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FORM OF PROTEST AGAINST THE DOMINANT GENDER IDEOLOGY AND
ILLUSTRATION OF SEXUALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE NOVELS OF MANJU KAPOOR

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ABSTRACT

Reading 'Indian English Women Novelists' has always been of great interest to me as the fictional narratives of these writers have given a new dimension to the Indian English literature. They have gained more popularity over the years because they have portrayed the challenges being faced by the Indian women in the contemporary times.

My idea to choose Manju Kapur and write this paper on her novels owes to the reason that she as a writer stands at the middle space' maintaining a balance between tradition and modernity. She is neither a staunch feminist nor a supporter of traditional norms. Her novels present women of the modern times who want to live in freedom, work outside, still want to be wives, mothers, daughters and so on. It is the struggle in and around this sphere of life that her novels have tried to represent being an acclaimed novelist; she has portrayed the pains and passions of middle class Indian housewives with a subtle depth. Reading her novels makes one feel that the women presented by her can be seen around as her depiction of these characters is so close to real life.

However, in this paper I tried to bring out how the author delineates the struggles of her female protagonists against the heterosexual middle class, upper class normative families, through the lens of popular writings that makes her works comparable to that of popular romances. This indicates that all her women characters undertake a journey to liberation, searching their identity in and outside their families but finally end up coming back to the old order. It is this trait of the author that has encouraged me to compare her works to that of popular literature. But in presenting the travails of the Indian women and delving deep to analyze their predicaments that have been fervently debated in the feminist circles, makes one assume that she is somewhat of a feminist too.

I attempted to deal with the issues of protest' where the author like a true feminist lashes out at patriarchal practices. As the solutions offered or the end results are not intimidating but an imitation of the popular novel formula, I have deduced that the author has portrayed her feminist concerns through populist modes.

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INTRODUCTION

It is an attempt made to study the element of protest made by the female protagonists of Manju Kapur in the novels namely *Horne, A Married Woman* and *The Immigrant*. Almost every Indian English Woman Novelist has raised issues of protest' in her novels. The idea here is to see what feminist stance Manju Kapur undertakes to present the struggle of women in her novels.

Contemporary Indian English women novelists have as protagonists women who are educated, career oriented, sensible but oppressed psychologically by the forces of hegemony. As the modern literary theory tends to concentrate on self presentation', women novelists explore the inner conflicts of their women protagonists simultaneously placing them in cultural, political and social constructs. The common issues of protest raised by the women novelists, circle around woman's identity, her struggle against the oppressive institutions of patriarchy.

The major works of probably all Indian women novelists present these issues of protest' in one or the other way along the following parameters-

- They represent the struggle that question the patriarchal prescriptions of a good woman.
- They reject the assigned roles inside the family and society and refuse to follow the traditional paths.
- They revolt against male domination or sexual politics within the institution of marriage.
- They show inherent revulsion to normal physical functions of the body such as menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and procreation.
- They express their revolts against the gender discrimination and fight against many social taboos like child abuse, barrenness and women going out and doing jobs, love marriages and many other issues that concern women aiming towards one objective - that a good woman is no longer passive.
- They voice their concern on social traditions that bind women.

The women novelists aim to present a new woman' who is capable of raising a protest whenever her identity is being thwarted All these anxieties are presented in one or the other way by major women novelists in their works. The emotional sensitivity of Maya in Anita Desai's *Cs, the Peacock* in contrast with her husband's crude rationality, leads her to complete neurosis that shocks the reader. Rhosexual politics in marital relations between Inner and Saroj in Nayantara Sehgal's *Storm in Chandigarh* is another sordid tale of torture that she bears but finally revolts to bow down at his relentlessly unforgiving behavior as Saroj finally unmasks the code of morality and moves on her road to liberation where women have expressed their anguish at the oppressive marital relations and the social traditions that limit women. Similar voices are heard in the repression and marginalization of women affected through traditional institutions like purdah and caging women in the four walls of homes just as in in Ania Hosain's *Sunlight in a Broken Column* and Rama Mehta's *Inside the Havez..* Protest against gender discrimination and sexual stereotyping is explored by Shashi Deshpande's in *That Long Silence and The Dark Holds No Terrors*, and going for inter-race and inter- caste relations mark Arundhati Roy's *The God Of Small Things*. All these novels challenge the existing system of patriarchy, caste, family, religion to protest against the oppressive traditions.

