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Isolation in Liberation in Manju Kapur's novels

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Abstract:

Manju Kapur's novels has reflected emergence of an essential Indian sensibility with an expression of cultural displacement, a voice of protest for autonomy, for a separate identity. Manju Kapur has indeed created sensation in the literary world by voicing the inner tribulation of her protagonists in an emphatic manner. The female protagonists are educated, aspiring individuals caged within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them towards a logical independent thinking which ultimately paralyzes them and enmeshes them in further troubles leading to isolation. Manju Kapur explored the unexplored array of maladies to reveal the explicit reality of the society and plight of Indian Women. Kapur in *Difficult Daughters* has walked through the alleys of the protagonists psyche and reflected that the desire to be liberated has landed one into no-man's land. The next generation surfaced by Ida though gets a fuller meaning of emancipation is too left isolated, in the pangs of loneliness. A similar note of entrapment emancipation, loneliness hangs heavy on *A Married Woman*. Astha's dejected marital love finds a fulfilling exposure in lesbianism with Pipeelika. But entrenched in roots, and choice of wider dimensions by Pipeelika makes her lonely and strangles her ultimately dampening her psyche.

Key words: Entrapment ,emancipation, isolation.

The pages of history have documented *The Book of The City of Ladies* (1405) by Christine de Pizan(1363-1430) where famous females throughout history are used as building blocks for defending female rights in construction of an allegorical city. Simone de Beauvoir's(1908-1986) *The Second Sex* (1949) ushers in a revolutionary statement 'One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the woman presents in society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature which is described as feminine.' The idea feminine becomes a cultural construct which can subjugate to the calls of the patriarch. The society reflected prolonged sense of imitation of the dominant traditions followed by a phase of protest echoed in literature including a demand for autonomy. The second wave of feminism by Betty Friedan's(1921-2006) *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) speaks of widespread unhappiness of women in 1950s, her *The Second Stage* (1981) liberates woman from their traditional role and takes feminism to a new stage dealing with the New Woman who is on her journey of self-discovery, a search for identity. Celie in *The Colour Purple* (1982) by Alice Walker(b:1944) cries out for her emancipation. The literature manifested the evolutionary aspect of woman's consciousness- first as a feminine then as a feminist and lastly as a female also resonated in Indian Women Writers. Toru Dutt's(1856-1877) archetypal suffering and sacrificing women figures Sita, Savitri have lost in the portrayal of women sensibility with a women's heart and a women's mind. Anita Desai's (b:1937) *Cry the Peacock* (1963) is Maya's search for her true identity ending up in loneliness, Shashi Deshpande's(b:1938) *Indu in Roots and Shadows*(1983) and Saru in *The Dark Holds no Terror*(1980) introspect and self analyze themselves reaching self realization, Githa Hariharan(b:1954) *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) also relates Devi's search for identity, Nina Sibal's *Yatra* (1987) is an emotional account of a woman's journey towards self search. But in all the literary texts the protagonist suffers loneliness, a sense of being alienated from the crowd in the chase of self identity. Manju Kapur's women characters with a desire for a life outside faces difficulties on reconciling the devotion to the family expected of middle class Indian woman. This research paper focuses on Manju Kapur's novels *Difficult Daughters* (1998) *A Married Woman* (2002) elaborating the protagonist's journey in search of her identity, exposing the gendered spaces and hierarchies of power to a stage where liberation, autonomy is gained at the cost of isolation, alienation.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* which won the Commonwealth Writers best first book prize in 1999 is a claim "How to step out of the framework defined by men and patriarchal values and how to identify and create a tradition of their own". (Jain,1992)Virmati the protagonist of the novel *Difficult Daughters* exhibits sheer courage in a tale of struggle, traditional repression and independence ultimately losing herself in isolation and despondency. Virmati the

eldest daughter of a prosperous AryaSamaj family of jewellers comes of age in the early 1940's in a country torn by partition and baffled by World War II. So at the very early of her life she becomes the second mother of ten siblings, loaded with domestic responsibilities, deprived of love yearnings and being made to realize at the age of thirteen the essentialities of marital contentment and domestic bliss. 'It seemed to Virmati that her family could talk of nothing else but her wedding. Every word they said had so little relation with her inner life that she felt fraudulent even listening to them passively immorally silent.' (Kapur1998:69) Moreover her complaints of being disturbed by her siblings before the forthcoming exam fall on her mother's deaf ears as she reasons 'it hardly makes a difference to the real business her life, which was getting married and looking after her own home.' (Kapur1998:18) Virmati is the budding New woman who does not want 'to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed' (Kapur1998:85) but defies the patriarchal notions that enforce a woman towards domesticity and asserts her individuality and aspires self-reliance through education.

