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A Feminist Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract:

This paper is a diatribe against the patriarchal rules prevalent in India. The purpose of present study is to investigate the positions of women in contemporary Indian novel *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur. The novel is set at the backdrop of Partition and Freedom Movement of India. The novel tells the story of an upper middle class urban Arya Samaj Punjabi family in Amritsar, Punjab. Two characters have been particularly taken for study Kapuri and her daughter, Virmati in the novel whose position usually bobs about in the society. These two females have been studied in this paper extensively with their roles and duties in the family and outside world. Third generation character Ida has been given less space in the study as she is the narrator. The paper is also an attempt to highlight how education deviates from the main objective; even the educated girls like Virmati who spoils her life by falling in love with a married professor who has already fathered two children. In this research paper, the writer analyzes and focuses on the issues related to the upper middleclass Indian women and their mental dilemma on their plight. The paper delineates the nervous-breakdowns of these ladies who live in patriarchal structured society and it also studies fraught mother-daughters relationships in the novel.

Keywords: Silence, Alienation, Education, Suffocation, Emancipation

Introduction

Manju Kapur was born in Amritsar, a town in the northern Indian state of Punjab in 1948. She completed her Bachelor of Arts from Miranda house University College for women. She earned her M.A. from Dalhousie University in Canada and she further did M. Phil from Delhi University. She is currently a professor of English in Miranda House, an Arts and Science College for Women under University of Delhi with her name Majul Kapur Dalmia. Her novels are stories of women living a life of marginality. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* is about three generations in a single family. The novel is about a search for identity in a different environment as Sudha Shree contends, “Manju Kapur deals with the theme of travails and self identity vis-a-vis socio-cultural identity in *Difficult daughters*” (Sudha Shree 165). It is set at the time of partition of India and it was also entitled as ‘Partition’ by her but on the recommendation of her publisher she named it *Difficult Daughters*. In an interview with *rediff.com*—an Indian news magazine; she tells that the novel took five years to complete; three years for fieldwork in Amritsar and Lahore and two years in writing the draft and getting it published. The novel is a story of a ten year old girl when we first meet her in the novel. She has to do different household tasks of the home. In the novel Ida, the narrator and daughter of protagonist, tries to tell secrets of her mother’s life. The novel opens with a crematory scene where Ida is a daughter of main protagonist of the novel, Virmati. Almost all the story of the novel is told by Ida. Joya Chakravarty also comments about the novel, “*Difficult Daughter* begins with death, is interwoven with

memories and ends in a feeling of loss and despair. This is essentially a story of three generations and partly analytical, partly historical and partly travelogue” (Chakravarty 200).

She tells the life of her mother how and where she lived. The story progresses and so the mother-daughter relationships are more explicit. Ida regrets on her being a daughter of her mother and she does not want to follow her footsteps, “The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she was gone” (Kapur 1). She further remembers the words of her mother who has her wish no donate organs of her body and die in piece without any societal rituals, “When I die, she said to me, I want all my body donated. My eyes, my heart, my kidneys, any organ that can be of no use. The way someone will value me after I have gone....when I die I want no shor-shar. I don’t want a chauth, I don’t want an uthala, I want no one call, no one informed” (Kapur 1). But she was cremated against her wishes “with all her organs intact” (Kapur 1-2).

