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## An Analysis of Mother-Daughter Relationship in *Difficult Daughters*

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‘Indian women Novelists in English are proving to be a singular phenomenon in today’s modern times. Their unique genius, as reflected in their novels, has provided insightful understanding of women’s psyche. The reader is kept abreast of all the intricate thoughts and views of today’s women. Thus the writing of these novelists enjoy a significant and central place in women’s lives.’<sup>1</sup> The stereotyped representations of women have been emphatically rejected by the contemporary women novelists. The repressive society has taught a woman to be culturally silent, and thus this act of writing is for her essentially an act of breaking her silence. These women writers are aware that hundreds of thousands of women are discriminated against merely for being women. Such an insight into the marginalized feminine consciousness is provided by Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*. Every woman wants to differ from the stereotypes based on sex but to win over the oppressive forces she must manifest courage and uprightness. Manju Kapur, as a keen observer, explores many aspects of feminine sensibilities in her novel, *Difficult Daughters*. The novel can be considered as an earnest effort to portray the various nuances of women’s psyche and especially of those women who do not wish to be encoded even by the deceptively trivial bonding of male supremacy. In the novel Virmati and Ida rebel against the existing traditional roles preordained for a woman. In spite of belonging to different generations both show an unmistakable urge of self- actualization. Through Virmati’s and Ida’s private and intimate experiences, Manju Kapur has boldly handled even radical themes.

Contemporary women writers also focus on the mother- daughter involvement and are deeply influenced by the topic. They aim at creating a significant literature on this subject keeping in mind the important role the mother plays in her daughter’s life.

“Yet so many stories that I write, that we all write, are my mother’s stories”.<sup>2</sup>

(This statement by Alice Walker only defines her recognition of the eternal mother-daughter bond.)

Fascinated by the subject I am myself prompted to write a paper and re evaluate the mother-daughter pains and pleasures in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*.

The societal forces seek to overpower women and exploit them but *Difficult Daughters* introduces two female characters that beg to disagree with discriminatory social situations and choose to assert themselves, but in their own stride.

Virmati has been portrayed as a woman who looks ahead and wishes for an independent societal set up. As a teenager she is deeply influenced by a tactful Professor who is eventually successful in ensnaring her. The Oxford returned professor of English is too convincing to neglect and gullible Virmati invariably reciprocates his love. She hopes that her acquaintance with the

Professor would open up new avenues for her. She wants to practice knowledge and education rationally but soon realizes that every step of hers has only brought disgrace and humiliation. She has wronged her family and even the Professor's wife, Ganga. Virmati is more a person of instincts than intellect who falls prey to Professor's duplicitous attitude. Because of strong forbiddance from society and the Professor's inconsistent view regarding a second marriage Virmati suffers several torturous years. She even goes through the hellish experience of an abortion. Dr. Mrs. B.R. Aggarwal observes, 'The novel touches myriad issues like revolt against deep rooted family tradition the search for self-hood, women's rights, marriage, gender discrimination and battle for independence at both fronts- personal and rational. It depicts the triumph of the women's spirit, her longing to beat the odd to conquer weakness and to move forward. Kapur has shown Virmati bravely fighting against traditional hackneyed values, which attempt to oppress the free spirit of women... like Hardy's Tess, for Virmati, too, sexuality becomes a site of her oppression. Having once experienced sex-trespassed- the flesh is now violated and a year later, one abortion and one miscarriage leave her cold and indifferent. She is reduced to an object, a body that is conquered and a consciousness that is violated. Even her education fails to take her out of this trap, for her education and independence both come with a heavy price. Her attempt to move out of the patriarchal enclosures is looked as a significant departure from duty and domesticity. Her education fails to free her from the shackles of male dominance, social tradition and popular prejudices.'<sup>3</sup>

Virmati wishes for independence but her lofty intentions are smashed to smithereens. When she marries the Professor she is branded as the other woman. The ignominy of being responsible for playing havoc in Ganga's life suffocates her. Throughout her earlier life she had longed to emerge from the shadows of parochial dominance and hoped to enlighten her life with love and knowledge and challenge the patriarchal framework. But Virmati who outwardly seems very confident, in fact, lacks farsightedness and self- control. Even in later life she cuts a very sorry figure when she cannot look beyond marriage and security. Virmati cannot redeem her womanhood and grace even after coming in friction with the phallogocentric inhibitions.

Her daughter, Ida is the other female character whom Manju Kapur has delineated as an agonizingly real woman who too refuses to curb down before the inhuman social structures. Ida intends to change the social order where human values are hardly given top priority. When she learns about the events and facts about her mother's tumultuous life she condemns her and disapproves of Virmati's quest for self- gratification.

