

UNDERSTANDING FACETS OF FEMINISM IN MANJU KAPUR'S FICTION

Dr. Latha Mutyaboyina
Assoc.Prof, HOD English
Dept., K L University,

Dist. Guntur
Thummala Sai Mamata
Andhra Loyola College,
Vijayawada

Feminism is a topic that widely attracts the male as well female readers. Feminism related to women deals with women sub ordination, rights, freedom and agonies of women. It was Alice Rossin, an American writer, who coined the term in his book *The Athenaeum*. The changes in the feminist theory were noted from 1960s and 1970s which helped to put forward a woman's conversation, leading to 1980s feminist approach towards intellectual fields, and the 1990s played a vital role in focusing the concerns of distinctiveness, divergence and questioning the eccentricity. The main focus of feminism is to make women a key role, central character in the feminist theory. The root cause for the escalation of feminism was the stress created by the society on woman. The rights like acquiring property, freedom and participating in political affairs was possible may be only due to feminism. It is crystal clear that Mary Wollstonecraft and John Stuart Mill owe the credit in spreading feminism. Mary Wollstonecraft, the wife of William Godwin and Shelley's mother-in-law and author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women (1792)* had received vicious reaction by many writers as it had a powerful influence upon the female readers. It is too pitiful that such a book which indicated the strength and powers of women was read by only a few women. The same treatment was received by John Stuart Mill, son of James Mill, a philosopher. Being a man he supported women and worked out on the potentialities of women inviting them into all trades. His book *The Subjection of Women (1869)* was also turned away as the elements concerning to women's rights were not accepted by the society. His book *The Subjection of Women* rightly points 'that the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human development; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (3) Whatever the dictionaries refer to the term 'feminism' or 'feminist', it's in general related to rights of women politically or economically or socially a status equal to men. Simone de Beauvoir says in *The Second sex* . 'The terms *masculine* and *feminine* are used symmetrically

only as a matter of form, as on legal papers. In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of *man* to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocityA man is in the right in being a man; it is the woman who is in the wrong. It amounts to this: just as for the ancients there was an absolute vertical with reference to which the oblique was defined, so there is an absolute human type, the masculine' (15)

According to some writers feminism cannot have a fixed definition as it is ever changing according to the pressures of the society. Whatever may be the definition of feminism, it ultimately brought about a change in the attitudes and thinking of women and the problems associated with them. When feminism started to grow, women wanted to remove the words like oppression, suppression and subordination from their mind dictionary. Finally women started to pen out their ideas into the society.

The women writers hidden writing skills were ascertained by them and women's literature has gained a prominent position in the history of literature. The writers like Chaman Nahal, R.K.Dhawan's views can be quoted on feminism. As Chaman Nahal says 'I define feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the independence syndromeThere is dependence syndrome, whether it is the father or the community, whether it is religious group or ethnic group'. (14). R.K.Dhawan opines that 'Feminism is to be used as a socio-cultural movement to secure a complete equality of women with men in enjoyment of all rights – moral, religious, social, political, educational, legal and economic.' (1). Feminists naturally concentrate on the writings related to independence of women minimizing the domination of patriarchal powers. Most of the women writers focus on the self-identity, recognition of their status in the society through their protagonists. The important writers in India who mainly concentrate on the women rights are Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Nargis Dalal, Manju Kapur, Sashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Geetha Mehta, Rama Mehta, Shobha De, Arundathi Roy, Mahasweta Devi and Bharati Mukherjee. The present article tries to focus on the feminine view of Manju Kapur with reference to her five nov

Difficult Daughters:

This is the first novel written by Manju Kapur, portraying the women in 1940s. The novel won Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1999. As Manju Kapur says for a question in an

interview to Deepa Diddi: Talking about *Difficult Daughters*, set in the 'forties, what made you write a character like Virmati, who defies tradition? How ahead are you of time?

Manju Kapur: Virmati's character is loosely based on my mother's story. The broad fact that she married a man who was already married is the same-the details are mine. (159,160)

Manju Kapur has delineated the role of Ida meticulously as the novel starts herself searching for the identity of her who is no more. Virmati born in a traditional family in Amritsar was trapped in the family traditions until she meets her cousin Shakuntala. She dreams for a freedom which her cousin was enjoying in Lahore, without any obligations of marriage. Virmati was inspired by her but she did not remain a spinster like her cousin but entered into an extra-marital relation with a professor, who had a wife and two children. Virmati was innocent to envisage her future after the marriage as she was not even guided by her parents. She was trapped by the acts and words of Harish, the professor, who was good at alluring Virmati with his adorable words.

