

The Interconnectedness of Gender and Education in the novels of Manju Kapur

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Taught from their infancy that beauty is woman's scepter, the mind shapes itself to the body, and, roaming round its gilt cage, only seeks to adorn its prison.(58-59)

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I do not wish them (women) to have power over men, but over themselves.(81)

-Mary Wollstonecraft

With the increasing number of feminist studies on the changing roles and status of women, studies on the exploration and meaning of gender have gained paramount importance. Feminist research has revealed that gender plays an important role in shaping basic functioning style of a society (Torri, 2009). Gender has been defined as by many feminists, as a concept evolved around reproductive differences of individual that shape's societal relationships, identities and meanings (Connell, 1989). Gender as a fundamental principle underlying societal behaviours affects major areas of life like work, family, sexuality which are organized on gender principles and the interests of power, hierarchy and privilege. The paper aims to tailor the interconnectedness of gender and education in the Indian context.

Grappling between unrealistic expectations of the society and individualistic interests, women in India have been constantly facing and fighting gender discrimination. Not only it is an inherent right of women to be educated, but also it is a social imperative as well; else succeeding generations would inherit their parent's ignorance instead of their wisdom. According to VrindaNabar, in India, discrimination based on "gender" begins right at the birth, or even before it. However, the societal preoccupations carry on the war between the sexes further and stretch and spill it in every aspects of life. From earliest times the gender discrimination was operative in several aspects. But the extent of the insistence on such distinction, as being historically and traditionally prescribed and therefore indisputable, prevails even in the present day situation. Such sanction reinforces other prejudices and works towards limiting the freedom of choice girls have in most cases.

Gender can be defined as a description of roles, activities and responsibilities assigned to men and women in a given society, culture, community or time. It also refers to the expectations of people from someone, because either they are female or male. Men and women are expected to perform the fixed roles assigned to them by the society and in this prescription women assume lower status. As a typical patriarchal society men tend to control over the socioeconomic, political and reproductive aspects of life and women are deprived of autonomy, tightened by male domination, hold subordinate position. Being brought up in a patriarchal society controlling women is perceived as a birth right from men, which is the main reason for violence against women apart from the social customs which have been put in place by men. Even women in most societies tend to hold the same discriminatory views about themselves which in turn leads to: illiteracy and economic dependency, low employment level, low status of women, and become victim of harmful traditional practices. Many women who belong to higher caste face oppression in many aspects of life and many times do not come out in public due to the fear of losing face. Ironically, women educated or earning more than their spouse are at a higher risk of domestic violence, as the spouse would see a better social status of his wife as a threat to his dominance (Yick, 2001). Indian society known for its patriarchal orientation is one of the prime reason, for widespread violence against women irrespective of their social status, which manifests itself in low literacy rates, high female mortality rates, deaths resulting from domestic abuse, high female malnutrition, etc. Long rooted social customs like dowry, devdasi, purdah make violence against women more prevalent. While some of the customs affect women specifically from the lower caste, others affect women in general irrespective of their position with regard to caste, social and economic status.

In a society dominated by patriarchal ideologies women in India have been struggling to create an identity for themselves apart from being known as a daughter, wife or a mother (Razvi, and Roth, 2010). As a result of their multiple identities depending upon their caste, religion and socioeconomic background, some women have experienced profound forms of discrimination and unfortunately are considered as outliers.

Decision making between couples is not carried out in a gender neutral environment. Biological and social factors do not function separately but there is a dynamic interaction among these factors affecting women in all aspects of life. Gender issues function at household, community and national level and adhere in society's social, cultural, economic and political system. Men are controlling over economic, political and reproductive life where as women are expected to be submissive, obedient, respectful and vulnerable to abusive treatments. This division of role and expectation favours one sex and victimize the other counterpart. Obviously the party at the disadvantage wing are women. As a result of gender notion and discrimination women have been suffering in many societies and it is one of the burning issues that needs to be addressed commonly across boundaries and value disciplines.

Manju Kapur is one of the most renowned women writers of the contemporary era in India. She not only portrays the vulnerable condition of women in the Indian society but also delineates how they are being kept ignorant about education and emancipation. In her novels she gives vent to the gender discrimination still overtly prevalent in the field of education. A study of few feminist theorists has also been included to expose how patriarchy creates havoc in the lives of women by denying proper education. With the British invasion, Indian men became aware of women education but the enthusiasm died out half way. So even after so many years of Indian independence, the condition of women has barely changed. Manju Kapur's novels circumscribe the condition of women education since independence till the present era.

Manju Kapur, in her novels, has tried to divulge the various ways in which patriarchy relegates woman to the periphery and curb female freedom and independence. The discriminating patterns of education proffered before the "sons" and the "daughters" baffle us. The girl's education is a trap to hunt down a good husband and become a perfect wife and daughter-in-law representing "Indian womanhood". Thus, marriage is the ultimate institution where all women should enter after the successful completion of education. Human are the products of socialization they behave in a way society expects them to behave i.e their upbringing dominates their life style. Girls are brought up to conform, to learn how to cook, marriage is primary and job secondary. Also the female has to marry and bear children earlier. As a consequence of this social approval boys become more independent and more reliant upon internal standards of excellence in achievement situations. While girls do not expect to achieve, they underestimate their academic abilities. Generally, girls socialize to be more dependent, more conformist and more vulnerable to interpersonal rejection than boys. However, there is no difference in intellectual level given the same comparable incentives women's could do as well as men in any kind of mental activities. Moreover, the previous biased educational system favours men and disfavors women. Kate Millett's observation in *Sexual Politics* is in league with the assumptions of the advanced nations:

