

A Critical Study of Patrilineal Family Set-up in Manju Kapur's Home

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Abstract

The literature of any land is the polished documentation of its socio-political history and cultural life. Women's literature proved itself as the voice of that section of society which was oppressed, ignored and rejected for centuries due to the overbearing nature of the patriarchal social system. Manju Kapur's Home is an extraordinary story about a middle class joint family in Delhi. Manju Kapoor has beautifully explored the patrilineal family set-up.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Cultural Heritage, Family structure

India is a land of rich cultural heritage dating back to thousands of years. This Indus valley civilization has seen numerous historical events like invasion by Mongols, Afghans and Mughals and colonization by the British imperial power. Yet the foundation of Indian cultural heritage is extremely strong and deeply rooted in its value system. Despite a sound spiritual and ethnic grounding, there are some shortcomings that plague the Indian social and family structure. More than half of the population of India comprises its female folk, yet they are not treated at par with men. Despite innumerable evolutions and revolutions, women are still given a secondary position in the Indian society. The fact that she has similar mental and moral power as her male counterparts has been conveniently ignored by the powerful patriarchal set-up till date. Women are denied equal opportunity and equal space inside and outside home. This conquest for equality and compatibility set many of the fair sex in search of their identity. The male dominated Indian society assigns her the role of a devoted wife, doting mother, caring sister and a home-maker, and easily ignores the fact that she is a human-being. She is expected to serve, sacrifice, submit and tolerate the acts of injustice and humiliation with fortitude in order to maintain equilibrium in her domestic life. As an individual, she is hardly recognized in the patriarchal society and is expected to be completely selfless. Eventually a woman's world is completely different from a man's world. Simon de Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex* gives the 'other theory' in which she says, "One is not born but rather becomes (a) woman". (Beauvoir, p. 283) Deviating from Simon's theory

of others, we can perceive that there is an inherent physical, psychological, emotional and behavioural difference between a man and a woman. These differences are wonderful and complementary. In the course of civilization, these differences have taken a new form and some set of cultural expectations, in terms of code of conduct and their status in the society were imposed on each sex. In India, family as the most primary unit of the society is given paramount importance. A set cultural role is imposed on the female folk in order to maintain the harmony within the family. In the process of civilization, women played a crucial role of cultural custodian and the preserver of the society's value system. The study of womanhood in general led us to the finding that women have to pass through different stages in their life. The roles like daughter, sister, wife and mother ensure complete fulfilment to a traditional Indian woman. She is supposed to pass through all these roles in order to attain complete equilibrium in her life. In order to perform these roles smoothly, women are expected to remain self-effusive.

In India, society has always tried to keep women within the periphery of domestic life and prevented them from showing interest in worldly activities. Women were circumscribed within the duties of looking after the home and the hearth. As a result, they were denied access beyond their familiar grounds. The worldly activities like social participation, economic dealings and political power struggle remained a far-fetched world for them, in which they were prohibited to enter. This intensified and strengthened their inner world of sensibility and emotions. They were caught within the emotional life and the intricate fabric of human relationships. The literature of women writers have always dealt with this world of sensitivity and sensuality as experienced by them.

The literature of any land is the polished documentation of its socio-political history and cultural life. The post-independent era in India is marked with an increasing number of women writers who disapprove of the hegemonic myth that considered literary creation a solely male domain. Women's literature proved itself as the voice of that section of society which was oppressed, ignored and rejected for centuries due to the overbearing nature of

the patriarchal social system. The women writers voice their own opinion through their literature. Chadra Nisha Singh writes in the introductory chapter of her book *Radical Feminism and Women's Writing*,

"Woman is no longer a mere sign in the writing of men, nor is she merely the muse, the idealized inspiration of the masculine artist and thinker....Instead, woman is a creator herself and an imaginative being whose discourse is subversion of her silence and whose speech is a challenge to her peripheral status." (Singh 01)

