

18

REDEFINING FEMALE EXISTENCE: "THE NEW WOMAN" IN SELECT NOVELS OF MANJU KAPUR AND ANITA NAIR

Ruchi Nigam, Lecturer in English, Junabhadra College, Jaipur, Odisha, India

Abstract:

Manju Kapur and Anita Nair are two contemporary women writers in English whose novels have ample and vivid portrayals of the domestic scene. Most of their novels are set against the backdrop of the family. Taking family into consideration, they portray the women as strong characters who resist the patriarchal dominance and hegemony, redefining their existence. The writers also throw light on how the protagonists reconstruct their lives, and their 'selves'. They are not left in the lurch but there are signs of hope and rejuvenation by restoring their selves as well as familial bonds. The writers give a glimpse of the post-independent India where the social notions about women have changed considerably. The novelists under study have tried to register these significant changes by creating illustrative situations and characters in different context. The novels under consideration are (Difficult Daughters and A Married Woman by Manju Kapur and The Better Man and Lessons in Forgetting by Anita Nair)

Key words: Resistance, new women, redefining existence, freedom, dominance, subjugation.

Manju Kapur and Anita Nair are two contemporary women writers in English whose novels have ample and vivid portrayals of the domestic scene. Most of their novels are set against the backdrop of the family. Taking family into consideration, they portray women as strong characters who resist the patriarchal dominance and hegemony, redefining their existence. Besides family, the two writers also take into consideration the relationships that define the family set-up, the psychodynamics of women- and also other characters. The writers have thrown light on how the protagonists reconstruct their lives, and their 'selves'. They are not left in the lurch but there are signs of hope and rejuvenation by restoring their selves as well as familial bonds. The writers give a glimpse of the post-independent India where the social notions about women have changed considerably. The novelists under study have tried to register these significant changes by creating illustrative situations and characters in different context.

Anita Nair is a novelist, though in the past she has been a journalist. Anita Nair deals with the concept of patriarchy and signifies inequality in relationships. Her novel raises questions about the role of woman in contemporary postcolonial India.

Manju Kapur is a well-known name in modern Indian literature. A modern writer with modern views and notions, she knows that today's women are far more intellectual and mature than their predecessors. Her protagonists are today's women who are not ready to submit to the age-old traditions and customs of patriarchal society. Her protagonists are well-educated and have independent thoughts. It helps them to take a bold stand against the society which is ready to tie them down with patriarchal rules and regulations. They understand the value of education as it is the only way to self reliance. All her novels speak volumes with their language, style and narrative techniques. Her canvas is always larger than life capturing the minute details of everything she sees in life through the prism of the family.

The emergence of a new generation of Indian Women in the nineteen eighties and nineties who tend to interrogate the traditional images of women in terms of feminist and female identities and patriarchal values, led to a radical change in attitude towards education, social roles, professional freedom, marriage and sex. The novels of Anita Nair and Manju Kapur follow a definite trajectory of the women's world in

which there is the assertion of freedom of 'New Woman' at the professional, educational and sexual levels. They define their existence through their resistance against traditional mindset that subverts distinct feminine and female identity within family. Manju Kapur, in her novels, not only portrays the vulnerable condition of women in Indian society but also the swift transition of women from being the dominated to the dominant in all spheres of life. Her characters emerge as 'real women' of the contemporary world.

In *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur portrays women, belonging to the new generation, who are motivated by the freedom struggle. For them there is immense satisfaction in leading their own life and being independent. Virmati is the eldest of the long chain of children born to an ever pregnant mother. Her life is smeared under the pressure of family responsibilities and her childhood lost in being a young mother to her siblings. Yet her desire to study further never diminishes. She belongs to a typical traditional family, which follows the tradition of marrying off their daughters after receiving the basic qualification of house-keeping. However, Virmati goes against the tradition of her family. She makes up her mind that, "She too had to go to Lahore, even if she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over" (17).

No one supports Virmati. There is an endless argument between 'educations versus marriage'. When Virmati repudiates marriage and insists on her further education, she is trying to articulate her own belief in women's possible emancipation. "Virmati, is a new woman of colonial India and stands as a metaphor to explore the possibilities for modern women in education and economic independence who experiences humiliation and disillusionment in their colonial matrix" (Srivastava 19).

