



# Man-Woman Bonding in Manju Kapur's Novel *Brothers*

Vandana Tomar<sup>1</sup> and Dr.Sanjay Kumar Misra<sup>2</sup>

Department of English, R.B.S. College, Agra  
(Affiliated to Dr. Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Agra)

**Abstract:** Manju Kapur is known for empathetically representing the family life and social relations of the middle-class Indian families in her novels. Women-centric concerns dominate her stories. The present paper is an attempt to appraise man-woman relationships presented in her most recent novel *Brothers*. In this novel, Manju Kapur sets the narrative in the conventional culture of Rajasthan where orthodox customs like child marriages, widowhood, and casteism dominate the society. Here, women are generally considered subjugated to men, and after marriage they have to strictly and silently follow the patriarchy norms imposed by the society in the name of tradition. She highlights the socio-cultural aspects of human relationships, behavior, beliefs, and values in this novel. The title refers to two Jat brothers, namely Himmat Singh Gaina and Mangal Singh Gaina. The stories of their family tussles are marred by wealth and power games. The crux of the narrative is about the lives led by women like Tapti, Mithari and Sonal, and girls like Mridula and Mansi, in this vitiated social atmosphere. This paper's focus is on man-woman relationships in this novel.

**Keywords:** Family, patriarchy, child marriage, widow, culture, tradition, custom

Manju Kapur's novels depict a fascinating picture of Indian families and social relationships. All her novels (*Difficult Daughters*, 1998; *A Married Woman*, 2003; *Home*, 2006; *The Immigrant*, 2008; *Custody*, 2011) present a slice from the life and of the Indian middle class. *Brothers*, her most recent novel, which came out in 2016, is a powerful depiction of the harsh reality of Rajasthani culture and society. The conventional culture of Rajasthan, the traditional ways of the Rajasthani people, their behavior, values, beliefs, customs, etc., are on a show in this novel. Kapur gives a good exposure to the typical Rajasthani social-cultural atmosphere, and also does not hesitate in pointing to the oppressive social ills and evils that pervade the society there.

In the conventional culture and society of Rajasthan, orthodox customs like child marriages, widowhood, and casteism dominate the society. Here, women are generally considered subjugated to men, and after marriage they have to strictly and silently follow the patriarchy norms imposed by the society in the name of tradition. After her husband's death, a widow loses significance for her family; she becomes a burden. Women are so much dependent on their husbands that they cannot raise their voice. They choose to remain silent because of their literacy and economic dependency. On the other hand, if they are educated, self-dependent and earn more than her husbands, then their husbands get insecure and their relationship starts suffering due to various differences and conflicts between them.

The title of the novel refers to two Jat brothers, namely Himmat Singh Gaina and Mangal Singh Gaina, and their stories of family tussles and misdeeds marred by wealth and power games. But essentially, the narrative is about lives of women characters with special focus on Tapti who is the wife of Mangal Singh Gaina. She is also involved with Himmat Singh Gaina in an extra-marital affair. There are other relationships as well such as Virpal-Mithari, Dhanpal-Gulabi, Kishan Singh-Guddo.

<sup>1</sup> Research Scholar, Department of English, R.B.S. College, Agra

<sup>2</sup> Professor, Department of English, R.B.S. College, Agra

The narrative of the novel moves from present to past, and from past to present. In the beginning, Manju Kapur depicts the struggle of a wife who tries to meet her husband who is in jail at that point in time. Tapti, the protagonist, meets her husband Mangal Singh Gaina in jail although her husband is not interested in meeting anyone. But this meeting does not have any exchange of words between the couple. In fact, it has always been like that; he always gives cold response to her and his family. Mangal Singh does not care for his wife and his daughters Mridula and Mansi, who are upset because they cannot face the society as their father is in prison. They feel embarrassed and suffer humiliation when they go outside.

Manju Kapur poignantly portrays the anguish and suffering of family, and also throws light on the circumstances arising out of this situation for the family members who are seen with suspicion and by the society at large. Tapti comes to face a dual humiliation: on the one hand, she tries to meet her husband in jail, and on the other, she also tries to console the family members of Himmat Singh Gaina who was shot by her husband Mangal Singh Gaina. It is quite complicated as everyone gives her cold response and assumes that she is also guilty. Kapur reveals the truth at the end of the novel that she is the reason behind the tragedy. Mangal Singh shoots his elder brother Himmat Singh because he gets to know about the relationship between Tapti and Himmat Singh. Both are involved in an illicit relationship. Mangal Singh loses his temper and kills his elder brother who is the Chief Minister of Rajasthan.