Kasturi’s Sufferings in the Novel

Kasturi is Virmati’s mother and she has to realize that she is a girl since she was in her school. She is repeatedly reminded that she is born to work and please her in-laws. Since her school days, “...it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued at home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by impeccable nature of her daughter’s qualifications. She was going to please her in-laws (Kapur 58). She has been described in the novel as a mother whose duty is to give birth to children as many as she can. The plight of the women is described in a beautiful manner where there is no birth-control in India and ladies are considered a machine to produce more and more children. When Kasturi gets married, she becomes the victim of this unrestricted birth. She is married in a traditional family. She has to give birth to six daughters and five sons against her wishes, “There had been eleven of them. The girls: Virmati, Indumati, Gunvati, Hemavati, Vidyavati and Parvati. The Boys: Kailashnath, Gopinath, Krishanath, Prakasnath, and Hiranath” (Kapur 4). The story of Virmati’s mother is overwhelming. When she is going to give birth to eleventh child; her pregnancy symptoms were like an anemic, mal-nutritional and restless women, “For the eleventh time it had started, the heaviness in her belly, morning and evening nausea, bile in her throat while eating, hair falling out in clumps, giddiness when she got up suddenly. How trapped could nature make a woman” (Kapur7)? She all the time prays to god to abort this child and aspires not to get pregnant ever in her life, “Her sandhya started and ended with this plea that somehow she should drop the child she was carrying and never conceive again” (Kapur 7). During her gestation period she is not free from her other children and due to strenuous schedule she feels always exhausted, “Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not tired, when her feet and legs did not ache” (Kapur 7). There is no provision for the gynecologist at their time and only midwives conduct deliveries. She has great fear in her mind to think how she will give birth to this child as it will be very painful again:

Kasturi looked eager, ‘I’ll try it.

It can be painful.

I will die if I have another child’, said Kasturi desperately (Kapur 8).

When Kasturi delivered her eleventh baby, it was cold December night. She was not properly attended after the delivery also. She was not allowed to take proper rest. Due to lack of post-natal care and the present circumstances, she had to start doing house-hold chores before her fully convalescence, “When Kasturi was finally allowed out of bed. She was still

bleeding heavily. She would still have to wash the stains on her bed sheet herself as the dai had stopped coming” (Kapur 9). It is generally seen especially in lower labour class, marginalized castes or kiln-workers in present times also that they generally don't put a check on the birth of their children due to lack of knowledge or sometimes they ignore it and consequently they bore many children. Their children's clothes are very dirty and their parents are busy in their routine labour work. These children fight at home and the elder one commands orders on the younger siblings. Almost the same kind of scene is reminded in the novel though it is an upper middle class in the novel.

Struggle from Home to Outer World

Virmati life is not much better than her mother, Kasturi. Virmati's parents are also hasty for her marriage like her mother. She remarks, “They want nothing from me but an agreement to marry” (Kapur 100). Women in that time were made to think of nothing else but marriage and that's why marriage becomes a problem in her life also. Her mother is always worried about her marriage and she does not understand her mental turmoil. Her mother fails to understand that Virmati is a very sincere girl since her childhood who has her self-respect. Sudha Shree also contends that she needed love in which she failed, “She yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special. But never got any” (Sudha Shree 165). She is the real mother for her siblings whom she takes care when her mother gets aside from her duties after giving them birth. It is only Virmati who tends them. Virmati was the eldest of Kasturi's all children. So her role in the family is less of a child, a sister and more of a mother. She is impatient, rebellious and intolerant of fuss. She considers herself another mother for her siblings and she takes care of her brothers and sisters though sometimes harshly, “On her return home from school she would hunt out the offending brother or sister and shove the cold food down their throats. If they refused to wear the hand-me-down clothes she assigned them, she slept them briskly” (Kapur 6). She feels ashamed of her siblings when they lighten themselves in open towards the wall of her aunt Lajwanti as her aunt insults them by her bitter language, “She would redden with shame over her aunt Lajwanti's comments about the litter that was being bred on the other side of the opposite wall. She did her best to make sure that none of the small children went over to the aunt's side to pee or shit, that they looked neat and tidy when anybody come to visit” (Kapur 6). Her mother wanted Virmati to do something all the time for her siblings and this habit of her mother irked her. She at such occasion gives a flat refusal to her mother. She does not like her mother's this nature. At one of such occasions she says to her mother, “Why did you bring me if you don't need me, mati (Kapur 12)? She is a girl of high aspirations. When she is thirteen years old and her mother was ill at Dalhousie, she comes to know the independent life of her cousin Shakuntla and she is then motivated to live a new life for her like Shakuntala. After that she makes good future plans for her life, “First FA, then BT on top of that. Even after her marriage she went for an M.A. to Government College, Lahore; you know-very good college, not like now a day. The Oxford of the Earth they call it” (Kapur 5). Thus Virmati proves a difficult daughter in this novel as she does not follow her parent's advice and tries to find a different avenue for her, “It is only Virmati who is the difficult daughter in the prosperous merchant family of Lala Diwan Chand. While in the generation of Kasturi, woman's role was confined to childbearing and kitchen work, the generation of Virmatibreaks away from the tradition bound limits of Indian women” (Milhoutra 164). When she wants to go to Lahore like her cousin Shakuntla. At this Shakuntla says, ‘Arre’, exclaiming her cousin

