



**DECONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES & IDEOLOGIES: A STUDY OF MANJU KAPUR'S
FICTION**

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Abstract

In post colonial literature, one can talk of various identities: individual identity, social identity, racial identity, cultural identity, women's identity, identity of an Indian writer/diasporic writer and so on. The question of identity is itself a problematized issue. Migration to other countries in search of better education, employment opportunities, growth and comfort is a common trend these days. Individuals who migrate may appear to be in a comfort zone but there are certain realities that cannot be denied; the loss of cultural norms, religious customs, and social support systems, adjustment to a new culture and changes in identity and concept of self. Every land, home or nation has its own set of customs, beliefs, ethics and practices that contribute to the formation of the native identity. Wherever the person places himself, the individual always carries within the self, the influence of this native identity that is an amalgamation of his land and culture. Indian English fiction captures some of these sentiments of an individual's need of assimilation into a new land, a new world of pluralistic and hybrid culture. Some postmodern writers have given new dimension to the so called identities and ideologies. These writers have tried to dismantle the unitary monolithic concept of identity and shown their works how these identities are subject to change. The fixed nature of what identity represents is called upon question. Contemporary Indian writer Manju kapur is no exception in this regard.

This paper is an attempt to explore Manju Kapur's fiction as texts that question the nature of identity. The concept of identity and ideologies is dismantled and fragmented and a fresh reading of Kapur's works is the objective of this paper.

Keywords: Manju Kapoor, identity, ideology, deconstruction, hybridity, fixity

The term deconstruction denotes a kind of practice in reading, a method of criticism and mode of analytical approach. As a school of philosophy, it originated in the late 1960s in France with its chief proponent being Jacques Derrida. As a theory it responded to phenomenology, Saussurean and French structuralism, and Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis.

In her book *The Critical Difference* (1981), Barbara Johnson clarifies the term:

"Deconstruction is not synonymous with "destruction", however. It is in fact much closer to the original meaning of the word 'analysis' itself, which etymologically means "to undo" -- a virtual synonym for "to de-construct."... If anything is destroyed in a deconstructive reading, it is not the text, but the claim to unequivocal domination of one mode of signifying over another. A deconstructive reading is a reading which analyses the specificity of a text's critical difference from itself."

The concept was first outlined by Derrida in *Of Grammatology* where he explored the interplay between language and the construction of meaning. He questions the fundamental conceptual distinctions or oppositions in western philosophy. The oppositions challenged by deconstruction are constructs and characteristically 'binary' and 'hierarchical' where the first pair unquestioningly takes the superior position and the other secondary or derivative. Examples include nature and culture, speech and writing, mind and body, presence and absence, inside and outside, literal and metaphorical, intelligible and sensible, and form and meaning, among many others. To "deconstruct" an opposition is to explore the tensions and contradictions between the hierarchical ordering assumed (and sometimes explicitly asserted) in the text and other aspects of the text's meaning, especially those that are indirect or implicit or that rely on figurative performative uses of language. Derrida coined the term *différance*, meaning both a difference and an act of deferring, to characterize the way in which meaning is created through the play of differences between words. He has elaborated a theory of deconstruction (of discourse, and therefore of the world) that challenges the idea of a frozen structure and advances the notion that there is no structure or centre, no univocal meaning. The notion of a direct relationship between signifier and signified is no longer tenable, and instead we have infinite shifts in meaning relayed from one signifier to another. In popular usage the term has come to mean critical dismantling of tradition and traditional modes of thought.

In his *Reflections on Identity*, Stanley Aronowitz reiterates the fact that "the older theories of identity have tended to posit 'society' and the 'individual' as fixed" (qtd. in Rajchman 1995, 115). The observation that identity was traditionally thought of as something stable and fixed can be corroborated by Stuart Hall who assumes that in the past the discourse of identity rested on the idea of fixity and stability wherein authenticity was sought for as a guarantee to secure continuity and resist the mutability of a rapidly changing world.

The logic of the discourse of identity assumes a stable subject, i.e., we've assumed that there is something which we can call our identity which, in a rapidly shifting world, has the great advantage of staying still. Identities are a kind of guarantee that the world isn't falling apart quite

as rapidly as it sometimes seems to be. It's a kind of fixed point of thought and being, a ground of action, a still point in the turning world. That's the kind of ultimate guarantee that identity seems to provide us with. (Hall 1989, 10)

This traditional discourse conceives of identity as being related to a fixed point, a particular set of values, serving as a sort of hallmark for the individual in society.

In line with postmodern thought, postcolonial theory fully subscribes to the new identity discourse by acknowledging the destabilisation and the fragmentation affecting the concept of identity. The destabilisation of the concept of identity stems from the growing awareness that identity is a question involving the relationship of the self and the other. Without the other, there would be no self, no identity. The contemporary concern with otherness highlights the proposition that alterity (difference or the existence of the other) determines the process of identification. It is the existence of the other that gives the self meaning. Besides, the self is not a finished product; it is not a stable construct; it is, rather, a process in constant flux; something that is incessantly shifting. The ceaseless change that affects the self in its relation with the other endows identity with mutable fluidity. "Identity emerges as a kind of unsettled space or an unresolved question in that space, between a number of intersecting discourses" (Hall 1989, 10).

