

Difficult Daughters : The Search for Autonomy and Separate Identity

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Abstract

Manju Kapur portrays such type of characters who are the strong rebels. She presents women as an individual who fights against suppression and oppression of patriarchy. Her novel Difficult Daughters gave her the international acclaim when she received the Commonwealth Award for Eurasian region. In this novel, the novelist put together side by side the women of three generations. It reflects the various problems faced by the women in the society including their subordination, their anxiety about sexist misinterpretation, their dilemma, marriage, experiences of maternity, love, loss, despair, isolation, suffering, their state of mind. The novelist presents the requirements of autonomy and separate identity in her female characters.

Keywords: rebel, problems, sufferings, dilemma, autonomy, identity

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I. INTRODUCTION

Woman's emancipation is no more a fiction; it has turned into a reality now. Women's recognition of their power made this possible. This transformation in their attitude is reflected in the writings of the authors during the last two centuries. In Indian culture and heritage, individualism, quest for identity, protest and the concept of rebellion have remained alien ideas, as far as women were concerned. While dealing with women authors, the cliché such as women liberation, feminism and patriarchy naturally flow down. Women were not supposed to raise voices for their rights, protest against injustice or question already existing beliefs, customs, rituals and superstitions. They have to merely exist subjected to the patriarchal set up. They have to be obedient, quiet, submissive and passive, not claiming any of their rights neither as a woman nor as a human being.

Indian women novelists have been successful in portraying the woman in various manifestations. Recently, the remarkable range of India's most accomplished woman writers of the post colonial strand has brought the tremendous change in the trend of depicting the woman characters. The group of women writers has been successful in projecting all these problems through the works of fiction. The women writers like Kamala Markendaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bhartee Mukherjee, Manju Kapur, Gita Hariharan and others have intuitively perceived the gender issues upsetting women and presenting women as an individual who fights against suppression and oppression of patriarchy. Their fiction reflect the various problems faced by the women in the society including their subordination, their anxiety about sexist misinterpretation, their dilemma, marriage, experiences of maternity, love, loss, despair, isolation, suffering, their state of mind. However, the

perception of themselves made the capable of making existential choices. According to Suresh Chandra -

However there is a marked improvement in the standards of demand of the upper class protagonists of post-Independence in Earlier, there used to be female either of the inferior status or courteous who observed the way man's energies and claimed his attention. With the twentieth century heading for a close, witness a new awareness sweeping the Independent India's social scene in which more attention and recognition to the status and claims of woman is bestowed. (178)

II. CONCEPT NOTE

In developed nations like America and Europe the common people do not have to struggle for bare existence and thus their fictitious characters are lost in romantic fancies. But, in India the miserable poverty is usual and people have to strive for absolute survival. The women writers are willy-nilly influenced by their social condition and conditioning. Such trying conditions destroy the lives of most of the characters in Indian fiction. Some Indian women novelists also portray the lives of women belonging to the educated and affluent section of society and their problems are not economic and psychological. They attend to more refined feelings and emotions. Manju Kapur portrays such type of characters who are the strong rebels. Virmati in Difficult Daughters, Astha in A Married Woman, Nisha in Home and Nina in The Immigrant are the examples. Manju Kapur's first novel Difficult Daughters (1998) which is set in a socio-political framework with reference to chaotic events of pre-independence India in 1940s and against the backdrop of The Freedom Movement and the partition of India etc.

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presents Vimmati and her intellectual cravings. Vimmati presents and behaves herself like a difficult daughter for her mother and also for her own girl child Ida in due course of time, moreover she becomes a difficult daughter for Vimmati. Ultimately, Vimati and Ida both end up bearing uneven burden of oppression and exploitation.

III. ANALYSIS

Difficult Daughters is an interesting story of a strong rebel by Vimmati, the protagonist of the novel. She is born in Amritsar as the eldest daughter of her parents. Being elder in the family she has to bear the entire list of the family work. Due to this she cannot concentrate on her studies and proves to be unsuccessful. Her life demonstrates that meager education and financial liberty are met sufficient for breaking the patriarchal customs. The novel won her the international acclaim when Manju Kapur received the Commonwealth Award for Eurasian region. The novel is partially based on the life of Manju Kapur's own mother. The novel is an extremely fascinating story - spanning three generations of woman. In order to portray the journey of these women from bondage to freedom she takes into account the increasing complexities of the life and different structures of values existing in the contemporary society. In the very first line, we are introduced with the exploitation of Vimmati and the will not be revision of the matter again, where Ida declares, "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother." (Difficult Daughters, 1)

Manju Kapur as a feminist writer presents the character of Vimmati as a rebellious but stoic woman ultimately breaking traditional restrictions in the milieu of a conventional narrative thread. The story revolves round the woman born at the turn of 20 century in a tradition Panjabi family. The novel describes the political upheaval of 1950's as well as the changing feminist perspective of the modern times. In the novel the novelist put together side by side the women of three generations: 'Kasturi', as a dependant on a man for her social, economical and sexual identity: her daughter 'Vimmati', the protagonist of the novel who tries to cross the threshold of the patriarchal system and become self-secured but in possession of Harish, her professor husband and Ida", Vimmati's daughter, who denies to be in possession of any male character around her. In view of Suman Bala –

"Right from birth a woman is thrust with social images, rewards and punishments that are carefully designed to ensure that she does not develop the qualities associated with men. Unmarried girls feel the constraints of parents and of society to which they belong." (150).

