

**BROTHERS BY MANJU KAPUR – A REVIEW**

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**Abstract:**

Manju Kapur has always excelled in unfolding family drama through most of her novels. She has an edge over other writers of her period in describing the power structures within the family which are at once constructive and destructive to individual's entity and growth. The novel is divided into three parts---Tapti, Virpal/Himmat, and Mangal. In the first section we see Himmat Gaina Singh's hospitalization in ICU and his subsequent death. The anguish of the family and public, in general, are presented in detail. Virpal is sheltered by upper caste Gaur Sahib who dies leaving a small fortune to start a business. He thus becomes a self-sufficient businessman in town. But his endeavors to dabble with politics meet with limited success as he has no 'connections' and is not of 'upper caste' He joins Bharat Jagrit Sabha which seeks to build a strong nation through training youth in yoga and Hindu dharma. It has a lot of resemblances to RSS. Dhanpal returns a changed man from the battlefield. Himmat Singh displays his magnanimity by allotting Mangal a petrol bunk which would provide a constant source of income to the family. Mangal proves to be a failure again by being over ambitious and seeks Himmat's financial assistance. There are many semblances between the fiction and fact of Pramod Mahajan's life. Pramod Mahajan too had humble beginnings. He joined RSS, became a student leader, went to jail protesting against Emergency, organized Lal Krishna Advani's Rath Yatra, contested the Lok Sabha elections in 1984, went on to become defense minister in Atal Bihari Vajpayee's cabinet. He also held the post of Information and Broadcasting Minister. He was shot dead by his brother Pravin Mahajan on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2006 and died on May 2006.

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Manju Kapur has always excelled in unfolding family drama through most of her novels. She has an edge over other writers of her period in describing the power structures within the family which are at once constructive and destructive to individual's entity and growth. Most often the equations within the family are affected by politics and economic factors which shape the destiny of the individuals. Her novels are often faithful documentation of the actual happenings in the society.

*Brothers* are one such latest novel of Manju Kapur which is camouflaged in the form of suspense thriller by starting with the murder of a Chief Minister in office by his own brother. The events which lead to it are presented in the form of the family saga in the next three hundred odd pages. Manju Kapur declares in the narration, "Never before had a chief minister been killed while in office. Comparisons to the Mahatma were made, comparisons that some said were excessive. But faced with murder, the excess was deemed only polite" (p17 ) Comparisons can definitely be made to politics before the Independence when it was service oriented, and present-day politics which have become the shortcuts to power and wealth. This is shown in the following pages where the victim Himmat Singh China's growth from 'the son of the soil' to the chief minister of state is described at length. The ambition, drive, and determination of Himmat Singh and his unscrupulous ways to gain power leave us flabbergasted and one wonders if Mangal Singh who shot his brother has really done a heinous crime.

The novel is divided into three parts---Tapti, Virpal/Himmat, and Mangal. In the first section we see Himmat Gaina Singh's hospitalization in ICU and his subsequent death. The anguish of the family and public, in general, are presented in detail. It is through the wife of Himmat Singh that we come to know of the jealousy angle which might have led to the murder. The reader is left puzzling at Tapti's soft corner for the victim of her husband's target. She detests her husband's thoughtless action and the effect it has on her two daughters who can't even go to college where innumerable questions are asked about their family. But Tapti shows her 'loyalty' to her husband by hiring her brother Ram Prasad as a lawyer for her husband's acquittance. She is humiliated at Himmat Singh's house by the sister-in-law. She secretly has the last view of the dead leader musing 'You have gone, but what about me'?(18) It gives an inkling into the affair between Tapti and her brother-in-law exposing another angle for the murder. It appears like a different form of 'honor killing' by a fierce Jat.

The second section 'Virpal/Himmat' actually describes the growth of Gaina family through two generations. We have two pairs of brothers –Virpaland Dhanpal, Himmat Singh and Mangal Singh which force a comparison between them. The story unfolds in the village of Lalbanga in Rajasthan which is divided into the caste lines of Jats, Rajputs, Bhils, Yadavs, Gujjars, Malis, pitted against each other. Virpal the elder brother is attracted by national politics of Satyagraha and Dandi march. He wishes to be of some service to the nation. His exit from the village is hastened by a local feud with Rajputs. He is thrashed for no valid reasons. He escapes to the town of Ajmer to make himself useful to the nation. Dhanpal is

left behind and in course of time gets enlisted in the British Army to fight against Germans in Asia.

Virpal is sheltered by upper caste Gaur Sahib who dies leaving a small fortune to start a business. He thus becomes a self-sufficient businessman in town. But his endeavors to dabble with politics meet with limited success as he has no 'connections' and is not of 'upper caste'. He joins Bharat Jagrit Sabha which seeks to build a strong nation through training youth in yoga and Hindu dharma. It has a lot of resemblances to RSS. Dhanpal returns a changed man from the battlefield.

His mild nature is transformed into rough, temperamental one owing to the bruises of the war experiences. Both brothers are married in childhood. Their wives Gulabi and Mithari represent the marginalized women with no voice. They follow the purdah system. They are meant for sex, procreation and all the domestic chores. Their life is blessed if they beget 'son' and are 'thrashed' if they go against the menfolk. The sister bonding between Gulabi and Mithari reflects feminist consciousness to a certain extent. Untimely death of Virpal's son Kishen in an accident impels Dhanpal to sacrifice his eldest son to replace his lost son's place. The protests of his wife Gulabi are not considered at all. Mangal is left to take over his father's mantle in the village. But Mangal is restless to leave the village and follow Himmat to the city. His belligerent attitude annoys Himmat till the end. He advises Mangal to study a little before he can make himself worthy. But Mangal's interests lie elsewhere. He wished to climb the ladder of success rather too fast and taking the crutch of his elder brother.