Manju Kapur is a contemporary Indian novelist in English who has established herself with her first novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998), which won her prestigious Commonwealth Writers Prize (Eurasia Section) in 1998. She has also written best seller novels such as *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008) and *Custody* (2011). Her books have been translated into many Indian as well as Western languages. Though Manju Kapur hates to be called a feminist writer, through all her fictional works she projects the feminine concerns. *Virmati* in *Difficult Daughters*; *Astha* in *A Married Woman*; *Nisha* in *Home*; *Nina* in *The Immigrant*; and *Shagun* and *Ishita* in *Custody* are all middle-class educated urban Indian women struggling to establish themselves with their own independent identities in the patriarchal set-up which has often victimized them.

Indian society has always given paramount importance to the institute of marriage and family as the foundation of the Indian social system. The responsibility of preserving the family values always rested on the shoulders of the female folk. Marriage as an institution has always been biased in extending its advantages to its seemingly equal beneficiaries. It has been observed for ages that the institute of marriage has been more beneficial to the male members of the society and led to the gradual cessation of women's identity. This institution, though ensuring family protection as well as domestic security to the female folk, also gradually annihilated the identity of the female folk. Marriage is a patriarchal weapon with the help of which the male member of the society can completely subvert and obliterate the existence of a woman. The hegemonic male power has long determined the code of behaviour and boundaries of feminine space; they were conveniently subjected to the exclusions and invisibility. The women were kept away from the prime activities of the society. The ideals like silence, submissiveness, dutifulness were idealized. These qualities were considered to be the integral characteristic features to attain an ideal womanhood. According to Hindu social system, the virtues of an ideal wife are

encoded pertaining to ungrudging services to family, enduring hardship for the husband's welfare, ready sacrifice of her own interests etc. These are considered as some of the essential duties of "bharya", a wife, towards "bharta", a husband.

Manju Kapur's *Home* is an extraordinary story about a middle class joint family in Delhi. She has beautifully explored the fine nuances of a joint family. The elements like conflicting loyalties, intrigues, triumphs and tragedies are wonderfully delineated in her phenomenal work. Throughout the novel, the narrative voice of the author is extremely soft. In this book Manju Kapur, once again goes back to her theme of three generations residing in one house, the women existing within the set up of a joint family. *Home* is about the home of Lala Banwari Lal, a patriarch who firmly believes in living in a joint family. He is the head of the family and runs a saree shop in Karol Bagh. He has two sons- Yashpal and Pyarelal, and a daughter Sunita, who is married.

The novel focuses on three female characters- Sona, (daughter-in-law of Banwari Lal), Rupa, (Sona's sister) and Nisha (Sona's daughter)-who claim their identity in their own ways. The story begins with two sisters: one is good looking and the other is ordinary looking. The beautiful elder daughter, Sona is married to the elder son of Banwari Lal while the younger one, Rupa is attached to a junior Government officer having a moderate earning. At the initial stage, the story revolves around the life of Sona and Rupa, and later the focus shifts on the whole family. Each sister thinks that the other is luckier and each one has more difficulties than the other. Rupa has only a husband and a father-in-law in the family whereas Sona has to look after a joint family. The only tension of Rupa's life is a wicked tenant who lives upstairs in their house. He refuses to pay his rent on time. They have already spent a lot of money on the case to evict him. Rupa and her husband, Prem Nath remain childless throughout the story. But she is lucky enough to not be subjected to the taunts of in-laws for not having any child. Even after two years of her marriage, Sona is childless. The members of her extended family start subjecting her to sneers and taunts. Although Sona performs all her duties like an ideal daughter-in-law, yet she could hardly earn respect from her family members. Right from her childhood, her parents have imbibed the family values of love, selflessness and obedience in her and she would never fail in rendering her duties as an ideal Hindu daughter-in-law. Meanwhile, Yashpal's younger brother, Pyarelal gets married to Sushila. Their marriage is appreciated by all the family because unlike her elder brother's disputed love marriage, 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. Sona feels that her position in the family has been relegated to an inferior position for two reasons; first one for not having a child of her own and second for not bringing a sizable dowry from her parents at the time of her wedding.

