



The concept of home in Manju Kapur's Home

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Keywords :

Home. That was what she wanted.

---Manju Kapur, *The Immigrant*.

A woman's shaan is in her home.

---Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*

It was useless looking for answers inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom, and the brightlights of Lahore colleges.

---Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*

I want to leave this house. There is nothing for me here.

---Manju Kapur, *Home*.

Home has been a persistent concern in the work of fiction writers. Specifically, in the novels of women writers the pre-occupation with the concept of home assumes enormous significance. The literary renderings of home varies from it being used as a theme, a concept, a trope, a metaphor, a symbol and an idea saturated with metaphysical dimensions. The current burgeoning of women-centric fictions by female authors have emphasised not only the primacy of home in women's life, but also how it transforms into a prison-house, reducing them to abject submission and slavery. Etymologically derived from Sanskrit *aham* home basically signifies a physical structure built for dwelling, an accommodating place, a domicile, a safe haven, a personal realm of retreat from the affairs of the world.

Among the myriad connotations of home the most potent are the notions of belonging, the right to lay claim to a place as one's own, the freedom to be oneself, secure spaces that emanate feelings of inclusiveness, comfort and protection. It associates with it relationship, privacy, warmth, attachment, desire, safety, happiness and freedom. Home may be the fixed and enclosed space of a house, a bungalow, a cottage, an apartment; or slums and caravans, shifting temporary settlements; open spaces as the pavement, homes for the dispossessed; or the jungles, habitat of the animals; and even the earth that is home to all the living beings. Home also signifies the birthplace, the motherland, and the native place as in the case of displaced peoples, the migrants, the expatriates and the exiles. But even migration and relocation vary. For there is a deliberate chosen movement away from the old home to a new one in search of new opportunities and a better future. It brings with it a host of nostalgia, longing, and desire, as the feelings it evokes for the diasporic people. Home may be transposed from a territorial plane to a psychological and abstract one as the memory of a lost home as in Salman Rushdie's *Imaginary Homelands*, or Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Interpreter of Maladies* or *Unaccustomed Earth*. Home assumes great poignancy as the expatriates strive to assimilate to their new land and make it their new home while confronting discrimination and marginality. For Avtar Brah home becomes, "a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return even if it is possible

to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of "origin" On the other hand, home is also the lived experience of locality (Brah, 1996, p. 192). It is also the sense of being at home at a particular locale while actually not residing and away from one's real home.

There is also the forced, unwilling movement, a fleeing away from home when survival is at stake and home becomes a dangerous site portending death and disaster. As Lal and Kumar say that the, "border crossings in war zones, life in refugee camps and fleeing from the fanatical rhetoric of ethnic cleansing are directed by the exigencies of survival" (Lal & Kumar, 2007, p. ix). In such unexpected and abrupt dispossession of home, it becomes a source of constant yearning, trauma, and a crisis. Home in such life-threatening circumstances becomes unlivable, unhomely, necessitating a movement away from home. Such choices of leaving one's home, though consciously made are forced and unwilling, and hence become an agonising and haunting presence for those who leave it. It arouses senses of unbelonging, deprivation and homelessness. Banwari Lal and Yashpal in *Home* painfully recount the pain and horror of losing their home and homeland, with the partition that created new homes for Hindus and Muslims. This nostalgic reiteration of affluence of their pre-partition days and their traumatic uprooting reverberates in the novel during moments of crisis. Their attempt to resettle in a new homeland across the border and begin their lives anew is conveyed through the image of constructing a home:

At thirty-two he felt great rage at being forced to start again, but that made it all the more necessary to bury his feelings in the determination to recreate every brick, every shelf, every thread of that which had formed the substance of his life from the age of fourteen. (Kapur, 1998, p. 4-5)

Displacement, dispossession, unbelonging, quest for home, and resettlement dominate the novel's matrix. The family's home is shifted from Lahore to Delhi. Women leave their natal homes to settle in their married homes. Nisha is shifted to her aunt's house, and returns back after more than a decade to ultimately reallocate herself in her husband's house. Vicky leaves, "the house his mother's death had made hateful to him" (77), to live in Banwari Lal's house where he is despised. Finally he leaves his grandfather's home to settle elsewhere. Individuals are thus, uprooted from their environs and are forced to house themselves in new places. Ancestral ties are severed and new attachments made while struggling to cope with the isolation and unhomeliness that swathe the people.

The opening unveils the centrality of the home in the lives of the novel's characters. Amidst the conflicting existences and multifarious resistances, home assumes a preponderance sublimating the dissenting collectivity into an acquiescing unity. Utmost care is taken to preserve the customs of the house with no scope for transgression. But as the story unfurls, both the home and its occupants seem untenable. The novel be-

gins in the household of Banwari Lal with an introduction by the author:

Their marriages augmented, their habits conserved. From an early age children were trained to maintain the foundation on which these homes rested... Those who fell against the grain found in their homes knives that wounded, and once the damage had been done, gestures that reconciled.

