The Curse of Infertility in Manju Kapur's *Home*

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This paper attempts to investigate the manner in which infertility, in most societies all over the world, has been deliberately constructed as a curse since it seems to deprive women of their primary function in society – that of motherhood. Patriarchal society glorifies and exalts motherhood, and thereby justifies the division of labour wherein the woman is delegated the responsibility of the children and household, while the man provides for the family. The paper examines how the inability of the woman's body to perform its delegated function results in serious psycho-social consequences, and explores the impact that infertility has on the psyche of women through an analysis of Manju Kapur's novel *Home* (2006).

In medical terminology, infertility has been defined as the inability to conceive despite cohabitation without the use of contraceptives. The definition, however, is insufficient as it does not encompass the socio-cultural definition of the word - it does not touch upon the repercussions of this problem, which in Indian society, may be close to a physical handicap or a serious disease. Sudhir Kakar (1981) quotes an ancient proverb which states, "Better be mud than a barren woman" (78).

The stigma associated with infertility is not restricted to India alone, but spreads across cultures. The extent to which it is treated as a curse varies from culture to culture. In *Perspectives on Black Women Writers* (1985), Barbara Christian talks about infertility from the African perspective through an analysis of literary texts: "The 'barren' African woman is seen as an incomplete woman. She becomes […] 'the dead end of human life, not only for the genealogical level, but for herself.' Unlike the revered mother, the old barren woman is supported not out of love, but out of charity, and her death is seen as a relief to all" (216).

Anne Woolett states in *Having Children: Accounts of Childless Women and Women with Reproductive Problems* that since motherhood confirms a woman's female identity and enhances her social status, childless women are automatically vulnerable to the charges of being 'unfeminine', mad and inadequate: "Their inadequacy is then sometimes used to explain their infertility and indirectly to emphasize the normality of motherhood: some women are seen to fail to conceive or maintain a pregnancy because they are overanxious, because they reject their femininity or are not well-adjusted" (60).

Unfortunately, infertility has not been accorded as much attention by feminists as it deserves. In fact, Jan Silverman, a founding member of a self-help group called IFF (Infertility – Facts and Feelings) expresses his feelings, "I feel feminism has ignored the plight of infertile women completely. This is a point that angers us. So much concentration has been put on birth control, on abortion, on choices in the birthing process" (Cited in Rehner, 14).

The Marxist approach to the division of labour offers an interesting critique of the patriarchal system, and lends itself to various interpretations, especially in dealing with the concept of infertility. The work performed by women at home, which includes

nurturing children and looking after the house, has been perceived by Marxists as unremunerated work, having only a use-value. Yet, the work has been recognized and rewarded socially, and the biological mother has been accorded a social status in society. Black feminist critic Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenti in "Calix the Beyala's 'Femme-Fillette': Womanhood and the Politics of (M)othering" (1997) explicates the repercussions for the childless woman, "What this means is that childless women or women who do not produce certain quantities of children are consciously excluded and positioned as inappropriate Others, as women who have no rights within the public sphere" (105). The very elevation of the social status of the mother in Marxist terms, based on her role in (re)production necessarily degrades the infertile woman since she seems to produce neither surplus value, nor use-value.

What is interesting to note is that men do not necessarily go through the same suffering and isolation that the women do, even if they may be responsible for infertility. The concept of male infertility in mythology has been analysed by Sukumari Bhattacharji in "Motherhood in Ancient India" (1990). She points out: "Male infertility was dimly known as the custom of levitate indicates, but no stigma ever attached to an impotent male. We hear of impotent kings both in Brahmanical and Buddhist literature but never with any aspersion of inauspiciousness […] It was always the woman who got blamed for failing to procreate" (51). An obvious case of male impotence is the figure of Pandu in the Mahabharata. Kunti and Madhvi produced sons through divine forces, who were accepted and whose legitimacy was never questioned. Pandu's impotency did not lead to him being considered inadequate or inauspicious, as would have been the case for a woman.

Given the importance of childbearing in Indian society, women who are unable to bear children for whatever reasons must suffer the consequences, which can be severely damaging both physically and emotionally. The infertile woman may be beaten up by her husband and in-laws for her inability to bear children, and may even be deprived of basic amenities like food and health care. In the Vedic period, a barren woman could be cast away because she was possessed by *nirrti*, an evil and ugly spirit who destroyed everything good (Bhattacharji, 1990, 51).

