

A Crusader for Women's Education - A Study of Manju Kapur's Fiction

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Abstract: The role of education and the right to be educated are both equally important for men as well as women. Traditionally, it is men who are supposed to receive higher education and develop professional career as they are considered the 'bread winners' for the family. The women's role is restricted to limited education and her major role is perceived in marriage and family upbringing. The society perceives men as someone who can shoulder economic responsibilities and women to take charge of the domestic world. The gender stereotype way of thinking projects men belonging to the public domain as they are considered powerful, active, logical whereas women belonging to the private sphere as they are thought as passive, silent, conservative and weak. This hierarchy between the oppressor and the oppressed based on status and power rules in a tradition and patriarchal bound society. Although we talk about secular education, yet it is not prevalent. Many literary writers have touched this issue and voiced for women's right to education through literary articulations. Manju Kapur, a contemporary Indian women novelist is one such writer. Being a professor and academician herself, she has poignantly crafted the value of women's education and made a critique of education from a feminine standpoint. Thus this paper is an attempt to analyze the literary manifestation of Kapur in the light of Women's education and empowerment.

Keywords: Patriarchy, identity, resistance, education, empowerment

Today when we speak of Indian writing in English, surely there is no doubt left that it has received international acclaim. Indian writers in the postmodern era are experimenting with various forms, narrative techniques and themes. Issues like Social evils, Indian history and partition, women's issues, patriarchy, immigration, east/west encounter, resistance towards traditions, multiculturalism, eroding sense of morality all find place in Indian English literature. Recently, Dalit literature, Subaltern literature and feminist literature gained popularity because of it voice for the voiceless and the marginalized group. In this context, Manju Kapur's fictional works has a sincere appeal to its readers as it addresses various issues to ponder upon. Kapur's debut novel

Difficult Daughters which won her commonwealth award brought her immediate fame and international recognition. Kapur's fiction makes a clear depiction of the lives of ordinary middle class women, their problems and how these women strive to strike a balance between their home, personal needs and societal demands. Most of her novels have episodes taken from Indian history as a back drop which acts as a device to portray the inner tribulations of suffering women, their rebel and resistance. One of the social concerns of Indian writers were concern for the girl child and women's education. Contemporary writer, Manju Kapur is one such writer. Being a professor and academician herself, she has poignantly crafted the value of women's education and made a critique of education from a feminine standpoint. A close reading of the fictions suggests the value and importance of education in women's lives, as pointed out by Manju Kapur in a delicate manner. This paper makes a humble attempt to explore Kapur's concerns for women's marginality and their strive towards centrality through education.

Difficult Daughters is a story narrated by the protagonist Virmati's daughter Ida. Both Virmati and Ida are 'difficult' as they rebel against the traditional roles expected from them. The story is set against the backdrop of India's freedom independence, its attainment and partition thereafter. The turmoil and pain that Virmati undergoes is aptly suggested through the freedom struggle of the country to free away from oppression. The novel skillfully unfolds with multiple subjects like self affirmation, man-woman relationship, family feuds and above all mother-daughter relationship. From an early age, Virmati starts looking after her young siblings for whom she is 'second mother' and the domestic chores without any recognition and love from her mother. This lack of love and longing to gain attention gradually makes her fall in love with a married professor which the family is totally against. Motivated by the idea of true love, self realization and independence, Virmati undergoes a series of humiliations which only makes her to be more firm in her decisions. The professor is caught in between the wife and the lover who could fulfill his intellectual needs to take any rightful decision. As no solution creeps in, Virmati decides to go for higher studies. She understands that education could give her enlightenment and freedom. Even the professor's wife realizes that "It is good the girls of today know so much." The value of education and the importance it carries in a person's life is clearly indicated. The professor working in a college symbolizes higher education. But since his wife is uneducated, he abandons her. The wife is submissive as she has no knowledge of the outer world. Every uneducated woman would feel that ignorance, lack of freedom and oppression suffered is due to lack of education. Kapur hints that women can be emancipated through education. Education makes us to think rationally, makes one realize and this in turn paves way for self independence. Virmati is educated but she goes for higher education to