Virmati shared the responsibilities of her mother and became a mother to her sisters and brothers. Her mother's continuous child-bearing made her sick and also the burden was shifted on Virmati as the eldest one to take care of her siblings. As every child expects to be cared by their parents, Virmati expected a warm treatment from her mother. But her mother in turn was always concerned about her other children, whether they were well-cared or not and it was Virmati's responsibility to take care of them. How can she express her feelings to a mother who is not able to understand such sensible things? Virmati had no other option other than looking after the needs of her siblings. So naturally craving for love and affection she could easily fall into the trap of the professor without thinking of the consequences of loving a married man.

Manju Kapur's protagonists were women, who were in one way or other way trying and fighting for their own independence and self-identity. Her stars were not supportive as her engagement got cancelled due to the death of the relatives. As she was bound by her family relations, unable to say no to her parents, she was caught between the professor and family. Not knowing how to overcome the situation, she tried to commit suicide. She was humiliated by the society, family, the professor's family and the society. She was blamed and rejected at the death of her father and grandfather, where her husband was accepted. She was opposed and suppressed by the society for marrying Harish.

Manju Kapur parallel runs the story by combining two events together, one Virmati's struggle for her independence and the other the country trying to liberate itself from the clutches of Britishers. As many had sacrificed their lives, property and time to liberate the country, Virmati had to sacrifice five years, her family and fame to marry Harish. In spite of that as the people started fighting for various political and economic settlements, Virmati was not accepted by the professor's family and she had to leave the family and continued her education in Lahore. As the country lost many great leaders, common men and valuable property, Viramti lost her father, grandfather and the family's years of reputation. There were none in her maternal or paternal home to understand her internal emotions or to mollify them. The country lacked its heritage after the freedom struggle.

Virmati could not really make out the freedom she was aiming for. She craves in her inner self to be like Swarna Latha, her roommate. When she goes for a meeting organized by women for the freedom struggle, observing all the women actively participating in freedom struggle she thinks herself "Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent in love. Wasting it." (131). The love which Kasturi, her mother received from her parents and the affection which Ida could experience from her parents were in one way the main reason for Virmati's struggle in her life. She was completely neglected by her mother, but she is always concerned about her only daughter Ida. May be the problem behind this can be clearly identified that too many children in a family cannot be cared properly, whereas one or two kids in a family are well-looked after.

A Married Woman:

An apt title, Manju Kapur conscientiously blends history its intervention into a small family. The issue of Babri masjid had turned the life of a married woman into a lesbian. Astha was brought by a middle class public servant father and religious and over concerned mother. Their only aim in life was Astha's marriage. Her infatuation on Bunty and Rohan before marriage but could realize the real love after her marriage. Astha, was happy for a few days after her marriage. She was well-cared by her husband Hemanth. Hemanth appreciates her art and poetry and encourages her to utilize her education. So Astha becomes a teacher. They had two lovely kids Anuradha and Himanshu. Changes come about in their life when Hemanth starts manufacturing T.V sets and resigns to his bank post. Astha starts missing Hemanth. The financial position of the family improves and Hemanth arranges everything

what his family needs. But he generally lacks the time to spend more with them and Astha misses her husband's concern. Hemanth, who was westernized in his thoughts, wanted a daughter when Astha conceived for the first time. He enjoys the birth of a female child but suddenly his Indian thoughts haunt him to have a son when Astha conceived the second time. He is well aware that it is not in the hands of Astha but he makes tensed and nervous about the male child. Hemanth starts to neglect Astha in spite of her headaches. He feels that she was responsible for her headaches. But Hemanth cannot be treated as an inhumane personality. He takes care of Astha when she had an operation. But Astha expects his affection to be continued where Hemanth again sticks to his business tours. When he is free and wants to enjoy with his family Astha was asked to volunteer students, who are participating in the street play by Aijaz Khan, who attracts Astha. Astha could not forget him after the play. She cries for him when he was burnt alive and this annoys Hemanth and she starts participating in the socialist activities run by Manch against their death. She even goes to Ayodhya alone leaving her children at home. Her recognition as a painter starts in the Manch programmes. She acquires fame and money through her paintings developing her self-identity. Hemanth's negligence makes her world outside. In Ayodhya she meets Pipeeliks Khan, Aijaz's wife. Pipee was an independent woman, brought up amidst challenges and hurdles. Pipee's independent nature and her stay in Delhi away from family, her school background made her a strong personality. Pipee dragged Astha into lesbian relation, but had to break up as Astha could not be her lesbian partner for life long. So they diverted concentration on their goals, one decided to become a professional painter and the other to pursue her Ph.D.

