
ROLE OF EDUCATION AND CAREER IN WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN MANJUKAPUR'S SELECTED NOVELS

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Abstract:

Manju Kapur is a Delhi-based novelist whose novels deal about the predicament of women in our culture. She depicts her women characters fighting for their 'space' within the limits of patriarchy. They do question their traditional roles and fight for individuality, but remain within the system. In their quest for self-attainment, education and career play a pivotal role. These two weapons may not be able to liberate them completely but do help in revitalizing their spirits. They do retain their dignity and self-respect due to their economic independence. Through this paper, I would like to discuss three of her novels- Difficult Daughters, Home and A married woman in which the protagonists gain emancipation though partially through education and employment.

Keywords: Patriarchy, self-attainment, Emancipation

In India from the Vedic era to the twentieth century, the position of women deteriorated from a state of respect and honor to one of complete subjugation and slavery. But towards the middle of the twentieth century, the slow but steady changes in cultural, social and economic patterns of life expanded and altered the reality of women's situation. The emergence of socio-religious reform movements further improved a lot of women. Education came to be seen as a means of equipping women to be better wives and mothers. Various practices like Sati, polygamy, child marriage, purdah, and female infanticide were seen as cruel and attempts were made to remove them. Reformers like Swami Dayanand, Raja Ram Mohan Roy did much to introduce education to improve a lot of women. But they were confined to the patriarchal framework of marriage and motherhood.

Lala Lajpat Rai, says in an article published in the *Modern Review* in early 1920 that the *Manu Smriti* is the "best-known code of Hindu law". If a girl needed education it was only for her complete evolution to motherhood. They wanted a woman "enlightened" but "dependent". She was given dignity but not freedom. Gandhiji's views on woman education were much wider. He subscribed to the idea of "perfect equality" between the sexes. He also advocated equal privileges for men and women in terms of legal provision and right to property. These continuous and genuine efforts of leaders definitely improved the position of women but the basic values of patriarchy continued to be embedded in the psyche of Indians. Women themselves have contributed to their state by unquestioningly surrendering to their roles and allowing themselves to be controlled and dominated as wives and daughters. They choose to remain devalued persons, both in the home and outside. An ideal woman meant she would remain a devoted wife, caring mother and should be able to lay down her life for the sake of fidelity and chastity.

The last few decades saw the impact of Western thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir(*The Second Sex*, 1952), Betty Friedan(*The Feminine Mystique*, 1963), and Kate Millet (*Sexual Politics*,1970). The movements in the west for equal rights of women on par with men in jobs, education, and votes did affect the movements in India. Reservation in education and jobs have made more and more women come out of the four walls of the kitchen. Better education, employment opportunities, more awareness of female rights and privileges have resulted in a changed perception of the woman and her place in the home and society. While ironically, some parents still see education and employment a secondary option while procuring a prosperous husband remains the topmost priority. But some sociological studies like PromilaKapur's *Love, Marriage and Sex and Marriage in the Working Women in India*, reveal that better education and employment have exposed women to a set of new values which influence their attitude to marriage and their status in society. This 'new woman', educated and financially independent exposed to new ideas, working in widened space beyond the walls of the house, have led to her consciousness of her own individuality. She now seeks companionship. For this, she has to redefine her status within the patriarchal

structure within which she has to operate. Thus modern English literature has this searching exploration of the role and status of women in society.

Difficult Daughters may be termed as a 'feminine Bildungsroman' to begin with but later falls into the groove of male chauvinism and female oppression. It is the story of Virmati, who shows indomitable courage in challenging the authority of her parents and family to marry the man of her choice but miserably fails to assert herself before her lover. Virmati journeys from strength to weakness.

