FEMININE SENSIBILITY IN MANJU KAPUR’S NOVELS

Dr. Jai Vardhan Kumar
Ph.D. & NET Qualified
B.R.A.Bihar University, Muzaffarpur (Bihar).

Abstract: Women’s position in society has been a matter of concern since long. The plight of women has been a matter of debate among the literary spheres. It isn’t a matter of today that the subjugation of women in society is realized. She has been bound up in chains of social traditions and dogmas. They are denied the same rights which are enjoyed by their male-counterparts. A man is born of a woman and at the same time he victimizes her in many ways. A woman is considered mere a commodity to satisfy the lust of men. She is marginalized in the male-dominated society and exploited through various means including sexual assault which is one of the major tools of these means. The Powerful always tries to grab and squeeze the powerless and they find women a soft target to victimize. In this respect some writers with social consciousness raised the issues of women through their creative writings depicting the social conditions of women to lay before us the true picture of our society which we are an integral part of. They sought to secure a place of dignity and prestige for women in society. Women in a society should be treated equally in legal, social, sexual, economical, educational arenas— regardless of caste, creed and gender. Manju Kapur is one of such writers who have feminine sensibility running through her writings. This paper presents a study of the feminine sensibility in the novels of Manju Kapur.

Keywords: Women, Male Chauvinism, Patriarchy, Male domination, Progressive.

Women’s position in society has been a matter of concern since long. It isn’t a matter of today that the subjugation of women in society is realized. These issues have been raised in the classic books, like Mary Wollstonecraft’s A Vindication of the rights of Women (1792), which study the problems of women in society. In this list we find Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own (1929), Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex (1949), John Stuart Mill’s The Subjugation of Women (1869) and The Origin of the Family (1884) by Friedrich Engels.

When Simone de Beauvoir wrote in her one of the most noted books The Second Sex (1949) the famous sentence, ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman,’ she ignited the whole world into an argument leading to a feminist discourse. Fiona Tolan writes in her critical essay Feminisms:
“The Second Sex was notorious for its frank and sweeping account of woman’s oppression,…” (Waugh 320).

Fiona further writes that --

“De Beauvoir constructed an epic account of gender division throughout history, examining biological, psychological, historical and cultural explanations for the reduction of women to a second and lesser sex.” (Waugh 320)

Feminist literary criticism of today came out of the 1960s women’s movement which is the second wave of Feminism which was organized around Women’s Liberation. The First wave dates back from 1830 to 1920 and is best recalled for suffragette movement.

Feminism is the idea that women in a society should be treated equally in legal, social, economical, educational arenas— regardless of caste, creed and gender. It sought to redress the imbalance in society by providing women with same rights and opportunities as men, in order to be able to take their rightful place in the world. It is a revolt against the patriarchal system of society where females have no-says and they suffer a lot due to male chauvinism. They are denied the same rights which are enjoyed by their male-counterparts. So, female writers began to raise issues through their writings. In this connection, Indian English Fiction could not keep itself aloof from this issue of women’s question because there are so many traditions and convictions prevalent in our society because of which our feminine gender are suppressed and dominated by male. These issues need to be discussed at deeper level.

In Indian English Fiction there are many women novelists who have presented the women’s issues in their writings. Among these some prominent writers are Kamala Markandaya, Kamala Das, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy and many others. Manju Kapur is also no exception to this and she addresses many issues related to the middle class women.

She is widely known as Jane Austin of Indian English Fiction. Her subjects hover around the family issues. ‘Difficult Daughters’, ‘Married Woman’, ‘Home’ and ‘Custody’ are famous novels of Manju Kapur. She is a professor of English literature at Delhi University and began her career as a novelist with her debut novel, “Difficult Daughters” which won her Commonwealth Writers’ Prize. And there was no moving back after this. A modern writer with modern views and notions, she knows today’s women are far more intellectual and mature than their predecessors. Her novels are chronicles of the middle class societies. Her novels capture everything that comes in the way of middle class family- that are sexual abuses, complexity of arranged marriage, infidelity, infertility, adoption, divorce, sexual dysfunction, family conflicts and so many related issues. M.K. Naik says about Manju Kapur that she

“….. emphasize(s) the plight of young Punjabi girls chafing under the tight control exercised by tyrannical fathers and traditional society.” (Naik 215) (Parenthesis mine)

