

Theme of Silence in Manju Kapur's Novels

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ABSTRACT

This paper deals with the theme of silence in Manju Kapur's novels. Manju Kapur is a distinguished, feminist, English fiction writer of our times. She is equally popular in India and abroad. She has written six novels so far namely – Difficult Daughters, A Married Woman, Home, The Immigrant, Custody and Brothers. She has received prestigious Common Wealth Award for the best first book, Difficult Daughters. Among other, Home was short listed for Hutch Cross Word Award and The Immigrant was shortlisted for the DSC Prize of South Asian Literature in 2011. So she has acquired well deserved name and fame in the English Fictional World. While depicting the plight of Indian women in our patriarchal society she inspires her protagonists to be aware about their equal rights, break the silence, and raise their voice for individual identity. It is her unique artistic skill that while portraying her female characters like Virmati, Nisha, Asha, Nina, Shagun and Tapti, Kapur lends them a forceful voice along with a much needed inspiration for struggle necessary for their emancipation and a tinge of revolt, matched with the post modern thinking to evolve a 'New Woman'. I have taken all her six novels for my analysis.

1. Introduction

Girls are a silent lot of the family and society. Glaring inequalities, grave assaults on women, wife battering, marital rape, sexual abuse of girls due to male muscle power by - boyfriends, class mates, co-workers, male relatives, strangers and sometime even fathers. Mental as well as physical torture and general deprivation experienced by girls in our society have remained invisible, undiscussed and unchallenged for centuries due to the tight lipped faces of these victims. There are thousands of them who are terrified, meek and helpless because man dominated society will blame them after victimizing. They are voiceless because nobody ever has listened to them. Everybody here is to silence them, for the sake of good name of the family. So they are lifeless never complain, no matter what cracks up within them. It is their duty to show the people that they are decent women from respectable families. They are the ones created really for an ideal social order. Sushila Singh writes, '*Human experiences for centuries have been synonymous with the masculine experience. Woman has not been defined as a subject in her own right, but merely as an entity that concerns man either in his real life or his fantasy life.*' (1)

Historical Aspects of Women's Silence:

There are thousands of episodes in history and mythology where no thought has been given to the silent sufferings of women. In Ramayana, Laxman – Saroopnakh's episode, Ram Chander sending Sita mata to exile after Agni Pariksha to prove her sanctity, Pandavas gambling and Daropadi's derobing in Mahabharata, Satti – Pratha are some of the examples about the injustice done to women by male dominated

society where women's voice is missing and no pen has ever written about them from their angle, in mythology as well as in history, till date. Lakshmana is known for his devotion and sacrifice. Siddhartha left his wife Yashodhara and son Rahul in pursuit of knowledge and became Gautama Buddha. Their respective wives Urmila and Yashodhara, however remain shadowy figures to live a life of anonymity and insignificance. Jane Austen has very rightly observed it in Persuasion, '*Men had every advantage of telling their own story. Education has been theirs in so much higher a degree; the pen has been in their hands.*' (4)

Patriarchy has made women to remain illiterate, to work endlessly within the four walls of house, to bear all the atrocities silently and live at the mercy of family or society, which is dominated by men. Manju Kapur depicts the plight of women, their pitiable condition mainly due to the tradition and due to their silence in almost all her novels. Kasturi of *Difficult Daughters*, Nina of *The Immigrant*, Astha of *A Married Woman*, Nisha of *Home*, Guddo and Mithari of *Brothers*. They all are compelled to bear the agony of their fate silently. They think, '*If they find out I even speak to you, they will kill me (Guddo)*'. (Brothers. 131)

The traditional women folk bear the injustice of men, considering it just as their fate or Karma and never raise their voice. They just beg before men, '*She said if she had annoyed him in some way, she was sorry, she begged forgiveness. She would learn city ways, she would change her style of dressing, all she wanted was a chance.*' (Brothers. 251) Women are dominated by men in such a manner that wives cannot dare to ask anything

from their husbands, what they don't want to tell. *'During the dinner his wife noticed how preoccupied he looked. Hardly any word passed between them, and she was in a state of perpetual hunger to know what he was thinking.'* (DD. 200) The plight of Indian woman, who unfortunately become widow is not better than hell. She has to bear all sorts of atrocities, without uttering even a single word as if she has no tongue in her mouth. She is called churail. She is cursed by the family members as if she is responsible for the death of her husband. She cannot wear clothes of her choice but only white or earthen coloured clothes she has to work, work and only work in the family without any appreciation, she herself consider, it is her Karma of some previous birth and bear this distress without uttering even a single word:

What life she could lead, besides this one, sitting in the shadows, hugging the walls, eating last, working incessantly day after day, season after season. (Brothers. 131)