Much against the wishes of her mother, Virmati ventures to Lahore in order to pursue a B.T. course where she encounters Swarnlata who is an extended shadow of Virmati. Shakuntala's visit provides her inspiration and plants the "seeds of aspiration" in Virmati (17). She takes Virmati to a meeting of the women's Student Conference, and the lectures of various luminary women expose her lacuna, as Virmati finds them "talking in language she had still to learn" (144). At such a time, Virmati contemplates: "Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent in love" (142).

Virmati now realizes that a woman's life is not confined to love, marriage, education, and domestic-limbo, instead she has to play a vital role in the outer world and in the empowerment of her nation. Consequently, she decides to be active in India's freedom struggle like her peer group. She opts for higher studies for she realizes that it can be "her passport to independence, not just her passport to sleeping with the Professor" (152). Studies ensure economic independence for Virmati. She joins as a Principal in Pratibha Kanya Vidyalaya at a hill station in Nahan. Kasturi feels worried about her but Diwan Sahib pacifies her and says: "She will be like my own daughter, and Nahan like her home. The *maharani* is interested in fostering education for girls and the Principal of her school will have a lot of status. People will treat her like Sita" (166).

Educationally and professionally equipped Virmati wants to be socially independent as well. Her streaks of rebellion come very early. She gets tangled in a love affair with the Professor even though she knows that the Professor is a married man. Her views on sex and marriage are liberal. After marriage with the Professor, she gives birth to Ida but

Virmati never corresponds to the age-old family tradition but paradoxically she persuades Ida to make herself fit into the channel of the family. In her futile attempt, she tries to keep her under control. Ida emerges as an uncontrollable person who is left alone having no issue, engulfed in melancholy, depression and despair (75).

Virmati is a prototype of postcolonial Indian woman, as she succeeds to shake off the fetters of her mothers' influence over her. Thus, in Virmati we see the incipient 'New Woman' who is conscious, introspective, educated and who wants to carve out a life for her. Virmati's desire for asserting self-identity is, a value charged, almost a charismatic term with its secured achievement regarded as equivalent to

personal salvation.

Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* figures the heroine who carries the fight of Virmati to new battle grounds. It is the story of an artist whose canvas challenges the constraints of middle class existence. Astha is brought up in a usual middle class family where the mother has the usual notions of an old lady; the belief of a traditional lady: getting the daughter married. The mother believes that: "When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the *shastras* say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth" (1). It was not only Astha's mother who was worried about her daughter's marriage but also her father who thinks that if his daughter will "sit for the IAS" (3) she will 'find a good husband there' (3). Thus, education for a daughter here is "seen as an alternate option for marriage and sometimes a trap to hunt down a good husband and become a perfect wife and daughter-in-law representing "Indian Womanhood" (Phaniraja, Janardhanreddy 16).

But, although her parents try to confine her to the tradition, Astha has her own tradition. She is a girl of modern Delhi with liberal thoughts. Thus, she refuses to meet a man whom her mother has invited to visit their home. Moreover, she has a physical relationship with Rohan whom she meets in the final year of her college. And as Simone De Beauvoir says: "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (1). Astha also meets her destiny in Hemant to whom she gets married and soon their marriage falls into pattern. They are blessed with two children. As time passes, Astha starts feeling lonely and marginalised and disturbed. She is left "with enough free time to be restless in" (46). She, therefore, joins a school, which gradually changes her life. Shalini R. Sinha states: "But this new career of hers, though vetted and approved by her family, is never allowed to come before her other more important roles that of a wife and a mother" (196). Her personality begins to explore. The school in which she was working organizes a workshop, in which Astha meets Aijaz and thus, begins her journey of breaking all boundaries one by one. Astha gets absorbed in her job. Her job gives her recognition and appreciation. "Between her marriage and the birth of her children, she too had changed from being a woman who only wanted love, to a woman who valued independence. Besides, there was the pleasure of interacting with minds instead of needs" (71-72). At school, she grows to be her principal's right-hand, woman, appreciated and valued for one-tenth of the work she did at home, and paid for it too. Her salary meant she did not have to ask Hemant for every little rupee she spent. And, thus, the once looked down-upon job becomes dear. However, Astha's education gives her the wings to question such a system, to be treated as equal to her husband.

