



GENDER IMPLICATIONS IN MANJU KAPUR'S SHORT STORIES *THE NECKLACE AND CHOCOLATE*

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ABSTRACT

In the decades of 1980s and 1990s, India emerged as a major literary nation producing works of international acclaim and recognition. The most striking feature of this age was writings of women who shed off their absence in the literary world. Among all, Manju Kapur showed preference for challenging the traditional family values in her writings. She has explored the female psyche and portrayed its problematized version. She presented society in its true account- painted woman fighting against traditional norms, challenging patriarchy and struggling for her identity and existence. The short stories Chocolate and The Necklace provide enough basic ingredients of gender implications imposed on women in name of tradition and conventions to satisfy male urge of superiority. Certainly Manju Kapur's fiction would help to find some core issues involved in Indian society stressing women's voice for equality.

Keywords: Problematized, Subordination, Hypocrisy

Women writers have produced the dominant Indian culture with a keen insight to showcase infliction and subordination of women. They prefer presentation of a contrasting picture of Indian traditions versus modern Indian women, crossing the limits by showing a strong sense of individualism. Manju Kapur's short stories present an acute understanding of social hypocrisies. Her characters are perfect emblems of modern ethos and traditional cultural

clutches. Women in her works appear in an assertive mood voicing their desires and endeavour to achieve the aspired goals. Manju Kapur beautifully depicts the rituals which enforce false dominance on women in the name of religion. A young daughter in the family remains a burden and is not treated like the male child. A glimpse of her stories poignantly draws the veil of hypocrisy, bares the familial values which give expression to gender implications operating in Indian family institutions. All the concepts of honour, ignominy, responsibilities and familial values are associated with particularly women only in the Indian system. Custom, honour and hollow, misinterpreted values collaborate to ruin woman's liberty. Manju Kapur emphasizes on the parochial nature of men over their wives as they subside their demands and keep them confined to domestic tasks. They imposed restrictions on them to circumscribe the scope of outdoor activities for them and in a way hurl hardship on them without expecting them to make any complaint.

In her story *Chocolate* Manju Kapur concentrates on the issues related to women though in a very light hearted manner. Here, life of Tara, the protagonist, is comprehensively studied revealing a colossal mass of imposed desires on her tender self. It seems as if from her childhood, she has been prepared with a sole career of matrimony. She receives education in a girls' school and later in a girls' college. Her free time is meant only for dance and music classes, as two necessary components for a girl child's education. She is not asked or counselled to pursue her wish for choosing the stream or discipline of studies or her career. Tara's mother shares the same attitude towards the girl child, while Tara nurses a different opinion. Her childhood is spent in shade of peculiarly prescribed roles for females. Manju Kapur gives the details of her education as: "Strict emphasis on studies and nothing else. Tara's free time is taken with going to dance and music classes. Her mother says these things are important give grace to a girl."(*Chocolate* 1)

Being an obedient child, she does not exercise her choice in matters of career or even matrimony. She takes admission in English Honours without any serious involvement in the same. Her wedding is fixed and nobody cares or even thinks about her future prospects. Tara's husband Abhay also follows the path of patriarchy after a considerable amount of time. When she is unable to bear child, she consults a doctor who proclaims her fit for motherhood. Abhay refuses to meet the doctor and being a staunch follower of patriarchy blames Tara for absence of child in their lives. Their conjugal life does not show any signs of love in their relationship. Here,

gender conflicts assume the centre of the story. Since Tara is not able to conceive after a long period, she tries to consult some doctor but Abhay summarily rejects the idea of his checkup, showing egoistic temperament. Manju Kapur here brings to light the Indian male psychology i.e. the wounded ego at the knowledge of his impotency and consequent aggressive reaction. For instance in one of their conversations we find: “May we should go and see a doctor?” she suggested to her husband; “There is nothing wrong with me”(Chocolate 2) replied Abhay. Here he confirms his male chauvinism and directly by forces his wrong opinion on her. His enforcement of opinion on her exemplifies the presence of gender conflict.

After a second thought, he meets and consults the doctor but does not reveal his report. He rather, advises Tara irrationally not to consult the doctor in future showing apathetic attitude towards Tara. He never shares with her the facts about his report. On the contrary, he blames Tara for infertility. Instead of admitting the truth before her, he calls medical advice a foolish. His insecurities do not allow him to accept his deficiency. His guilt is manifested when he hides his medical reports and in his defence puts the share of blame on the doctor. Gender conflict is visible in their conversation when Abhay forces his opinion on her. Their conversation reflects Tara’s secondary or peripheral role in her own household.

