

Deconstructing Mother-Daughter Relationship: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

Jitender Singh
MDU Rohtak, India.

The relationship between mother and daughter is characterized by tenderness, love and affection. It is generally conceived as the most sacred bond replete with care and concern. The same kind of representation is found in the literature as well of the earlier times, since literature is a mirror to the society in which it is written and received. The role of the mother has been extolled even in ancient epics and scriptures. Swami Vivekananda has eulogized motherhood in these words:

The ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood that marvelous, all suffering, unselfish, even forgiving mother. The wife walks behind the shadow, she must imitate the life of the mother; that is her duty. But the mother is the ideal of life, she rules the family, she possesses the family. (58)

Thus motherhood has been glorified and celebrated since times immemorial. Even the Gandhian movement in India, which had the objective of emancipating women, projected mother as a self-effacing, sacrificing person. Hitherto, this relationship has been considered as humming with love and care. "The word 'mother' connotes love, affection, selfless devotion and all that is noble in human nature" (Chaubey 107). Mother is considered a source and fountain-head of incessant love. Motherly love has been represented in both religious and social documents in the limelight, as uncompromising and consistent. Through such representation of woman as mother, a very strong stereotype is born called motherhood. The ideology of motherhood is to show mothering as innate or natural to women by its ceaselessly glorified representations. The responsibility of mothering and its tenderness are considered as the principal defining attributes of a woman. Such types of stereotypical representations are strengthened by their recurrence in literature and carried out from generation to generation. But with the emergence of intellectual and philosophical revolutions, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, representation of motherhood has also radically changed. Recent observations of feminist writers have questioned and challenged the socially constructed phenomenon called motherhood. It is realized that such sacrificing image ties women to the role of a mother and she herself is expected to forget her individuality. The fact that the mother is an ordinary human being with her own passions and emotions is miserably ignored in the patriarchal society. K.R. Sujatha and S. Gokilavani hold the view, "The nature of motherhood is dependent on the cultures and societies that have moulded them. Indian motherhood is inculcated in the woman from the day of her birth. She is raised to look forward to nothing else and she rates her worth by her efficiency to fulfil this role" (147).

However, with the advent of psychoanalytic theories, the previously held assumptions about mother and her relationship with the child have given rise to a large body of critical discussions. Following the insights of Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, influenced by Deconstruction, has presented three stages of a child's development: imaginary-stage, mirror-stage and symbolic-stage. In this regard Pramod K. Nayar observes:

Lacan argues that the child's notion and sense of the self emerges in its reference to an Other. Before the emergence of the self, the child lives in the realm of the *imaginary*. Here there is no distinction between the I and the Other. . . . In the pre-Oedipal stage the child has a *symbiotic* relationship with the mother, and does not distinguish between the mother's body and itself. (74)

Hence, it is in the imaginary-stage that the child finds itself in a one to one relationship with the mother where complete identification takes place. But when the child enters the mirror-stage, it begins to conceive a separate self of itself, different from that of the mother. "The

'mirror stage' is the origin of a fundamental alienation in the child's sense of the self" (Nayar 74), and finally, in the symbolic-stage, the child asserts its own identity represented by the language system. "The child discovers that it is separate from the mother, and is a part of a whole network – of family and society – in which it is expected and pre-ordained to play a specific part. It discovers that identity is based on difference – its difference from others" (Nayar 75). These doctrines of psychoanalytic critics greatly influenced the feminist studies in recent times. The feminist critics probe this relationship of mother and child minutely and often with different parameters. The male child, son, after reaching a certain stage, identifies himself more with the father than with the mother, and takes a leap into his own self. But, in case of daughter, she turns to the mother for strength, identity and understanding. "Women as children are able to identify with their mothers quite strongly" (Panja 61). Later on, it is the mother-daughter relationship that remains one of the important areas of focus for feminist writers. Under the rubric of Poststructuralism or Deconstruction and Marxism, this relationship has become more problematic and complicated.

