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Different Facets of Women's Emancipation: A Study of Manju Kapur's Select Works

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Abstract:

Indian women writers have projected women issues with their inner-aspiration as well as their peculiar responses to men and society. Contemporary Indian women writers are trying to trace assertion, identity consciousness as well as professional endeavor in women protagonists. Modern women portrayed in these writings try to become counterproductive to their real empowerment. In the present times these women characters are seen as more professional to become the official keepers of sexual equality.

The study encompasses the works of an eminent Indian woman writer, whose writings are distinguished in presenting the bold status of women in Indian society without any social concern. The chief concern of this paper is to present major concepts of women's self-independence and assertiveness.

Keywords: Consciousness, Empowerment, Assertiveness, Identity, Equality.

Indian fiction writing in English is a long-cherished victory on the world literary platform amid which women's writings in English secures its acclaimed position. Historically, the earlier phase of women's writings was associated with women issues on the basis of patriarchal norms. Towards the end of the nineteenth century significant attempts were made to criticize the specific roles assigned to women based on their gender. The principal focus was made on the suffering of women characters at different stages of their life. But contemporary Indian women's writings in English have crossed the boundaries in bringing out the issues like identity consciousness or sense of autonomy of women. Manju Kapur is a prolific writer and primarily deals with women-oriented

issues. She has five novels to her credit. From her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) to the *Custody* (2011); she focuses on middle-class working women of Indian.

Manju Kapur in her writings brings forward the images of women who are rebelling against their conventional role. They try to break the silence of suffering by confronting themselves. All the women protagonists of her novels come as confrontationists. According to Dr. Ashok Kumar:

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writings 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 (194).

The main attempt of the present paper is to analyze the existential problems faced by women protagonists in the two novels *A Married Woman* and *The Immigrant*. These novels symbolize strong protest against social restrictions, taboos, and long-established code of conduct of society. Her novel *A Married Woman* is based on the life of the protagonist Astha. Astha is a middle-class modern woman who dreams of her individuality. Astha is a married woman but does not submit herself to the conventional roles assigned to her. She had a passion for life since her adulthood. She wanted to lead her life according to her choice. She protests her mother's decision whose only concern was Astha's marriage. In their opinion, if parents die without getting their daughter married then they will be destined to perpetual rebirth. On her mother's statement Astha says, "I don't believe in all that stuff and I think as an educated person neither should you" (Kapur, *AMW* 1).

Manju Kapur's female protagonists do not want to confine themselves to moral or ethical values. Astha's consciousness of identity was depicted through the choices she made regarding her partner. During her adulthood she was engaged with several love relationships. She always dreamed of a handsome guy to hold her hand, "Shadowy young man holding her in his strong manly embrace" (1). Her first love affair was with Bunty, an Army cadet in Khakvasala. She was so daring that she invites her lover for meeting and movie without any hesitation. She paid no

attention to the warnings of her mother. Astha was in her world away from the business of society, waiting for the holidays so that she could meet with Bunty. She broods:

It would be different now, no awkwardness or shyness. They were closer, they had shared their thoughts and feelings. Hopefully they would kiss. Where and how? She imagined the place, grew lost in her fantasies (12).

Her relationship with Bunty ended with the interruption of her mother. Astha protests her mother's step by saying, "How dare her mother interfere in her friendships?" (15) Next, she engages herself with Rohan and tries to taste the sense of freedom. This relationship didn't come to fruitfulness. Meanwhile, she continues rejecting all the proposals coming to her, "I am not coming" she shouted... "I cannot meet anyone like this" (21). At last, she becomes ready to get herself married with Hemant; a foreign returned man of a bureaucrat family. Astha enters into her matrimonial bond with firm apprehensions but slowly goes astray in her conjugal ecstasy, "A few months and dullness began to taint Astha's new life" (46). Through her protagonist Astha, Manju Kapur has tried to bring forward the subservient position of a wife to her husband. Astha feels, "Her subservient position struck her. She had no business kneeling, taking off his shoes, pulling off his socks, feeling ecstatic about the smell of his feet" (50).