Coming from 'an austere family', she was the eldest of the eleven children. But being the eldest of the eleven progeny of her parents, very little childhood is left for Virmati to spend time studying. She becomes a foster mother to her siblings and a maid to serve her ailing mother Kasturi. Early in the novel it is revealed, "she was so keen to study, but her mother doesn't favor her intellectual pursuits. Kasturi too is eager to train her in female pursuits like stitching, cooking, which would make her a better equipped as the wife. Had it not been for the influence of her cousin Shakuntala, Virmati would end up as another Kasturi confined within the walls of marriage. When Shakuntala visits Virmati and her mother at the hill station where Kasturi is convalescing, she exposes Virmati to a wonderful world of freedom, traveling, entertaining, reading, learning, and attending seminars and conferences. "I want to be like you Behniji", blurts Virmati. Shakuntala who was actually thought of as "the poor, unmarried older cousin", is transformed into a smart, educated, independent woman who is the mistress of her own destiny. In fact, she symbolizes the alternative face of a woman who denies the traditional roles of a mother and wife. Virmati realizes that it is possible to be something other than a wife.

The breakdown of the joint family system is also one of the features of changing times. Virmati is engaged to an engineer. It is postponed due to some reasons. Meanwhile, Virmati gets an opportunity to study further. Being the only girl in the class, Virmati attracts Professor Harish attention. The Oxford-returned professor finds little to share with his uneducated wife. Virmati's thirst for knowledge and love makes her easy prey to the Professor's amorous advances. Her desire to study becomes a bane for her. She gets involved with the Professor who refuses to acknowledge their relationship in public. After repeated urges to marry her, Virmati out of desperation attempts suicide. She is rescued but the engagement is broken. With nothing to do in Amritsar, she is allowed to go to Lahore to continue higher studies. The continuous struggle between her aspirations to study and be independent and the love for Professor is sustained till the end of the novel.

Shulamith Firestone writes in the book *Dialectic of Sex*:

For, love, perhaps even more than childbearing, is the pivot of women's oppression today. (1970, 126)

Simon de Beauvoir calls it the curse that lies heavily upon women. The relation between a man and a woman in love may be described as that of the colonizer and the colonized. Men occupy the position of masters in love whereas women lose whatever little individuality is allowed them in a patriarchal situation.

Virmati though was fond of studies from the beginning, it is the influence of the Professor which implores her to cancel her engagement to an engineer and urge the parents to continue her studies. She pursues the right dream for the wrong reasons. Education is her opportunity to continue with the professor, who has enticed her. Virmati, hungry for love and knowledge, falls an easy prey for Professor's attention. Being a married man he knew how to exploit a young maiden.

Eldest and a girl, she was finely tuned to neediness, it called to her blood and bones. He spread his anguish at her feet and demanded that she do with him as she pleased. (50)

While love brings happiness to the Professor, Virmati loses the little peace of mind that she had earlier. The Professor coaxes, cajoles and pressures her to refuse to marry but conveniently pretends to be happily married with a kid. Virmati, in a frenzy, tries to commit suicide. It is averted timely. She is then send off to Lahore to lessen anymore ignominy.

It is in Lahore "where everybody with brains in their head went to study", that Virmati undergoes trials and tribulations of love. Harish follows her to Lahore and entices her to physical proximity in Lahore. With no family to object, Virmati, knowing that her love would not get a social sanction, indulges in an illicit love affair. Swarnalata, her friend, represents her foil. Swarnalata is a woman committed to freedom of women and is ruled by a head, unlike Virmati who is ruled by heart. Swarnalata represents the culmination of a liberated woman who is committed, articulate and takes decisions which aren't detrimental to her material or emotional progress. Later in the novel, we find her married to a like-minded person and happily settled, unlike Virmati who struggles all through her life for her love. Virmati becomes pregnant. Harish refuses to have the baby. She is forced to go through the trauma of abortion alone. Thus we find her torn in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day.

