

## Savouring the 'Self' In Manju Kapur And Gloria Naylor

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### Abstract

*This paper explores the theme of female selfhood and identity through a comparative literary analysis of Manju Kapur's and Gloria Naylor's novels. Framed within the evolution of feminist philosophy—from classical to assertive and accommodative feminism—the study investigates how women confront societal norms to assert their existential autonomy. It focuses on the existential dilemmas and psychological struggles faced by female protagonists as daughters, wives, mothers, and sisters in both Indian and Afro-American cultural contexts. The study draws on Simone de Beauvoir's theory of the "Other" and integrates existentialist thought to examine the ways in which these women challenge the constraints imposed by patriarchy, race, and tradition. Through characters like Virmati, Astha, Mattie, and Sadie, the paper reveals how self-realization emerges from resilience, rebellion, and the redefinition of traditional roles. Ultimately, the paper posits that both Kapur and Naylor depict women as agents of change who reclaim their subjectivity and become saviours of their own lives within oppressive socio-cultural systems.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, Female Identity, Existentialism, Postcolonial Literature, Manju Kapur, Gloria Naylor

### Introduction

The evolution of philosophy of feminism can be divided into three phrases: classical feminism, assertive feminism and accommodative feminism. The first phase can be characterized by "classical feminism" of 18th and 19th century, which was ambivalent in nature simply because it tried to analyse the gender relationships in the binary of male and female. Thus, the classical feminists places man and woman in the state of conflict. The second stage, which emerged in the second half of the 19th century in the form of women's rights movements in Europe, can be called as "assertive feminism". They adopted the approach of sex equality to study the relations between the sexes. The radical reformists such as Beauvoir argues that woman needs to negate her femininity so as to reject the patriarchal structure in which woman is identified as an object for man. The third stage which emerged as consequence of radical feminism may be called as "accommodative feminism." It provides urgency to refine the identity of woman

in concrete terms [1]. All these approaches put emphasis on building self-confidence and self-esteem among women; restoration of women's rights to determine their choices, increase the activity of women to influence the social practices that affect their lives.

Woman is naturalised with the qualities that are granted to her by the patriarchal society. This is what de Beauvoir describes famously "women still dream through the dream of men." In the chapter "Woman: Myth and Reality" of the *Second Sex*, Beauvoir argued that men had made women the "Other" in society by putting a false aura of "Mystery" around them. The *Second Sex*, published in French, sets out a feminist existentialism which prescribes a moral revolution. As an existentialist, she believed that existence precedes essence: hence one is not born a woman, but is constructed. Her analysis focusses on the Hegelian concept of the Other. It is the social construction of woman as taken for Quintessential Other that Beauvoir identifies

becomes basis for women's oppression.

On a philosophical level, this female principle ultimately rests in the oneness of the male, but on a practical level it is the female that is most significant in the world. The vast array of iconography and mythology that surrounds the gods such as Vishnu and Shiva is a backdrop for the worship of their female consorts, and the male deities fade into the background. Thus, it is that the divine is often present in female as per the belief in ancient mythology.

Indian woman is always prepared to endure with the help of her inner strength of godly virtues. Indian woman struggles throughout her life, to survive not to live. There have been constant voices challenging the domination of patriarchal thoughts in which a male claims to define what is good for a female. Indian women have consciously accepted the supremacy of the patriarchy value system by surrendering meekly to their traditionally assigned roles and allowing themselves to be dominated. The culture that created Sita and Gandhari has denied existence to woman except as a daughter/sister, a wife/daughter in law, and a mother/mother in law. The Hindu society has denied woman the possibility of being a 'She', a person capable of achieving individuation.

But, the women of today are in a fair way to dethrone the myth of femininity; they are beginning to affirm their independence in concrete ways. Thus, the psychological study of a modern woman has become the prime concern among the occidental and orient female writers. The issue of existential dilemma is perennial. The present paper aims to study the quest for 'Savouring the Self' of the female protagonists in Manju Kapur and Gloria Naylor for their existence and idealization [2].

Existentialism is a movement in philosophy and literature that emphasizes individual existence, freedom and choice. It began in the mid-to-late 19th Century, but reached its peak in mid-20th Century France. It is based on the view that humans define their own meaning in life, and try to make rational decisions despite existing in an irrational universe. It focuses on the question of human existence, and the feeling that there is no purpose or explanation at the core of existence.

