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Self-Assertive Role of Women: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters and Home*

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Abstract:

The Indian woman was portrayed as the tradition bound silent sufferer who was born to uphold the values handed over to her from centuries. She was confined to the roles of the caretaker of the domestic affairs of the family in the roles of daughters, sisters, wives, mothers, grandmothers whose only duty was to obey the patriarchy. Women thus have been the victims of male domination. They have been always looked down upon by the male dominated society. Gender discrimination was thus, the part and parcel of our society in which women were considered as weaker sex and were deprived of equal opportunities in almost all walks of life. More than half of the world's population in the form of women was thus kept in the custody for the ages together by killing their creativity and contribution to their respective nation building. It was then but natural that the women in the West first raised their voice against each and every kind of exploitation and exclusion.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Self Assertion, Exploitation, Modernity, Hegemony, Protest.

Introduction:

With the widespread of education that inculcated a sense of individuality among the women, a set of new paradigms related to a women's life such as tradition and modernity, self-assertion and self-efficacy, economic dependence came into existence in the writings of some contemporary women writers. The strength of the women began to be focused upon which was in contrast to the traditional picture of literary damsels. Such new women characters portrayed by the modern novelists seem to challenge the male devised orthodoxies about women nature, capacities and roles. A close analysis of the female characters in the novels of Manju Kapur reveals the trajectory of the physical, intellectual and psychological growth of the new woman through their constant resistance, struggle and success. The apparent failures at different phases of their lives don't jeopardize their inherent strength. On the contrary, they awaken their superior selves and provide them the impetus to look forward for newer ways of living their lives. Notwithstanding their improved socio-economic position, they always try their best to maintain a balanced social relationship. From the quagmire of their troubles and tribulations, they always rise victorious, not vanquished, rejuvenated, and not refurbished. Manju Kapur, unlike the feminists, doesn't make her characters all time rebels against patriarchal hegemony all the time; she makes them grow with their renewed knowledge and strength to confront their problems.

They right from the beginning of the 19th Century started demanding political, economic and educational equality. The movement started by Wollstonecraft in 1792 led to the decisive Movement in the 1960, with the publication of *The Second Sex* in 1953 by Simon De Beauvoir. She was followed by Betty Friedan, Germain Greer, Shulamith Firestone and so on. These views, naturally then reflected in the literatures of all countries.

In Indian English fiction too women were portrayed as mute sufferers, exploited ones an embodiment of tolerance, loyal to their husbands and their family members and one who is dedicated to

the household duties like rearing and caring the family. Their role was confined to only hearth and child. They were not allowed even to go out of the house and were kept always in the dark room behind the curtain. They were the embodiment of the dark room virginity, loyalty, tolerance, patience and all other virtues sans every kind of vices.

Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Jai Nimkar and a few novelists projected this kind of Indian tradition bound women. Through their women characters they show some rebellious hints, they did not cross the threshold of their house but the women players in the novels of Bharati Mukherjee, Uma Vasudev, Githa Hariharan and Manju Kapur dare to cross the threshold and assert their separate identity. In the process they even reject their husbands and do not hesitate to have illicit physical relations with other men.

The Paper aims at studying how Manju Kapur, well-known novelist in Indian writing in English has portrayed Indian women in her novels *Difficult Daughters* (1998) and *Home* (2006). Manju Kapur, a professor of English in Miranda House University College for women, Delhi has written five novels so far. They are *A Married Women* (2003), *The Immigrant* (2009) and *Custody* (2011) in addition to the earlier mentioned two novels. She won the prestigious Common Wealth writers prize for her very first novel *Difficult Daughters* and it became a bestseller in India. In both the novels under discussion Kapur has tried to project the new woman who is educated, self-reliant and does not want to be confined to the limited world of household duties. She wants to revolt against the set pattern of Indian society where women are subjected to the male members of the family, thus perpetuating the myth of female servitude. Her protagonists are always in the Quest of Identity. She elaborates the traditional Indian families and modern thinking of characters. As Shaleen Kumar Singh comments, "Manju Kapur has successfully portrayed the conflicts of tradition and modernity in her characters. The speciality is that

her female characters are only involved in clashes against male dominated traditional worlds". (2012:100).

Virmati is the protagonist of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, she is the eldest of all eleven children born by the mother for whom children were gods-end and god gift. The mother goes on giving birth to children one after another, enburdening Virmati of the household duties and a rearing of the younger brothers and sister because of her being the eldest daughter. Due to the overburden of domestic duties she does not even concentrate on her studies and fails in the examinations. Somehow she makes it to college education as she strongly desires for it.

