

Evolution of Modern Women in Manju Kapur's Novels.

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Abstract: Manju Kapur's women protagonists are well educated, intelligent and talented and above all, career women. They are essentially feminist novels and they have educative value too. The general stress in her novels is on the enlightenment of women and their empowerment. Women in fighting for their rights in general and their identity in particular in every field of activity make perceptible progress especially in the domestic sphere. Women, unlike the women of the past, assert themselves and come into the centre of focus. Men start recognizing women as formidable force in all spheres of activity. Manju Kapur's fiction stresses the women's need for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self-realization, and a fight for her own destiny, independence, individuality and self-actualization. She presents the hidden intricacies of woman psyche in her novels. Her protagonists make an effort to dismantle the gender polarization up to a great extent. The women in the novels of Manju Kapur are not traditional women who think that marriage is their destiny and they are to obey their husbands. They differ from traditional women and break all social taboos and conventions and emerge as a new woman who is aware of herself. The women in the novels of Manju Kapur are the personification of the 'new women'. They are projected as convention-bashing new women, subverting the male chauvinism.

Keywords — *autonomy, empowerment, independence, male-chauvinism, marginalized, self-identity,*

The protagonists of all the novels of Manju Kapur are seen as women struggling against all odds. She has always tried to depict the sufferings of women at a deeper level in her novels. The strains of feminism are obvious in her writing. This is overtly seen in the struggles of her women characters, their vulnerability, struggle for identity and their liberating attitude. The female psyche and the female biological world are the main features in her writings. A woman's attempt to succeed in her fight to assert herself is to be esteemed for she has made an attempt. She not only comes to value education and the higher things in life but also deals with the darker aspects of life. The endless vicissitudes of life make her a matured woman. She crushes and defies the patriarchal restrictions and expectations to assert her identity and achieves self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment in her life. Kapur's novels present the long struggle of women to establish an identity.

The concept of ideal Indian woman has become outdated. A modern woman is career oriented because she knows that it is her economic independence which empowers her and enables her fight against the patriarchal hegemony. This paper discusses those factors that have been at work in bringing

about certain conspicuous changes in the status of women in our society.

Manju Kapur while championing the cause of women, creates her women protagonists as being modern in their attitude to life, setting their back against tradition, flouting conventions and deviating from customs; and in this process they encounter many a hurdle in their way and being well equipped to brave the storms of life, emerge as finished modern women. Kapur imbibes the spirit of the fast changing times, renders her protagonists capable of adapting themselves to situations that challenge them at every stage in their lives.

Manju Kapur, in her second novel *A Married Woman*, like a few other contemporary Indian authors, attempts to re-imagine femininity. Astha, the protagonist, while living the life of a conventional wife with her husband Hemant and a typical Indian mother to her children, is steering a path of independence which, under normal circumstances, an Indian wife and mother would not dare to do. In order to escape from the tedium of married life, she tries to reach a heightened sensational experience of life, in a rather clumsy way.

After her collegiate studies, she is married to a young eligible bachelor by name, Hemant who is an American returned son of an affluent bureaucrat. Astha, in her early married life drinks the bliss of wedded life to the lees. She feels her husband's home, now hers, is a home away from home. In no time, Astha endears herself to one and all of the family so much that she fills the void created by the absence of the daughters of the house. Astha experiences the height of joy in her married life that she finds no words to express it except to feel dissolved in her husband. Kapur brings out the fullness of womanhood that Astha feels, "She felt a woman of the world, the world that was covered with the film of her desire, and the fluids of their sex." (46)

In this connection, Simmi Gurwara opines that:

In the early years of her marriage, she was captivated by the magic of their sexual life. She eagerly looked forward to a physical union with her husband and enjoyed it immensely thinking physical intimacy to be the be-all and end-all of her married life. (90)

But this period of ideal wedded bliss slowly evaporates by imperceptible degrees giving place to a normal, routine domestic life that is dull, drab and dreary. Moments of boredom insidiously creep into Astha's married life and she begins to feel a sense of boredom which begins to suffocate her at home.

Hemant becomes busier than ever before and finds little time to spend with her. So it has been decided that Astha should seek some job; and she becomes a teacher and this vocation allows her some space and a welcoming change from her dull, dreary routine of household chores. But this change has brought about another change in her life that unfolds a new dimension of her personality, triggers a series of dramatic changes in her life. Astha reveals the real person of her inner world and it is the larger outer space that offers her wider scope to exhibit her versatile personality. But for this change, her potential self would have been petered out into disintegrated smithereens.