Manju Kapur too deals with similar themes and issues as is evident through the detailed discussion that follows. this chapter examines the spirit of protest against the patriarchal hegemony that the subdued women protagonists undertake in their own individual ways. the three novels under study are *Horne* (2006) *A Married Woman* (2003) and *The Immigrant* (2008).

'Home' - Protest Against The lock in

While everything else in the world has transformed drastically, the status and power of women in relation to men has remained more or less static. This novel is influenced with the bits and pieces that one finds at once so recognizable with all happenings in the joint families - marriages, celebrations, scandals where Manju Kapur unwaveringly focuses the spotlight on the women. A good number of women show their presence in the novel - Rupa, Sona - two childless sisters, their daughters-in-law and in fact the leading character of the fiction Nisha-Sona's daughter born after ten years to her, around whom the second part of the whole narrative rotates.

The leading women characters in the fiction 'Sona' and 'Nisha' in relation mother and daughter, take the reader to the four walls of the 'Horne' the family which is not sweet home. All women in this *Horne* are unhappy women under a lot of stress and tension. Sona of the second generation is stressed because the world around her is changing very fast and Nisha because it is not changing fast enough and she feels that she is trapped. Banwari Lal, the family patriarch, believes in the old ways and is the firm believer of that men work out of the home, women within. Men according to him carry forward the family line, women enable their mission. Apart from Sona and Nisha, who are predicated into the torment of being a woman, is 'Sunita', the daughter of Banwari Lal. Married off in a hurry, without any concern about the suitability of a proper match, as if to remove the burden of the daughter from their shoulder, the residents of *Horne* are least bothered about her well-being in her new home. Her problems are seen as "bad karma" (*Home*, 17).

Her bad karma' reflects in her getting of a bad husband She is married to a man; a drunkard who always has eyes on his wife's rich lineage and coaxes her in all dubious ways to bring money from her father. As long as her father is alive the exchange of gins continues, after him the poor sister is left on the vagaries of brothers and their wives. The sorry creature has a son. She is beaten, harassed and exploited in all possible ways and finally one day, she is killed by the husband for not borrowing money from brother. Her murder is named as an accident in kitchen similar to many dowry deaths in the nation. Her psychologically unbalanced child Vicky, who bears the traumas that his mother silently underwent, is eventually brought back to the family and given to Sona for bringing up the child as she is barren. Sona's inner self cries whenever her barrenness is being commented upon by her mother-in-law, the female patriarch in the home.

All these concerns are essentially of the bourgeois, middle class type of families where childlessness is considered as a curse to a woman. The patriarchal Indian society believes that that a woman is complete only if she provides a male heir to carry the family lineage otherwise she does not deserve to exist. Even if she does so, she is subject to the tortures and humiliations and is looked down with a disregard and does not get the status that she aspires for in the family. Childlessness is a major source of feeling that breeds insecurity, vulnerability and worthlessness among such women.

They often become difficult to tackle because they have volcanoes of protest against not only their bodies but against the society that degrades them. One of these protests is torturing oneself:

"Where could she except to God? Every Tuesday she fasted. Previously she would eat fruit and drink milk once during the day, now she converted to niljal fast. No water from sun-up to sundown. She slept on the floor, abstained from sex, woke up early in the morning, bathed before the sunrise.....in the evening .went to the local temple, buying fruit on the way to distribute to as many as Brahmins as possible." (*Home*, 15)

Sona's protests are her contemplations, her broodings- " Then as she had so often, she lay awake at night, going over her mother-in-law's words, gnawing at them, leaching out of them the last shred of bitterness(*Home*, 19). For the first ten years of her marriage she is childless, which makes her a subject of resentment and pity and some gloating among the other women in the house, it being considered that a woman's prime function is to serve as the vessel that will bring forth the next generation. Sona is made to realize the futility of her existence. Life of middle class families, in this novel is so realistically explained as to how such women are made to feel insignificant when they are subject to the traps of patriarchy. Keeping fasts, visiting 'babas', the holy sages who shall pour blessings on her to conceive has a heavy burden on Sona's psyche. Sona's power as a woman is restored to her by 'Horne' only after she achieves motherhood through Nisha and later through a son, Raju.

