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Portrayal of the Evolution of the Indian Woman in Manju Kapur's Novels

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Abstract

Manju Kapur is one of the foremost modern Indian Women writers who has significantly contributed to the progress of Indian fiction. She is a writer who instinctively identifies with the position of women in a patriarchal society and deals with the problems of women. Her novels present the ongoing struggle of women to establish an identity of their own. Manju Kapur depicts different histories, culture and different structure of values; the complexities of life in relation to the socio-cultural context; and, the patriarchal pressure, control and social ostracism that women are subjected to. Her writings reflect the experiences of the woman in the real world. This article attempts at examining the socio-cultural evolution of women over time in India and where they stand now as depicted in Manju Kapur's novels.

Keywords: Modern, Patriarchal society, Struggle, Identity, Socio-cultural evolution

Introduction

"We delight in the beauty of the butterfly, but rarely admit to the changes it has gone through to achieve that beauty."

Mary Angelou

India is a society in transition, and the societal roles and responsibilities are evolving between men and women. While traditional role-playing is still seen in many households, there are some interesting profiles evolving amongst modern Indian women. After India's independence in 1947, as the country began to create its own identity, its citizens, especially the women, began their very own transformation. From women participating in nationalist movements, to being pushed into the domestic household space, to their resurgence as super-women today, women in our country have seen it all. While on one hand, India has seen an increased percentage of literacy among women, and women are now entering professional fields, the practices of female infanticide, poor health conditions and lack of education still persist. Even the patriarchal ideology of the home being a woman's 'real domain' and marriage being her ultimate destiny hasn't changed much. If one looks at the status of women then and now, one has to look at two sides of the coin; one side which is promising, and one side which is bleak.

The socio-cultural evolution of women has been a convoluted road. Over the history of time the perception and roles that women were meant to foster has transcended from the nurturer to the provider. There has been a steady growth of nuclear family homes. This trend has gained speed with rapid urbanization and migration in search of work. The concept of nuclear families in itself changes some of the dynamics of the home. The ancient concept of the 'karta' or the head of the household is no longer prevalent in a large percentage of homes. All these are empowering the woman of the house to do a lot more than she has ever do. The role of the woman in India has now expanded beyond the home and the kitchen and in the process; the Indian woman has redefined her role in her own eyes as well as those of the society at large. Women in India have slowly started recognising their true potential. She has started questioning the rules laid down for her by the society. As a result, she has started breaking barriers and earned a respectable position in the world. Today Indian women have

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excelled in each and every field from social work to visiting space station. There is no arena, which remains unconquered by Indian women. Whether it is politics, sports, entertainment, literature, technology everywhere, its women power all along.

Today, the modern woman is so deft and self-sufficient that she can be easily called a superwoman, juggling many fronts single-handedly. Women are now fiercely ambitious and are proving their mettle not only on the home front, but also in their respective professions. Women in India are coming up in all spheres of life.

But, if on one hand women are climbing the ladder of success; on the other hand she is mutely suffering the violence afflicted on her by her own family members. As compared to the past, women in modern times have achieved a lot but in reality they have to still travel a long way. Women may have left the secured domains of their home, but a harsh, cruel, exploitative world awaits them, where women have to prove their talent against the world. The Indian woman has to make her way through all the social prejudices against her, and the men yet have to allow and accept the women to be equal participants in the country's way forward.

Many young women in India are now living their lives exactly the way they wanted to – from living away from home to living alone, from earning their own money to spending it how they liked, from marrying when they wanted to or not, and from choosing when to have children or not, they are making their own choices.

Indian Women Novelists

A graphic depiction of this transformation of the Indian woman has been very successfully done by the various Indian women novelists such as Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandeya, Ruth P.Jhavbala, Anita Desai, and Nayantara Saghil. Bharati Mukherjee, Gauri Deshpande, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Arundhati Roy, Meena Alexander and Manju Kapur. They have tried with sincerity and honesty to trace the growth of the Indian woman on the one hand and dealt with the physical, psychological and emotional stress syndrome of women on the other hand.