When Astha conceives for the first time, this news sends ripples of joy in both the families. Traditionally the older people, and often the prospective father would like to have a male child. When Astha's mother like Hemant's mother wishes for a male child, Hemant tells them that he would like to have a female child and wonders why people in India make such a gender difference.

Astha feels extremely happy to have such a husband like Hemant as he is above gender prejudice and this is a testimony to his broad-mindedness. Here he thinks like an American-

bred. Hemant lessens her burden of work by generously helping Astha in bringing up the child.

After some years Hemant suddenly declares to Astha that he would have a male child, "I want to have my son soon". This comes to her as an unexpected shock and asks Hemant what they should do if a male baby is not born. Hemant, in a casual tone, insists that they should go on trying until they have a male child. Astha rejoins that trying again and again for a male child might interfere with her teaching career to which Hemant, in a heckling tone, tells her that teaching is hardly a serious job, "Oh-ho, what is there in teaching?" (68) In this regard Bhagabat Nayak opines that, "Astha's marriage to a Pan American and Pan Indian husband in her parent's choice is a miscalculation." (225)

Astha perceives a striking change in Hemant's attitude which changes from an all-American to an all-Indian personality; and there is a patriarchal touch to his tone in certain other respects also. Once, Hemant in a casual tone attributes the nature of sex to work and hints, to her grasp of understanding, about the difference between the work done by a man and the work done by a woman. He does not hesitate to tell her that she had better quit her job in order to manage the household work in a proper manner. He has totally identified with the interests of his work to the complete exclusion of Astha's own interests which made her lonely and dejected. Although, she has often thought of giving up her job, she is disinclined to take this decision, since she enjoys a pleasant sense of independence as a teacher. Gradually her genuine love of independence relegates her erstwhile most cherished desire, to be one with her loving husband, to the hinterlands of her mind. Thus, one sees a distinct change in Astha's attitude towards herself and towards her husband. Her deep yearning for love gradually gives way to her sense of independence which she values most and which is associated with her job. Since Astha finds her spirit growing expansive through her interaction with other minds in the open space, she prefers to be a teacher rather than be a full-time wife at home. And she thinks that her salary meant she need not have to ask Hemant for every little rupee she spends. Here, one is reminded of Simone De Beauvoir, the pioneer feminist, who mentions the two prerequisites for woman's freedom: "Economic independence and liberation from orthodox traditions of society." (328)

Against this scenario, Hemant becomes too preoccupied with his business problems to pay any due attention to her unlike in the past; consequently, the gulf widens gradually with ever-increasing responsibilities, both as a mother at home and teacher at school. There is little space for respite or relaxation and as a consequence she feels suffocated and this results in frequent and bitter headaches which are more psychological

than physical. Astha is essentially a being that craves for independence; hitherto the pleasant company of her loving husband used to alleviate the burden of her work. But now the ever-increasing distance that grows between them develops into a mental trauma, a kind of 'Chronic Fatigue Syndrome' in the famous phrase of Elaine Showalter. In other words, this is a consequence of unhealthy restriction on someone's perception. Another reason, as psychologists observe, is when the cherished image of one very dear to the victim of this trauma is disturbed or disintegrated. In Astha's case, the cherished image of her dreams is her husband who, for his own reasons, ceases to be the centre of her imagination. Kapur rightly presents the situation thus: "It was in this two children, husband, servants, job scenario that Astha started to have headaches." (74)

Astha gives vent to her repressed emotions through writing poetry and sketching pictures and they are tinged with the hue of pessimism. The language is oblique, but it is her own experience replayed endlessly which provides an escape from her pent up emotions.

There seems to be an element of mental incompatibility between the wife and husband. Like most husbands with a traditional mindset, Hemant thinks that he provides his wife with all the material needs that a married woman wishes for; but he is sadly blind to one important fact that women need fulfillment of their emotional needs rather than their physical. Obviously, Hemant lacks an artistic and sensitive mind, and therefore fails to understand the beauty of Astha's poems. But now her poetry seems to be bleak and they are, "all about cages and birds, and mice, and suffering in situations that are not even clear." (81) Her poetry is nothing but the true reflection of her inner world. This emotional turmoil is not understood by Hemant and he ironically states that, "If others read these poems, they might actually think you weren't happy." (81) This is one of the cardinal reasons for the rift that goes on widening and this has a far-reaching effect on their marital relationship.

