

Traditional and Modern Women's Character Analysis in the Novels of Manju Kapur

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Abstract:- This research presents how Manju Kapur, a contemporary Indian woman writer, in her novels, has depicted diverse images of women and the traditional as well as modern roles they play, asserting themselves in the process without defying marriage and motherhood. Even though the cultural ethos has given the girls a sense of security, it has also burdened them with more responsibilities than the boys. As women are given a subaltern status in Indian society, Kapur's women characters have been caught between tradition and modernity, it is thoroughly investigated how these women struggle and suffer to demolish the age-old, oppressive customs forced on them to be emancipated. In her novels, one can find a feminocentric expostulation against phallogocentric mores and values.

Keywords: Tradition, modern, women, society, status, family, religion and culture.

Introduction:

Manju Kapur clearly expresses the female characters from colonial and pre-independent India. These are the females that are steeped into traditions. Traditions are the backbones to these females and are nothing without these traditions. They have breathed each breath in the traditions and they feel that their status and position as a daughter, wife and mother is pretty secure and safe. She feels that the patriarchal system is safe for her interests. They are so adapted to this system that they even can't think of any kind of revolt. Any thought against the system is irrational to them. They are highly adjusted to this patriarchal system and they are fully dedicated to it. The researcher article has divided into three parts namely: The traditional image of the female in society in the novels of Manju Kapur, A modern image of the female in society in the novels of Manju Kapur and Changing Image.

The Traditional image of females in society in Manju Kapur's novels:

Manju Kapur presents her concept of womanhood by creating different types of characters; and in so doing, she delves deep into the woman's psyche. Her novels depict various

complex aspects of women personality. This trait of Manju Kapur makes her a master to delineate human characters and in particular female characters. She through her insight finds out the motives of her leading characters that motivate them to go for unpredictable actions. This part of the thesis deals with the concept of traditional women in the novels of Manju Kapur. Tradition includes the burden of customs, rituals and conventions, social norms that shapes and control the characters living in that society.

Tradition is an unwritten document that is transmitted from one generation to another generation and the person living in the society and follows the set norms without any questioning or objections are termed as traditional. Such people never deviate from these set of norms. It can be said in other words that the ancestors laid the examples for their upcoming generations and are followed as their role models. A female child who follows the footsteps of her mother is a traditional woman. There is one danger in this traditional approach that if the trend continues without any alteration, objection or question then there are chances that the society becomes stagnant. The old order must change, yielding place to new. Lest one good custom should corrupt the world. (Tennyson, Alfred: 1885)

The novels of Manju Kapur present the image of modern women emerging out from the traditional women. She traces back to the status of women in traditional era. She picks up her characters from the traditional spirit. The change is the result of fierce struggle between the old and the new. This phenomenon of change is made clear in the following couplet. We think our father's fools, so wise we grow our wiser sons, no doubt, will think us so.

The character of Kasturi in *Difficult Daughters* is such a traditional character. Manju Kapur through her character beautifully presents the characteristics of traditional woman. Kasturi is the mother of Virmati in '*Difficult Daughters*'. A mother becomes a formidable force in the patriarchal system. She is the very replica of the traditional woman. She embodies all the traditional qualities. We find in her, all the salient traits ingrained in a traditional woman. Kasturi comes from a well-to-do middle class, traditional, Arya Samaj family. She has been trained from her girlhood that marriage is her destiny.

As such Kasturi was trained in the culinary arts which were an essential qualification for a young girl to be married. Marriage changes the status of a daughter into the status of a daughter-in-law and from then onwards her in-laws, become hers. And her chief duty as a daughter-in-law is to please her in-laws. Traditionally she is well-equipped to be a daughter-in-law whose chief duty is to be good at cooking. "During Kasturi's formal schooling it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated her education continued in the home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by the impeccable nature of her daughter's qualifications. She was going to please her in-laws" (Kapur, Manju, 1998: P62).