Manju Kapur reveals the charm and affection of the initial stage of marriage where husband and wife treat each other with love and respect. But soon things change and affection in the marriage disappears leading to confrontation and conflicts. Tapti is surprised and wants to find the reason for this. She feels that Mangal Singh is a good husband and treats her well. Things get worse when his factory is shut down and she is selected for a government job. It seems that in his masculine pride he starts giving cold shoulder to his wife. Mangal Singh is not happy with Tapti's job. As his business suffers losses, he becomes dependent on his wife's income. It hurts his male ego and pride.

In *Brothers* Manju Kapur showcases the mentality and social attitudes that are prevalent in the society. She underlines the reality that social norms and values are different for men and women. In patriarchal view of things, a wife can be dependent on her husband, but a husband cannot be dependent on his wife's earnings. This kind of thinking is inherited in Mangal Singh's mind. Bala and Subash Chandra remarked in their edited book *Difficult Daughters: An Absorbing Tale of Fact and Fiction* about the man women representation in Manju Kapur's writing and continue, "Male ego- centralism blinds men to the situation of women, who may be placed in agonizing circumstances on account of their relationship with men." (Bala, 1999:108)

Besides, Tapti and Mangal Singh, there are other couples in the novel. Virpal and Mithari get married at an early age. Virpal Singh Gaina belongs to the village of Lal Banga east of Ajmer. He lives there with his family. But he leaves his village due to caste conflicts. His family thinks that he is dead. Due to this reason his childhood bride Mithari has to live like a widow. Everyone considers her a widow of Virpal Singh. Through this instance, Manju Kapur explores the tradition and culture of conventional Rajasthan where child marriage is quite common. The custom of child marriage is practiced by the people without thinking of its consequences. In a child marriage, the couples do not know the meaning of marriage. They have to live with each other whether they like it or not. Both suffer a lot; but the wife suffers more because she is dependent on her husband. For example, in the case of Mithari who has to spend her entire life as a widow. She is not allowed to get married again. She becomes a kind of maid in the family. We also get to read in the novel that sometimes due to difficulties and humiliation, women leave their homes and shift to ashrams, and often, they ruin their lives when they end up being in brothels. Mithari does not say a single word against the family. She abides by the tradition in the name of fate.

Gulabi and Dhanpal is another couple in *Brothers*. Gulabi is the one who always consoles Mithari that her fate will change soon and gives her hope. She too faces some difficulties in her marriage. She is wife of Dhanpal. Theirs is a child marriage. They live happily with the hope that Gulabi will deliver a boy for the name of the family. But her hope is ruined when her husband is selected for war and leaves the home. Gulabi is sad because there is no information about Dhanpal as to when he will return. Gulabi faces loneliness due to separation from her husband. After two years, Dhanpal comes back but the man has changed a lot because of the impact of war on his mind and personality. Manju Kapur writes, "But the man who has come back is nothing man who went away. She knows he is still young, but his talk is all of war." (93) Mithari and Virpal are separated for ten years, and Mithari lives as his widow and passes ten years of isolation. On the other hand, Gulabi and Dhanpal face loneliness and distance of two years because of war and also face the family pressure that is on Gulabi to give a baby boy for the sake of family's name. Manju Kapur also presents the social reality of woman mistreating another woman.

Often, women are oppressed by women. The wheel of time rotates. Kishan Singh's widow bears the torture of her mother-in-law. She is beaten and harsh by Mithari. She does not have any sympathy and love towards her daughter in law. She treats in the same way as she was treated in her past. Mithari does not learn anything but she follows the tradition and culture blindly and has done same thing with Kishan Singh's widow. Kapur writes in the novel, "The only time Mithari shows her life is when she gets up to beat her son's widow. She has brought this tragedy upon the house.... The widow did not question the turning of her mother-in-law love into hatred; it seemed too natural to her. The sorrow she expressed in the privacy of her ghoonghat could be of no interest to anyone. Her life was over, she knew that." (103)