With Swarnalatha, Virmati attends the Punjab Women's Conference. Here she meets and sees women who exude confidence and strength and are vociferous about their ideas on the meaning of the flag, the importance of freedom for the development of human spirit, impact of war, human rights, strikes, academic freedom etc. Virmati fails to concentrate on these issues with her heart lingering on the intimate moments she shared with the Professor. Virmati induces herself to wake up from the 'stale dream' of her longing for intimacy with Harish, to envisage the advancement of her strength and self-respect through the avenue of education and professional competence. Swarnalata warns her about the frivolousness and unpredictability of such affairs.

Ironically, Virmati, in an effort to come out of patriarchal norms of marriage and motherhood through education inadvertently is enmeshed in another such colonial relation of an illegitimate affair.

After completing her B.T., Virmati gets a job as Principal of a girl's college in Nahan. Here she renders her services to her best. But here too Harish brings disgrace to her by visiting her often and she is forced to search job elsewhere. Thus not only education but career too is disturbed by love. On her way to Calcutta, she accidentally meets Harish's friend and he forces the marriage between them.

Vandita Mishra says about Veermati's marriage to the Professor:

Even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into new ones. While her relationship with the Professor provides an escape from a loveless marriage, it is itself furtive and claustrophobic—Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow. (*The Pioneer*, 1998).

Manju Kapur's novel *Home* is about the joint family system. The Banwari Lal family belonged to a class whose skills had been honed over generations to ensure prosperity in the marketplace of Cloth business. Their marriages augmented this steady flow of prosperity. It is against such backdrop of that Nisha, the daughter in the Banwari Lal's household tries to prove her identity and economic independence. It is a house where women were expected to cook, serve and satisfy the male members, do 'karvachouth' or 'savitrikatha' for the well-being of them. The whole existence of women folk was for the benefit of the earning member. Manju Kapur comments, "...This is the life of a woman to look after her home, her husband, her children and give them food she has cooked with her own hands." (p127)

It reveals the life of women, their struggle for basic rights, the quest for identity and survival. With education, they become aware of their self-reliance which is proved in concern with a new generation in Banwarilal's household. With the passing of each generation, we find women are more educated. When compared to Sona and Sushila, the first generation 'bahus', next-generation daughters-in-law—Pooja, Asha, and Seema are more educated and liberated. Nisha fights within these constraints to prove herself with the help of education and a career of her own apart from the family business. She rather proves better than her brother Raju in carving a career for herself setting gender discriminations at rest.

Nisha is born to Sona after ten years of marriage after a lot of prayers and pilgrimages. Soon with the birth of her brother, Nisha is neglected. Sona is interested to groom her daughter which would make her a good wife. Moreover, Nisha was a mangli which meant a difficult task for getting a groom. She is desisted from playing in Sun lest her skin gets tanned which would bring down her prospects in the marriage market. Being sexually abused by Vicky at a

tender age, Nisha undergoes trauma. She is sent to her aunt's house for a change. It is in Rupa's house, she tastes the fruits of education and independence. Being childless, Rupa and her husband PremNath give much-needed attention to Nisha's upbringing. Premnath brought many books from second-hand shops like Stories from Ramayana and Jatka Tales. She listened to them sitting in Rupa's lap. Nisha followed them with interest and respect. It is with his insistence, Nisha joins a good school and completes her school education. She is clever and learned things quickly. Nisha's mother Sona, however, isn't interested in her education. Her aim was to train Nisha to become a good wife and mother. Sona represents the patriarchal mindset in women for whom fitting into the roles ordained to them is more important than freedom and individuality. Soon she is brought home to learn things suitable for a wife. When Nisha is told to fast for her future husband, the educated Nisha protests. Her mother is annoyed,

'How are you going to get married, madam, if you do not make sacrifices?'

