

Women and Nationalism: A Study of Manju Kapur's Novels

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Abstract

The paper will examine the nationalist perspectives of women in the novels *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur. It will also present the issues in the Pre-independence India and post-independence India. The focus is to understand and analyse the representation of women in Indian Nationalism by focusing on the active participation, ideology and resolution of social conflicts in presenting the idea of love for the nation. The embattled narrative of secular nationalism in *A Married Woman* encourages communal harmony and condemns the ideological entrenchment based on religion. On the other hand *Difficult Daughters* highlights the elevated and involved role of women as a leader of the freedom movement. It challenges the traditional roles of women and projects women as equal to men. It also magnify the role of single woman Sakuntala, who seeks to contribute for the nation by refraining from the constructed role of women.

Keywords: Indian Nationalism, Nationalist Perspective, Women, Education and Independence.

Manju Kapur's novels have been standing as a beacon to the contemporary social, political and economic issues of Indian Women. Her novels not only present the women issues but it also addresses the national sensibilities of women. She promotes the idea of women coming out of their homes, getting education, participating in social and political issues of ones nation and interacting with the outside world. She also advocates through her

novels that women should play an active role for the nation and they should not be bound by their domestic duties.

Nationalism and Mahatma Gandhi's name cannot be separated when we discuss in terms of Indian Nationalism. He was one of the social and political activists who sought to bring a revolutionary change in the status of women. Mahatma Gandhi appealed women to come out of their domestic duties which is socially constructed. Gandhi encouraged women to come forward and participate in public affairs that will benefit both for their own lives and society. This Gandhian aspect of equal involvement of women in public sphere is seen in the novels of Manju Kapur. It is also believed that "Participation in politics and governance structure is viewed as the key to redress gender inequalities in societies and to promote women empowerment. It is a stronger means to transform women's lives from the state of marginalization, subordination and deprivation to that of empowered one" (Das 30). Political participation and consciousness are quintessential for women empowerment as it is the only way to redress gender inequalities in the society.

The paper aims to analyse the representation of Women in Indian Nationalism by focusing on the participation of women in Indian freedom struggle and in active politics of the nation, their ideology towards nation and empowerment. Kapur presents her view on the role of women by defining her nationalist perspective through her characters. Women Empowerment has been the basic focus in her novels. In *Difficult Daughters* (1998) and *A Married Woman* (2002) there is a clear representation of women's love for their nation. These two novels are set at the backdrop of historical context. It exemplifies the struggles women faced and their actions for the nation. The aspects of women's advancement through political participation and how constructive nationalist of women tends to build a better nation and better lives for women have been some of the prime focuses of these two novels. The novel *Difficult Daughters* is set at the backdrop of political happenings before and after

partition. Most of the women characters shows their concern and love for nation. Kapur revisit the partition scenario from a contemporary mind where she criticizes the politics of partition on the basis of gender, caste, creed and religion. Although Kapur creates a fictional recreation of Indian freedom struggle and partition but in a very successful way she configured the feeling and sentiments of Indian independence and freedom movements of 1947.

Difficult Daughters is published in 1998 but the setting is of Indian partition 1947. During this period in history, women were passionately involved in the Gandhian *Satyagraha* movement which was Mahatma Gandhi's non-violent civil disobedience campaign. In the novel we find a host of women characters who participate in the movement. Swarna Lata, Sakuntala and Virmati represents the nationalist women in the novel *Difficult Daughters*. Their love for their country is projected through their independent mind, assertiveness and fearlessness in their actions for the nation. Kapur's women shows their quest and love for nation by dedicating their lives for the nation. They project themselves with the potentials to understand the issues related to freedom struggle and take up action for the nation. The novel *Difficult Daughters* is set in the then Punjab before partition. Swarna Lata stands out with her constructive nationalist perspective. She carries a vision of united India by raising her voice against the segregation of Hindu- Muslim communities. She floats her love for the nation while addressing the Punjab Women's Students Conference held at Lajpat Hall. She expresses her thoughts:

As women, it is our duty, no, not duty, that word has unpleasant connotations. It is our privilege to be able to give ourselves to the unity of our country. Not only to the unity between rich and poor, but between Muslim and Hindu, between Sikh and Christian. Artificial barriers have been created amongst us to gain power over insecure

and fearful minds. Let the politics of religion not blind out to this fact.(DD 145)

She presents her rational thoughts for the unity of the nation at the same time she expresses her concerns for the boundary of gender both in family and society. During those days women's education was not undertaken to liberate women's minds but to promote the welfare of homes and families to a certain limit so that they are able to undertake home and family affairs only within the four walls of home. There are many inequalities in Indian traditional social structure due to its patriarchal nature as well as based on caste, community and class. These inequalities significantly influence the status of women in different spheres thus creating an unrealistic status of women. Kapur advocates for women by challenging the accepted roles of women and norms that govern their behaviour. Through Swarna Lata Kapur sought to construct the vision of free and unbiased nation. Nationalism has experienced numerous tensions in India due to social hierarchy, class, community and many more. Kapur has articulated women's limited role in political participation as one of the social evils that has affected Indiannationalism. She has tried to attempt and define women's perspective on restructuring Indian society by projecting the significant role of women in nation building. She focuses that in constructing a new national identity one need to reject the inequalities based on gender, caste and religion. Women need to be modern in her approach Swarna Lata says: " Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war-the Satyagraha movement- because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, going to jail, wake up from your stale dream"(DD 151). Swarna Lata presents her love for the nation and expresses the role of a women in constructing a free nation.

