



## **CUSTOMS OF THE PAST AND CULTURAL PRACTICES OF THE PRESENT IN THE SELECT NOVELS OF MANJU KAPUR**

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### **Abstract**

Tradition refers to the customs, beliefs and cultural practices that are passed down from one generation to the next generation. The word 'tradition' itself derives from the Latin 'traditio', the noun from the verb 'tradere' literally meaning to transmit, to hand over or to give for safekeeping. It has its origin in the past. Modernity refers to the contemporary behavior or the way of doing things. It is fresh, new and modern. Tradition and Modernity both prevail together in India. Indian culture is a blend of traditional values and the modern spirit. Tradition and modernity are two terms used to express an entire range of differences between distant development stages in a society. Tradition will always refer to the ways of the past and modernity to what is happening now or will soon happen. Hence, it is quite natural for elders to lean towards tradition whereas young people usually propagate modernity as the better option. The question is though - do we really have to choose? Traditional approach represents ethics, religion, widely acceptable behavioral patterns which for many, means a lot. Young people tend to stray from this path praising the modern - liberal ways above the traditional approach. On the other hand, religion and tradition is full of ideas which are not applicable to modern societies and they cannot be fully transferred. Why? Because people live in a completely unique way nowadays, they are more conscious and well-educated. At the same time, some of the modernists go so far in their struggle for 'the new' that they produce ridiculous ideas. They might seem interesting but they are not valuable nor viable.

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**Keywords:** AMITAV GHOSH, women, oppression, equality of rights, democracy, society and changes

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This Modern Indian society cannot completely break itself from the old traditions. No society can do that, nor is it necessary for India. Her past is remarkably rich and varied, capable of providing a starting point for modernity. Indian Tradition offers numerous instances of the spirit of free and critical inquiry of the highest intellectual order, determination to pursue truth regardless of where it leads a positive and secular approach to life and a tradition of abstract thought necessary for the growth of modern knowledge. India needs to modernize herself but she does not have to seek inspiration solely from a culture which is not a part of her own tradition. She can partly get it from her past and establish continuity with it. The rich tradition and culture of India provides a bridge for the masses between the present and the future.

In the present post-modern times, consumerism has gate-crashed into homes along with its caravan and is converting compassion for relationships into commodities. Flow of desire has become limitless; Respect for values is being drained along with it. There is no space for parents in the family. All the relatives are now distant. In the grip of greed, a society is developing in which no true respect is left for old people, or true love for children. Such a society is not only estranged from the positivity of tradition, together with that it is deprived of the conscience to identify the promises hidden in the womb of future.

These people identifying themselves as modern have cauterized their nerves which are collectively known as conscience. A coincidental and inevitable consequence is that they are deprived of the sensitivity of love and sharing. They are just unaware of what is love. They do not have any understanding of the pain of love, joy of love and joy of pain. They know only getting; they do not crave for joy, hankering after happiness they are destined to run after the mirage of life. They keep on guarding their ego confusing it with self. Most remarkable achievement of modernity is to project new dimensions before the women. Traditionally a woman has been identified only as a member of family - a mother, wife, sister or daughter. Modernity recognizes her as an individual and deserving status equal to man. They have opportunities as well as insecurities. Modernity has offered unprecedented opportunities to women. It is a challenge too to the modern women, if she gets ready to face this challenge and grab the opportunity, then only she would become blissful.

In post-independent India, tradition and modernity came into close interaction. The Constitution of India is the best document of individual liberty, freedom and right of expression. It is also a manifestation of modern values and norms. The safeties and securities given to the weaker sections present a blueprint for the attainment of modern Indian society. It refers to the vast range of changes that are taking place today in the form and functions of the Indian social

structure and traditions. Indian society is changing and is undergoing adaptive changes towards modernization. In other words, the traditions maintain their continuity but at the same time they undergo changes also. There is in the process of change, modernization of traditions, that is, the traditions make adaptive changes while accepting modernity.

