

Research Article

Compathy as a motif in the three select novels of Manju Kapur

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Abstract

Manju Kapur has accentuated the feeling of love to each other in a family. But, when a woman is treated as ‘Other’ in the family, this relationship of love is strained. The word ‘Other’ indicates the subjection of women. This makes Manju Kapur’s protagonists nervous nellie. This evidently points the reason behind their fear as patriarchy. Perhaps, Manju Kapur’s men are bigheads. So, she urges women to open up themselves so as to sustain their individuality.

Key Words: Other, patriarchal, dominance, femininity

Marriage unites people. It sets up rights and responsibilities between a married couple, their children and their in-laws. Simone de Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* deals with the notion of ‘Other’. The book highlights femininity while stating that women are ‘exhorted to be women, remain women, become women’. This very concept rises in Manju Kapur’s novels as well, through the characters of Astha, Nina, Nisha and Virmati who display complete femininity. Astha in *A Married Woman* is forced by patriarchy to live with many handicaps. Through such a character, Kapur has attempted to project the hurdles of Indian women in a typical male chauvinistic society. Such a society’s shortcomings find expression in Kapur’s novels, which rebuffs women freedom. Married women are expected to be as good as gold, who can bar their life for their family. For instance, Astha becomes a school teacher in order to fulfil her husband’s desires. She nods to his every wish and command. His success as a businessman pulls away his time from spending with her. This attitude is expressed as:
“Somewhere along the way Hemant’s attitude to Astha changed. She told herself it was only slightly but is oppressed her” (66).

Being a woman, she is obliged to meet the expectations of her growing children, deal with the pressures at home along with accepting the silent disfavour of her in-laws. On the other hand, her husband keeps her away from involving in the financial matters of the family. Even when Astha tries to, she is subdued by him who orders her to have a life of sacrifices and self-adjustments. Nevertheless, Astha accustoms with her husband and in-laws since she has been brought up by her mother in Indian culture and tradition. Thus, she prioritises her role of a wife, mother and daughter-in-law. In addition to that, she is nurtured so as to meet the standards of these roles flawlessly. Indeed, this character can be put in close proximity with Simone de Beauvoir’s concept of women. The institution of marriage is expressed in Beauvoir’s words as:

Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to woman by society. It is still true that most women are married, or have been, or plan to be, or suffer from not

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being. The celibate woman is to be explained and defined with reference to marriage whether she is frustrated, rebellious, or even indifferent in regard to that institution. (237)

Astha adjusts herself with her life's most important people, who are her parents, husband, children and in-laws. Sita, her mother, has acquainted her with the patriarchal issues concerning marriage and husband. The author expresses this as:

Every day in her temple corner in the kitchen, she prayed for a good husband for her daughter. 'You pray too', she insisted as they stood before the shrine on the shelf,....Astha obediently closed her eyes to delicious images of a romantic, somewhat shadowy young man holding her in his strong manly embrace.(1)

Also, Kapur adds the upbringing of Astha as:

Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear. One slip might find her alone, vulnerable and unprotected. The infinite ways in which she could be harmed were not specified, but Astha absorbed them through her skin, and ever after was drawn to the safe and secure. (1)

Astha's mother strongly follows the convention. Kapur describes all the mothers through a single mother Sita of the novel. In fact, every mother believes the domination of man because of which they indirectly promote the subjection of their daughters in Indian tradition. After the death of her husband, Sita is deserted. Despite Astha's persistent calling to live in her house, Sita rejects it as it is improper to live with her daughter and her in-laws. Astha too feels lonely at times and writes poetry for relief. This is described as:

Writing alleviated the heaviness within her, a heaviness she found hard to deal with. Discussing her feelings with Hemant usually led to argument, distance, and greater misery. In the struggle to express herself she found temporary relief. (79)

Manju Kapur highlights the lives of many married Indian women which are crushed in the hands of their husbands, like Astha's. When Astha's compositions exceed two hundred, she approached Hemant for help in publishing the poems. But, he goes ballistic after reading the collection and says: "Good heavens, Az, they are all about cages and birds, and misery, and suffering in situations that are not even clear. There is not one happy poem here" (81). His rage blatantly shows his inability to interpret her emotional state. He fails to understand that none can compose happy poems with an unhappy heart filled with unfulfilled emotions. Just like how poems reflect the poet's emotions, Astha poems too reflect hers. However, Hemant is not keen in recognising them. So, she confines her poems to herself: "May be one day she could do something with her art, but for now her school and herself were audience enough." (82) Traditionally, women are not kept on par with men. In her article *Feminism in Commonwealth Literature: A Difference of View*, Ameeta Mulla Wattal describes the state of women as: "Whenever women have climbed out of the traditional limitations of domestic obligations by claiming to be a human being, their impulses, convictions, notions were scoffed at. Her sex was all that really mattered about her"(10). Thus, Kapur presents the cliché of women's acceptance of men as their mentor and defender.

In *Immigrant*, Nina's mother Sona wants her daughter to marry which shows the conventional belief that only a married women earns respect in an Indian society. But after marrying, Nina's husband Anandan takes her to Canada where she becomes alienated. She is left alone to cope with her emptiness. "The Immigrant who comes as wife has more difficult time.

She realizes, she is an immigrant for her life. The minutes she gets up she is at a “Loose end” (124).