patting her on the back, ‘times are changing, and women are moving out of the house, why not you’ (Kapur 18). Virmati tells her mother that she wants to go to Lahore for higher studies; then her mother Kasturi reproaches her saying, “When I was your age, girls only left their house when they married. And beyond a certain age...” (Kapur 111). She further tells that a woman must be reserved up to her home and family and a woman who has neither her home nor family is not a real woman, “...a woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings” (Kapur, p 111). In Amritsar, a Professor of English comes to live as a tenant at her aunt’s house with her wife. The professor has been married with his uneducated wife in his childhood. When she goes to college, this professor falls in love with her, and he gradually keeps a full control on her heart and mind. Virmati, even knowing that he is already married, fails to deny him as Sudha Shree contends, “She reciprocates the infatuation and love of the Charming Professor, for she, who was, tuned to neediness, reciprocated to the professor’s need” (Sudha Shree 165).

Virmati turns down the marriage proposal of Inderjit, a Canal Engineer. But she dares not tell it to her mother, “In *Difficult Daughters* Virmati is unable to tell her mother why she has not wished to get married. She decides to commit suicide. She fails in her attempt and is locked up in a godown as a punishment (Chakravorty 201). Virmati’s contact with the English professor named Harish Chandra brings a turning point in her life. Virmati listens his lectures with rapt attention. She rebels against her family to get her love. Virmati is deeply in love with Professor and refuses to marry Inderjit. She tries to end her life by drowning. Ultimately she shifts to Lahore. But this professor is a great manipulator. He is not satisfied with his previous wife as she is not educated like him. Another thing is that their thoughts don’t match. He does not accept Virmati socially and keeps continuing his illicit relationships with her. Virmati is now a highly educated woman and gets a job in a girls’ school as a headmistress run by an enlightened maharaja. This is the happiest period in Virmati's life she spends in Nahan, the capital of Sirmaur.

Trauma of Married Life

Virmati hates this kind of life and takes refuge in Shanti Niketan to save herself from professor’s tortures. But professor understands the demand of time and he hastily marries her. Then Virmati becomes his bride and now finds some solace as she considers herself a part of society by wearing red bangles like other girls when they get married, “The only thing she said she wanted were the red ivory bangles that the women of her family wore when they married” (Kapur 186). But this marriage leaves her more disturbed, disposed, dissatisfied and perplexed. “Though married, she was dispossessed. Well so be it. She would walk tight-lipped, mute, on the path her destiny had carved out for her” (Kapur 196). Maneeta Kahlon says that this life proves disastrous for her as it brings many bad experiences for her, “Although Virmati succeeds in marrying the Professor, yet her marriage proves to be a disaster (Kahlon 02) He wants that Virmati may pursue her higher studies but he does not like her mingling with other persons, “Getting involved with Swarna Lata, with Leela, with Kiran, with anybody and everybody except your husband” (Kapur 241). Virmati feels that it would have been better if she had not married Harish, “I should never had married you” (Kapur 212). Sometimes Virmati blames herself to be responsible for the destruction of Ganga’s life. She is accepted now neither in her own home nor in her husband’s home as Sudha Shree says, “At her married home ,the mother-in-law feels she is woman who strayed, the step sons call her ‘a

gandi (bad) mummy, the step-wife/co-wife does not allow her into the kitchen or to do household jobs of carrying for family members. The mother beats her up and abuses her, when she attempts to come home and visits her sibling" (Sudha Shree 166). She is considered a woman of nowhere: she is neither accepted in her husband's home nor in her parental home. Thus, Christopher Rollason rightly contends, "Virmati's married life with the Professor in Amritsar turns out to be a disaster. She wilts under the implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband's first wife, with whom she has to live. (*Rollason 3*). Even at the time of death of her father, she is not allowed to cross the threshold of the house while the son-in-law is warmly welcomed. Thus she is forgiven by none and she has to suffer a lot by her own mistake, "She realizes she isn't forgiven by the maternal and paternal family for the mistake of trying to put her own needs first above others' need" (Sudha Shree 166)

