**India's women and the writing process: Interview with Manju Kapur.**

Lisa Lau interviews Manju Kapur, author of 5 novels (Difficult Daughters, 1998; A Married Woman, 2003; Home, 2006; The Immigrant, 2008; Custody, 2011) and editor of Shaping the World, 2014.

**Introduction**

Manju Kapur and I became acquainted when she graciously gave me permission to reproduce the front cover image of one of her novels in a book I was writing, on issues of visual representation[1]. Manju[2] agreed to an 'interview series'; a methodology comprising a series of interviews (via e-mail) spanning 5 months (July-November 2014), which is then written up thematically[3]. This methodology which was developed initially to accommodate my interviewees' availabilities and very busy lives, has proved – given suitable interviewees[4] – to have additional advantages of being able to develop a richer, deeper dialogue over time, to have the opportunity to ponder a question and return to it repeatedly over the course of several weeks or months if desired, as well as to provide both the interviewer and respondent with more opportunity and space for follow-up, enabling a more thoughtful handling of questions and answers than the single interview usually does. It is possible too that the growing understanding and trust - as a relationship develops between researcher and author - may help in eliciting more pertinent questions as well as richer responses.

Manju Kapur is one of those comparatively rare Indian-resident women novelists of social realism fiction celebrated and widely read *both* in India and in the West.[5] (Her predecessors include literary lions such as Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande.) Her debut novel, Difficult Daughters, 8 years in the writing, was released in 1998, eventually published by Faber and Faber, and was received with great acclaim. From that first novel, Kapur stamped her mark by providing a memorable protagonist, a young Indian woman struggling to find her way within the particular confines of her culture, her time, her gender-allocated space and roles. In her subsequent 4 novels, Kapur has created other

[1] This book is entitled *Indian Writing in English and Issues of Visual Representation: Judging More Than a Book By Its Cover*, Pivot, Palgrave, forthcoming in 2015.

[2] I have used her first name here, to mark the personal level and cordiality of our acquaintance, but in the rest of the piece, I refer to her as Kapur, respecting the conventions of professionalism.

[3] The series of interviews are edited into a single long interview, rather than presented in fragments. This edited version – which arranges the material for optimal coherence and flow - is then sent to the interviewee for approval, to check and ensure that there is no alteration in wording, phrasing, or meaning.

[4] Suitable interviewees are those who are extremely comfortable with the written word, naturally highly articulate in textual form, enjoy the e-mail medium, and are engaged, involved, and willing to maintain consistency of interaction for a sustained period of time. Successful series-interviews also in part depend on a rapport being established. It seems to appear that for suitable interviewees of the interview-series, this method may be more satisfying than the single interview, enabling them to represent their views more thoroughly and holistically.

[5] There are some excellent women writers resident in India, such as Kavery Nambisan, K.R. Usha, Anuradha Roy, some of whom have been writing literature in English for a while, but whose excellent social realism fiction is still relatively little known outside India.

fascinating women protagonists, each negotiating identity and autonomy within their domestic milieus as well attempting to find their place within the wider public sphere.

The New Indian Woman has been a topic of intense academic interest in the last 2 decades, or since the 1990s. Kapur's oeuvre primarily features middle-class, urban, young Indian women at the turn of the century and into the new millennium, providing rich material depicting and reflecting changing attitudes of Indian women and of their society, especially towards controversial issues such as extra-marital sexual (and sometimes homosexual) intercourse, adultery and infidelity, marriages (both love and arranged) and divorce, and even issues of child custody and split families. Studies have discussed how the roles and expectations of women in India are changing (Rajan, 1993; Thapan, 2001; Lau, 2010 & 2013). Increasingly, Indian women are having careers and salaried jobs, leaving the private sphere of home to join the public sphere beyond, becoming financially independent, and this in turn has led to socio-cultural adjustments needing to be made. Studies show Indian women continue to be highly family-oriented, with very many still wishing to prioritise family (and family needs and wellbeing) over career achievements and the earning of income (Radhakrishnan, 2007). That said, with new-found financial independence, Indian women are negotiating for ever more personal autonomy also, and breaking away from the traditional confines of what constitutes a good Indian girl, challenging definitions of modesty and shame and dishonour, rewriting the concept of Indian-ness and femininity. These themes and topics are at the core of Kapur's writings, rendering them extremely topical and pertinent in current debate and discussion. In fact, Kapur's writings track and chart, and then rechart, new domestic territories in the heartland of the Indian households and joint families, mapping new conventions and changing social spaces.