The inability to bear children can destroy a marriage and lead the husband to seek another wife to produce progeny. *Manusmriti* claims that if the wife has not given birth to children for eight years, and if she produces only girls after ten years, the husband should marry again. Moreover, her reluctance to accept her husband's second marriage should not be treated with sympathy and understanding. Instead, she should be scolded and sent to her father's house (Cited in Kelkar, 1995, 41). Ancient texts thus provide justification for divorce or second marriage in the case of the husband if the couple is childless.

Such ideas were not restricted to India alone, but malpractices against infertile women have been observed all over the world, irrespective of nationality or religion. Ignorance of facts regarding conception led to the belief that women alone were responsible for infertility. Apparently, in ancient Rome, a man could divorce his wife if she was suspected to be sterile. Moreover, when noted Greek philosopher Aristotle suggested that males could also be responsible for the inability to produce progeny, he

became an object of mockery since patriarchal customs and beliefs necessarily placed the blame of infertility on the woman concerned. Research conducted by Karl Ber from St. Petersburg regarding the contribution of the male and female to conception alleviated women of the total responsibility for producing children, making both partners subject to scrutiny in case of failure of conception (A Portion of Donor Sperm).

Fertility also plays an important role for the Muslim woman. According to G I Serour, Fellow of the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists in "Bioethics in Infertility Management in the Muslim World", "The social status of the Muslim woman, her dignity, her self-esteem and her place in the family and society as a whole are closely related to her procreation. Childbirth and childrearing are regarded as family commitments and not just as biological and social functions". By implication, a woman who cannot procreate does not fulfill her familial commitments, and suffers devaluation in social status. Societies all over the world thus seem to accord immense importance to fertility, the absence of which can be a serious ordeal for the woman concerned.

Globally about ten to fifteen percent of all couples are infertile (Sami and Ali). However, as infertility affects comparatively only a small group of women, the issue has been suppressed. Yet, infertility is a major cause for concern. By projecting motherhood as the primary social function of women; by making women who are unable to fulfill this function feel inadequate and incomplete; by punishing infertile women through harsh ill-treatment; by reinforcing the need for couples to have children, by pushing them to turn to religion and superstition for 'curing' their infertility, and finally by providing and encouraging them to avail of reproductive technologies regardless of its high cost and the bodily damage it entails, patriarchy deems infertility a curse.

Commonwealth Writers' Prize winner of 1998, Manju Kapur tackles the issue of infertility in her novel *Home* (2006). Revolving around the lives of two sisters, the novel establishes their identity as infertile women in its very first sentence: "Mrs. Sona Lal and Mrs. Rupa Gupta, sisters both, were childless. One was rich, the other poor, one the eldest daughter-in-law of a cloth-shop owner, the other the wife of an educated, badly paid government servant" (2). The introduction seems to suggest that infertility is the one common factor that the sisters share, an exception to the rest of their lives which are starkly contrasted by their financial and social status.

It is precisely this difference in the social status that leads both women (and their husbands) to perceive infertility differently. While Rupa accepts her infertile status as her destiny, Sona longs and strives desperately for a child.

Rupa's husband, Prem Nath has accepted her condition and Rupa proudly says that he "does not hanker after children, he says his sister has enough, he helps with their education, his heart is as big as the sky" (25). It is significant that no medical test has been conducted on either couple and the cause of infertility has not been diagnosed. It is assumed that the problem lies with the woman, and Rupa is thus grateful to her husband for having accepted her unconditionally: "Her husband was a decent man, never throwing her barrenness in her face" (39).

Unlike the 'traditional Indian male' who craves for children to carry on his lineage and the name of his family, Prem Nath, being highly educated and learned, is different and has ideas which are considered philosophical by his family members. "He did not regret not having children. Part of his capacity to think, felt his admiring wife, was reflected in his stoicism. To want children was another word for I, me, mine. It was easier to be free without such attachments. Besides, India had enough children (69)."

Rupa's infertility gives her an opportunity to embark upon a career, and enables her to make money by selling pickles and chutneys. It has been suggested in certain socio-psychological theorists like Montagu (1974) that in the case of men, their inability to reproduce ('womb envy') is compensated by their desire to 'produce' in other areas, and that they derive satisfaction from the projects that they engage in or develop. Montagu points out that a man uses the phrase 'that's my baby' to indicate his pride in something – in an idea he conceives and gives birth to (Cited in Lindsey, 1997, 51).