These women are discarded and humiliated by their families and they bear it silently, because in patriarchal society all social norms, social rights and ownerships are favouring men only while women's home, their belongings, their social status and respect all are due to their husbands. They themselves never raise their voice for their rights. They are so moulded by the existing pattern of society that they are unable to think freely rather they feel proud of family codes and never cross the 'Ram Kar' of social maryada. Sarla Parkar considers that women themselves and their silence is responsible for their secondary position in the society:

Women should accept their own responsibility for what they are, see how much they have contributed to their own victimization, instead of putting the blame on everybody except themselves. (15)

It is a part of our age – old traditions, bestowed by patriarchy that women are admired for their ability and desire to sacrifice, to suffer, to live for others. This has been a psychological trap for women. Peace and harmony is maintained at the cost of women. Their voice has been silenced and thus women have been abstaining for telling the truth. Simone de Beauvoir is also of this view, *'The History of humanity is a history of systematic attempts to silence the female.'* (2) It is exactly the tradition of silence, responsible for not revealing their victimization. Manju Kapur depicts the complete view of our society in her novels. She depicts the two sides of the mirror, to exhibit the transitional phase through which our society is passing – the traditional one in which women feel honoured and esteemed by sticking to the age – old family codes, cultural rules, the customs and themselves feel proud to be a part of patriarchal, traditional system that confines them to the four walls of the house. At the same

time Kapur has also presented in her fiction a free and bold expression of post – modern Indian woman who is a personification of a 'New Woman' who wants to throw away burden of inhibition or so called maryada for ever and break the tradition of silence.

Manju Kapur's protagonists have travelled a long journey from traditional orthodox to the modern and post – modern era where a woman wants to shed all patriarchal customs, traditional inhibitions, break the silence and find her place in society and protect her dignity, social respect and her own individual identity. All her female protagonists from Virmati to Nina and from Astha to Tapti are the representatives of that female folk who long to be free from the stale social family codes and age old traditions. Their education leads them to independent thinking, for which their families and society become intolerant towards them and creates all sorts of hurdles. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is there individual struggle with family and society. They put a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves. They fight against taboos, social restrictions and man – made code of conduct. Thus her protagonists are the pioneer generation of women who struggle and fight for their individual freedom and search for their identity at any cost. Kapur has endeavoured to bring out significant new meaning in the changed exemplar of cultural encounters in which conjugal roles, dual burdens, equal opportunities and social constraints are seen from the feminist and existential points of view. The sufferings amidst the dual standards have made these protagonists strong and they constantly struggle for their emancipation. They have raised their voice in a very forceful manner against the injustice meted out by them for ages. They wanted to break the age – old silence, pasted on their blank faces by the patriarchal society. Durrani considers this silence of women as a crime, *'Our society considered it obscene for a woman to reveal her intimate secrets, but would not silence be a greater crime.'* (9)

Equipped with such thoughts, a feminist writer Manju Kapur evolves a 'new woman' who is ardently longing to break this age – long tradition of silence.

In her first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur tells an absorbing story of a woman torn between opposite forces of society / family norms and her ardent desire to break the silence. Virmati is torn between her family duties, the desire for education and elicit love. Her opposite forces, family and traditions, are so strong and unite that they do not allow her to break the norms of the family, *'The family talked, united they raged and grieved, united they questioned. Kasturi hit her. Across for face, from cheek to cheek.'* (DD. 87) Even then Virmati was determined, to stand against these rigid behaviour of her orthodox family. She spoke, *'Study, mumbled Virmati like a mantra. She swallowed 'study' And not marry.'* *Virmati's face twisted. 'I don't want to marry.'* (DD. 87) *'The boy, 'she said I do not like the boy.'* (DD. 87) Here we find Kapur's protagonist

revolting against the orthodox family norms and break the silence against something she doesn't like.

There are so many factors responsible for making the women deaf and dumb in the patriarchal society. Peace and harmony is maintained at the cost of women, and they maintain it by not raising their voice at any cost. Fear of family and elders is responsible, for a woman to bear the injustice silently, *'If you say anything to anybody, they will beat you. They will lock you up and never let you go to school.'* (Home. 62)

Thus like 'Nisha', women become prey to the cruel lust of men from childhood and psycho – impact of such incidents haunt them throughout their life. They are being tormented and filled with a complex of hate, helplessness, distress, guilt and sin for no fault of theirs. They bear this helplessness themselves without telling anybody and this silence breaks them physically as well as psychologically. Such silence has negative connotations. It stands for passivity, inactivity, fear, helplessness, escapism, the inability to communicate, it reveals the imbalance and stillness in a girl's life, *'She sat alone in the kitchen, till her mother scolded her for being a lazy girl Nisha could not eat. Her mouth felt dry, her head heavy, her hands clammy.'* (Home. 62)

