

# REFLECTIONS OF JANE AUSTEN IN MANJU KAPUR'S NOVELS

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## Abstract

Manju Kapur and Jane Austen are two prominent fiction writers in English. Though they belong to entirely different cultures, their perspectives on women and society can be linked together. The most striking feature of their fiction is marriage, which has been considered an ultimate destiny in women's lives. Both have explored the position of women and the lives of middle-class people in their respective societies. The paper entitled "Reflections of Jane Austen in Manju Kapur's novels" is a short comparative study on Manju Kapur and Jane Austen. It focuses on the similarities between the two novelists in depicting characters and themes such as marriage, women's education, and patriarchy. It highlights female-centric issues and how the central characters overcome these issues with courage and self-confidence. The paper also delineates the portrayal of two different cultures, man-woman relationship, mother-daughter relationship and tradition.

**Key words:** Marriage, society, inequality, struggle, culture

The art of writing is a gift that God has showered upon every writer to express their powerful thoughts spontaneously. In the beginning stages, writing was completely dominated by male writers. Women were not provided any freedom to identify themselves in the field of writing because of the patriarchal structure that denied authorship to women. Male authors depicted women as objects of pleasure and servants to men. Male writers were also considered the 'fathers' of a text in Western civilization. Their identification with a pen left many talented women writers uncertain about their identity. As a result, many intelligent women writers went through emotional conflicts. Another reason for the lack of women's writings is their poor financial status. Virginia Woolf asserts that a woman needs both financial independence and a personal space to engage in fiction writing. After a long feminist struggle, women were allowed to explore the field of writing only in the early 20th century. Both Western and Indian women writers started celebrating their female space through their art of writing.

Among the most prominent feminist writers, Jane Austen and Manju Kapur have delved into the realm of women with their insightful perspectives. Jane Austen is an English novelist known primarily for her six major novels. Her plots often explore the dependence of women on men and the importance of marriage to get social status in the western society. Her novels are also realistic and sentimental portraying the picture of 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. Manju Kapur is a contemporary Indian woman novelist. Her style of writing novels is interesting as it speaks much about the unspoken aspects of women's true feelings. In her exploration of themes like family, love and freedom, Manju Kapur has drawn inspiration from the literary path paved by Jane Austen.

Manju Kapur has probed into the urban Indian middle class just as Austen's heroines are from middle-class families. Both writers are familiar with this predominant class structure and are comfortable in writing about it. Kapur's Indian middle class has majority of population. This class is identified with the joint family structure although this notion has also undergone change. The family lives together and the personal space for each individual is limited. Kapur in her novel Home beautifully presents the join family of Banwari Lal where three generations survive in the same home till the novel ends. The characters in the novel are unable to create a personal space for themselves. They are strictly dominated by the traditional aspect of living. But in England joint family structure is unknown and there is space for every individual in the family to take nuclear decisions for themselves.

The importance for education and employment is denied for the protagonists of both novelists. The social conditions are not favorable to women to explore in the field of education. In *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility*, Miss

Bennets and Miss Dashwoods lack good education and employment due to their dependence on men for social status and economic security. They are often worried about getting a suitable partner. In Kapur's novels, the protagonists are allowed to be educated until their parents arrange marriage. In *Difficult Daughter* Virmati's desire to pursue higher studies gets fulfilled only because her wedding with Inderjit is postponed. Nisha in the novel *Home* is not encouraged in her studies, rather she is advised by her mother to learn female responsibilities to fit into the mother-in-law's family.

Both Jane Austen and Manju Kapur's female characters fall in love. Marianne with Willoughby, Elizabeth with Wickham, Fanny with Crawford, and Emma with Frank Churchill all experience love, and their relationships are not deemed harmful to their culture; instead, they are considered cultural practices. Similarly, in Manju Kapur's novels, the heroines fall in love before their marriage, though it is not encouraged in Indian society. Virmati's love with Professor Harish affects the whole family. Astha's love with Bunty during her adolescent stage is stopped by her mother Sita. Nina in the novel "The Immigrant" falls in love with Rahul and is cheated by him. Nisha in the novel "Home" falls in love with a low-caste boy, roams with him to many places, "feeling adventurous, daring and modern" (*Home* 145). But, except Virmati, all other protagonists of Manju Kapur marry a man chosen by their parents. But the women of Jane Austen have full freedom to choose and reject their lovers. It depicts the cultural difference between west and countries like India.

The major theme followed by both novelists is marriage. Jane Austen's heroines, along with their mothers, are worried only about finding suitable partners. From the age of seventeen, girls are allowed to meet and mix with others. They can attend social gatherings and balls in a refined manner and can display their sense of culture through dance and music to attract the attention of young men. In *Pride and Prejudice*, the daughters of Mrs. Bennet attend social gatherings and participate in ball dances under the wish of their mother to find suitable life partners. It shows the middle-class people's mindset in Western countries to upgrade their social status through marriage. However, the culture of India is unique where women will never be allowed to find their own life partners even if they fall in love. This is evident in the novels of both authors.