Kapur delves deep into the psyche of such "barren" women as the theme of childlessness is frequently explored by distinguished women writers, the finest example being Maya of CW, *The Peacock* who plunges into deep neurosis just because of the emptiness in her life never to recover from it.

Apart from vividly painting her women's inner and outer world, Kapur brings in relationships that do not conform to the social meridian. Nisha is brought up with all conservatism in the 'Horne' with women of all kinds to preach her. Her life is a series the issue of sexual abuse too has been dealt with by many women novelists to reveal the affliction women suffer inside the safe walls of family. The way Kapur raises the issues

and then winds in a hush-hush manner again makes it unclear as to who of the two- Vicky or Nisha is abused as the writer moves on a parallel track of sympathy for both these characters. Vicky's sexual abuse of Nisha is considered to be the lack of love, dejection that he receives from the maternal family and no concern for him after the death of his mother. Confused and uncared for by everyone in the home he becomes the eyesore for Sona, Vicky's foster mother who doesn't ever think of him as a growing boy and treats him as a family attendant to take care of her children. Thus the author gives a justification for his bad behavior. Home, considered as a safe haven, thus becomes the place for psychological and sexual assaults on young girls and boys. This issue can also be taken as a sort of representation of child abuse in general where the writer has tried to study the psyche of the boy as to what leads to these instances in the family, a result of the selfish bounds of middle class conventions.

The next protest raised by Nisha is in the form of her rebellion against the conventions of marriage. She has an inborn desire to be on her own. All this is the result of the sincere efforts made by her uncle to provide her good education and congenial family atmosphere for eleven years. As a result the girl becomes the first woman in the Home to go to a college. A feeling starts pushing her that she is different from rest of the women in family. She has the desire to break all traditions. She dreams outside the set rigid codes of matrimony and maternity of family. In a patriarchal family culture, where women are supposed to remain within the peripheries of home, where family believes in arranged marriages, she protests and dares to marry a boy from a lower caste. She expresses resentment against the kinds of marriages that take place in the family. Raju, her younger brother gets married in the most traditional manner:

" a collection of old fashioned people where Raju is allowed a glimpse of the girl, though his opinion was the least important as every elder of the family believed: " What did the boy know of life, that he should be allowed a decision (Home, 249)

Whereas Nisha, walks off the beaten track' and thinks beyond the frames of an arranged marriage in her family. She asks her Rupa...

" Whatdo you think of love marriages? And Rupa replies in a matter of fact way, without missing a word- "They are very bad. Require too much adjustment."(Home, 196)_

Perhaps she wants to point out that founding a marriage on a single passion that might ebb is bad. There is a great struggle within Nisha's mind when at last her individuality pushes her to stand against her conservative family. She is alone with no one to support her. She protests against all the antiquated notions of her family to marry a low caste boy, Suresh, whose father runs an auto repair shop. Her protest of family traditions over her marriage increases and her resolve to go for a love marriage' is strengthened more and more as the boy dares to meet Nisha's father at his shop. Her going to the college is banned Her movements checked But her decision does not change. When told that the boy is from a low caste, Nisha cries out in despair.

Instead of the radical feminist rejection of patriarchal mores, this text presents the female protagonist's eventual reintegration with the existing social framework but with enhanced awareness achieved through a phase of rebellion and self -scrutiny. The institution of marriage thus offers no space for a woman to articulate her desires. Nisha takes the initiative for love marriage owing to the example of her parents- Yashpal and Sona who get married around thirty years before by their choice. Their imposition on their daughter against her decision for love marriage is beyond understanding It only can be accounted that Yashpal gets married because he is a man and Nisha does not because she is a woman, making her protests fall prey to the idea of heterotopias.