In Rupa's case as well, she experiences pleasure in engaging in paid labour, which not only allows her to contribute financially to the family but also gives her a sense of achievement. However, years later Rupa must explain to her niece that the world of paid labour is not a woman's domain: "[…] women's work was allowable only in unconventional situations (no children), and that respectability demanded that it be avoided as much as possible" (212). Women are expected to stay at home, and any transgression from the role assigned to them would result in negative consequences. Rupa's case is an exception because she does not have a child to occupy herself with.

Rupa and Prem Nath eventually get an opportunity to experience parenthood, albeit briefly, when Sona's daughter Nisha comes to stay with them to overcome her trauma of sexual abuse. Nisha brings a complete change in Rupa's household. "The childless Rupa was now partially blessed […] The first night the child was there, three adults hung about her watching every bite of puri aloo she put into her mouth." (67). Rupa's husband is as enamoured by the child and Rupa regrets her inability to have a child of her own when she observes Prem Nath watching Nisha in fascination: "What a father the man would have made!" (67).

Although Prem Nath frequently reminds Rupa that Nisha is a borrowed child who would be returned one day, he himself begins taking an interest in the child's studies. While the issue is never discussed in so many words, Prem Nath and Rupa unofficially become Nisha's adoptive parents, taking care of her every need. Yet, they are never given the status of adoptive parents, and remain, for all practical purposes, Nisha's guardians with no legal rights or control over her.

According to the Wikipedia Encyclopedia, adoption "results in the severing of the parental responsibilities and the rights of the biological parents and the placing of those responsibilities and rights onto the adoptive parents" (Adoption). However, by conveniently working out a situation where the ties with her own family are not severed through weekend visits to her parents, and by providing financial assistance, Sona and her husband ensure that they do not give up their control over their daughter. Hence, even though Rupa and Prem Nath take over all the responsibilities for Nisha's upbringing, they can never achieve the status of Nisha's parents.

When Nisha's grandfather expires, her father Yashpal decides to bring her home after eleven years of having lived with her uncle and aunt. The news is broken to Rupa who cannot even express her feelings to her sister: "'She is yours, Didi,' said Rupa, staring hard at her knitting, willing her hands not to slow down, or the tightness in her throat to become a sob" (124). She realizes the insignificance of her own position: "What were an aunt's rights? Could she say, I won't give her to you, she is mine" (124). She recalls her husband's advice: "Her husband was right, advising her not to lavish so much love on a niece-on-loan. But then her husband was a thinker, he understood the world, she was just a simple woman" (124).

Yet, for Prem Nath, Nisha's departure is also a blow, having become accustomed to her presence in the house and having developed an attachment for her. The couple cannot directly communicate the sense of loss experienced, not even to each other. For years, Rupa and Prem Nath had been accustomed to an empty house with no chatter of children. Nisha's entry into their lives had changed everything. Yet, having experienced the joys of parenthood briefly, it becomes more difficult to go back to being childless.

Meanwhile the efforts put in by Prem Nath and Rupa seem futile and are not appreciated by Sona when she realizes that her daughter has not been prepared for the real task that is the girl's domain – looking after the house and managing the kitchen. "No children had produced an excess of love, and a girl who was good for nothing" (126). Sona assumes that the thwarted maternal instinct has led Rupa to shower excessive love on Nisha.

Sona's own situation had been, to an extent, similar to that of her sister. While she had also remained barren for ten years, she had eventually conceived after the entry of an adoptive child into her life who had been imposed upon her much against her own wishes. Numerous cases are cited wherein a couple has a biological child after adopting one. James Gordon, Chairman of the Complementary and Alternative Medicine Policy, and Director of the Center of Mind Body Medicine in Washington, says that he has heard the anecdote of couples conceiving after adopting a child, repeatedly in thirty years as a physician. "You sort of let it go and reach a stage of acceptance, and it gets easier" (Cited in Ianzito, 2002).

However, unlike Rupa, Sona had never been complacent about her infertility, and nor had she accepted it as her destiny. Living in a joint family, she had always resented being unable to fulfill what seemed to her to be the basic function of a woman. Her husband, Yashpal, who had fallen in love with her at first sight, remained too enamoured by his wife to ever blame her for her infertility. Unlike Rupa's husband Prem Nath, though, he did desire children, and expected their life and relationship to improve when the children arrived.