The character of Kasturi in the novel firmly believes in the values of patriarchy. She feels that it is her responsibility to transmit these inherited values to her upcoming generation daughter Virmati. Her daughter rebels against these traditional values. She feels: "Most women simultaneously demand and detest their feminine condition, they live it through in a state of resentment vexed at loving produced a woman, the mother greets her with this ambiguous curse: 'you shall be a woman'. She hopes to compensate for her inferiority by making a superior creature out of one whom, she regards as double and she sometimes she tries to impose on the child exactly her own fate: 'what was good enough for you, I was good enough for you, I was brought up this way, you shall share my lot'" (Beauvoir, Simon de: 1986).

Manju Kapur portrays the problem of infertility in women through Ishita's character. Infertility is regarded as a curse in Indian culture. Ishita in this novel plays a victim of this harsh thinking. "Smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in the sunlit air, smaller than drops of dew caught between blades of grass in the morning was Ishita as she sat in the gynecologist's office with her mother-in-law, watching as the doctor sketched out the messages concealed in her body. Here were the tubes, here the eggs, here was where conception occurred. The loss of normal anatomy meant fertilization couldn't take place without intervention." (Kapur, Manju, 2001:P65)

Through two different characters Manju Kapur presents two faces of the society Shagun on one hand and Ishita on the other. Shagun has a loving husband and her two children. She wishes to live her life in her own way but she has to think of her family. Ishita on the other hand experienced rejection from her married life because of her infertility. Shagun and Ishita are two different faces of a coin. They are totally different from each other. Through the novel Manju Kapur depicts the characters of typical gender stereotype, traditional women who act as formidable force of patriarchal family. They not only carry the burden of their traditions and familial relationships but also wish to pontificate their coming generation thus being the flag bearers of it.

Modern image of female in society in the novels of Manju Kapur

The female characters in the narratives of Manju Kapur are depicted as strugglers against the odds of the society. She through her novels presents their sufferings at a deeper level. The characters are crushed under the pressure of patriarchal traditions and her characters are attempting to free themselves out of the clutches of odd traditions and wish to lead a free life. They search for their own identity.

Manju Kapur portrays her character as modern in their attitude towards life. They set back towards the traditions laid by society. They wish to deviate from the patriarchal customs. In doing so they meet encounter many hindrances at several stages. Finally, they emerge out as

strong, bold, new, modern and empowered characters. She in novels imbibes the spirit of changing times and depicts her characters as highly adaptive personalities to changing situations and time. They adapt and adjust themselves very well to the changing situations and new challenges.

Manju Kapur in this novel investigates the themes of Education, polygamy and marriage. The central character in the novel is Virmati. She makes continuous efforts to find her identity but she fails after she fell in love with a married individual. She in her novel presents two categories of women i.e., traditional and modern women. The former kind of women sticks to the norms and standards laid by the society. They live their life according to the set norms of the society. They sacrifice their self but adhere to the traditions. On the other hand, the later kind of women enjoys freedom and do not bind themselves to any tradition. They live their life according to their own desires. They wish to have their own identity. They wish to be independent and self reliant. The characters of Ganga and Kasturi represent the traditional women and the characters of Swarnlata and Shakuntala shows the characteristics of modern women.

Manju Kapur creates Ida, the daughter of Virmati in '*Difficult Daughters*', as distinct from any other woman character in the novel. Ida belongs to a new generation of free India and imbibes the spirit of the new times. There has been a generation gap between Ida and those who preceded her. It is quite natural that the change of time brings about a change in the view point of the present generation. The new woman is a manifest in the character of Ida. Unlike her mother, she appears to be very strong, determined and clear-headed radical.

In her next novel *A Married Woman*, she attempted to reimagining feminism like other contemporary writers. After the completion of college studies Astha got married to Hemant who is a young and has returned from America. He is the son of a prosperous office bearer. She in her early married life lived a blissful life. She took her husband's home as her second home. She mixed herself with all the members of the family so beautifully that they did not feel the void created by the absence of daughters of the house. She was so happy that she does not get words to express her happiness. In this connection, it is clearly said: "In the early years of her marriage, she was captivated by the magic of their sexual life. She eagerly looked forward to a physical union with her husband and enjoyed it immensely thinking physical intimacy to be the be-all and end-all of her married life" (Gurwara, Simmi, 2001: p-89).