Coincidentally however, her college Professor, named Harish, comes to live in their house on a rental basis. In college Virmati falls in love with the professor knowing full well that he is not only married but also a father of two children. He also falls in love with her. He forgets that he is her teacher and there are certain professional ethics he should have observed. Both of them thus, blind in their love, forget the rules and ethics of the society they live in. They developed very intimate relationships with each other and very frequently they have clandestine meetings.

Soon it becomes known to the family members and her parents decide to marry her to an engineer. The marriage is delayed for two years due to the death of the engineer's mother. During this period Virmati passed her examination and rejected the marriage proposal. She tries to commit suicide by drowning herself in the canal water. She is saved by the servants of her grandfather. She then tells the family that she wants to go for higher education instead of marrying the engineer whom she does not like.

Virmati is the heroine of the first novel *Difficult Daughters*". The novel is the story of a daughter's journey towards self realisation, vicariously through her mother's attainment of selfhood. The story is presented through the conscience of Ida. She tries to explore not only the life of her mother Virmati, but also of Kasturi, her

grandmother. Virmati was born in Amritsar into an austere and high minded household. She is torn between family duties, the desire for education and her illicit love. After completing her B.A., She returns to Amritsar and is offered the principalship of a college at Sultanpur. The story describes her fighting struggle for freedom. In the end she becomes free and gives away her heart and body.

Difficult Daughters is an absorbing story of a woman torn between opposite forces of society and her ardent desire to break that silence. The Story tells how she is torn between her family duties, the desire for education and elicited love. In this novel, Virmati seeks her identity throughout her life not only in her mother's house, but also in her husband. Virmati realizes that in patriarchal societies, women are subjugated to mere existence with no clear identity, individuality or self will. She is marginalized in her own family. Virmati's family acts as a large patriarchal power structure which forces the daughters to sacrifice their studies and freedom for the sake of marriage.

The beginning statement itself is a good example of new woman consciousness. "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother," is the crux of the novel. Throughout the novel Virmati is shown torn between filial responsibilities, her desire for education and emancipation and her delinquent love towards a married professor of English. Virmati neither yields to the age old tradition nor to the suffering and tries to secure a space for her.

Home is yet another novel of Manju Kapur in which we have a fast moving story of an ordinary middle class family in Delhi, with a woman protagonist as its centre. The head of this patriarchal family, Banwari Lal, a cloth merchant believes in the old and traditional values. According to him only men should work out of home and women within the house are confined to the household duties. He also believes that men are the most important part of the family. They carry the family line and women have to play only the supporting role by obeying men in each and every matter. It is the duty of the youngsters to obey the elders in everything and they

should not even doubt any of their motives. The wife of Banwari Lal is also portrayed as an upholder of traditional values. She never questions her husband and does not let the two sons Yashpal and Pyarelal contradict the father. The two sons follow their parents but their wives have some reservations about their mother-in-law. Relationship between the daughter-in-law and the mother-in-law is a topic of special study, hints of which we get in this novel too.

Protagonist of *Home* is Nisha. The novel begins with the life of Sona, the eldest daughter-in-law of the Banwarilal family. Her barrenness is the cause of her constant source of misery. After ten years of married life, she gives birth to a daughter named Nisha. Nisha is sent to Rupa's house at a tender age when she shows signs of emotional disturbance due to the secret sexual abuse by Vicky, one of her cousins in the extended joint family. But, it is her later pursuit in life doing English honours in B.A., falling in love with a low caste boy, forcefully standing up to conservative family, despairing at being jilted by the lover, her courage in struggling with the meanness of life, her attempts at finding her place in an uninformed society that does not like to recognise the promise of abilities, her complaints, simmering frustrations and her disappointments. The novel depicts how family norms are ignored by the new generation.

After throwing some light on the protagonists of Manju Kapur's novels, we come to know that her protagonists are not puppets or they do not want to be rubber dolls. They dare to defy the patriarchal notions and want to cross patriarchal threshold that enforces women towards domesticity. They aspire for self-reliance through education. They want to set their own identity. They want to shoulder responsibilities beyond husband and children. They are not ready to adjust, and compromise. Manju Kapur has brought forth the experiences being faced by the women in Indian socio-cultural set up of society. In all her novels, Manju Kapur has concentrated on the middle and upper class working women and their struggle in the specific social and cultural milieu of India.

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