Chapter-1

Introduction
Manju Kapur is an emerging and one of the glowing stars of the literary sky of Indo-Anglian Fiction. She is a popular writer of the day with a considerable impact of her writing on society. The review—

Kapur is a generous, far seeing writer, who knows there are no answers, no conclusions to be drawn. . . . She thinks and writes in vivid colours, but it’s the grey areas--life’s queasy compromises--that she furiously yet tenderly exposes. (1)

-clearly explains her worth in Indian English Literature. As far as her biographical elements are concerned, they are rather scanty as she seldom discloses them to everyone. But still the little is that she was born on 25 October 1948. She belongs to an affluent family of Dalmias, and was married to Gun Nidhi Dalmia, a business man. She lives at 27 Akbar Road, New Delhi. Tall stature, fair complexion, short hair, beautiful visage and sharp features add to her physical attributes. Kapur’s parents were well placed Arya Samajis. Her father was a professor before he became a bureaucrat. Temperamentally she is down-to-earth, welcoming, considerate and most important the best of hosts. Her children--Katyayani, Amba, Maya and Agastya fill her lap. Her teaching career spanned fourteen years in Miranda House, Delhi University. Then she took voluntary retirement only to devote all her time to novel writing. Her being a teacher has not been a desired step but due to her parents’ obligation who thought teaching profession befitting for her, she became one. As for her academic qualifications, she did her MA in English from Halifax University, Canada, and M Phil from Delhi University. First tried her hand in poetry, then in drama but finding both cumbersome, she found her forte in novel writing and now is a full time novelist. She aspires for a secure and formidable place among the leading Indo-Anglian fiction writers. Her literary output comprises five novels. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* was published in 1998, and received tremendous international acclaim. It was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the first book (Eurasia), and was a number one best seller in India.
Her second novel *A Married Woman* came in 2003 and was shortlisted for Encore Award. The third *Home* was brought out in 2006, and was also shortlisted for Hutch Cross Word Award. Her fourth novel *The Immigrant* appeared in 2008 and the last novel *Custody* came into being in 2011. Besides these novels, Kapur has also touched other genres of writing like Short Story ‘The Necklace’ published by Harper Collins, Essay ‘The Birth of a Baby’ and ‘The Power Behind the Shame’ edited by Janet Chawla New Delhi: Har Anand Publications, and Press Article ‘Speaking up for Inter-Community or Cross Marriages’ in Outlook (New Delhi) 14 January 2007. Manju Kapur belongs to that period of Indian writing in English when Feminine sensibility is audible in each and every novel of women writers. She has joined the growing number of women writers of India like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Gita Hariharan, Nayantara Sehgal, Shoba De, Kamla Markandaya, Anita Desai, Ruth Prawar Jhavwala, Bharati Mukherjee et al. These women writers have come up as individuals rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the silence of suffering, trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self. In the hands of these writers the portrayal of woman in Indian English Fiction as a silent sufferer and upholder of tradition and traditional values of the family and the society has undergone a tremendous change and she is no longer presented as a passive character. The women of India have indeed achieved their success in half a century of independence. Since Gandhiji helped the women cross the threshold of family life and move out into the outer world of freedom struggle and social reform, the women are presented to be justifying their worth in the novels also. Kapur in this regard suggests that the root of all present-day evil is this tension between modernity and tradition. She is regarded as a woman who understands well the predicament of other women. When she writes about the condition of a woman, she can never be unjustified in portraying her in past, present and future scenario. Her treatment of women is realistic. How a woman has been treated as a daughter, a beloved, a daughter-in-law, a wife, and a co-wife, is fully
reflected as the plot of the story develops in all her novels. The conflict between tradition and modernity and between imagination and sensibility is brought out well in her novels. Kapur has chosen her characters from the middle class and the upper-middle class families. But they are drawn with a convincing psychological consistency. These characters are full of life and vitality. They are thoroughly human in their likes and dislikes and are neither saints nor sinners but human beings as ordinary or extraordinary as others are. She has portrayed not only the protagonists of the novels but also the major and minor characters with sharp sensibility. In her novels she presents women trying to establish their own identity and search a space for themselves. In them Kapur has stressed on the female characters against a political upheaval of the time. Being a social realist, she has treated women characters on the practical ground. Though Indian women writers wax eloquence on all aspects of the flaws and felicity of characters both male and female, Kapur’s main thrust is on female protagonists whether it is Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, Astha in *A Married Woman*, Nisha in *Home* or Nina in *The Immigrant*. The themes of Manju Kapur are not new. Whatever she has portrayed in her novels has been depicted earlier by her contemporaries but every writer, poet or author has his or her own style and perception to view something. What is worth liking in her novels is the observation and superb understanding with which she has analyzed each and every character. This is quite evident by the following review:

