

Manju Kapur's Brothers: A Study In Political And Social Theme

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Indian women novelists are gaining ground worldwide and winning critical appraisal and international recognition. Their work is no longer considered as something derogatory, melodramatic, or sub-stuff. The cause of their success as novelists lies in the fact that they are born storytellers and they are endowed with the gift of delving deep into the workings of the human mind and heart with sympathy, sensitivity, and understanding. But there is also the common element of conflict of values and fighting between different ways of life. All the above prolific women novelists; Manju Kapur is also a distinguished person in the world of novels. She is one of the groups of Indian women writers in English who lived and wrote in India itself. She was born in 1948 in Amritsar, a city familiar with sectarian conflict. Manju Kapur has lived through turbulent times in India. She is the daughter of a bureaucrat and married her right-across-the road neighbour Gun Nidhi Dalmia which draws on her father's bureaucratic days to create same condition with her father. She has four children- Amba, Maya, Katyayani and Agastya. She did her graduation from Miranda House University College for Women and went for M.A. at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada and an M.Phil. from Delhi University. She teaches English Literature at Miranda, Delhi University. She projects a new vision of Indian woman in her fiction. She is the author of five novels. They are *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2009), and *Custody* (2011) *Brothers* (2016).

Brothers is Manju Kapur's sixth novel, and much like the previous ones, it highlights the lives of women in multiple locations, rural, urban, domestic, public, offering up for view the happenings within the home with the same urgency as the goings on in the world. Kapur deftly weaves a narrative that spans eight decades, from World War II to the first decade of the 21st century.

The opening of Manju Kapur's new novel *Brothers* is also its denouement. With the outcome already known, author Kapur has to work doubly hard to keep the reader engaged in the working out of the plot—something she fortunately achieves with aplomb.

Deliberately or otherwise, the plot seems to mirror an actual event in 2006. The action starts with the assassination of Himmat Singh Gaina, the Chief Minister of the province of Rajasthan, by his younger brother, Mangal. Tapti, the wife of Mangal and on-off lover of Himmat, is left facing an uncertain future, bereft both of a husband (now jailed indefinitely) and the only source of happiness and affection she had ever known.

How the brothers arrive at such a tragedy unfolds in the rest of the novel. It begins in the past, a couple of generations back, in the ancestral village of Lalbanga. Here, in a mirror story, the brothers' uncle, Virpal, flees rural life by heading into the town of Ajmer, bent on joining Gandhi in protesting against British rule. Virpal's brother, Dhanpal, is left behind and, in stark contrast, is corralled into joining the British army to fight the Germans in Africa.

Both brothers escape the fatal consequences which such life twists could produce. Dhanpal returns from the war scarred but alive, while by chance a childless Brahmin happens upon Virpal sleeping rough and takes him in. This sets the tone for a series of happy coincidences which ultimately result in Virpal's nephew, Himmat, taking the baton on Virpal's political ambitions and rising to the top. Kapur is keen to undermine the notion that success is due to destiny rather than character. Himmat's family believes his rise is built on fate and connections rather than understanding that charisma and

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sheer hard work might have done the trick. Himmat's brother Mangal expects, and is granted, similar sponsorship. However, he doesn't have the drive or the talent to put it to good use. When his projects fail, he is resentful and lays the blame squarely on his brother. The ensuing jealousy and bitterness build the foundation for the eventual fratricide.

Tying the two plots together (quite literally as it is a recurring metaphor) is the rope of the village where every brother is born. All four are unable to escape completely the umbilical cord which binds them to Lalbanga: its antiquated laws and superstitions, its caste wars, and the grinding poverty experienced by a rural community eking out a living from an unforgiving climate. Worse, being both farmers and born into the lowly Jat caste, they are at a disadvantage when it comes to climbing the greasy pole of a city career.

This tension between country and town—and ultimately new and old—is nuanced. Himmat, for example, is afraid “of being sucked back into the earth from which he had emerged”. Yet when Mangal is disrespectful of the land which supports them, Himmat reproves him. Similarly, while Himmat is a reformer—especially on women's rights and the caste system—he can also turn “the modern way” to his advantage by getting a divorce from his first wife and justifying an affair with his sister-in-law.

Mangal, in his turn, represents tradition. He may be a murderer but he remains closer to the village and the family than Himmat who rejects them. Had he stayed in Lalbanga, he might also have enjoyed a higher status than his peers and a wife who didn't answer back. When these entitlements are challenged, he (not unreasonably) becomes angry and confused, finally playing to his stereotype by reacting with violence. “Jats are like this ... quick to kill,” mutters a bystander.

