

Mother – Daughter Relationships in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

Manju Kapur’s novel *Difficult Daughters* is a story of a daughter’s journey back into her mother’s painful past. It spans the genres of fiction and history and falters in both. The dream of independence and decolonization were portrayed clearly. The incidents like orgies of rape and murder, staged in the name of freedom. In the beginning, Ida, the narrator and daughter of protagonist, trying to reclaim her mother’s secret life, turns out to be main story. Virmati was a child of a conservative Hindu family, comes of age in the turbulent and optimistic 1940s. It was considered to be the time of transformation to the educated Indians. Exposed to taste the new wine of freedom, Virmati encounters freedom-fighters of all religions and persuasions, falls in love, and marries an already married professor. Sequestered with mother-in-law, co-wife and stepchildren, Virmati uses advanced education as an escape route. It is true here, “Education led to independence and loose conduct”. Her progress parallels the new-found freedoms of educated Indian women, but double standards prevail, increasing awareness of the ties that bind. This paper brings out the mother – daughter relationships in the novel.

Key Words: Mother – Daughter Relationships in Manju Kapur’ *Difficult Daughters*

Background of the Novel

Difficult Daughters is a story of three generations of women: Ida, the narrator, who is a divorcee. Virmati, her mother, who marries an already married professor for love, and Kasturi, her grandmother, who come to terms with a difficult daughter, Virmati. This was not a fictional family, but the story of a real, middle class home with fathers, mothers and brothers and sisters that one had seen and lived with. Merging them together was the background of the Partition, which 50 years later seems to be the watershed event of modern India. In short, their popularity rested on their documenting accurately the life and times of this nation’s early years, providing us with a picture that was like going through a family photo album where half-forgotten people and events leapt back into our consciousness. Virmati is attracted towards an English professor who falls passionately in love with her because his illiterate wife could never prove a soul mate. After his repeated overtures Virmati gives in, as she is also a soul thirsting for love. This illegitimate affair leads to many a trouble. Virmati has to bear the brunt alone. She is forced to abort the child of Harish as the professor is reluctant-rather afraid – to marry her. Finally at the insistence of a friend, the professor is forced into marrying her. But Virmati’s hardships do not end here, they simply change colours. Most of her sufferings are caused by maternal apathy. Virmati does not

have a sympathetic shoulder to weep on and this aggravates her agony. She suffers at the hands of the parochial society, her family and above all her paramour.

Tradition of Punjabi Families

Difficult Daughters is set at the time of partition in Amritsar and Lahore. Virmati's life would have ended at an important point, had she agreed herself to be married to the eminently suitable boy, a canal engineer, her family find for her. But, fortunately for her and more for the reader, a dramatic change takes place there. Virmati passes her time by helping her ever-pregnant mother in the housework taking care of the younger siblings and studying. Virmati's family considers her eligible for marriage as she is proficient in stitching, cooking and reading. At the same time, Virmati is fascinated by the young professor, fresh from Oxford. Sophistication that she sees in the Professor's life – ability to understand English Literature, particularly poetry, his preference for tea in delicate china cups and his gramophone attracted her very much. She realizes that is useless to look for answers inside the home.

Women in Difficult Daughters

When we take a look around at the women in this novel, one may delve into family history and examine grandmothers and great grandmothers. Almost every woman has a story to tell under their cheerful I'm – only – an – insignificant – cog – in – the – wheel facade. Perhaps they wouldn't think their lives worthy enough, but we have a lot to thank our foremothers for, from equal political participation to the right to education. Being the eldest of the children, Virmati spends her time as nurse / mother, while her mother, Kasturi, spends her life reproducing, Virmati goes to school and college. She has a liberal father, luckily, and sees education as an escape from the rigours of family life. Virmati sets upon a course of education that doesn't radically change her way of thinking, but gives her the gumption to demand to make her own mistakes. The catch is that she marries a man with two children. Their love is found out. Harish emerges unscathed. Virmati on the other hand is ostracised, and kept imprisoned at home until she agrees to marry someone of her mother's choosing. She refuses, holding firmly on to her love for Harish. As per wish, she is sent to higher study. Her lover marries her after five years as a socially accepted second wife. Education for girls was always seen as a path to immorality. As far as Virmati is concerned, education is an escape. But her family is convinced that it led to her moral degradation. Her falling in love made her a fallen woman. Manju Kapur successfully portrayed early twentieth-century Punjabi life and has effectively captured the relationships.

