

The making of the novelist Manju Kapur

Ajay Kumar

Extension Lecturer, Department of English, Govt. College, Barwala, Hisar, Haryana, India

Abstract

Manju Kapur taught English literature in Miranda House College, Delhi University for over 25 years. Her first novel, *Difficult Daughter* published in 1998, won the commonwealth prize for best novel. Manju Kapur is an Indian writer living in New Delhi. She is one of the noted South Asian women writers of today. She studied and received an M.A. in 1972 from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, and an M.Phil from Delhi University.

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Introduction

Manju Kapur, one of the most likeable novelists of recent times, was born in Amritsar on 6th August, 1948. She completed her graduation from Miranda House, Delhi University. Kapur did post graduate work in English from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia (Canada) and went on to do her M.Phil. from Delhi University. She currently teaches English-Literature at Miranda House, a liberal arts and science college for women at Delhi University. Kapur is married to Gun Nidhi Dalmia- an investor and lives in Delhi. She had been blessed with four children- Amba, Maya, Katyayni and Agastya but cruel hands of the fate snatched the life of her elder daughter Amba, a 21 year old student of philosophy at Lady Shri Ram College. She died in a car accident on 19th November, 2001. In a talk to Ashwin Ahmed, her father, says-“our tragedy was unbearable but at least some good should follow.” (Delhi News line, Monday, May 27, 2002).

A computer centre has been running after her name at Miranda House Works among the shining stars of literary sky, Manju Kapur is also a glowing star of Indian Writing Fiction. She has joined the growing number of women writers of India, like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Gita Hariharan, Nayantara Sehgal, Shoba De and the likes. She earned the fame and name with the publication of her first novel ‘*Difficult Daughters*’ in 1998. It received huge national and international acclaim. Such has been the popularity of her work that it has been translated into several languages. *For examples* - Spanish, Dutch, German, Greek, Italian and many more. The novel published shortly after Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* and bagged the ‘Commonwealth’ writers’ prize for the best first book in Eurasia section. It was the result of her five years research at Nehru Memorial Museum and library at Teen Murti Bhawan. It involved a lot of hard work. As Manju Kapur says, “I had to rewrite the book eight times over seven years and each time I thought that I have finished the book.” (50 years of Indian Writing edited by R.K Dhawan, Suman Bala and Subash Chandra) 6
The novel is based partially on the life of Kapur’s mother

Virmati, which is also the name of the novel’s main character. The novel’s dedication “to my mother and her mother and to my father” emphasizes this deep and abiding woman to woman attachment that is also the book’s central thematic concern. (Rastogi, Pallavi, *South Asian Novelists in English: Manju Kapur*, P.P.122)7

Her next work ‘*A Married Woman*’ was published in 2002. It is also quite as powerful as its predecessor. Kapur negotiates different issues emerging out of a socio-political upheaval in her country. Set against the bloody backdrop of Babri Masjid demolition, the novel explores the space in domestic relation and sexual intimacy between woman and woman. About the controversial issue and theme Manju Kapur says in an interview with Ira Pandey. “I have used the Babri masjid episode in this novel partly because it gives story a body that I felt it otherwise lacked. So while at one level it became a way of articulating my concern at the growing communalization of the country. It also provided with a device with which push the life of Astha, my heroine, towards awareness of political matters and to world outside the confines of an unhappy marriage.”

In 2006 her third novel ‘*Home*’ was published. Its story revolves around a large typical Indian family. Unlike Kapur’s first two novels, it explores the complex terrain of the Indian family with much inside and affection without venturing into any social, political or religious issue. It had been short listed for Hutch Crossword Book Award 2006. According to *Hindustan Times* – a leading newspaper declares it ‘superb.’ Her latest work is ‘*The Immigrant*’ published this year 2009. It is a passage to Canada of 1970s. For an immigrant there was no going back, ‘notes Manju Kapur in her intensely readable tale of an Indian husband and wife to Canada’s frozen expanses.

Autobiographical Notes in Manju Kapur’s Novels

Kapur has partially given a personal tinge to her novels. If we trace autobiographical notes in ‘*Difficult Daughters*’ we find that the name of the protagonist ‘Virmati’ is the name of her mother and the picture on the jacket of her book is her

mother's. In the novel it is like Kasturi's Virmati Manju Kapur teaches in a college. She had a traditional upbringing and her mother's priority for her daughter was marriage. As Manju Kapur says 'conflict between daughter and mother is inevitable and, I suppose I was a difficult daughter (50 years of Indian)8

Kapur's parents were well placed Arya Samajis like Virmati's relations. Her father like Virmati's husband was, a professor before he became a bureaucrat. In the novel (Home) Kapur's joint family resembles to Banwari Lal's. She has mentioned her daughter's names – Katyayni Agastya in chapter xv entitled The Karol Bagh house. The setting of the story of the Immigrant is partly Canadian and partly Indian. Halifax, Nova Scotia of Canada is the place where Manju Kapur herself studied and spent a few years as the protagonist of the novel Nina and her dentist husband Anand live.

Themes

Post-independence era witnesses the growth of Indian writers basically in fiction. They registered their names not only in the native sphere but also in the alien sphere. A large number of Indians use the English language as a medium of creative expression. Salman Rushdie rightly observes: "*One important dimension of literature is that it is a means of holding a conversation with the world. These writers are ensuing that India, or rather; Indian voices (for they are too good to fall into the trap of writing "(nationalistically)" will henceforth be confident indispensable, participants in that literary conversation" (TVB1W, 1947-49, p.XV)9*

Fiction writing is the most dominant form in the twentieth century. Manju Kapur along with her contemporary writers such as Kamla Markandya, Shoba De, Ruth Pravar Jhavwala, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and Bharati Mukherjee captures the Indian ethos very successfully and skillfully. At the same time they show their deep insight into human nature and their understanding of day to day problems.

