



Arjoo Kharb

Manju Kapur As A Versatile Genius

Research Scholar- English, J.S. University, Shikohabad (U.P.) India

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E-mail: peetambrask@gmail.com

Abstract: *Among the contemporary Indo-Anglian women novelists Manju Kapur has become the most appreciated and widely read novelist and by virtue of her feministic attitude and highlighting the various current social, political and religious issues, she has been ranked among the great early women novelists like Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De and Anita Desai. She has basically written about the problems of woman, about their heart-melting miserable plight and their constant struggle against inhuman and rigid rules made by male-oriented society for women which have imprisoned women under the four walls of the house. She makes her women protagonists to go against the narrow and old traditional thinking of the people. The result of widely and rapidly spread of education is that women have become alert and assertive to claim for their rights, identity and empowerment. Manju Kapur has become the voice of the 'New Woman'.*

Manju Kapur is the retired professor of English from Delhi University. She was born in Amritsar. She took her degree of M.A. in English from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada and M.Phil from Delhi University. She spent her childhood in Washington. She has five very popular novels to her credit dealing with the problems of women and other social, political, religious and cultural contemporary problems. She achieved common wealth prize for her first novel 'Difficult Daughters'.

Key Words: Indo-Anglian women, appreciated, feministic attitude, highlighting, political, religious issues.

The story of this novel revolves round its central figure Virmati, who has to undergo the pangs of traditional and narrow outlook of her mother Kasturi for whom marriage is the only purpose of a girl's life which is boldly opposed by Virmati. She, being the eldest of the eleven children of Kasturi is given the responsibility of caring of her younger brothers and sisters. But Virmati is inclined to continue her education as she is inspired by Shakuntala, her cousin who is already continuing her study keeping aside the mission of marriage of the parents. Virmati comes in the contact of the married Professor Harish Chandra and makes illicit relations with him and finally marries him for which she is much condemned. She has to live with the first family of the Professor as his second wife. She has to undergo much humiliation in that family. The story of this novel covers three generations of Virmati and happens to refer to the life story of the novelist's mother. The novel besides relating the tragic tale of Virmati's life also refers to the days of struggle for freedom and the impact of Mahatma Gandhi. Shakuntala and Swaru Lata present the belief in woman empowerment and identity and they play as the fountain heads of inspiration to Virmati to come forward and do something new according to her own decisions instead of crushing her desire under the pressure of old traditions and narrow rituals.

Her novels truly speak and plead for changing image of women towards self-assured and assertive well awakened and educated woman, the example of which can be seen in her second novel 'A Married Woman', the protagonist of which Astha is an educated woman well equipped with the demand of her rights of being socially and economically self-dependent.

Manju Kapur's versatility lies in her multicentricity of themes in her novels though the main focus remains on the issues related to women regarding their social and economic plight, their fight for identity, self-respect and empowerment, yet besides this she also highlights the current social, religious, political and cultural issues. For example in her first novel she refers to the fight for Independence as she includes the incidents and events of Pre-I



ndependence period and after that as we find in these words of Swarn Lata to Virmati-

"We are responsible for our own future marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war - the Satyagrah movements - because of these things women are coming out of their homes....." (Difficult Daughters Pg. 151)

It can be obviously noticed that every novel is marked and set up in the background of some historical or religious background. Virmati's story and the event of India's fight for freedom run together.

Manju Kapur's novels have brought a revolutionary change in the progress of women in India. She present an image of new woman in her novels. Virmati's marrying the English Professor is her daring step which speaks a step toward independent decision and woman empowerment, as she challenges the age-old rigid norms of her family and those of society, though her marriage is severely criticized. The novelist present her protagonists as strong and bold in the new attire of progressive views.

Manju Kapur while focusing on the theme of woman welfare and empowerment does not ignore the current contemporary social, religious, cultural and political issues, as we find in her novel 'A Married Woman'. Astha, the protagonist fights for her individuality as she has been a devoted wife and a caring mother, but she claims to lead a life beyond house-hold duties.

She joins a school as a teacher and thus comes out of the four walls of the house. She becomes a member of the theatre group of Aizaz who performs shows to bring out social awakening and spreading awareness for education. After the tragic killing of Aizaz she openly participates in the protest against this killing for demanding severe punishment to the culprits. The novelists does not forget the prevailing conflict of Ram Janmbhoomi and Babri Mazjid. This is the great literary skill of Manju Kapur to make the situation necessary to include in the story of the novel and give space as the sub-plot. There is no struggle in the family of Astha with her mother-in-law and husband Hemant as they are against her participating in social and religious activities and there is another struggle for Ram Janmbhoomi and Babri Mazjid as there takes much violence in Ayodhya in the name of religion. The novelist refers to this issue.

"Pseudo-secularists want the mosque declared a national monument forgetting that Ram was in India and Babar an invader. It is a national dishonor if a symbol of invasion is so declared".² (A Married Woman Pg. 186)

Manju Kapur does not talk only of the suppression of women under male-dominance, rather she includes all the aspects of a woman's life. She does not ignore the most essential part of human life - the need of sexual satisfaction. Pipeelika-Astha relationship is an example of homosexuality which may be against morality according to Indian ethics, but the novelist pleads for Lesbianism as a rational result of dissatisfaction from the institution of marriage. Homosexuality speaks of woman's step towards self-identity and rejection of male-dominance.