Astha's involvement with Aijaz offers her opportunity of independence. After the death of Aijaz, Astha emerges as a social activist and starts taking part in rallies and staging related to his death in spite of much resistance from her husband and in-laws. She gradually, moves out of the physical and emotional constraints set by her and the society and the family. The constant opposition and disinterest in her affair shown by her family members makes her irritable. She is sick of her frequent sacrifices for family and her status of an unpaid servant. Astha slowly moves away from Hemant, both physically and emotionally only to find gratification in another woman Pipeelika someone she met in the rallies. She enters a lesbian relationship with Pipeelika whose name is pared down to Pipee, Pip and then, finally P as the intimacy grows.

In Astha's extra-marital sexual relationship a new dimension of rebel feminism is visible. She challenges the constraints of the middle-class existence and the established notions of heterosexual relationships with Pipee. In this connection Ashok Kumar says: "Manju Kapur has exposed a woman's passion with love and lesbianism, an incompatible marriage and ensuing annoyance with passion to revolutionise the Indian male sensitivity, she describes the traumas of her protagonist from which they suffer and perish in for their triumph" (165). Kapur shows Astha growing and evolving at various stages through various relationships. In words of Kavita:

She is progressive and conscious of her rights, but she quickly compromises to the fact that a woman's real position lies within the family unit which she must sustain and protect and

not ignore or neglect due to the false notion of being "liberated". In this sense Astha is not only the face of the new woman of our time but also the real woman of our time (187).

Anita Nair's novels follow a definite trajectory of feminine world. She portrays women characters who are independent both educationally and professionally and define their existence through their own choice.

Nair's debut novel *The Better Man* is set in a little fictitious village called Kaikurussi in the state of Kerala. There are a set of new women in her novels. The character of Valsala is a non-conventional character, one who murders her husband along with her paramour Sridharan. She is a woman who values sexual liberty as a necessity. She thinks: "I am just forty years old. I don't want to be pushed into old age before it is time. I want to live. I want passion. I want to know ecstasy, she told herself night after night" (131). Her desire for passion is so strong that she conspires her husband's murder along with Sridharan.

Valsala characterizes "a new woman". She is fearless, with no hesitation in declaring her wish for sexual liberty and she is clever enough not to abandon her husband's wealth either. She knows that she will get material wealth "the house, the land, the retirement benefits, the sizeable LIC. After twenty-three years of marriage she thinks, she deserves to have it all. She didn't want to give it up just like that. Now does she want to give up Sridharan.

Anjana is the female protagonist of the novel. She is beautiful, educated but abandoned by her husband after a failed marriage. But her failure in marriage could not shatter completely. She stabilizes herself by joining a school. Her new job fills her life with contentment. "Books became her comrades and the transistor radios her baby. By losing herself in other people's lives, she tried to escape the grimness of her own reality" (233).

During these hard times, she meets Mukundan who offers her support. Once she decides to marry Mukundan, she files a divorce suit against Ravindran to free herself from the virtual bondage that ties her to her husband. Anjana is a principled lady. The day she gets to know that Mukundan has betrayed his friend Bhasi, she gets and decides not to support him: "You are a coward. A smug and completely self-absorbed person who puts himself before anyone else and then uses his own feebleness of character to excuse it. What a great trick that is! To admit your frailty so no one will condemn you later on" (323). She has the guts to rebuke a man for the fault and by this, she emerges as a strong woman. Anjana remains unperplexed by the ignominy of divorce. It is she who initiates the process of severance rather than men. She proves that she is not a helpless woman but a strong woman who knows the possibilities.