An analysis of Nisha's predication in Home with regard to the protests undertaken by her make us believe that Manju Kapur makes Nisha belong to that category of emerging Indian Women for whom protesting against norms of tradition becomes an immediate necessity to survive and exist. Her stand for love marriage and later on, her crossing over to the domain of entrepreneurship that had hitherto been unattained by any women in the family is an affirmation that women are rising every day and their questions and revolts have for sure to a great extent shaken the hegemonic norms under the patriarchal structure.

A Married Woman- Protest against family conventions

Kapur has undoubtedly touched every sphere of Indian middle class family life. Where as in Horne she breathes out the turmoil of a lower middle -class business family, in '*A Married Woman*' she explores the sensibilities of an upper-middle class woman, Astha, the leading character in this novel.

" Astha was brought up properly as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear." (*A Married Woman*, 1)

The fear that one slip in life makes a girl's life unprotected and vulnerable is injected in every woman from a very young age, is made to loom large on the consciousness of the girl. The infinite ways in which she can be harmed are not specified especially in the Indian bourgeois social set up. Therefore Astha grows up with confusions and conflicts in her mind that result in the form of an initial first crush with a neighborhood boy Runty and an immature physical relationship with Rohan, another boy friend in her life whom she meets in college. Both of these affairs termed as 'illicit' and illegitimate according to the social conventions arise out of the Astha's protests against the kind of family conventions where she finds life stifling Therefore she breathes outside by establishing such relations.

Astha's affairs too can be regarded as a protest against the social conventions within which she is brought up. With her growing up, the parental pressure too mounts up. The girl is expected to be bright in studies and is told to sit for the IAS or else they shall not find a good match .The girl is told to frown less as frowns mislead people about one's inner nature, her body nurtured by walks that start every morning at five .The whole narrative finds the worries of parents regarding their daughter's marriage until it solemnizes- 'Do you know the Shastras say that if the parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?' (*A Married Woman*, 1).

With such an atmosphere around and mother collecting spoon, sheet, sari, jewellery towards the girl's dowry, Astha is brought up with all kinds of preaching at every step. The result is that the girl is not able to breathe openly and think freely. Whenever she sees a boy who appeals her, she dreams of marrying him even when she is in school, falling a prey to her infatuation for Runty, a boy in the neighborhood, studying in a hostel at NDA with whom the exchange of letters continues for more than a year with her mother interfering and putting an end to their relations for ever. Highly dissatisfied by this interference and her mother's continuous vigil over her, the girl again rebels, this time exploring her freedom at the cost of her virginity with a boyfriend Kabul whom she meets in College. He makes her many promises and finally leaves her to suffer again as he flies abroad for higher studies similar to the kind of romance heroes of popular novels. She expresses her protest against all suitors arranged by her parents, rebelliously refuses everyone, locking herself in the bathroom and coming out when the guest goes away, taking deep breath, saying- 'I can't meet anyone like this.'(*A Married Woman*, 21)

Astha's life in *A Married Woman* is again a series of protests throughout her life as presented by the author. Finally she agrees to tie the nuptial knot when she finds the 'Mr. Right' in Hemant whose life at the University in the States has turned him into a liberal thinker. At least, this is what she hopes when Hemant does well as a husband and the marriage falls into the expected pattern and rhythm of conjugality. To her, Hemant seems to be a complete antithesis of a traditional Indian man, she feels proud to think that she will not have to pass through the traumas of oppression that an Indian woman has to suffer. This is evident when she is pregnant. The couple informs her mother who prays the child to be a son. To that Hemant replies:

"But Ma, I want daughter...In America there is no difference between boys and girls. How can this country get anywhere if we go on treating our women this way?"

----- (*A Married Woman*,, 57)

These words by Hemant come like amazement both to Astha and her mother. Astha is happy to have a modern minded husband like him. She does have a daughter, they name her Anuradha and the family prospers until Hemant inexplicably transforms.

