On the Threshold: Gendered Spaces in *Home*, by Manju Kapur

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Abstract

Starting from her first, award-winning novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998), Manju Kapur has always chosen to focus her narratives on the controversial condition of women in the context of Indian patriarchal society. Moreover, her characters' struggle to balance tradition and modernity, their attempts at reconciling the demands of their families and their own individual aspirations, have often been reflected in the tension between the spaces women are entitled to inhabit and those from which they are supposedly excluded. By employing the approach of close reading and critical analysis, this essay sets out to explore the way physical and metaphorical thresholds are trespassed in Kapur's *Home* (2006). Therefore, family values symbolically identified with domestic spaces are challenged and transgressed to attain the freedom and self-fulfillment the characters long for.

Keywords: *Gendered spaces;* Home; *Manju Kapur*; *marginalized masculinities; modernity; tradition.*

1. Introduction: The home environment and its crisis

As Maryam Mirza has elucidated, the meaning attributed to the home environment may vary according to the theoretical lens through which it is observed and analyzed. When a Marxist framework is adopted, houses turn into instruments for the perpetuation of a capitalist system, as they provide the necessary respite for exploited laborers. For Western feminists, domesticity is often linked to male oppression and abuse within patriarchal contexts; conversely,

postcolonial and African American feminists regard the homeplace as a potential "site of resistance" (Mirza 2015: 3) for black women, capable of challenging white supremacy. For Gaston Bachelard, the house, "the human being's first world" (Bachelard 1969: 7), "shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace" (6), thus acting as a "large cradle" (7), as a defensive shell. On the contrary, Homi Bhabha has investigated the concept of the "unhomely" (141), when the boundary between the private and the public is blurred and feelings of dislocation and disorientation prevail. Viewed against the background of current-day India, struggling to balance tradition with modernity, the homely space is often associated with the re-negotiation of gender roles and prerogatives. No longer idealistically perceived as women's undisputed domain, where the female members of the family could lead a seemingly undisturbed and fulfilled existence, the domestic sphere is actually fraught with tensions, contradictions, and even dangers, as it emerges in the writings penned by many contemporary Indian writers such as Manju Kapur. This essay will offer a close reading and analysis of her third novel, evocatively entitled *Home* (2006). As will be shown, the changing topography of the family mansion (where most of the story is set) corresponds to the shifting power dynamics within the family, which becomes increasingly evident as the newer generations replace the old. Moreover, through the study of Vicky and Nisha−two of the main characters who, for different reasons, occupy a liminal position within the environment they both live in−the gendered nature of domestic space will also be discussed and challenged.

2. *Home*: A close reading and a critical analysis

Home chronicles the vicissitudes and the achievements of the Banwari Lal family, starting from the patriarch, Lala Banwari Lal (the owner of a thriving cloth shop), and ending with his numerous grandchildren. The centrality of the home environment (also evident in the choice of the novel's title) is emphasized in a note to the reader placed before the first chapter, in which Kapur clarifies that "from an

early age, [the Banwari Lal] children were trained to maintain the foundation" (Kapur 2006: 1) on which their home and their future rested. To further highlight the importance attached to the physical and emotional space of the house, the author recalls the harrowing times of the Partition, when the Banwari Lal family had been uprooted and compelled to flee from Lahore to relocate in Delhi. There, the patriarch had strived to recreate the mirror image of what had been lost or left behind, "every brick, every shelf, every thread of that which had formed the substance of his life" (6). Right from the onset of the story, therefore, the mansion is presented as inextricably entwined with the characters' identity, as an emblem of harmony, hope, and closeness; as Lala Banwari Lal used to repeat to his children, in fact, "united we stand, divided energy, time and money are squandered" (7).

