

## **The Impulsive Self and the Critical Inner Voice: A Study of Ratika Kapur's Overwinter and Mallika Krishnamurthy's Six Yards of Silk**

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**Abstract:** *The Indian Women novelists in English Ratika Kapur and Mallika Krishnamurthy have explored the complexities of modern life even in their debut novels. Both, Ratika Kapur 's Over Winter and Mallika Krishnamurthy's Six Yards of Silk narrate poignant tale of love, loss, memory, hurt, and guilt. The novels take place in different milieus but the quintessence of the human emotions has been captured splendidly. Ratika's Over Winter sets in the quiet leafy enclaves of South Delhi is about Ketuki, the protagonist, and her familial bond and her relationship with others. The novel, long listed for Man Asian Literary Prize, investigates the cold internalizations of family, betrayal, and hurt. It conveys that the well ordered life is a life of thin film of ice that covers a lake in winter. Mallika Krishnamurthy's Six Yards of Silk is about Sharmila who lives in New Zealand with her husband and three sons. The action shuttles between India and New Zealand, through memory and loss as Sharmila seeks to understand the mysterious disappearance of her brother, Ramesh. Ratika Kapur and Mallika Krishnamurthy portray the complexities of human relations and their mental breakdowns in their debut novels.*

**Key words:** *family, humanity, hurt, love, relations*

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### **I. Introduction**

The onset of 21<sup>st</sup> Century has seen the flourishing of Comparative literature worldwide – particularly in countries with multilingual base. India being a multilingual third world country has to explore it in two fronts – national and international. The contemporary Indian writing in English is richer in content and panoramic in range. It has made its mark in every genre especially in the realm of fiction. The Indian Women novelists in English Ratika Kapur and Mallika Krishnamurthy have explored the complexities of modern life even in their debut novels. Both Ratika Kapur 's Overwinter (2011) and Mallika Krishnamurthy's Six Yards of Silk (2011) narrate poignant tale of love, loss, memory, hurt, and guilt. The novels take place in different milieus but the quintessence of the human emotions has been captured splendidly.

Ratika Kapur is a well acclaimed author of Overwinter and was long listed for Man Asian Literary Prize. Her husband is also a writer and has written the best-selling novel Above Average. She lives in New Delhi with her husband and son. Kapur worked in the past with multimedia and publishing industries. Her debut novel, Overwinter, sets in the quiet leafy enclaves of South Delhi is about Ketaki, the protagonist, and her familial bond and her relationship with others. It investigates the cold internalizations of family, betrayal, and hurt. Generally, animals overwinter by either migrating or hibernating. In Overwinter, Ketaki faces a winter of not just discontent by also tragedy and confusion. Ostensibly, Ketaki has a charmed existence. She is a graphic designer who after her schooling went to New York and then returned to India. Her work is impressive and there are clients looking forward to her designs. She has her own flat and has a string of lovers at her beck and call. There seem to be no struggle and no reason for anguish. But this well-ordered life is like the thin film of ice that covers a lake in winter. One misstep and it can crack and plunge into the tangled, emotional mess that lies beneath.

Ketaki is a free-spirited girl who is reeling under the effects of her strange ties with her family. Brought up in a broken family, she loses her mother at an early age and is further displaced from her roots by being placed in the care of her maternal aunt, Neera, and her uncle, Deepak. Her aunt is not the easiest person to talk to. She gets along like a house on fire with her uncle who seems to be the most doting person in her life. She socializes with a few people and finds it difficult to open up with them too. Ketaki is a very private person and is surrounded by people who also build forts around themselves. Neera is shown as a person who has been through a lot in her life and this reflects in her character. She completely ignores certain things while being totally overwhelmed by others. Despite everything that transpires in their family, she deeply cares for Ketuki. Ketaki finds her behaviour intolerable at times leading to arguments between the two of them. It is through Neera, she discovers a lot about her mother which even her father doesn't know. The more she discovers about

her mother, the worse she feels. She believes that there is a quick-fix solution for everything and the 'forever' tag of any relationship is enough to scare her off. Her uncle has been the biggest influence in her life and at this point in her life, she is unsure whether it has been positive or negative.