Astha, for the first time, comes in contact with Aizaz Akhtar Khan, a history teacher, the founder of 'The Street Theatre Group', and a social activist. He is invited to Astha's school to hold a workshop to enlighten the students about 'Babri Masjid - Ram Janambhoomi' controversy. The author very subtly deals with the situation where Aizaz is all praise for Astha for her artistic talents.

Aizaz, during their interaction calls Astha by her name; she is thrilled when he calls so since, she is used to being addressed by her husband as 'baby' or 'Az'. Her name is her identity and Aizaz recognizes her talents and asks her to prepare a script about the 'Babri Masjid - Ram Janambhoomi' episode. She

feels flattered and naturally draws a contrast between her husband who discourages her at every stage and Aizaz who recognizes her talent. Astha feels dignified because for the first time, she has been valued for her existence. Referring to the same Ishwar aptly comments:

She feels somewhat suffocated, exploited and unnoticed at home. It is Aizaz's trust which motivates her to think out of the house. He makes her think about the ongoing socio-political activities which become her future interest. (2)

Aizaz's encouragement helps her to grow, learn and evolve. She is drawn to him, basks in his admiration and attracted towards his fascinating personality; but her roots cling to her and she continues to live in a limbo until his untimely and gruesome death in a Hindu-Muslim riot. Astha notices Aizaz passing glances at her seeking her opinion and smiling at her even though the occasion does not call for it. This makes her feel that there is no harm in thinking about him as it made her happy and it's worth something. Subsequently, when Aizaz's hand inadvertently touches her knee, she reminds herself that she is married, with two children. Talwar observes in this context that, "She is pulled by the cords of transition, on the one hand, and by her own reluctance and hesitation to act, thanks to the social conditioning, on the other." (29)

Astha immediately dismisses all these thoughts connected with Aizaz; but she is sure that Aizaz has great appreciation for art and this immensely pleases her and a silent rapport is established between them and "Suddenly she glimpsed possibilities, suddenly her life seemed less constricted." (115)

It has been published in the papers that Aizaz and the troupe of actors were burnt alive by some religious fanatics. Hemant reads out this piece of news to Astha and it comes like a bolt from the blue to her and she starts crying over the ghastly incident. Hemant, indifferent to the shocking tragedy, inhumanly asks his wife, why she weeps over the death of somebody who is nothing to her. Astha tells him that any such ghastly tragedy would call for human sympathy and this leaves a deep sense of revulsion in her towards her husband. In this connection, Manju Kapur brings out Astha's feelings thus: "Astha stared at her husband in revulsion. Ten men had died in the most ghastly way possible, and this was all he could say. Did he have no feelings?" (140)

After the ghastly tragedy of Aizaz and his troupe, *The Sampradayakta Mukti Manch* has been set up in memory of the dead to carry on the message of secularism. Astha emerges a social activist, identifying herself with the activities of the *Manch*. Reshana suggests to Astha that she might contribute her mite through her paintings to the *Manch*. Astha

is overburdened with domestic responsibilities on one side and her duties as a teacher and a social activist on the other side. Hemant wants his wife to quit her job if she so insists on her painting but she could never do that as her job is something that gives her independence and autonomy. Astha feels that her job “represented security, not perhaps of money, but of her own life, of a place where she could be herself.” (149)

Later her first painting is sold for ten thousand and her second painting for twenty thousand rupees of which ten thousand is hers. Hemant, for once, realizes her talent as a painter and congratulates her in a very casual tone, Astha feels the triteness in his tone; but for all this she feels proud and sees the vision of herself as a woman who had sold two paintings in one year and, “She felt rich and powerful, so what if this feeling only lasted a moment.” (159) In this context Sushila Singh comments that: “Through Astha, Kapur offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization and control mechanism by her inner potential as an individual and her desire to attain personal recognition.” (65)

On the very first day of Astha’s going to school after summer vacation, her colleagues happen to discuss marriages and divorces as they take place in the West and here in India. Astha being a modern woman, sick of sacrifice, is fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood that is used to trap and jail, does not want to be pushed around in the name of family and tentatively gives her opinion that, “It may not be a bad thing, ... If a marriage is terrible, it is good to be able to leave.” (168) Astha is prompted to say this as she was somewhat disillusioned with the ‘rocky terrain’ of her own marriage.