The expansion of women's education and equal participation with men during the *Satyagraha* movement played a significant part in projecting women's role in Indian freedom struggle. Prejudice, orthodoxy and apathy were some of the major hindrance but within these

limits too women's role made remarkable contribution in the freedom struggle due to their access to education. It helped in their formation of consciousness and in their articulation of their needs and rights. It also widened women's intellectual horizons, exposed them to new ideas and other processes of modernization. Thus altering their views on themselves and of the outside world. In *Difficult Daughter* Swarna Lata expresses her socio-political interest she says: " I was very clear that I wanted to do something besides getting married. I told my parents if they would be forced to offer Satyagraha with other congress workers against the British. And go on offering it until taken to prison" (DD 118). Her statement clearly give away the message that women too have space beyond marriage. She is equally efficient to fight for the nation. Women played a powerful force in achieving freedom. It became possible because they came out from the controls of the society to participate in the freedom struggle. Their love for the nation was encouraged by the women's movement in the country. This radicalism that took birth during the freedom struggle also helped them to understand and integrate gender equality. The political ascendancy that evolved due to their formal education resulted in advancement and progress of Indian women, they became more conscious of living their life with a purpose. Swarna Lata took active politics by addressing conferences, asking women to come out from their homes and participate in the movement because she felt that the cause of freedom must not suffer. she is passionate about the *Satyagraha* movement and have been influencing many women through conferences.

Sakuntala ,Virmati's cousin too is a source of inspiration in the novel. She highlights that women should not remain silent in the matters of nation. Ones wisdom should be shared and when necessary they should raise their voice for the welfare of the nation. Sakuntala as an educated girl decodes the patriarchal codes and asserts the need of education to enjoy freedom of self and of the nation. She says: " Here we are fighting for the freedom of the nation but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else....And conduct political

meetings, demonstrate, join rallies. I wish you could see what all the women are doing in Lahore. But for my mother, marriage is the only choice in life. I so wish I could help her feel better about me” (DD 17). During this transition there were many changes in the field of education, fashion and social participation. For few like Sakuntala’s own mother and aunt it was difficult for them to accept Sakuntala’s nature of job where she as a teacher have to spend almost all her time in the lab like a man. Staying out from home was considered proper only for men and women were expected to stay at home performing domestic chores “ Manju Kapur’s depiction of history of pre-independence day indicates that she explored how the ideology of Britishers had shaken the roots of tradition and thus changed the conventional thoughts”(Kumar 191). The freedom struggle has changed the conventional thoughts among women , they are seen to participate in every social, political and professional fields in equal footing with men.

Virmati, the protagonist also realizes her self worth when she accompanied Swarna Lata in women conferences. She learns that women have a greater role to play for the nation. Swarna Lata’s speech on the unity of Hindu and Muslim to fight against the British greatly influenced her to decide the purpose of her life. Virmati says “... the meaning of the flag, how freedom was necessary for the development of the human spirit, how war especially affected women, how progress was their object so that freedom could be enjoyed by all classes of people, even the lowest of the low” (DD142). The influence of freedom movement opened her mind to see life beyond love and marriage.

The novel *A Married Woman* is a firm commitment of a woman for a secular nation during post independence . It is set at the suburbs of Delhi in the late 1980s and early 1990s, against the historical background of the Babri Masjid crisis in Ayodhya in the year 1992. India is a Multi-religious country where religion plays a vital role in everyone's life. It is not a part of life but it gives essence to our life. In such a multi-religious society Kapur’s

protagonist Astha appears as a secular nationalist who supports secularism within her own state. Kapur has tried to promote the value of other religions and religious equality. The background of the novel reflects socio-political scenarios, communal tensions such as communal violence, religious discrimination and also the use of religious sentiments for political advantages. Amidst this, Astha tries to work for the Manch to bring peace through her understanding of religious equality.

She started to contribute to the socio-political issue when Aijaz, a professor and a street play artist, suggested Astha to write a script on Babri Masjid and Ram Janambhoomi for a summer workshop on theatre and drama to be organized by Aijaz in her school. She was recommended by her school principal to be the staff volunteer for the workshop. As a volunteer, she works hard to understand the religious sentiments behind the Babri Masjid issue and why “A nation falling apart because of religious differences and dynamics of power politics” (Swami 165-166)

Astha tries to eradicate the conflicts that make space in the minds of the people around her because of the traditional religions and thus maintain communal harmony in the multi-religious society like India. She speaks about the positive effects of secularism to her mother-in-law and husband. Her participation in socio-religious events organized by Sampradayakta Mukti Manch to commemorate the sacrifice of Aijaz brought out the secularistic vision of Astha. Astha does not hesitate to put her views in front of her husband, who does not carry the same perspective like that of her. She shows her secular nature by nullifying the perspective of her husband on communal differences that exist between the Hindus and Muslims. Later, Astha turns into a socially conscious painter after the violent confrontation between Hindus and Muslims where a Muslim like Aijaz, who used to work for the unity of Hindus and Muslims, loses his life. Her deeper exploration of her own religion and the conflicts that arise out of religious sentiments evolves her as a secular painter. Astha

then decides to put on canvas the image of Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid controversy. She speaks loud through her painting about the conflict and how people are losing their lives because of the religious differences as the understanding of religious truth differs from person to person.