Thoroughly dictated by the patriarchs the Lakshmana Rekha – the threshold of Hindu mythology by which Lakshmana limits Sita's movement in the epical Ramayana is both a physical and psychological boundary as it sets the mark within which a woman may operate. Crossing the rekha i.e. threshold or transgressing the patriarchal world resulted in Sita being abducted by demon king Ravana. So rekha is the restraining concept of entire womanhood that Kasturi the first generation matriarch of this novel tried to percolate the idea that a woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings to the second generation- Virmati. Manju Kapur adeptly introduces Shakuntala Pehnji whose electrifying ideas make irmati approve for expansion not of confinement. Virmati becomes alienated as she is impelled by her inner need to feel as a individual rather than a responsible daughter, wife and mother and learn the lore of self sacrifice, nurturance and devotion. Resistance to patriarchy starts with Virmati's insistence on education and refusal for marriage. She believes: "One of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves (Kapur102). She becomes the self-directed woman of the new generation alienating herself from the society to taste the wine of freedom through education & transgresses the threshold by falling in an illicit relationship with an already married Prof Harish who professes his love for her seduces her through culture sending her petrarchan sonnets & by referring to Machiavelli & the Greek tragedy until he gains complete control over her mind. Virmati's independence is loathed and looked down with indignation. Her decision to pursue education and remain single is criticized and brings her disrespect from her family members. Virmati's journey to Lahore is to alienate herself from her past shame, from the melancholy and dejection suffered in the hands of Harish to the ultimate realization that she is just to gratify his intellectual needs, and to reinvent herself in a greater cause. She is emotionally starved as her approaches are questionable, even being the most educated woman of her family paradoxically she has to stay hidden from society and bear the curse of being the black sheep of the family. She cries her heart out to Harish on his visit to Lahore: 'I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family's name, am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people will say if they find out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace.....and why? Because I am an idiot.' (Kapur1998:149) Being an idiot she allowed Harish to take an advantage of her virginity bearing fruit of ill luck only to reveal to Swarna Lata her roommate. Even during the discomfiture caused by pregnancy, when she started spending sleepless nights with a worm writhing and gnawing, with a deadly bitterness creeping into her against Harish who is responsible for her plight, she glamourises being worthy of independence unlike other women. Losing her virginity outside the walls of domesticated existence, going through the ordeals of abortion, be a crawling worm dependent on others for survival not only make her an icon of transgressing the threshold but also independent as she concludes 'Her body has gone through knives and abortion, what could happen to her now that she could not bear?' (Kapur1998:175). Few women during the 40's would have dared to come out the privacy & secularism of their sweet home climate & cried their heart out. Iron-willed as she was, she displays marvellous strength of mind when she keeps Harish's request at bay and overcomes her dejection and strikes out an independent root as she takes the role of a headmistress of a girl's school at Nahan, the capital of Sirmaur, the small Himalayan state run by an enlightened maharaja. It is this utopian phase where she achieves the greatest degree of control over her life: there are rules she has to obey (and breaking them proves her fall), but she is able to teach inside an ordered framework, and her performance wins her a deserved respect. In the micro-state to which her destiny leads her, she has no family or close friends. She attains a near-exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, gets a room of her own. She believes she needs a man, and she makes the wrong choice, returning to a relationship that had already brought her nothing but suffering. The repeated clandestine visits of the fatal Professor lose Virmati her employers' confidence, and she is obliged to quit her school, house and employment. From Nahan her journey to Shantiniketan, to get greater freedom is again of alienation cut off from her dear ones until she is bound in a wedlock with Harish. It is ironical that the throes of struggle only reaps partial freedom and entangles her in greater struggle. She fights but fails. Every time she rebels to liberate herself and aspires to live a freer life, she is condemned because of the