free from everyday problems and make some life for her own. But she wants a name for the relationship and finally the professor agrees to marry her and she becomes his second wife. The value of education is also voiced through Virmati's friend Swarnalata. Virmati's problems end there and there comes another set of problems for her - her life and adjustment in her married household as a second wife. Life continues for her with its odds and ends, but Kapur has subtly brought out the idea of liberation through education. The theme of alienation, self assertion and identity is interwoven skillfully through the idea of educating oneself. In most of Kapur's novels we have at least one character who works as a principal/ professor or teacher in educational institutions. The portrayal of institutions of higher education and the central characters moving for higher education emphasis the point raised in this paper. Not all Indian English women writers have been careful to portray this aspect. Hence we see this strong message in a very subtle way. In *A Married Woman*, the central character Astha has everything that a woman could ask for, but there is some gap between the husband and the wife that disappoints Astha. Astha, just after marriage was a school teacher. She yearned for some time from her husband but he was "a criminal, destroying her anticipation, ruining her happiness" (p-50) Gradually Astha turns to writing poetry and this alleviates the heaviness within her. But remarks from Hemant, her husband makes her leave writing and switch to sketching and drawing. Soon she enters into a lesbian relationship with Aijaz's wife Pipeelika after Aijaz's death. Though Astha and Pipeelika are into this relationship, yet they know how futile it is. Astha cannot leave her family and Pipeelika can't expect much from her. Towards the end of the novel, we find Pipeelika leaving for the USA to do her Ph.D as suggested by her brother who sponsors her. Manju Kapur also shows that life is a labyrinth. Whatever happens with us, we finally return to the conventional set up. Both Virmati and her daughter Ida accept this and try to fit themselves into it. Astha too knows that whatever happened outside her married life is only temporary and she is bound to go back to her earlier life.

Women's empowerment as Kapur points out in her fictions can be defined in terms of achieving power in order to take part in decision making, designing their lives, influencing the social and political process. Formal Education need not necessarily be a tool to emancipate women. Women learning to defy themselves and making their own identity are empowered. Though education cannot bring complete emancipation, it has an immense effect on the lives of women. According to the feminists' view education has to generate awareness and make women ask questions about their condition in order to move towards empowerment. Manju Kapur's protagonists are women trying to maintain a balance all the time. Their everyday struggles have made them strong and they struggle to set themselves free from the shackles of tradition and various

prejudices. All of Kapur's female protagonists are well educated but again they are seen heading for higher education. In Kapur's fictions, we also find female characters probing into literature and reading books to seek solace and companionship. *Difficult Daughters* explores the possibilities of change in attitude through exposure to literature. *The Immigrant* is another book where this aspects are exposed in a diaspora set up. Nina, in *The Immigrant* works as a lecturer in a college. She is married to Ananda, a dentist settled in Canada. The novel is a story about the adjustments that Indian expatriates have to make when settled abroad. The journey of Nina is a journey from traditional upbringing to freedom and liberation as defined in a foreign land. Nina's life with Ananda is not a satisfactory one. Soon she discovers that her husband has sexual dysfunctions and hence avoids her. He goes for a treatment without her knowledge and later experiments his sexual pangs with white women. Nina pursues her studies in library science and takes a career in a library. She seeks professional identity as a student of library science. Nina finds some kind of fulfillment by associating with a group of women. There are literary reference points to DH Lawrence, E.M Foster as Nina is a voracious reader. Her association with Sue's La Leche League and Beth's support group expose her to the western concepts of liberation, freedom rebellion, courage, integrity and individual woman self. She reads for the first time, beyond authors like Lawrence, *The Second Sex* and *The Female Eunuch*. Towards the end, we find Nina heading out for a job interview at the University of New Brunswick, uncertain if she will return to her Halifax life or not. It feels, though, as if she is now ready to take control of her own destiny – 'heading towards fresh territories, a different set of circumstances ... When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home' (p334). The reader may nonetheless fairly ask what is that Nina is reinventing herself as.