The first changes in the house layout occur when Yashpal, the firstborn son, gets married to Sona, who fails to conceive for over ten years, while Sushila, the wife of the patriarch's second son, immediately gives birth to two boys, thus moving to the upper floor, formerly occupied by a tenant. Indeed, the shift from a horizontal to a vertical arrangement of space is revealing: a hierarchical element is introduced, connected with women's generative capacity, and igniting a rivalry "between upstairs and downstairs" (98) that will continue until the final metamorphosis of the mansion, many years later. After Lala Banwari Lal's demise, in fact, (followed by the death of his wife a few months later), the house is pulled down and completely reconstructed and furnished according to the latest fashion. This highly symbolic action signifies a physical and psychological break with the past, an attempt at trading traditional family values for glamour, profits, and privacy. A basement and two more storeys are added by the developers, who retain the ownership and the management of the newly-built floors in exchange for their work and a sum of money to be paid to the original owners. The family house, previously characterized by its shared spaces, such as the *aangan* (the traditional courtyard) and the kitchen, where meals were collectively prepared for the small community, is

thus replaced by a block of independent, equally sized, fully equipped, anonymous flats, partially occupied by strangers. The Banwari Lals' transition into modernity is complete: even their shop is enlarged in the pursuit of a more substantial revenue, while fine silk and cotton saris are slowly substituted by casual clothes and marketable garments.

In her novel, Manju Kapur also tackles the issue of gendered spaces in a thought-provoking and unusual way, which also grants her the opportunity to delve into the questions of marginalized masculinities[1] (an umbrella term that encompasses men who are socially constructed as less deserving, authoritative, influential) and women's self-assertion, through the characters of Vicky and Nisha respectively. Vicky's peripheral status within the Banwari Lal household is hinted at, at the beginning of the narrative, when readers gather that, as the son of the patriarch's daughter (Sunita), his birth as the first grandchild does not really count. Elsewhere in the novel, explicit references are made to his presumably weaker blood ties, which determine his subordinate position to his younger cousins: "the boy/man knew that the blood lines from the female side can only whisper" (111); "the blood […] on his side was a pale pink dribble through the house" (175). When his mother is allegedly killed in a domestic accident in the kitchen (in truth, she is fatally injured by her abusive husband), the ten-year-old boy is moved to his grandparents' house, where he experiences both emotional and physical rejection. Sona abhors the "borrowed child […] from another woman's womb" (23), whom she has to dutifully raise as if he were her own, since she is still childless. When she eventually conceives and gives birth to her daughter Nisha followed by her son Raju, she dreams of "push[ing] that unwanted child back to his proper home" (48). For Vicky, therefore, the domestic environment does not identify with the protective cocoon envisioned by Gaston Bachelard, nor does the boy only yearn to become

[1] For further information on marginalized masculinities, see *Communicating Marginalized Masculinities: Identity Politics in TV, Film, and New Media* (2013) and *Marginalized Masculinities: Contexts, Continuities and Change* (2017).

active in the public sphere by working in the cloth shop together with his male relatives, thus meeting the normative standard of hegemonic masculinity. As time elapses, in fact, teenage Vicky continues to crave to belong to a nurturing community of women, to be finally accepted and recognized. Nonetheless, every attempt at invading and appropriating the private sphere from which he is perpetually excluded proves fruitless and unsuccessful. "Unhomely" Vicky is entitled to freely inhabit only the roof, a *non-place*, which graphically corresponds to his feelings of isolation and being disconnected from his kin. While on the roof, he molests his little cousin Nisha, the only family member that had shown care and affection to him. Even though his vicious behavior cannot possibly be condoned, as Maryam Mirza has underlined, it may be argued that "his actions are partly a *consequence* of his marginality, his homelessness within the joint-family house" (Mirza 2015: 7): as he is not accustomed to the warmth and the security of domesticity, Vicky can only share his sense of precariousness and his trauma with Nisha, for whom the home also ceases to be a safe haven.

Before being definitively evicted when the mansion is pulled down (in the new block of flats there is no room for him and his wife), Vicky is given the possibility to build a *barsati* on top of the two-storey house, namely a small, detached residential unit. The *barsati* was conventionally used by servants or, as Christiane Brosius has explained, it functioned as "a 'transit' room for male bachelors working away from the parental home" (Brosius 2017: 250), a temporary dwelling whose very name is reminiscent of the monsoon season, *barsat*, and its transient nature. Hence, Vicky ends up suspended in a limbo, abandoned in a vacuum of place and time, as he remains in the *barsati* for many years: neither included nor positively excluded from the Banwari Lal family and their business. Thus, he is stuck on the emblematic threshold between domesticity and masculinity, unable to cross it to fully attain either condition.

