Anusandhanvallari
Vol 2024, No.1
July 2024
ISSN 2229-3388

Marriage, Motherhood and Stigma: The Traditional to Modern Transition of Women in Manju Kapur's Fiction

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Abstract: This study explores the diverse representations of womanhood in the fiction of contemporary Indian author Manju Kapur, focusing on the negotiation between traditional and modern roles that her protagonists undertake while remaining anchored to marriage and motherhood. It argues that while Indian cultural ethos offers security to women, it also assigns them greater obligations than men. Occupying a subaltern status, Kapur's women characters are torn between tradition and modernity. Their struggles to dismantle repressive, centuries-old traditions in order to achieve liberation are examined in detail, revealing a feminocentric critique of dominant cultural values in her fiction.

Keywords: Gender, society, class, tradition, modernity, and cultural elements

India is a transitional society where gender roles and responsibilities are fluid and interchangeable. While certain families in Indian society continue to adhere to traditional beliefs and rituals, others are assimilating into contemporary Indian culture. Indian culture has undergone significant transformation since Independence, and the lifestyle of women has also changed considerably. Their character and status have been transformed. They have passed through several stages, including that of oppressed housewives, activists for social change, and finally, emancipated and empowered women.

Women in India have established themselves in every sector and are by no means inferior to men, with their presence evident across all domains. The position of women in our society presents a dual reality. On one hand, they are achieving success and advancing in all areas; on the other, they continue to endure suffering silently in the face of familial pressure and oppression. Undoubtedly, they have made considerable progress, but a significant distance still needs to be covered. To attain their set objectives and milestones, women must traverse a long path, overcoming barriers imposed by societal stereotypes. It is equally imperative for men to recognize them as equals. Modern women lead lives guided by their own choices and aspirations. Living independently, they support themselves and their families. They are now autonomous in deciding how to utilize their income, whom to marry, and whether to have children. It may be argued that they are no longer confined to a life of subservience.

One of the most influential contemporary Indian writers, Manju Kapur, has significantly contributed to the development of Indian fiction. In her works, she examines and discusses a broad spectrum of historical periods, ranging from the pre-independence era to the phases of liberalization and globalization. In her novels, female protagonists strive to overturn socially imposed customs and norms while attempting to maintain equilibrium in their lives. Through her diverse narratives, she explores how women are subjected to continuous pressure from their families. Before marriage, they are under the control of their mother, father, and brother, and are expected to remain obedient throughout this period. After marriage, this pattern continues as they remain under the dominance of their husband and in-laws. They lack the autonomy to make choices for themselves, and only a few women succeed in liberating themselves.

Manju Kapur vividly depicts women characters belonging to colonial and pre-colonial India. These women are traditionally inclined, and their traditions form the very skeleton of their existence; without them, they perceive

themselves as nothing. They believe that by adhering to customs every day, their status and position as a daughter, wife and mother remains secure. They consider the patriarchal structure as protective of their interests. So deeply conditioned are they by this system that they are unable to envision any form of rebellion. Any argument against the system appears illogical to them. They have successfully adapted to and remain wholly committed to this patriarchal society. The paper is organized into three parts: the traditional, the modern, and the changing images of women in the novels of Manju Kapur.

The present study examines how Manju Kapur explores female psychology and articulates her vision of womanhood through the portrayal of varied female characters. Her books highlight the complex and nuanced aspects of women's personalities. A traditional person is defined as one who lives within a culture and adheres to its established norms without questioning or resistance. Tradition may be understood as an unwritten document passed down through generations, to which such individuals remain consistently faithful. Thus, ancestors serve as exemplars, establishing patterns of behavior for the present and succeeding generations.

A conventional woman is a female child that imitates her mother in behaviour. This conventional method carries on danger: if the tendency continues without any alteration, opposition, or question, society may stagnate. “The old order must change, yielding place to new. Let’s one good custom should corrupt the world”. (Tennyson, Alfred: 1885)

In her writings, Manju Kapur portrays modern women as deriving from traditional women. She links it to the position of women throughout the conventional era. She adopts her personality from the conventional world. The outcome of a bloody battle between the old and the new is change.

Kasturi from Difficult Daughters exemplifies such a conventional character. Manju Kapur presents her as beautifully embodying the features of a traditional woman. Kasturi, Virmati's mother in the novel, represents a powerful force in a patriarchal society and is a perfect embodiment of conventional womanhood, possessing all its defining attributes. Hailing from a prosperous, traditional middle-class Arya Samaj family, she has been taught since childhood that marriage is her destiny.

Consequently, Kasturi was trained in culinary skills, considered a prerequisite for marriage for young girls. Upon marriage, a daughter assumes the role of a daughter-in-law, whose principal obligation is to ensure the happiness of her in-laws. Traditionally, she is viewed as an ideal daughter-in-law if she excels in 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” (Difficult Daughters 62).

