Exploring Indian Feminism from Marginal Position to New Woman in Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*

Vikas Yadav Raskar  
Assi Prof of English,  
Hutatma Rajguru Mahavidyalaya, Rajgurunagar, Pune  
University of Pune, Pune, Maharashtra, INDIA

Feminism is both an intellectual commitment & a political movement that seeks justice for women. It started as part of the International Women’s Liberation Movement. Feminism is the belief that women have equal political, social, sexual, intellectual and economic rights to men. Manju Kapur’s novels portray truthful picture of the plight of the Indian women, their great suffering care and anxieties, their humble submission, persecution and undeserved humiliation in a male dominating society. The lives women live and struggle under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society are reflected in the writings of Manju Kapur. They nurture the desire of being independent and leading lives of their own. They want to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond a husband and children. They are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. *Difficult Daughters* is an indication to the message that a woman, who tries in search of an identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well. The present paper is an attempt to show the journey of Indian feminism from marginal position to new woman in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*.

The new woman is no longer a myth. She is standing up, asking discomforting, unconventional, unnerving questions; she is exploiting the myths of motherhood, subverting the myths of motherhood, subverting the myth of purity and virginity. It is an attempt to study the changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards self-assured, assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands. India has different complications that put the development of women in a completely altered context than their Western counterparts although the key objectives remain similar. The impact of patriarchy on the Indian society varies from the one in the West and therefore, the Indian women novelists have tried to evolve their own stream of feminism grounded in reality. They have their own concerns, priorities as well as their own ways of dealing with the predicament of their women protagonists. My aim in this paper is also to examine how the status and position of Indian women is changing from marginal position to new woman in Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*.

Feminism is a social theory and political movement. It studies patriarchal language and literature by exposing how these reflect male ideology. It examines gender politics in works and traces the slight construction of masculinity, femininity, their virtual status, positioning and marginalization within works. It is the belief that women should have political, social, sexual, intellectual and economic rights equal to those of men. It involves movements, theories, philosophies and all concerns with issues of gender difference that advocate equality for women and the campaign for women’s rights and interests. Feminist literary criticism became a theoretical issue with the ad-vent of the new women's movement initiated in the early 1960s. In fact, feminist criticism started as part of the international women's liberation movement.
According to Toril Moi in Feminist Literary Criticism "Feminist criticism...is a specific kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism..." Thus the term "feminist" implies a political position. As Sharon Spencer argues, “feminist criticism attempts to set standards for a literature that is as free as possible from biased portraits of individuals because of their class, race or sex.”

Feminism in Indian Writing in English is a modest attempt to evaluate critically the various aspects of feminism. A group of Indian women novelists in their in-between’s, hybridist of thought, multicultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious social dimensions have contextualized the women’s problems in general and middle-class and upper class women in particular. While the gynocritics think that too many women in too many countries speak the same language of silence. Some Indian women novelists like Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Meena Alexander and Manju Kapur have tried with sincerity and honesty to deal with the physical, psychological and emotional stress syndrome of women. The present paper is an attempt to show the journey of Indian feminism from marginal position to new woman in Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters.

Manju Kapur has achieved a high degree of critical success, in and India and abroad, as an admired exponent of Indian Writing in English (IWE), with her three novels Difficult Daughters (1998), A Married Woman (2002) and Home (2006) Her first novel Difficult Daughters received a huge international acclaim. It was awarded the commonwealth Writers Prize for the best first book (Eurasia) and was a number one best seller in India. It was set against the historical background of India’s partition. It is the story of a young woman who falls in love with a married man. It is family saga against the historical backdrop of partition, places, things, people or food she describes them in which are invisibly and inconspicuously different and yet realistic, sensitivity threads the events that from this book. We all know about Women’s emancipation and the communalism but Kapur has dealt with both these relativity state issues in such a manner that we read not just with our eyes, but also our heart. She simply writes about Women’s lives through women’s eyes. The story telling is also poetic. Kapur has presented the problems of the Indian women in a joint family in a male dominated society. The novel highlights the issue of patriarchy, which denies woman’s voice and freedom set at the time of partition. Manju Kapur portrays truthful picture of the unpleasant condition of the Indian women, their great suffering care and anxieties, their shy or modest character, violent or aggressive, humiliating and degrading treatment in a male dominating society. It also shows the women Marathon struggle for seeking the sense of ‘identity’ in a totally averse and ungrateful society.

