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**Research Article****Opening New Vistas: A Study of Manju Kapur's Heroines****Dr. Naresh Sharma**

Associate Professor (English), GC Nagrota Bagwan, Himachal Pradesh, India.

ARTICLE INFORMATION**ABSTRACT****Corresponding Author:**

Dr Naresh Sharma

This article throws light on the female protagonists of Manju Kapur who came out of the cage of patriarchy with strong determination.

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This article deals with the female protagonists of Manju Kapur refusing to be puppets in the patriarchal set up. They finally come out with the clarion-call that self-determination is the only way out to cross the walls of patriarchy without damaging them. Most scriptures of the world, including the *Bible* and *Manusmriti*, have defined the role of women, by placing them in the "confines of the household" (Laxmi, 827). The *Bible* categorically exhorts women to submit themselves to their husbands. *Manusmriti* occupies a significant place in the mainstream of Indian philosophy and culture. It expresses some noble sentiments about women:

Where females are honoured there

The deities are pleased; but where

They are dishonoured there all

Religious acts become fruitless. (Buhler, 74)

Nevertheless, it prescribes that a woman remains dependent on the father in youth, on her husband after marriage, and on her son after the death of her husband. It is considered a sin for a widow to think of another man whereas a right for a widower to remarry. It is generally prescribed that a Hindu wife must please and follow her husband unquestionable. Her relationship with her husband is given more importance than the daughter-father, sister-brother or daughter-mother relationships.

With the passage of time, Indian women started realizing that injustice has been done to them in their traditional roles and they woke up from a long slumber. They started raising their voice against inequality and oppression. In the twentieth century, the female consciousness against male domination gave birth to various reform movements towards the upliftment of women in society. Feminism is expression of women identity in works of art. It is part of women liberation movements across the globe.

Feminism deals with the inferior position of women in the four walls of the home and with discrimination encountered by women because of their sex. It is a term that emerged long after women started questioning their inferior status and demanding amelioration of their social position. This may be looked as a movement: "to gain for women equal rights with men in social, political and economic fields" (Laxmi 827).

In India, after the promulgation of the Indian constitution and enactment of various laws for women, the feminist movements caught momentum and strength. This movement provided them an opportunity to understand the political process in the country and the politics of gender inequality and suppression of women's rights. The contemporary feminist movement demonstrates that the present day availability of women for a variety of causes is also a part of the historical legacy. Basically, feminist movement in India is now an important part of the world-wide movement of women for justice, equality and empowerment.

Today, women have woken up from their long slumber and they have become aware of their rights. They are proving their mettle in all walks of life. Many societies, including the most industrialized like Japan have used the visibility of women in top political leadership, bureaucracy and armed forces to exemplify their claims that women in their countries have already achieved equality. This claim is frequently reaffirmed in everyday discourses mainly by men whereby it is argued that women

have pushed men back so that now it is the men who actually need to fight for equality with women. Yet an examination of institutional structures in different societies within the military, political organizations and society as a whole, as well as discourses on national identity, leads to a rather different picture. Does mere entry of women in public sphere signify gender equality? At times of national crisis women have always been recruited to participate in the war activities, but once this crisis is over and before a new crisis emerges both the rhetoric of equality and representation of nation, are once again adjusted to fit yet another patriarchal heterosexual familial model. In the words of a feminist writer women are vote gaining machines for all political parties. In basic terms men are elected, and women help them to get elected. So the fact remains that women have put on their socks and still getting ready to keep their feet in boots. The iron is being made hot by feminist movements and the women must not only touch it rather they should strike it very hard and of course with a bang. Through there is great increase in the proportion of women in high positions yet, the role of violence against women is increasing and the condition in rural areas is very miserable. The feminist movements want women to be empowered and given opportunities to perform roles of their choices.

In the modern Indian English fiction writings it is seen that there is a continuous striving for identity by the female characters may it be Saru, Jaya, Virmati or Astha. These characters are the products of feminism. The main focus of a woman in the writings is a deep concern and assertion of her own personality along with her rights as a woman.

One of the most notable and eye-catching forte in the writings of women in the past few years have been the genuine concern and increased degree of awareness about the abuses which the woman are often subjected to in the male dominated society which is patriarchal in authority. The feminist movements have sensitized the women writers which has given a new direction to the creative literature in general and women literature in particular. Many women crusaders seem to have realized the need to feminize the issues and experiences which have been either misunderstood or distorted by their male counterparts. The novels of Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Bharti Mukherjee, Namita Gokhle, Nayantra Sehgal, Anita Desai and Rama Mehta revolve around one common theme – ‘a deep concern for women’. They faithfully portray the tortured consciousness of the urban middle class woman who in quest of her identity passes through a series of ordeals, becomes a hard core rebel, breaking the age old restraining ethics of this patriarchal world and in the process emerge out as a new woman.