Himmat meanwhile proves to be a promising student and a 'natural leader'. Apart from academics and public life, he successfully woos and indulges in incestuous relation with his dead cousin's wife. He becomes instrumental in the girl's absconding out of fear of public shame. Himmat doesn't even know the name of the girl until she disappears from his life and the house. Such acute marginalized women inhabit the lives of the men. Himmat fathers a son from his legal childhood wife in village but shoulders no responsibility of being a parent. Out of callousness he even doesn't attend naming ceremony of his son. He becomes the student leader in the university after the murder of a 'Rajput student'. He sees the local IPPP leader Bishnoi Sahib as a passport for his future political life. He does all menial work of taking care of Bishnoi Sahib during his tours. He knew connections mattered a lot in shaping one's political career. Being married he unscrupulously influences Bishnoi's daughter into marrying him. By divorcing his wife in the village, he marries Bishnoi's daughter and wins a ticket as the party nominee for elections. His hard work and shrewd political acumen bring him to victory. Thus Himmat rises as a 'Jat leader' unseen in Rajasthan's political history. His unprecedented success sows the seeds of discord between the brothers. Mangal feels neglected and left out.

Himmat meets 'Tapti in a college function who comes to garland the young minister. He is instantly attracted by her beauty and education. He sends his wife to be the bride of his younger brother Mangal. Tapti is attracted by the halo of the elder brother and marries Mangal hoping he would be similar. But Mangal's uncouth and harsh ways horrify her. Mangal feels treacherously kept away from the politics by his brother. He concentrates on cement factory on the outskirts of Ajmer. But his impractical plans and unintelligent investments put him in huge debts. He is forced to sell it to Dalmias. His failure in business forces Tapti to opt for civil services to fend for the family. Himmat Singh exploits the disillusionment and loneliness of Tapti by initiating a clandestine affair. Tapti too gives in to his passionate longings. The desperation of bearing the brute(Mangal) induces the beauty(Tapti) to get involved with the brain( Himmat Singh)

Himmat Singh displays his magnanimity by allotting Mangal a petrol bunk which would provide a constant source of income to the family. Mangal proves to be a failure again by being over ambitious and seeks Himmat's financial assistance. Himmat Singh, now the Chief Minister of Rajasthan, out of fear of public disgrace refuses to help. Mangal feels ditched. Meanwhile the affair ceases due to the busy schedule of Himmat. Moreover Himmat appears as a person who would just indulge in intimacy without emotions attached as he steals women of others—earlier Kishen's wife and now Mangal's wife.

In an unexpected turn of events, Mangal discovers the adultery and true to his impulsive character picks a pistol and shoots his brother. The last section of the novel Mangal deals with the frustrations of Mangal and his subsequent murder of his brother. He remains unapologetic for his crime and surrenders. Kapur says at the outset of the novel," this can happen, look at the Mahabharat, Jats are like this only, quick to kill."(6)

The story also mirrors the sea change in politics over the decades. The motto of Virpal to join politics was to serve the country. Himmat's drive to join politics has been the lure of instant success, luxury, and power. The selfless service of earlier leaders is replaced by goondalism, murders, liquor, prostitutes, bribes, casteism, connections, and the unethical means to woo voters. It is predominantly a man's game where women whether educated like Tapti or uneducated, docile women like Gulabi or Mithari, function at the marginal level and serve the purpose of filling the sexual and emotional lacunae in man's life.

The title 'Brothers' is also suggestive of the difference in two sets of brothers spanned over two generations. There is deterioration not only at the political and social level but on a personal level too. Virpal and Dhanpal like Ram-Laxman stood for each other during success and failure, through hardships and sacrifices. But Himmat fails to be the ideal brother and Mangal too is smitten by jealousy of Himmat's success. Though Mangal is guilty of fratricide, Himmat too is guilty of poaching his wife. The meteoric rise of Himmat is eclipsed by Mangal's ghastly act. It is a story of how the ambitions of 'sons of the soil' go awry and are met with tragedy. Mangal sums up," I have ended where I started"(52) amidst cows in Tihar Jail. However high a man may rise, his roots pull him back.

There are many semblances between the fiction and fact of Pramod Mahajan's life. Pramod Mahajan too had humble beginnings. He joined RSS, became a student leader, went to jail protesting against Emergency, organized Lal Krishna Advani's Rath Yatra, contested the Lok Sabha elections in 1984, went on to become defense minister in Atal Bihari Vajpayee's cabinet. He also held the post of Information and Broadcasting Minister. He was shot dead by his brother Pravin Mahajan on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 2006 and died on May 2006.

Manju Kapur deftly spins the stories of the rise and fall of the 'Jat brothers' against the backdrop of national politics. Earlier novels too had mention of politics but the involvement and growth of the protagonist entirely in politics are what sets *Brothers* apart. In this way, she has ventured into the male bastion of political writings with a man as a central character. The language is highly loaded with translations of Hindi idioms which give a cultural feel of Rajasthan. One wonders if such experimentation in language could succeed so well in telling an Indian story in an essentially Indian way.

#### References:

- Brothers by Manju Kapur