In spite of certain differences between Hemant and Astha, the latter has never openly rebelled against him; all her disagreements with him are said in asides. Even when she wants to go to Ayodhya in connection with the *Sampradayakta Mukti Manch*, Hemanth strongly opposes saying that, as his wife she is not supposed to abandon home, leaving the children to the servants. She goes into her familiar distress reflecting thus, “As his wife? Was all that she was?” (188) as if she has no identity of her own.

The introduction of Pipeelika Trivedi in the life of Astha is very significant as the former exercises a powerful impact on the latter. Pipeelika, the young widow of Aizaz for the first time comes in contact with Astha at Ayodhya. Astha who is very eager to know Aizaz’s wife ever since his death, is overwhelmed with curiosity to know more about her when Pipeelika’s identity as his wife is known to her.

This curiosity impels her to know more about Pipeelika and they begin to meet more often and a strong sexual relationship is established between them. Thus, “an element of secrecy entered the relationship and gave it an illicit character” (218)

and in their case, thus, “There was no aphrodisiac more powerful than talking, no seduction more effective than curiosity.” (218)

As S. Robert Gnanamony puts it,

The reader by now understands from their behavior that as far as sexuality is concerned, it is not something biologically given or transmitted by the genes, rather it is a cultural construct, which is learned in society due to certain circumstantial constraints. (112)

Astha experiences a self-absorbing ecstasy in her physical union with Pipeelika which is too deep for words. During the brief spell of sexual congress, they enjoyed their relationship talking of their discovery and attraction towards each other, the absolute intimacy expressed through their minds as much as their bodies. And even Astha finds it “strange, making love to a friend instead of an adversary.” (231) As Jyothirmaya Tripathy observes, elsewhere that their sexual conduct shows that, “An alternative exists and this is not less enjoyable, that sexuality does not mean pulverization of the female principle, and lionization of a dominant male. It proves that sexuality is a pleasure not a power structure.” (290)

A woman is not just a woman; she has many roles to play in the society for instance, daughter, wife and mother. Astha is predominantly a family oriented woman. It is the mother in her that dominates more than any other role that she is to play. Even the role of a wife is secondary to her. So, as a woman, she gives her paramount importance to motherhood; although, at one time she is tempted to be free as Pipee, she immediately checks this thought.

Astha, after having tasted the private pleasures of lesbianism with Pipee, turns bold enough to tell her husband that she is not a sex object and she is not in a mood for love-making, when he insists on it. She questions him, “Do I have to give it just because you are my husband?” (224) Of late, Astha has been involved in love with Pipee and she fantasizes her experiences with her and looks upon it without qualms since both of them are women, Kapur thus brings out this scenario saying, “So far as her marriage was concerned, they were both women, nothing was seriously threatened.” (232)

Astha likes to have a break from her dependence on others and proceeds on the path of full human status that poses a threat to Hemant and his male superiority.

In the meanwhile, Pipee tries to instigate Astha for a complete commitment towards their secret relationship. When Pipee casually tells Astha about her Ph.D. programme, Astha is a bit shocked and disillusioned that this may put an end to their

newfangled friendship. Immediately she realizes that one can never be one with another person; it's better to realize and accept this so that life becomes easier.

Astha intuitively grasps that Pipee wants to have full commitment in this regard, namely her relationship with Pipee, with no strings attached. This is quite unpalatable to her, realizing that Pipee was saying, "if Astha had her children, she had her Ph.D., as though you could equate the two." (241)

In a mood of self-sympathy and helplessness, Astha feels herself as a bird pecking at a few leftover crumbs from the feast of life. For a moment, she oscillates between the two worlds, one that is her family and the other, her relationship with Pipee. This conflict is resolved in favour of her family interests and she confesses to Pipee thus: "I love you, you know how much you mean to me, I try and prove it every moment we have together, but I can't abandon my family, I can't ... Oh Pipee, I'm sorry, I am not like you." (242)

Astha finds herself trapped and torn between her two obligations: quest for freedom and her family duties. She realizes that any relationship could be demanding after a length of time. Though she is not willing to come out of her family life, she feels complete fulfillment in her relationship with Pipee and finds a soulmate in her.