Manju Kapur shows Astha's role as a woman confined to her family as she was the part of a patriarchal system. She delineates Astha's character as a mother and a wife in an Indian traditional family. 'A large part of her belonged to her children..... a willing body at night a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth were the necessary prerequisites of Hemanth's wife. (231) Astha thought of separating from Hemanth but her Indian traditional brought up could not allow her to think beyond that as her children would be the ultimate sufferers. Astha's Indian attitude comes out when she finds a condom after her husband returns from a business trip. She suspects him, but doesn't share it with anyone and feels internally though she did trust Hemanth. She involved herself in lesbian relation, amusing herself. Astha was deep in ocean that she felt '...if husband and wife are one person

then Pipee and she were even more so. She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her'. (243)

Astha's yearning for love from her husband and may be her inner emotions on Aijaz made her to turn towards Pipee. Two types of feminism, Radical feminism and Marxist feminism are absorbed in *A Married Woman*. The first type of feminism imbibes patriarchal differences between the genders and Marxist feminism concentrates on material aspects rather than social aspects. Astha's reaction to her mother's age old traditions can be claimed as radical feminism and Marxist feminism could be seen she was not allowed to retain her father's books and was denied of the money invested from her mother. Astha's feminine role was challenged by her husband expecting her as a woman who need not be consulted in all the decisions he would take. Astha's role as a wife was more challenging to her after she met Pipee. She started lying to Hemanth when she went to meet Pipee. But her female sensitivity had come out when he was hospitalized with cardiac problem. She ate the tasteless food along with Hemanth and showed the true feminine nature.

Home:

Home is another marvelous story which shows a traditional family migrated during partition. Banwari Lal's had to struggle for their existence with small kids when they came to Delhi from the rescue camp. Lala Banwari Lal, the head of the family was a practical man who motivated his sons to follow the path laid by him. Yash Pal and Pyare Lal were the brothers and strong pillars of the family. Sunita, their sister was married to Murli at the wish of the Babaji, whom they trusted much but they lost Sunita, who left Vicky her only son as her memory. Lal Banwari Lal as a pragmatic man wanted to choose his daughter-in-laws from his community. But Yashpal wanted to marry Sona, a beautiful girl who was a customer to his shop. Lala Banwari Lal's wife could not accept her son's proposal and threatened that she would consume poison rather than agree to her son's proposal. But Lala Banwari Lal's thoughtful mind conciliated his wife 'It's our son's happiness we have to think about said her husband severely. 'If he wants a love marriage, he shall have it. He has worked sincerely all these years. He has never had a holiday, never taken one paisa. His younger brother travels with me, spends what he can, while the elder one is simple and retiring. Who knows what he might do if he is thwarted in the only thing he asks for?' (7). Pyare Lal married according to his father's wish. It was difficult for her mother-in-law to accept Sona. Pyare Lal and Sushila could fulfill the wish of their parents as they had given them two grandsons. But Sona could

not conceive, her only obligation was to become a mother for which she had made so many sacrifices.

Sona's sister Rupa, who was quite opposite to her sister was married to a government employee and stayed close to her sister's house. As son was the part of a patriarchal family she had all the pressures upon her, whereas Rupa was free from family tensions except the tension created from the tenant, who refused to vacate their house. Sona always thought of Rupa as lucky because she didn't have any obligations as hers. Manju Kapur brings out the contrast in the attitudes of the two sisters in an interview to Deepa Deedhi: There is a stark contrast between the two sisters – Rupa and Sona. Coming from the same background, they have different approach towards life. Manju Kapur: the way of approaching life stems from your circumstances. Sona came from a poor family and was treated as an outsider by her in-laws. She tries to adjust in the joint family. When the children grow, she tries to prove herself through her children. Rupa, on the other hand did not have to prove herself to anyone. (163)