Meenakshi, the third woman character who is really strong suffers from a broken marriage but uses it as a platform to strengthen herself unlike women who seek sympathy. "Meenakshi stonily rejected the sympathy of aunts, cousins and neighbours because she realized that it was self-congratulatory" (58). What she does is makes herself economically independent. She opens a creche, sells bangles and accessories and even becomes an LIC agent. She is known for her sagacity and wisdom and people forgot that she was married and that her husband had left her. After some years her husband returns when he suffers from the tuberculosis of the spine and has to quit dancing as a profession: "He couldn't dance anymore and when they abandoned him, he remembered that I existed" (61). When she hears that he wants to return, "a part of her wanted to rush to his side. To forgive and revive the dead marriage. To know once again the protective feel of a husband's arm thrown around her" (61). She finds Balan helpless: "she saw how weak and lonely he was. The men did their best to heal his body. But they ignored his ego. No one told him how great a dancer he was or how his talent was so rare that it could only be god's gift" (62). In spite of being aware of the problems and the burden she accepts him. "This time I could have said no. which is why I said 'yes'" (62). Her greatest strength is, thus, seen when she decides to 'revive a dead marriage' (61) and forgives Balan for his wrong doing. She is an example of women, whose identity has been scripted by patriarchy. In spite of all the pain and rejection she bears at the hands of Balan, she tends and nurses her consumption-ridden husband back to health.

The strength of the character makes her a true woman with an identity of her own. Mukundan wonders, "Where did it come from, this streak of steel that ran within her, straightening her back, tilting her head high, and sealing that cracks in her much-broken heart?" (62). He draws an inference that was a curse on Meenakshi. She was the one who always needs to be strong. Even when her husband is beside her she is struggling to earn money for her husband's treatment. Mukundan misunderstands her meetings with him and dreams of her magnificent body. But she is now an insurance agent trying to meet the target. She can sense Mukundan's feeling and clearly announces, "I am married and a grandmother. I know what everyone in the village thinks, but I have been faithful to my husband. And I am not going to change that even for you" (66). After many days she gets an offer to work as a matron of a hostel for working women in Thrissur. She decides to live her life independently. When Mukundan inquires about her old house and its inmates she bluntly says, "Haven't I given them the best years of my life?... there is nothing left of me to give any more" (249). She remains undeterred and strongly takes the decision: "Let my son cope from now on. His wife can manage the house. As for my husband and mother, they can look after themselves. No one here is weak or helpless. If I don't leave now, I will never be able to" (249). She longs for some personal space in her life: "No expectations. No heartbreaks. I will read. I will sew. I will watch some TV and I will sleep. I won't think of anything or anyone else except myself" (250).

The three characters in *The Better Man* Meenakshi, Anjana, and Valsala are portrayed as evolving into new women who transgress the traditional borders of womanhood and seek self-identity in terms of unbridled freedom and carnal love. They are the women of a new generation who realize selfhood through resistance to tyranny and bondage as well as through assertion of personal choice, who have no qualms in desecrating the institution of marriage for the sake of love and passion.

Lesson in Forgetting, a novel about second chances brings forth women characters who are strong and determined.

Meera, the central character of the novel is an urban, educated woman "wife of Giri, queen of her world, mother of two, author of cook books, mentor of corporate wives, and friend to the rich and celebrated..." (6). What makes Meera strong is that although her husband Giri has left her, yet she maintains her cool temper and realizes that she needs to survive and live for her son and daughter. She gets a job for herself so that she can support her family. She faces all the trials and tribulations all alone and defies the idea that a woman needs the support of man to live in this world.

Meera is close to Vinnie, who runs a boutique, drives her own car, manages the dual life of a wife and mistress and never has one varnished hair out of place. "Even her chopstick stays where it should" (168).

Meera is able to express her thoughts, conscious and subconscious, when Vinnie pokes her with her incessant queries. She advises her and consoles her when Meera feels guilty for having said or thought of things she never did earlier. She eases her when they are out shopping. At one instance she says, "it's all right, you know. You have your needs too. We all do. Whether it is for chocolate or men. If it is JAK who makes you feel like a woman, let it be JAK" (171). Meera sheds her coyness and opens her heart to Vinnie, "but it would be nice to be seen as a woman. I get lonely too, Vinnie. But no one would like me to admit it. Neither my children, nor my mother or grandmother. It is as if the woman in me had to die when Giri left" (171). She reveals her telephonic conversations with Soman, a man half her age. When Meera says that she has to make him understand that she is not that sort of a woman, Vinnie snaps her and justifies her switching of lovers. She labels women as vulnerable. She explicates, "that's what we are. Vulnerable fools who believe that this time, no matter how often we have been proved wrong, we've found the right man. The one who is going to enchant our lives into an extended fairy tale. The man you think you can lean into, and he'll be there for you" (173). Vinnie is the force that helps Meera become a new woman. When she goes to the party alone, Vinnie is happy at it and says, "you don't need an escort. No one makes much of these things any more. A woman by herself at a party is like a man by himself" (183). She thinks of Vinnie's and