In spite of herself, Astha feels the tight grip of Pipee on her. At every possible stage, Pipee establishes her supremacy over her so much that Astha feels a mere fragment in the absence of Pipee. Elsewhere, Astha expresses her complete fulfillment owning the company of Pipee, "I live my life in fragments, she is the one fragment that makes the rest bearable. But a fragment, however potent, is still a fragment." (264) Astha feels marginalized and somewhat excluded when someone is in Pipee's company. She wants Pipee all for herself, this may be her weakness and she contemplates, "How do people have affairs? They seem very complicated businesses." (251) Astha is humane and optimistic in her view towards friendship but unable to assert herself she also gets emotionally disturbed and feels suffocated unable to come out of limbo.

Astha keeps her marriage on a higher pedestal knowing full well the support system that marriage provides her with. Astha somewhere down the line acknowledges the importance of marriage in her life. It is an outcome of the values that she imbibed from her parents, especially her mother, who ingrained the sanctity of marriage in her mind by repeated doses of pontification.

Ultimately, Astha grows and evolves through these conflicts and transcends into a talented woman, surer of herself and more confident. She tries to reshape her identity through her growing social awareness and involvement in the public arena.

Throughout her life she struggles against set patriarchal values of the society in order to create a niche for herself. Towards the close of the novel, one finds that Astha emerges as a 'New Woman' passing through many vicissitudes and conflicts and asserts herself with supreme confidence in her. Kapur brings Astha as a well-developed woman to the point where she restarted her married life. Gradually, a sense of calmness settled on her which is a sign of fulfillment. She thought of her name, 'Faith'. "Faith in herself. It was all she had" (299). Here, it is apt to quote chaman Nahal who observes:

A woman should be aware, self-controlled, strong-willed, self-reliant and rational having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense. (17)

Manju Kapur, through her protagonist Astha, dethrones the inherent definitions of gender, religion, culture and tradition that traces women's inherent potentialities to rise up to the situation at the right hour and also to exercise a radical mission with guts to proclaim their self-identity and autonomy. In this sense, Astha is not only the face of the 'new woman' of our time but also the 'real woman'. Seema Malik aptly comments in this regard that, "Astha is Kapur's 'New Woman', conscious, introspective, educated, wants to carve a life for herself, to some extent she even conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social codes." (171)

Nisha, the central character in Manju Kapur's third novel, *Home* passes through many stages of traditional restraints and ultimately emerges as a 'New Woman'. It is a ceaseless struggle between two forces: rigid traditional mother and a formidable modern daughter. And in the course of the story one witnesses how the apperception of tradition is upset and given a dent so much as to give way to the ways of Nisha, the new woman. It is chiefly the story of Nisha who becomes the victim of narrow-mindedness and conservative thinking of her mother. Manju Kapur voices the trials and tribulations of Nisha, the protagonist who while living in a suffocating atmosphere of traditional values and constraints, strives to assert herself. She is also the victim of sexual abuse in the hands of her cousin, Vicky. Her sexual victimization makes the home unsafe, undesirable and reflects the delusion of its security. Unable to sleep in her own home, she is sent to her aunt's house. It is only after eleven years that she returns to her family. Brought up under extreme care and an enlightened ambience by her aunt, she finds her old home stifling, demanding, with no privacy or scope for personal autonomy. The writer brings out the power dynamics in describing how a girl child becomes the victim of sexual assault in her own

house. The gradual emergence of Nisha, the protagonist of *Home* into a 'new woman' against the background of sturdy tradition, constitutes the exciting story of the novel.

On listening to the *Karva Chauth Katha* where the girl in the story, for not observing the fast according to the religious injunction, is punished, Nisha protests that it was not the girl's fault and it is the brothers who should be punished as they made her a widow. This passage reveals the independent thinking of Nisha as a young girl having least regard for the tradition.

Banwari Lal's family is highly traditional and their primary concern is the marriage of Nisha and they believe in fate, predestination and God's firm hand over everything. Nisha is a *mangli* and to find a suitable boy will take much longer time; after much discussion her family has decided to allow her to pursue education as a stop-gap arrangement. Nisha's admission into college brings about a turning point in her life. Thus Nisha is exposed to the outside world, wherein the urge for self-identity and to discover her own individuality, nascent within her finds ample scope for their self-expression.

It is at this juncture, Nisha has her hair cut with a view to appearing different from a traditional look. This is her first step towards modernity and negating what her mother stood for. Knowing full well, that her family will certainly be upset at her present hair style, she takes this daring step. She falls in love with an engineering student, Suresh and when he tells Nisha that her parents would not agree to their marriage since he is not rich, Nisha tells him that her parents's was also a love marriage and adds, "For my parents the boy's merit is the only consideration." (155) As their intimacy grows, their love increases and Nisha absconds from her classes visiting coffee houses, theatres. She grows more confident and more daring and all this is clearly visible in her modern dress replacing her salwar kameez with jeans and T-Shirts.