Difficult Daughters is the story of a daughter’s journey towards self-realization vicariously through her mother’s attainment of selfhood. The story is presented through the conscience of Ida who goes on to explore the life and times of not only her mother Virmati but her maternal grandmother Kasturi as well. Virmati, being the oldest of the eleven children, is forced to look after and nurse her younger brothers and sisters as her mother goes on
giving birth to children after children. Kasturi is either ill due to pregnancy or she is bed ridden because of delivery. This bearing of children after children has been presented to stop and just think over the Indian society which never thinks about the health of the women which are used as a machine of child-maker. There is a strain of feminine sensibility under running the story. In this situation, Virmati has to take care of the children and in this process Virmati is taken to be a governess of Kasturi’s children. Now the study of Virmati is taken to be her secondary job, the primary one being her doing the household chores and caring for the children. Virmati wants to study like her cousin Shakuntala, who studies abroad, but her mother Kasturi would like to marry her suitable boy of her elder’s choice and settle down like a good girl. But in the due course Virmati is attracted towards a Professor who falls passionately in love with her because his illiterate wife could never prove a soul mate. After his repeated overtures, Virmati gives in, as she is additionally a soul thirsting for love. This illegitimate affair leads to many troubles. On being pregnant, she is forced to abort the child as Professor Harish is reluctant to marry her. Virmati decides to commit suicide and writes to the professor of her intention. The professor is helpless and does not know what to do and so sends the letter to her family. When she is saved from drowning and returns home she simply states that she wants to study and not marry:

“Study, mumbled Virmati like a mantra. She swallowed, ‘Study…. And not to marry.’……. Virmati’s face twisted “I don’t want to marry”, then she had to explain, “the boy, I don’t like the boy”,……. Her silence though was not of acquiescence but refusal. She would not marry”. (Difficult Daughters 80)

While she is asserting her views, Harish is sitting on the back seat and simply listens to the whole matter. Since he does not take any positive decision and is not prepared to marry her, Virmati decides to study and sent away to Lahore to study. In Lahore he meets and makes love to her and at home he begets a child from his wife Ganga. When Virmati asks for marriage, he talks of his ‘image’ and his family’s reputation. He never gives a second thought to Virmati’s family, their reputation or Virmati’s place and status in society. And thus she gets upset:

“I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family’s name, am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people will say if they find me out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace…… and why?” (Difficult Daughters 137)

and further,

“Why don’t we get married? You say your family makes no difference. But still you want to continue in this way. Be honest with me. I can bear anything but this continuous irresolution. Swarna is right. Men do tyake advantage of women!” (Difficult Daughters 137-138)

Here we find that she is right but he is not ready to marry her. The novelist has tried to expose the male chauvinism and the pitiable condition of a woman who has become a prey to the lust of the male sexual desire. At last after having been almost dismissed from her job of principalship, she decides to go to Shantiniketan. It is Harish’s friend that forces him to marry her. After marriage she finds that she is not accepted either by his family or her family. She is kept in the outer room or study room. She is not permitted to cook or wash or do anything for him or his
family. Though she is legally his second wife, one feels that her position is of other woman and not of a wife. To avoid unpleasantness, Harish sends her to Lahore for her further study. Here too she is not given any option. It is only the partition of India that takes away the wife and the family to their home town, and Virmati gets really united to Harish and her own family. Once they shift to Delhi, she acquires her coveted place of the wife and mother of a daughter.

Manju Kapur has presented Virmati as a progressive woman who does not like to forsake the desire to acquire higher academic degree in life. We get a clear idea that she is a defiant of the conventions of the society she belongs to. A woman’s right to love and to choose her mate cannot be questioned. She protests, in one way or another, the observance of rituals like funerals and does not want these to be observed on her death. She wants to die without any shor-shar, without an uthala. Here she possesses the desire of defiance against the rituals of society and in this way refuses to submit to the dictates of the male dominant society.

*A Married Woman* is a tale of Astha’s longing for a purpose in her life other than being a wife and mother against a vividly realized backdrop of Indian sectarian politics. It presents an interesting mixture of the problems, insecurities and unrest faced by middle class woman. The author presents a lesbian relationship between Astha and Pipeelika but in the end regularity norms are set in play to confine women’s sexuality within the framework of heteronormativity- i.e. relationship that are monogamous, within marriage and often with opposite sex.