Manju Kapur takes a rather unsympathetic view of motherhood in her novel. The subtly negative approach towards the mother can be explained by the role a mother plays in grooming her daughters into traditional gender roles, thus hinting at male dominance and female subordination. Mutual understanding and trust, considered as the most enduring aspects of the mother-daughter relationship, simply do not exist. Virmati and then Ida feel severely deprived of their respective mother's love. Ida considers Virmati as an inadequate model, too involved and self- absorbed for any meaningful communication.

The opening lines of the novel *Difficult Daughters* rather shock us where Ida refuses to identify with and denounces her mother's character quite curtly. Ida carries on the legacy of being a difficult daughter herself. Her relationship with her mother is always strained and misunderstood. Ida hardly feels any intense emotional attachment with her as Virmati virtually dominated her

early life. Even later Ida is never happy with herself or her mother and considers Virmati's character frightening because it is like her that Ida dreads to become- a pawn with clear discrepancy between her outer freedom and her lack of inner freedom. Virmati's unique needs branded her as a difficult daughter but ultimately adjustment and compromise overshadowed her life. Adriene Rich writes 'Many Daughters live in rage at their mothers for having accepted, too readily and passively, 'whatever came'. A mother's victimization does not merely humiliate her, it mutilates the daughter who watches her to clues as to what it means to be a woman.'<sup>4</sup>

Ida on the other hand represents total disregard and revolt against the existing norms of the society. Ida wants to overcome the vicissitudes of life and make it to the top. She wants to explore new ways ushering towards furtherance and progression and work for a relationship that would be transparent and based on interactive approach. Being educated Ida can be seen with a drive on her mind motivated and brimming with gumption to leave no stone unturned in the search of identity. She seems to be imbibed to the roots with a sense of freedom and looks forward to further strides towards betterment and eminence.

But she is always dominated by a male member – first, her father and then her husband. Her father wanted her to study, dress and behave the way he thought best for her. He forced her to take spirited part in varied curricular activities in her student life and blossom with a keen conviction and positive personage. But these expectations irritated Ida. In an attempt to individuate from her mother Ida turns to her father. She tries to identify with all his male traits and achievements. She justifies her impulse by denouncing the feminine. But she desperately wished for a life which wasn't engineered by someone else. She hated the struggle to become a model daughter. When Ida married, she disapproved of her mother's views who held Ida's husband in high esteem. Virmati appreciated most of her traits, which were similar to those of the professor. But Ida's husband could never match up to his standards. When a woman mothers a female child it cements a daughter's relation with her mother but this is precisely what causes anomalies in the daughter's individuation. As Nancy Chodorov concedes in "The Reproduction Of Mothering", the mother tends to experience her daughter as an inseparable part and thus the bond between the two is so intense that the daughter also encounters difficulties in identifying herself in various ambivalent situations in her growing years. Daughters feel themselves to be continuous with their mothers and so face difficulties in trying to separate from them. The adult psychic status of a daughter is very complex and demands to maintain a balance with other relations. A woman may resort to mothering in order to establish that anticipated relationality. As Chodorov explains, Ida also wished to fill her emptiness by mothering because this profound need for reciprocation is hardly met by her husband. Now she has to cope up with other essential issues—how to strive for self-actualization despite being denigrated in various phases and how to achieve emotional fulfillment with a masculine individual who is more prone to the public world.

Ida is filled with contempt for her mother when she learns that Virmati had terminated her pregnancy. It is unpalatable to her and in turn it is for this very reason that Ida decides to separate from her imperious husband.

"I knew, mother, what it was like to have an abortion.  
Prabhakar had insisted I have one. In denying that incipient  
Little thing in my belly, he sowed the seed of our break up –

--as perhaps he meant to do. Yes, I knew what it was like. I  
Had lain awake nights wondering why he wanted me to have  
An abortion, worrying whether he was having an affair, feeling  
Unloved, because he didn't want a baby from me." (DD 144)

Male oppression can take up various forms always leading the woman to face trauma and humiliations. Even subtle reproach and instigation can lead to a woman's mental torture and humiliation. But a crime is considered to have been committed by our society only when a person or community intentionally or inadvertently causes physical harm. The emotional abuse is overlooked very comfortably. The psychological anguish and the suffocation faced by innumerable women is just ignored by the insincere and inconstant approach of our society. Men hardly have any civil liabilities and their chameleon like attitude is exposed when they rate women inferior, superior or equal to them as the situations demand. The world appreciates a meek and submissive wife and thus Ida too is forced to go through an abortion much against her wish. The insensitiveness of her husband even when she is in the operation theatre crosses all limits. The graphic description in the novel fills us with repulsion. Ida cannot forgive her husband and the rift in their relationship leads to separation. Then Ida wonders how Virmati could not see through things in the right perspective. Virmati had wanted the same that Ida herself had broken---marriage and permanence. Marriage for Virmati was sacred and an institution that could not be revoked. For her, a broken marriage reflected a woman's failure. So a marriage was looked upon as a perpetual contract that could never be annulled.