In the novel, Kasturi staunchly upholds patriarchal values and feels duty-bound to pass these inherited ideals to her daughter Virmati, who in turn defies these societal norms. Simone de Beauvoir, in “The Second Sex,” observes the paradox of femininity where women both demand and resent being feminine, experiencing resentment even as they embrace the creation of a woman. The mother imposes this ambiguous curse as a blessing. Beauvoir writes:

‘you shall be a woman’. She hopes to compensate for her own inferiority by creating a superior being out of her daughter, whom she sees as her double, and at times attempts to impose her own destiny upon the child: ‘what was good enough for me, was good enough for you, I was brought up this way, you shall share my lot’ (134).

Ishita’s persona serves as a vehicle for Manju Kapur’s portrayal of the issue of female infertility. In Indian culture, infertility is regarded as a curse. In this novel, Ishita is portrayed as a victim of this pessimistic viewpoint.

“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 were

the eggs, here was where conception occurred. The loss of normal anatomy meant fertilization couldn't take place without intervention." (Custody 65)

Manju Kapur presents two contrasting facets of society through two distinct personas — Shagun and Ishita. Shagun is married with children; while she desires to live life on her own terms, she is constrained by familial obligations. Ishita, conversely, faces rejection in marriage due to her infertility. Though Ishita and Shagun are diametrically opposite, they represent two sides of the same coin. Throughout the narrative, Kapur depicts characters conforming to stereotypical gender roles as traditional women who wield considerable influence within patriarchal households. Their deep-rooted connections to family and tradition impose a heavy burden upon them. Furthermore, they attempt to articulate the aspirations of their generation's future.

In Manju Kapur's novels, female protagonists are portrayed as overcoming social obstacles. She portrays their sorrows on a deeper level in her work. The characters are suffocated by patriarchal traditions and are struggling to break free of these rigid traditions in order to live free lives. They search for their uniqueness.

Manju Kapur portrays her female characters as possessing a contemporary perspective on life. Although they revisit socially sanctioned customs, they aspire to break free from patriarchal traditions, encountering numerous obstacles in the process. Eventually, they assert themselves as powerful, courageous, and modern individuals. Kapur infuses her narratives with the spirit of changing times, creating characters with highly adaptable personalities who demonstrate a remarkable ability to adjust to new circumstances and challenges.

Manju Kapur explores the themes of matrimony, polygamy, and professional training in the book Difficult Daughters. Virmati is the novel's main character. Virmati makes consistent attempts to discover her identity, but when she falls in love with a married man, she is unsuccessful. Kapur depicts two types of women's roles in her book: traditional women and modern women. Traditional women's roles are represented by Ganga and Kasturi, while modern women's roles are illustrated by Swarnlata and Shakuntala.

Ida, Virmati's daughter in Difficult Daughters, is distinguished by Kapur from other female characters. As a member of the new, post-independence generation, Ida embodies the modern spirit. Her perspective reflects a natural generational shift, and her personality symbolizes the 'new woman' — powerful, resolute, and rational — in contrast to her mother.

Like other contemporary authors, Kapur attempted to redefine feminism in her subsequent book, A Married Woman. After finishing her undergraduate education, Astha married Hemant, a young man who has just returned from America. He is the successful office-bearer's son. She has a happy marriage and early married life. She makes her husband's house her secondary residence. She expertly blended with the entire family, preventing them from noticing the gap left by the absence of the house's daughters. She is so overjoyed that she struggled to find the right words to describe it.

In the elegant culmination of Manju Kapur's Home, the protagonist Nisha stands out as a driven modern woman from a traditional family background. A close analysis of Kapur's heroines demonstrates a marked progressive shift in their ideology, which contrasts with traditional virtues and underscores their modern perspective. This progressiveness becomes more pronounced when compared to characters with conventional worldviews. Through their adamant rejection of age-old traditions, characters like Virmati (Difficult Daughters), Astha (A Married Woman), Nisha (Home), and Ishita (Custody) ascend to a higher level in their pursuit of self-identity and uniqueness. Kapur's women, therefore, work diligently to establish their own space. They are spirited individuals who extricate themselves from traditional constraints and challenge repressive ideals. Their education enables them to perceive such customs as impediments to their rational and critical thought.

Conclusion

An analysis of Manju Kapur's fiction reveals a gradual yet significant transition in the roles and conditions of women parallel to the transformation within Indian society. Women remain encumbered by rituals, traditions, and moral codes that engender a sense of enslavement. Throughout the narratives, her central female characters quest for personal space and identity within both the domestic and public spheres. Through the trajectory from Kasturi to Virmati and finally to Ida, Nisha, and Ishita, Kapur illustrates the traditional to modern transition of Indian womanhood. Marriage emerges not merely as an institution but as the primary site where a woman's identity is validated, contested, and redefined. Motherhood is portrayed as both a source of power and a site of stigma; while Kasturi fulfils it as destiny, Ishita is stigmatized for her inability to achieve it, revealing how infertility is constructed as a social curse. Thus, Manju Kapur suggests that neither complete conformity to tradition nor absolute rejection of it provides a viable existence for women. Her protagonists do not achieve absolute liberation, but they negotiate, resist, and redefine the norms of marriage and motherhood. Her female characters are significant because they not only actively participate in the struggle against patriarchal domination but also articulate the pain, stigma, and resilience inherent in that struggle, marking a decisive shift from subjugation to selfhood.

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