'In school nobody does it'.(P92)

It is instilled in the psyche of the child that marriage is the sole occupation of a girl. Thus the girl who is dark skinned had fewer chances of getting a good groom. Education and career were options for such an unfortunate girl. Being a mangli, Nisha too had to wait for her turn to get married. Meanwhile, a college education is seen as an alternative. Her mother Sona is against her education. Here again, Rupa interferes on behalf of Nisha:

"If anything happens in the girl's later life, she is not completely dependent"(P140)

She continues in a careful emotional manner:

"It would be a shame to not educate her further. Let her do English Honour, not too much work reading story books."(141)

Nisha joins DurgaBai College. This is the next generation woman who is trying to prove her identity in a patriarchal setup. Here not much discrimination is not made between Raju and Nisha. Equal opportunities are given to male and female genders. In college, Nisha makes friends with Pratibha, an ambitious girl, who joins NCC programme hoping that it would lead to a Government job with the police.

Nisha also meets Suresh, a student of Khalsa College of Engineering. They often meet in University and canteens. After some such meetings, it is Pratibha who alerts Nisha about the secrecy of Suresh who was hiding his particulars like caste, family background etc. Ultimately Nisha does fall in love with Suresh. Nisha becomes so bold that she skips classes to roam with Suresh in University lawns, film theatres, sipping coffee in Coffeeshouses. Suresh influences her to change her looks. She cuts her hair like Suriya, a Bollywood actress of those days. She realizes her studies are being affected,

With the loss of classes, Nish finds it difficult to get the first division. Suresh helps her with,

St. Stephens Tutorials which results in securing first division which surprises all.

But it turns out that Suresh was of a lower caste and his family was not very keen to have the marriage. Towards the third year, her shortage of attendance is known by the family members and the affair is out. She faces ridicule and house arrest. Nisha fails to see Suresh's timidity. With some money, Suresh vanishes from her life. Nisha is shattered by Suresh's back up.

Even feminists feel that love is venom in disguise. Simon de Beauvoir calls it the curse that lies heavily upon women, ' Love, almost always, is narcissistic and as such it allows the woman to play at best the role of man's echo'(p669)

Cupid, himself, is a male who victimizes women. The initial halo and thrill which engulfs love totally takes women into control and makes them bequeath their 'value' and 'identity' under its influence. Nisha who could go against the patriarchal norms falls prey to love and foregoes her struggle for independent identity and trust of the family members.

Her reputation is harmed and many a suitor rejects her. She wanted to leave the house to join an ashram where she could live with dignity and respect. Astonished father Yashpal asks if she would like to read further. Nisha rejects. She muses 'I do not want to study, what has it ever got me?' Only Suresh, betrayal, pain to her family and herself.

She can't sit at home waiting for prospective grooms to marry her being a mangli and wrought with skin disease. Her resentment is clear,

She toys with the idea of fashion designing having done English honors. For a few days, she joins a play school. But she finds it uninteresting and unchallenging. And moreover, the pay was a pittance.

Rupamasi becomes her role model. She would like to start a business of making salwar suits like Rupamasi. She pleads:

"Give me a chance to show you what I can do"(p287)

Yeshpal manages to arrange a place for work and twenty-five thousand rupees to start her business on condition of return.

Nisha enjoys the panic, the excitement, the challenge faced in business. She feels pity for teachers. Nisha proves to be a good businesswoman. Nisha arranges tailor Mohseen Khan and assigns important issues with RupaMasi. Her father suggests calling her line, "Nisha Creation". In a short time, she creates goodwill among the customers and earns profits. She works hard, takes risks and builds trust in the Readymade cloth Market. She enjoys the challenges and makes her presence felt. And her listlessness is gone and she becomes lively as in her college days

The sorrow which ensued marriage was lessened with the business where she got uncomplicated pride and pleasure. In a grueling, competitive sphere, Nisha proves herself with nothing beyond a small loan and a few initial introductions to big shops. She repays the

twenty-five thousand loan not to become a burden on the family. Yashpal understands her daughter's growth though not in the anticipated direction of marriage and kids. He also felt she was more intelligent, methodical and independent than Raju. But he feels she should get married because 'Her fulfillment lay there, no matter how successful her business was'(P295)

One day she is shown a picture of Arvind, a widower, and a mangli. She doesn't attach much importance to whom she was marrying. No matter whom she marries she was sure to come back to her creation' every single day which has given her dignity and respect. She prefers to talk to Arvind about her intentions before marriage.