Today fiction by women writers contributes a major segment of the contemporary Indian writing in English. Women writings have contributed much to the growth of Indian English literature and have highlighted issues pertaining to women. The women writers are highly acclaimed and have won international recognition. Indian women's fiction deals with multiple issues concerning the self and society. Much of the women's writing is primarily a criticism of social justice and equality in a patriarchal society. The world is being seen in a new dimension through the eyes of women fiction writers. The problems and issues faced by the women in today's male dominated world are some of the aspects presented with a deep insight.

Manju Kapur as a Novelist

Manju Kapur is one of the foremost modern Indian Women writers who has significantly contributed to the progress of

Indian fiction. Kapur is a writer who instinctively identifies with the position of women in a patriarchal society and deals with the problems of women. Her novels present the ongoing struggle of women to establish an identity of their own. A close look at the Manju Kapur's novels draws one's attention towards certain interesting facts. Almost all women novelists write from their personal experiences and usually end up in one or the other form of feminism. Many of them give us their autobiography in fiction and most of them identify with their female characters. Manju Kapur depicts different histories, culture and different structure of values; the complexities of life in relation to the socio-cultural context; and, the patriarchal pressure, control and social ostracism that women are subjected to. Her writings reflect the experiences of the woman in the real world.

Manju Kapur's novels portray the budding new woman, who is not a puppet in the hands of others, but someone who tries to assert and carve her own identity in this all man's world. She writes about personal experiences, problems, spaces and identity crises. She writes what today's women can easily relate to and can see her novels as an extension of their own life. She deals with the predicament of the modern woman in accepting the traditional or modernist ethos. Her writing steadily and firmly argue for the values like freedom of thought and Expression, liberation from oppression and marginalization, and equality. The modern Indian woman's quest for dignity is the prime theme of her novels.

Manju Kapur is a trend setter and she has hauled the woman protagonist out from the clutches of the image of a suffering woman to a daring and amazing woman. She has bestowed the Indian woman, a new image of confidence, self-assurance and boldness. The women in the novels of Manju Kapur seem to be the personification of the "**New Woman**" who has been carrying the burden of inhibition since ages and wants to be free now. Manju Kapur also deals with the roles of woman as a daughter, a wife and a mother. Manju Kapur's heroines negotiate for their independence and a respectable place in society. The heroine is progressive in the real sense of the word, whether she is **Virmati** (*Difficult Daughters*), **Aastha** (*A Married Woman*), **Nisha** (*Home*), **Nina** (*The Immigrant*), **Shagun** (*Custody*) or **Tapti** (*Brothers*). The female protagonists are the new women who hail from the middle class but challenge the existing socio-cultural patriarchal system. In the social milieu, they are educated, modern, intelligent, bold and assertive. Manju Kapur is one of the new age women writers who has challenged the traditional family values in her writings, especially from a woman's perspective. In the words of Vimmy Sinha, "She is yet another woman writer from India on whom the image of the suffering, but stoic woman, who is eventually breaking traditional boundaries, has had a significant impact...". Manju Kapur's writings are a revolt against the deep rooted social values.

Manju Kapur is the author of four novels. Her first, **Difficult Daughters**, won the Commonwealth Prize for First Novels (Eurasia Section) and was a number one bestseller in India. Her second novels, *A Married Woman*,

was called 'fluent and witty', while her third novel, **Home**, was described as 'glistening with detail and emotional acuity'. Her fourth novel, **The Immigrant**, had been long listed for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. Her fifth novel, **The Custody**, is a heart-wrenching tale of infidelity, divorce and broken hearts. Her most recent novel, **Brothers**, excels in recalling the power of spaces inside the home and the depiction of human struggle, ambitions and raw emotions is mesmerizing

Difficult Daughters is set during India's independence struggle and is partially based on the life of Manju Kapur's own mother, Virmati. She enters into a scandalous relationship with her married neighbour, the Professor. The relationship parallels India's battle for freedom, and eventually Virmati becomes the Professor's second wife. The book is set mostly in Amritsar and Lahore. The story, set during partition, revolves around Virmati who is caught in an illicit relationship with her married English professor. She gets pregnant with his baby and so the professor has to marry her and bring her home to stay with his first wife and children. This is a poignant tale of a lady who has to sacrifice her freedom for her love.