It's quite natural though they are born in the same family, it is not necessary that they should be alike. Even if their attitudes are of the same type it is not necessary that they behave in the same manner when they move to their in-law's house. Here Manju Kapur clearly shows the patriarchal element dominating the feminine aspect of the gender. Sona is married into a traditional family where the family still retains its customs and traditions. Rupa's husband's education, employment and economical background didn't allow him to dominate his wife. Rupa or Premnath never worried about children, but they were happy since none were there to comment on it. Sunita was also a victim of patriarchal system, that she never opened her mouth to tell to her parents about her husband, who was entirely hostile towards her. Her inner tribulations were buried inside, entirely burning her to ashes.

Sona could conceive after 10 years and Nisha, a mangli was gifted to her. Nisha was another sufferer of female sex. She was sexually abused by Vicky, Sunita's son. Nisha was too young to bear it and she was sent to her Rupa's house and brought up there with good education. Her mother who believed only in marriage did not give any importance to her education. Nisha's love was not accepted as Suresh was from a low caste. Unable to digest the rules of patriarchal families Nisha developed a kind of dermatology problem. With her father's cooperation she could start a boutique and succeed in the business. But her marriage and kids stopped her to continue in the business. Unfortunately her father's love marriage

was accepted, but Nisha's was not accepted in the same family. Sona's entire life was her family, cooking, serving and following the rituals. She wanted Nisha to be the same. She blames her sister for not training her in gastronomic skills, while Rupa thinks its education that should be given importance in her life; such culinary arts can be acquired later. Nisha's life had been caged in the house, one way suffering from skin problems, the other way accepting the blame of her family members for loving Suresh. Lala Banwar Lal's family is the best example to show women undergoing suppression under the masquerade of patriarchy.

The Immigrant:

Manju Kapur's first three novels were set around the families in India, depicting the north Indian families and their conventions. The fourth novel blends the Indian and western cultures and the problems faced by the Immigrants. In her first three novels Manju Kapur concentrated on patriarchal families where protagonists were suffocating under the clutches of the system. In this novel the protagonist has a different problem. As Manju Kapur is a feminist, she brings out the predicaments faced by women in the male dominated society. She concentrates on the various problems concerned with women as the main prey. Whether it was Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* or Astha in *A Married Woman* or Nisha in *Home* they suffered from their traditional families. Nina in *The Immigrant* is not from a big family like other protagonists; she lives alone with her widowed mother and works as an English teacher at Miranda House in Delhi. Her mother's one and only battle in life is Nina's marriage. Nina feels the burden and responsibility she was shouldering on her mother, as it is clear that in Indian families a daughter of the age thirty becomes a hot topic among relatives causing burden to the parents. As Nina's mother was a single parent left over with none of her relations to feel responsible towards their family finds the match of Ananda, a dentist in Halifax. Ananda had undergone a tragedy of accidental death of his parents and leaves his married sister Alka in India and accepts the invitation of his uncle and moves to Halifax. Alka feels the responsibility of her brother's marriage and she finds Nina's match as a suitable match and calls her brother. Ananda and Nina gets married and when Nina leaves for Canada leaving her close buddy Zenobia and her mother. Nina warns her mother not to return to her grandparents into the patriarchal sector. At the time of her departure she feels sorry to leave her mother for whom she was everything and now is flying off miles away. Her mother convinces her 'Don't worry about me beta', said Ms Batra, constantly endeavoring to

reassure. 'Don't worry about me. I will be all right. If need be I can go back to Lucknow.' 'And be their unpaid servant? Promise me you won't do that. You know you can always come to Canada.' 'Yes, yes, I know. But you can hardly arrive there with your mother.' (101)

Nina reaches west and feels sick of east. It's not easy for immigrants to adjust on the new surroundings. Nina got used to Halifax and tried to establish her own rather than depending on her husband. She becomes alienated from the world as she had none. She was a teacher who enjoyed her teaching and reading books. Now she has none. She joined the library course and had an extra marital relationship with Beth but ended it after coercion rape. Her life is like road with ups and downs. She lost her mother and finds that Ananda had deceived her, so there were to feel depressed about her. She leaves Ananda and sets her foot into a new world with her new degree. She knew the lapses of Ananda , which she could identify that it was not the same with Rahul her previous boy friend. But she never abuses Ananda for it.