Nisha got ample opportunity for self-expression, self revelation and for asserting her own identity and thinking when she took admission for completing her education in the college and thus, also got a chance to confront the outside world. She took a new look when she got her hair cut into a different from the traditional look. This is the starting point of a new journey of modernity discarding all tradition.

She was well aware that her family would not like her new hair cut, she took this bold step. She develops a love affair with Suresh, an engineering student. He was not rich and tells Nisha that her parents would not allow their marriage; her answer was that her parents' marriage was also a love marriage. She tells him, "For my parents the boy's merit is the only consideration." (Kapur, Manju, 2001: p-155) Manju Kapur neatly concludes this beautiful novel '*Home*' with Nisha, the protagonist standing out as a modern woman with determination from the background of a traditional family.

A critical study of Manju Kapur's women protagonists allows one to perceive a progressive and conspicuous change concerning their forward views against the traditional values which mark the modernity of their outlook. They appear more accentuated when they are contrasted with the views expressed by those of the traditional attitude or outlook. From Virmati of "*Difficult Daughters*" and Astha of "*A Married Woman*" to Nisha of "*Home*", and Ishita of '*Custody*' one traces progression from a lower stage to a higher one towards self-identity and individuality by stoutly opposing hoary tradition. Thus, Kapur's women strive to create a niche for themselves. They are dynamic women who protest against the oppressive traditional values and wriggle out of the coils of tradition. They are sophisticated enough to ignore these traditions as stumbling blocks in the way of their free thinking.

Changing Image

India is a transitional society and the roles and responsibilities are transited between males and females. Several families in the Indian society still abide by the traditional values and customs and on the other hand several families are living a life of modern Indian society. After the Independence Indian society underwent many changes and women community also faced several changes in their lifestyle. They transformed their characters. They have transited through various phases like: suppressed housewives, participants in national movements, emancipated and empowered women.

Female literacy rate also increased after independence and as a result they became independent. They entered different professional fields. Though there are several changes in the condition of women but poor health, beating of women, female feticide still prevails in our society. On analysis of status of women, it is revealed that there are two faces; one is promising and the other 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. Nuclear families are preferred to joint families. This is the result of urbanization and migration in search for job. Dynamics of home are changed due to this concept of nuclear families.

The ancient pattern of the head of the family or household does not prevail in many families now. These factors are leading women characters to empower themselves and they are

doing much more than they ever did. The position of women has changed and is not confined to their houses only. They have expanded their presence beyond kitchen work. Indian females have redefined their roles in the eyes of the society. The females have recognized and identified their potential. Now she is in a position to question the society about the traditions laid and imposed on females. She does not want to bind themselves in any restrictions. She breaks up all the barriers and wishes to earn a respectable position in the family and the society.

Indian women showed their presence in every field. They are not behind their male counterpart in any sense or any respect. They are heading up in all the spheres of life. There are two sides of women section in our society. On one side they are moving ahead in all the fields and getting great success in various fields and on the other hand they are still suffering and silently accepting the torture and pressure of their family members. No doubt that they have gained a lot but still there is a lot to achieve. They have to travel a long way to achieve the set target and desired milestone. She has to cross the hurdles in terms of the prejudice made by society. Men also need to accept them as their equal. The time is changing in the modern generation and young women are living their lives according to their own desire and wish. They are living alone, earning for self and their family, they are no more dependent. They spend their earning as per their choice. They marry according to their choice; they decide to become pregnant or not. It can be said that they are no more living a life of submissive character.

A graphic depiction of this transformation of the Indian woman has been very successfully done by the various Indian women novelists. In today's era, fiction by feminist writers contributes as a majority to 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. There has been a greater focus on the challenges and concerns of women in a world dominated by men. Manju Kapur is one of the leading modern Indian authors who has made a valuable contribution to Indian fiction's development. She explores and covers a wide variety of times across her books, from pre-independence to liberalization and globalization. The female characters in her novels maintain the balance in life and also attempts to break up the traditions and norms laid by the society to suppress women. She explores through her genres that females are under the continuous pressure of their family. Before marriage they are in the clutches of her father, mother and brother. During this period, they are so trained that they become submissive and after their marriage they continue this as their habit. They remain in the clutches of their husband and in-laws. She is not free to take her own decisions. Only few females are able to liberate themselves.