Manju Kapur has extensively explored the theme of marriage in her novels. Parents are particularly conscious about arranging marriages for their daughters. In *A Married Woman*, Sita reveals her narrow-minded ideology by stating, "If the parents die without marrying their daughter, they are surely bound to rebirth"(2). She believes that the salvation of parents through a girl child is possible only if their daughter is married before they die. Kasturi in *Difficult Daughters*, Sona in *Home* and Ms. Batra in the *Immigrant* solely focus on ensuring their daughters' marriage to a man. The primary goal for these parents is to secure their daughters' union and shape them as good wives for their future husbands. The personal desires of the daughters in marriage are never considered important from the parents' perspective.

The mothers play a vital role in the lives of all the heroines. Both authors highlight the darker sides of motherhood and the relationship between the mother and daughter which is not affectionate or friendly in the novels. Jane Austen's portrayal of mothers seems strange as they become the cause of heroines' misfortunes and discomforts. Geoffrey Gorer in his essay 'Myth in Jane Austen' says, "Mrs. Dashwood encourages Marianne in her romanticism. Mrs. Bennet's behaviour is directly responsible for Elizabeth's and Jane's unhappiness and it is suggested for Lydia's elopement; poor Fanny Price has less than three stupid, incompetent and spiteful mothers- Mrs. Price, Aunt Bertram and Aunt Norris and though Emma is motherless, her dangerous flirtation with Frank Churchill is forwarded by her mother-surrogate, Mrs. Weston". As in three out of four of the novels the heroine actively dislikes her mother... (93).

Like the mother characters of Jane Austen, Manju Kapur's protagonists are often disturbed by their mothers' tradition-bound ideas. The mothers expect their daughters to strictly follow traditional values like them and never have a desire to uplift their daughters in society. They often become blind supporters of patriarchy and force their daughters to marry and give birth to children rather than being independent. Kasturi's expectation from Virmati to become a dutiful woman of the family and the second mother of her eleven children causes a rift between the mother and daughter. Nina's mother in the novel lives with the sole aim of marrying her daughter to a suitable partner. Though she is a responsible mother, she never understands the inner struggle of Nina throughout the novel. Sona's nonstop advice to Nisha to behave like a homely girl raises many questions within her. She never allows Nisha to play outside and never treats her equally with the boys in the family.

Gorer also highlights the psychological aspect of father- daughter relationship. He states that the novels of Jane Austen have the central theme in which the heroines despise their mothers and marry a man who is the father surrogate. Gorer calls it 'Jane Austen's myth'. Manju Kapur too highlights positive side of father daughter relationship. Unlike the mothers, the fathers encourage their daughters to achieve more in their careers and occasionally act as supporters by holding their hands. But they too are sometimes influenced by the idea of Indian male superiority and hesitate to fully support their daughters' endeavours.

The novelists have taken up gender issues as they are perceived in their respective societies. Austen's novels highlight the issue related to inheritance which is enjoyed only by men. Compared to Jane Austen's heroines, Kapur's heroines are more affected by the male-dominant society. They are monitored both before and after marriage in their lives. They are either under the control of their parents or husbands. They struggle with gender inequality and face many social issues. Some of them try to find a way to escape but fail. In *Home* Banwari Lal's only daughter is burnt alive by her husband Murali in a dowry issue. However, the members of Banwari Lal's family do not raise questions against the violence even though they know the truth. It highlights the aspects of male chauvinism in Indian society. *Virmati* in *Difficult Daughters*, *Astha* in *A Married Woman*, *Nina* in *The Immigrant* and *Nisha* in *Home* are not only females, for whom life is difficult. They have been the victims of this male oriented society. It shows the difference between two societies.

Sangeeta Phulsunge in her introduction to the book, *Novels of Manju Kapur: A Critical Study* says, "Manju Kapur speaks of middle class and even has earned several comparisons with Jane Austen for her middle-class character portrayal who are often caught in awkward situations and also for her very keen, sharp and chiselled characterization of feminine self" (3). Both writers have excavated the notion that a woman must seek security through marriage and a man must be revered and worshipped as a hero. A woman is expected to be subservient to men, and entirely dependent to him. Both writers have emphasized the prevalent belief that women are the weaker sex and major decisions should be made solely by men. Overall, Austen and Kapur have written extensively and intensively on the position of women and their culture in their respective societies. They have exclusively chosen heroines, not heroes. Thus, both writers have effectively depicted social issues, the struggle of women, and gender issues in their novels.

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