Judith Kegan Gardiner observes that "the word 'identity' is paradoxical in itself, meaning both sameness and distinctiveness, and its contradictions proliferate when it is applied to women" (347). In the light of the above statement, it can be concluded that "identity" for a female is both identification with the mother and a distinct self. This contradiction is the result of the fact that mothers are not all that doting, sacrificing one, but are also instruments through which the patriarchal society exercises its values. In this context Asha Choubey aptly observes: "Feminists, however, have deprived motherhood of much of its halo. The kind of motherhood that has been celebrated through tradition is a myth created by the male of the species to chain their womenfolk" (107). Thus, the dominating circumstances shape the mother-daughter relationship in society. In her attempt to get recognition, the girl child, daughter, protests to be different from the mother. But when she herself attains motherhood, only then the daughter tends to identify herself with the mother. Kusum Lata Sawhney rightly points out:

When you are a teenager, she [mother] is the most out-of-touch person who just does not understand you. We want her approval all the time and become irritable and disappointed when she is critical, for, she seems to only notice our flaws! When we are in our twenties and thirties, we again change and, hopefully, we become friends again. This is because you have matured or because marriage and childbirth also make you understand yourself better and in doing so you also have further insight into your relationship. (1)

Therefore, when the daughter takes to writing about her mother, this is actually her attempt to search out her own roots, identity and a better understanding of herself and the mother. The present paper is an attempt to deconstruct this love and hate relationship existing between mothers and daughters in Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters*.

Manju kapur's award winning novel, *Difficult Daughters*, primarily deals with both mothers and daughters and the complicated relationships which they share. Sudarshan Sharma points out that "It is a first-rate realistic novel about a daughter's reconstruction of her troubled past hinging on her mother's story describing how she was as a daughter" (46). The novel reveals the attitude of three generations of women-Kasturi (Virmati's mother), Virmati and Ida (Virmati's daughter). In other words, it captures the complex relationship between mothers and daughters over a period of three generations. The story is narrated by Ida, the daughter of Virmati, a divorcee and childless lady. As a daughter, Ida feels alienated from her mother. In the very first sentence of the novel, she says: "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother" (Kapur 1). This opening sentence strikes the keynote of her relationship with her mother. Therefore, in her attempt to reconstruct the history of her mother, Ida tries to search out a better understanding of her mother. Until now, she has a

different impression of her mother in her mind, but after looking at her mother's past with her experienced self, Ida discovers the meaning of what it is to be a mother. In this regard, Asha Choubey's observation is worth quoting:

As a child she [Virmati] keeps craving for a little understanding from her mother but with the passing of time she learns to accept the situation as it is. This mother-daughter relationship marches from identification to alienation. Years after Ida – the daughter of Virmati – relives her relation with her mother, marching from alienation to identification. (110)

In the society we live, which is especially patriarchal, it becomes painful for an elder daughter to enjoy her childhood under the pressure of responsibilities. "The conditioning begins at home and women are supposed to walk from mother's womb into mother's shoes" (Choubey 112). Virmati, in *Difficult Daughters*, is the eldest daughter born to Kasturi in a respectable 'Arya Smaji' business family at Amritsar. Kasturi enjoys her fecundity and every year she gives birth to a child. She remains either sick or pregnant most of the time. Hence, Virmati has to play the role of a second mother for her brothers and sisters. She longs for love and affection but does not get any. Much of her energy is wasted in rearing and caring for her younger siblings. Kasturi says, "You are the eldest. If you don't see to things, who will?" (Kapur 7). After her matriculation, she is further trained into domestic chores that are considered to be the essential pre-requisites of an Indian marriageable girl in a traditional family. Her relationship with her mother becomes problematic when Virmati reveals her wish to study further instead of getting married. This is because Kasturi, the mother, considers Virmati a rival, able to challenge her world. Here, the world of Kasturi is not a female world but a world of man-made values. Mothers are merely exercisers of the patriarchal ideology under the pressure of their own gender. Asha Choubey rightly states:

Mothers, being women, were themselves conditioned by their mothers first and the society at large next. Mothers take it as their duty to condition their girl child into the norms of the patriarchal society. The sooner the process is begun, the better it is for the daughter. (113)

Virmati belongs to a typical orthodox family, where daughters are married off after receiving the basic qualification of housekeeping. But Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin, does not adhere to this family tradition. She studies, teaches, and takes part in the political-Gandhian movement in Lahore. Thus, she becomes a role model for Virmati. Once Kasturi retorts: "Study means developing the mind for the benefits of the family. I studied too, but my mother would have killed me if I had dared even to want to dress in anything other than was bought for me" (Kapur 17). Kasturi was never given a choice by her mother; therefore she is not ready to allow any choice to her daughter, Virmati. But Shakuntala has planted the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. She shares her feelings of being independent with Virmati, "These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent" (Kapur 14-15). Now, Virmati tends to think of a life without marriage, husband and children. But Kasturi is unable to understand her daughter's restlessness and distrusts the role of education. For her, education has a corrupting influence over her daughter. When Virmati refuses to marry, she questions, "What kind of learning was this that deprived her of her reason" (Kapur 60), and she condemns, "Leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad-tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first" (Kapur 21). Hence, Kasturi is least concerned about educating her daughter further. She intensely seeks to shape Virmati after herself, and considers any attempt of her towards independence as an ungrateful act of selfishness. Hence, Kasturi here unknowingly voices the ideology that is integral to patriarchy. "She holds those values as ideal which patriarchy has taught her to be so. And when her daughter rebels against such values she takes it to be a rebellion against her own self" (Swami 68). In addition to this, most of the mothers are firm

believers in the view, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it, “What was good enough for me is good enough for you, I was brought up this way, you shall share my lot” (533-34).

It is the hollow inside her created by her mother and her craving to be loved that compels Virmati to seek love in her relationship with a married professor, Harish. He usually comes to meet her in Lahore. Consequently, she succumbs to his requests and implorations, and gets involved in a useless love affair and unwed pregnancy. She has to undergo an abortion. Then she realizes the vacuum existing in their relationship. Indu Swami observes: “She does not know that love and autonomy cannot coexist. Love makes one vulnerable and vulnerability does not lead to autonomy” (69). However, by becoming the second wife of the professor, Virmati completely breaks away from her mother and family. This marriage proves fortunate neither for Virmati nor for her family. She has to live a life of a stranger in her husband’s home. Ganga, the first wife of the professor, and her mother-in-law treat Virmati as an outsider and untouchable. Neglected by her own family, she receives a marginalized place in her in-laws’ house. On the other hand, when her father dies in the partition riots, Kasturi blames Virmati for her father’s death. “Because of you he died. Otherwise is this the age to go?” (Kapur 239), says Kasturi, “Would your pitaji have gone if he didn’t have to live with the disgrace his daughter caused him?” (Kapur 240). These pricking questions of her mother stir the conscience of Virmati. She begins to consider herself as an isolated being that is unwanted both in her parental home and in her in-laws’. The next day, her grandfather also expires, and this leaves her completely broken. “Her father had died without forgiving her, and now her grandfather too. Not one of her family cared for how she felt” (Kapur 240). She does not attend any of the rituals which are performed after her grandfather’s passing away. After that, she hardly speaks even to her husband, the professor.

“Our inheritance from our mothers, then, is not of property . . . But instead, it is a longing for becoming, for a creation of ourselves, and an entitlement to discover, to recreate what surrounds us” (Bannerji 186). This is true in the case of Ida, the narrator, who attempts to reconstruct the history of her mother and thus discovers the identity for herself. When, in Ida’s memory, Virmati is in Lahore doing MA in Philosophy, the partition riots force Ganga, with family, to shift to Kanpur. Virmati gets the chance to come back to her own home. There she gives birth to a daughter named Ida. Moreover, in trying not to be like her mother, and to portray herself as the sheer opposite of her mother, Ida confirms her inheritance. She herself says, “She couldn’t have, because when I grew up I was very careful to tailor my needs to what I know I could get. That is my female inheritance. That is what she tried to give me. Adjust, compromise, adapt” (Kapur 256).