The fiction by woman writers in India constitutes a major segment of the contemporary writing in English. It mirrors the life of Indian woman, her sufferings and sorrows which are imposed by patriarchy. The chief reason for having a large number of women writers is the opportunity to create their own world about them, of them and by them. It has given them a much coveted opportunity to weave a web of their own existence without the influence of men.

It is also observed that a large number of readers of the books written by the women are the women themselves. They get inspiration and also get motivated. Through this platform, they get a chance to explore a wide range of experiences of the world, from which they can identify themselves with a range of characters produced by the woman writers.

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women writers has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. Traditionally, the work of Indian woman writers has been undervalued due to patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of their male counterparts. It was alleged that the woman only write about the enclosed domestic space and their works keep on beating the drum of their own problems and their work will automatically be ranked below the male writers who deal a higher degree of complex and varied subjects. But in the present scenario the tables are turned and book-shelves in the libraries and book-shops abound in the titles authored by female writers.

Many Indian women novelists have exposed new women in their fictional attempts in order to establish an identity that is not imposed by patriarchal society. Thus, the theme of growing up from childhood to womanhood and further – a wife, a mother and as an individual are frequently seen in women writings. Resultantly, the image of women has undergone a sea change during the last four or five decades. Women writers have gone a big step further from traditional portrayals of enduring self-effacing women toward conflicted female characters searching for identity, no longer characterized and defended simply in terms of their miserable status. In sharp contrast to the novels written in the past, female protagonists from eighties onward assert themselves and give an open and bold threat to the institutions of marriage and motherhood.

Modern writers of Indian fiction have depicted dynamic energetic and swashbuckling women protagonists who pose a great threat to patriarchy. In other words, they have given a clarion-call to women to come out of their narrow walls and emerge out as promising women as innumerable vistas are open to them.

On the whole, it can be commented that the literary endeavours of the Indian women writers are significantly important in creating an awareness in the society that women are integral part of every civilization and they cannot be sidelined otherwise the chariot of society will turn turtle. History is an ample evidence to prove that injustice leads to violence and action. The pens of women have allowed them to create their own world. It has also allowed them to sow the seeds of their own existence, free from the direct interference of men. Likewise so many women have taken up reading women's writing because it allows them a safe place from which they can explore a wide range of complexities and experiences of the world, from which they can identify with a range of characters and a variety of existences. Owing to these reasons women writing have occupied such a significant and central place in women's lives.

Out of these writings, the face of a new woman emerges which has been globally acknowledged. An Indian woman has to face many trials and tribulations in the patriarchal society of India and she feels crippled by the chains of patriarchy. She has to face discrimination right from the womb, a sense of insecurity, sexual harassment and violence which makes her an unwilling puppet in the male-dominated society. Despite the wind, blowing against her existence, a woman is emerging as a new woman who has courage and strength to blow her trumpet and make men to dance to her tunes. She has converted her weakness into her strength and has also mustered fortitude to swim against the tides. She was a bird in the cage but now wants to fly and stop fluttering in the cage. She has wings of fire and urges to fly higher and higher. Thanks to the liberation movement, feminist movements and most importantly, the feminist writings. She has developed an urge to create a milieu for the full expression of her emotional and moral self. She wants to be an independent individual, a person in her own right and enjoying the same status as men have always enjoyed.

A number of Indian women novelists made their debut in the 1990s and produced the novels which mirrored the true state of Indian society and particularly its treatment of women. Particularly, the modern Indian fiction has given vent to Indian

feminine sensibility; their increasing awareness, unyielding determination to combat men's hypocrisy and search for self-fulfillment. It has obtained its sustenance from various socio-political events and resultantly the depiction of the Indian women has undergone a metastasis. Several of the writers have portrayed the 'new' woman who is inclined to take the road not taken". Such a woman is independent, assertive and even defiant. In this chapter, such two women characters are taken from the novels of Manju Kapur i.e. Virmati in "Difficult Daughters" and Astha in "A Married Woman".

Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact. Like the writers and critics of Adrienne Rich's genre, Kapur had been engaged and assessing and studying the 'common female culture'. She writes in the novel: *For a mighty empire fighting for survival, battlefronts Proliferating – identities, loyalties, future and nations were becoming a matter of choice rather than tradition.* (Kapur, Difficult Daughters, 217)

While depicting the inner subtlety of a woman's mind, Manju Kapur displays a very clear and mature understanding of female psyche and portrays woman as 'voler' who breaks and crosses all boundaries and centers metaphorically. She speaks as one who has lived through the commotion and unrest of the communal riots, which in some way affected the lives of all Indians as "the atmosphere is changed, and voices reverberate with self-awareness" (Kapur, 128). The major historical events of pre-independence India have been imbued by the novelist with simplicity and with very clear understanding. She presents an India that is relevant both to those who stayed on in their country to face the aggression of western influences and heightened competition, and also those who opted to view the country from the west. Manju Kapur is a post-colonial woman writer who transcends time and country in exposing and exploring female psyche and its problems.