Kapur reveals the cruel face of society through the isolation and suffering of the women folk due to conventional thinking. Nobody tries to understand the concerns and aspirations of a woman, not even another woman. It is men sometimes who happen to give more comfort to wants and desires of women. Kishan Singh's widow gets the sympathy of Himmat Singh, the son of Dhanpal. Both feel alone and share their feelings with each other. They get close and form a relationship and begin to live like partners though she knows well that there is no future of this relationship. Himmat Singh tells her that woman is also an integral part of society and has the right to live life on her terms. But Himmat Singh is clueless to the question of life of a widow. When she asks him, 'What about widow?' he does not know what to say because it seems that in the society, a widow has no right to live a life on her terms. She is not allowed to get married again; but a man can marry after the death of his wife. This shows the dual face of society where norms, tradition and culture values are different, one for men and one for women. Kishan Singh's widow knows the reality; that is why she leaves the home without telling anyone in the darkness. On hearing this Himmat Singh shocked and he is the one who thinks about her, "Where would she go? To a brothel, a Dai, a morgue to Banaras to hide her degraded self in an ashram for the destitute? At political party meetings, the agenda for female empowerment had been frequently discussed. His own home was a good illustration of what could go with the life a girl." (138)

Manju Kapur brings out the real and cruel face of society in Rajasthan. In case of the widow of Kishan Singh who lives in the house, there is no one who knows her name; no one remembers her face; and no one really wants to know where she can go. She is a burden on the family after her husband's death. She is alive just for the namesake. But it is Himmat Singh who thinks about her and tries to find her because he really cares about her. Himmat Singh thinks she has left the home because she is pregnant. But all others forget her so easily. When Himmat Singh returns to his village after two years, he has to live with his childhood bride who has been waiting for him for long. Gulabi convinces Himmat Singh, "The mother tries to placate him, 'you will be happy when you have a son. That is what she is here for. She is a good girl; all these years she has not said a word. She is your wife.'" (164) But Himmat Singh is a changed man after having lived in the city. He likes the manners of the city. He is not interested in her. Himmat Singh is not Virpal. He is an ambitious person. He does not take any interest in her but he fulfills his duty in the name of husband and son, and leaves the village after a month. Thus, in the man-woman relationship, wife's life and wishes depend on behavior and aspiration of her husband. There is no choice for the woman who has to spend her life on her husband's terms and conditions. In a perceptive criticism of Manju Kapur's writings, a critic states, "Almost all civilization are patriarchal societies. Only the male member in the family will be having all rights. He alone is entitled to social, economics, and religious freedom. In the course of human civilization customs, traditions, superstitions and irrational beliefs has slowly reduced woman as to a slave, a domestic animal and an instrument to fancy the will of man. History of human civilization through its scriptures written and made by men were conditioned by prophets, saints and sages who were only men." (Girija 2017:03)

Himmat Singh wants to get married for the second time in order to enhance his political career. Himmat Singh wants to get married to Sahib's daughter Sonal. He does accept his child marriage. He wants to get party ticket as the son-in-law of the party chief. He is ready to divorce his first wife and give the papers to his younger brother Mangal Singh for collecting the sign. Mangal Singh is not happy but he follows for the sake of his brother. Gulabi asks her daughter-in-law for her thumb impression, who silently signs. His uncle Virpal tries to convince him: "Don't fool yourself. You are married, right and tight. You have a son. So what? I did it for them. All the time they kept saying. It is your duty. Otherwise, you are not man. The uncle was silent." (203) T.Staney, aptly remarks on women's voiceless existence in his paper on the subject of marital discord in *Brothers*, "A reading of the novel of Kapur confirms the fact that women are voiceless victims who can neither fight for their rights nor break the manacles. They are destined to suffer under the cruel norms of patriarchy." (T.Staney 2018:258)

Manju Kapur boldly portrays the relationship of Himmat Singh and Tapti in the novel. Tapti is a confident woman. She thinks that she can do whatever she wants in her life. She moves on in her relationship because of Mangal Singh's careless behavior. To a large extent, Mangal Singh's life is made miserable by his elder brother Himmat Singh. Mangal Singh understands the true face of his brother who does not care for anyone. We also see the conflict in the life of Mangal Singh in regard to his relationships with his wife, his brother. He is cheated by them both. When he learns about the extra-marital affair of his wife, he is furious and wants to take revenge. He shoots his brother and feels no regret. Tapti tries to find a way to lessen his punishment but all is in vain. Thus, in *Brothers*, Manju Kapur vividly represents the man-woman bonding in the social and cultural milieu of the Indian society, especially in the state of Rajasthan.

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