Kishore's relationship. They only share a home and a business and independent lives. When Meera calls this relationship a farce, Vinnie justifies, "It is the circle of security that has us enchanted. Not the house or the money, the sex or kids. Not even companionship" (185). Vinnie's presence in her life transforms her. When Raj tries to flirt with her in the party she could handle herself. She clarified to him, "single not available" (186). She finds herself bold and assertive: "Now that she has dealt with the wolf, Meera is confident enough to gambol with lambs" (186). She learns to rise above the heap of burden and enjoys "the lightness of being" (186). She finds a way to live happily in spite of all the depressions and burdens: "temporary remission. A quick joy in the period of lull" (187). Thus, Vinnie is a true new woman.

Smriti, Prof. JAK's daughter is yet another woman who proves her mettle in the novel. *Stree Shakti* is one forum that works to make awareness among the Indians, especially among villagers about dowry, burning women for that and killing girl child at the womb of mother. Smriti is part of this forum. This forum plans to cover all Tamilnadu by arranging workshop series on female feticide. It gives Smriti an opportunity to see true India, to talk to the women who kill their daughters in their wombs without a qualm. The forum is intended to stoke up guilt, regret, remorse.

Young and spirited, she joins this NGO and works for it. She is shown as both educationally and professionally independent and mature. Smriti becomes a victim of such a mistaken identity. Smriti with all her frivolousness is also a girl who wants to bring about a reform in the society by her social activism but she is cruelly punished by the male society for her interference in local matters. Vinai states:

She is a product of the contemporary society, with its potential to liberate women from male-domination and give birth to the new woman. But Smriti appears a freak in the eyes of her community since she demonstrates the possibilities of her society to a group of people, who are not yet ready to either grasp these possibilities or acknowledge them (119).

But destiny has it otherwise for her. She is rendered invalid for a life-time because she shows the courage to defy her boy-friend.

Kala Chiti, the caretaker of Smriti and Kitcha, although uneducated falls into the category of 'new woman'. She emerges as a woman of strength in the novel. Her husband and her in-laws, no one supports her because she is unable to conceive a child. Her husband even decides to go for a second marriage. Her husband's decision to go for second marriage is too much for Kala. She resists the marital tie by choosing to move out of marriage a conscious decision. She redefines her womanhood- confident, decisive, not obedient, docile, self-sacrificing, self-effacing, silent and submissive. She lives her life to the fullest extent without harbouring a deep sense of resentment or regret of not having acquired marital bliss and comfort of a home and family.

JAK's mother Sarada tries every method to fit herself into the mould of a good wife or a *grihini*. She is described by the author in the following manner: "who observed every auspicious date and ritual, who braided jasmine for evening puja and played the *veena*, who on *janmasashti* laid a trail of footprints through the house and lit a hundred and one lamps *kartika vilakku*" (15). Sarada, as her husband leaves her and her parents blames her for that, starts to live on her own with her son Kitcha, i.e. JAK. She begins to work in a small school in the neighbourhood school. She is graduate with Mathematics. As the school needs a primary teacher in Maths, she joins it and also completes her B.Ed. She received a letter from her husband, in which he writes that he is not coming back but going to Rishikesh where the ashram would help him seek the unconscious better. After that, Sarada stops to talk much about her husband. Finally, she accepts that her husband is not coming back. She becomes aware that her life is not over. She marries a Physics teacher from Hyderabad. It is a fine example of woman's struggle to live a life without husband. *Lessons In Forgetting* is a story of women's quest to move on life.

The novels of Anita Nair and Manju Kapur unravel the misinterpretations about the role of women in contemporary post-colonial feminist literature. The question is about the vulnerable position of women and whether she can survive alone. The novels provide an answer that there is certain strength deep inside

that every individual has and that woman must be courageous and claim their own lives and possibilities.

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