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PROBLEM OF SEXISM IN MANJU KAPUR'S HOME AND A MARRIED WOMAN

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Abstract:

The novels of Manju Kapur project the real picture of Indian society. She does not deal with the extra-terrestrial characters. She has achieved success in narrating live tales, describing the lives of middle-class Indian women. She explores the dilemma of modern women in a patriarchal social set-up. In the post-colonial period, the decolonized male oppressed the female continuously. As a women writer, Kapur's dilemma is to focus the voice of women's concern. Women are oppressed in a society by a male-dominated discourse. This paper focuses on the gender discrimination and the intricate pattern of patriarchal codes which harm the progress of women in contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: *Patriarchy, stereotype, gender, suppression.*

Gender is the problem of cultural conditioning. The portrayal of women as weak has marginalised them in society. Men hold the centre enjoying every kind of freedom and women are silenced. The powerful section of the society creates some stereotypes to increase and perpetuate its power. The women liberation movement rose to prominence with the publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). It serves as a plea against the patriarchal culture and the negative portrayal of women in society. The society has created stereotypes like word 'womanly' which is associated with the meaning of weakness. Wollstonecraft questions the plan of education set out by Rousseau, which indicates women's status in society. "For my part, I would have young English woman cultivate her agreeable talents in order to lease her future husband with as much care and assiduity as a young Circassian bashaw" (Wollstonecraft, 95). In other words, there should be such kind of an educational system which will make upper and middle class women submissive partners in marriage.

In India, there are set patriarchal codes that limit the women's progress in society. Like Rousseau's educational system, there are infamous laws put forth by Manu. According to the laws of Manu, "Her father protects (her) in childhood, her husband protects (her) in youth, and her son protects (her) in old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (The Laws of Manu, ix). These infamous laws of Manu were put forth many years ago, yet they are still in practice in the contemporary society.

The Indian society has got its typical patriarchal codes around which it works. The gender discrimination in India begins right from the womb. Male child is preferred over female child. It happens because of a patriarchal thinking that a female child cannot carry the line forward. Also, because with female child is related the honour of the family. Even at the thought of having a daughter people feel cringed in India. In A Married Woman, when Hemant tells Astha's mother to forget the sorrows of her dead husband and celebrate the joy of being a nani. Astha's mother declares, "Beta, you are right. May it be a boy, and carry your name forever. A great son of a great father" (56). This reflects her traditional mind-set which she could not change even at the old age. Hemant being a product of American education shows his liberal thought. He says that there is no difference between boys and girls in American society. But after the birth of a daughter, Astha notices a change in Hemant's behaviour. His liberal attitude proves to be a mere pretence. Only six months after the birth of a daughter, he becomes possessive and not only demands sex but also asks for a son. Further Hemant declares, "I want to have my son soon. I want to be as much a part of his life as papaji is of mine" (61).

Astha's mother-in-law is also a traditional woman who wants Astha to produce a male child who will carry the long line of the race. She calls a pundit every morning to do special pooja so that she is blessed with a grandson. When Astha's son was finally born, she felt gratitude for completing the family. In this way, the traditional approach of the old women in India is reflected in the reactions to the birth of their grandson. Thus, we observe that not only men but also women are involved in perpetuating the male dominated discourse. In this regard, Armin Wanderwala comments that "It is not men alone who are responsible for gender inequity and gender discrimination in our society. Women themselves are also to blame in several cases, one generation visits into the next the inequities of the previous; and so the vicious circle goes on" (2002).

The daughters are neglected in India. People are very careful about the growth and career of their sons but when it comes to the daughters turn, they always get neglected. In Home, the family head Banwari Lal was very careful while selecting a bride for his son, but he is not much careful while marrying his daughter Sunita. What he thinks of is the negligible dowry. He is guided by things which are not real. The reality that there is no mother-in-law and also sister-in-law is considered a positive thing. At least she must be able to live a free life from taunts of in-laws. The fact that the grooms business is a small hosiery shop in Bareilly is ignored by Banwari Lal by saying that it has every prospect of growth. It is only after the accidental death of Sunita, the family realizes its mistake. This clearly highlights the prejudiced attitude of looking at the daughters.

A girl cannot grow in the company of the boys in India. There is always the fear of sexual harassment. In Home, when Vicky finds Nisha alone resetting the upset snakes and ladders, he threatens her to play with him before she ran away. Vicky not only harasses her but also warns her to keep it a secret. It highlights the fact that these kind of incidents are thought unthinkable to be discussed and brought to the open. Nisha is unable to sleep peacefully after this incident. She is sent to aunt Rupa's house to recover from the shock.

In India, women are still oppressed on the basis of dowry. Dowry deaths are common and feature in daily newspapers. In Hone, Sunita is continuously harassed by her husband to bring money from parents' house. Sunita's life turns into a hell with daily harassment and torture from her husband. He actually wanted her parents to invest in Bareilly, to either help him open an outlet or upgrade his shop. He thinks her dowry has been small and demands them to redress. However, Sunita decides that even if her life would be hell she would not exploit her father, anyway. Devastated by the cruelties of her husband, Sunita gets psychologically disturbed and thoughts of suicide keep on haunting her. Sunita bears this harassment for fourteen years after her marriage. Then it ends as the family gets the news by telegram about Sunita's accidental death. This indicates the harassment of women in India on the basis of cruel practice of dowry.