The notion of femaleness in several conduct books emphasised woman's fortitude and her tireless duty towards others. Bathshua Pell Makin (1612-74) governess to the children of Charles 1 published an essay and laid down an educational model that was actually meant for the gentlewomen who had enough wealth and liberty but not adequate education to make use of their privileges for moral improvement. As a result, they indulged in 'Toyes and Trifles' (130) and spent their time in 'Cards, Dice, Plays and

Frothy Romances' (137). Accepting the home to be the true sphere of a woman's activity Makin considers domestic education essential for them. Makin consequently accuses women for men's promiscuous life. "we can't expect to prevail against the Ignorance, Atheism, Prophaneness, Superstition, Idolatry, Lust that reigns in the Nation than by a Prudent, Sober, Virtuous Education of our daughters. Their learning would stir up our Sons whom God and Nature hath made superior, to a just emulation.'

### **Question of Silence & Struggle for Existence in Gloria Naylor and Manju Kapur**

A woman has to forbear the journey of her struggle as a daughter, sister, wife and mother. Sometimes, she is privileged to be born in a family that becomes an asset to her. Thus, she does not have to struggle much on being blessed full-fulfilling her economic and social needs. But, if the woman lacks this privilege, then she has to break the monotony of silence and starts with her existential endeavour to survive [3]. Not only does she have to fight for her physical and societal needs but becoming demanding for psychological and emotional needs. In Indian context, the woman becomes fortunate to be recognised as the pivotal for running the family in domestic affairs, whereas black woman is considered trivial and non-judgemental in any affair.

She is relegated and considered having no virtue. Her inner force pushes her to be survivor for herself. Moreover, her segregation for being black leaves her alone, considering her only as an object of sexuality. Thus, she has to face the burden of double oppression for being a black and a female. Her inner urge to assume different images to signify her vitality for her existence may bring catastrophic situations in her life. But still she does not revert back and strides forward in multi-directions. Somewhere, the individual self of the black writer coincides with the self of her protagonists to reflect the dilemmas faced by an Afro-American woman.

**Womanly Self as A Mother:** -In Gloria Naylor's novels, the victimised females transcend themselves to the image of mother. They become true saviours for their children in bearing the hardships of life all alone and in order to give them a secure life. In this way, they celebrate their own genuine and real black womanist self by liberating themselves from the patriarchal dictatorship. We come to see how the economic independence affect the matrix of human relationships in the highly charged sexist and racist society of American. Mattie dared to give birth to her child Basil that was the result of flirtatious relationship with Butch Fuller. Despite that she took utmost care to be a caring mother.

'Mattie tightened her arm around Basil and shook her

head. There was no way she could have slept another night in that place without nightmares of things that would creep out of the walls to attack her child. She could never take him back to a place that had caused him so much pain.' Mattie's son Basil is caught by police and Luciella Turner's daughter Serena is electrocuted and dies. Kiswana's mother assuming silence indirectly gives support to her daughter to live at the Brewster Place to do something for the African women. Their lives becomes catastrophic when they are unable to spare their children from ill-fate. They are seen either losing their children or the children fail to understand their mother at all. Basil gets mislead and breaks the social norms, by being fallen into the bad company. Thus, the black motherhood is not able to cherish as a successful mother due to the lack of support by their male counterparts [4]. But the motherly nature does not step back and rather she does accept the alterations with humility. Mattie's motherly and savouring figure comes to limelight when she consoles the grief stricken Luciella Turner (Ciel), granddaughter of Miss Eva. Mattie is sensitive to Ciel's plight.

In *Difficult Daughters*, Ida does not think it necessary that her child needs that the care and attention of her father, as she strongly takes the decision of getting divorce from her husband. She takes the sole responsibility of rearing her child. Moreover, she is also interested to know the problems that her mother encounters. Thus, we find a cultural shift in performing the motherly roles. In *A Married Woman*, Astha makes a comeback which clearly indicates that somehow she is much attached to her children and in their well-being. She doesn't want to deprive herself from the motherly bliss.

**Womanly Self as A Daughter:** - In Gloria Naylor, the woman tries to prove herself a daughter but their disobedience becomes clear-cut when they get involved into pre-marital relationships and forbid to stay into the conventional hierarchy of family and society. Thus, the misfortune of their lives cannot be a saviour for them to get protected as sacred daughters who could fit themselves into nobility of their characters to fulfil their familial duties. They rebel for their autonomy and don't wish to be treated as obedient daughters. They negate their parents and chase their desires which further prove to be catastrophic.

Bailey's Cafe isn't defined by just one character, but rather its world, a way station on the edge of any city anywhere. Sadie's dream of having a home of her own is hopelessly thwarted, she escapes into alcoholism and works as a whore, earning only enough to support her habit of cheap wine. After losing the home, Sadie began to drink. Her wine dreams have become so fulfilling that when she finally is offered love, she chooses illusion instead [5]. She knew the difference in the way her mother treated her and

the way other parents treated their children had to be her fault, so she tried to be as good as she could. Her mother forced her to become a prostitute at the age of thirteen and when she had her first abortion her mother had the doctor sterilize her. Sadie spent forty years of her life trying to find approval and love, first from her mother, then from an elderly husband.