Ketaki's life comes to halt when Deepak meets with an accident and slips into coma. She has had a feel of losing her uncle. There is a strong bonding between Deepak and Ketaki, which could be father-daughter or something more. While Ketaki is wrestling with the fear of losing her beloved uncle, her father, Vikram, who lives in New York, decides to make a visit to Delhi. Vikram makes use of this opportunity to reveal a family secret that shakes up Ketaki and forces her to re-examine her feeling for her uncle: "Twenty-nine years need to be imagined again, it is as if entire history demands to be rewritten" (Overwinter 75). When she came to know about the longtime affair between her uncle and her mother, she feels that her world is then thrown into disarray. As she remembers her own relationship with her uncle, she realizes that he had been moulding her to become like her mother. He made her learn the same sport, he tried to encourage her to be an artist like her mother. Suddenly, Ketaki finds herself floundering. For years, her anchor has been the closeness she shared with her uncle. Now it seems that she was loved because he saw her as a clone of a dead woman. With the family secret out, Ketaki, now, starts to look at her aunt with new vision. She started to understand her passive nature. Deepak is died and Ketaki started to move on in her life. She feels that "there are some things about family that should remain secret" (Overwinter 75). Written with an eagle's-eye view of the family drama as it unfolds, it offers an insight into the world of household bliss and the little it takes to make things fall apart. Kapur has touched the right raw nerve.

Mallika Krishnamurthy's *Six Yards of Silk* is also a haunting story that deals with familial problems. Krishnamurthy was born in South India and grew up in New Zealand. She has combined creative and community work for over twenty years and speaks four languages. She is dancer, has a degree in French and trained as a teacher. She has worked around the world in diverse settings and roles, from community and arts education with children and adults, crisis and support work to running community and arts events. She is working in palliative care as well continuing to write. Mallika currently lives in Australia with her husband and two sons. Her debut novel, *Six Yards of Silk*, is a simple but powerful evocation of the experience of migration from South India to New Zealand. The novel questions about what migrants bring with them and what they leave behind. It is a mesmerizing novel, set in Wellington but redolent with memories of India. The story is about the protagonist, Sharmila, who lives in New Zealand with her husband, Keith, and her three sons. The narrative flows between India and New Zealand, through memory and loss, tastes and sensations as Sharmila seeks to understand the mysterious disappearance of her brother, Ramesh. The death of her brother haunts her to the point of making her obsessive about cleaning. The pivotal point of the story is the arrival of her maternal aunt, Meenamma, from India. Sharmila's mother, Vasanti, and Meenamma are very close to each other and share every familial issues. After Vasanti's death, it is Meenamma's first visit to New Zealand. The only thing that Vasanti hides from Meenamma is about her son's mental illness. Ramesh's sudden mental break down shatters her and she consoles herself by believing that it is merely an infection. When she enquires Sharmila about Ramesh, she is shocked to hear his disappearance. Sharmila is totally lost and she her brother's loss haunts her a lot. Though Keith is lovable and caretaking, he cannot console her and she seemed to be lost forever.

More truths unravel during the conversation between Meenamamma and Sharmila. When Meenamamma asks about Ramesh, Sharmila opens her mind by telling what happened on the particular night when he went missing. She says "he rowed out to the sea in the middle of the night, far enough that he couldn't swim back" (*Six Yards of Silk* hereafter abbreviated as SYS 111). The police states that it is an accident and said he is dead but she still feels the presence of Ramesh. Sharmila feels devastate and cannot concentrate on anything. Meenamma is worried on Sharmila's condition and she decides to make everything right before she returns to India. She along with Keith has planned to organize a memorial for Ramesh by inviting all his friends and family members at a seashore. The children want to fly kites in the name of their uncle. On that particular day everyone pays their tribute to Ramesh by sharing their experience they had with him. While all are flying the kites, Sharmila has taken a silk saree and goes to the top of the rocks, she unfolds the saree and flies it above the sea. She thinks that it will reach her brother. The sight of the sea seems to beckon Sharmila, "The waves rolled in and out, hypnotizing her, drawing her in, tempting her out. Cool and inviting." (SYS 157). The sea tempted her to follow Ramesh's sari, "It called to her to come with it, to find him. The sari sang that it would wrap itself around her, care for her and lead her to her brother" (SYS 158). Somehow, she steps back from the rock and reaches the place where everyone gathered. Now she feels relieved. Keith and Meenamma feel happy to see Sharmila as normal. The novel ends by the departure of Meenamma to India.