Set in the middle-class locality of the metropolitan capital of India, Banwari Lal's house in Karol Bagh radiated a sense of affluence and status. For Karol Bagh is a locality inhabited by upwardly mobile tradesmen of upper caste strata of society. Contrasted with the spacious house with urban amenities is the house of Murli in Bareilly. A dilapidated house amidst the dingy lanes, it reeked of the pathetic living conditions of the inmates. Small, congested, with betel stained walls, and poor sanitation and lighting facilities it symbolises the poor and claustrophobic existence of Sunita (Banwari's daughter), and her son Vicky. Sunita's death in a kitchen fire is thus ominously foretold by the very description of the tarnished house owned by an abusive and a drunkard husband. Further, the replacement of the traditional houses by modern buildings and apartments reveals the gradual erosion of conventional modes of living and their replacement by modernised ways. About the significance of the locations of homes and the settlement patterns Chauhan writes:

homes within communities have the potential of becoming crystallized symbols of social status. The location, design and settlement patterns of homes inhere within themselves the physical, emotional and social relations of the inmates. In fact, homes and housing patterns become one of the most visually unambiguous signifiers of social stratification. (Chauhan, 2007, p. 242-243)

He further states that, "The relation of gender, caste and class that frame the home enter it like invisible spirits and condition the psychological, emotional and social expectations as well as responses of the inhabitants" (Chauhan, 2007, p. 243). Thus, while Banwari Lal's house in Karol Bagh implies the prosperous and customary lifestyle of the inhabitants, Vicky's room in the same house on the Barsati explicates his marginal and alienated status within it. Even behind the façade of loving togetherness of the house lurks the uneasy revulsion and jealousies amidst the members. There is constant indication of two separate worlds within the house, the upstairs inhabited by Sushila's family and the downstairs by Sona and others. Vicky's residence on the barsati becomes an added appendage, and a burden for the house. The gloomy basement, ironically, becomes for Nisha her place to discover herself and escape from the turmoils of her life. Juxtaposed with the imposing house is Nisha's new home in Daryaganj situated above her husband's shop, "Its entrance was from the back gully, dumping place for rubbish... The household bathed, peed, shat, cooked in cubby-holes on opposite ends of the *angan*" (321). The locale and constitution of Nisha's new house reflects the rapid shrinking and overcrowding of urban landscape leading to decreasing availability of residential plots. Accommodating the mounting populace and providing for their means of living, has led to a drastic change in building patterns. Consequently, congested buildings, with shops at the ground floor and residential units above have become an all too common sight in busy commercial areas of cities. Large, independent houses with open courtyards and spacious rooms have been replaced by smaller living units jostling against each other.

Home in feminist literary works has been a contentious and thoroughly interrogated site. Its ambivalence elucidated by, it being presented not only as a preferred destination and a sanctioned space authenticated by society, but also as a portent socio-religious tool denying women and even an individual, their own space. The idea of home as a habitat, as a simplistic notion of a physical space is negated when we focus on the ambivalence of the concept of home and the

complex theoretical paradigms associated with it. For home also carries with it images of confinement, of closed restrictive spaces, of vigilantly scrutinised crippling domains that tenaciously grip individual sovereignty and the freedom of movement to the outside world. Home, hence, becomes a site of both liberation and safety, a place to finally arrive at; and an oppressive pressing structure from which its inhabitants seek to escape. In the domestic fictions of Manju Kapur, home has been a constantly occurring motif acquiring dominance in the lives of its protagonists. All her novels *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody* reveal the complex dialectics between the home and its residents. This paper seeks to investigate how home has been dealt in her novel *Home*. Its primacy is emphasised by the very title of the novel itself. For it is the house that keeps the joint family integrated together and it is here that the major actions of the novel takes place. It is also the home that becomes the cause of the split in the family. As the family expands and their needs grow the living space gets constricted and the home becomes rife with tension. The prime focus of the novel is the home which is deployed both in its physical manifestation and its metaphysical dimension. The prevailing idea of the homogeneous space of home is contested as it becomes the arena of class, caste and generational clashes, as the old and the new generations struggle to exist within the common house. As generational disparity becomes evident and signs of rebellion erupt, the whole dynamics of family relationship and individual rights gets reconfigured. Ultimately, the old strain, under the increasing pressure of the new and finally fragments itself. The shop branches into readymade garments and shawls to keep pace with the family's ever growing needs and societal modernisation. The old house with the open *angan* gives way to modern self contained flats with more floor area but less common space. Thus, community living and collective existence gradually fractures dividing the family into smaller units.