incredulousness of her family and of the man whom she loves. After much rigmarole she gets an entrance into Harish's family as a co-wife something allowed but frowned upon by the Hindu society. Her marriage to the man of her choice gives her no triumph but a feeling of being relieved of a guilty conscience. It is a deliverance from fear of being socially condemned. After the couple had been pronounced man and wife, 'as Virmati rubbed her eyes, watering from the smoke, she knew, rather than felt, that the burden of the past 5 years had lifted.' (Kapur1998:202) Her entrance into the family only increases her loneliness and enmeshes her in further troubles. The sense of pride of being consciously self-reliant is razed to the ground as it has to be bartered for being doubly alienated first from her old house and secondly from her in-laws. 'At the end of that road lay Virmati's old house. How far she was from it! Though married she was dispossessed. Well so be it. She would walk tight-lipped, mute, on the path her destiny had carved out for her.' (Kapur1998:212) Virmati's journey of realization and freedom scrambles into incoherence and aggravates her misery of life and closes all the doors of happiness. In the intricate odyssey of her life the novel depicts the shattering of all her romantic illusions of equality which ultimately force her to lead the role of a second wife in a man-made society. (Lata, 2006) With her transgression though the link with her family has been severed but with a heart of desperate hope for reconciliation she shuffled down Lepel Griffin Road to her home. Kasturi blames her for being educated and abuses her for bringing disgrace to the family. This encounter left her blank and dazed as she realized that the years of concern, care, sacrifice and responsibility are lost just because she expressed her choice of living a life. Even Harish distances her, encourages her to study, to learn and sends her to Lahore much against her choice only to be left isolated. Gur Pyari Jandial felt that despite the failure to attain complete autonomy Virmati's efforts to break the confinement of the patriarchal world is not insignificant altogether: 'what Virmati tried to do in the forties is a great achievement in itself.' Manju kapur has artfully drawn the character of Virmati as the incipient New Woman – one who is conscious, introspective, educated wants to carve out a life for herself, conveying her personal vision of womanhood only to be left alienated. Though to be her own mistress sounded at the back of her mind and teased her with greasy tongue but she returns again and again to be imprisoned emotionally and intellectually. If Virmati's dependence syndrome has set her at a back foot, Ida her girl child breathed in the air of independence giving a full throated voice to women independence with no compromises and no fetters. Ida could not accept her mother's decision to abort the foetus & terminate the life growing inside as she rejected the male autocracy when forced to abort by severing the marriage bond with Prabakhar. "I knew mother, what it was like to have an abortion. Prabakhar had insisted I have one. In denying that incipient little thing in my belly he sowed the seeds of break up." (Kapur1998:156) Ida was resolute to leave her past behind & live for the future. It is Ida who in her determination to live life despite all odds presents the real face of modern woman. She hates the drudgery of compromise, the burden of adjust and adapt that passes from one generation to the next. She does not agree to be a man's shadow, 'an appendage', 'the unwanted & the neglected other and was left husbandless childless. 'I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of the society'(Kapur1998:279) In the second class ladies compartment while journeying to Amritsar her existence as a single woman draws a hundred glances towards her and make her feel more desolate. It is an irony that self-reliant, self-controlled, self-dependent women suffers a sense of alienation. So whatever generation be it women emancipation is always at the cost of isolation. The third wave of feminism manifested in the form of *Women Identified Women* (1970) hastened social acceptance of female sexual freedom. Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002) stretches from a woman rebellion against society to an exploration of positioning of women in sexual orientation resulting from an incompatible marriage & resultant frustration and isolation at the end. Astha the only child of God fearing parents brought up as one that befits a woman with middle class values tears up her protective & traditional conformations & falls into lesbianism thus transgressing the threshold only to give a vent to her marital discontentment. Astha a young romantic girl drawn to the idea of love marriage succumbs to the desperation of her perpetually anxious parents who wish to see her safely married as they were on the verge of retirement- as her mother states "Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth."(Kapur2002:1) Though she believes in the contrary but to relieve her parents she meets Hemant who appears to be a liberal thinker & brings fresh hopes in Astha's. After initial years of marriage Astha finds her marital life oppressive & feels suffocated under the repetitive responsibilities as wife & mother. Astha gets disillusioned about human nature & is trapped in the social dynamics of her in-laws. Her temperamental incompatibility with her corporate thinking husband compels her to play the role of mother & father for her children. This discontentment, loneliness develop a lack of self esteem in facing the challenges of life. Her deeply entrenched roots of submission, passivity guide her always. Keeping with her husband's wish she takes up the job as a school teacher as a good time pass that would keep her involved during her husband's delay but would not come between other important roles as mother & wife. Till so far she has pampered the wish of her husband with a steady conflict evenly growing in her that manifests itself in the form of recurrent migraines. When she feels that a married woman is an unpaid servant 'always adjusting to everybody's need' (Kapur2002:227) she wants to canonize and commemorate her feminine sensibilities. Pressure at home, silent