The plight of women, like Rosie in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide*, married to men like Marco has been a matter of concern for authors like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya and Ruth Jhabvala. Maya in Desai's *Cry the Peacock*, Monisha in *Voices in the City* and Sita in *Where Shall We go this Summer?*- all these women protagonists cry for recognition. Maya finally jumps to death, Monisha also commits suicide and Sita goes out in search of peace and tranquility. Narayana's Rosie, in *The Guide*, drifts towards the tourist-guide Raju, as do the female protagonists of Markandaya's *Coffer Dams* and Ruth Jhabvala's *Heat and Dust*. Such extreme steps taken by these characters are a kind of rebellion against their menfolk who either ignore or refuse to understand their wives' demand for companionship. Similarly Ida is completely disillusioned when love is denied to her.

Ida walks out of her marriage not because of physical abuse but emotional violence. She is forced to unclasp her fingers from everything she clung to. She goes about for days with a weight that crushes her. But is she really strong as she looked? Does the severed relationship with her husband grant her the much longed for self-identity? She feels as if she has been granted a new lease of life, but unfortunately this effort also bears no fruit. She fails to guard herself against gender vulnerability and the balance invariably tilts against her. There is no escape for her even after a divorce. She has to stand where she was and bear the consequences. With her husband alienated she is lost into oblivion. Her relations pity her and sympathy comes naturally to them because a divorced woman is considered worthless....

'I know my relatives feel sorry for me. I am without husband,  
Child or parents. I can see the ancient wheels of my divorce  
Still grinding and clanking in their heads.  
He was such a nice man.....  
So educated.....

But with Virmati for mother, it is not so strange that such a thing should happen '. (DD 3)



So invariably Virmati is again incriminated and not forgiven even after her death. Women who exhibit courage are branded as insolent and fit for doom. Ida realizes that by divorcing her husband she too has transgressed the rules laid down by tradition. Ida definitely aimed for self identity but all she received was loneliness and despair. We get a glimpse into the workings of Ida's mind through her following observation:

I was nothing, husbandless, childless, I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society. For long periods I was engulfed by melancholy, unable to sleep pitying myself for all I didn't have, blaming my mother, myself. (p258)<sup>7</sup>

Ida, as portrayed by Manju Kapur, is a down to earth and a straight forward person. She recognizes Virmati's flaws and shortcomings and even after Virmati's death does not want her memories to haunt her. Ida's conscience could not tolerate Virmati's impulses and nonconformity with the prevailing standards of social life. Ida is even uppish and unpleasant on certain occasions and fails to sympathize with Virmati for the turn of events in her own life.

Ida holds Virmati responsible for the calamities in the life of the Professor's first wife, Ganga. She blames her for encroaching upon Ganga's territory. In the vicious maze if anyone suffered any kind of indignity it is Ganga. Virmati was more vociferous in voicing her needs and chasing what she wanted even if she had to bend the rules to get that. But in an attempt to get her rights Virmati had wronged Ganga terribly. Ida feels that Virmati had disregarded the feeling of sisterhood among women. Ida's reason rejects Virmati not as a mother but as a woman in the following concluding lines.

‘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. Do not haunt any more’ (DD 258)

It is clear that Ida the narrator has achieved a lot more than her mother and much more than her grandmother and that is so by the simple fact of being courageous enough to write down her own family history. There is a qualitative leap between the lives of Virmati and Ida.

'In *Difficult Daughters* we do not listen to Virmati's voice. She could not speak out, being certainly situated at the juncture of two oppressions: colonialism and patriarchy, what we have is her daughter's reconstruction and representation<sup>5</sup>.

So it would be unjust on the reader's part to incinerate Virmati only on the basis of the lopsided observations forwarded by Ida. Gur pyari Jindal also opines that it would be a mistake to devalue Virmati's efforts and her struggle just because she failed because finally what mattered was she atleast tried to subvert the suffocating social norms. 'What is necessary is to break the patriarchal mould, and for Virmati to have tried to do that in the forties was a great achievement'.<sup>6</sup>

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