Post-colonial women writers of fiction have not only exhorted and explicated the patriarchal ideologies and their oppressive tendencies towards feminist growth and expression, but have also envisioned ways of contracting those attitudes. Here an attempt has been made to highlight the selected writings of three post-colonial Indian women writers by analyzing their varying ideals of feminist emancipation vis-a-vis in relation to the roles that communities play in aiding or in obstructing feminist freedom. It was felt that women must put themselves into the 'text' as into the world and into history, by their own movements and this is precisely what Manju Kapur is doing in "Difficult Daughters".

The women characters of Manju Kapur openly protest against the patriarchal community in order to explore their own potential so as to live on their own terms and conditions without bothering about the consequences that such a protest may have in their lives. They take the position of outsiders to speak against those cultural ideologies that become stumbling blocks in their way of becoming free individuals.

Self-chosen withdrawal, for these women, takes on the form of a weapon for survival in a patriarchal community. Kapur, very meticulously explores the space that women occupy in domestic relationships in "Difficult Daughters". Manju Kapur's next book "A Married Woman" (2004) is also about women seeking their space in life and in this process, they emerge out as new woman.

The protagonists of Manju Kapur break away from the social life which makes them realize that they are 'outsiders' and even their self-aversion fails to make them complete. This decision sometimes results in torture and consequently may be in death. Such decisions add insult to the injury. Manju Kapur's women, thus, want freedom within the community of men and women, as it is the only way out that can bring fulfillment in their lives.

In "Difficult Daughters", through Virmati Kapur points to a kind of feminist emancipation that lies in not limiting women to their traditional roles but in expanding and awakening them to several other possibilities and to their own consciousness. Feminism is not merely a doctrine but a consciousness supposedly more in touch with reality as Sandra Bartky's view is reiterated by Kapur in "Difficult Daughters". It is a pretty peculiar mental world as:

Feminist consciousness is a little like paranoia, especially when the feminist first begins to apprehend the full extent of sex discrimination and the subtlety and variety of the ways in which it is enforced. Its agents are everywhere, even inside her own mind, since she can fall prey to self-doubt or to a temptation to compliance. In response to this the feminist becomes vigilant and suspicious. Her apprehension of things, especially of direct or indirect communication with other people is characterized by what I shall call 'wariness'. (Sandra Lee Bartky, Femininity and Domination)

Feminism is consciousness of victimhood and rigidity that has been built into it and which has had deep consequences. This kind of life, apart from being invigorating, also frees them from dependence on men. Through her courage and individual freedom, Virmati, exemplifies Simone de Beauvoir's description of an independent woman in her book, "The Second Sex", where she asserts that "Once [a woman] ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator" (412)

Yet at the same time, Virmati does not negate her desire to nurture others and finally finds a "room of her own" in the home (the dressing room) that she shares with her husband's first wife Ganga, by celebrating her unbounded nurturing of feminine self, through acceptance and accommodation rather than withdrawal and rejection. This room symbolizes her 'space' although she finds herself limited and cloistered in and thus tries to find an escape in Lahore and for further studies. Virmati had grown in a house where she had seen women living together and uncensored their jealousies and quarrels over the space they occupied. As she says:

Even in her own room she felt raw and exposed-it was clear that not an inch of that territory was going to be yielded. If Virmati had the bed, Ganga was going to have the house- in the short time since her marriage she had learned to look at space in a new way, to define it and mark it, to think of what was hers and what wasn't in ways that would have been unthinkable in the fluid areas of her maternal home. She felt contrite (Kapur, 210-213).

Manju Kapur depicts the world of *Difficult Daughters* in which traditional norms have strong hold over the story of Virmati whose home has an authoritarian power structure and only the male head of the family takes decisions in the family. In this patriarchal setup, the status of a man is higher than that of his wife and the husband-wife relationship is subordinated to father-son or brother-brother relationship. The family members in the novel are rooted to their family norms, values, ideas, and traditions which are scrupulously followed by every woman. In the novel it is a male dominated society in which a man having an affair, even a second marriage is easily accepted and respected whereas it is ironic that an educated woman in the same

relationship is rejected by all and sundry. Virmati is not allowed to enter the family circle at the time of her father's death as she has dared to step beyond the thresholds of the house which fully highlights man-woman relationship in the patriarchal system.

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