Any reader can observe that the novel Difficult Daughters is based on the female desires, compromise and fulfillment.

Vimmati is the eldest child born in Amritsar in the Punjab in 1940 in the family of Suraj Prakash and Kasturi. Suraj Prakash is presented as a person with progressive ideas while Kasturi is a traditionalist mother in the patriarchal family. Kasturi is compelled to give birth at least to eleven children. Among them Vimmati is the eldest. Kasturi hopes a freer life than that offered her by those around her. This aspiration is denounced to failure, thanks to incomprehension she obtains from both - her own family and that of her husband's. She has to consider that what she receives may not be the fate of her

daughters. Even though she reprimanded and snapped them, Vimati as an eldest daughter in particular. Vimati lost her childhood in bringing up her brothers and sisters. She lives her life under the pressure of familial duties and responsibilities. Vimati, is introduced as a modern educated woman having a job before marriage. Whenever she tried to cross the patriarchal threshold and break the tradition she had to suffer a lot. Her free spirit is found suppressed and torn many times between the tradition and modernity. In this regard Simone de Beauvoir rightly comments -

The mother, as we shall see, is secretly hostile to her daughter's liberation, and she takes to bullying her more or less deliberately; but the boy's effort to become a man is respected, and he is granted much liberty. The girl is required to stay at home; her comings and goings are watched: she is not encouraged to take charge of her own amusements and pleasures. It is unusual to see woman organize by themselves a long hike or an excursion on foot or by bicycle, or devote themselves to games such as billiards or bowling. (Beauvoir 358)

But Viramati never terminates her further study. She is a member of a typical traditional family of Lala Diwan Chand in which marrying off their daughters conventionally after receiving the basic qualification of housekeeping is mandatory. Viramati has to face a large numbers of problems due to her desire of higher education and her opposition to marrying off. She has to take care of her brothers and sisters after returning from the hills. She might be a second mother of the children as they were constantly challenging. Vimati's struggle started when she failed in FA She was forced to get married by her mother. She is always regarded as a sentimental hungry being. When she falls in love with Harish Chandra, a Professor in English the situations become chaotic. The professor is already married and living as a tenant in her aunt's home at Lapel Griffin Road with his family - a mother, wife and children. She is impressed by her cousin Shakuntala and that Oxford returned Professor in the early stage of her life. Shakuntala is post-graduate. She is M.Sc. in Chemistry and her own reflections about living life, and her life style makes an impact on Vimati as is educated and Shakuntala is also educated and takes part in the political Gandhian movement.

When Kasturi and Lajwanti reminded her of marriage, she gets angry another word about shadi, and I'm going back to Lahore' (Difficult Daughters, p.7). Even after marriage she continues such activities. The conversation between Shakuntala and Vimati offers the lucid picture of her character. Vimati would like to be free and break the shackles of the society from her early stage. When she is just seventeen years old her parents think about her marriage with a canal engineer, Inderjeet. During this time she came in contact with Harish Chandra, the professor who motivates her for further studies. When she passes her FA exam with distinctions her parents think that these were respectable adequate amount for a girl. Her marriage with Indrajeet is postponed owing to the death of her father-in-law and she concentrates on further studies and one day she decides not to marry but to study further. This firm decision of Vimati disturbs the whole family. She attempts to commit a suicide but is saved by her father's servant. Then Indumati, her younger sister is married to Indrajeet and Vimati is to Lahore for further studies.

She gets admission in A S College where Harish Chandra teaches English. Here in this college, he feels catching the attention of Virmati and he was attracted towards her beauty. This entire thing shows Virmati's determination and strong will power. It is owing to the lack of love from the parents and also from the rest of the family that she had to be rebellious in what she wanted then she achieved. She may consider herself as the string of the puppet which can be led by the family members so far for doing the household chores.

Viramati never gets affection, love, care and attention from her mother too. Her mother, Kasturi was pregnant when Virmati was seventeen years old and because of this she has failed in her FA exams. She becomes the second mother of her younger sisters and brothers. She has to carry the heavy responsibilities from her early childhood. Here Kasturi, like a traditional mother thinks that girls should be treated as a servant who has seen only the households like her. Manju Kapur candidly confesses during one of her interview that the character of Virmati is based on her own mother -

"Virmati (from *Difficult Daughters*) was, in a way, inspired by my mother. She a teacher, a principal. She went out the world and suffered accordingly. Because once you go out in the world, you are touched by it. You have your own life and you do not want to be contained by the family. But the family objects to it violently." (Interview)