However, Sona's inability to produce children does not become a preoccupation with Yashpal as it does with Sona. Wright (1991) and Greil (1988) suggest that in most cases, among infertile couples, women tend to show higher levels of distress and feelings of incompetence than their male partners (Cited in Coleman and Nonacs). The inability of a woman to meet the demands of the family members leads her to experience guilt and results in a loss of self-esteem which the man escapes simply

because of the comparatively lower pressure that he experiences from those around him. Moreover, the man can occupy himself with work outside the house, while the woman who is confined to the house remains preoccupied with the notion of infertility as she has no form of escape.

Sona blames herself for her infertility, and experiences a loss of self-esteem. She recognizes that although she could not offer any wealth to the family in the form of dowry, they had always known of her financial status and never expected her to come loaded with gifts. "But no children? How could anyone justify that?" (14).

On a couple of occasions, in a fit of anger, her mother-in-law expresses her rage against Sona. This anger and resentment has its foundations in her son's very decision to marry a woman against her wishes. It is aggravated when she observes the constant attention he seems to shower on his wife, and she finally gives vent to her feelings when her own daughter passes away: "What can you know of a mother's feelings? All you do is enjoy life, no children, no sorrow, only a husband to dance around you" (19). As Christine Crowe points out in *Women want it: In Vitro Fertilization and Women's Motives for Participation (1987)*, "…due to the ideology of motherhood in which motherhood is perceived as the 'natural' situation for women, the infertile woman is subject to a considerable amount of social scrutiny" (93).

The scrutiny and criticism lead Sona to develop an inferiority complex, and she assumes that the members in her family perceive her as an incomplete woman: "Everyone, she felt, found her defective goods," (16). She constantly compares her situation to that of her sister, and fiercely envies her sister's independence, convinced that Rupa "had no one to envy, no one to rub salt in her wounds, no one to keep those wounds bleeding by persistent hurting comments" (17).

To add to Sona's misery, her younger sister-in-law Sushila, who gets married two years after her, conceives soon after her wedding. When her sister-in-law eventually gives birth to a son, her "jealousy raced up and down her veins like sharp-pointed needles" (15), though she remains careful to hide her feelings from her husband.

Sona does not accept her condition as Rupa does, and turns to God, imploring for a child, and following strict rituals to enable her to produce a child, "Every Tuesday she fasted. Previously she would eat fruit and drink milk once during this day, now she converted to a nirjal fast. No water from sun-up to sundown. She slept on the floor, abstained from sex, woke early in the morning, bathed before sunrise" (15).

Yet, she refuses to seek medical help since she perceives it as demeaning and shameful. When Rupa reminds her that she can afford the best medical care, and questions her avoidance of doctors, Sona "side-stepped the question, not wanting to reveal how humiliating it would be to be seen as a flawed creature, whose body needed expensive medical aid to perform its natural functions." She refuses to take initiative to seek medical help. "If her family had wanted it, how willingly she would have put herself in the hands of modern medicine, suffered a thousand tests. But strangely her in-laws had never suggested this. Perhaps they wanted to punish her, perhaps they felt she was not worth the money" (25).

When Sona's sister-in-law expires, the custody of her son Vicky is conveniently handed over to Sona because she does not have any children of her own: "Sona's childless situation continued to make her vulnerable. She was considered to have a fund of motherly emotion waiting to pour itself into the orphaned Vicky" (25). Her mother-in-law comments that he has no one else in the world now, adding, "It was your kismet not to have children so you could be a true mother to your nephew" (26).

Sona, however, does not envisage Vicky as the answer to her prayers: "But was this dark, ungainly, silent, sullen child any substitute for the baby that was to still the yearning in her heart, that was to suckle from her breasts, and use her ample flesh to its satisfaction" (27). Unlike Rupa who had readily consented to take care of her sister's daughter, Sona cannot come to terms with taking care of a relative's child.

Sona eventually conceives after she visits the shrine of Chitai where she prays for a child. During this visit, which is a pilgrimage cum holiday, Sona experiences a new kind of sexual pleasure: "Sona had not realized how much difference leisure and a change of location could make to a man's sex drive" (32). The very fact that Sona does not go through any medical treatment for her infertility, that no problem is ever diagnosed nor any solution proffered leads one to question the cause of her infertility. Research has suggested that unexplained infertility could sometimes be caused by stress. While these ideas have been controversial and have been severely attacked and critiqued, they still continue to exist. In an article entitled "Relax to Conceive" (2002), Christina Ianzito cites studies which reveal that women who have high levels of cortisol (a stress indicating hormone) stop releasing eggs. Ianzinto comments, "Infertility begets stress, which begets infertility, it seems."