Here, Kapur discusses her sources of inspiration and narrative, her publishing experiences, and her conceptualisation of being an Indian author, and all that this entails. She talks through the writing process for her as an author, the learning to shape a story, the rejections and repeat-editings, her growing confidence, and those themes and concerns close to her heart.

**Interview:**

*LL: I am fascinated by how your writing 'grows' from novel to novel and over the years. And particularly by how your depictions of Indian women characters also grows.*

MK: If my depictions of Indian women have grown, I think it's because I have developed as a writer. To be able to express all the contradictions I see around me, I need a prose that is supple and

nuanced, that is capable of reflection without judgement. I also don't want to be stuck in a niche – to be seen as a family or a woman writer – anyway what I am seen as is not so important as how I see myself. So far each novel has been really tough to write – but I also feel that my struggle to express myself means that somewhere I am pushing boundaries and that can only be a good thing.

I do see a change in women, in the sense that they go out more, they are more independent, more women are working, etc. I don't know whether I have said this before, but I draw my stories from around me. I consider myself a very Indian novelist. More specifically a North Indian urban middle class novelist.

*LL: Do you write with any consciousness to faithfully represent the social situations (fictionalised of course) you see around you?*

MK: Yes I do write with a great deal of awareness of my social milieu. I draw inspiration from it, for one thing. I might hear or see something – usually hear – and wonder about it – how did that happen, what lay behind it – and chose to explore it fictionally. I find my surroundings in India very rich so far as such inspiration is concerned. At every corner, particularly now, when things are changing so much, there is a story.

*LL: Do you think India - especially middle class India, and particularly the India experienced by its women, has changed a lot since you yourself were in your 20 or 30s, and also since you first began writing <u>Difficult Daughters</u> (which was published before the turn of the century)?*

I started writing <u>Difficult Daughters</u> in 1991. And of course in the 25 years since, India has changed a lot. But in writing <u>Difficult Daughters</u>, I was not aiming to reflect society around me. Rather I was going back in time, to pre-Independence India of the 1930s and 40s. In doing so I was – at first inadvertently – going back to my own roots. For the subject of my first novel I had initially chosen to focus on a woman in her 40s, a lecturer like myself – divorced and alone in a DDA flat - Delhi Development Authority – a body that has been responsible for a whole lot of multi housing blocks in the city – wondering why she had ended up in the way she had. From my own experience of women and families I knew that parental influences were all important. What had been the effect of this girl's mother on her life? Why had she ended up alone, and miserable, when her mother had tried so hard to make her a good girl, to curb her wings, to equip her with all the necessary traits of compromise and adjustment that would ensure an eventual happy marriage.

As I went back to this woman's mother, I decided to draw upon my own mother's life. This was the only mother I knew as well as I did. So I began the exploration into my mother's past, for to understand her I had to bring in her mother, my grandmother.

I often feel I have no imagination. I would have found it hard to imagine lives of women around the turn of the 19th century, my mother was born in 1915 and the more I delved into her life the more fascinating it seemed. There were so many issues that her life covered! There was the move towards female education, there was the involvement of women in the freedom struggle, there was the push towards khadi and local manufacture of cloth, the dependence on Indian goods rather than foreign, there was the intertwined lives of Hindus and Muslims, there were women working.

When I finished with the grandmother's and the mother's life I discovered that I had my novel right there, and the divorced woman, living alone in a DDA flat faded away. I came back to her, or a creature like her, in the sense of writing about more contemporary situations in later novels.

I taught in a woman's college for much of my professional life. Undergraduates from 18-21. Although legally adult, there were girls still being educated, being formed, girls with a sense that they were on the threshold of something. But of what?