“So Tara never knew what happened at the doctor’s.”

Abhay came home tight-lipped and cross and refused to comment. “But what happened? What did she say?” She asked several times.

“She a fool. Huh ! No point in your going to her either.” (Chocolate 3)

To conceal the handicap of son and man, too, Tara is forced to live a strict and regimented life. She is advised to follow the path of religion as her infertility is the sole outcome of her past life or sins earned in previous births. She is emotionally tortured for observing fasts and *pujas*. Unreasonably, she bears pain to her own self, excruciating physical pains for the need of a child. Even being an educated girl, she follows all the superstitions, whatever is suggested and bears physical trauma. She visits temples and shrines; crawling on hands and knees, starts wearing gemstones for some effects.

But this divine aid does not yield any fruit to her. Suspicious about his behaviour, she notices that Abhay has started giving her chocolates in bulk--she discovers his idea to make her

fatter day by day. He takes advantage of the situation to make fun of her obesity and conveniently develops an extramarital affair. Soon Tara smells the rat in their relationship, especially, in the changed behaviour of Abhay. Mistakes of life have made her mature, at least mature enough to understand the reason behind the situation intentionally created before her. Now onwards, Tara starts seeking revenge on her husband. She changes her life style and loses some weight. She takes cookery lesson and makes delicious dishes for Abhay. Now fate takes a different turn. The reversal of roles i.e. the role of villain earlier played by Abhay is now adopted by Tara, adds the element of excitement to sustain and reveal the plan. Abhay gains weight and gets entangled in Tara's web. His extra-marital affair comes to an end. The last step of Tara's revenge is to develop relationship with Abhay's friend but she finally disconnects with him when his role is over. To fight with age-old prevalent gender conflict, Tara uses her husband's friend to execute her plan and success fully comes out of that relationship. Out of this relationship she begets a girl child and the accomplishment of this long awaited desire over whelms her:

Given the circumstances of her revenge, she needed an affair to give it a finished ending. She chose a friend of his, the most convenient male to hand... She had long given up the possibility of conceived, and when she found herself pregnant, she was exhilarated. (*Chocolate* 4)

Abhay is oblivious about the paternity status of child. Tara plugs all loopholes in her plan in such a way that Abhay fails to justify his suspicions and accepts the child. For this child, she decides to arrange good education and make her independent. She shapes up her daughter to be a brave woman. Though she is a victim of gender based society, she finds the path to her victory and wins herself back in the story and life. The saga of Tara conveys not only gender conflict but also generational conflict which comes to the fore when we see Tara's mothers-in-law's behaviour. She professes double standards- she uses nice words but with sarcasm to make her feel her infertility and weakness seriously. When Tara visits various shrines, and fails to get any positive result, she is reduced to a 'thing of pity'. Tara's mother-in-law plays the dual role. On one hand she sympathises with her daughter-in-law while on the other, she makes fool of her by forcing the superstitious approach of last generation that she is the real cause of infertility. Her mother-in-law shows sympathy for her but this sympathy is just an outward show. "Poor Tara!" she heard her say once. "She is trying so hard", and then in a lowered voice, "but she is unhealthy from the inside" (*Chocolate* 3).

Tara gets the lesson of life and decides to rear her child and design her as career-conscious and independent girl to face all kind of assaults with a tendency to fight back. This specific change in her behaviour takes place due to different gender implications which are ascribed on her. She does not want her child to face the same fate and thus rears her child in a different way. Tara rears her girl child, developing in her a career oriented approach and priority for self dependence. “When Tara’s daughter was born, she crooned her lullabies of brave women warriors, and made sure that all her education was oriented towards a career that would make her independent” (*Chocolate* 6).

Manju Kapur highlights that girls are brought up, even in an educated family with an idea to settle them in matrimony-the sole career for them. Even educated families are caught in the patriarchal whirlpool forcing a girl to be dependent on her husband and in-laws. Career-orientation and economic dependence of their daughter are still assigned less importance. This particular bent of mind clearly demarcates the presence of gender conflict where choices in educational fields are also done only taking care of the gender not their interests. Nalini Prabhakar comments:

Education in her case is considered mostly as an ornament that would brighten her chances of getting a good husband. Her growing disaffection for the course she is pursuing does not alarm her parents. Clearly they do not expect her to take up a career. Tara, at this stage, still warm from the embraces of her husband does not have the foresight to figure out the importance of economic independence which a career would give her. (1)