disapproval of her in-laws, demands of growing children & attitude of an unresponsive husband Astha recluses in writings that echoes the deep embedded feelings, her consciousness, her plight, fears, dilemmas struggling against gender discrimination, her existential angst to find a day of final peace & tranquility. As Chaman Nahal states “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.” I would never suffer again/But no matter how many times/I heave the doorways of my soul/To get chill light in/The darkness grows silently/To hide me in the break of day (Kapur2002:80)

This is the man’s world & like Kasturi in *Difficult Daughters* Astha’s mother too remains metaphorically ignorant to men’s issues. So she on her verge of retiring from worldliness & being attached with non-attachment gave the financial responsibilities to Hemant without even consulting Astha as she thought it fit. Astha’s education makes her think to reshape the age-old conventions of a patriarchal society, of men being the sole decision makers where women are not consulted. ‘If her mother was at fault, so was her father, for managing the money, and teaching his wife that this was the normal behavior, so was her mother-in-law for bringing up Hemant to never regard women as beings to be consulted in their own lives...’ (Kapur2002:98) However her requests to Hemant to make her feel his equal & not a dependent by giving her an access to their financial situation was misunderstood. ‘Astha sat stunned. What kind of fool had she been to expect Hemant to understand? She had a good life, but it was good because nothing was questioned. This boat could not be rocked.’ (Kapur2002:99) It is Astha’s existential crisis which makes her isolated, unable to share with her colleagues as they had no shadows between husbands and themselves. Later on a discussion with her colleagues over the divorce rates in India & America with one preaching the values, morals of ideal Indian women sacrificing Astha who had so long been jailed & trapped in the familial institution blurts out her heart ‘If marriage is terrible, it is good to be able to leave.’ (Kapur2002:168) She moreover specifies giving example of her sister-in-law who has to enslave herself to the dogs because if she contemplates divorce social & economic death would follow her. Manju Kapur through her mouthpiece Astha not only pities the Indian womanhood but also questions the code of matrimonial laws & banters the constitutional jargons on gender equality.

In the political upheaval of RamJanmabhoomi-BabriMasji she comes across Aijaz, a social worker, the founder of The Street Theatre Group, a person who is the voice of the under privileged. Unlike Hemant Aijaz encouraged and elevated Astha to a platform that was lost in meshes, allowing her to parade her knowledge, making her feel something of worth. “Why don’t you come to my place sometime, you can have a look at what I do.” (Kapur2002:141) made her gripped. But it is possibly with Aijaz that she comes to estimate her potentials as an educated woman. The repeated migraines a result of frustration, desolation and marital disharmony eased when she smelled liberation. As thoughts relating to Aijaz are against the moralistic, idealistic phenomena of typical Indian women so as roots cling to her she continues to live in a limbo until Aijaz’s untimely death in a Hindu-Muslim riot. With this temporary liberation her activities as a socially committed painter became firmer and her greater need of isolation and spatial demands further alienates her from her family.

