



Feministic Perspective in Manju Kapur's Novel: *Custody*

Mr.Shubham Motiram Meshram

Research Scholar

Email : shubhammeshram2011@gmail.com

Feminism is a broad term that has been used in relations with the social issues and problems of women in the contemporary society. Nevertheless, the women throughout the world occupy the secondary place in the male dominated society. She is suppressed and exploited at the hands of her own consanguinity. She is treated as a subaltern and deprived from the natural power that she should get and create her own identity. The very idea of feminism is highly focused on 'women' and the role of the feminist is to create awareness among the women who helplessly suffers and do not raise any voice against the existing system. In this process, there is not only active involvement of the women but the rational thinking men also are supporting this challenging task to liberate the women from the unending chains of slavery and emancipate from it giving equality, rights and justice. Many western thinkers especially John Stuart Mill advocated the liberation of women and fought for their privileged rights. In his text *The Subjection of Women* (1869) asserts, "How difficult it would be for women to free themselves from the constraints and influences of the male literary tradition..." (qtd in M.A.R.HABIB,p.691). John Stuart Mill also expressed his great concern about the gender discrimination and the way women are treated in the society and pioneered to fight for their right. French feminist Simone de Beauvoir pertinently describes and gives voice in her epoch making book, *The Second Sex* (1949). She writes "One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature" (Beauvoir 457). Again Beauvoir comments: "it is not by increasing her worth as human being that she will gain value in man's eyes; it is rather by modelling herself on their dreams" (68). In oriental countries like India the social reformers Raja Ram Mohan Roy in Bengal and Mahatama Jyotiba Fuley in Maharashtra did the yeomen service for the advancement of women. In the twentieth century the champion of downtrodden, the maker of Indian constitution Dr. Ambedkar also tried to pass the 'Hindu Code Bill' in the assembly so as to give equal rights to the women in India.



In the present paper the feministic perspectives in the novel of Manju Kapur will be highlighted. Manju Kapur the acclaimed female writer in India has profusely portrayed the various nuances of depressed woman in her writings. Like her contemporary female writers Manju Kapur also started writing novels in English and pictured the real position of women after independence in India, male dominant society and ill treatment given to women. In their creative writings number of female novelists probed the burning problems of women in the existing society and how they revolt against the rotten society so as to live free life and enjoy themselves like men. They freely think of love and sex.

Her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998) won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize (Eurasia). *A Married Woman* and *Home* were shortlisted for the Hutch Crossword Prize for fiction, and *The Immigrant* was shortlisted for the DSC Prize.

In her novels she has presented the grave problems of contemporary society wherein which the second sex torments and is humiliated forcibly. How the modern women reflect over the dark reality of life which has been deeply rooted in the society and attempt boldly to go against the society without a slight trace of terror in her mind. No, it is her intense urge to break the so –called canons of patriotic and desires to live free and fearless life. She does not like to live within the four walls of house and goes against the principle of old maxim “to cook and look”. And thus accepts the challenges that are faced before her in order to create her own identity.

In Manju Kapur’s novels we find the reflection of variety of problems that the modern society faces. The protagonists of her various novels deal with the burning issues. In this paper the feministic perspectives of Manju Kapur’s novel *Custody* are highlighted.

The protagonists portrayed by Kapur are well qualified and are from middle class family of the Indian society. They do rationally think over the worst situation of the existing society and rebel against it. They are not in a mood to follow the traditions blindly but to change the system radically. In her fifth novel *Custody* Manju Kapur has given the life style of modern men with the emergence of global market and cut-throat competition throughout the world. The author has revealed the open secret of social concern in the form of infidelity and infertility through her female protagonists. Besides this she gives the aftermath effects of divorce and legal fight for the ownership of their own kids at the particular age and responsibility to nurture them in different situation. In the globalisation and the IT sector have changed the mentality of emerging young generation to go after worldly power and materialistic development especially in the middle class family in India. Shashi Deshpande



also writes in *Ships that Pass* about marriage system: "Marriage is a very strange thing. It's a very public institution, it's meant to tell the world that two people are going to live together, to declare that their children will be legal, that these children can inherit their property."