"I work", she offered

"I know", (Arvind)

"I would like to continue".

She adds, "It is called Nisha Creations". "Lots of women are doing ready made. I see small boutiques operating from houses all over Daryaganj". "I cannot give it up", she confided, (p303)

In a way, her success in business leads her to marry and fulfill her quest for home. Arvind is marrying for the second time after the accidental death of his first wife. They get registered marriage and Nisha gets entrapped into the inescapable cage of 'Home'. Two days after marriage she comes back to look after business. Family members object to be serious about business since she is married.

'Of course, she has to be serious, even more than before. Orders will not wait because she is married.' (P319)

After marriage, she finds working wasn't that easy. Her parents had laid down her working as a condition for marriage, she finds the conditions melting into nothing. She had a duty towards her mother-in-law, duty 'towards whom had been bred into her blood and bone.' (323)

But pregnancy again halts her business. 'Her body again decided her fate.' (P324)

Her body doesn't allow her to concentrate on businesses. Rupamasi talks about her caliber and confidence in restarting business at any time after she would be fruitful and have sons. She consoles:

"You know beti; you can always restart a business you have shown a flair for it. But this time with your baby, this will not come again" (334)

As Clara Nubile points out in the *Danger of Gender* (2003) for an Indian woman, " Being a woman in modern India means to be entrapped into the inescapable cage of, 'being a woman-wife-mother'.... (Clara, 2003:12)

After ten months of her marriage, Nisha delivers twin-one girl and one boy. Pooja takes over the business with a condition that the name Nisha creations would remain the same. Thus

through a failed love affair, her struggle for emancipation through education and career, Nisha shows modern trends but ultimately by getting molded into the traditional role of a wife-daughter-in-law, mother, she comes back a full circle into the 'Home'.

In a *Married Woman*, it is the struggle of Astha against the shackles of phallogocentric society. Almost all the female characters of Kapur are educated, aspiring individuals caged within the confines of a conservative society. They struggle between tradition and modernity but succeed in voicing their identity.

Astha was the only child of her parents. Her mother, in a traditional way, saved all cutleries and jewelry for her marriage. She believed her duty ended when Astha got married. Astha didn't believe in all 'that stuff'.

'Her education, her character, her health, her marriage, these were their burdens'(P01)

Her father believed in the new woman who would be strengthened by education. At least once a day he said to her, why don't you study?(p2)

Her interest in maths was miserable and it disheartened her father.

'You worthless, ungrateful child. Do you know how much money I spend on your education?'(2)

Astha's interests lay in brushing and painting. Their parents were worried that art had no future. They pinned hopes on her to sit for IAS and find a suitable groom there. Her father was a government servant, meagrely paid and dissatisfied. He didn't want his daughter to be like him.

'You have so much potential, you draw, you paint, you read, you have a way with words, you do well academically, the maths is a little weak, but never mind, you must sit for the competitive exams. With a good job comes independence.'(p4)

Astha then felt his words boring. After his death, she realized the efficacy of his words when she felt suffocated in the marriage.