Kapur's literary accomplishments include five full length novels, namely *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant*, and *Custody*, two short stories namely *Chocolate* and *The Necklace*, and four poems namely *Birds*, *The Master*, *Phantom Lover* and *Renaissance*. Quest for feminine identity, a dominant Post- Independence social phenomenon in India, forms the central theme of her novels. They also weigh with varied subjects like man-woman relationship, human desire, longing, gender discrimination, marginalization, rebellion and protest. Kapur's perceptions of women's liberation and autonomy are deeply stretched within the social-cultural and economic spaces and paradigms of the country. Her works stress not on any joint social efforts to safeguard the individuals, but insists on every woman's self- development for the betterment of her society. In other words, it is not on the society's effort to improve its women population but it is on every woman's self-consciousness and social-consciousness to improve her society. Such a self-realization proves challenging during various man-made conduct of the society. Her novels are therefore a story of struggle for freedom and search for an existence at various levels.

This paper has pointed out that though women in general are not given a choice of their own; the educated women strive towards that. Kapur's novels depict that the traditional Indian society oppresses women. It does not help them choose a life of their own. The patriarchs of the household and the society have a strong say in everything. The passion or the feelings of women have not been given any recognition. Women must conceal their emotions, good or bad. It is due to this pressure; women have started revolting against it. When the need to go against the dictates of the elders arises, Kapur's women find it difficult to manage the situations. It is in this context the researcher has analyzed each novel of Kapur in which the protagonists are shown to fight against traditions.

Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India, like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, and Shobha De on whom the image of the suffering but stoic women eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact. Manju Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individual caged within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunge into a dedicated effort to carve an

identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless background. The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as a woman caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day.

Women protagonists of Kapur are a personification of a new woman who struggle to throw off the burden of inhibitions she has carried for ages. They crave for self-sufficiency and separate identity. Trapped in the passion of their self, they also yearn to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. Kapur's protagonists are mostly educated. Their education leads to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. Their struggle between tradition and modernity, encourage them to plunge into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as an ideal woman.

Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughters* published in 1998, won her the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the best first book (Eurasia). The novel was internationally acclaimed and best sold in India. It portrays the protagonist's struggle between the passion of love and the yearning to be part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. In her search for identity she is branded as a *Difficult Daughters* by the family and society. Her second novel *A Married Woman* published in 2002 was shortlisted for Encore Award. The novel is an attempt to undo the titled and distorted image of women whose cries for freedom goes unheard in patriarchal world. Steeped in love and romance, the novel details the joys and aversions of a married woman. The third novel *Home* brought out in 2006 was also shortlisted for Hutch Cross Word Award. The novel again projects its protagonist's search for identity in her highly traditional joint family. In an extraordinary way, the agonizing truths of a home are brought out in this novel. The fourth novel *The Immigrant* appeared in 2009 projects the protagonist bold and self-conscious, stressing the need for woman to cope with society and family for her independent existence. Kapur's fifth and the latest novel *Custody* published in 2011, reflects the universal angst of marriage, with its burden of individualism. Here is an ambitious woman whose self-fulfillment comes before familial fulfillment. Legal and social complications in divorce and custody of the children are the key issues dealt.

Manju Kapur is a compelling storyteller and a perceptive chronicler of the urban Indian middle class and the microcosm called the joint family. In an interview with *Hindustan Times* she says that writing is "conveying a world view, it aims to persuade, to convince, to move. Obviously, it is easier if you attempt to do all this with something you know." Her novels portray the struggles of the Indian women of these times as they oscillate between tradition and transition, duty and desire, family and self, suppression and independence. This is the internal conflict which is an ongoing battle due to her conditioning which is challenged by education and experience. The

external oppression results from patriarchal forces that prohibit formal education, job or marriage of one's choice. Kapur's women characters can be categorized as three conventional orthodox women, the emancipated women like Virmati, Ida, Nisha, Astha and Nina belong, i.e. the ones who struggle between convention and emancipation. Kapur shows that choices exist before these women but often they fall back on the same conventional path tread by their mothers. In the beginning, they show modern attitude but then follow conventional path. Kapur's novels present the theme of clash between tradition and modernity. Along with this theme she touches bigger themes like corruption, consumerism, dowry, immigration, communalism, religion and superstition etc. She negotiates different issues emerging out of the socio-political upheaval in the country by presenting the Independence struggle, Partition, demolition of Babri Masjid and Rath Yatra. She also deals boldly with taboo issues like female sexuality, masturbation, infertility, sexual abuse, sexual dysfunction and frustrations. She says, "All issues are grist to the writer's mill" and hence there is no issue that she wouldn't touch. More specifically she is concerned with the consequences of these problems as it affects both men and women in the family.

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