After her marriage, she started feeling disappointed. She strongly felt the lack of sagaciousness in her life. Days passed but she remains disillusioned and lost in her sense of individuality; waiting for Hemant to understand her. To overcome her boring life, she decides to join the school. She thinks, "with good job comes independence" (4). Astha tries to get a new personality as a teacher at St. Anthony's School. She transforms her image of housewife to a working independent woman. At the same time, she tries to keep stability between her inner and outer spheres. "She too had changed from being a woman who only wanted love, to a woman who valued independence" (72).

Astha was a woman of self-dependency. She was a new woman who asserts as well as secures her position in her family. She comes up as a liberated woman who fights for her sense of independence. Next, she finds her expression in writing poems. But her writings faced the criticism of her husband, "Writing alleviated the heaviness within her, a heaviness she found hard to deal with...In the struggle to express herself she found temporary relief" (79). To secure her position as an independent human being, she started writing script for a workshop. The workshop was organized by Street Theatre Group and founded by Aijaz Akhtar Khan, a theater artist. This phase

of her life was a new kind of sensation to her identity. She completely engaged herself in writing script of Babri Masjid- Ram Janambhoomi controversy. She started asserting her desire in the company of Aijaz, "suddenly she glimpsed possibilities, suddenly her life seemed less constricted" (115). Her creativity started blooming as soon as she takes her painting work seriously. She tells her husband, "I want something of my own...My own money" (148). Her paintings were highly acclaimed. Soon, she started receiving heavy orders. After sometimes she has to leave her teaching job to devote herself to her passion of paintings completely. Her love for paintings financially secured her position in the family as well as in society. Her painting exhibition became a grand success.

Next, Astha became more conscious for her choices. She makes her first independent decision of joining the '*munch*' to protest the brutal death of Aijaz and nine other people in a communal violence. Despite the disapproval of her husband Hemant, she joins the active mass rally to protest. When Hemant says, "Please. Keep to what you know best, the home, children, teaching. All this doesn't suit you" (116). She replies to this by saying, "It's not the political, made-up kind of rally. We want to draw attention to what has happened...Besides, we don't want their memories to die...Astha left the house without a further word" (142).

She didn't feel seeking Hemant's permission to join the demonstration. She became independent and stubborn in taking decisions. She wanted to walk on her own decisions.

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". "As my wife, you think it proper to run around, abandoning home, leaving the children to servants?" "Astha went into familiar distress. As his wife? Was that all she was? (188).

During her trip to Ayodhya and different other places with Pipeelika, the widow of Aijaz, Astha realized her true self. Soon her meeting with Pipeelika curved out to be a fascination. By keeping a lesbian relationship, she challenges the prevailing paradigms and existing societal customs. Her lesbian bond with Pipeelika was an individual choice to discover a substitute from the oppression of a heterosexual involvement. Alka Singh states, "A secret desire lies at the bottom of Astha's heart which seeks freedom from the hearth and home thus abandoning her duty to maintain moral standard in society" (171). Through all these instances from Astha's life, Manju

Kapur has tried to negotiate the quest of existence at various levels. Through her protagonist Astha, she has brought the frontal challenge to conventional thinking and norms. Dr Kumar explains as:

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).

Her next novel, *The Immigrant* (2008) represents the issues like self-consciousness and sense of autonomy through the protagonist Nina, a thirty-year old unmarried woman. Manju Kapur's portrayal of Nina brings out the images of a woman, who is in search of her individuality amid unfamiliar culture. Like other female characters, Nina is also an independent modern educated woman. She is a lecturer at Miranda House. Nina migrates to Canada soon after her marriage with an NRI dentist, Ananda. In Canada, Nina broods over her situation as a wife. She feels lonely for hours. Due to the immigrant psyche, Nina started feeling homesick. Novelist Manju Kapur has well stated an immigrant psyche of a woman, when she comes to another country. She says:

The immigrant who comes as a wife has a more difficult time. If work exists for her, it is in the future and after much finding of feet. At present all she is, a wife, and a wife is alone for many-many hours. There will come a day when even books are powerless to distract. When the house and its conveniences can no longer completely charm or compensate...an immigrant for life (Kapur, *TI* 121-22).