In India, it is very difficult for a woman to be childless. In Home, Sona does not conceive for a long time and has to bear taunts from her mother-in-law. She even goes to the extent of blaming Sona that she is using birth control pills to enjoy sex. Inspite of taking Sona to the doctor, she is taunted by her mother-in-law. The situation of being a childless woman makes Sona's condition worse. In addition to the mental block, Sona suffered of the harassment by her mother-in-law. Sona being a traditional woman succumbs to the situation. She does fasting, so that she may be blessed with a child. On the other hand, we have her sister Rupa who is completely modern in her attitude. She accepts the fact that she is unable to conceive and changes herself accordingly. Kapur highlights here the contrasting views regarding the childless women. If a daughter-in-law finds her in laws tolerant and liberal, she can easily cope with the problem of childlessness like Rupa does. On the other hand, if a daughter-in-law finds her in laws harsh, she suffers the mental trauma like Sona.

Love marriage in India is still thought to be a taboo. Astha's mother control's her daughter from falling in love. After her mother intervenes, Bunty, Astha's first lover easily gives up the matter. Her mother also tries to imbibe deep values of family in her. The patriarchal code is at risk if love marriage happens.

When Yashpal, the elder son the Banwari Lal family falls in love with Sona, all the family members go against him. It happens because of a certain purpose. According to a patriarchal code marriage takes place between the equals. A girl must possess some fixed qualities to fit in a patriarchal family. Rekha is chosen daughter-in-law by the Banwari Lal business family because she possesses all the prerequisites that are needed to fit in a patriarchal family. Firstly, she is doing BA by correspondence which indicates that she is virtuous and unspoilt. Secondly, she knows cooking. And lastly, she can give dowry to enhance the business of a Banwari Lal family. Without these qualities, marriage is thought to be a threat to the security of the family. Yashpal's mother thinks that Sona has used magic to ensnare Yashpal because Sona belongs to the poor family who cannot give dowry and hence, falls short of the set prerequisites.

When Nisha falls in love with Suresh, she is not allowed to go out. Padlock is put on the phone, so that only incoming calls can be received. Whenever, Nisha goes out for exams, Raju, her brother accompanies her. This is a typical step taken by parents to control their daughters in Indian families. Even educated male characters like Premnath are not modern in thinking and behaviour. It becomes clear when Premnath tries to console his niece Nisha, who is upset by her family's interruption in her love and marriage with Suresh. He tells her the proper way to be married. Premnath believes that had Nisha's lover Suresh sent his parents to her parents and made an offer, it would have been easier for her to do as per her will. But Nisha rejects his idea by saying that it is a modern age and you cannot expect one to stick to these old ideas.

Education in India is not free from patriarchal codes. It is considered as the time pass because, girls after all have to do domestic jobs. Therefore, girls are sent to college to pass time, till they get a better match in marriage. Nisha is sent to college for this purpose not to achieve any kind of independence which is the essence of education. "Her family's attitude to college proved sustaining. Higher studies were just a time pass, it was not as though she was going to use her education. Working was out of the question, and marriage was around the corner" (141).

Men in India are obsessed with the concept of virginity. It is a social evil which Kapur tries to highlight in 'A Married Woman'. When daughter reaches to maturity, male members of the family start vigilance around her. Parents are expected to save the honour of the family which is related to the daughter. When Astha asks Hemant, why didn't he marry an American woman? Hemant replies, "I wanted an innocent, unspoilt, simple girl, he went on...A virgin he elaborated" (40). If Astha had not been a virgin, Hemant would have made it an issue. But the blood on the sheet has served as a certificate of her being a virgin. Astha being an educated woman argues that some women do not bleed even though they had no sex before marriage. Hemant evades the argument and says that it did not happen in our case. Therefore, we should stop talking about it. Men are free from these social evils. They do not have to pass any virginity test even if they commit fornication daily.

A married woman in India becomes a slave in work. She has to take care of everything. At her home in Delhi, Astha submerges herself to the household work. She spends time in the kitchen, experimenting with new dishes. She treats Hemant's clothes with reverence, sliding each shirt in his drawers and a quarter centimeter out from the on above and so they are easily visible, draining all the tiny holes in his socks, arranging his pants on cloth-wrapped hangers so there would be no crease. With her mother-in-law she visits shops in the mornings. However, Astha is not happy with the insulting behaviour of her husband at night. She shows anger and rage when Hemant suggests her sexy clothes. Then a brief argument between the two occurs,

> What do you think I am? A whore?
> There is nothing to be ashamed of darling, said Hemant caressing her. It is to increase married pleasure.
> Astha looked at the lacy black thing he was offering her.
> What is it? She asked suspiciously.
> A teddy.

> So I am to be your teddy bear? (44).

Women in married life seem to appear in a perpetual cage. Although, Astha does all the household work yet she is forced to submit her body at night. Men enjoy the power of being superior in marital bond, as if they own women as property. In this regard Sudhir Kakar illustrates,

> It is evident that with such a collective fantasy of the wife, the fate of sexuality within marriage is likely to come under an evil constellation of stars. Physical love will to be a shame-ridden affair, a sharp stabbing of lust with little love and even less passion. Indeed, the code of sexual conduct for the house holder husband full endorses this expectation. Stated concisely in the Smritis (the law codes), elaborated in the puranas (which are not only collection of myths but also contain chapters on the correct conduct of daily life), modified for local usage by the various kinds of religiosity, the thrust of marriage seems to "No sex marriage please, we're Indian" (Kakar, Scenes from marriage, Intimate Relations 19).

Kapur projects the intricate patterns of sexism before and after marriage to show oppression of women in Indian male-dominated society.

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