Kapur through her novels raises her voice against this prejudice and she makes a diversion to these stereotyped characters. Her novels deal with both traditional as well as modern characters. She in her novels presents the women characters that wish to live a free life by breaking up of the patriarchal foundations and old age traditions. Her characters are keen to

get out of the domestic four walls and make their own world. She depicts the clash between tradition and modernity by her characters. Her characters wish to have their own identity. Her specialty in the presentation is that her characters not only revolt against the odds present in the society but they evolve out of them as new women or modern women.

Difficult Daughter, her first novel presents the three generations of females. Virmati is in the lead role in the novel her mother Kasturi and daughter Ida also play a significant role to play in the novel. All the characters depict the society of their period. Kasturi is portrayed as mother of eleven children. She has shattered her health as a result of deliveries of children and she is not convinced to give birth to an eleventh child. She makes an unsuccessful attempt to abort the child with the help of Dai which leaves her devastated. She gives birth to eleventh female child; named Parvati. Her health was so poor that the doctors suggest her complete rest and advise her long holiday on a hill station otherwise she will meet her death. "It is only Virmati who is the difficult daughter in the prosperous merchant family of Lala Diwan Chand. While in the generation of Kasturi, woman's role was confined to childbearing and kitchen work, the generation of Virmati took some bold and radical steps in joining the political movement for India's freedom, asserted the need for women education and independence. As a non-chalant representative of the middle generation, Virmati breaks away from the tradition bound limits of Indian women." (Milhoutra, Ruby, p- 164)

Ida is Virmati's daughter and her nature is on the contrary side of her mothers'. Her appearance in the novel is very less but she depicts the life of a modern girl. She would like to break up the unsatisfactory relations rather than take them as a burden. Though under the pressure of her husband she got aborted but then she divorced her husband. Her mother's life had been a mystery for her and as a result of this only she used to hate her mother. After the death of her mother, she vowed to resolve that mystery. "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she was gone and I stared at the fire that rose from her shriveled body, dry-eyed, leaden, half dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept." (Kapur, Manju, p-1)

'*Difficult Daughters*' is a strange story of mother daughter bond. The steadiness of conflict between customs and modernism in the women of three generations from Kasturi to Ida, where Kasturi is presented as traditional symbol who thinks that marriage is the ultimate aim for girls and education is prerequisite for marriage. But Virmati the symbol of conflict has passion for knowledge and yearns for study and she revolts against the traditional symbol. So, she is branded as Difficult Daughter. But her love for married professor dooms her career and her married life is disaster as she has to bear the grunt of second wife, requisitioned with mother-in-law, co-wife and stepchildren. She uses inclusive schooling as an escape path. The modern symbols in this novel are Shakuntala, Swarnlata and Ida. Astha, the

protagonist in the novel *A Married Woman* belongs to a middle-class family. She enjoyed her relation with Rohan in her adolescent period. Like any other girl she too has a wish to get married to a handsome and young man. She got her wish fulfilled and got married to Hemant. He is handsome and smart. After few years of her marriage, she got entwined in the web of household tasks. Nobody was there to share her responsibilities. She gave birth to a female child. After this pregnancy, she is again expected to bear another child who is a male. She was told that she will continue to give birth to children unless their family have a male child. Hemant states, “*Of course, we will have a son, and if we don't, we needn't stop at two.*” (Kapur, Manju, p-61)