I taught in Miranda House for many years. Though I also studied there, it was my many years as a teacher that made the place so meaningful to me. When I started writing I thought that the teaching of English literature would in some ways contribute to my own writing, and maybe it did in a subliminal way, in the sense that I knew what a good book should look, feel, read like, but in any practical sense it was no help at all. As a writer you are looking at the stuff from inside.

Through my almost 30 years in Miranda House I had plenty of time to observe the lives that my students thought awaited them. If the girl came from an upper middle class professional background then a career loomed in front of her, maybe education abroad, if she was smart and wanted to study further. But these girls were few, maybe about 1 or 2 per batch. This was the route I myself had taken out of college many years ago, and I understood it. Or the girl could be from an upper middle class conservative background – and there were many such – in which case there was only one option for her and that was marriage. Whether it was arranged or love, depended on how conservative the family was.

As for a career, what about that? That depended on other circumstances, economic factors played a role as well as conservative tendencies. For those who had to marry the minute they graduated, college was seen as the last years of freedom, a place of happiness. From remarks such as these I gathered, they enjoyed an independent social life, as opposed to a social life linked with relatives, and that in those hours they were free from household cares and responsibilities. Those who were looking forward to independence and a job, or a career, or something away from home, often looked at college as a waiting place before their real life took place. By third year they looked bored and resentful.

I have talked so much about college, because it was there that I witnessed the lives of women for close to thirty years. When it came to being a novelist I had more than my own family to draw upon. I could see first-hand how jobs and a career began to be increasingly important, even as marriage remained the constant consideration. So do I think India has changed a lot? In some ways. Depends on the class you are looking at. As a society we span all attitudes from the middle ages to the modern. In the modern there are the most changes, in the cities a sense of freedom and social mobility that is encouraging.

There is also an increase in violence against women for which various explanations have been offered. Whatever the reason it is a fact that is difficult to live with.

*LL: From your first and semi-autobiographical novel , are your subsequent novels of women depicting lives you have seen, watched, observed, and heard about as stories - fictionalised of course - but based on real people and real stories?*

MK: I actually don't think of my first book as autobiographical. It is true that I drew upon both my grandmother's and mother's life. This meant that I was both distanced from my subject matter as well as intimately connected with it. Curiosity also drove me. What was it like to live in Amritsar and Lahore just before Independence? What was it like being the eldest of so many children? So far as Amritsar was concerned, I drew upon my memories, for this was my grandmother's home, and a place we had visited as children. This made it easy to imagine. But for everything else I had to rely on interviews, on newspapers, on books. In <u>Difficult Daughters</u> I felt I had freedom to reconstruct events and feelings to do with the history of our country as well as the history of a particular Punjabi family.

I also had, and this was very important for me, my mother's permission, her cooperation in drawing upon her life. Her own memory was bad, and she would often say I don't remember when I asked for details. But she did introduce me to people who were her acquaintance, people who she thought might be able to help me. Maybe this was my mother's own strategy of remembering and not remembering at the same time. She was very reticent about her past. Sometimes I think that Difficult Daughters was my attempt at understanding her. How much of it is true, I don't know. After she read it, and she read it both in manuscript and in print, she only made one comment, and that was, "how much I troubled my parents". What did this imply? That I was accurate? Perhaps, but it had not been my intention to portray a troublesome child (despite the title which was given by the publishers). Rather it was to generate empathy. How do women function given the pulls and tugs that govern their emotional lives? To some extent these are still my themes.

LL: *After you told your mother's and grandmother's story in Difficult Daughters, for the 2nd novel, whose story did you want to tell?*

MK: In a political sense the second story grew out of the first. The Babri Masjid was an incident that attacked the secular basis of our country and I felt strongly about it. The division between Hindus and Muslims was a legacy left behind by the British and we have not recovered from that. Instead, factions of the Indian polity have served themselves by fostering communal and identity politics. The destruction of the Babri Masjid and the violence that followed, a violence that spread to many parts of India was a symptom of divisions that are hate fuelled.