Astha is unable to bear the traditional notions and protests-; her restlessness increases because of her insensitive, indifferent and infidel husband who makes her feel that she has lost her worth. But Astha is not prepared to lead a meaningless existence under stress and tensions, uncared for. Her life 'becomes a

metonymic extension of the migraines She is hit by existential angst and thereby, she begins a rebellion, though on tender terms.

Astha's sojourn to lesbianism is one of the daring experiments she conducts to search for her inner self. She has emerged out as a woman who is ready to rebel against all odds that come her way. A strong and headstrong woman, who felt stifled, walks out of her modes of domination her marriage', is daring enough to seek refuge in a lesbian relationship. But the basic equations probably have not changed She is thus a representative of the women of the present times who live with such tensions in family but are aware and strong enough to take recourse to their self-desired path with unexpected turns. They are not repentant. In the present times it has been observed of late that patriarchal heterosexual hegemony is being challenged by queer practices' and present day authors are trying to explore all these possibilities of breaking this oppressive trap finding a way out of it just as Astha of A Married Woman does.

'The Immigrant' A Protest against Hegemony

The women writers of the contemporary times do not limit their writings to the feminine issues and protests but their scope of interest has also included topical issues like Postcoloniality, History, Nation, Diaspora, corruption and politics. It is through their works that they express their discontent, their protest against the issues they take up for their writing. Before attempting to trace the elements of protest in Nina's character in *The Immigrant*, the novel's diasporic associations need to be carefully examined as the novel is mostly placed in Canada and partially in India.

The Immigrant too, is a tale of protest of Nina. The two leading characters in the novel are Nina and Ananda, who barely know each other and are struggling to adapt and cope with the different lifestyles and values they are confronted within a new land after they are married. For 'Nina' it is more difficult:

"The immigrant who comes as a wife has more difficult" time. If work exists for her, it is in future, and after much finding of feet. At present all she is, is a wife, and a wife alone for many, many, hours. There will come a day when even books are powerless to distract When the house and its conveniences can no longer completely charm or compensate." (*The Immigrant*, 124)

Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak in one of her essays her essay *'Problematizing/speaking the Margin'* writes that for woman, Asian and an immigrant in the First World, the experience of marginality is a common factor. The west has used many imperialistic and capitalist market strategies to control the third world. Woman are exploited and suppressed in a double bondage in the colonial and patriarchal system.

The first world's unstated but commonly practiced discriminations are based on race, gender and class. For 'Nisha' and 'Astha' it has been a protest against hegemonic order of control over woman in India, for 'Nina' it is something more than that a triple burden i.e. a woman, an Asian and an immigrant struggling against controls of all sorts of domination She bears it painfully and wages a protest against all these bitter experiences. Finally she decides to live a life of her own.

Living with a widowed mother, Nina earns the family bread as an English lecturer in a college in Delhi. Her mother worries about her getting married in her eyes Nina is a sweet innocent virgin. She does not know and understand the anguish, pain that Nina experiences with her lover Rahul who deserts her when she is in M.A - like all cakes, this one was chewed, marked into pulp and swallowed ((*The Immigrant*, 6).

Humiliated at being rejected she plunges into loneliness, as a form of silent protest until she forgets him with the passing time. As she has many more challenging predications waiting in store for her future, she gets married to an NRI dentist who lives at Halifax, in Canada successfully practicing at his clinic. Hoping that her flight to the West, to a modern land shall provide her a relief from the male dominated culture of her race, and make her join the category of immigrant women', she feels optimistic. Nina is hopeful that an escape from the rigidity of Indian culture will automatically empower her. Though she takes time to adjust to the new culture with formal and dry relations, non-vegetarian food, western clothing- the dislocated, displaced educated Nina chooses a path different from living and standing behind the man.