Being an Indian wife, Nina accepts the situation, which is expressed as:

In Indian society, the identity of a woman is attributed to her husband. She is a decorative appendage who is expected to accompany her husband everywhere and meet the people her husband approves. She can never expect to have her own associations and definitely not of the opposite sex or else she is relegated as infidel. (14)

Though she detests her husband’s behaviour, she leaves her situation to fate. In her article “Breaking the Tradition of Silence: A Study of Manju Kapur Novels the tradition of silence in India”, Poonam Rani Gupta recounts as:

It is exactly the tradition of silence, which proves that the victims of male domination are prevented from revealing their victimization. Manifested through various forms and supported by an overwhelming number of agents male domination against women in a patriarchal society is not always perceived as a violation of human rights. (15)

Nina resigns to loneliness than compromise. Despite feeling upset, she tries to abstain from it. In the attempt to overcome loneliness and its distress, she becomes stoic. All she wishes for is “to be happy, she whispered. That is what I want to work at” (312). Ananda, her husband, seems to confine his world under the name of privacy. Nina, who searches for relief, desires to meet her mother. “He would use their liaison to defend himself. The whole affair would be out and her integrity questioned” (312). Adding to her painful situation was Ananda’s statement of ‘Life is not all books’. But still, “She kept quiet... she represented a dark inner world of feeling, instinct and intuitive wisdom. She was Margaret Schlegel, he was Mr. Wilcox, she Constance Chatterley, he Clifford” (146).

Also, she dislikes her husband instructing her on what to wear, how to wear, how to speak and so on. He insists “That you are a traditional, backward Indian girl, like some of these women you see at the India club. Can’t even speak properly”(150).

He resembles every other Indian husband who is dominant and feels as if he is giving his wife an identity. “Never for a moment, in all her years at home, had she to think about who or what she was. She has belonged. Only now was she beginning to realize how much that meant”(157).

Not only that, his cold-hearted attitude throws Nina a curve, as a result of which “she felt rootless, branchless, just a body floating upon the cold surface of this particular piece of earth” (162). Nina longs to stand on her own, which is not only her problem, but also of all Indian women. The writer depicts this as:

In a clinical setup the anxieties and problems women have tend to be treated as neuroses, rather than the result of stress that comes from coping in a male dominated world. Often women fell inadequate, powerless, and even sexually vulnerable. (217)

It also makes clear of her exclusion and deception. Her slavishness torments her emotionally, financially and socially. She reminds of Simone de Beauvoir’s words which are “Women are defined relation to men” (221). Not only Nina, but also other women characters of the novel present the plight of women as: “We have Privileges that make it harder to uncover our inner servitude without awareness; we can be manipulated and manipulative, exploited, as well as exploitative” (223). Being authoritative and dominant, Ananda refrain himself from sharing anything with Nina, including his physical set-back. He feels that doing so makes him shameful.

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In his life “he preferred to make on his own” (189). Nina feels agitated when she becomes aware of Ananda’s betrayal to her. She ponders as: “Above all I want us to have a solid relationship, with us sharing everything” (211), which is quite opposite with Ananda.

Another quality of Nina is her endurance. She patiently bears her tedious and tiresome married life in an expectation of harmony, agreement and acclimation. “She has to live between her husband and herself” (279). Ananda has perceived Nina only as an object to satisfy his sexual needs. Yet, Nina longs for a healthy relationship with her husband. Despite her persistent attempts to save her marriage, her life worsens and continues to be a struggle. She is in quest for true love and sincere living from Ananda, but all she receives is “Loneliness, heartache, denial, all grist to the mill” (328).

In *Difficult Daughters*, Nisha is another character like Astha and Nina who becomes a victim of patriarchy. At the age of six, her life takes a tragically turn when she experiences sexual harassment from her cousin Vicky. She was too small to understand the cruelty, which took place at her aunt Rupa’s home. Her aunt took care of Nisha’s future. The writer puts forth this as:

if anything happens in the girl’s later life. She is not completely dependent, interposes Rupa. She knows her views should be confined to her sister, who would recycle them as she thought fit. But she couldn't help herself. In this day and age there were still people wondering whether girls should get education. (139)

It is pity to accept the fact that Nisha refuses to confess inequity between men and women. Her idea to set up a business of salwar-suits is presented as comically peculiar. By this idea, she shows herself as being independent and attempting to find her own place in the world on her own. But, such idea raises a common question of ‘How far is it faceable’. Nina’s mother, resembling Sita in *A Married Woman* and Sona in *Immigrant*, indirectly burns her daughter’s desires to ashes by inculcating conventional customs and family practices as mentioned:

Nisha had been forced to observe her first Karva Chauth fast for her future husband even as a ten year old child. A good example of the misuse of religion to downscale women is Sona's narration of Vat Savitri Katha to Nisha and the other women in the family. It highlights how the ideals of womanhood purveyed over and over again,... insidiously enter, capture and mould the minds of women in this country leaving them cocooned in ignorance and complacent in their secondary status.(6)

On one hand, Kapur speaks the truth of marriage being an important intuition in a woman’s life. On the other hand, she extends support to Mary Wollstonecraft’s remark, which is:

With respect to religion, she never presumed to judge for herself; but conformed as a dependent creature should, to the ceremonies of the church which she was brought up in, piously believing that wiser heads than her own have settled that business: - and not to doubt is her point of perfection.... These are the blessed effects of a good education. These are the virtues of man's help-mate! (25)

One can agree with these ideas of Mary Wollstonecraft and Kapur and state that in a traditionally-bound society like India, women deserve to have their own field day. As a reward for her sacrifices and adjustments, she receives the experience of a caged bird. Yet, it is undeniable that she is a horse of different colour and works as a mule. If patriarchy tries to bring her to heel, then she can straightforwardly deny riding. She is courageous enough to suppress

negative emotions and people who conceal her future, thereby finding her life's purpose and that of her family and society as well.

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