In the present novel Kapur has probed the Delhi based family which is highly sophisticated lacking moral values who prefers materialistic approach with the advancement of information technology and globalisation that pave the people to live modern life. Like Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur also yokes the idea of marriage in a narrative manner. The opening of the novel reveals the relationship between husband and wife. Also she focuses on the extra-marital relations of Shagun with Ashok Khanna who has been the boss of her husband Raman besides having two kids of their own. This disturbs her peace of mind and unable to take the right decision when she asks for divorce from her husband to live happily with her partner. On hearing this Raman fails to pacify and convince his wife the decision she has taken to be separated from him. She being the feminist writer, Manju Kapur has touched the serious problems of Indian couples after their marriage realistically and how they are unable to understand each other. This type of conflict is significantly seen in the well educated people and so the increasing demand of family courts in India. In this respect the writer is very balanced while portraying her female protagonists and male counterparts. She penetrates the things naturally that happens in modern society.

In *Home* Kapur describes the familial relationships and marriage system. The expectation of a boy child from daughter-in-law is centred and for this the female character has to suffer endlessly. The truth is that woman is not responsible when she gives birth to the girl. But desperately women are being victimised and humiliated at the hands of their mother-in-laws. In her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* also she has portrayed the rebellious story of Virmati and her quest for liberty. In her second novel *A Married Woman* (2002) Kapur has expressed the concerns of Indian parents about the daughter. Ashtha is the female character in the novel who was brought up lovingly and caringly by her parents. When she attained the puberty the parents were worried about her future partner as it is a part of social institution that the girl should get married before the death of parents. It is a blind faith in Indian scenario if parents failed to do so they will not get opportunity to reborn. They consider that keeping a young girl at home is burden for the family as well to the society wherein they live. Sita, Ashtha's mother declared "When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?" (A Married Woman, p.1).



Keeping the same view Manju Kapur has depicted the female protagonists at its centre in the form of Shagun and Ishita in her latest novel *Custody* (2011). She has highlighted different aspects of life especially a woman who is not happy with her husband even after having kids and remains infidel to her husband and Ishita who suffers a lot owing to her infertility. Raman the brilliant prospectus sacrifices his family life for the sake of business. The novelist has described the arranged marriage of Raman and his fiancée Shagun who stands for beauty. When she conceives for the second time she desperately expresses her unpleasantness, “always tied to a child, is that what you want?” (17)

Raman Kaushik, a very talented industrious and ambitious young man works in a corporate sector as a sales manager. He dreams very high in this field and wishes to prosper himself. Raman an IITian who did his MBA from renowned institute of IIM Ahmedabad got married with a beautiful and alluring Shagun. His wife does not like joint family and lives freely like a western modernized woman. That is why she fails to understand her husband who off and on stays away from her on business purpose. She expresses her alienation and how she is fed up with the monotonous recurrent things that always occur in her day to day life and wishes to have change in her life and enjoy what life meant. “I want something else in my life, can’t you understand that? We always meet the same people, talk about the same old things over and over. It’s boring.” (*Custody*, p46)

Mrs. Sabarwal, Shagun’s mother, keeps watch on the sudden change in the demeanour of her daughter after her marriage with Raman and having two children. She does not care for the feelings of her own husband and lives in her own whimsical, wayward ideology. Neither has she thought of her own children nor the customs of the society. She prefers to live her own life as if she is unmarried and she has nothing to do with the existing society. Her mother sarcastically comments her for not following the religion of wifhood and social attachment that she has to own on her shoulder and remain cemented forever with the husband. She warns her daughter the illicit love relationship she has developed with Ashok, the strange man who will bring her disgrace in her life, “Nothing good come of a mother giving up her children, but to continue to live with Ashok without marriage would in the long run be even worse” (p,242). Shagun's mother advises her daughter how to maintain the family life and always think of the society as she is traditional “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?”(p,76)

The other female character that the novelist has portrayed here is Ishita who is also educated and has different notions about her marriage. Ishita is married to Suryakanta, the only son of



a traditional merchant who was shy and inarticulate. Before their marriage the both parties observed the horoscope and same caste. Orthodox family does not care for the daughter-in-law. She has to carry out all the household works and look after the whole family. So it was natural for Ishita to introspect herself being a well graduate and desires to be independent. Like other modern women, she longs for liberty and equality where she could go without interference.

Mrs. Rajora, mother of Ishita was worried too much for not having conceived her daughter after eighteen months of their marriage. To her producing grandchildren was a moral obligation. In order to fulfil her dream, she redoubled her prayers, went to the society temple morning and evening, with offering of sweets, coconuts and flowers (p,53). On the other side, Ishita was forced to do special type of jap 108 times a day and fast on Tuesdays. Her optimistic mother prayed for good news, made all kinds of promises to the small goddess in her bedroom. Ishita's mother-in-law also had the similar traditional desire to have her own grandchild. She reminds her daughter-in-law that how they were particular in not demanding any dowry from her parents. She wants only quality possessing girl and expects the same from her. She is not going to compromise with any other things. She decides to test her scientifically and the cause of her infertility. "For us money is not as important as family. But beta, it is essential that Suryakanta have a child. As the only son he has to make sure that the bloodline of his forefathers continues." (p, 66)

Ashok Khanna, the real marketer develops clandestine relationships with Shagun and forgets his own business in the corporate sector as if he is getting ecstatic pleasure in the company of hers that he has not experienced earlier with any other. He expresses, " she felt more real to him than any woman he had known ;..."(27). Shagun also does not care for her husband and kids rather engrossed in sensuous relations with Ashok who is bachelor. She longs for free life and aims at achieving her unfulfilled dreams.

