

Status of Women in Manju Kapur's 'Home'

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ABSTRACT

Home, Manju Kapur's third novel is an engrossing story of family life amid the bustle and commerce of the Banwari Lal Cloth Shop. When their traditional Delhi business - selling saris - being threatened by advent of jeans and pre-stitched salwar kameezes, the whole family knows it's time for change. So begins a series of struggles - to have children, to find education, to find peace.

Key Words: education, family, empowerment, gender relationships, identity, life, marriage

INTRODUCTION

In her third novel, Manju Kapur takes us through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations. Anupama Chowdhury says, "Home reveals a disturbing home truth that joint families can both destroy and preserve our maturity, individuality and mental progress". (Chowdhury, 33) In an interview with Jai Arjun Manju Kapur says:

"Literature by women, about families, always has these larger considerations, with years of studying texts, it becomes almost second nature to look beneath the surface at social and economic forces, gender relationships and how they are played out in an arena that, in my writing happens to be the home. But then, all sort of things happening outside do affect what is happening inside the home." (Singh)

Home is about the home of Lala Banwari Lal, a patriarch who has faith in living in a joint family. He is the head of the family and runs a sari shop in Karol Bagh. He has two children Yashpal and Pyarelal, and a daughter Sunita, who is married. The novel spotlights on three female characters-Sona, (daughter- in-law of Banwari Lal), Rupa, (Sona's sister) and Nisha (Sona's little girl)- who claim their identity in their own ways. The story starts with two sisters: one is attractive and the other only plain. The beautiful elder Sona is married to the elder son of Banwari Lal while the younger one, Rupa is attached to a junior Government officer of less esteem. At the starting stage the story spins around the life of Sona and Rupa before it focuses on the whole family.

Every sister believes that the other is more fortunate and everyone has more difficulties than the other. Rupa has just a spouse and a father-in-law in the family while Sona's is a joint family. The main strain of Rupa's life is a wicked tenant who lives upstairs in their home. He declines to pay his rent on time. They have officially spent a considerable measure of cash looking into the issue to expel him. Rupa and her husband, Prem Nath stay childless couple all through the story. In any case, she is sufficiently fortunate in light of the fact that she is not subjected to bear taunts of in-laws for having no child. Like Sona, after passing two years, Sona is still not pregnant. Her mother-in-law comments her occasionally, "What can you know of a mother's feelings? All you do is enjoying life, no sorrow, only a husband to dance around you". (18) Sona performs each duty as a daughter-in-law as she is prepared from an early age to love, serving and comply with her in-laws. In the mean time, Yashpal's younger brother, Pyarelal gets married to Sushila. Their marriage is welcomed by all the family in light of the fact that it is arranged by the parents. Sushila brings a huge dowry with her including a scooter, fridge, cooler, double bed and sofa. Sona realizes what she has not understood in three years of her marriage. She feels herself inferior to Sushila, as Sona's parents did not give her dowry at the time of her marriage.

The new married couple starts living upstairs where Sona wishes to shift. But the system of joint family remains same. All take their meal together only. The family believes, "Separate kitchens led to a sense of mine and yours, dissatisfaction, emotional division, and an eventual parting of the ways". (12)

Sona struggles to have children in order to establish her place in the family and rejects the responsibility for Vicky, the orphaned son of the daughter of the family. Sona finally gives birth to a baby girl. Everybody is happy because "It is good to have a girl in the house". (35) Girl is considered as Lakshmi for the traditional family. "And now the womb has opened," continued Rupa, 'a baby brother will come soon.'" (36) The boy child is seen as 'Kul-Ka-Deepak'. Sona's

delivery of her next progeny, a son is enjoyed and welcomed more than the first. Sona's mother-in-law declared, "Now I can die in peace". (41) As both of her sons now have their sons and they can hold their head high in the society. Due to this gender differentiation, the family never let Nisha go outside and play with her brothers.

The family of Banwari Lal is traditional and patriarchal. They believe that men work out of the house, and women within. His two sons follow the ways of their father without any question. The head of the house, Banwari Lal, is ready to do anything for the honor of the family and to maintain its unity. He believes, "United we stand, divided energy, time and money are squandered". (7) At first his principles are challenged by his elder son, Yashpal, who falls in love with a customer and then marries her. The opposition of the 'love marriage' is the very feature of traditionalism. Further Sona's childlessness and later Nisha's empowerment is also considered as shameful. They believe that a girl is supposed to find satisfaction in the performance of her duties in the varied role of mother, daughter, sister, and daughter-in-law. The home is 'Karma- Bhoomi' and for a woman to aspire life beyond the limits of the home is unnatural. Malti Mathur asserts, "Any woman who wished to give up the security and safety of the confines of the home for an uncertain, unsafe identity outside, are looked upon as no less than a Jazebel". (Mathur 85)