Manju Kapur puts under scanner the social institution and its drawbacks where a girl is reared only with marriage prospects, where marital relation demands her to procreate anyhow and her failure to procure desired results, the entire blame is put to her share. Same thing happens in case of Tara. Her husband serves his own means and provides her a vast quantity of chocolates so that she would become fatter and prepares her for the cause of future break up. Here Manju Kapur gives a twist in the story and the protagonist uses chocolates as a back-up plan to inflict her revenge on her husband. In a way she answers the patriarchy ridden society and utilizes her culinary skills. She inflicts her revenge so cleverly that nobody could trace any loophole to detect her role in that scene. She ultimately wins back her life, restores happiness and decides to live by her own values. Manju Kapur declines the infertile status as a cause of

melancholy in one's life. Tara comes out of forced infertility and paves her path towards liberty and self dependence. She realises Abhay's infidelity and plans to win him back. Manju Kapur presents the example of woman's winning position in an objective way that makes the story interesting and realistic. Here, Tara comes out of her victim status and tactfully regains her position in her husband's life.

The short story *The Necklace* is set in the backdrop of pre independence era during British regime. The story starts with the discovery of lost necklace of governor's wife but narrates woeful tales of repression, falsely executed riots of Hindu- Muslim and misuse of government machinery and power of post by Governor. The story unravels before us the sorry state of George's wife whose lost necklace has triggered much hype and hoopla. The whole Indian colonized community has to pay the price of necklace as it belongs to a colonizer's wife. Surprisingly, the lady whose loss and missing necklace is the epicentre of the entire chaos and turbulence is neglected. Her emotions are not taken care of rather her husband's status is considered more important. Manju Kapur brings forth the idea of woman's 'uncared for' emotion. The short story, '*The Necklace*' represents the embodiment of gender conflict, especially in the elite class affecting the lives of women with foreign background. Here in the story Lady Blake belongs to a noble class. Despite her status, she goes through a humiliating situation that only reflects her subsidized status. Her husband does not admire her for her merits rather he considers her as an arm candy of an elite husband. Manju Kapur points to the gender conflict when George accuses her of her misdemeanour. This 'uncared for' situation presents the existence of gender conflict in their relationship.

Can this woman be blamed for the state she was in, even though she was Lady Blake, and the Governor's wife? Poor thing, Stress had wiped out time and place, causing her to forget she was not an ordinary person and could not behave as ordinary people did. Ignoring this, her husband, unreasonable man, later accused her of allowing the white man's burden to slip from the shoulders. (*The Necklace* 74)

Her identity is assessed and evaluated on the base of her husband's position not her emotions. Her loss, her emotional attachment to the thing is ruthlessly unnoticed. Patriarchal mindset of governor comes to fore when he gives priority to his position over his wife's emotions. George, The Governor not only keeps Indian people colonized and underrated but also

treats his wife on a secondary status. He even controls her behaviour in public as of a subordinate status. For a small incident several people have to pay for their lives and remain divided as Hindu and Muslims. He further tries to control her behaviour as she is wretched and cries. Her clothes are not laced down properly. He imposes his status on her and controls her public behaviour. Her emotions are again ignored and cruelly crushed when Blake, her husband scolds her publicly. His articulation discloses his meanness he hurls on his wife. Gender conflict can be well observed in Governor Blake's behaviour when he scolds his wife for her foolish public behaviour. Gender conflict is apparently visible in that Governor Blake wants his wife to hide her emotions. He controls her tears and remarks: "Those kind of things creates a bad impression. All those tears and loss of control. You're not cracking up, are you darling?" (*The Necklace* 74).

When she sobs again Blake replies in rather a cruel way: "I will make them return it, if I have to horsewhip every man in the province." This is his actual way of holding his reign over any country and he believes if he takes the issue of lost necklace slightly, slowly everything will be gone. He further remarks: "Have to set an example. Let one thing slide and soon the whole Empire will be gone. (*The Necklace* 74)

One can clearly observe the gender inflictions and also racial prejudice in George Blake's behaviour that he accuses Indian people only for whatever happens and scolds his wife for not following the code of conduct for the governor's wife. He blames his wife and Indian people together and says: "You were crying so much you didn't notice your buttons were undone. These blacks can't stand too much white skin. Drive them mad I could see... I could see..." (*The Necklace* 75). Even when the necklace is recovered from his own countrymen, the poor Indian people have to undergo various kinds of ill-treatment; Hindu-Muslim riots take place, women undergo serious mental and physical trauma. Religious books were torn or burnt repeatedly. Ironically the colonized people have to pay the cost of lost necklace by their flesh and blood, losing many lives and curfew clamped to disturb their normal course of life. Innocent women have to pay the price for their specific biological distinct body structure and religious scriptures were burnt to ashes. Manju Kapur remarks: "Blood began to flow, at first-tentatively, and then in fuller course. Women were dug out from their places and raped. Each side had their sacred books torn and desecrated" (*The Necklace* 76).