She is taken in by the beauty of Canada, enjoys the frank company of Ananda, and is wary of becoming a mother. She spends almost more than a year haunting gynecologists' clinics but she cannot carry despite her trying all methods of conceiving. Later she realizes that she cannot conceive due to her husband's

impotency, she is disappointed Ananda's lack of cooperation, his disagreeing to visit gynecologists despairs her. She dreams of their child who shall be born in a new soil' and her affinity with Canada may grow strong. But she is not destined for that. A feeling of isolation, alienation, and worthlessness starts gripping her. She starts brooding, while Ananda refrains from her company. From here develops a sort of misunderstanding between the couple that makes their marriage a relation of conflicts.

Every Thursday they meet. Nina hears of sexual harassment in the work place, of woman having to struggle with housework, child care and a job while the husbands watch T.V, of a mother who suspects her estranged husband has molested their daughter, of a jobless husband who resents every cent his wife makes, of infidelities that come in all guises and justifications.

Nina feels marginalized, exploited by the same male hegemony as every woman in the group is. She also shares her burden of conflicts with Amanda, and yearns to put it down. She starts with her inability to conceive and Ananda's going to California without telling her. His secrecy regarding his cure of impotency makes her more hostile and his false explanations to justify himself pains her. Her words find a tender home' in that group. She feels more alive than she has been ever after reaching Canada in befriending the women of the group. 'How she was going to tight was uncertain, but she hadn't been wrong at all' (*The Immigrant*, 219).

She reads Simone De Beauvoir's 'The Second Sex' and finds it too western, and feels that woman is not a universal category. Meanwhile her husband, after regaining his manliness is busy exploring white women's bodies, straying from one woman to another, Nina adverts registering for a course of a librarian and later finding for her an admirer, Anton. Nina thus protests by moving on a parallel track. The writer explores what happens when both husband and wife try the path of cheating. Nina doesn't wants to become an object of atrocities though it brings a sense of fulfillment and frustration to both. This is how she protests. Through her protests the writer means to say that human beings will go in this world without a sense of satisfaction until they are involved in some meaningful relationship.

Back in Halifax Amanda and Nina have heated discussions not over their inconstancies to each other but because of their misunderstandings. Freshly motivated by the conscious raising group' not to bear any kind of domination, Nina feels that the time has come to walk out of that sordid relation of having a husband and being a wife as a form of revolt against their marriage that has lost its value. Now she doesn't want to go back India but wishes to establish herself independently away from Ananda.

She shuns all kind of domination;

"I need to be myself, she clarified.

'Away from me. Why don't you say it?

Yes, away from you.'

He had anticipated the answer,

But not the pain". (*The Immigrant*, 303)

She packs her bags and ventures on a new path without Amanda as the University of New Brunswick has called her for an interview. Rejecting the hegemonic control over her of her duties as a wife, she finally evolves to be a true individual who can without any discrimination live, thrive all around the globe. Nina of course would make a life for herself and that's truly endearing- a green signal for every woman who wants a space to breathe in a globalised, multicultural, transnational world.

Conclusion

A detailed study of Manju Kapur's three novels with her women protagonists under the theme issues of Protest reveals that her women protagonists protest against the patriarchal hegemony though indifferent modes and different settings. Today's women don't want to live under any sort of control, and that is clear from the three novels under study. A humane world with equality of sexes is the need of the hour and efforts by authors like Manju Kapur fulfil the aspiration of every woman. Nisha's protest against arranged marriage and her daring en tourto entrepreneurship in *Home*, Astha's challenging the institution of marriage' by her desire to be a lesbian in *A Married Woman* and Nina's rejection and shunning of any form of control to her liberation project the fact that Indian women no longer want to be a rubber dolls for others to move as they will. Their own value systems and inner potentiality enables them to resist unjust social pressure.

Manju Kapur has presented an unprejudiced picture of what an Indian woman faces in a social set up that is highly patriarchal. A detailed analysis of the ' issues of protests' in the novels of Manju Kapur has revealed how the author has used the opportunity to present the real picture of the middle class Indian woman and the social conventions that bind her . She has thrown light on the issues concerning women- her identity, her independence, her education, gender discrimination, sexual abuse, childlessness, sexual stereotyping and patriarchal dictatorship with such a keen observation that she may be regarded as a prolific women writer with feminist concerns.

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