The novelist has portrayed the three different generations of women through the characters of Kasturi, Virmati, and Ida, for elaborating the transitional phase of tradition to modernity. She has presented the female characters related to each others as Virmati, is the protagonist of the novel while Kasturi is the mother of Virmati and Ida is the daughter of Virmati. Manju Kapur has concentrated upon the different structures of the values as well as socio-political scenario and culture of the era. Kasturi, as a traditional woman, admits the male dominance whole-heartedly while Virmati rejects it and protests against the patriarchal society. As an independent human being, it is Ida who absolutely refuses to adjust in a male dominated Indian Society. In this regard O. P. Dwivedi rightly remarks-

The novel covers three generations of daughters starting from Virmati's mother, Kasturi, Virmati and ending with Ida. Each of these daughters never share a happy relationship with their respective mothers and always remain alienate. Their daughterhood has spelt dooms for their mother. (Dwivedi 32)

Manju Kapur focuses on the mentality of the Indian families where a daughter's education is not paid much attention. Traditionally, it is considered that a girl's duty is to get married, take care of her husband, deliver children and nurture them for the sake of her family while the men are expected to do all the resourceful works. Kasturi, being an educated woman does not give much importance to Virmati's studies. Overlooking her preparation for her F.A., Virmati goes to Dalhousie to look after her poor mother. Virmati's cousin Shakuntala, an educated unmarried girl and a teacher by profession, visits them. Virmati is very much impressed by her. Kapur reflects the stereotype thinking of women of the time of Independence of India, through Kasturi's remarks - "Hai re, beti! What is the need to do a job? A woman's shaan is in her home. Now you have studied and worked enough. 'Shaadi' here Kasturi's eyes glistened with emotion. After

you get married Viru can follow." (*Difficult Daughters*, p.16)

In Indian culture, mothers compel their daughters for adopting the social values established in the society. They themselves turn out to be the cause of their daughters' sufferings. They are grown up in an unhealthy environment where they are not able to develop confidence and qualities as the male members of the same society do. The women's sufferings in traditional Indian society are the issue at the center of her attention which has been portrayed through the character of Kasturi in the novel. Kasturi feels tired and weak, her legs and feet always ache. Often she has to face the unwanted pregnancies, resulting in her continuous illness- "Her life seemed such burden, her body so difficult to carry. Her sister-in law's words echoed in her ears Breeding like cats and dogs", 'Harvest time again (*Difficult Daughters*, 07)

Manju Kapur demonstrates that in India, women are not given liberty in decision making and they have to perform according to the man's choice. They are expected not to have their own choices and they should move in accordance with the other's desires and instructions. For example, Ganga is not permitted to wear things of her favourite colour. When Virmati suggests Ganga to buy blue bangles but Ganga denies saying - "He doesn't like blue. I wear nothing blue." (42). She makes it clear that she has to wear, whatever her husband Harish likes. Even Ganga fears to remain away from home so long and that too without her husband- "How could she explain all the different qualities of silence that could thicken the air in a house, and that to someone who was not married? It was impossible. She stood distractedly in front of the bangle-seller." (*Difficult Daughters*, 42) Ganga is self-sacrificing and well accomplished in household works however she is complete failure in earning her husband's love and attention. Manju Kapur has been successful in projecting the impact of patriarchy on women. In patriarchal Indian society they are brought up in an environment of compromise and adjustment. If they are not educated, they have to entirely depend on men for their economic and social status and they are bound to adjust and compromise. Kishori Devi reminds Ganga of her duties and morals of a good mother as well as duties of an obedient and loyal daughter-in-law, as if she has no emotions but only duties to perform. Her husband's second marriage breaks and humiliates Ganga that even after being a devoted towards her husband and his family, she is complete failure in achieving her husband love and affection.

IV. CONCLUSION

Manju Kapur's novels disclose an idea of feminist struggle against all the biases. The daughters in the family are burdened with the household duties. These duties are forced upon them by the society and especially by mothers in the house. In such families education for girl is not considered very important. But Virmati is worried to be highly educated and independent, though she has to rebel a lot to achieve liberty. She not only rejects the traditional values of her family forced upon her but also an early marriage to a canal engineer whom her family has selected for her. She pines for gaining further education. However, her interest in an illicit love relationship with a married professor named Harish turns out to be the main obstacle in her path to empowerment.

No doubt, Manju Kapur is an acclaimed writer who has presented her female protagonist who wants to change the traditional norms of the society in which male plays a dominating role. She interprets the manipulative trends of the patriarchal society. The close study of the novel shows that an Indian woman having all the intelligence and values like education and her own status: when, she made an effort to marry of her own choice, made an effort to spoil her life in between two sides- the one that she rebels against and the other she will live in. A large number of the female writers in India advocating feminism have actually presented the conflict between tradition and modernity by means of their characters. Manju Kapur all the way through this novel, bring to the surface significant new meanings in the untouched phenomenon of cultural circumstances in which matrimonial roles, dual responsibilities, equal opportunities and social restrictions are seen from the eye of the feminist. The novelist is well conscious of the reality that woman under the male supremacy are subjected to more social isolation. In this patriarchal system man is the legal head of the family. Hence, Manju Kapur presents the requirements of autonomy and separate identity in her female characters.

V. REFERENCES

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