One of the key features of Kapur's writings is her constant preoccupation of women's issues. She particularly focuses on women's constant negotiation with her private and public life. Manju Kapur's *Home* is a story about Indian joint family; Manju Kapur weaves universal truths about the complexities of extended families and the pull of tradition against modernity. The patriarch of the family is Banwari Lal, a cloth merchant who lives with his family in Karol Bagh, New Delhi. The Banwari Lal family belongs to a class whose skills have been honed over generations to ensure prosperity in market place. From an early age children are trained to maintain the foundation on which these homes rested. Banwari Lal is believer of older ways. Men work out at home, women within. His two sons unquestioningly follow their father in business and in life but their wives do not. Contemporary women writers like Kapur through their texts question the age old traditions and patriarchal system and show signs of resistance to them. They represent women in their postmodern narratives. Hence there are strong

and bold women characters. They question the idea of 'being an ideal woman'. She critiques the patriarchal power structure of Hindu society through the characters. She deconstructs the notions of gender, equality and identity through the narrative. She has also pointed that however educated and forward notions, yet in Indian society, still the longing for a male child is prevalent. In *Home*, after Sona gives birth to a male child, the mother in law declared, "Now I can die in peace". (*Home*,41) Nisha who is the protagonist has some difficult phases of childhood and adolescence. College education makes her life stable and independent. Later, Nisha strives to establish her individuality and becomes an entrepreneur. She starts her own business of garment stitching. After making her presence felt in primarily a male dominated profession; she had to fall in the same trap of matrimony ascribed by the patriarchy. But she was ready for the same i.e. to shoulder responsibility not only of husband and children but beyond that. Nisha is a confident, self-reliant, bold and determined person, who defies patriarchal notions. She establishes her own boutique and names her products her 'Nisha creations'. Once economically emancipated she throws social codes to the wind and proves herself to be a responsible working businesswoman. Thus we learn that education boosted self confidence and economic independence and thereby an identity for oneself.

After the introduction of western education, significantly with the advent of colonialism in India under the British Empire, reformist movements, promotion of women's institutions, the freedom movement and so on, life had begun to change once more. In post-Independence India, where education of women had already commenced, the New Woman also had begun to emerge. Education had inculcated a sense of individuality amongst women and had aroused an interest in their human rights. It was then that the feminist trend in Indian literature had appeared on the horizon and women came into conflict with the double standards of social law through ages and the conventional moral code. Feminist ideology in Indian literature, which had come into India precisely from the west and the women's liberation movement are not widely spread into India, as fighting for human rights of women has been misinterpreted as movement against Indian womanhood. In post-Independent India, the educated New Woman with economic independence and a search for identity is clearly depicted in fictions. Good education consists of a balance between passion and pragmatism, which are opposing forces. In today's fast-paced world, the researcher feels that there is a distortion of importance and perception in this balance. Therefore, the need arises to focus on a writer like Manju Kapur who foregrounds women who come to a cross junction in life where they wonder which way they should go. The texts, which bear testimony to characters who step in and step out due to their sex impulses and their final decision to be pragmatic through a compromise, form the essence of

the study. Resistance to patriarchy starts with Virmati's insistence on education and refusal for marriage. She believes: "*One of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves*" (p102). She wants to live an intellectual life of mind, but the society in the guise of her parents reminds her that a woman is no more than a body and the patriarchal society permits no alternative to marriage and holds in pity and contempt those who attempt to thwart it. Virmati resists patriarchal norms, and becomes a self-directed woman of new generation and chooses her life partner.

Kapur has a straight forward approach in her novels. She gives us real characters and real examples from the society. It is significant to point out that Kapur's novels refuse to offer any obvious, explicit and ready made view points. Kapur believes in 'showing' rather than 'telling'. She would rather problematise than provide solutions. Her descriptive mode of narration combined with an air of detachment and open endings place her in the post modern domain. Kapur does not point that education will eradicate all problems. In fact Kapur's major women characters are well educated. She suggests that education will make us more rational and enable us to think more independently to solve our problems. Although already educated, some of the characters are shown to pursue higher studies. Perhaps reading good books and keeping oneself professionally busy either in work or studies would make us more preoccupied and less worried. This is what some Kapur's characters tend to realize.