Suresh takes Nisha to a place of tryst, a friend's room in Vijaynagar. Nisha reluctantly goes there but, once they are together in the room, Suresh very subtly makes advances towards Nisha; but she resists convincingly with all her might saying that they should wait till they are married and adds that, "It is just as well there is something left for when we are married." (192) This scene unmistakably reveals that Nisha successfully resists any sexual act and comes out a virgin. This incident proves that Nisha is a woman with will-power and a modern girl with traditional thinking. She maintains her chastity and never lets Suresh violate her.

Nisha's parents discover the love affair between Suresh and Nisha and they decide to ban her college-going and she is denied the freedom to go out. After this the domestic atmosphere becomes very tense and she feels like a guilty

thing, worse than the dirt under their feet and she remains a "hapless sister, wriggling like a worm on the hook of her family" (199).

The marriage of their daughter Nisha is not an individual's affair as it involves the family prestige. They cannot get down to the level of a low-caste Paswan boy with no family background. They are stubborn and stick to their guns. They try to convince Nisha that by no means the boy under discussion is worthy of her; and they try to bring home that they have rejected many proposals in their search for her saying the least of them better than this nobody of a Paswan boy. Nisha turns convulsive with anger saying, "Who cares about caste these days? What you really want is to sell me in the market, ... Sell me and be done with it. What are you waiting for? ... Either I marry him or nobody." (200-201) Thus Nisha tries to fight against the social taboos and restrictions and in her constant struggle to exist, she tries to free herself from the shackles of tradition and various prejudices.

Subsequently Nisha's life becomes very miserable at home. She remains a prisoner all day in the house and becomes the victim of the circumstances and her luck as she is distrusted too much to allow her to step out.

After Suresh finally vanishes from Nisha's life, her family is busy in searching for a suitable groom for her. Meanwhile Nisha tries to reconcile to the present situation. After three years of thinking that Suresh was her future, Nisha had to adjust to the idea of another man in his place. She tries to compromise with the circumstances and hopes that the boy who comes to see her would like her, so she could be over and done with the whole thing and life would be easier and her family would be happy. Against the background of her failure in love with Suresh and the oppressive atmosphere at home, Nisha being emotionally disturbed develops skin disease (eczema). Nisha has to pay heavy price for her modernity and independence during her college days: heart break, social ostracizing, skin disease, helplessness and a long period of spinsterhood. Nobody tries to understand Nisha's psychic trauma and least of all, her mother. When Nisha continues to scratch her skin Sona irritably remarks, "Stop it ... Your skin will become as black as a buffalo's, then nobody will marry you." (229) In this connection, Malti Mathur observes that, "Any woman who wished to give up the security and safety of the confines of the home for an uncertain, unsafe identity outside, is looked upon as no less than an outcast." (85)

Nisha is taken to different doctors for the cure of her skin disease; almost all the doctors affirm that the disease is psychosomatic. But Sona, obsessed with Nisha's marriage, grievously fails to understand the plight of her daughter and

looks at the whole problem in terms of marriage what is being indefinitely deferred and thinks that it would be better if Nisha could wait until her marriage takes place.

Nisha starts her business with the help of her father and proves herself to be a successful business woman with her 'Nisha's Creations'. Her journey as an entrepreneur is her journey of self-realization. She left no stone unturned to meet the expectations of her father and her success in her business proves that she is indeed a 'new woman'. Her business becomes her tool to move from silence to voice. This gives her confidence which makes her realize her individuality and self-identity. Thus she would no longer be the poor unmarried sister, not allowed to touch the baby.