She promotes unity in diversity both for religious and communal harmony. Women like Astha condemns the violence over religious issues. Shes does not stop working for the manch even when she was targeted by her husband and mother-in-law for voicing against their own religion:

But why go to Ayodhya?... ‘This is all politics, you should not get involved. Besides have you thought about what you are going to protest? Lord Ram’s janamsthan is in Ayodhya, is there any country in the world where the birthplace of their god is not honoured? Hindu tolerance does not mean you accept everything and anything; is this the pride we have in ourselves.’ (MW186)

Astha replies “ But Mummy, if the temple is constructed, thousands of people will die agitating over it...” (186). Her reply to her mother-in-law suggests how deeply she is concern for the unity of the nation. She understands that because of the ideological differences people become victims and create instability in the nation. She tries to enlighten the conventional mindset of her husband as she tries to pull a pamphlet and say: “‘look at the stuff they are publishing. It’s so inflammatory but people fall for it.’ ‘ you should see the stuff they publish against India and Hindus in Pakistan. Why don’t you protest against that?’ ‘I do protest. I happen to think that any religion that incites violence is bad, ours, theirs, everybody’s” (MW 188). The conversation between Astha and her husband reflects Astha’s secular mind and her dream of a state where religion and politics should not be infused to dominate the weaker section. She further suggest that their should not be discrimination against anyone on grounds of faith. This statement of Astha pronounce that she stands for

religion to participate but not dominate to incites violence among people. She imagines a society where all can live fairly and peacefully. Therefore, she decides to go to Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh to protest against the proposed demolition of the Babri-Masjid despite of various objections from her family. Through the character of Astha, Kapur highlights how women are ready to work for the development and unity of the nation. Her way of nation-building is seen through her works for the unity and parity among Hindus and Muslims.

For the sake of the nation Astha has left her children at home to fight for the cause of nation. She says: "To do something you believe in makes other things a little easier"(MW 173). It was never easy for her to leave her home and children but she goes out thinking that there are greater role for women to take up for the nation. Through the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch, Astha, all the artist community and teachers unitedly commended the "Fascist forces in the country, and in failing to take quick action against the threats to the Babri Masjid. Were these threats actualized, secularism would be at grave risk, and communal hatred unleashed on a scale that would be difficult to control. To take no action was tantamount to encouraging social divisions along religious lines. Weaker sections would suffer. This was not to be tolerated. We appeal to the government to do something before it is too late"(MW 175). Astha imagines a unified multi religious India where there is no division between Hindus and Muslims.

Pipeelika, too presents her secular mindset by contesting against the opinion of her mother . She argues with her mother to marry with Aijaz, who is a Muslim " I'am not going to find anyone else. He's intelligent, sensitive, socially committed, a history lecturer, a theatre activist, but all you can see is a Muslim who is going to both divorce me and marry four times"(MW 118). She carries a rational outlook and does not see religion as a divider rather she carries a secular identity. The shifting attitude of women during this time is reflected through Pipeelika's character. Kapur has presented the new kind of women the nation needed

to throw away the ideologies that does not change with time. Pipeelika as a secular person goes for interfaith marriage with Aijaz. Although it was unacceptable for the older generation woman like Pipeelika's mother yet Pipeelika marries Aijaz and later lives as his widow after Aijaz's death.

The nationalist discourse suggested by Kapur in these two novels reflect powerful contributions of women in the field of nationalism. The participation of women in the freedom movement had altered the position of women in the society. It has sown the seed of individualism and independence in them. Kapur has attempted to highlight different perspective to understand women by exploring women's contribution in different aptitude and personality. Her projection of women are not as a mother and wife but as economically, socially and politically active. The newly emerging women of Kapur are deeply committed for the love of their nation and for the emancipation of their self. Kapur presents the different conflicts of ideologies based on religion, gender and nationalism through her characters in both the novels. In *Difficult Daughters* Kapur articulates a nationalism where men and women could participate as equals and in *A Married Woman* Kapur has drawn her focus to build a secularistic nation where all religion would come together to build a nation based on trust, love and respect for one another with their democratic rights. Kapur does not promote or mobilize any religious belief through her character Astha but strongly speaks for communal harmony. Kapur's educated women are influenced by egalitarian ethos thereby working equally especially in political, economical and social fields despite of many conflicts regarding their roles in the society.

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Conflict of Interest

Author declares that they have no conflicts of interest related to this research.