

Home Without a Space: A Reading of Manju Kapur's Novel *Home*

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Abstract: Home is the domestic terrain of family system, with its gendered spaces and hierarchies of power which dictate and limit the interaction of women. The private space of home is both sanctuary and prison for women, for not only their identities, but their survival is dependent on their successful staking out of positions within their domestic territories. Home is the conventional notion of the 'women sphere' and carries with it the image of restrictive, restricted and dangerous periphery. The women are confined within the social universe of the home, with multiple, invisible thresholds regulating their mobility even within it. Kapur depicts the life of protagonist Nisha and her mother to show that in Indian homes the socialization of the girl child is a complex process, the main purpose of which is to inculcate in girls the appropriate codes of conduct including self-effacement and self-denial and to train them to see their life primarily in terms of service to others.

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With respect to Indian culture, identities of women are traditionally tied with the domestic space and idea of home especially in situations where families live in a multigenerational household. Widows, new daughters-in-law, and unwanted wives are amongst those who could traditionally expect the lowest levels of consideration within the joint family system. The multigenerational households entail the sharing of resources and responsibilities. It also implies a hierarchical and patriarchal structure among the family members. For women in the Indian culture, this structure defines their role by the relationship to the patriarch, their marital status, their ability to bear children, and their parents' "socio-economic class". What is for men a source of physical and emotional sustenance, a safe haven, and the only domain for the free exercise of power within a larger world, often symbolizes for women a negation of all these- and the home comes complete with what women sometimes view as domestic male colonization. Upon these entrenched structures of domination within the home is contingent their ability to eke out what happiness they can, for they live out their lives almost entirely within its four walls. The home, also considered in the culture as the women's domain, is the ideal place for struggles and power negotiations to take

place. ManjuKapur in her third novel *Home* presents home as a social microcosm of society. It reveals a disturbing home truth that joint families both destroy and preserve maturity, individuality and mental progress of its women. It has been reiterated by Kalpagam that “the ties, that bind women in their lives provide both securities that impact positively on their personhood, as well as liabilities that are often very oppressive” (Kalpagam 177). The family is undoubtedly the single most important of such ties. In the extended family of Banwari Lal, each member has an allotted rank, with a prescribed set of rights and duties, while the patriarch shoulders the financial responsibility for all those dependent. In its hierarchal structure, along the lines of sex and age, the dominance of males and seniors provide the overall guidelines for behavior of women. A clear authority structure shapes the normative pattern of role relationships within the patriarchal extended family.

Kapur depicts the life of protagonist Nisha and her mother to show that in Indian homes the socialization of the girl child is a complex process, the main purpose of which is to inculcate in girls the appropriate codes of conduct including self-effacement and self-denial and to train them to see their life primarily in terms of service to others. Woman has an identity in the home only as a daughter, wife or mother. From an early age, girls are brainwashed into believing that marriage and motherhood is the ultimate goal in their life and they can attain a certain kind of stature only in their marital home. A girl goes through girlhood preparing for the big event 'marriage'. She lives in her natal home in a sort of limbo, where every freedom and joy, is measured by its being temporary one. The rules for the presentation of bodily self in everyday life are clearly defined and they are socialized into conformity from a very early age. The identification of female with her body thus becomes the root cause of her oppression in a patriarchal culture. Female identified primarily with her bodily functions is seen essentially as a vehicle for male sexual satisfaction and reproduction and its natural corollary, childbearing, rearing and nurturing. Her entire life, her roles, her position and status in society, is defined by this primary bodily function. In a deeply ingrained system of patriarchy, a woman's role continues to be defined through her (subordinated) relationship to man.

The novel opens with the narration of the economics and politics of arranged marriages in joint families: “In order to remain financially secure, and ensure the family harmony that underpinned that security, marriages were arranged with great care. The bride had to bring a dowry, come from the same background, and understand the value of togetherness” (3). But this motive is jolted when Banwarilal's son, Yashpal is captivated by the beauty of Sona. The marriage is materialized though Sona is in college and Yashpal is a high class pass. Sona's parents place financial security over education for the prosperous life of their daughter. As, nurtured with traditional notions, she leaves her college studies to match the intellectual level of her husband. For woman, husband's family is the essential, moral center of which she is the silent,

domestic guardian. Sona "trained from an early age to love, serve, and obey her in-laws" comes to the husband's house with preconceived notions of female subordination. Sona is regarded as an intruder, whom the mother-in-law sees as a threat to her carefully nurtured relationship with her son. Sona complies with her orders as SudhirKakkar comments: "The bride usually occupies one of the lowest rungs. Obedience and compliance with the wishes of the elder women of the family, especially those of her mother-in-law, are expected as a matter of course" (Kakkar73). The all-encompassing nature of the Indian family keeps Sona and Pyarelal's wife Sushila trapped within its complacent world of warmth and contentment. Kapur shows how a woman's social status, direction in life, economic achievement, well-being and the very meaning of marital life hinges around her ability to give birth and rear children. Sona, "though twenty and old enough" does not become pregnant and so is vulnerable to society, but no censure falls on Yashpal. According to Adrienne Rich, "Motherhood is not only a core human relationship but a political institution, a keystone to the domination in every sphere of women by men" (Rich 216). Patriarchy in the guise of mother-in-law accuses her "Enjoying, enjoying" and "All you do is enjoy life, no children, no sorrow, only a husband to dance around you" (19). When the younger daughter-in-law gives birth to a son, her worthiness is destroyed and she blames her "bad past karma that made her suffer so in this life" (15). To escape from the stigma of infertility, she "became even stricter in the rituals she observed ... every Tuesday she kept *anirjal* fast. She slept on the floor, abstained from sex" (15). Then motherhood is forced on her childless situation as her sister-in-law's son Vicky is thrust upon her, further deteriorating her self-esteem and womanhood.