> Few writers have explored the complex terrain of the Indian family with as much insight and affection as Manju Kapur. She describes the small rebellions and intense power struggles with a knowledge of the human heart that is at once compelling and terrifying. (2)

As far as Kapur’s prose is concerned it is bare, and is devoid of the stylistic flourish that has become a characteristic of Indian writing in English. There is no gimmickry in the language as we see in some other books.
Kapur earned great fame and name with the publication of *Difficult Daughters* which is:

A skillful, enticing first novel by an Indian writer who prefers reality to magic realism. . . . This book offers a completely imagined, aromatic, complex world, a rare thing in first novels. (3)

Such has been the popularity of the novel that it has been translated into several languages like Spanish, Dutch, German, Greek, Italian, and many more. The novel was so painstakingly written that Kapur herself suggests that:

It was the result of my five years research at the book eight times over seven years and each time I thought that I have finished the book. (4)

Mukul Kesavan regards *Difficult Daughters* to be-

A first rate realistic novel about a daughter’s reconstruction of her trembling past, hinging on her mother’s story. (5)

If an autobiographical note is traced in the novel, it is found that the name of the protagonist ‘Virmati’ is the name of her mother and the picture on the jacket of her book is her mother’s.

The novel is based partly on the life of Kapur’s mother Virmati which is also the name of the novel’s protagonist. The novel’s dedication ‘for my mother, her mother and my father’ emphasizes this deep and abiding woman to woman attachment which is also the book’s central thematic concern. (6)

The novel presents a tale of struggle, traditional repression and independence. The story is for those who are sensitive and romantic enough to feel and understand India. Struggle against superstition and social imagination has come with transparent discussion. The pain and horrible experience of partition is the key word of this novel. It centers on
a woman, born at the turn of 20th century in a Punjabi family. The novel tells of an illicit affair and its wider political and social implications. It deals with the most bothered issue of marriage versus education, particularly for Indian women. In her quest of identity, Virmati, the protagonist, rebels against familial tradition. She is impelled by the inner need to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. She marries a person of her choice and thus goes against the wishes of her family and fights for her desire for education. The story tells how she is torn between family duties, the desire for education and illicit love.

Her next work *A Married Woman* is an

*Enthralling, convincing, absorbing . . . A magnetically alert, deeply readable novel, deeply readable novel, written with profound intelligence and a deceptively light touch. (7)*

Here Kapur negotiates different issues emerging out of a socio-political upheaval in her country. Set against the bloody backdrop of Babri Masjid demolition, the novel explores the space in domestic relation and sexual intimacy between women. The focus here shifts from a woman, rebellion against society, shackled in tradition, torn between duty and desire, to an exploration of the positioning of a woman in sexual orientation. The story is of Astha, an educated, upper middle class, working Delhi woman. She develops extra-marital relationship with similar sex and fills her vacuum of life. It is a beautifully honest and seductive story of love and deep attachment set in a time of political and religious turmoil.