Despite all the problems faced by her she has a desire to search for herself. She wishes to have an autonomous life. She participated in social movements related to Ram Mandir and Babri Masjid. She through her speeches at the gatherings molded the mindset of the mob. She was not satisfied with her marital relationship with Hemant and to satisfy her sexual desires got indulged in lesbian relationship with Pipeelika. She became an artist and got recognized by the society. She achieved her desire to be independent and self-reliant. She made her family realize that she is not only a housewife but is able to fulfil the needs of others also. “A post-modernistic ethic has spread its wings everywhere. *A Married Woman* deals with tradition versus no tradition, permanent versus temporary, moral versus immoral, usual sex to unusual sex, factual history versus imaginary history and religion versus in-humanism. The life in the novel presents contradictions, paradoxes, illusions and fantasies.” (Roopali, p-51)

The novel ‘*A Married Woman*’ deals with the theme of tradition versus modernity. The character of Astha is the outcome of her traditional upbringing mingled with western education. Traditional concept of woman is that her place is in home only. Although she marries Hemant –Foreign return, who in the beginning seem to be the man with modern thoughts but gradually he presents a different picture for who birth of boy is necessary. The exploitation of woman is depicted where her life is considered only to serve. Astha could not bear this mental pain which results in serious headaches. She joins job to provide escape from humdrum life and financial security also, but no recognition is given to her at home. She finds companionship in Aizaz who praises her literary attributes but he is killed in riots. This void was filled by his wife and both develop lesbian relation. But ultimately, she has to return to her roots of home.

In *The Immigrant* the dilemma of second sex where two themes are portrayed. The first element is sexual and the second is social. But sexual aspect overpowers. If it does not derive its life force from the main stream of our own society, the imitation of Western sex is required to lack vitality and power. The modernity does not mean adulteration. Nina, the trained woman who is unable to deal with the conventional context in which she is raised is the emblem of

strife. The portrayal of a middle-class woman sandwiched between tradition and modernity is illuminated. Nina's love for country is sacrificed at the altar of marriage but finds that her marriage is not what she thought it would be. She has to migrate to Canada where she's an Immigrant. She adapts new culture, clothes, food but could not get sexual satisfaction. Anand suffers from sexual insufficiency and isolation comes between them leading to distress in marriage.

Custody is the last novel written by Manju Kapur and is a part of discussion in the thesis. Unlike other books, there are two female protagonists in this novel: Shagun and Ishita. It is set in the liberalisation phase and the age of globalization. This era is seen as a time for any successful person to rise economically and socially. The people in the society became financially strong and but morally and ethically weak. The divorce between Shagun and Raman is the excellent example in the novel to depict the hollowness of relationships in the modern marriage life. The divorce of Ishita and Suryakanta is another example presented by the novelist to depict the degradation of moral values. Although marriage is well-trodden territory for Kapur, here her possession of the subject is complete. In the accumulation of detail, and her tone of emotional restraint, *Custody* becomes something more than just a social commentary, but a novel that is true to the universal angst of modern marriage, with its burden of individualism.

In *Custody*, Manju Kapur examines that a modern woman fulfils her own desires and dreams, before considering her familial desires. Through the novel the transformed life of women in the era of globalization is depicted. It depicts the dissolution of marital lives and families in modern Indian society. Shagun is such character who leaves her husband and children to accomplish her own desires and dreams. She does not even think of her children then what to talk of traditional values and norms.

Conclusion

The analysis of the novels by Manju Kapur depicts the changing roles and positions of women in the changing scenario of the Indian society. Traditional society lays a burden of rituals, customs and moral values on women and they feel bondage under their pressure. All the leading women characters throughout the story try to find their position and personal space in the family and the society. They quest for exploring themselves. The female protagonists in the novels of Manju Kapur seem to represent new modern women who carried the burden of traditions for a long time and now they wish to free themselves. Through her novels Manju Kapur presents a message that neither traditional nor modern women can survive individually. In her books, she presented the tension between tradition and modernity through various characters. The speciality of her female characters is that not only they are involved directly in the clash against the domination of male members in the society but they have suffered a lot as a result of this conflict. Her characters wish to lead a free life and so they break up the set

traditional or social norms. Manju Kapur does not resolve the conflict between tradition and modernity deliberately and is still a debatable issue in Indian society. One thing that is clear and beyond any doubt, is that one who raises a voice against odds has to suffer and one who surrenders also has to suffer admitting it as their misfortune.

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