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Feministic aspects in the novels of Manju Kapur

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Abstract

Manju Kapur daringly presents the themes of 'protest' and 'sexuality' in her novels. It is also shown that she has not intimidated the reader by shocking him, by breaking through the normative order. It is argued that this is possible because the author has a peculiar desire for driving her novel towards the populist concerns. This she does by including various details. This chapter attempts to trace these elements in the fictions of Manju Kapur. The purpose of this chapter is to subject the following three novels, the Home, A Married Woman, and The Immigrant to a critical scrutiny.

Keywords: Feminism, autobiographical, culture, immigrant women, sisterhood

Introduction

This scrutiny is attempted with a view to examining the narrative function of the 'popular' elements in her novels such as long running discussions on food, clothes, couture and places that hold the kind of common man readership present in any popular novel, as well as her resolution of the predicament of her protagonists. It is argued that it is essentially the way in which Kapur aims at resolving the problems of her protagonists that help her to establish herself as a popular writer. The author has also catered to the popular taste by presenting some social and political issues of national significance as a backdrop to retain the interest of the common readers. The recent happenings that influence the life of the nation are a necessary ingredient of popular novel. This chapter attempts a brief overview of what popular novel is, and then goes on to study these elements in the works of Manju Kapur that help us categorize her as a popular writer.

The Popular Novel: its Elements

The contemporary popular novel tries to address predicaments of the current age. Though popular novel accounts to a wide range of readership, it is differentiated from 'serious' or 'high culture'. The perception that the writers of the serious literature consider popular literature as catering to the crude sensibilities of less educated ones is changing. It is seen as one form of popular or mass culture that has emerged with the rise of industrial capitalism, the mass media and the mass culture industry in Post Modern world marked by mass marketing and mass reception. The textual strategies that are deployed in the works of popular literature are- the generic forms, formulaic plots, stereotyped characters and cliched language along with powerful ideologies and discourses that successfully reach out to stir the hearts and fire the desires of millions of readers.

Whether these fictional works talk of adventures in some exotic landscapes, or deal with the tales of aliens, talk of tear-jerking romance in the security of the monogamous family, or they may present the erotic transgressions of family ties and sexual norms; the imagined worlds of popular fiction seem to set themselves off from, and simultaneously point a finger at, the everyday realities of its readers' lives. If looked from this point of view, popular novels attain the role of a distinct literary field.

Many authors have earned a good name as writers of popular novel. Sir Walter Scott, Ian Flemming, J.K. Rowling, Stephen King, Jackie Collins, John Grisham, J.R.R Tolkein are few names in the long list of the many eminent names who write under this genre. Contemporary Indian English novelists are no less behind. With the successful writers like Shobha De who is also called as the Jackie Collins of India, we have popular novel writers like Chetan Bhagat, Aravind Adiga, Jhumpa Lahiri, Tishaa Khosla, Kiran Desai and of course an attempt is being made in this chapter to examine the works of Manju Kapur as belonging to this genre.

As has been noted above, popular novels have established a literary genre and a cultural field. Ken Gelder, an ardent supporter of this genre says:

Popular fiction is best conceived as the opposite of Literature. It is distinguished from literature as a general field of writing. Both of them exist in a constant state of mutual repulsion or repudiation.

By literature I mean the kind of writing produced by Jane Austen, George Eliot, Henry James, James Joyce, Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, Tobias Wolf and so on^[1].

Ken Gelder in the same book writes of R.L. Stevenson's view, who in his defence of popular novel speaks up for simplicity:

Novel is not a transcript of life, to be judged by its exactitude, but a simplification of some side or point of life, to stand or fall by its simplicity. For although, in great men, working upon great motives, what we observe and admire is often their complexity, yet underneath appearances the truth remains unchanged: that simplification was their method, and simplicity is their excellence^[2].

And today the situation is that popular literature is simple and literature is complex. Literature is intimately connected to life, while popular novel gives over to fantasy. Literature is cerebral, but popular novel is sensuous and caught up with 'danger' and 'intrigue'. Literature is restrained or discrete, popular novel is excessive, exaggerating. Literature does not need a story or a plot, but popular novel could not function without one. And to take Stevenson's side - Literature is dull, while popular novel is simply exciting. Literature also lacks what popular novel values most of all; a large number of readers. The sentiment: I love my readers is common to all popular novel writers who often work hard to maintain an intimacy between themselves and their readers. Most popular contemporary novelists have their own online pages and some actively engage with their fans. Popular novel in this way is mindful and respectful of its audience and perhaps that is the reason that they are the bestsellers.

Tracing Popular elements in the Novels of Manju Kapur- (a) Home

Manju Kapur's novel *Home* (2006) is replete with elements that can be regarded as the ones from a popular novel. 'Home' is perhaps the story of the struggle of lower middle class people who have come to India during the time of partition from Pakistan after losing their wealth and property to finally struggle and rise like the stories of rags to riches wherefore the characters rise by saving each penny they have. These stories are read with greater interest as most of the Indians especially the people from Punjab, Haryana, Delhi and surrounding areas have suffered the brunt of partition. They fantasize their lives under such similar circumstances. The opening page of 'Home' tells of the theme of the fiction that it is a tale that moves around two sisters- Sona and Rupa- one poor and the other rich, married to two different families by their good or bad fortune- themes quite often explored by the popular novelists.

The author through this novel has deliberately taken up certain issues surrounding women in general as she intends to voice out the female struggle by hinting out the social parameters under which the women of Indian middle class thrive between the dominant and the subordinate under the roofs of Home.

The rest of the story flows into the expected frame of a family saga as the unfolding of each event in the story tells the expected result beforehand. The story opens with the 'home' of a Patriarch, another heterosexual unit of Banwari Lai and his two sons Yashpal and PyareLal who support their father in family business of cloth merchandise. Where the word of the patriarch is followed by rest of the family without any argument, the sons carry the family legacy by being the proud fathers of two offsprings each. Though Yashpal is not so lucky to be father at an early stage, his wife takes good long ten years to give birth to a daughter Nisha first, then to a son Raju, the younger brother very soon becomes the proud father of two sons very soon after his marriage. Through the family portrayal Kapur highlights the social culture of north Indian middle class families where the culture assigns primary importance to the head of the family and where birth of sons is considered as a moment to rejoice.

More than first fifty pages are spent illustrating the barrenness of the elder daughter-in-law, Sona whose worth in this great world can be only realized if she contributes to provide an heir to the family. All these factors are the anxieties held by common men and women that contribute to the making of the popular novels. Like movies there are flashbacks of the memories how the romance between Sona and Yashpal materializes into their marriage in the good old times when love marriages and inter-caste liaisons were socially condemned. Vicky, the son of Lala Banwari Lai's deceased daughter is first given to Sona so that her luck might change, perhaps adopting a child might help in opening her womb, and this dream is soon fulfilled as she gives birth to two children after adopting Vicky, is nothing more than a fantasy. It is after the birth of the children that Sona starts hating Vicky and treating him like the servants of the family is similar to the stories of stepmothers in popular literature.

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