Despite her large eyes and fair complexion (which increase a woman's value in the marriage market), Nisha is a *mangli*, i.e. she was

born under inauspicious stars. To compensate for this flaw, therefore, her mother pays utmost attention to preserve her looks and instill in her the typically female qualities of meekness, modesty, and self-sacrifice. From her early years, Nisha is initiated to the cult of domesticity; when she longs to go outside in the sun, to play cricket with the boys, she is reminded that "it is better for girls to remain inside" (Kapur 2006: 52), otherwise they will get "dirty and black" and nobody will ever want to marry them. To convey the message even more effectively, Sona metamorphoses herself into a pure and graceful lotus, while a suntanned girl is transformed into an inferior and degraded creature: either "a black buffalo" (52) or "the sweeper woman who comes to the house" (52), belonging to a lower caste. As already observed, however, the house fails to shelter the child when Vicky sexually assaults her: instead of *protecting the dreamer* (to paraphrase Bachelard), the oppressive home environment haunted by traumatic memories triggers Nisha's recurring nightmares, which actually prevent her from sleeping. The only treatment for her inner wound (which, nevertheless, remains more or less concealed to her parents) is the relocation to her aunt's house, where Nisha enjoys previously unknown educational opportunities which, in turn, open a novel dimension to her existence, and fresh prospects to her life. Significantly, when she is claimed back over ten years later, she cannot manage to conform to societal norms, nor can she easily bend to fit the patriarchal mold. While her mother claims that "her real education is in the kitchen" (135), the young lady rushes to the veranda, "away from the family" (135) and the stifling atmosphere of the house, to plunge into her books. Nisha is depicted by Manju Kapur as a liminal figure, torn between her family's expectations and her firm intention to release herself from the accepted paradigm of domestic womanhood−daughter-wife-mother−which she deems inadequate to her aspirations. The girl decides to further her education (albeit not completely successfully), she cuts her long hair−"family treasure, the essence of traditional beauty" (148)−, she even dreams of a modern relationship and falls for a lower-caste boy, who eventually deserts her. Back to her family's flat, where she is supposed to sit and

wait for marriage proposals, she develops an eczema which progressively spoils and darkens her fair and delicate complexion. In his 2006 review of *Home*, Suresh Kohli criticized the numerous pages devoted to Nisha's ailment as, in his view, that episode had "no bearings" (Kohli 2006: 189). Conversely, far from being inconsequential, her skin disease turns into an unconsciously enacted strategy, aimed at discarding the stereotypical model of femininity she has been prompted to emulate. Initially mocked as a "useless", "sub-standard female" (Kapur 2006: 127), given her inability to cook, the girl is now ordered to avoid domestic chores: "Slowly, the duties it was inconceivable for a woman not to do, became hers not to do" (240). Besides, she even employs her newly-acquired time to carve a social space of her own, located on the threshold between her family's flat and the outer world: the basement, which she rents from the developers, using her father's loan, to start her own flourishing business. Buried in the darkness of the ground, the basement is figured as a symbolic womb that shapes Nisha's new life as a female entrepreneur (borrowing the expression from Anusha Mathew's title for her essay), as a human being capable of joining male and female prerogatives. Indeed, women's generative capacity is turned into the ability to produce beautiful garments (as in the label "Nisha's creations"); her head tailor "bac[o]me[s] the man in her life" (Kapur 2006: 293), and her work ethics and commitment are equated to marital vows: "her job would be the object of devotion rather than a husband" (272).

Conclusions

As Manju Kapur revealed in an interview with Alex Tickell, many readers resented her for ending the novel with Nisha's marriage to a widower and the subsequent birth of their twins (a boy and a girl), as if she wished to *redeem* her protagonist through the recognition of her primary function as a nurturer. Nisha's suspension of her business activity might seem consistent with this interpretation. On the other hand, rather than a betrayal of both her character and her own feminist

stance, the final chapter of *Home* provides Nisha with one more option in life, from which to choose. In the writer's words: "Women grow into their roles as they age. They have more freedom, more choice. Just because [Nisha] can't [have a business] *now* doesn't mean that that's the end of the story […]. One day, if she is interested, she will" (Tickell 2015: 341).

To conclude, as this essay has tried to demonstrate, in *Home* Manju Kapur describes the homely environment as a contentious site, capable of mirroring the characters' development and their struggle against the strictures of gender roles. While Nisha finally succeeds in crossing both real and metaphorical thresholds, Vicky's condition of "unhomelinesss" leads to his definitive estrangement from his family and society. In both cases, the house (and their changing relation to it) emerges as the objective correlative for their shifting status within the household and their new position in the world.

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