Ida's Passion on her mother

It is true that she is the mother that Kapur writes of but certainly she forms the core of the personality that Kapur so lovingly presents. *Difficult Daughters* begins with a daughter going back to Amritsar carrying her mother's ashes to meet her maternal family. The narrative then alternates between the past and the present with the mother and daughter speaking to each other through places and events. Traced within this paradigm are both the history of the mother's extraordinary life and the turbulence of the years preceding the independence of our country. Amritsar in those times was a vastly different place from what it is today because it isn't today. Towns such as Amritsar had what was called a 'genry', which counted eminent educator, teachers, lawyers and landed families among their class. To such a family belongs Virmati. Her grandfather is a prominent landowner and ardent Arya Samaj, Committed to the education of women. Because, it is he who helps Virmati to stand upon her point. His sons run a successful jewellery establishment and have a large brood of children. Virmati is the

eldest of 11 children and divides her time between helping her anaemic mother cope with the housework and studying. It doesn't mean that she did it with wholeheartedly. Virmati's interest in studies is incomprehensible to her family which considers her accomplished enough to handle life, equipped as she is to deal with stitching, cooking and reading and writing. The narrative, then, alternates between the past and the present, revealing bit by bit, Virmati's life from the information Ida collects from her mother's friends, brothers, sisters and acquaintances. She concludes by saying, "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 anymore.

Virmati's passion on Ida

Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* has to be a mother, to all her ten siblings. The mother Kasturi is involved in the sole job of procreation leaving the young ones for Virmati to tend upon. The absence or lack of mother's sympathetic shoulders at home forces these daughters to look for sympathy outside which in turn leads to deception. At times Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that was special. However, when she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away. "Have you seen to their food-milk-clothes-studies?" The poor girl does her best to appease her mother and at the same time pursue her studies. The world may not love a lover, but it certainly adores a mother, simultaneously a daughter may adore her mother. The world is full of love, affection, selfless devotion and all that is soft and sweet and noble in human nature. Between a mother and a child, trust and love exist. This should be especially true of a mother – daughter relationship. "What will happen to you after I am gone?" is her favourite lament about Ida. Because, she is nothing, husbandless and childless. She feels herself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society. Daughters are not all that dependant, admiring lot and mother are not all that doting, sacrificing one. Their relationship is shaped by the circumstances that were dominating. Because it is that the long chain of conditioning of women starts from their mothers. Mothers, being women, were themselves conditioned by their mothers first and the society at large into the norms of the patriarchal society.

Conclusion

India has a rich tradition of ancient tales and stories. The stories not only amuse but also reflect about the culture that prevailed. Apart from excitements, adventures, and emotions, they also preach moral values and philosophy, rich in meaning. The novel gives us a critique of mother-daughter relationship, tracing it through three successive generations. Through the sensitive portrayal of three generations of women and their problems, Manju Kapur has given us an unforgettable picture of the evolution of the Indian woman's psyche overtime, starting from the pre-independence period through the independence era upto the time of the post – independence. We see feminist leanings at the outset in the portrayal of Shakuntala and Virmati who make their own choices in life. The later developments seem to spell out that women who go against tradition are sure to be singled out and oppressed by society, rejected even by their own mothers. Their relationship with their mother becomes the first casualty. And the sears they bear are handed down to the next generation. Due to the difference in times, the generation gap becomes too wide to be bridged. Even the common experience of child bearing did not bring them together, unlike in usual mother – daughter relationships. The stressful times of Partition and its aftermath, much elaborated in the novel, may have caused a rift in relations. Only with Virmati's death is the ghost laid to rest, and Ida becomes free to lead her own life, no longer threatened by the shadow of her mother. The novel is a

pointer to how a mother's influence could be unsettling to the daughter under different circumstances. How filial love and affection could be replaced by hate and bitterness, how a mother, traditionally and epitome of sacrifice and goodness, could become a symbol of selfishness and resentment to her children.

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