Manju Kapur’s novels acquire a significant new meaning when they read in the point of view of network canons of feminist and cultural critical thinking. Manju Kapur’s novels furnish examples of a whole range of attitude towards the important of tradition. However, Kapur seems aware of the fact that the women of India have indeed achieved their success in sixty years of Independence, but if there is to be a true female independence, too much remains to be done. Women under the patriarchal pressure and control were, subjected too much more bunts and social exclusion or banishment. The lives women Lived and struggled under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society were reflected in the novels of Manju Kapur. Taking into account the complexity of life, different histories, cultures and different structures of values, the women’s
question is despite basic harmony need to be solved in relation to the socio-cultural situation. The portrayal of woman in Indian English fiction is seen as the silent sufferer and defender of the tradition and traditional values of family. Now the society is undergoing a tremendous change and she is no longer presented as a passive character. Since Mahatma Gandhi helped the women to cross the entrance of family life and moved out into the outer world of freedom struggle and social reform, the woman is presented with varied opportunities not only today but also yesterday during freedom movement.

Manju Kapur’s female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring or hopeful characters caged within the margins of a conventional society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become prejudiced and intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they move suddenly into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for them as competent women with perfect backgrounds. In post-independence India, when the women’s education already commenced and life had started changing, the new women started emerging. The spread of education inculcated a sense of individuality among women and aroused an interest in their rights. Women started becoming economically independent and there was a striving for the realization of their own ambitions.

Difficult Daughters shows the feminism of Virmati who opposes her whole family and continues a study against the wishes of her family. Virmati is like so many other sub continental women. At the beginning she is asked to accept a typical arranged marriage. She rebels against that destiny, to the lasting shame of her family. She insists on her right to be educated, she manages to leave home to study in Lahore. However, seeds of aspiration are already planted in Virmati when she sees Shakuntala, her cousin, tasting the ‘wine of freedom’ She secretly nurtures the desire of being independent and leading a life of her owns. She wants to take responsibilities that go beyond a husband and children. She realizes that it is useless to look for answers inside the home. Therefore, she has to look outside for the education. “She had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over”

We see the promising ‘New Woman’ in Virmati, who does not want “to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed.” Virmati asserts her individuality and desires self-reliance through education. She is not a silent rebel but is bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. She knows she cannot depend upon the Professor to sort out the domestic situation and proceeds to tackle it on her own. Later, she very decisively and coolly rejects the Professor, ignoring his request and keeps the reins in her hand. She displays a marvelous strength of mind in overcoming her dejection. She burns the Professor’s letters in the determined and composed manner to show her resolution to close the chapter and look forward to a meaningful life in Lahore.

Shakuntala, her cousin; and Swarnalata, her roommate in Lahore representative certain female type that recurs in Indian literature: the emancipated woman militant. Swarnalata suggests Virmati not to marry Professor because some men marry twice and leave helplessly their wives often with small children. She says “Marriage is not only thing in life, Viru, the war-the Satyagraha movement-because of these things; women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, and going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream” But Virmati, finally marries the man she loves (or thinks she loves) and returns to Amritsar to live with him.
However, Professor refuses to leave his first wife. The consequences of it for Virmati are harsh indeed. She ends up being marginalized by her own family and despised by her husband. Even, whenever she visits her first home to see her family, she is beaten by her mother. The step-wife does not allow her into the kitchen or talk to the family members. Virmati does realize the hopelessness of her illicit love when she learns about the pregnancy of the Professor’s wife. 

How could it be true? Man professing his love for her on the one hand and making his wife pregnant on the other. She gets angry and stops him saying that “You think you can do what you like so long as you go on saying you love.” Virmati's married life with the Professor in Amritsar turns out to be a disaster. Virmati is being used by the Professor. He enjoys the better of the two worlds and is not there even at the most crucial time when she undergoes the termination of the pregnancy.

