Quest for Feminine Identity and Struggle For Change in Manju Kapur’s Home

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Abstract
The paper aims to analyze the quest for feminine identity and struggle for change in Manju Kapur’s ‘Home’. Through her fiction Kapur artistically projects the feminist concerns and raises the feminist issues. Kapur envisions a society which is free from gender discrimination and creates the female characters in a manner in which they rebel against the oppressive mechanisms of the male dominated society. In Indian society, women have never been acknowledged as an individual outside their pre-destined roles of a wife, daughter and a mother. The female hero of ‘Home’ tries to free herself of ‘dependence syndrome’ thrust upon her by the agents of patriarchy. The paper focuses on the journey of female protagonist, Nisha towards individuality and self identity and do not like to be seen as a self sacrificing rubber-doll. She had to struggle for her existence as like other heroines of Manju Kapur, she is in the transitional phase in the quest of autonomy and feminine identity. This struggle has been going on for centuries and will probably continue till the very end of time.

Keywords: Feminine Identity, Autonomy, Patriarchy, Self identity, Dependence Syndrome, Gender Discrimination, Individuality.

Introduction
Feminism emerged as a great movement in the western world in 1960. It focused on women’s struggle for recognition and survival and made them realize that the time has come when they should stop suffering silently in helpless. The major component of feminist theory is to challenge the patriarchal ideology for attaining individuality and identity. The modern woman does not find any sense in such self-sacrifice and yearns for self – expression, individuality and self identity. She is trying to free herself of the dependence syndrome as says Chaman Nahal:-

“I define Feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is a dependence syndrome, where it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group when women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life………..”

In practice, many Indian women are relegated to a secondary status; a woman is never regarded as an autonomous being since she has always been assigned a subordinate and relative position. Women fraternity is still battling for their legitimate space. It is rightly said:

“Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man and she is simply what man decrees. She appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex… absolute sex, no less…” (Selden, 534).

Manju Kapur is a critically acclaimed writer of international repute who has five novels to her credit: Difficult Daughters, A Married Woman, Home, The Immigrant and Custody. Through her fiction Kapur artistically projects the feminist concerns and her novels are mostly looked at from the lens of feminism. “Feminism” as we know, originated in Simone De Beauvoir’s epoch making book, “The second Sex” (1949) and gained momentum in the 1960,’s though as early as 1869, J.S.Mill wrote about the problems of women’s inequality in society and pointed out that “What is now called the nature of women is an eminently, artificial thing- the result of forced repression in some direction (22). It was the excerpt quote above that started a debate which propelled feminist thinking in a new direction creating ripples in a pond constructing new meanings and deconstructing the older ones.

The women protagonist or ‘female heroes’ of Kapur’s novels pass through complicated relationships and evolve into independent and autonomous entities. The male characters of Kapur’s novels affect the psychology of women but they do not fit in the mould of a hero. On the other hand, the women characters qualify as heroes because they directly or indirectly transcend the social restrictions thrust upon them by the agents of patriarchy. Her women characters are thoroughly conscious of their position in family and society which leads to their quest for individuality and freedom.

A house is a physical building which is used for dwelling or accommodating place by the people but a house can be called as a home only when it encompasses unconditional attachment, support, nurturing and protection of family members towards each other. ‘Home’, (2006) the third novel of Manju Kapur is an engrossing tale of family life, across three generations of Delhi Shopkeepers. It
has three female characters-Sona, her sister Rupa and Sona’s daughter Nisha, who claim their voice in their own ways. In an interview with Ira Pande, Kapur Said: In the present paper the journey of Nisha towards individuality and self identity is traced. “Perhaps it would be more appropriate to say that I am exploring the space that women occupy in domestic relationships. It is a world I know and understand….. many manifestations of the Indian woman’s roles. She is a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law, in fact there are so many aspects of a woman’s life that I still need to write about that”.