Asta, the protagonist, becomes an enduring wife and sacrificing mother. Her temperamental incompatibility with her corporate thinking husband compels her to play the role of “mother and father” for her children. This denies herself fulfilment and leads to the collapse of the institution of marriage. Discontentment leads her to defiance and restlessness. Her anxiety, discomfort, loneliness and isolation do not encourage her to give voice to her unhappiness over her troubled relationship, rather it prompts her to develop the feelings of guilt, negativity and lack of self-esteem in facing the challenges of her life. Restlessness drives her to enjoy absolute loneliness, a sort of entrapment by the family, its commitments, its subtle oppression and she yearns for freedom. In the midst of a family and its vast minefield of income, expenditure, rights, responsibilities, knowledge, discontent, restlessness and dependency, Astha enjoys the fate of the poorest. She is suffocated with the growing needs of her family and “always adjusting to everybody's needs”. (227) Astha understands a married woman's place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death in her Indian status. She feels for herself that “A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth”, (231) are the necessary prerequisites of a married woman. She contemplates marriage a terrible decision as it puts her in a lot to enjoy bouts of rage, pain and indecision. Judging the male impression of woman she thinks that a married woman is an object of “mind fucking”. (218) She does not think “marriage is just sex” (275) rather it provides interest, togetherness and respect. She felt torn between her duty and responsibility, faith and fact, public ethos and personal ethics. Therefore, she thinks “a tired woman cannot make good wives”, (154) and struggles for an emotional freedom from the scourge of the nation.
Her next novel “Home” quite fascinatingly shows the choking closeness and destructive limitations of Indian family values. It is a closet dark world where any hint of individual expression is swiftly trampled to death, to be substituted with deadened conformity. This novel is about the family of Banwari Lal. He was running a big cloth shop in Lahore. But after partition he moved to Delhi with his sons Yashpal and Pyarelal and their wives and children and it explores the world of joint families. Joint families are not what they seem outwardly. It is a world trying to grapple with complexities of adjusting your aspirations and individualities with those of the others inside closed walls of the house, facing challenges of generational changes, trying to accommodate growing children in narrow personal spaces and even narrower working spaces. This world of joint families does have altruistic, elders, a mutual support system and intimacy that makes joint family living such a pleasure and pain, but the novel does not dwell much on these aspects, it rather focuses on tensions and rivalries, almost a Darwinian struggle of finding your own space for catching the sunlight and growing up, escaping the shadows of the others, who came before you or who have more rights than you.

Manju Kapur has very nicely presented the feminine sensibility of her characters in this novel too. How does a mother feel and reacts when his son falls in love with a girl and wants to marry. Banwari Lal’s wife becomes jealous of the girl whom her son, Yashpal, loves. She thinks that some magic must have been cast on her son. When Yashpal is married, naturally his attention shifts to his newly wedded wife. At this her mother feels neglected. The novelist has described this feeling so well here:

“When the two of them were alone, she could see how her mother-in-law had to struggle to even talk to her. Every gesture suggested the daughter-in-law had no right to exist, and if she had to live, why was she doing it in their house.” (Home 11)

In our Indian society it is a firm setup of mind that a girl after her marriage must conceive soon. Otherwise it is taken seriously. Kapur describes this sentiment like this:

“Two years passed. Sona still wasn’t pregnant, though twenty and old enough. ‘Enjoying, enjoying’, muttered the mother darkly, imagining the use of birth control.” (Home 11)

The story that had started with the tale of Sona and Rupa finally finds its calling in Nisha, Sona’s daughter, who spends her childhood at auntie Rupa’s home because she was scarred by incestuous abuse and was disturbed psychologically. But Nisha at her aunt’s home spends her ten years safely and later in her life she pursues her University degree in English Literature. She has the courage to fall in love with a low caste boy going against the norms of conservative family and society. Nisha’s worth is not recognized in the society which results into frustration and disappointments.

Manju Kapur has successfully portrayed her women characters who are defiant enough and ready to cross over the social dogmas set up for women. Her women characters are progressive. Whether it is Virmati, Ida, Astha, Sona, or any of the women characters of Manju Kapur, they are no longer confined within the four walls of the family and traditional values. They dare to break down the conventional perceptions and dogmas of the patriarchal society or the bonds of incompatible marriage. In their quest for identity the bold women characters of Kapur are presented by her as real women of flesh and blood who have their
own emotions and sentiments. They also yearn to be a part of the intellectual movements of the day, trying to establish their identity.

**REFERENCE**


