapur, as a true feminist, levels a charge against the society which has no hesitation to reduce the much-dreamt about marriages into mere mechanical arrangements. Her fiction is a manifestation of the feminist critique because of the polemical seeds embedded in it. She tries to deconstruct the superstitious society in order to reconstruct a new society. According to her, only a desirable change in the attitude of the society can bring about the transformation. Her novels are not result of skepticism but they are an expression of hope. She envisions a "brave new world" where women have greater roles to play.

Now let us have look over the story of the novel *the immigrant*. The story follows the journey of one woman who strives to make a separate identity for herself. At every step of her journey, she is faced with restrictions, discriminations, compulsions and expectations which describe her existence. The character Nina has to confront a multitude of obstacles at every new situation she encounters and strives to be assimilated to the changed environment at the earliest. Nina portraying the struggles of the typical Indian woman is in the condition of perpetual immigration at several levels. In every new land or circumstance, she as the 'immigrant' is expected to adjust, accommodate, compromise and sacrifice in order to be accepted. The women must comply with the male defined patriarchal norms in order to gain her identity in the society. Even in the liberal west, the immigrant woman is discriminated on gender, color, and race. The journey is a process of awakening for Nina, who finally realizes that even she has her right to happiness. She accepts and adopts the western individualistic philosophy where self gratification takes priority over family and social obligations. This understanding liberates her from the bondages that she had been confined to, within the prison of traditions. She becomes enlightened and decides to seek happiness on her own terms. She also accepts change as a constant and inevitable companion as symbolized by the process of immigration that she had to undergo. Kapur says:

These immigrants are always in two minds. Outwardly they adjust well. Educated and English speaking, they allow misleading assumptions about a heart that is divided (Kapur 2008: 120).

A change in the mind set with regard to empowerment and liberation of women is quite noticeable among the present-day literary artists, particularly women. Most of them reveal social awareness in their choice of themes and delineation of characters, particularly women characters. In doing so they reveal a sense of feeling that wrongs are wrongs and should be responded to as how sensitive human beings should respond to wrongs. This is the key reason why the women novelists, both in regional language and in English have taken up the themes of women empowerment and liberation as the most vital themes of their creative works. As discrimination against women extends to every field of their activities more and more literary works from different genres, particularly the novels deal with such themes with redoubled vigour and enthusiasm. A study of the women characters in the novels of Manju Kapur enables one to extrapolate that the society needs a change in its attitude with regard to objectification and subordination of women. Society has to accept women at par and give them due respect and should not think women as mere child –bearing structures. This study focuses mostly on the gradual changes that have come over in the minds of women from generation to generation. Virmati, Astha and Nisha may be termed as modern women and these modern women are, though educated and have economical independence, are not ready to go beyond the limits of tradition as traditional values are deep seated in their mind whereas Ida, Nina and Shagun who may be put under the category of new women, are ready to break the conventional ideas and beliefs of patriarchal society in their search for their self.

In view of the fact that the violence against women has become very common, it need not be dismissed as the order of the day. A feminist awareness is the need of the hour. It must be treated as the sacred duty of each individual, no matter if it is "he" or "she", to strive for achieving this feminist awareness. This is exactly what the modern women writers do through their creative endeavours in the form of their writings. Their contention that women are the final losers cannot be dismissed as a mere polemical juggernaut. There is truth in their fervour for social justice. Kapur has presented an interesting and intriguing depiction of women, focusing on the ecstasy and the agony experienced by women in her novels. Marriage is a result of relentless adjustments and compromises made by the proverbial homemaker. It is because of a woman's patience and insight that a family becomes a force; it faces all storms; survives all rough patches. But the flip side is the Indian males, who, with a chauvinistic approach, do not easily give equal position to women. According to the events in

the novels, all women do not necessarily want equality with men but they do want to be seen as a subject, and in terms of difference, subjectivity has a different meaning for each. Internalized patriarchal values have a significant result on the life of women. If women begin to bring these values to the surface they can move on in their journey towards emancipation.

One of the things that become clear through the study of the novels is that women do have the strength in themselves but the problem is that they get caught in the web of patriarchy and forget their strength. They need to move towards self-realization but the process each one goes through is different from the other.

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