

# Voicing the Silence: Womanhood in Manju Kapur's Home

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## **Abstract**

*Delegates of the socio-political movement, feminism, have formulated a school of thought that focus on the welfare of women in society. Critics and theorists including Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Kate Millet and Elaine Showalter have voiced those silent aspects related to the predicament of women in a patriarchal society. They have discussed and debated on aspects such as the marginalization of women, their quagmire in patriarchal society and spatial justice with respect to women across the globe. In spite of all these reverberations raised on the mantle of gender equality and gender politics with respect to the condition of women, true feminine experiences and expressions are still suppressed and silenced in the tangles of cultural conditioning. In this scenario there is a need to lend an ear to those agonies and anguish experienced by women in the gendered role plays set within the matrix of the patriarchal system. The eminent post colonial Indian English writer, Manju Kapur, exhibits the dilemma, susceptibility, vulnerability and identity crisis experienced by women folk in different gendered roles that are bound by time and space. In this context, this paper is an attempt to bring forth the predicament of women in a gendered society with respect to the novel, Home by Manju Kapur.*

**Key words:** *feminism, gender politics, gender roles, patriarchal society.*

## **I. Introduction**

Harbingers of the socio-political movement, feminism, have formulated a school of thought that focus on the welfare of women in society. Critics and theorists including Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, Julia Kristeva, Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Kate Millet and Elaine Showalter have voiced those silent aspects related to the predicament of women in a patriarchal society. They have discussed and debated on aspects such as the marginalization of women, their quagmire in patriarchal society and spatial justice with respect to women across the globe. Feminism has always questioned the patriarchal concept of man's autonomy and coercion towards women. This movement has opened its claws against this gender inequality in which women are kept aloof from the social and personal space. In spite of all these reverberations raised on the mantle of gender equality and gender politics with respect to the condition of women, true feminine experiences and expressions are still suppressed and silenced in the tangles of cultural conditioning. In this scenario there is a need to lend an ear to those agonies and anguish

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experienced by women in the gendered role plays set within the matrix of the patriarchal system. For women writers who try to picture true feminine experiences, a text or a book is a tool and a space to express and explain the gender politics that is in play within society.

Manju Kapur one of the celebrated contemporary Indian English writer voices the subdued silence of women in the personal and public space. Kapur was born in Amrisar and graduated from the Miranda House University College for Women. Currently she works as a professor at her alma mater. *Difficult Daughters*, her first work of fiction was much acclaimed and it won the 1999 Commonwealth Writers' Prize, Best First Book, Europe and South Asia. Her novels *Custody*, *The Immigrant*, *Home*, *A Married Woman* and *Difficult Daughters* reveal dynamic female characters who try to assert their individuality in all adverse situations. Through impressive elucidation she captures on paper true thoughts and emotions of the feminine psyche. Female protagonists in Kapur's fiction, whether she is Virmati (*Difficult Daughters*), Astha (*A Married Woman*), Nisha (*Home*), Nina (*The Immigrant*), or Shagun (*Custody*) fight for liberation and self fulfillment. The defiance put forth by these empowered women characters challenge the norm of a gender biased society.

Kapur's third novel *Home* is applauded as a master piece that opens the doors of hidden truths with respect to women. The title of the novel, *Home*, itself calls to mind the domestic circle in which most women drain themselves physically as well as spiritually. The novel presents in detail the story of the three generation of the Banwari Lal family. It focuses on their domestic space where the events and narration take place. The peaceful, tranquil and glorified image of a home is juxtaposed with a space of familial dissatisfaction and generational clashes as space, privacy and money become a demanding priority than loving coexistence. Through vivid illustrations of mind and matter Kapur takes the readers into the substance of the Banwari Lal family. Banwari Lal, the cloth merchant had settled in Karol Bagh, Delhi with his wife, two sons and a daughter after the partition. With the money received by selling his wife's ornaments, he opened a sari shop that lit up his life slowly but steadily. Over the years his name came to be associated with the well established cloth merchants in Karol Bagh. The narrative turns and twists through the mind of the prominent women characters including Sunita, Sona, Rupa, and Nisha. The first chapter titled 'Sisters' begins with a categorical, gender biased sentence, "Mrs Sona Lal and Mrs Rupa Gupta, sisters both, were childless." (1) This line itself reveals the crux of the story which highlights child bearing as the most significant role of a woman in a patriarchal society. Sona is the wife of Yashpal, the eldest son of Banwari Lal and Rupa is married to Prem Nath, a junior government official. Sona lives with her in-laws within a joined family system and is often taunted by her mother-in-law for her barrenness. She confides her turmoil to her husband, who says, "Then patience, my life, patience. Once we have children, you will see how she changes." (11) As an only solace to her situation she is forced to observe very strict fasts and prayers. "Covertly Sona became even stricter in the rituals she observed. Where could she turn except to God? Her face was already in that direction; now she did not allow herself even a sideways glance." (14) As per the words of Clara Nubile, "In modern India the situation is still far from an ideal, liberated, democratic model. Indian women keep on struggling against the burden of tradition, against the legacy of the past and the orthodoxy of patriarchal system."