Nina tries to assimilate herself into the culture of that country. She spends her time in reading books but was not able to find a solution to cope with the situation. She was a lecturer at Miranda House but in that alien country her teaching degree was not enough to get her a job. She cries at her situation:

Everything is very strange", she said in a rush, "I used to be a teacher, in fact I taught for ten years before I came here. And now I do nothing. I have not even been able to conceive. Am I locked into stereotypical expectations? I don't know...I miss home — I miss a job — I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife? (229-33)

Nina wanted the space in her life away from the image of a housewife. She used to be independent as a teacher in India, but here she is entirely alone for a long time. She wanted to enjoy

her life, working herself freely. She thinks, "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). To come out from her state of loneliness, she decides to take a membership of a library. She starts passing her time in reading several books. During that, she felt the sense of liberation from her image of a house wife. She finds her 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 she swung her tote bag in a simulacrum of carefree gaiety (142).

Again, she tries to assimilate with the surroundings and culture of a foreign land by wearing western clothes, eating non-vegetarian food, spending time in meeting with peoples, and visiting several malls. She Thinks:

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 (121).

Eventually, Nina starts accepting the cultures and norms of Canada instead of thinking over the time spent in India. Meanwhile, she came to know about the impotence of her husband, Ananda because of which she could not conceive. The mutual understanding between both Ananda and Nina was not working correctly. The constant demand of child dragged her away from her marital bond. In utter loneliness, she joins a women's group to express her feelings. She meets with Beth, who initiated the idea of starting a group. The group aimed was to support and strengthen women by working on the feminist principle and using co-counseling sessions. She makes her decision to join the group. She faces the criticism of Ananda, who keeps addressing the group as 'bra-burning feminists'. Nina was a self-willed woman, who wanted to carve her identity by herself. She protests the decision of her husband. She says vehemently:

Why shouldn't I join a group? When in Rome, do as Roman's do...Bra burning feminists? If there were any around she hadn't met them, and surely he was too

intelligent to stereotype. And she was going to the meeting. ‘I need to find my feet in this country; I can’t walk on yours’ (216).

Nina was daring enough to locate herself in western code of conduct. She didn’t want herself to submit towards the atrocities or stereotypical images of women. She was ready to welcome the change in her life. In search of her individuality as well as identity, she enters in an extra-marital affair with her colleague, Anton. In her sense of westernization, she didn’t feel any sense of guilt in keeping illicit relationships. She smells the air of liberation from the image of a house wife. Manju Kapur rightly comments, “She felt daring. It was easy here, drinking, smoking, asserting something, probably her sexuality” (258). Again, Manju Kapur mentions the state of Nina in which Nina asserts her position by saying that:

She had lived. Who can feel guilty about living? Judging from the evidence and the sexual therapy centers, every citizen in North America regarded good sex as their inalienable right. It was her right, too... So strange that the sex did not make her feel guilty, not beyond the initial; shock. Easy, she was amazed it was that easy. Her first lover had taken her virginity and her hopes, her second lover had been her husband, her third had made her international (260-61).

The actual independence came to her, when she receives an interview call from the University of New Brunswick. She decides to break away from her husband to acquire her liberation as well as to achieve aspirations in a foreign country. She asserts, “I need to be myself,” she clarified. ‘Away from me. Why don’t you say it?’ ‘Yes, away from you’” (329). Through Nina, Manju Kapur has represented the images of a woman, who has enjoyed the lifestyle of Canada without the shadows of her husband. Nina becomes satisfied with her decision to spend a life alone without any help of her husband.

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).

Toward the conclusion, it is clear that the projection of women in Kapur’s fiction is completely transformed. Women are independent and autonomous. They get rid of the images of submissive, meek or docile women depending on men for their survival. The women like Astha

and Nina, decides their path of life by making independent decisions and choices. Their negotiations and quest for self, have become noticeable phenomena in recent fiction writings in India.

Abbreviations:

AMW- A Married Woman

TI- The Immigrant

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