Kapur's most recent novel *Custody* (2011) is a story about infidelity and infertility resulting in marital discord which has tremendous impact on the lives of the children. It is also the tale of children's custody and the Indian legal system. The plot of *Custody* is set in the backdrop of urban upper middle class family of Delhi. Kapur explores the hollowness of modern life. The story revolves around the couple Raman and Shagun, along with charismatic Ashok Khanna, Raman's boss and Ishita; a childless divorcee. Kapur uses the institution of marriage in this novel to present the story of four adults and two children. A sequence of dispute follows along with arguments, heated discussions, exposing the evil side of divorce. Kapur through Ishita's life exposes the shallowness of marital life where a woman is stigmatized because of her infertility and the fact that she can't carry forward the family name. Ishita was happy after marriage but when she could not bear him a child, all her miseries started. Her husband and mother in law threw her out of the house. When she was divorced, her parents were her support. To overcome her sadness, she started working as a social worker and teaching the under privileged. Like in most Kapur's novel, the teaching profession enters here as well. This could be because Kapur herself is first a teacher and academician. Hence the role of education, the teaching profession become some of Kapur's habitual references. Further, Kapur's novels clearly state the conviction that higher education and economic

independence support women to take independent decisions. Her novels also state that the lens of education and economic independence also helps to mitigate the threats of violence which women have to face in various relationships. This aspect is also commented on by several other critics also. Manju Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughters* narrates the story of Virmati, the protagonist whose struggles for liberation is supported by her education. She is very much influenced by her cousin Shakuntala, who is depicted as a qualified woman, a woman of substance, who holds the view that "here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else" (*Difficult Daughters* 17). Shakuntala's portrayal narrates how in a patriarchal society, a woman is respected and considered to be honourable only if she is limited to her roles of a wife and mother. Her family's aggressive refusal to allow her to study further leads Virmati to Harish Chandra, a professor from England who not only expresses his vision towards woman's education but also encourages Virmati for further study. Professor Harish Chandra becomes a spokesperson for Kapur when he says:

For him, too, studies are very important. It showed he really cared for women's education ...who is responsible for this state of affairs? Society, which deems that their sons should be educated, but not their daughters. Once she had gained a proper education, she would be on her way to becoming one of the finest flowers of Hindu womanhood (*Difficult Daughters* p103).

Education and the resulting financial independence is what Kapur is aiming at to project. Education should be sort for shaping one's individual make up not for the sake of being a potential candidate and enhancing opportunities in the marriage market. Though Virmati's mother accuses her even after her education and career growth for ruining family honour, it is her father who remains supportive and sends her for higher education. In *Married Woman*, Astha's father is liberated and believes that his daughter must study to expand her mental horizon. He "believes in the new. He feels that his daughter's future lay in her own hands, and these hands were to be strengthened by the number of books that passed through them" (*A Married Woman* P2). Her father, a bureaucrat does not want his daughter to be like himself, dissatisfied and wasted. He preaches her to work hard to create her own opportunities, "You are so much potential, you draw, you paint, you read, you have a way with words, you do well academically, the maths is a little weak, but never mind, you must sit for the competitive exams. With a good job comes independence" Kapur has shown her male characters supporting female education for independence. But at the same time she has pointed that our patriarchal society wants women to be married and to stay in husband's house as that alone brings self respect and dignity for

a woman however educated you are. So there is a conflict perhaps between education and marriage, women's free will and society's wants. Sometimes, women are allowed to continue studies till a suitable match is found. This happens with Nisha in *Home*. She is given higher education as the family is not able to find a 'manglik' match for her. Even then she is told not to take it seriously, "Higher studies were just a time pass, it was not as though she was going to use her education. Working was out of the question, and marriage was around the corner" (*Home* 141). Kapur voices the need for self independence through Nisha who says ;, "I want to study fashion designing. Lots of girls do it. ... I have seen girls working in shops. Why should it be only Ajay, Vijay and Raju? There must be something I too can do" (*Home* 226, 267). In custody, Mrs Hingorani says: "It will get you a job with more income, and that spells respect and independence" (*Custody* 178). Ishita decides to pursue MA in Social Work from the Institute of Social Welfare in Bombay.

Manju Kapur has very clearly pointed that women's education makes them to self realize and be more independent. Through certain dialogues by some women characters we find how women are prepared for marriage and education is only to fulfill the time gap or to get potential suitors, not only this it is also pointed that education is a gendered in traditional mindset where some careers are meant only for women and or some careers would bring disrespect to women. Kapur has skillfully not only emphasized the value and role of education in women's lives but at the same time made a critique of education itself by questioning the very notion of education and career based on gender in a patriarchal society.

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