Nina being sexually dissatisfied with her husband does not hesitate in making extra marital relations. Manju Kapur in her novel 'The Immigrant', highlights in a very clear way the cultural difference at the difference of traditions in the western countries. The immigrants have to face the change but the only way out is to compromise with the situation and conditions.

It is Manju Kapur's skill that she can picturize a simple middle class joint family while she has been a student of Delhi University and has been abroad too.

In her novel 'Home', we find a clear picture of a joint middle class family with old traditional customs and rituals. But at the same time Nisha, the grand daughter of Lala Banwari Lal brings a change in the attitude of the members of the family as she comes up as a 'new woman'. The novelist in her novels presents the transitional period of middle class woman, a generation gap between the old and new. Nisha in 'Home' presents this change from the age of rituals and old religions faith to the modernity which has been brought by the spread of knowledge and which has resulted in the form of a 'new woman'.

Manju Kapur has wonderful skill of peeping into the human heart and mind. Therefore, she makes a



psychological study of her protagonists and presents clearly what is going on in their minds. Her protagonists Virmati, Astha, Nisha and Nina are mentally divided between the two waves and it has been beautifully picturized in the novels of Manju Kapur. Her protagonist Shagun in 'Custody' chooses to live with Ashok Khanna, the boss of her husband, because her husband did not fulfill her desires and requirements. The novelist touches this serious part of a woman's heart that craves from full attention of her husband. It speaks of deep study of the human heart and it adds to an essential need of a writer we notice, how beautifully she has described the psyche of the immigrants in her novel 'The Immigrant'.

Manju Kapur's skill and art of plot construction makes her a versatile writer as she has been successful in presenting the changing image of women without involving her personality in her, but like an objective observer of the society. The plots of her novels appear quite realistic as all the incidents and events move naturally. There appears nothing unnatural. The events of struggle for Independence, partition of the country and the dispute of Ram Jambhoomi and Babri Masjid are real contemporary events.

Manju Kapur's art and skill of characterization also makes her a versatile genius as her characters give a feeling of reality as they appear as persons seen around us. Her characters give the message of Indian cultural heritage and also place the difference between Western and Indian culture as we find in her novel 'The Immigrants'. Manju Kapur though brought up in the culture of Delhi, studied in Delhi University and abroad, she presents her characters as if she had lived with them. She depicts the characters from the old traditional generation like Kasturi, Lajwanti and Kishori Devi and then the characters emerging from modernity under the impact of wide spread of education as Shakuntla, Swarn Lata, Astha, Pipeelika and Nisha, but each character stands realistic in her form and situation. Therefore, the novelist adds new dimension to the art of fiction writing. The following two dialogues bring the picture of two generation and here lies the greatness of the novelist-

"Kasturi:- What is the need to do a job? A woman shaan is in her home"³ (Difficult Daughters Pg. 16)

"Shakuntala to Virmati:- Times are changing and woman are moving out of the house, so why not you?"⁴ (Pg. 18)

Through her art of characterization, Manju Kapur has been successful in bringing out the changing role of women in her novels and thus shows how the woman empowerment is gradually taking a practical shape. Her woman characters seem to crusade against patriarchal dominance and narrow traditional thinking. All her women protagonists leave an unending impression on the readers.

In spite of difference between the 'Old' and the 'New'. The novelist does not favour for disharmony in family relations. She believes that a family can run smoothly with mutual understanding and harmonious relations. Finally she makes her women characters bold, outspoken, determined to achieve a place of respect in the family as well as in the society. Their main object is to achieve empowerment.

Manju Kapur's use of simple and lucid language makes her novels highly admirable and widely read. She uses the language 'really spoken by men'. The local colour in her language makes her art more charming. The combination of Hindi-Punjabi words brings her narration more realistic and life-like. She uses English language not as a foreign tongue but as one of the Indian languages. This 'Indian-English' is generally used by educated people in India specially.

Her novels are full of such Hindi, English and Punjabi words which add an extra charm to her novels. Kasturi in 'Difficult Daughters' says to Shakuntala "A Woman's shaan is in her home." Such use of words like 'Shaan' makes her novels more homely and realistic. Whenever she presents any romantic scene or description, her language becomes very fascinating as we find when she describes Pipeelika's personality-

"....Her hairs was like a holo-round her face, springing away from it, black, brown and orange..... her skin was a pale milky coffee colour...."⁵ (A Married Woman Pg. 197)



She becomes very frank and open while describing the homo-sexual relations between Pipeelika and Astha-
"She goes to sleep, and I pass my hand over her breasts. At first it had seemed odd, after years of being made love to by a man, to have one's breasts met by a similar pair, though larger....." (A Married Woman Pg. 258)

Such a use of simple language and even unspoken sometimes brings her works near to become life like and realistic. Thus Manju Kapoor has added new dimensions to Indian-English fiction with her minute observations of the Indian society with special reference to the plight of women in middle class society.

The novelist has handled all her themes with a sense of balance, though she gives a message that women's fight for autonomy and empowerment should go on for achieving perfect and complete empowerment. Manju Kapoor's multiple literary talents make her a versatile genius and ranks her among the world famous women novelists of Indo-Anglian Literature.

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3. Manju Kapoor - Difficult Daughters - Pg. No. 16-18.
4. Manju Kapoor - A Married Woman - Pg. No. 197.
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