There are many sub – cultures in our country where the grip of tradition is very powerful and it has strengthened the complex of silence in many ways. In Rajasthan and Gujarat there is still a custom that women don't talk with their family members like their brother – in – law, father – in – law and even their husband. Manju Kapur has depicted it in her latest novel, *Brothers*. When Tapti asked Mangal about his conversation with his elder sister – in – law, Mangal replied, *'How do I know? We don't take names in the village. Disrespectful. We had never talked. I had never seen her face.'* (Brothers. 251) In our culture where illiteracy prevails in the rural area we cannot expect of women to break their silence and speak in public for their rights and move freely in society. Male – oriented society nourish women in such a way that they themselves start looking at the world and interpreting it from the male angle. Parents tame their girls to be ideal women and obey the family codes silently, *'Her head remained modestly bent over her work. No question, no assertion. She was going to please her in – laws.'* (DD. 62) There are a large number of psychological, social and cultural factors responsible for the 'silence' of women and take away their ability to create, to express and to decide important issues of the family. Such attitudes and practices cripple the personality of woman, right from their childhood. No effort is spared to indoctrinate her to play the role of a meek and submissive daughter, wife and mother as it is the only way for a woman to live and survive, *'Mrs. Ahlawat exclaimed, society speech needs to be carefully deliberated, especially if you were young and female.'* (Brothers. 28)

In fact, patriarchy has tamed women folk in the grab of – maryada, false honour, self – sacrifice and self –

respect in such a way that neither the women of older generation themselves want to be free from the clutches of patriarchy nor they allow the women of next generation to stand against it and raise their voice. Manju Kapur do encourage her female protagonists to speak about their rights frankly and fearlessly. When Nisha's parents objected her decision to choose Suresh as her life partner she reacts, *'Nisha: you also did the same thing, Ma.'* (Home. 197) When Raju spoke some foul words about Suresh, Nisha did defend Suresh and in turn defended herself, *'Don't use such dirty language she said crossly, 'you know nothing about him.'* (Home. 198) But the bonds of culture, customs and society are so thick that these are not so easy to break, *'The first step the family took was to ban her college going.... you can study at home. The easiness between her family evaporated.'* (Home. 198) *'Her mother slapped her, although the girl was too old for this to be of any use.'* (Home. 199)

In *The Immigrant* her heroine 'Nina' was a college professor for ten years in India and now living in Canada is also facing the same problem of patriarchal hegemony. Her husband 'Ananda' a dentist. Despite being a well educated woman and an immigrant in a well advanced western country like Canada she considers herself a helpless creature, *'Nothing is going to change, not here with this group, not with Ananda, not anywhere.'* (The Immigrant. 230) In a patriarchal society husband thinks that his advice and guidance to his wife is a final word and she must follow it because she cannot think herself about the future plans for her life. here Ananda told his wife, *'Life is not a game. If you are so unsure, why go through all the trouble.'* (The Immigrant. 232)

In our society woman is relegated to a secondary status. She is never regarded as an autonomous being since she has always been assigned a subordinate position and women fraternity is still struggling for their legitimate space in male dominated society. 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 essential to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex.....absolute sex, no less... .
(Selden, 534)

Manju Kapur is of the view that Indian women are themselves responsible for their plight. The age old patriarchal conditions of our society have made them mentally so weak that they become the victim of inferiority complex and consider themselves insecure and incomplete without the company of man. They behave like a wine that cannot withstand without some support. Manju Kapur describes this dependence syndrome of Indian woman, *'Despite all that had happened, she had not got over the habit. Marry me, love me, above all, look after me.'*

Somebody had to be responsible for her, besides herself.” (The Immigrant. 325)

Chaman Nahal has very effectively expressed about it:

“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.....”

Patriarchal impact is so strong in our society that it indirectly compels our women to adopt a habit of silence. They cannot express whatever they think for themselves, *‘Because I have to do something that ensure me a job. I am suited for...And that would give her independence, she thought but didn’t say.’* (The Immigrant. 232) Well – educated and globally – aware protagonists of Manju Kapur want that their emotions be realized, their feelings should be respected, their voice be listened and they should not be snubbed for presenting their views, on one pretext or the other, *‘Blame was a power game, a way of making the woman uncertain and confused. She had to give legitimacy to her own feelings.’* (The Immigrant. 216)

Kapur inspires her protagonists that when they shun this complex of being a woman, they will feel the difference, they will enter a new phase in their life and thus a ‘New Women’ of present era, will emerge who will be the free souls without any slavery, without any fear, without any subordination, they will be the masters of their life like Nina and they will feel relieved like Nina, *‘Nina felt more alive than she had in days. Talking, sharing, it was amazing.’* (The Immigrant. 216)