Many thinkers agree today on the shifting nature of identity in a globalised world characterised by what Edward Said calls in *Culture and Imperialism* "the mixture of cultures and identities" (Said 1994, 407). For Edward Said, instability is a major characteristic of identity. Identity is always in progress, fluctuating between differences, shifting beyond Manichean thought, undergoing an endless process of change. "No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, or American are not more than starting-points, which if followed into actual experience for only a moment are quickly left behind" (ibid., 407). As it develops the self embraces different identities and becomes therefore an on-going process of differentiation. Identity is not stable because the self is constantly shifting from one identity to another, and this is mainly because of the inherent diversity within identity. Identity cannot be restricted to only one particular thing; instead of being enclosed within the boundaries of particularism, identity opens out to embrace pluralism.

Pluralistic identity is a notion that calls for Homi Bhabha's treatment of the concept of hybridity; such a concept is inescapably intertwined with the notion of ambivalence and indeterminacy. The indeterminacy and ambivalence of identity, the fluctuation between sameness and difference, spring from the inadequacy of any attempt to adopt only one particular identity. The inherent diversity of the self, places identity in an in-between interval, a third space, for Homi Bhabha who, in adopting a politics of the in-between, opens the scope for investigation into the fertile interstitial space of identity.

Identity in postcolonial theory becomes a process of questioning. Postcolonial theory perceives identity as a process in constant flux wherein the self, in its perpetual negotiation with the other, enacts a self-interrogating mechanism, a self-centred process of interrogation, establishing a deconstructive apprehension of identity. According to Jacques Derrida, the self, "in departing from itself, lets itself

be put into question by the other” (1978, 96). In its encounter with the other, the self indulges in a process of becoming other than itself (ibid., 119, 133).

Manju Kapur texts can be read from the light of these theoretical discussions. As a postmodern writer, she deconstructs certain stereotypes revolving around gender issues and questions the nature identity within the narrative structure. Deconstructing femininity, feminine consciousness, decentring the centred notion is the aim of this paper. Kapur subverts ideologies and projects that identities are fractured or fragmented representations. Postmodernism offers opportunity to celebrate plurality. In this paper, the researcher wants to explore these theories by taking two texts: *An Immigrant* and *A Married Woman*

An Immigrant is a story about Nina, unmarried until thirty years and then gets married to an NRI settled in Canada, who works as a dentist. Marriage becomes a platform for Nina to dislocate. The story revolves around the couple settling with their new life and for Nina, its altogether a world as well. The relationship under goes turbulences and brings in a rift between the husband and the wife because of the husband’s sexual dysfunction which is hidden in the relationship. Kapur subtly brings in the idea that diasporic communities undergo cultural transformation. Therefore, diasporic existence uproots the notion of fixed, rooted identities. Diaspora embraces multiple, hybrid identities. Nina confronts racism, nostalgia for the homeland, cultural in betweenness and a sense of rootlessness at the initial phase. But as time progresses, she learns to adopt and adapt with her external surrounding and the internal personal life at home. Name, food habit, clothing, practices are all cultural markers and when one is a diasporic state, these no longer remain fixed. These concepts undergo change. Nina’s husband Ananda is happy to be called Andy. Kapur deconstructs the idea of unitary concept of identity itself and identity itself is shaped by our social surroundings. As Nina identifies with the North American counterpart, the Indian culinary lexical becomes thinner. Nina who always chose vegetarianism and wore sarees now adapts to meat eating and western clothing. She doesn’t seem to enjoy doing this but it is a strategy to adapt to western ways of life and reverberation of anguish at the breakage of marriage life for which she travelled across oceans.

Emergent homosexual, gay, lesbian and queer groups and their movements is a strategy to resist the unitary, monolithic identity created by dominant culture. In *A Married Woman*, the conjugal life of muslim Aijaz and Hindu Pipeelika against the backdrop of communal violence is shown. Astha, the central character has a family and children and has everything a woman aspires for. Yet, there is some lacuna which drifts her from being heterosexual to choosing homosexual relationship. The title ‘*A Married Woman*’ in variably suggests heterosexual relation between the partners. Astha, in the text symbolizes many married women who are caught between desire for love and freedom and their obligations towards family life. Hetero sexual relation that marriage legalizes is challenged by violating the social codes. Homosexuality is a way of resistance to patriarchal power structures. Astha and Pipeelika are mutually involved in a homosexual relationship, they don’t seem to be under any societal pressure but only Astha has a troubled psyche as her thoughts are preoccupied by duty consciousness towards family and children. But unlike some other texts, the relationship does not evolve only in closed rooms but the two together bring out their togetherness from closed spaces to the public domain. They take trips, go for movies and explore the world. They are not limited to sexual intimacy. Kapur makes an intentional strategy to represent

the queer space from the private to the public domain. Thus Kapur's *A Married Woman* deconstructs received understandings of sexuality, sex and gender in India and gives space for lesbian discourse. With this it is not meant that Kapur endorses lesbian existence but voices for much secular ideas.

Conclusion

The author through these texts subverts individual identity that undergoes change in diasporic existence and that of sexual identity which marriage promises. Both the texts, decenter the idea of identity and challenge the notion of identity being a fixed state. In postmodern situation, identity is viewed as shapeless, shifting and moving beyond the fixity. Thus, Kapur emerges to be a true post modernist in this sense where hybridity and plurality is welcomed and celebrated.

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