A Married Woman revolves around Aastha, an educated, middle-class Delhi woman has everything she could ask for - children, a dutiful loving husband, and comfortable surroundings. But she ends up having a physical relationship with a much younger woman, Pipee, the widow of a political activist. Aastha finally throws off the fear instilled in her by her parents and her husband.

Home, Manju Kapur's third novel is an engrossing story of family life amid the bustle and commerce of the Banwari Lal Cloth Shop. When their traditional Delhi business - selling saris - being threatened by advent of jeans and pre-stitched salwar kameezes, the whole family knows it's time for change. So begins a series of struggles - to have children, to find education, to find peace.

The Immigrant chronicles the lives of two NRIs (non-resident Indians), Nina and Ananda, and their newly-married life in 1970s Canada. But she finds that her marriage is not what she thought it would be. Kapur explores the special challenges facing immigrant wives: the way a young woman's life, already so pressured in professional and reproductive terms, becomes an even more impossible balancing act inside a foreign culture.

Custody is the riveting story of how family-love can disintegrate into an obsession to possess children, body and soul, as well as a chilling critique of the Indian judicial system. Told with nuance, sympathy, and clear-sightedness, Kapur addresses the gendered nature of custody battles in India - men often refuse to grant divorce while women usually have greater claim to the children - but she refuses to generalise or moralise. Neither does she spend too long on whether Shagun's infidelity scandalises society, but focuses on how it affects her characters. The concept of family shame and social propriety is firmly in the background.

When Shagun leaves her husband Raman for another man, a bitter legal battle begins. The custody of their two children is at stake - and Shagun must decide how much she wants to pay for freedom. Raman's new wife is unable

to conceive and finds happiness by being a step mother. But when the courts threaten the security of her new family, she decides she has to fight for it. As Shagun says in her critique of the old world, "**It was part of the Indian disease. Ashok was always going on about stultifying tradition. The great Indian family, which rested on the sacrifices of its women.**" Kapur explores the minds and hearts of the divorced couple Raman and Shagun, their future spouses and the traumatic effects of the complicated custody arrangement on the children, Arjun and Roohi.

Brothers is author Manju Kapur's sixth novel, and much like the previous ones, it highlights the lives of women in multiple locations, rural, urban, domestic, public, offering up for view the happenings within the home with the same urgency as the goings on in the world. Kapur deftly weaves a narrative that spans eight decades, from World War II to the first decade of the 21st century. It is, at heart, the story of Tapti Gaina, Mangal's wife. Tapti, however, makes choices that aren't allowed to other women characters—she chooses not to have more children, she chooses to exert her desire, she also works and earns for herself and her daughters. Her husband doesn't support her decisions, but he doesn't thwart them either. Tapti's character implicitly critiques the Gaina family's attitude towards women, as property, as child-producing machines, forever subordinate. The book delves deep into the ways in which her modern, city-bred sense of equality leads to tension in her married life.

Manju Kapur writes about women's lives through the eyes of a woman. She has presented the problems of the Indian woman in a joint family in a male dominated society. Her novels highlight the issue of patriarchy, which denies woman's voice and freedom. Manju Kapur portrays a truthful picture of the unpleasant condition of the Indian women, their great suffering care and anxieties, their shy or modest character, violent or aggressive, humiliating and degrading treatment in a male dominating society. It also shows the women's marathon struggle for seeking the sense of 'identity' in a totally averse and ungrateful society.

The new woman is no longer a myth. She is standing up, asking discomfiting, unconventional, unnerving questions. She is probing the myths of motherhood and undermining the myth of purity and virginity. Manju Kapur demonstrates through her woman protagonists that **"a woman should be aware, self-controlled, strong willed, self-reliant and rational having, faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense."** (Nahal, Chaman, "Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and variations"). The conflict for autonomy and separate identity remains unfinished. Manju Kapur is thus very suitably described as the great chronicler of the modern Indian family.

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