Amidst all these trauma opens up the life experiences of Sunita, the daughter of Banwari Lal. In the novel, Sunita does not appear in person but readers come to know of her predicament from other characters. She is one of the victims of domestic violence and this is evident from the fact that her husband always taxed and troubled her for more dowries. After fourteen years of married life, she dies of an accident that took place in the kitchen of her in-laws. When Sona's mother-in-law laments the death of her daughter, Sona is again accused bitterly while to console her, "You think sleep possible? What can you know of a mother's feelings? All you do is enjoy life, no children, no sorrow, only a husband to dance around you."(18) Surprisingly, Smitha's death coincides with Sona's barren life. Smitha's son Vicky is thrust upon Sona as her soul responsibility. This attitude of her in-laws and her husband flames her up and she expresses her contempt. She laments, "A borrowed child? Ten years old? From another woman's womb? Tell me, is this what you really want?"(22) Eventually after ten years of mental and physical struggle Sona gives birth to a baby girl, Nisha, the protagonist of the novel. After a year she gives birth to a baby boy called Raju. Kapur vividly describes the attitude of the family members towards a male child and a female child. The girl child is brought up strictly as it is suitable to a girl -obedient, docile and domestic. She is very often reminded of her forth coming marriage and the dowry that would go with it. The calculations for her future are made on the naming ceremony itself, "... sets of silver glasses, cups, spoons, and rattles.... gold bangles for baby wrists, gold chains that hung around her neck and reached her knees. With this gold Nisha's dowry was begun."(40)

Nisha, the central character comes across many ordeals. In spite of very close surveillance oh her beauty and security she is molested by her own cousin, Vicky, within the house. This incident deprives her of physical and spiritual happiness. She becomes gloomy, lazy and irritated until Rupa, her mother's sister, takes her away from her own house and brings her up in a different atmosphere. All these incidents reveal the threat women face in society at the physical and emotional level. Caste, class and financial distinctions are also highlighted in the novel along with marriage proposals and acceptance. When Nisha falls in love in her college days with Suresh, a low class boy she is ruthlessly punished by her family. Her father and brother also threatened him to leave her for good. After enquiring about Suresh, Yashpal discloses his whereabouts, "They were Paswans, in class and caste so far below them that in an earlier age their son would have been murdered had he dared to raise his eyes to their girl, let alone address her."(199) Nisha tries but fails to convince her parents the worth of the man whom she had chosen to live with. As Purneet Kaur argues, "Women in *Home* are the rebels of inhibition, societal oppressive expectations, joint family regulations and patriarchal limitations in the society." (19)

The character of Nisha, sets the path for the women in society to struggle free of constrains and to assert individuality along with self respect. Through her infancy to adulthood, Nisha suffers for being a female. The societal values and codes of cultural conditioning with physical abuse strangles her but she never gives up. As the novel proceeds, one can see the emergence of the self-confident and independent Nisha who lives up to her own expectation of life by gaining strength from her past experiences. Against the traditional custom of her family, according to which women are only permitted to work indoors, she takes up a professional job- first a teacher and then a designer. With the assistance of her father she becomes a successful cloth maker and establishes herself as a business woman. This success encourages her to move ahead in life with better vision of the future. Nisha carves herself into an indomitable character and gains pleasure from emotional and financial independence. In spite of all

these achievements, her parents are still worried about her marriage. Yashpal , feels thus of his daughter, “ ... she was more intelligent, methodical, and independent than Raju. Still, it was his duty to see that she married. Her fulfillment lay there, no matter how successful her business was.” (295). Eventually, many proposals came and unlike the ignorant traditional girls, Nisha responded to the issue of her marriage as a woman of the world and would only consent to a match with a family who would let her work. When the suitor, Aravind, comes to meet her, her mother tells Nisha to be silent. She responds thus, “If I am going to marry him I should be able to say what I like.” (299). This expresses her reluctance at being a mere domestic figure within her future husband’s house. From Aravind she demands her right to run her business even after marriage. Thus suitable to her interest she was married to Aravind, a widower in his early thirties who appreciated her skill at a professional job that went beyond domestic circle.

To conclude, the novel is unique in its treatment of both male and female characters. Despite the fact that certain characters adhere to traditional norms, some men and women are more understanding and compassionate. In this work, Kapur has convincingly depicted the complexities encountered by typical Indian women in their single and married life through the vivid portrayal of two kinds of women. The first kind being the promoters of the patriarchal norm and the second one representing those women characters who get transformed into aspiring individuals by stepping out of the rigid familial structure. Though *Home*, Kapur depicts the emerging free-thinking women who value their own space and performance while establishing their womanhood. Her protagonists are torch bearers of the new social order that accepts and regard women at par with men. Ultimately, *Home* drills the fact that women should be free of the conventional family and social structure that set boundaries for their enhancement.

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