Research conducted at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center in Boston, USA suggests that reduction in anxiety and stress can improve fertility. In fact psychotherapist Barbara Blitzer, based in USA, conducts workshops to reduce stress in order to help couples to conceive (Ianzito). In other parts of the world as well, psychological counseling has been known to help infertile couples. It is possible that Sona's anxiety has been responsible for her infertility, and that a break from the mundane routine as well as the positive aura of the shrine of Chittai eventually helps her to conceive.

The birth of Sona's baby girl removes the stigma of barrenness that has been associated with Sona for a decade. Becoming a mother herself gives her a right to voice her own opinions, which would have been silenced and ignored earlier: "Motherhood increased the things she could openly say" (44). However, it is with the birth of her son Raju that her status within the household really changes: "That moment on the hospital bed she experienced as the most blessed of her life. The mother of a son, she could join Sushila as a woman who had done her duty to the family, in the way the family understood it. Gone was the disgrace, the resentment, gone with the appearance of little Raju, as dark and plain-featured as his father, but a boy, a boy" (49).

While the birth of the girl breaks the jinx on infertility, the 'boy' child still remains essential in order to elevate the status of the woman in the household. As Anjali Wigde suggests, "Women want to have children (sons, in the Indian context) because it brings them power in real terms, and also because, for many, it is the only power

base they have, from which they negotiate the terms of their existence" (61). Sona's envy of Sushila's position which had been created with the birth of the sons of the latter, now diminishes, since Sona herself can boast of having produced sons with pride.

Through the lives of the two families, the novel effectively explores the theme of infertility. The complacence of the male characters who do not hold their wives responsible for infertility is significant. It marks a change in the image of the traditional Indian male who is always portrayed as being obsessed with his virility and sexual potency, with an intense desire for offspring who will continue his lineage. By projecting the husbands as understanding and practical, and yet refraining from idealizing them, Kapur presents a new face of the Indian male.

The characters of the sisters also reveal the importance of fertility for the woman. It is significant that Rupa's self-image is based on her husband's attitude towards childlessness. Had her husband chided her for being infertile, it is implied that Rupa may have suffered a loss of self-esteem. However, his acceptance of the situation allows her not only to deal with her predicament, but also to engage in productive labour, and earn money to support the family. Yet, given a choice, it is suggested, that she would perhaps be happier in the traditional role of a mother. Her work is simply a substitute for childcare that she has been deprived of. This is also evident in her joy which lasts while her niece stays with her, since it seems to complete her family and give her immense joy and fulfillment.

Sona's attitude to infertility is also derived from the attitude of others around her. Living in a joint family, she constantly imagines comparisons being made between herself and her sister-in-law. Despite the fact that her husband showers her with love and attention, she perceives her status within the family as being insignificant and her position within the household as insecure. It is only with the birth of her children, especially her son, that she regains her confidence.

Fertility thus plays an important role for the women in the novel, and is an integral part of their identities, defining their social status and their self-image as well. In ancient times, female protagonists were subject to ill-treatment or physical abuse, and this has been reflected in several novels over the decades. In Bhabani Bhattacharya's *Music for Mohini* (1952), for instance, which was published over five decades ago, the protagonist Mohini is urged by her mother-in-law to cut the skin of her bosom and give her blood to the goddess of births in a lotus bowl. Kamala Markandya's *Nectar in a Sieve* (1955) illustrates the plight of a mother (Rukmini) and daughter (Ira), both of whom suffer on account of infertility. While Rukmini's husband fathers sons with another woman, Ira is abandoned by her husband who chooses to remarry since he needs sons to continue his lineage. Githa Hariharan's novel *The Thousand Faces of Night* (1992) explores the physical abuse of the barren housekeeper Mayamma whose mother-in-law smears freshly ground spices into her vagina, and deprives her of food. Like Mohini, she too is made to cut the flesh from her breast and use the blood to bathe the 'lingam'.

While times have changed, and so has the treatment of infertile women, what does not seem to have changed over a period of time is the emotional trauma and pressure

to procreate. Infertile women are still regarded as incomplete women and deprived of the prestige and honour that would be accorded to them if they were mothers. Motherhood thus defines a woman's identity, and infertility remains a curse even today.

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