However, for a woman, there is much more to consider beyond financial independence and personal satisfaction. Yashpal feels proud of his daughter as a successful business woman; he feels that success in business is not the end of her life. He earnestly feels that she finds her fulfillment only in marriage. "Still, it was his duty to see that she married. Her fulfillment lay there, no matter how successful her business was." (296)

Nisha would not leave her business at any cost since it is a means of her economic independence and her strong sense of self-assertion is clearly revealed when she says, "She would only consent to a match with a family who let her work." (297) When the marriage proposal with a 34 year old *manglik* widower, Arvind comes up, she tells him about her 'Nisha's Creations', "I cannot give it up ... This was the only thing she could visualize in any marriage" (303) and he concedes to her condition. Her marriage has been duly solemnized and she enters her new home to start her new life as a wife and daughter-in-law. With the advancing months of pregnancy Nisha gradually loses her grip over her business. But she reserves the right of goodwill for herself with a view to resurrecting it one day. Very much in control of her life again and confident of her latent business acumen, Nisha does not feel a sense of loss when she surrenders her work, which has been her passion, to a traditional way of life. She feels a profound sense of security and safety about her family and eagerly waits for the birth of her child. The birth of twins makes all the members of the family extremely happy and it is how Nisha realizes her thorough fulfillment: "Surrounding her were friends, relatives, husband, babies. All mine, she thought, all mine." (337) As Sudhir Kakar puts it in this regard: "It is in her motherhood that her society and culture confines to her a status as a renewer of the race and extends to her a respect and consideration which was not accorded to her as a mere wife." (79)

Manju Kapur neatly concludes this beautiful novel *Home* with Nisha, the protagonist standing out as a woman of determination and succeeds in her quest for self-identity and selfhood from the background of a traditional family. She gives birth to twins and thereby gets a sense of complete fulfillment as she realizes that she belongs to all and all belong to her.

Rupa Gupta is the wife of Premnath, a badly paid government servant. She is the sister of Sona who lives in the same neighbourhood. Rupa is childless but does not bother about her present condition and she accepts it stoically. She does not lose her self-composure and the gaiety of her spirits. Comparatively, her domestic life is very happy; she has no one to envy and rub salt in her wounds. Their only problem is their lawyer-tenant who proves to be a thorn in their bed. Being childless Rupa engages herself in pickle business to make both ends meet.

Rupa is very forward in her views and she suggests to her sister, Sona who is also childless, that she might consult a doctor and try all possible sources instead of only relying on pujas and fastings. She suggests to her "Didi, why have you never considered going to a doctor? You can afford the best medical care." (24)

One definite aspect of Rupa's character is well revealed in her conversation with her sister Sona that she is very pragmatic in her attitude to men and matters. When Sona reveals to Rupa that she has conceived, the latter receives this news stoically. Though she felt the initial pang of being the only childless woman in the family, she contemplates more on her prosperous business and financial success than on an elusive baby. A little girl. It is here that Nisha has outgrown the stage of nightmarish dreams.

Rupa is a woman of lateral thinking and she insists that education for women is very important and it would stand her in good stead in future. When Sona insists on Nisha's returning home, Rupa expresses her concern that her studies would be spoilt. And she tells Sona that Premnath is of the opinion that a good degree gives something to fall back on when one is forced to stand on one's own feet. Here one must observe that Kapur's novels are interspersed with pure common sense that border on practical wisdom.

When Nisha's higher education becomes the centre of their discussion, it is Rupa who advocates in favour and she earnestly feels that higher education is essential for a girl so that she can fall back on it when circumstances so demand. In this regard she says, "If anything happens in the girl's later life, she is not completely dependent, ... It would be a shame to not educate her further, ... Let her do her English Honours, not too much work, reading story books." (140-141)

Rupa, in the right spirit of sisterhood, always stands by Sona in the hour of her distress. When Sona emotionally breaks down in connection with Nisha's skin disease (eczema), Rupa stands as a moral support: "This was her sister's hour of need, and the frequency of her visits increased. Her refusal to breakdown made her invaluable at the doctor's, at home she was a cornucopia of strength and solace." (238)

Figuratively speaking, Rupa has been a panacea for all the problems that are so intimately connected with her sister Sona and her niece Nisha and thus she plays the most admirable role in their lives.