Thus, she could not prove herself to be an ideal daughter as she was not fortunate which further disrupted her life. She was very strong and bold who had never given up. She sold everything whatever she has and finally begins to sell her body for her survival. This was the only way to be a saviour for herself. On the contrary, Mattie also breaches the trust of her father due to her revealing about her pregnancy before marriage. She is scolded and beaten badly by her father and later she deserts her parental house to live at her ending years in a brothel when Eve dies and she sells her home to save her son Basil. In Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters* Virmati is overambitious as she does not like the way her mother leads her life. Although her mother Kasturi who was an orthodox lady could not do anything from her daughter's tying up the wedding knot with the professor.

'The Professor's third visit to the college passed without his managing to meet Virmati. For just before his entrance to the compound gate he saw Kasturi being escorted outside by her. He could see the mother look angry and turn Virmati back to the hostel, talking all the while. He could see Virmati vehemently shake her head. It was obviously impossible to see her now, so he hailed a tonga and left.' Therefore, she wants to use her education as a tool to change her fortune. In her thrust to get an intellectual companion she is trapped into a love affair with a married person which further intensifies her pain when she finds the walls of Social Ostracism. So, she is compelled to spend her life with indignation. Thus, her emotional pleasure stays for a shorter-time and finds her daughter Ida in her lap [6]. The impact of her own disobedience is seen when Ida, her own daughter takes divorce from her husband after marriage.

The independent thinking & autonomy of a daughter is clearly visible in the conduct and behaviour of Ida who becomes a rebellion and does not follow the conventions. Thus, it becomes clear that Manju Kapur's heroines break conventionality and stride freely to be the Saviour for themselves. They are not ready to make adjustments in the patriarchal conventions existing during their times. In 'A Married Woman' Astha is brought up in a conventional middle-class Hindu family set-up. She is good in accomplishing household tasks. Despite her love affair with Rohan before marriage, she agrees to marry Hemant in an arranged marriage. But later feeling dissatisfied with her

husband breaks away from her marital life for a shorter period of time.

**Womanly Self as A Wife-:** In Gloria Naylor the woman protagonist could hardly be seen enjoying the marital bliss due to the controversies associated to their lives. They don't get the support of their husbands rather they are seen as commodities who are only meant to give birth to the children and their husbands deny to shoulder any responsibility to bear their children. They don't get love and union in thinking and ideologies. They do get a sense of completeness of their roles as wives. Thus, their pitiable condition finds a different channel to find a meaning and existence in their lives. In Bailey's Café, Daniel does not seem to appreciate Sadie's efforts, she remains committed to creating a pleasant home life for herself and her husband. Having learned the art of invisibility from living with a stern mother, Sadie knows not to intrude on Daniel's space and consequently negotiates around him whenever he is present [7].

Jesse Bell regains her equilibrium after suffering from an emotional downfall that leads also to drug abuse. Like the other women's stories, Jesse Bell's is a story of survival despite the obstacles placed before one. Jesse Bell hails from a solid working-class family and is proud of their fast-talking, hearty-living existence. Nevertheless, Jesse Bell marries into one of Manhattan's most prominent black families, the Kings and later is deserted by him. These women are compelled to live derogatory life.

Eugene is ignorant to his wife's emotional needs and leaves him alone when his daughter Serena dies to escape the wrath of his wife Lucielia. Thus, Lucielia feels emotionally bereft due to irresponsible husband. After developing physical intimacy with an unmarried girl, the professor keeps on impressing her sensibility which gets clear through these lines:-'An exquisite sari draped around an exquisite body like his Virmati's would be a mighty reflector of his taste. Finally he chose a heavy south Indian silk, with the traditional small orange, black and red checks, and a border of black and gold. It would set off her fairness to perfection, he thought. He could hardly wait to see her in it. In the parcel he made, he enclosed a small red lipstick. Coty's. He liked a little make-up on women. Virmati always wore kaajal, emphasizing her eyes, but an added touch of lipstick would supplement the original high colour of her lips.'

In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati tries to seek time to be a good partner for her husband. Despite her love affair with Professor Harish, she is bound to make adjustment with the first wife of his professor husband. Ganga gets the preference and social respect as being the first wife of Harish. Whereas, Virmati doesn't escape the situation rather

bears all the trials and tribulations to be regarded as a true companion for her husband. Thus, she becomes a saviour for her married life through her adjustments [8].

Similarly, Astha in *A Married Woman* don't share commonality in ideology with her husband who is quite ignorant to her emotional needs. Astha, who is a school teacher, joins the social movement and tries to find space for herself. She gets engaged into lesbian relationship with Pipeelika. But, she is able to save her married life as her ailing husband needs her attention. Thus, her timely comeback to the life of Hemant proves a bliss in disguise and hence becomes lucky to be the saviour of herself as a wife.