Love, war, politics, economics and social tensions, legendary, history. "The groves of Academy", even spirituality- all are popular themes with contemporary novelists." (IWE, p.12)10

As a novelist, Manju Kapur differs from other Indian English novelists. Though Indian woman writers, wax eloquence on all aspects of the flaws and felicity of characters both male and female. The main thrust is on female character. Thus Manju Kapur has also represented her all protagonists female in her novels, either she is Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, Astha in *A Married Woman*, in *Home* Nisha and Nina in *The Immigrant*. All her protagonists search for their identity and seek space for themselves in their relationships. As Virmati seeks her identity and space in her own home and after marriage in her husband Professor Harish's house with his first wife Ganga The conflict between tradition and modernity, striving for freedom is a modern topic of Manju Kapur and it is well- depicted in *Difficult Daughters*. Kapur suggests that the root of all present-day evil is this tension between modernity and tradition. In *Difficult Daughters* daughters include two daughters Virmati the main character of the novel is difficult for her parents (Kasturi and Suraj Prakash) and Ida has been a *Difficult Daughter* for her parents (Professor Harish & Virmati). Infact Kapur wants to suggest or indicate to the message that a woman, who tries in search for an

identity is branded as a *Difficult Daughter* by the family and the society as well. While Asha Choubey says "Daughters are difficult only when life becomes difficult for them." Infact in her quest of identity, Virmati rebels against tradition. She is impelled by the inner need to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. The story tells how she is torn between family duty and desires for education and illicit love. This is a story of sorrow, love and compromise. The major portion deals with Virmati's love affair with Professor and rest part describes fighting struggle for freedom set around the turbulent years of World War II and the partition of India.

In her novel, '*A Married Woman*' Manju Kapur has taken writing as a protest, a way of mapping from the point of a women's experience. She deals with the socially critical and women oriented themes. In contrast to other fiction writers who focus on a historical view, Kapur's stresses on the complex portrayal of the social and communal unrest. The focus here shifts from a woman rebellion against society shackled in tradition, torn between duty and desire, to an exploration of the positioning of a woman in sexual orientation. In the India's Homophobic socio – cultural context, where any overt expression of sexuality by women is considered as promiscuity, Kapur's novel explores the twin explosive subjects of sexual intimacy between women and Hindu Muslim confrontation, against backdrop of respectable middle Delhi life.

With women as its central theme once again, Kapur raises the question of identity which has been representation of lesbians in literature and culture. Even Shobha de in *Starry Nights* and *Strange Obsession* has extensively dealt with the theme of lesbianism, Deepa Mehta too, in her film *Fire* focused and projected the world of lesbian utopia. However, though novel approaches this "Women – Identified experience" it does not specifically address lesbians are [present an ideal role model in the protagonist who "could be emulated by the invisible lesbian community in Indians society. The novel should not simply be assessed as a rendition of lesbian relationship. Set at a time of sociopolitical upheaval, a married woman is well balanced depiction of a country's inner development- its strengths and its failure and anguished of a women's unrest, which as complicated as the social and political upheaval going around her. Manju has beautifully combined love, family values, communal riots a married woman's life and how she finds love in a person of the same sex. The novel beautifully chronicles the socialist generation of India's post-independence, dealing with self-imposed limitations, socio economics privations and yearning for much more. Cast in the rising independence of urban women from the shackles of feminist rhetoric, *A Married Woman* expects the acknowledgement of oppression and the inability individual, to effect change in circumstances, despite the antagonistic forces and expectations of the family and society.

Kapur beautifully entwined the major historical event with the lives of her characters and depicts the political situation with the same fervor and graphic details as she describes the protagonist Astha's turmoil. Anita Niar's remarks beautifully some up the essence of the novel----"If once looking for a metaphor, here it is. A nation falling apart because of religious differences and the dynamics of power Politics: a marriage falling apart because of difference that somehow cannot be

bridged. Like her earlier two novels, Manju Kapur's novel "Home" beautifully weaves "Conflicting loyalties, intrigues, triumphs "as well as the "small rebellious an instance power struggles" which constitutes the universal human experience. Here, too, the canvas is the familiar one. The ordinary middle class joint family and the subject is the exploration of the lives of ordinary women, and the ways in which they connect to and resist other women, as it had been in *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*. A novel about the pressures and rewards of living in a traditional extended but close knit Indian family of shopkeepers: brothers and their families living in the same house, the story presents the women characters as mistresses of a joint kitchen in the day time and their husband's bed at night. Destined to be married off at a marriageable age they except every brunt easily as something controlled totally by fate. Kapur's novel describes submissiveness of women to their mother -in -law when they show resentment of theirs daughters -in -law; the pressures on wives to produce children—boys for preference- and disgrace if they fail to do so; and the women in the novel are shown spending their energies left over from cooking and house work in being jealous of each other and being particularly status conscious in nagging their husbands who are softer than their wives. The shifts in relationships the power struggles within a family, the suppressing individuality are all very minutely captured by Manju Kapur.

Thus Manju Kapur's novels present the changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards self-assured, assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands and in this way providing a medium for self-expression in the works of Manju Kapur.

References

1. P.P.122)7
2. (IWE, p.12)10
3. (TVB1W, 1947-49, p. XV)9
4. Anna Metcalfe (9April 2011) "Small talk: Manju Kapur