Ishita, the only daughter of Rajoras in *Custody*, though not strikingly beautiful, is kind, wise and generous; the only daughter of tradition-bred parents naturally possesses modern views. She knows her priority is education and then independent life. With this goal in mind, she acquires higher education; she has a very strong disposition to be a career woman but as fate would have it, she marries Suryakanta, a young bachelor from an affluent family. After three years of happy married life, she is found to be infertile; therefore, she can never become a mother and this thought deeply oppresses her and eventually on this ground she is divorced and the divorce has come to her as a death blow. Under most humiliating circumstances Ishita is forced to leave her husband's family through mutual consent for divorce. The knowledge that she can never be a mother, despite the many tedious and painful medical treatments she has undergone, lets her indulge in the most humiliating self-disparagement, making her psychologically distorted and feel thus: "Smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in the sunlit air, smaller than drops of dew caught between blades of grass in the morning." (62)

Ishita is socially ostracized on the ground of her barrenness. She is ill-treated by her husband and in-laws; she felt degraded, a non-person, certainly a non-woman indulging herself in self-pity and finally taking refuge in what one calls Karma. She undergoes so much of stress and trauma and she is subjected to severe mental torture with no one to take her side. Her mother-in-law, in spite of being a woman, is apathetic towards her and she callously fails to understand her daughter-in-law. Ishita is ostracized and pressurized into divorcing just because she has a womb that does not function. Kapur exposes the shallowness of marital life where a woman is stigmatized and denounced because of her infertility and the fact that she cannot carry forward the family name. She also brings out the oppressive and gender discriminating patriarchal norms and the subjugation of women in the male-dominated social set-up. As Reber comments in this regard, "Child bearing has been viewed as a valuable gender-specific

role to married women. Therefore, women who are unable to bear children, experience a pervasive sense of personal failure." (674)

It is nature's trick that time hurts and time heals. Ishita is a robust optimist and resilient and takes things in their stride; she does not easily succumb to despair. By nature, she is a woman of modern views and she knows her priorities. Her parents instill moral courage into her and in order to escape from her immediate nightmarish past, she finds diversion by associating herself with an NGO and thus she gets an opportunity of doing social service educating slum children. Socially isolated Ishita finds courage to be a volunteer in a social service organization, *Jeevan* where she teaches the underprivileged children. In the face of her unexpected tragic situation, she does not lose heart and tries to realize her aspiration to be an independent woman. She is able to continue living with some dignity and even job satisfaction, and is still loved and supported by her parents. Gradually she finds hope and in the process, her own lost sense of identity; any young woman in Ishita's place would think of her marriage; but, she dismisses such a thought for the moment. "Why should I go on waiting for some man to marry me?" (179)

It is by quirk of fate that Raman and Ishita come in contact with each other, although for the present they are indifferent to their marriage. These two divorcees, namely, Raman and Ishita, by some fortuitous circumstances are made man and wife and thus they restart their regular family life. This incident proves to be highly salutary for both of them: it helps fulfill Ishita's desire to be a mother of a child and for Raman it enables him to reconstruct his broken domestic life. It, indeed, marks a rite of passage to Ishita since it confers motherhood, though not biological, on her. It not only gives her life a meaning, it also makes her fulfill her motherly instincts. She enjoys an intimate emotional bonding with Raman's daughter, Roohi. She fills the emptiness of her childlessness with Roohi and enjoys experiential and emotional benefits of motherhood thus: "She thought of the little arms around her neck, her weight on her lap, the smell of her breath ... For those moments in the car she had allowed herself to feel she was the child's mother." (280)

Ishita has made the best of a bad bargain. Ishita, who has been in suspended animation till Roohi has said that Ishita was her mother, is finally relieved from her psychological trauma. She regains her wifery and secures her motherhood; the fulfillment of her dream has enabled her to be a full-fledged woman. She is free from all tensions and fears of losing her precious child, Roohi. Her joy knows no bounds; she won her husband and secured her wifery and what is more, she has

won a greater claim to motherhood, both notionally and practically, if not biologically; and she is sensible enough not to grudge for not being a biological mother. The crown of womanhood is to have motherhood; the real happiness is hers since she manages to be a devoted wife and a loving mother. Thus Ishita negotiates infertility, decodes its very meaning and destigmatizes it by being the caring stepmother to Roohi and emerges triumphant against social determinants that subjugate her.

A critical study of Manju Kapur's women protagonists allows one to perceive a progressive and conspicuous change with regard to their forward views against the traditional values which mark the modernity of their outlook. They appear more accentuated when they are contrasted with the views expressed by those of the traditional attitude or outlook. From Virmati of *Difficult Daughters* and Astha of *A Married Woman* to Nisha of *Home*, one traces progression from a lower stage to a higher one towards self-identity and individuality by stoutly opposing hoary tradition. Thus Kapur's women strive to create a niche for themselves. They are dynamic women who protest against the oppressive traditional values and wriggle out of the coils of tradition. They are sophisticated enough to ignore these traditions as stumbling blocks in the way of their free thinking.

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