When the daughter, Virmati, who was difficult for her mother to handle, herself becomes the mother of a daughter, then she realizes the meaning of being a mother. She imposes the same restrictions over her daughter, Ida, which were once imposed upon her by her own mother, Kasturi. Ida states candidly: “My mother tightened her reins on me as I grew older, she said it was for my own good. As a result, I am constantly looking for escape routes” (Kapur 279). However, Manju Kapur views mother-daughter bond from that vantage point where the experiences of the mother meet with the experiences of the daughter and lead to a common understanding. Ida, daughter of Virmati, in her journey to her mother’s past, measures her own state with the situation of her mother. She comes to know why Virmati, herself a difficult daughter, turns out to be a stern and strict mother, because in patriarchy, a mother has to become strict for the safety of her daughter. Ida wistfully remembers how her mother has tried to teach her lesson to “Adjust, compromise, adapt” (Kapur 256). The daughter confronts the fact that it is not as simple to be a mother in a male dominated society. Thus Kapur views this relationship in the broader context of woman’s situation in the patriarchal domain.

At the end of the book, understanding takes place between Ida and her mother. She declares: "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me any more" (Kapur 280). If Ida is compared with Saru, the protagonist of *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, no such complete understanding takes place between Saru and her mother. However, a daughter's attempts to reconcile with her mother can be witnessed. Saru, throughout her childhood, remains a victim of her mother's sexist and gender-based bias. Her coming back to her mother's home suggests a daughter's effort to understand her mother's behaviour. A better realization of her relationship with her mother descends on Saru when she tries to accept the elements she hitherto neglects and detests because they, in one way or the other, belong to her mother. Like Ida, Saru too hates her mother and do not want to be like her. But what Premila Paul feels about Saru is that: "Though she tries to learn from the mother what not to be, she ends up as an educated version of the mother herself" (35). When Saru, like Ida, puts her feet into her mother's shoes, then she realizes what it is to be a mother in the patriarchal society. Moreover the daughter may hate and cause injury to her mother in response to her mother's apathy, indifference or alienation. But no daughter can escape completely from the burden of being the daughter of her mother.

Manju Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters*, thus touches various dimensions of mother-daughter relationship. Initially, the daughter, belonging to the same sex, identifies herself with the mother. Then a stage comes when in her attempt to assert her identity, the daughter breaks away from the mother and feels alienated. However, when the same daughter, after being an experienced self, looks back at the past of her mother, she realizes what it is to be a mother in a patriarchal society. In this way, again an identification and understanding takes place between the daughter and the mother.

Ida's reconstruction of her mother's past life has a wider significance in the field of feminist literary studies. Elaine Showalter has identified three historical phases of women's literary development: "the 'feminine' phase (1840-80), during which women writers imitated the dominant tradition; the 'feminist' phase (1880-1920), during which women advocated minority rights and protested; and the 'female' phase (1920-present), during which dependency on opposition is being replaced by a rediscovery of women's texts and women" (Guerin 198). It is this "female" phase and its emphasis on the rediscovery of ancient women writers which makes a parallel to the rediscovery of Virmati's past life by her daughter, Ida. Shormishtha Panja rightly observes: "Women ought to acknowledge their female precursors [mothers] who often lived lives of anguish . . . who had the same dreams as [others] . . . but could not realize them . . . women write through their mothers" (60). Thus, Ida's reconstruction of her mother's past is analogous to the current practice of feminist studies. By rediscovering the history of their forgotten female writers, women can arrive at a better understanding of themselves.

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