In Indian patriarchal society woman has to give birth to a son to establish a power base in the family. The experience of procreation is an enactment of spatial demand. Sona conceives and gives birth to a daughter Nisha and her infertile sister Rupa utters, "And now the womb has opened, a baby brother will come" (37). Kapur depicts that giving birth to a son is a unique gender-related asset for Sona: "The mother of a son, she could join Sushila as a woman who had done her duty to the family. Gone was the disgrace, the resentment... confidence began its steady journey" (49). The experience of procreation is an enactment of spatial demand and Sona realizes her claim to womanhood. In rearing the children, a liberal attitude is shown to Raju but there is restriction on the mobility of Nisha: "you can get dirty and black playing in the sun" (53). From infancy, she is indoctrinated with notions of duty, etiquette and moral obligation to make her a submissive daughter and an obedient wife. Gender identity is firmly entrenched as a social and cultural construction through the process of socialization in the family. Bourdieu (2001:95) explains this process:

Through the experience of a 'sexually' ordered social order and the explicit reminders addressed to them by their parents, endowed with

principles of vision, acquired in similar experiences of the world, girls internalize, in the form of schemes of perception and appreciation not readily accessible to consciousness, the principles of the dominant vision which lead them to find the social order, such as it is, normal or even natural.

Home is considered a safe haven for women and girls but it is also a site of sexual harassment. Nisha experiences male violence as Vicky sexually abuses her and as she has internalized her passivity, socially determined incapability to speak, is not able to voice her victimization. This physical assault, 'endures an invasion of the self, the intrusion of the inner space, a violation of her sexual and physical autonomy' (Stanko 9). She camouflages it by suffering in silence. Infact as Bartky emphasizes, 'psychological oppression' is "dehumanizing and depersonalizing"; it attacks the person in her personhood' (Bartky 29). She is shifted to her aunt's house as she is mentally disturbed. The heavy controls of patriarchy that supposedly protects female modesty and chastity restricts Nisha's parents' choice of school for her: "A girls' school would provide traditional upbringing, and after her probable experience it was best there be no exposure to boys" (74). Kapur emphasizes that starting from a very early stage of development a woman's construction of identity aims at her submission. Nisha's mother instructs her to respect and comply with men's decisions and discourages her to behave in an independent manner. Her mother forces her to fast for her good future in matrimony: "how are you going to get married, madam, if you do not make sacrifices?" (94). So Nisha is forced to stay home and miss school to learn "how to be a good wife". Sushila remarks, "It's never too early to fast for your husband" (94). The practice of fast emphasizes the patriarchal values of chastity and devotion of the wife to the husband and his welfare in the face of odds. The atmosphere of her joint family is strict and gendered, so she prefers to stay at her aunt's house.

In traditional society girls experience the mother-daughter relationship as informal and not always warm tinged as it is by the mother's responsibility of disciplining and training her daughter for her future wife- mother role, a task in which the mother's reputation is at stake. Her carefree life is curtailed as the patriarch of the family Banwarilal dies and she is called back to perform the duty of a daughter and soothe the aching heart of her widowed grandmother. So, she has to sacrifice her selfhood in service of her family as she, "was a girl who, despite the overuse of her brains, was only going to get married" (122). A religious bent of mind is encouraged as a strong undergirding to her identity formation, and to her role as the true bearer of culture and tradition. Sona passes on the laws of '*Stri-dharma*': "This is the life of a woman: to look after her home, her husband, her children, and give them food she has cooked with her hands". Nisha's studies suffer at her home as there is no atmosphere and space for studies and no importance is given to the education of a girl as the other women of the house think "her real education is in the kitchen" (135). The freedom of Nisha to live, grow and actualize herself the way men do is curbed by misusing the religion,

tradition and myth to condition her into an acceptance of her secondary status causing her to lead claustrophobic and circumscribed life. Sona's narration of the *Vat SavitriKatha* to Nisha is a misuse of religion to degrade women.