Traditionally patriarchy permitted occasional minimal literacy to women while higher education was closed to them. While modern patriarchies have, fairly recently, opened all educational levels to women, the kind and quality of education is not the same for each sex. This difference is of course apparent in early socialization but it persists and enters into higher education as well.(2000:42)

The son is free to aspire for higher education, or even foreign education. But when it comes to the daughter, she is educated largely as a concession to a superficial social change, or no education at all. With the independence of the country, the in raid of westernized education system swept the social heads. Thus the melodrama of educating the daughters of the family came in vogue. When marriage failed to work, only then the daughters were allowed to pursue their higher studies. However, the western philosophy of individualism was never allowed to be nurtured during the course of education. This shocking state of education for a daughter has been reflected in the writings of the contemporary writers and Manju Kapur is one of them.

In *Difficult Daughters* (1998) Virmati is found boasting before Ganga about the family trend of educating the girls: "My mother, my masi, all studied. It is the rivaz in our family," says Virmati proudly. Even now my father keeps getting my mother books and magazines to read" (*Difficult Daughters*, 36). The limitation of such education is divulged when Virmati herself tries to go for higher studies. Her mother Kasturi regrets sending her to school which she feels has robbed Virmati of her reasons altogether.

In a family, the patriarch has given the authority to the mother to tug the rope of independence whenever the daughter is found transgressing the laws of the threshold. Thus, Kasturi was protected from the missionary influences of the British by being sent to a school meant to put education following the conventions of the Samaj. Kasturi was allured with other things of life and told that once she gained a "proper education" she would be on her way to becoming one of the finest flower of Hindu womanhood. She learned to read, write and balance household accounts and sew. Above all, the school ground rituals of Arya Samajhavan, sandhya and meditations so deeply within her that for the rest of her life she had to start and end the day with them. After five

years of this rigorous and disciplined education, it was considered that Kasturi had acquired all that it was ever going to be useful for her to know.

During Kasturi's formal education it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued in the home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by the impeccable nature of her daughter's qualifications. Along with attention to her culinary skills, her mother took special care to include her in all her pujas. She justified herself by thinking that she needed to be grounded in the tradition that would make her a wife worth having. The art of service and domesticity should shine in her daughter so brightly that she would overcome her negative karma to be a beacon in her married home and please her in-laws. Ganga, like Kasturi, was taught to internalize the vows of womanhood from a very tender age. Her mother was not educated and she had neither read, nor felt the need. She had taught Ganga everything she knew. Her mother-in-law made sure that she learned the ways of in-laws' household. Though Ganga played the perfect role of being a "women" skilled to do all housework, but she had the feeling of "inadequacy" and "defenceless"-ness into a union with a man so unlike the others she knew; who was much more educated and cultured than those she found around her. Unlike any other woman her hope lay in her daughter, that someday Chhotti would be as educated as her father, Harish.

Manju Kapur explores a totally different different aspect of educating girl in *A Married Woman* (2003). Like any other woman of her age Sita, Astha's mother, believed in the old, traditional ways. She regularly prayed to God to marry off Astha to a good husband. But Astha's father believed in the "new". He felt that his daughter's future lay in her own hands, and these hands were to be strengthened by the number of books that passed through them. "With a good job comes independence" (*A Married Woman* 4) her father feels. But this manipulative way of his is another way of finding a good match for his daughter. Thus, the final destination fixed for their daughter is "marriage", only their perspective differed. This patriarch, being a bureaucrat himself, shrewdly camouflages his real intentions, while encouraging his daughter to study hard.

Nina in *The Immigrant* is an established lecturer of English and is leading an independent life. Her mother is always looking out for ways to find and fix a match for her. Thus, inspite of being educated and independent, the prospect of marriage looms large on her. Yet, "education was a gift" and she is not ready to "exchange the life of the mind for any humdrum marriage" (*The Immigrant* 3).

The double standard patriarchy plays in the educational system can be summed up in Millett's observations:

As patriarchy enforces a temperamental imbalance of personality trait between the sexes, its educational institutions, segregated or co-educational, accept a cultural programming toward the generally operative division between "masculine" and "feminine" subject matter, assigning the humanities and certain social sciences to the female- and science and technology, the professions, business and engineering to the male. Of course the balance of employment, prestige and reward at present lie with the latter. One might also point out how the exclusive dominance of males in the more prestigious fields directly serves the interests of patriarchal power in industry, government, and the military. The present encouragement of their "artistic" interest through study of the humanities is hardly more than an extension of the "accomplishments" they once cultivated in preparation for the marriage market. (*Sexual Politics* 2000:42-43)

In all her novels Manju Kapur highlights on how women in the Indian society are bereft of proper education in the name of tradition. Lack of education makes them dependable and vulnerable to both the inner world and the outer world. She advocates the plausible reality that education brings dignity, honor and power. Women's education and employment tends to be a promising catalyst for the country's overall growth besides it, enhances women's economic independence, self esteem, self-reliance, and helps to increase country's socioeconomic development. When women are able to control their lives, free of gender based violence and participate in the decision making processes, they will be in a position to maximize their potentials as human beings. In spite of women being worshipped as goddesses and equality being preached in its vedic verses , the reality seems to be harsh and ironical. Eradication of the epidemic called discrimination and providing access to basic human rights to all should be the goal of the intervention.

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