In the Western Literature, women started to move out of their invisibility and silence in the 19th century when Ibsen’s Nora in A Doll’s House provided a model of the new woman by saying “no” to the male power structure. Scholars contend that one of the major objectives of women’s liberation movements “has been to free women from the cultural demand for self effacement and to establish their right to full human development” According to Marcia Holly, it is “a tentative beginning in the development of a feminist literary aesthetic- one that is at odds with masculine’s value standards, measuring literature against an understanding of authentic female life.”

In Virmati we see the developing New Woman who is conscious, introspective, educated and wants to carve a life for her. She even conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social codes. Yet she lacks confidence, self control and farsightedness. She is also sensitively imprisoned with an underlying need, which are emotionally and intellectually dependant on a superior force. She fails to break the ‘dependence syndrome’ and halts on the path to full human status. Trampling patriarchal norms, Virmati challenges community expectation to assert her individuality and hopes to achieve self- fulfillment. But what does she really get? She is a loser whose acts totally alienate her from her own family. She fails to create a space for herself for which she had been striving all along.

Ida, who grew up struggling to be the model daughter, does not have the heart to reject Virmati, the mother, but her head, the rationale, rejects her as a woman after having an insight into Virmati’s past. The concluding lines of the novel retell Ida’s rejection of Virmati not as a mother but as a woman. Through Ida’s admiration for Swarnalata, who enters into a wider sociopolitical sphere, the novelist seems to be saying that a woman can maintain her individuality and pursue her interest without threatening the family structures. Thus a woman should basically strive towards a fine interdependent partnership. But if she feels suffocated, then a voice ought to be raised and there should be a total breaking away, like Ida. But merely transcending societal norms is not enough. Virmati’s case may be seen as representative up to a point, but not absolutely so. It is well-known that women participated forcefully in the social movements that led up to Independence and, alas, Partition.

Virmati’s daughter Ida, who belongs to the post independence generation, breaks up her marriage as she is denied maternity by her husband. The forced abortion is also the termination of her marriage. Here, Ida by severing the marriage bond frees herself from male domination,
power and also from conventional social structures which bind women. She has that strength which Virmati lacks. Swarnalata, Virmati’s friend, is also a clearheaded strong woman. She too experiences tension with her parents over the issue of marriage but unlike Virmati she canalizes her energy into a new direction which gives her a sense of group identity. It also breeds ideas of radicalism and militancy but what is admirable is the fact that she can build these ideas of independence into her marriage without destroying the structure of the family. Her marriage rests on the condition that it would not hamper her work. Virmati is a sharp contrast to both Swarnalata and Ida. She does not know what to do, cannot take decisions and is confused. Virmati, by going to Lahore, taking up a teaching assignment and then deciding to do an M.A. creates some space for herself but not as much as Swarnalata or Ida creates for them.

The new woman is no longer a myth. She is standing up, asking discomforting, unconventional, unnerving questions; she is exploiting the myths of motherhood, subverting the myths of motherhood, subverting the myth of purity and virginity. Women writers both poets and fiction writers are repeatedly showing concern for the new woman. The new woman need not be a western model; she can be authentically Indian. In the works of women we see great possibilities with thematic concerns, projection of women characters, the new archetype by the writers of the eighties and the effort to transcend the ‘feminine’ to become the ‘female’. Feminist literary theory is not an integrated whole. It has branches and sub-branches like French School Feminist theory, Black Feminism, Marxist Feminism and so on. Therefore, feminism has not only redefined felinity but also given rise to the entire field of gender studies. Manju Kapur’s desires to prove through her woman protagonist that “a woman should be aware, self-controlled, strong willed, self-reliant and rational having, faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense.”

Works Cited:


iv Ibid., p.15

v Ibid., p.85

vi Ibid., p.139

vii Ibid., p.96


Nahal, Chaman, “Feminism” Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and variations” Feminism and Recent Fiction in English ed, Sushila Singh, New Delhi Prestige, Books, 1991, p.17

Ibid., p.17