It's possible to take the boy out of the village but not the village out of the boy, Kapur seems to be saying. Certainly she doesn't offer any solution to this conundrum which is one India itself is facing in its transition to a developed economy. Perhaps there are no answers but at least by depicting both sides of the argument, in brusque yet evocative prose, Kapur is leading the charge to find a resolution.

The title of the book is *Brothers* but make no mistake, this book is about a woman, and it is the lives of women, especially the untold ones who are depicted as silent, veiled foils to their husbands and sons, that remain with you long after you have finished reading. The title refers to siblings Himmat Singh Gaina and his younger brother Mangal, sons of Dhanpal Gaina of Lalbanga village, east of Ajmer. Dhanpal is the younger son of Lal Singh; his elder brother, Virpal, runs away from the village to escape its endemic caste war (the Gainas are Jats, and live in rivalry with other castes such as the Rajputs, Gujjars, Yadavs, Bhils and Malis). He began to live in Ajmer, and thus escaped taking part in the war. When the English came calling for able-bodied Indian men to join the colonial army, Dhanpal enlisted, and eventually fought in World War II. As Virpal grew up in the city, he joined the fight for independence, eventually co-founding the Indian Progressive People's Party (IPPP), “with its roots in Hindu culture and identity”. When he heard about Dhanpal's enlisting, he returned to his village, a rich(er) man, no longer a farmer but a businessman with political ambitions. His wife Mithari—they were married as children—had been waiting for him in the village, her only source of solace being her sister-in-law, Dhanpal's wife Gulabi. It is in the passages relating to these women that Kapur excelled—in describing the *angan* or the kitchen, where the women talked about their distress and found comfort, often through a gesture, or, in a few words, recalled the power of homo-social spaces that the feminist movement had evoked consistently.

This then is the first set of *Brothers* which forms the plinth for the next generation—Himmat and Mangal—to build on. However, things weren't quite the same with the younger duo. If Himmat was the go-getter, with political ambitions, he was as unlike his uncle, whose political life was thwarted by lack of contacts. Himmat sought a divorce from his child bride, refused to acknowledge their son, and married the daughter of a political mentor (and his uncle's colleague from IPPP) to establish himself. Mangal, the younger sibling expected his brother's help to access wealth and power, in much the same way that Dhanpal and Virpal counted on each other. But this relationship wasn't the

same, and Mangal was left feeling perpetually short-changed by an elder brother who continued to do exceedingly well for himself.

As mentioned in the beginning, this novel may be well titled *Brothers* but it is, at heart, the story of Tapti Gaina, Mangal's wife. We meet her on the very first page, distraught at her husband's action. It is 2010, and Mangal has shot Himmat, the Chief Minister of Rajasthan. Her teenage daughters are flabbergasted, unable to go to college and answer the questions of their friends; Himmat's family—his wife and children—shun Tapti; the journalists hound her; and Tapti is unable to meet Himmat, who is admitted to the ICU.

As the novel moves back in time, we see how Himmat met Tapti and arranged the marriage between his brother and her; we also meet Virpal and Dhanpal, and see the relationship between Himmat and Mangal develop against the backdrop of political flux. Gender-based oppression and subordination is never too far, whether we're reading about Gulabi, Mithari or Himmat's first wife, who is not even named in the novel, let alone seen or described. She remains a shadowy figure, the ultimate victim of Himmat's callousness, ambition and neglect. Tapti, however, made choices that weren't allowed to other women characters—she chose not to have more children, she chose to exert her desire, she also worked and earned for herself and her daughters. Her husband didn't support her decisions, but he didn't thwart them either. This changed gender equation owes much to the feminist movement that was overtaking India in the period the novel is set in. And, as Elizabeth Jackson writes in *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women's Writing*: "The problem of violence against women was the initial focus of feminist campaigns in India during the 1970s. Campaigns against rape, domestic violence and dowry deaths escalated during the 1980s, attracting considerable support from men as well as women."(9) Tapti's character implicitly critiques the Gaina family's attitude towards women, as property, as child-producing machines, forever subordinate. This didn't inure her from tragedy. On the contrary, the book looks deep into the ways in which her modern, city-bred sense of equality led to tension in her married life. The big reveal at the end of the book is not explaining away anyone's (mis)deeds, and as such, is fairly anticlimactic. I don't think the author intended it to be anything else—the strength of the book lies in its capacity to tease out the strands of familial relationships and the moral complexities of multiple affiliations, setting them against the backdrop of changes wrought by politics and time. We can experience the characters.

Works Cited

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