The family chronicle of an extended business family has two main strands to it, the story of Sona and her daughter, Nisha. The subplot narrativises the life of Rupa, Sona's sister; and Vicky, the grandson of Banwari Lal. The novel relates how the lives of each get enmeshed in the house and how they feel dispossessed while at the same time staking a claim to the house. Sona is stuck in the quagmire of family disputes and wrangling, as she remains childless for the first ten years of her married life. For her the shift from the maternal to the marital home entails a difficult journey as she has to abide by not only the rules and regulations of the patriarchal household, but also remains conscious of her weak financial background in a home acutely sensitive about economic considerations. In a family where strict divisions were maintained between the private and the public realm, the life of the women was strictly confined within the boundaries of the house. Nonetheless, homes, that are assigned to women as their actual place impinges on their lives as the inmates have to strictly abide by the codes of conduct that govern the house. Hence, women merely *occupy* the homes they live in. They *do not possess* the homes which society so assertively grants them. These women, domesticated and tamed by patriarchy are subject to control by the larger external forces that mould and frame their lives. Sona is thrust with the guardianship of a loathsome relative. She becomes helpless as, "The house was quick to detect neglect, and many people quick to attack with their conclusions" (26). Nisha is allowed to start her business only because of her dire misfortune. Yashpal agonises over the thought that, "The women of the house had never worked. Not one. And here he was sending his beloved daughter out into the world because she did not have her own home to occupy herself with" (269). Even marriages are settled to increase the wealth and status of the house, with scant consideration for the prospective partners.

The outer world was solely for men striving to expand their commercial base. "The women stayed home, as was appropriate" (17). Not allowed to cross the threshold of the house, the old tradition snaps when Nisha is sent to her aunt's house to stay. Nisha's traumatic experience of being sexually mo-

tested by her own cousin shatters the belief of home being a safe abode. Yet, so anxious are the household members about the traditions, chores and prestige of the home that they are unwilling to consent to the idea that the safe sanctuary has turned into a terrorising space. The incidence and Sunita's accidental death demythologises the visualisation of the intransience of home. It is Rupa who detects that the "demon lay in her home" (67). It is only after eleven years that she returns to her family. Brought up under extreme care and an enlightened ambience by her aunt she finds her old home stifling, demanding, with no privacy or scope of personal autonomy. Her college becomes an escape route to freedom. But she has to pay for the liberty as her love with the low-caste Suresh is doomed. Her home becomes a dungeon as all her outside movements are banned and her activities closely monitored. "All day she remained in the house, a prisoner of her deed, a prisoner of their words" (200). Imprisoned within the precincts of her house her freedom and cravings are stifled.

Rupa is perennially troubled by her lawyer tenant and embroiled in a lengthy legal battle with him. Owning a house that was rightfully hers she could not evict a troubling tenant due to the legal loopholes. Vicky's life assumes an intense complexity in Banwari Lal's home. He is maltreated by the residents who treat him as a servant boy swaying between home and shop, and subject him to constant taunts. The pervading sense of unhomeliness, caused due to negligence and maltreatment, compels him to seek solace in shop, and on the terrace, the comparatively free space available in the home. Meanwhile he betrays his relatives trust and sexually abuses the only daughter of the house, scarring Nisha's life.

Thus, while the members physically find shelter in the home they psychologically and emotionally suffer in the very house that is their refuge. Concomitantly, the real home becomes frightening and controlling, with the characters frequently struggling to break free from the interruptions, vigilance and oppressiveness that becomes a prominent feature of the house they live in. The novel explores how the people's life in a joint-family house is entailed by the broader considerations of the collectivity and relegates the free play of individualism and open choices. Living in the house the people are beset with anguish and alienation. The utopianism related

to home is fractured as it engulfs the people's lives. There is a lessening of the home with a gradual attenuation of the homely atmosphere. The fictional personages are abhorred, controlled and pushed to the periphery. Physical home becomes problematic and there is a continuous sense of being unhomed and not being at home. Ma ji feels her life useless after her husband's death. Sona feels her home usurped by others. Nisha, Vicky, and Asha are constantly reminded that their present home is temporary. Nisha's sexual victimisation makes the home unsafe, undesirable, deflecting the delusion of its security. Vicky and Asha, while being emphatic about their share, are painfully aware that they have no legal entitlement to the place they call their home. Chandra Talpade Mohanty elucidates:

the tension between two specific modalities: being home and not being home. 'Being home' refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; 'not being home' is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself. (Mohanty and Martin, 2010, 90)

The fiction, thus, involves a multilayered treatment of home. It deals with home as the locus for its inhabitants; the loss of the living space of home; search for a home due to loss of the older home; and an abstract emotional sense of belonging to a home. *Home*, thus, invites a critical rethinking about the nature and existence of home. The lived reality of the characters cracks the myth of home being a safe site for living in every circumstance, by all its denizens, and at all times. The sanctity of home, the novel further elucidates is contaminated by the very inmates who are supposed to guard and protect it. Further it envisages that home is never a permanent and stable site as it is not immune to the changes and fissures occurring within it. Its disintegration and complete transformation symbolises the eroding away of old filial ties and traditional values. As the old home is dismantled and new one built there is a sense of materialistic advancement but a gradual loss of emotional succor and mental solace. Lived in by members with varied predilections home no more remains a unifying site but becomes an arena of contesting claims.

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