The global awareness of women’s rights provided by the women’s group, enabled Nina to express herself and encouraged her to be angry and assertive, *‘I need to be by myself.’ She clarified.* (The Immigrant. 329)

In her fifth novel *Custody*, the protagonist, Shagun is an educated, modern woman of high society with liberal thinking. She dares to develop an extra – marital relation with Ashok Khanna, an executive head of a multinational company, to achieve her goal to be a model or heroine and to fulfill her quest for identity. Kapur’s protagonists, want to be free from the clutches of tradition. They want to come out of the four walls of their house, they want to stand on their own feet, they want to prove their capability, and they want to perform some significant role in society, *‘I too want to do something significant. Why should I sit around doing nothing just because I am a woman? Said Tapti.’* (Brothers. 31)

Desire to have a son is the bi-product of patriarchal thinking, that our society has adopted and with

the passage of time, it has become a very natural thinking of our society. Kapur has raised this issue in her novels. Older generation sticks to this thinking and advocates its necessity because a boy carries the name of the family. Women having only daughters are seldom respected in our society. Many a times they are divorced or husband used to remarry to have a son. To fulfil this desire of their husbands, many women die after giving birth so many daughters but they don’t raise their voice against this thinking. In *Difficult Daughters*, Kasturi, Virmati’s mother gives birth to six daughters and ruins her health.

Due to repeated pregnancies, women are consumed physically and depressed psychologically but they remain silent. *‘Fatigue was her constant companion. Boy or girl, there was no question of her getting pregnant again.’* (Brothers. 264) Husbands don’t bother about the difficulties of their wives in our society under the influence of patriarchy they always think that their family will be incomplete until or unless a son is not included in the family and for that, women’s health is never under their consideration, *‘Another daughter is born. ‘Never mind’, said Mangal, you are still young, there is always a next time.’* (Brothers. 266) Tapti showed her inability, for further pregnancy on health ground, *‘I don’t think I can go through this again.’* (Brothers. 266) But Mangal forced his desire, *‘My mother had to try many times before she gave birth to boy that lived..... village woman have ten ten children. Are you so superior to them.’* (Brothers. 269) Here every logic given by Mangal is derived from patriarchy and from husband’s angle while wife’s voice is weak and in begging tone that is ineffective.

It is the architectural characteristic of Kapur’s fiction that she portrays the prevailing reality of our society on one hand and the desired reality at the same time on the other hand to show the reader both sides of coin and leave it upto him to decide whether we should stick to the age old orthodox traditions or we should change ourselves with the changing tide of the world. Mangal Singh Gaina is representative of patriarchal tradition who thinks, *‘How could daughters take on the responsibility of a business, or carry on Gaina name? It is his son who will work beside him and give his struggle a meaning and continuity.’* (Brothers. 268) Manju Kapur questions the manhood of Indian society through her protagonist Tapti’s low soulful voice; with all her grief and helplessness, *‘What was she, a machine that would go on producing children until he got a son? It hurts her that he saw nothing of how she was feeling, his main concern not her, but his seed, his line, his name.’* (Brothers. 262) It is pity that in our society woman’s individuality, sentiments, her dreams and desires are not realized rationally and sympathetically but her utility to man is the main consideration as Jean Baker has rightly put forward, *‘Women exist to serve other person’s need.’* (Baker, 62)

Kapur inspires her protagonists to have courage, not to keep mum, to tell their husbands and family members about their dreams they should persuade them

logically and after a little resistance they will agree to their proposals as Tapti's persistent demand to take civil services exam, compelled Mangal to agree with her, '*His wife knew how little he had wanted her to have her own carrier. She put her arms around him..... One day you will be proud of me, I swear.*' (Brothers. 274) Tapti's clearing of civil services exam in first attempt make Mangal overjoyed and he realized her worth, '*Pride filled Mangal. He had a wife who cleared the competitive exam in her very first try..... You have succeeded where many don't. Brains, you have brains.*' (Brothers. 274)

After analyzing all her novels we can conclude that in her fiction Manju Kapur emphasis her view that time

has come when women should not stick to the age – old tradition of bearing the oppression of patriarchy, silently as their fate. The image of good old 'Sati Savitry' is of no use in the modern scenario. They should break their silence and raise their voice for equal rights in society. They should tell about their decisions and dreams frankly and assertively without any inhibition. Education has provided them enough awareness, they should find their own space rightfully, free themselves any sort of dependency syndrome, stand up on their own feet, be economically independent and play an active role in every sphere of society, be it socio – political, socio – cultural, socio – economical or anything else. Sky is the limit.

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