Astha slowly but consciously recognizes & registers the fact that a women’s lot has to bear with pain in whatever forms, has to learn to devalue her work, has to minimize the call of instincts, has to be the unpaid servant gratifying everybody’s need. Being marginalized by the affluence of the family, vicious social atmosphere, sheer hysteria of communalism, quarrel of two communities over trivial issues and the clash between personal ethics & public ethos leaves Astha battered & disillusioned so much so that she even contradicts her mother-in-law & becomes determined to go to Ajodhya to serve the cause of Sampradayakta Mukti Manch. It is here that Astha comes across Pipeelika Khan & starts off with a rollercoaster ride. As Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* has chosen an unconventional way for self gratification that barred her from domestic bliss Astha embarks on a powerfully physical relationship with a much younger woman, losing the acquisitions of her conventional marriage. Astha basking in the glory of independence breaks free from dependence syndrome and proceeds on the path of full human status that liberates her from male superiority. When she feels that a married woman is an unpaid servant ‘always adjusting to everybody’s need’ (Kapur2002:227) Astha wants to canonize & commemorate her feminine sensibilities through this act of unnatural sex with Pipee crippling her married life & carving out a life of her own. They in their female swabhava forget their personal anguish in samarpan & voice women liberation through their passionate female bonding protesting against the male tyranny. As Astha rejoinders “if husband & wife are one person than Pipee & she were even more so. She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her.” (243) Astha being in love started judging her own sexual nature but she realized that making love to a woman was like ‘making love to a friend rather than an adversary’ (231) whereas ‘relationship between her husband & herself reflected power rather than love’ (233) Astha who had begun to lose self worth & find herself only as a sex

machine for her husband' a willing body at night, a willing pair of hands & feet in the day & an obedient mouth' rediscovers herself through Pipee's desire. Fed up with disintegration of the body, she wants to reinvent herself as a human being and get back her female body with its desires, aspirations, emotions, feelings and dreams and sets on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationship with Peepilika, a widow. Astha wants to canonize & commemorate her feminine sensibilities through this act of unnatural sex with Pipee crippling her married life & carving out a life of her own. Though the duo have challenged the power structures, reversed the subject positions to be confined in them but the relationship does not follow the expected trajectory. Pipee abruptly leaves for US to pursue her PhD leaving Astha in a neurasthenic malaise. Astha from the very beginning has been alienated from the family structure as she claimed for a liberation that could be approved by less. Pipeelika's entrance opened new vistas of hope, a realization of self which has been locked and despised. The togetherness which has once comforted her, breathing in fresh challenges to usurp the power structures, bringing in a new lease of life is relaxing its hold over her. In search of self she has been so physically and morally attached with Pipee that she feels her inner life dead with Hemant, a tide of isolation shrouds her. Pipee's physical detachment made Astha psychologically attached to her at the same time distanced from others. After Pipee left Astha lay still unaware of Hemant's approaches. 'Motion of any kind was painful to her. Her mind, heart and body felt numb. It continued like this for days. She felt stretched thin, thin across the globe.' (Kapur2002:307)

The crisis of being a woman that the female protagonist suffers in a patriarchal power structures is given a voice in Virmati's crisis in man-made dictums and dogmas which is given a vent through education that brings a deeper realization of self and a psychological release. For her liberation extend its arms to the inclusion of an illicit relationship ending her life in disastrous isolation. Ida composite with post modern sensibilities too shares a similar fate of dejected isolation. Astha though initially customized herself playing the stereotyped role of a middle class house wife, suffers desperation and channelizing her isolation through lesbianism. Pipee who has initiated Astha to the world of intimate pleasures giving her a sense of completion leaves her for higher motives leaving Astha alienated and choice less. When Mridula Garg(b:1938) wrote of *Chittacobra*(2007) analyzing the dichotomy between body & mind she was charged & arrested with Obscenities Act. Today Woman Writers are establishing New Woman "Here she comes running, out of prison & off the pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman." (Gilman) This line pertains true to the post independent woman attitude who explores deep into her psyche elaborates her needs without compromising & searches for that elixir in whatever form even at the cost of being a pariah to declares herself free from those bondage which had previously rioted over her entity.

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