In a traditional family the motive of promoting girl's education and the type of education provided is not intended to promote her emancipation or independence but to reinforce patriarchy. In Nisha's traditional family marriage is the primary goal and purpose of education. "In the end DurgaBai College was decided on. On campus, all girls, with a reputation of steady mediocrity. It would do nicely for a girl waiting to get married"(141). Her achievement in studies is not acknowledged: "Higher studies were just a time pass;it was not as though she was going to use her education. Working was out of question, and marriage was around the corner" (142). After some days of college, for the first time she interacts socially with an unrelated male, Suresh, an engineering student. In course of time, she develops a love relationship with him and discovers her personal worth. When her lover suggests a makeover, she is in dilemma to; "choose between an outsider and her family, modernity and custom, independence and community"(150). Her autonomy to get a haircut is greeted with questions: "Who gave you permission, suddenly you have become so independent, you decide things on your own"(150). After a few years of romance, Nisha longs to have a love marriage with Suresh, but her marriage is not an individual choice but a matter of 'family honor'. Marriage is viewed not as self-fulfillment, an individual prerogative but as a fulfillment of a social and familial duty where the body is foregrounded as a commodity. The concept of women as symbol of honor makes them into mere signs in which the actual flesh and blood woman disappears. Nisha defiles the honor of the family by exercising her individual desire and agency, which is a sin for a cultured girl. She is punished for violating the gendered norms: "All day she remained in the house, a prisoner of her deed, a prisoner of their words. She was distrusted too much to be allowed to put a foot outside. A padlock was put on phone"(201) and "She moved like a guilty thing among them, worse than the dirt under her feet"(199). Woman's socially internalized respect for family and community honor restraint her from rebellion. Nisha, though self-aware, is unable to reconcile the empowerment she has acquired through her education with the requirement of being an obedient daughter. Her life is jeopardized, as the feeling of having got sullied, both physically and mentally, overpowers her: "She tried to keep her mind on love and purity, but the past intruded with all its might. Was there never to be relief from her thoughts? She imagined the acid used to scour toilets, yellow, evil-smelling. If only she could dip a rag in that and swab her mind with it" (209). Her traditional aspect of growing up stirs anxiety and anger, for it transmits fear of sexuality; it also crystallizes her consciousness about cultural demands of respectability. "She clung to the only pathetic reassurance that came to mind: she was technically a virgin. No one need ever know. But with every cell in her mind

preoccupied with violation, what difference did virginity make?”(209). Education seldom prevents woman from being perceived as incomplete without marriage. Yashpal and his brother's hunt for a boy for Nisha become difficult as she is a *mangli*. A marriage proposal comes but doesn't materialize as Nisha's romance has stained her character and has brought a bad reputation as it is a commonly held belief that brides are the embodiment of the family's honor and pride. Pyare Lal tells Yashpal, “They have heard rumors about the girl, they were an old fashioned family, they believed in old-fashioned values, and those values included absolute purity” (221). So, Nisha's body becomes a site of social censure. As Nisha has to bear physical and mental stress, there is hormonal imbalance which causes severe eruptions on her body. Her loss of body esteem results in self-esteem. Ayurveda, Homeopathy, Allopathy, Nature care and China washing fail to bring any healing effect on Nisha's skin. “For twenty years people had commented on her fairness. From the day of her birth, her complexion had been protected from the sun, nurtured with up tan before every bath and in adolescence safeguarded against pimples by bitter herbs. Now it was turning against her” (230). In a culture which values female more for appearance, Nisha faces humiliation as she is rejected in the marriage market as a pariah. Her body fails her when it is most needed. Her status is further degraded when her younger brother, Raju is married. Nisha feels cast off and unwanted as she feels that she has outlived her period as a daughter in the house and she, no more claims any space in her parental home. She in forlorn misery bursts out: “There is no place for me in this house. If it is only marriage that will get me out, then marry me off to anybody” (281). Then, to remove the monotony of her life she takes the conventional job of teaching prescribed for women but is not satisfied. To give value to her creativity and life, she starts her own business, 'Nisha Creation' and achieves success as an autonomous individual. But her new identity does not equip her with alternatives to marriage. Sona objects, “Working was all right as a time pass. Families wanted a daughter-in-law, wife, and mother; husbands were not looking for businesswomen” (297).

Finally Nisha's scarred body fetches a *manglik* widower in the marriage market. The purpose of this marriage is compulsion and duty of a son: “Arvind must marry, the old mother must have someone to look after her, someone should be there to see, notice, care and where are the children going to come from” (323). Once married, she is forced to behave along strictly disciplined lines. She subsumes her identity under her husband's. She becomes pregnant and as a woman she is satisfied, “In one area of her life at least she had performed as expected” (325). But her mobility is restricted and she is burdened with the responsibility of bearing the children. In the end she reconciles with her destiny, “Ten months after Nisha's marriage, twins were born. One girl, one boy. Her duty was over” (336). Her rootedness in a tradition that glorifies family and relationships within the family results in her complete immersion in

the domestic world of home. Nisha, who was an outsider in her marital home, finds space as a mother.

So, Manju Kapur presents the home as the theatre where the drama of gender politics is played out not only between partners but also in the complexities of relation among and between the members of the larger family. It is in the marital relationship that is embedded in the family that a girl finds sexual pleasure and fulfillment (women have to be virgin until married) but is also oppressed primarily by other women in her husband's family and where she finally achieves control over her situation through a strong expression of her agency. The family in modern India is simultaneously the source of fulfillment as well as unyielding control to which the women are subjected within the strict perimeter of home.

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