Westernization brings about many changes in the lives of immigrants. They are used to their own cultures and traditions but are forced to accept the culture of west. Ananda and Nina were not used to meet but slowly they get used to it accepting modernization and shedding their Indian culture values. They feel their extra marital relations as a common aspect in the west. She internally feels "That she like, she had lived. Who can feel guilty about living? Judging from the evidence, and the sexual therapy centers, every citizen in North America regarded good sex as their unalienable right. It was her right too."(263)

The story can be read as two parts. In the first part before her marriage also Nina suffered as a single child brought up by a single parent. She was seduced by Rahul. She led a spinster life till the age of thirty and was always questioned by the society about her marriage. After marriage even in the second part her life did not take an unexpected turn. She led a solitary life except a few interactions with Gary's, Ananda's uncle's family and few of her friends. She did not receive the kind of love she expected from her husband and at last she had to leave him and run a tight ship alone in the alien world.

Custody: Manju Kapur took the world by storm through her four novels and her fifth novel reached to the expectations of the readers by leaps and bounds. Though her favourite topic was feminism, she dealt with different psychological and emotional problems faced by women in Indian scenario. *Custody* deals with the lives of well educated and established

families of people like Raman, Shagun and Ishita. Raman and Shagun had everything in life, as Raman was an IIT paid highly and Shagun, his beautiful wife with two lovely kids Arjun and Roohi. Raman's travelling job made him to stay away from home and Shagun was left alone with her children. It's the duty of a man to earn and unfortunately if he earns and gives a lavish life to his family they suffer from loneliness of missing him. Shagun's beauty attracted Raman's boss Ashok Khanna and they started to have a relation. Astha's lesbian relation with Pipee in *A Married Woman* didn't disturb to a large extent the children as both of them were women and Astha did not try to continue lifelong relation with Pipee. Nina's extra marital relationship with Beth in *The Immigrant* didn't disturb her family as she was not having any kids. But Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* and Shagun in *Custody* were directly affected by their families. Virmati could never say about her to her daughter who found about her mother's life only after her death. She wanted to be safe in the eyes of Ida. As the novel was set in 1998, Shagun didn't feel odd at her relation with Ashok. She was not concerned about her mother or Raman's parents. She wanted a life which she could not even think over as she was married soon after her exit from college. She wanted a life with Ashok. If Raman had at once agreed to give divorce may be she could have left the children for him. But Raman was too outrageous and she had no other way other than kidnapping the children and using them as powerful weapons. As Astha in *A Married Woman* she wanted to end her relation with Ashok and lead a dull and a monotonous life with Raman after his cardiac arrest but Ashok denied her in doing that, whereas Astha cared for her husband looked after him after his cardiac problem. Ashok Khanna a real boss in office has used his bossism to seduce Raman's wife Shagun. He feels that he won over Shagun by breaking a relation between a wife and a husband, who were happy till his entry into their lives. With his love and support Shagun fights for her autonomy denying her mother's apprehensions. Mrs Sabharwal knew that Raman who cared well about her was a good husband. He should make that her daughter was greatly influenced by Ashok Khanna because never before she complained about Raman. As a mother she says "Beti, have you ever thought of the consequences of your actions? Even if you don't care for Raman, for heaven's sake preserve some appearances. You think all wives love their husbands? But they stay married. You are so idealistic, you don't think about the long term. What about society, what about your children?" (76).

Manju Kapur introduced another protagonist Ishita, the daughter of Rajora's who was divorced as she could not become a mother. The childless Ishita was introduced to Raman and she becomes a real mother to Roohi, whereas was handed over to his mother. The

ultimate sufferer in this story after Raman was Arjun, who was very intelligent and smart was hurt at the new family her mother had created. Arjun couldn't face his friends at the old school and he stopped going to school, while Roohi, who was too young was not aware of the changing things around her.

As Manju Kapur says "I obviously write about the things I know well – I wouldn't be able to write about them otherwise. But my novels are imaginative reconstructions. I feel uncomfortable writing about recognizable situations. The one exception was my first novel where I used some of the details from my mother's life, but this was with her permission." Manju Kapur's novels are all focused on feminism, making feminism a centralized part in her novels.

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