Through many twists and turns Kapur explores this space and reveals the myriad issues that are deep rooted within the family, revolt against the rotten tradition, the search for selfhood, woman’s rights and the politics of marriage. The novels is set amid the hustle bustle of the Banwari Lal Family, Nisha is very intelligent in her studies. Her beginning as “unfortunately her outfits did not match her incisiveness”(53). But unlike other women in Banwari Lal Family, Nisha is very intelligent in her studies. Her mother is aware of her intelligence but her ultimate aim is to get her married. Whether it is the mother or the brother all impose this code of conduct upon Nisha:

“Their marriages augmented, their habits conserved. From an early age children were trained to maintain the foundation on which these homes rested. The education they received, the values they imbibed, the alliances they made had everything to do with protecting the steady stream of gold and silver that burnished their lives”. (Home,1)

The first ripple on this placid scene appears when the Banwari Lal’s eldest Son Yashpal, while displaying cloth to a customer becomes inexplicably seized with the desire for ‘love-marriage’ with her. But all the marriages in their family are negotiated keeping in mind the hefty amount of dowry that the bride would fetch. However, the turning point in the novel comes when Yashpal défies the prevalent mode of wife selection and admits his love for Sona, a girl from ordinary family. After much ado both are married but her mother-in-law is not pleased. But Yashpal consoles her saying that when we have children, mother will forget all this. But unfortunately inspite of her fasting and praying she remains childless for the first ten years of her marriage. Surrounded by relatives and family members, she faces humiliation and pity for her condition from almost all corners.

In the Indian patriarchal system woman’s primary function is to serve as the vessel that will bring forth the next generation. Our society forces motherhood as a social obligation and looks down upon sexuality that is removed from procreation. This is evident from the sarcastic comment made on Sona by her Mother-in-law (known only as ‘Maji’) “enjoying, enjoying”(12). Meanwhile, Banwari Lal’s married daughter Sunita passes away under mysterious circumstances and the responsibility of her orphaned son Vicky is handed over to Sona on account of her being childless.Ultimately, after a relentless psychological struggle for ten long years Sona gives birth to a ‘Mangli’ daughter, Nisha. But her duty towards the family is not yet fulfilled because ours is a culture that idolize sons and dreads the birth of a daughter. Her prayers are rewarded once more and after a complicated ‘caesarian’ she gives birth to a son: “The moment on the hospital bed she experienced as the most blessed of her life… Gone was the disgrace, the resentment, gone with the appearance of little Raju, as dark plain featured as his father, but a boy, a boy”. (49)

She felt victorious to have won the favour of the family by giving birth to a son, the waris. But her sense of home as a site of warmth and safety is distorted because of the sexual assault by her cousin Vicky on her daughter Nisha.

Nisha flourishes as the most beautiful girl and she is the girl of the new generation. But right from her childhood Nisha starts showing the signs of rebellion from the very beginning as “unfortunately her outfits did not match her inclinations”(53). But unlike other women in Banwari Lal Family, Nisha is very intelligent in her studies. Her mother is aware of her intelligence but her ultimate aim is to get her married. Whether it is the mother or the brother all impose this code of conduct upon Nisha:

“It is better for you to remain inside” (52) or “Nisha is a girl, she has nothing better to do than sit around and read” (122). Beauvoir’s comment on this form of oppression is worth noting:

“The great advantage enjoyed by the boy is that his mode of existence in relation to others leads him to assert his subjective freedom … She is not given the freedom to grasp and discover the world around her. She does not dare to affirm herself as subject.” (307-08)

Even in such a family Nisha takes admission in Durga Bai College to do English Honors. Sona is highly skeptical of educated girls and thinks that “People are suspicious of bride that are very educated. Too Many ideas make it difficult to adjust” (140). On the contrary Nisha feels that a girl should be contend everywhere provided she is allowed to give a direction to her aspirations. She does not want to remain the slave of society and customs. So, “The first time Nisha was told she had to fast for her future husband, as fasting for the would be husband and his family from an early age is considered a virtue”. But Nisha protested, “why should I”? (93). When Nisha shrugs from observing the rituals in home,
She is told, “It is never too early to fast for your husband” (94). Sona can sense the rebellion in her daughter. “Sona rolled her eyes. Only ten and the girl was beginning to argue. She had never questioned anything for her mother asked her to do.” (93)