The story raises the issue how a trivial issue of a lost necklace triggered such riots in which several innocent people were either subjected to death or were ill treated. The worst was

with women as several women had to face sexual and mental harassment without any appropriate fault. The real culprit, George Blake was neither blamed nor punished for the unexpected hazards heaped on many Indians. A small necklace took several lives but unblushingly its discovery is celebrated with the notion of gratitude and thankfulness. The worst result of it is that it disturbed peace among Indian people and created disorder in India. The whole issue spread communal violence as George Blake used inhuman means to regain the necklace. The necklace no more remains an ornament but becomes a thing of false honour to Governor Blake.

Sir George was unsure of what to do. True to his expectations, a series of betrayals by back stabbing natives had lead to recovery of the necklace. It had been restored to his wife, and her expression of love and gratitude had made every interrogative method worth which. However the breakdown in Law and order did not resolve itself with the same gratifying immediacy. (*The Necklace* 75)

The whole issue relates the sub standardized position given to women and Indian people. This political stunt satisfies only the Colonizer's need and above all, male ego. Right from the initial moments till the end, Lady Blake is presented as a thing of display, an arm candy rather than a living human being. She is controlled, directed; imposition of every incident on her serves her as an eminent propellant. Though, ironically Lady Blake is given the status of highly respected lady but reality is just the reverse of it. In social scenario, Indians are treated rudely after riots. A committee is constituted to investigate the real cause behind chaos and shallow transparency is advertised among the public.

The story opens with the news headline in The Tribune dated 11 July 1944 which was published from Lahore. The story further reveals how a news headline of stolen necklace results in spread of riots and reveals Britisher's strategy and attitude towards Indian people. Governor misuses the incident of necklace and blows up the fire of hatred among Hindus and Muslims, thus triggering riots. The whole issue is concocted in such a clean way that the real culprit is considered respectable at last, negating the fate of poor unprotected people. The whole matter serves political purpose only and innocent lives are put at stake. The story depicts the autocracy and monopoly of colonizers over colonized countries. The short story *The Necklace* produces a background of pre independence India. The stolen necklace of governor's wife so incensed people about communal difference, that thousands of people were killed for the sake of religion. Political effects on contemporary events are highlighted in a matter-of-fact manner. Governor's wife and

Indian people are treated in a like manner. The story does not convey any prevalent generational aspects but gender conflict becomes an eminent centre point of the story in a clear manner. Though the incident of lost necklace is not a matter of import but it highlights Lady Blake's lower status granted to her and reveals the sorry status of a high class woman. The story reveals the diminishing condition of a high class woman and simultaneously raises a pertinent question, what could be the condition of a common woman. Gender issue appears at the forefront as the major theme detected in the character of George Blake.

Lady Blake is conditioned to that particular ornamented expression. So, after having finished the hue and cry over her loss she thinks and finds her behaviour inappropriate to situation. Her conditioning and consequent regret over the issue and her strange expression may be of guilt reflects her suppressed personality and bent of mind. George Blake conditioned her psyche and conveys gender conflict. Her guilt and sense of regret is obvious here: "She shouldn't have shrieked and rushed out like that...She looked at George. Could he forgive her?" (*The Necklace* 75).

Gender conflict here appears in different shapes. Conflict here, boggles the mind of lady, disturbing her peace with guilt, diluting her self-confidence and also her individuality. Her husband's status, his stiff aura is a constant reminder to her as a gift and boon to her, rare embellishment to her, to adore her in every eye. The weight and feel of this aura of his is so heavy and vehement that it triggers deep sense of guilt in her, killing her naturalness, a natural reaction of her to the loss of a most precious and coveted thing.

Manju Kapur presents women's deprived self within male dominated culture. The demanding world of patriarchy requires a woman to play various roles simultaneously. It is she who needs to adjust accordingly. Women can regain her status not by passive resistance only but by confronting all, developing an aptitude of survival. So, we can say, this conflict of women characters and their combat with male counterparts within that particular situation makes Manju Kapur's stories more interesting and true representation of society. Men altering familial traditions are not counted as disappointment while women are trapped in the name of religion, for the sake of their sex and also for the sake of duties forcefully imposed on them. Manju Kapur calls for a change in the attitude of man and society towards woman according to changing roles of woman and situations.

Referances

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