After two failed crushes, Astha marries a foreign returned MBA. In honeymoon, she pens down her feelings in a poem. Hemanth looks and frowns,

'They say a picture's worth a thousand words. But this is not a picture'(p41)

Hemanth appreciates her imagination and intelligence. Astha hopes he would encourage her becoming a poetess and a painter. Little does she realize that she would be molded into the roles of a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother too soon. After the initial euphoria of courtship dies away, listlessness enters Astha's life. She gets bored of waiting for Hemanth to come home. She had help in the house, her in-laws were not demanding and hence the restlessness creeps in. Everyone considered teaching job suitable for her since her household duties will not suffer

'As a teacher, you will earn some money, but you will only be out half the day so the home will not suffer'(47)

With talents like writing and painting her father thinks journalism would be a suitable career for her. But after marriage, it is the husband who decides the career of a woman. Hemanth

convinces her, 'Journalists have to stay out late, they have very odd hours. We must see about a teaching job. You read quite a lot'(P47)

Thus with the approval of in-laws as a good time pass, she joins as a teacher in St. Anthony's School. But with growing demands of kids, job and household responsibilities she finds it suffocating. Hemanth meanwhile changes from "an all-American to an all Indian one". He makes Astha realize the difference between man's work and 'woman's work'. He concentrated only on his business, its expansion, and foreign tours. Astha slowly became a single mother. When she brought it to the notice of Hemanth, he doesn't mince words to tell her to resign her job if she finds it demanding. He wanted a successful career at the cost of family. But Astha had to sacrifice her inner urge for an identity apart from mother-daughter-in-law- wife image. She does think of resigning her job from time to time unable to fit into the tight schedule. But school meant not just work and money but her independence. Though monetarily she had fewer benefits, she enjoyed her identity as a person apart from being Mrs. Hemanth. She had matured a lot. She had changed from being a woman who earned for love to a woman who loved independence. She could not give away the pleasure of 'interacting with minds instead of needs.' Her the job gave her appreciation and recognition of her talents which were grossly neglected at home. She could be more than a decorative or sexual 'teddy' for Hemanth.

Astha is ostensibly torn between her duties for family and job. One gave her the sense of autonomy and the other gave her security at the cost of individuality. She is the representative of the modern woman who dares to come out of the four walls of the house but is chained by family responsibilities. Because in Indian culture, it is the 'woman's job' to take care of household things and kids even if a woman has a career of her own. Men, even if devoid of career have the luxury of shunning these house responsibilities.

But juggling a job and the demands of growing children, the pressure at home, silent disapproval of in-laws and the attitude of an unresponsive and indifferent husband, Astha gets recurrent migraines and a feeling of isolation. In a frantic search to retain her individuality amidst negative circumstances, Astha undergoes a lot of physical and psychological stress which result in the development of terrible headaches.

Hemanth, "MBA. foreign returned(33)" initially helps Astha in bathing the baby, unlike traditional Indian husbands. Slowly he expects a male offspring from Astha in a typical patriarchal mindset. Astha reminds him that the sex of the child is determined by a man's chromosome and not that of her's. Hemanth is rebuffed by her knowledge. He complaints 'You are always reading', said Hemant coldly.

'I am sorry. Does it bother you?'

'It fills your head with unnecessary ideas. Let us first not have a son and then we will see. Keep it simple. All right?'(P61)

Thinking, questioning, educated woman is a threat to male egoism.

A painting drawn by Astha is sold for twenty thousand rupees and she is happy about it. Hemanth plans a Goa trip and the ticket was arranged by the money earned by Astha's painting. It was thoroughly out of season and avoidable. Astha likes to buy a carved silver box which would cost two or three thousand rupees. But Hemanth crushed down the proposal saying, "You must be out of your mind,"(165). The tone of refusal hurt her. She was an earning woman but she had no say in how her money was spent. She couldn't object to his squandering her money on airline tickets. She felt, "limped, attacked and baffled.'(167) A woman may have a career and economic independence. But money matters were decided by men.

A few months later, Hemanth brings home a new dish for their TV. Astha is horrified since the cost of the dish was at least eight times to that of the silver box which she was denied in Mapusa. She could not murmur for her longings as children and business were Hemanth's undisputable priority.

This woman though educated and employed often find it difficult to come out of the roles defined for her in a phallogocentric society. Through the study of three novels, one can say that woman is empowered by education and career to a certain extent but not totally. She is still bound by tradition and patriarchal values.

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