In this novel, Mallika Krishnamurthy beautifully portrays how the protagonist, Sharmila, is immobilized by the mysterious disappearance of her brother and seeks to gather the strands of her life and weave them into a new future. It is a story of dislocation and redemption. Like a sari folds and wraps around a woman's body, this story intertwines and unfolds Ramesh and Sharmila's lives in a story that resonates deeply

human search for redemption wherever we are. Ratika Kapur and Mallika Krishnamurthy delve deep into the family history of the protagonists. There are no negative characters in the novels and the loss, pain, disgust are due to the experiences they came across in their lives. The familial secrets which penetrate deep into the heart and haunt the characters in these novels lead to an overwhelming sense of loss in their minds forever. Both *Overwinter* and *Six Yards of Silk* takes place at different ends. Kapur's novel sets in New Delhi, whereas Krishnamurthy's novel takes place in New Zealand. Though the places differ the human emotions such as memory, love, and loss are common everywhere. Both the novelists have done an exceptional job of capturing human emotions, particularly pain, betrayal and loss of loved one.

In *Overwinter*, the arrival of Ketaki's father unbound the familial secret, that is, the relation between her mother and her uncle. It gives a major twist in the novel and shatters the image of Deepak in Ketaki. The corrupt relation gives her a mental blow and she feels a huge void in her mind. Like wise, in *Six Yards of Silk*, the arrival of Mennamma brings the reality of Ramesh's mental illness to light, which Sharmila and her family hides from her. And it is her presence soothes Sharmila and helps her to come out from the frustrated thoughts about her brother. The characterization in these novels are portrayed brilliantly and captures the complexity of their relations. Though they are westernized, routed to different places, their sense of nativity, their inner sense of being an Indian is projected neatly by the writers.

Amongst today's deluge of bestselling writers, Kapur's and Krishnamurthy's voice rings with a rare integrity. They bring out the impulsive self of the characters and project their critical inner voice. Ratika Kapur and Mallika Krishnamurthy, through their novels, unfurl elegantly, revealing unexpected details and twists that serve to both untangle and tighten the emotional knot that Ketaki and Sharmila carries around with them all the time. *Overwinter* and *Six Yards of Silk* are about intangible feelings and abstract emotional meanderings that rush like currents beneath the river of these plot points. Both the novels centre around the familial secret that is hanging in the background while the characters go around with their lives trying to deal with it. The secret means different things to each one and effect their lives depending on each one's approach to it – one forgives, one tries to forget, and one keeps the secret alive. In both the novels, the male characters seem to dominate with their little presence. Deepak and Ramesh, though plays a little role in the action of the novel, their presence haunts through out the novels. Their thoughts create a deep wound in the hearts of the protagonists and they feel it difficult to move away from that.

The book delving into human emotions could have been a tough call for a first-time novelist, but Kapur and Krishnamurthy acquit themselves admirably. The characters are woven within a delicate, tenuous web in which these intricate relationships are caught. Human beings are arguably the most complex creatures on the planet. They think and rethink, process and analyse and then act and react to each and every action of theirs and of others. This capability to scrutinize every action, their own and of others, is a boon as well as a bane. The characters in both the novels are never free of the baggage that they impose on themselves. Add to that, worrying not just for oneself but also for everyone they love and wanting to please them all the time. With such a burden in their hearts and heads, they set out to in quest of happiness.

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