The newly married couple starts living upstairs where Sona wishes to shift. But the system of joint family remains the same. All the members of her family take their meal together since, the family believes, "Separate kitchens led to a sense of mine and yours, dissatisfaction, emotional division, and an eventual parting of the ways". (Kapoor, p.12) As Lala Banwari Lal's family followed a purely patriarchal principle where no disagreement regarding the behavior and responsibilities were entertained. There was no democracy in the family as the freewheeling individualism could wreck what was being so carefully built.

From the initial days of her married life Sona sensed a cold disdain in her mother-in-law's behaviour. She could get clear suggestions that her daughter-in-law, who entered her house through a traditionally unsanctioned path, had no right to exist. In the extended framework of her joint family, the existence of Sona is in a state of limbo. She finds herself dwindling between profound love of her husband and hatred of her mother-in-law. The only hope of acceptance in the family could be seen from her prospectus of begetting kids for the family. Two years of her married life passes without any blissful sign of pregnancy. Her apparent barrenness gives her mother-in-law sufficient reason to express her disgust for Sona. Her mother-in-law would sometimes mutter, "Enjoying, enjoying...darkly imagining the use of birth control." (Kapoor 12)

Traditional Hindu society is patriarchal in nature, wherein a great value is attached to the motherhood of a woman. The Rigveda considers "... propagation of the species as a duty and the only way for a woman to become a complete individual" (Gupta 236). The Hindu mind cherishes a dominant desire to have sons for the attainment of spiritual immortality and for the continuity of the family line. The Atharvaveda says: "Women's main occupation is to procreate. Therefore, an infertile woman is an object of contempt" (Sharma 52). Thus the concept of womanhood in Indian society is inseparable from motherhood, the responsibility and honour that it follows is entirely hers. The cultural construct that promotes a feminine mystique associates a woman's identity with

her role as a mother. Woman is viewed as a reproductive machinery where she needs to act as a life giver and nurturer. A woman plays a stipulated role in her family and social unit.

Feminine sexuality acquires justification in Indian society because of its inevitable link with procreation. The dominant culture specially rules out an independent feminine sex drive. The patriarchal power structure articulates a sexual system in which sex is valid for the purpose of reproduction. Thus Sona's mother-in-law's pent up frustration and anger in the novel finds full justification in the Indian social context. She suspects her daughter-in-law of using some method of birth control in order to avoid early motherhood and shamefully enjoying her blissful married life, which bore the status of being the only love marriage in Lala Banwari Lal's family. Her mother-in-law comments occasionally, "What can you know about a mother's feelings? All you do is enjoy life, no sorrow, only a husband to dance around you". (18)

Sona struggles to have children in order to establish her place in the family. She rejects the responsibility of Vicky, the orphaned son of the daughter of the family as she intensely wishes for her own child. Meanwhile she prays, she observes fasts, and she practically undergoes every ritual that anticipates some promise of fulfilling her wish. Finally with the blessings of Babaji, the family guru of Lal Banwari Lal's family, Sona is blessed with a baby girl. Everybody is happy because "It is good to have a girl in the house"(35). A 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 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 heads high in society. Sona experiences the most blessed moment of her life as her disgrace and resentment disappears with the appearance of Raju, her son. Although the complications of caesarean operation had been severe, Sona was content. For the first time in life, she finds herself in the most respectful position of a son's mother. The family unanimously decides to welcome Raju in a way suited to the first son of the eldest son of the family. Manju Kapur's Home is one of the best chronicles of the urban middle class in India. Manju Kapur's depiction of her heroine, her passing through the labyrinth of rules and regulations of traditional middle class milieu is sincere and realistic. A woman in Indian family is groaning under the burden of patriarchy. She strives to establish herself in her own family and explore space for herself. Eventually, most of the women folk try

to seek satisfaction by fitting themselves in the role prescribed and made sacrosanct by the andro-centric Indian society.

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