The novel itself took off from the idea (abandoned) in Difficult Daughters of writing about a woman in contemporary Indian society. In Difficult Daughters she was to have been a lecturer in a college in Delhi University (like me) but I made her a painter instead. The novel itself was easier to write than Difficult Daughters. I didn't have to do so much research, I was writing about Delhi, a city I had grown up in and knew very well. I didn't have to go traipsing off to Amritsar and Lahore and Nahan, all places I visited for Difficult Daughters. I only visited Ayodhya, (the site of the Babri Masjid), and this in itself was fascinating. The whole disputed area, cordoned off by barbed wire, resembled a war camp, rather than a place of worship. The place where the god images were said to have been found had armed guards all around it, bhajans blared aggressively from loudspeakers; it was all deeply disturbing.

Initially I do not really know how I am going to shape the story that is going to illustrate the theme I have in my head. I do have an issue that interests me, but the characters that are going to live out these ideas grow very gradually, almost painfully. The story comes as I write. Often by the time I have finished I find I have a very different story, or very different characters, from the one / ones in the initial chapters. Then I have to go back and make it harmonise. By then I have different ideas and so it goes on. I often think, there must be an easier way of doing this, but long and laborious though my way is, it is the one that works for me. Remember, I have no imagination!

*LL: In your 2nd novel,* A Married Woman*, you moved into quite a radical aspect of Indian society - lesbianism.*

MK: So far as A Married Woman is concerned I did have an agenda, but it was a political one. This was the background to the story. When it was published the lesbian part of the story received more attention that this, somewhat to my disappointment.

The lesbian relationship in A Married Woman grew out of a number of factors. My initial intention in writing the book was to show the strength of female friendship, how often it can be a source of companionship and joy. It is not only marriage that caters to one's emotional needs. Of course this is a truism, no one relationship can cater to every need, and in India there is a whole supportive network around marriage that can both sustain it and destroy it, depending on the people involved.

Having embarked on this theme, I found it not very effective in driving a plot. Beyond stating a few obvious facts, I didn't know what else to say about it. I would return to this theme in Home.

Making the friendship a sexual one answered the problem of driving the plot, but this was a solution that also emerged from Astha's own timidity. She wants to have her cake and eat it too. This can't work as Pipee points out. Astha is very rooted in her family, it is what defines her, and she can manage no life outside it. Yet she yearns for more than is offered her.

LL: *How do you select those explosive themes of yours? (Homosexuality, infidelity and adultery, divorce and remarriage, broken families and custody battles, challenging the traditional conventions and codes?) Are you consciously and intentionally trying to raise them to bring greater awareness and attention to these social issues?*

MK: How do I select my themes? Hummm, I don't really know. To give a broad and vague answer, the only one I can give, I will say that I chose my themes, (though that sounds more deliberate than what is actually going on) from what I see around me. I consider myself a very Indian writer, an Indian living in India, reflecting issues, concerns, problems that are part of our daily life and have aspects that are peculiar to the culture from which they emerge. There is nothing peculiarly Indian about divorce, except perhaps the ethos which governs it which I explore in Custody. The handling of children, the break-up of traditional family structures, the duty of sons, the way in which courts function all this grew out of observations specific (though not necessarily confined) to Delhi.

As for raising greater awareness of course that is my intention! If something is an issue I'd like others to at least be aware of it. Our country is changing so fast that to see the changes reflected is an education of sorts.

So far as the New Indian Woman is concerned, I had no idea I was reflecting her! But numerous PhD students have told me that this is their thesis topic. Clearly there is something in the books that gives rise to this understanding. I myself do not see my women in terms of new or traditional, only in terms of their struggles; as an author labels are distracting, though useful to the critic. Author and critic speak from different sides of a book, and having experienced both, I don't think there is any common ground between them.

*LL: You had mentioned in passing, right at the start, that you had to struggle with your male characters - I was hoping to invite you to say more about why.*

MK: I did have to struggle with my male characters – especially at first – this is now easier – because I do not know men the way I know women. Women's emotions are so much more accessible to me, so much more understandable. I just don't know as many men intimately as I do women. But now the more woman-oriented focus of my work is changing. In Custody, for example, the emphasis is as much on Raman as on his two wives. In the book I am now working on, the main characters are one woman and two men.