Virmati's and Kapuri's unsuccessful married life can be compared to Astha Vadera who has done M. A. in English. The novel is related to her life and she gets a loving and caring husband and better surroundings to live in Delhi. Her husband is a businessman who sells South Korean TV sets. She starts teaching in a school to run her home just after her marriage and she has to get up early in the morning. She has to complete her official duties as well as domestic duties. She develops headache and has to undergo an operation. She is hospitalized for four days. Her husband is dissatisfied from his life and his boss. He often comes home late and Astha keeps on waiting to spend some time with him., Not only this her husband, Hemant expects a boy from her and he tells her that he would not stop until he gets a boy as his son, "But Hemant's desire is to have a son and his insistence that he would not stop until he has one makes Astha dissatisfied and uneasy. She cannot fathom her man" (Kapur MW 61). "When Astha's son was finally born she was felt a gratitude as profound as it was shamed...Her status rose...She was fulfilled" (Kapur MW 68). They both are so busy in their lives that each complains to other not to have time for him/her and thus live a dissatisfied and like-incomplete life.

In the novel *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati repents on what she did. Then she is impressed and moved by Swarnalatha who is her room-mate in the hostel. She tells her that marriage is not only thing in life. Now the time has changed and women are coming out of their houses to take part in Satyagraha Movement to fight for their right. They are the conscious women who are using their energy in reforming and creative activities. Virmati is filled with regret and guilt and says, "I am not like these women. They are using their minds organizing participating in conference, politically active, while my time is being spent in love. Wasting, it" (Kapur 142). Thus this novel has historical undertones of Mahatma Gandhi's Satyagraha Movement for the independence of India. Kapur uses another historical theme of Hindu-Muslim conflict related to Ayodhya/Babri Masjid issue. So Kapur's works remind us Amithav Ghosh's *Shadow Lines* or Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Jasbir Jain rightly says, "History and family sagas also facilitate an analysis of institutions like family and marriage, institutions linked ever so closely to the question of gender, institutions which establish connections with the ground realities" (Jain 13). According to Chatterjee, "Virmati desperately sought an escape from her meaningless life and thought that pursuit of higher education might enable her to do so. She coveted an independent life like that of Shakuntala. Despite her desperation to forget the professor she helplessly failed and became more entangled with him. Being away from her home, and moral control exercised by her mother, she succumbed to his passionate demands (Chatterjee 3).

Conclusion

In the novel the women are found at marginality level in the society. This novel does not approach the women of a family or a single state of Punjab; rather it has wide dimensions. Kasturi, Virmati, Astha or Ida are victimized of the rotten-rules of the patriarchal society. Kasturi's role of a procreation tool and Virmati's position of a dispossessed emerges the key theme of this novel and Ida's role strengthens the mother-daughters relationships though outwardly she does not want to follow her footsteps. Virmati role is of an ordinary woman as Sudha Shree comments; "Virmati represents the Indian woman's psyche, which depends on social approval of the family and man" (Sudha Shree 167). Ultimately women get awareness and they are conscious of their rights and try to carve a niche in the turbulent environment. According to Sudha Shree, "Thus *Difficult Daughters* represents the turmoil of a woman who tries to overcome her cultural identity and forges 'a self identity', an attempt which leaves a woman hard-hearted and dissolute" (Sudha Sree 168). Joya Chakravarty contends that Manju Kapur's novels are a feminist struggle throughout, "Manju Kapur's novels enable us to get an idea of the feminist struggle against biases. While reading the novel one gets the impression that a woman's life is like the life of a nation which is passing through various Trials and tribulations" (Chakravarty 207). Not only this even Ida is not satisfied with her life and she too finds her life useless when she claims, "I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society" (Kapur 258).

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