Manju Kapur has highlighted the aftermath effects of divorce. Kate Millet asserts,

"Woman is still denied sexual freedom and the biological control over her body through the cult of virginity, double standard, the prescription against abortion, and in many places.

Because contraception is physically and psychically unavailable to her."

Shagun had ambitions in her life to be a model before her marriage. But her mother did not like her idea of becoming a model as it leads to lechery. And advised her "Do what you like



after you marry" (11). She is not given opportunity to act accordingly her willing and has to listen silently the orders of parents because of her sex. This attitude naturally provoke her to go against the framework and boundaries of the society as she has also her own feelings, expectations and dreams. Therefore in order to live her own life she goes one step forward and does not yield to whatever its consequences.

The writer minutely observes inner conflicts of her characters like a veteran psychologist. In the due course of family crisis the children have to suffer endlessly "torn between two mothers, two homes, and two countries". The novelist has naturally brought to light the ignorance of parents when they are isolated from their dear ones and how do the kids suffer because of them.

Kapur at one side presents the modern woman Shagun who desires only materialistic progress and live her life like the westerns. On the other side she beautifully depicts the sufferings of sincere Ishita for her inability to conceive. Giving birth to a baby is considered as a holy thing in India as it has been the tradition and it also symbolises true motherhood. If the woman fails to procreate, she is supposed to suffer the sarcastic comments of the society as a barren. There is no one who supports her. Neither her husband who claims his true love for her turns hostile and simply follows his parents wish. What about the mother-in-law? She is really a typical woman and strange. As a woman she had no sympathy and empathy for her daughter -in-law. She has only sympathy with her son as he is not impotent after medical test in the fertility case, but the daughter-in-law's infertility. The novelist as a true socialist depicts the role of mother-in-law while treating with the daughter-in-law as a woman. As mentioned earlier how second sex is suffering at the hands of patriarchal society but in the present novel the novelist also has shown the dominance of woman on the same sex. This has been bitter truth that in India many worst things are happening because of misunderstanding of mother-in-law itself. The same woman forgets herself and exploits other woman. Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* (1969) had argued that Patriarchy was a political institution which relied on subordinated roles of women. It also distinguished between the concept of "sex" which was rooted in biology, and that of "gender", which was culturally acquired. (qtd in M.A.R.HABIB,p.670)

The way the novelist has depicted the picture of Ishita and her separation from the husband on the ground reality of her infertility is highly noticeable.

Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* argues that society only permits women to be "Being-in-itself" an object, while men are "being-for-themselves". She states,



"Woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality. And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change. "

In this novel the novelist has interwoven the complexities and intricacies of woman sufferings, the various problems inside the well-educated family and settlement in the unhappy world. The portrayal of family dispute in the court and their submissiveness against the backdrop of the society is highly remarkable.

Manju Kapur's female protagonists are modern and well educated that is why they fight for their existence and go against the age-old traditions of the society. They are the pioneers of the depressed sections of the women. Ishita takes bold decision to remarry Raman and live her life with him as a part of respect and honour. And she loves Roohi passionately.

Elaine Showalter an influential American feminist critic writes in her book *A Literature of their Own* (1977) formulated the female literary traditions as an evolution through three phases:

"First, there is a phase of imitation of the modes of the dominant tradition; the artistic standards of that tradition, as well as the social roles it implies, are internalized. The Second is a phase of protest against these standards and values, and a call for autonomy. The Final stage is one of self -discovery, a turning inward freed from some of the dependency of opposition, a search of identity." (LTO,13,qtd in MAR. HABIB,P.691)

The novels penned by Manju Kapur are associated with these three phases as mentioned above. In the present novel also the novelist has portrayed the quest of woman and her consistent effort for identity in the patriarchal system of the society.

Works Cited:

1. De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Trans. & ed., H.M. Parshley. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983.
2. Kapur Manju. *Custody*. Noida: Random House India, 2001.
3. Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000.