*LL: How did you get your first novel published? Did you already have an agent?*

MK: My first novel took a while to be published. From start to finish Difficult Daughters took 8 years, my 40s were spent on this book. I sent it out to various publishers, first in India, then when rejected

by Penguin and Ravi Dayal, tried publishers and agents abroad. Faber were the first to see possibilities in the manuscript, and they were the ones who went on to publish it.

I think I learned to write through those rejections, learned the importance of editing, of cutting and shaping. But when you come to writing late, and you are being rejected, you sometimes wonder whether your work will ever see the light of day, and maybe you should give up. You wonder why you are struggling so much, because you have a full teaching job, you have children, husband, a house to run, and what's it all about? Why not just abandon the whole painful process? After all it was not as though I had always wanted to be a writer, I hadn't. I stumbled into it by accident, and then it acquired its own momentum.

My youngest child was one when I started, and I had constraints. I started so tentatively, so unsure of what I was doing. I admired literary novels way too much to be able to think of writing them. But Salman Rushdie happened, Indian English gained in confidence, throw a stone and you hit a writer, and all in all the whole process became far more accessible. If everybody I knew could write, so could I, and besides I was looking for something to do apart from teaching. I chose writing because it could be done from home, it could be picked up and dropped at any time, or so I thought then, I don't think so now.

The 8 years that it took to write and re-write <u>Difficult Daughters</u>, were years of discovery, discovery of my own voice, my own abilities, even my own ambition. After all I came to this writing thing late, I am not going to leave behind a huge stack of novels, but what I do leave behind, I want to be as good as possible.

Writing <u>A Married Woman</u> was easier because I knew what writing involved. I didn't waste so much time on a first draft because most of it, if not all of it, was going to be discarded. I knew I would have to revise extensively, so I was prepared for the enormous amounts of time that a novel takes. I didn't keep thinking I had finished, when I hadn't. I had a stronger critical sense of what constitutes good writing. <u>Difficult Daughters</u> had taken so long because I was still finding my way. Not only so far as the story was concerned, (though that too) but so far as the writing and the editing was concerned. Repeated rejections meant repeated editing, but I would not have been aware of the need if I hadn't been rejected so many times. It was only to justify the months and the years that I had spent on this one activity that I persisted rewriting and submitting.

LL: *Do you have a clear personal preference whether you rather publish with Indian or Western publishers?*

MK: I don't know if I can answer that. It's not as though Difficult Daughters was accepted in the West and rejected in India, it was rejected everywhere, the US, the UK and India. So I was fortunate to eventually land up on the desk of Julian Loose, (the non – fiction editor at Faber and Faber) who did see something in the manuscript. Julian has been my editor ever since. He did say, when we met (a rare event) that it was unusual to have unsolicited manuscripts published.

I have been with Faber throughout. They are my British publishers, and more importantly, they are my editors. It is in India that I have changed publishers. The first one was Penguin, because Faber had a tie up with Penguin. This was ironic because Penguin had rejected me earlier. For A Married Woman, I decided to go with a small Indian publisher. My aim was to go Indian if you like, and I liked the work IndiaInk had done. But before my third book was ready, IndiaInk was sold to Roli, and at that point I was approached by Random House India who were about to enter India. This is roughly the story, barring some excruciating details.

Wherever else I may be published, including India, I think of Faber and Faber as my publishers, because it is there I am edited, and I have come to appreciate how very important a good editor is. In my case the agent came much later, when I was already established, and who therefore was not difficult to find.

*LL: On a final note, would you be willing to just briefly mention what you are working on now?*

MK: In the novel I am writing – almost finishing now – I have left the comfort zone of urban middle class Delhi. Some of the action takes place in Lalbanga, a Rajasthani village, the rest in Jaipur and Ajmer. Delhi doesn't even figure. It has been difficult to write this book, and part of the reason has been this change in locale. But I felt I must challenge myself, must move away from the city.

*LL: Thank you for so openly sharing your writing experiences, the place of writing in your life, and all that is involved in that process, creative and logistical alike. It has been such a rewarding set of interviews with you.*

MK: Thank you so much Lisa, for giving me this opportunity to express myself in a way that is not distorted as interviews sometimes can be. It has been a pleasure working with you.

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