Kapur’s best and biggest triumph is Astha herself. You know her, you understand her, you just don’t want to let her go. Every breath she takes, every word she utters, every feeling she experiences, every dusty scooter ride, every sari in her cupboard--all of them are shattering real. Most of all , the even-handed and touching portrait of her marriage--the husband who genuinely cares and wants to be
sexy and progressive, but is in fact the uneasy result of a traditional upbringing mixed with western education--is brilliantly done. (8)

Kapur’s third novel *Home* revolves around a large typical Indian family. It is “glistening with detail and emotional acuity.” (9) Unlike Kapur’s first two novels, it explores the multifarious territory of the Indian family with much insight and warmth without venturing into any social, political or religious issue. According to The Hindustan Times it is ‘Superb’ and ‘Captivating’ opined by the Guardian.

In today’s Kahani Ghar Ghar Ki age, *Home* is infused with bits-and-bobs that you find at once so recognizable. What begins like a short story, perhaps bringing your neighbours to mind, stretches to as many as 337 pages, with nuances that are at times rather singular, and at others so universal. (10)

This is a story of Nisha who resolves to marry a boy irrespective of his caste and creed, but fails in doing so and later on has to wait for a long time in spite of all her physical and mental attainments due to astrological reasons. She first becomes a rebel and falls in love with that boy, but after having been let down by him at the last minute controls herself and finds solutions in commencing her own business. Very beautifully the novel weaves-

‘Conflicting loyalties, intrigues, triumphs’ as well as ‘the small rebellious and instance power struggles which constitute the universal human experience.’ (11)

It is a fast moving story, which makes an ordinary middle class family’s life across three generations of Delhi shopkeepers. The novel depicts how family norms are ignored by the new generation. Very humane and hugely engaging, *Home* is a soulful story of compromise, and secrecy that lie at the heart of every family. Even the title indicates an ironic nod to some long-running soap. Along with young Nisha’s dilemma, the story is
about the family of migrants from Lahore to Delhi, the timeless atmosphere of arranged marriages, preoccupation with childbirth and heirs, the wrangles over property, the intrusion of a daughter-in-law and a possessive mother’s ensuing envy.

The story of the fourth novel *The Immigrant* delves deep into the psyche of the protagonist Nina’s conscience. She finds herself totally dissatisfied with her life and cherishes post-marital sex with her lover keeping aside the Indian woman sensibility and at the cost of her familial life. As literati, Nina finds it quite hard to adjust with her practical minded husband. She is motivated by her own desire but often finds herself sandwiched between past and future. Progressive but inhibited by openness and often finds herself wanting. She is also independence seeking. *The Immigrant* is an intimate portrait of an arranged marriage and a mesmerizing saga. It is a passage to Canada of 1970s. The novel is intensely readable tale of an Indian husband and wife to Canada’s frozen expanses.

Thus Manju Kapur’s novels present the changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self sacrificing women towards self assured, assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands and in this way providing a medium for self expression. The concept of new woman in Indian society varies from the one in the west and therefore Manju Kapur has tried to evolve her own stream of emergence of new woman grounded in reality. While studying a woman in the novels of Manju Kapur, taking into account the complexities of life, different histories, cultures and varied structures of values, along with woman’s question, we find that the life her women live is a life of struggle under the oppressive mechanism of a conservative society. But sweeping this oppression aside, the emergence of new woman in Manju Kapur’s heroines who do not want to be rubber dolls for others to move according to their will, is also discernible. Defying patriarchal notions that enforce women towards domesticity, they assert their individuality and aspire for self-reliance.
through education. They nurture a desire of being independent and of leading a life of their own. They want to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond husband and children. They are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. All the protagonists know they cannot depend on others to sort out the domestic situation and proceed to tackle it on their own. An element of feminism especially in the realm of biological, sexual, cultural and racial aspects has been probed in her novels. She has her own concerns and priorities as well as her own ways of dealing with the predicament of her women protagonists. Her novels make a significant contribution in this direction.
Works Cited

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