Actually Nisha wants to be independent and like to live her life without any crutches of family and society. Nisha wants to make her own identity and does not want any compromises on her individuality. Nisha dares to fall in love with a low caste boy. She goes with him to the coffee house as she thinks nothing wrong in having a cold drink with someone she has seen so often and “returned to college feeling adventurous, daring and modern” (145). She now totally changes, “Who gave you permission to cut your hair, suddenly you have become so independent, you decide things on your own, where did you find the money, the time, the beauty parlour, where did you find all these things” (150).

Her affair generates restlessness in the household because according to Nisha’s family since Suresh belongs to a low caste and he is in no way eligible to marry her. Nisha defends Suresh and rebels by saying, “Who cares about caste these days? What you really want is to sell me in the market”. (200)

Towards the end of Nisha’s third year her parents receive a letter from the college authorities. Their daughter is short of attendance and will not be allowed to sit for exams and finally family declares Nisha “unfit” for the girl.

Nisha does not want to be part and parcel of the kind of institution of marriage where things are imposed upon the girl and not desired by her. She rejects the institution of conventional arranged marriage. She wants her individuality to remain intact but in the Banwari Lal family even boys are not allowed any choice in marriage. But Nisha loves Suresh and strongly believes to settle down with him forever and ever. She is not scared of her conservative and orthodox family. To quote: “Don’t be afraid of my family once my exams are over, we will talk to them, fight them and run away if necessary” (209). This statement shows that she is not only rebellious but is also assertive and ready to put her words in actions. But when the family finds out about it, this relationship is quickly snubbed out.

But Nisha is a very strong and bold character who is daring, independent and individualistic. Instead of getting choked inside the four walls of her home she opts for spending as much time as possible outside her home. She refuses to accept that her actual position is inside home as she “wanted something more, more and more” (27). Compelled by her loneliness and ardent sense of becoming independent Nisha becomes an entrepreneur.

She once again attempts to find a place in an uninformed society that refuses to recognize the promise of her merits. She feels alienated in her family because being a thinking woman she has no patience with typical code of conduct which force a woman to resort to dependence on man.

As Jean Baker has put forward that “women exist to serve other person’s need” (Baker, 62) Nisha is no exception. The family’s search for a groom whose horoscope matches with hers finally settles on a widower, Arvind. When Nisha meets Arvind she does not present herself as an anxious female but as a bold individual for whom her work is her identity. She says, “I work”, to which Arvind calmly replies, “I know”. After she marries him, Arvind welcomes her with the words, “Now you are home” (322). She creates her own business but her creativity is tolerable as long as she is unmarried. To quote, “…..Working was all right as a time pass…. families wanted a daughter-in-law, wife and mother, husbands were not looking for business women (297). “Nisha’s Creation” was a search for an emotional independence rather than a financial one. She finds herself nothing but a marginalized woman seeking ordinary social levels and emotions.

Finally Nisha succumbs to her role of an ideal housewife, it restricts her self development, first by taking away her freedom of thought and expression and secondly by denying her the scope of giving a free play to her creative potentiality. To quote the words of N.S. Warake:

“Though Manju Kapur has portrayed the character of Nisha as an educated, confident, self assured, bold and independent, high spirited new woman, paying honour to Indian tradition, like Ezekiel believes ‘Home is where we have to gather grace’. (Warake, 277)

So in the end Indian household is intact. Thus Nisha is also like other Manju Kapur’s heroines who are in transitional phase, in the quest of autonomy and feminine identity but it is smothered by the plethora of family duties and cultural trap in society. In her novel, we meet the woman of the modern era, her problems and her desire to become independent and shows a new vision of Indian woman. Women have always had to struggle and fight for their existence and survival. The battle has been going on for centuries and will probably continue till the very end of time.

References
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