Nisha, the main protagonist and the daughter of Yashpal and Sona, emerges as a self-dependent woman in the novel. She refuses to reconcile with the patriarchal and male dominated family structure and tries to make her own individual identity. She spends a congested childhood where she is not allowed to play or go out by her own choice. She is provided with nice dresses and everything else yet, "unfortunately her outfits did not match her inclinations,' I want to play in the park,' she whined periodically". (53)

In the traditional family of Banwari Lal's, girl's education is considered secondary. But Nisha's education begins properly at her aunt's house. Her uncle, Prem Nath helps her in her studies and spends much time in telling her stories and lessons. A change appears in Nisha's behavior after she leaves her own home. Her aunt and uncle try to talk on the issue of Vicky with Nisha's father. But no one in the family is ready to believe in such tales about Vicky, whom they consider like their own child.

During Nisha's education, her brother's get married. Now it is Nisha's turn. Her mother knows that she is manglik and it is not as easy to find a manglik boy for her. Nisha is told to keep fasts for her future husband by her mother. Nisha is of modern thinking and does not believe in traditional beliefs. She is not ready at all to spend her whole day without food and water like her mother. As the family believes in superstitions, Nisha is also forced again to keep 'Kava Chauth' fast for the long life of her husband.

Nisha has been influenced by her Maasi's updated thinking of life. The lady believes in practical ways of life and thinks of her sister, "There was an age for everything, and when the child should be thinking of studies, she was forcing her to think of husbands". (95) Nisha's stay with them has conditioned her mind according to the ways of her uncle and aunt. Rupa has a business of pickles; Nisha sees her mentor in her aunt and wants to lead a life like her.

Sona does not understand her daughter Nisha very much similar to Kasturi in *Difficult Daughters*, where Kasturi, the mother of the protagonist Virmati, stands opposed to her daughter's happiness and wishes. Both Kasturi and Sona are the forces of patriarchy within their homes; the opposition does not come so openly from the male members as it does from their own mothers. They are unable to understand their daughter's feelings and rather expect them to follow the traditional role of women in a family. Sona says, "This girl will be our death. My child, born after ten years, tortures me like this. Thanks God your grandfather is not alive. What face will I show upstairs?" (198) The traditional mother wants her daughter to be like her. For her doing kitchen work is more important than studies. The main concern of Sona is Nisha's marriage. Throughout Ajay's marriage, Sona wants Nisha to look beautiful so that any boy or his family may choose her. When Nisha returns home after living for a long time with her aunt, Sona discovers with horror that at the age of sixteen, Nisha does not know how to cook. "What can Rupa have been thinking of? I assumed she was teaching you everything she knew,' Sona grumbled. You take half an hour to peel ten potatoes. How will you manage in your future home?"(125)

Nisha always protests in return, "Masi says there is always time to learn cooking, but only one time to study" (125) The girl always tries to defend herself and her aunt. This clash between Nisha and Sona is a clash between tradition and modernity. The mother wants her daughter to be rooted in the tradition that would make her life worth having. "Roop, I would never had imagined you, of all people, filling the girl's head with rubbish. This is the life of a woman: to look after her home, her husband, her children, and give them food she has cooked with her own hands. Next you will be saying she should hire a servant". (126)

Social structure conditions one's thinking. A person becomes that, under which circumstances he or she lives. We see that two real sisters- Sona and Rupa, born in the same house, are totally different in their thinking after their marriage. It is result of the atmosphere of their new families One considers a working woman as emancipated individual, while for the other it is shame. One protests, "Times are different now" while the other defends by saying that "We are traditional people. Tradition is strong with us. So is duty". (123)

During first year of her college, Nisha comes across a boy, Suresh, at the bus stop. She falls in love with Suresh but in her mind she always reminds herself of the patriarch set up of her home and yet

“As they rode towards metamorphosis in Kamala Nagar, she felt she was entering a phase from which there was no turning back.” (149) Kapur brings out some disturbing home truths in this novel which still exist in our society and is a very part of social structure. In her interview with J. Dadyburjor Farhad she asserts that this novel is based on real facts.

“I teach in an all girls college (Miranda House College, Delhi) and ‘Home’ was first conceived in response to the home situations of some of my students who came from conservative backgrounds”. (Farhad)

Once her family comes to know she is not allowed to go out. The only ray of hope is again her aunt and uncle. With her uncle Prem Nath, she plans to meet Suresh. At first her uncle consoles the girl, “His family should have met your family”, for Nisha, it is a traditional approach, so she answers back, “Uncle this is the modern age”. (202) finally they go to meet him in a restaurant. Their meeting results in the destruction of her hopes and love. After three years of thinking that Suresh is her future, now Nisha has to adjust the idea of another man in his place. Now starts Nisha’s journey towards emancipation. She wants to do something valuable. She complains, “Why should I sit at home every day waiting for proposals?” (226) she further wants to do fashion designing course. She wants to be economically independent. It is her first step towards empowerment. Her idea of working and earning is bitterly opposed by her mother.