**Womanly Self as A Sister-:** The real compassion for an Afro-American woman is gathered through cherishing sisterhood. 'Mattie sat in her frayed brocade armchair, pushed up to the front window, and watched her friend's brave approach through the dusty screen. Still toting around them oversized records, she thought. That woman is a puzzlement. Mattie rose to open the door so Etta wouldn't have to struggle to knock with her arms full. "Lord, child, thank you," she gushed, out of breath. "The younger I get, the higher those steps seem to stretch." She dumped her load on the sofa and swept off her sunglasses. She breathed deeply of the freedom she found in Mattie's presence. Here she had no choice but to be herself. The carefully erected decoys she was constantly shuffling and changing to fit the situation were of no use here. Etta and Mattie went way back, a singular term that claimed co-knowledge of all the important events in their lives and almost all of the unimportant ones. And by rights of this possession, it tolerated no secrets.'

Mattie became glad to find her childhood friend. Not only Eva gives her house to Mattie but provides true companionship through her unconditional support. They are not sisters by birth but somewhere the commonality of their experiences bring them together to get meaning for their lives. The tragic wounds borne by them are not healed by their family members but through the bond of intimacy. The misfortunes and the bad life experiences bring them closer and get healing through companionship. In *Difficult Daughters*: Virmati faces pangs of humiliation & emotional outbursts for the treatment she receives at her mother's home after her marriage. She realised that she is considered as a disgrace and is considered an outsider.

'Virmati didn't say anything. Paro looked at her face, and then said to cheer her up, 'Kailash is getting married soon, Pehnji. Then you will come?' Virmati stopped walking. That was how far she had come from her family, how much they hated her. She was not to be invited for her own brother's wedding, when the furthest, most removed relative would be pressed to come. She started to cry. '



It is only her love for her husband that makes her alive. Otherwise she is broken from inside as a daughter as dares to marry a man who is already married.

**‘It’s not nice, Pehnji, being married?’ asked Paro after a while. ‘It’s very nice, darling,’ said Virmati bravely.’**

Ganga and Virmati are poles apart in education and background. But Virmati tries to consider her as her elderly sister. But Ganga and other women in the family and neighbourhood look Virmati with disgrace. In *A Married Woman* Astha forms intimacy with Pipeelika, but both of them come to the physical plane to develop lesbian relationship which soon gets fragmented as the latter has to leave for abroad for her higher studies [9-11].

Thus, here Manju Kapur has opened up the layers of the mind of a female that is constantly changing. The impact of modernisation and education is clearly visible in the changing ideologies of woman and in her building various relationships [12]. The transformation of a woman into a strong, independent & intolerant person has become the need of the hour to challenge the outdated dogmas and to be conscious as a person who is awakened for her rights and readily denies any kind of subjugation and oppression. Gloria Naylor has shown the fragile nature of a female self who succumbs to sexuality for the gratification of her emotional needs at the hands of pretentious and hypocrite society people. Thus, they are forced to club together to materialise the economic and physical needs through their entanglement into different relationships.

## Conclusion

In the end, we can say, that post-colonial writers have used their canvass to reflect the psychological upheavals faced by the Indian and Afro-American female writers which is surely radical and is promising to bring change in the conditions of the women at world level. There have been constant voices across the shores that woman is not the other self rather she is the essential self [13]. Her survival and pleasure should be primary and she should not be streamlined. In *Black Culture*, women are misfortune to face the triple jeopardy of caste, colour and race while in *Indian Culture*, breaking the patriarchy is itself challenging. Thus, assuming themselves into different roles and responsibilities the women try to frame a new aura of pleasantries to get refreshment for themselves when they get burdened under the tortures and start feeling choked under the undue pressures and stigmas given to them in different relationships. We find that she is constantly ignored for the physical, social, economic and emotional comforts [14].

She is only considered as an icon of sacrifice and hardships. It is considered sinful if she dares to break her cultural legacy. Thus, she is projected as an image of ‘Savouring Self’ who owns the responsibility of being the saviour for the entire mankind. God has endowed her with the potential

to draw the line of choices to make her existence not for herself alone but to be a ‘Self’ that is consoler and healer for all alike. One has to harmonise both the individual and societal self to bring peace and harmony that help in balancing one’s life [15, 16]. Hence, a woman befits herself in the role of a daughter, wife, mother and a sister to give meaning to her life. She forsakes all the bitterness and always greets the new ways that become congenial to perform her different duties. ‘The Womanly Self’ assumes new shapes and becomes the mirror to reflect the images of society through various relationships [17]. Therefore, both Gloria Naylor and Manju Kapur have gone through the psychological mapping of their female protagonists through highlighting their roles in different cultural and social contexts.

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