Manju Kapur seeks freedom for the Indian woman but within the Indian socio-cultural values. She always bears the process of oppression and gender differentiation within the institution of the family and the male centered Indian society. Nisha is a victim of gender discrimination when she feels that she can’t work outside like her brother. She requests her father, “If only you could take me with you, Papaji,” she continues, “I have seen girls working in shops. Why should it be Ajay, Vijay and Raju? There must be something I too can do” (268). This reveals her inner quest for independent existence and self-identity. She counts herself equal as her brothers. She denies the patriarchal system. At her request, her father allows her to join a play way school, near her home. Instead of going to shop and attending the customers it is the better option for her. But soon Nisha feds up with children at the school and leaves the job. Another example of woman submission has been presented by Manju Kapur through Nisha’s struggle to adopt the profession of her own choice. The author has depicted through the character of Nisha that it is not easy for a woman to choose the profession of her own choice. In order to do so, she has to struggle a lot in her life. Society deprives her of this right just because of her being a woman. Tradition bound society has made certain restrictions and laws which she is not allowed to cross over. Working in shop is not considered to be a good profession for a woman.

Focusing on the change of women’s position, Manju Kapur has presented the changes in the moral foundations of the Banwari Lal’s family. The novel touches the realities of life in which owing to the modernization the ‘old fashioned’ shop of Banwari Lal is replaced by modern type mirror’s showroom and the ‘home’ is fragmented into flats. Anita Sethi in her review of Home writes,

“As tradition battles with transition, the older members of the Banwari Lal family struggle to adapt to the seismic changes rippling through the country, from Nisha restyling herself with a new haircut and clothes to buildings being bulldozed to make way for chandeliered shops”. (Anita)

Nisha defies the social structure and defines womanhood entirely in different terms that suit her aspirations. She does not dance to the tunes of conventions and wishes to live a carefree life. With the help of her father, she starts her own business, a boutique, named ‘Nisha’s Creations’. First time in her life she feels proud as “Her father trusted her as he would have trusted a son”. (291) She takes money from her father to start the business but she vows to return every single penny to her father. She hires a tailor on monthly pay and collects material for suits from her father’s shop. Her friends and customers like her suits and dresses. She gets heavy orders and becomes a successful and known ‘businesswoman’ of the Karol Bagh market. She is now economically emancipated. She has thrown the social codes to the wind and wants to display her talent and is ready to take up any challenge.

Nisha proves to be a responsible working businesswoman. Her boutique starts shining in the Karol Bagh very soon. She is very conscious regarding her workers, the raw-material for dresses and the genuine prices. Within a year she returns half the money loan to her father. She keeps an eye on the workers. In her absence, she arranges her mother, Sona, to look after the workers. She is very much alert about her status as a reputed businesswoman. She bears no negligence in her work and says, “My reputation will be spoilt. Do you know how competitive the market is?” (294)

Meanwhile Nisha’s marriage is fixed with Arwind As Clara Nublie has pointed out in *Danger of Gender* :

“Being a woman in modern India means to be entrapped into the inescapable cage of, ‘being a woman-wife-mother’,” (Clara 12)

Same is fated in Nisha's life. She is closed inside her home after her marriage. Her sister-in-law, Pooja, takes over her business. In the institution of marriage Nisha's husband never shares anything, personal or professional, with her. He does not understand her desires and aspirations. Therefore, we can say that marriage, the promised end in a traditional society, becomes an enclosure that restricts a women's movement. Nisha was like a flying bird that has been prisoner in the cage of social norms. Within a month of her marriage, she conceives. During her pregnancy, she seeks to go to the shop. Her husband and mother-in-law do not appreciate her idea of going out during these days. Even her modern aunt, Rupa, consoles her, "You know beti; You can always start a business you have shown a flair for it. But this time with your baby, this will not come again". (334)

Same thing is highlighted by Clara Nublie for an Indian woman, "Marriage must be followed by motherhood". (Clara 24)

Nisha delivers twin-one girl and one boy and becomes a complete woman according to the frame of society. Malti Agrawal in "Manju Kapur's Home: A Chronicle of Urban Middle Class in India" observes, "Manju Kapur's depiction of her heroine, her travelling the labyrinth of rules and regulations of traditional middle class milieu and stepping out to start earning for her existence are superb. A girl in Indian family is whining under the burden of patriarchy. She while living in her home feels herself homeless-shelter less. She strives to explore space for herself. She tries to be self-reliant in order to survive".

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