

ISSN 0976-8165

The Criterion



The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi - Monthly Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal

June 2014 Vol. 5, Issue-3

5th Year of Open Access

Editor-in-Chief

Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor

Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

criterionejournal@gmail.com

About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>

The Desire for Independence and Self-Affirmation in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

Dr. Monika Anand

Assist. Prof.

&

Dr. Shibani Banerjee

Assist. Prof.

Sir Padampat Singhanian University, Udaipur

Difficult Daughters is the story of the strife of women. The novel brings to light the pain, the suffering and the endurance of women and tries to look at life from their perspective. The focus of the paper is on Virmati, the protagonist, who in her desire to be independent becomes a woman who belongs nowhere and ends up being rejected by her daughter also. Virmati's story is a story of innocent dreams and unfulfilled desires. She falls in love with a married man and this leads to her fall for all that she had been aspiring for so long in her life, her independence, her desire to be educated and to have an identity of her own minus the label of a daughter or a wife. The paper traces her journey from compliance to rebellion and speaks of her turmoil, her social, moral, psychological ups and downs in the journey of assertion in a patriarchal society.

The protagonists of Manju Kapur's novels are women who make an attempt to carve out an identity of their own in the patriarchal world. Mrs. Kapur herself asserts that "conflict between mother and daughter is inevitable and I suppose I was a difficult daughter. The conflict carries on through generation because mothers want their daughters to be safe. We want them to make the right choices - right in the sense that they are socially acceptable. My mother wanted me to be happily married; I want my daughters to have good jobs." (Bala and Chandra 107) The very title of the novel by Manju Kapur suggests the difficulty of daughters who in their pursuit of identity are labeled as *Difficult Daughters*.

The story traces the difficulty of not just Virmati but also of Ida and their yearning to have an independent identity in a patriarchal society. Virmati in her journey to create an identity for self falls in the eyes of her family and society. Dr. Ruby Milhoutra says:

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 Virmati took some bold and radical steps in joining the political movement for India's freedom, asserted the need for women education and independence. As a non-chalant representative of the middle generation, Virmati breaks away from the tradition bound limits of Indian women. (164)

The novel opens up with Virmati's intense desire to be loved and valued. She tells Ida to donate her organs so that she is valued at least after she is no more. This sets the tone of the story in the forthcoming pages. Virmati, eldest of Kasturi's eleven children, always yearned for love, for

“some sign that she was special... indispensable to her mother and the whole family.” (6) This desire leads her towards revolt from the carefully laid and time-honoured norms only to realize later that she too, just like her mother, wanted to be a wife looking after her husband and children.

Although Virmati succeeds in breaking all man-made boundaries, there are certain priorities so deeply embedded within her that she struggles to shake through the shackles. In the course of the novel she grows up from a naïve girl to a woman matured by suffering and through experience. (John 1)

Virmati wanted to be the cynosure of her family and her constant attempts to be near her mother, Kasturi, are thwarted as Kasturi is no more than a child-bearing machine who is busy fulfilling the role of a daughter-in-law and has no time to pamper her daughter. Instead she passes on her domestic duties to Virmati, her eldest child. This leaves Virmati yearning for love, to be cherished as an individual. It is this desire which leads her to Harish, a married neighbor who dotes on Virmati. She soon falls in love with him and embarks upon a journey of love, desire, shame, guilt and alienation where there is no place for, much sought after, self-identity. She is constantly torn between desire and duty, between her desire to assert her identity and break away from the mould of tradition and to conform to the traditional role assigned to a woman in Indian society. She refuses to marry Inderjeet, the man chosen by her family and instead goes ahead to choose a man, Harish, for herself. Myopic as she is, she fails to understand that

a man who is already married and a traitor to his wife can never give happiness to any woman. (85)

Virmati uses education as an excuse to shun her familial duty and be near Harish. Education which led Kasturi to her husband was thought to be the cause of Virmati's difficulties.

My mother keeps saying that all my education has achieved is the destruction of my family. (91)

Virmati, though a rebel, has her moments of doubt but soon resigns to her fate.

I feel strange, one pea alone in a whole pod, no use to anybody. I have to get used to it, for this is my fate. (92)

Love adds to her difficulties. She time and again doubts Harish's intentions and questions “was it desirable for a man to abandon his children for the love of a woman?” (112). She also questions her own actions and wonders that how could she ruin the life of two children. She is alienated, lonely and shun by all. She temporarily faces the truth and succumbs to the call of family, values and tradition and decides to sever her ties with the professor and move to Lahore. She feels that she paid a heavy price for being a rebel and now she wants no more of it, “At least I would not be as lonely as now.” (101)

Lahore becomes a symbol of education, independence and meaningful existence, a new beginning. There she feels that she should do something worthwhile for her country's freedom struggle than while away her time pinning for "a useless love and a doubtful marriage." (122) But this is short-lived and she once again surrenders to her desire to be with the professor. She dares to assert her opinion on unity and tolerance which are in stark contrast to that of the Professor's. For one minute she shows that she is indeed on the path of creating an identity for herself, an identity which is not dependent on a father or a husband. But she is mocked at by the Professor. She is torn between desire and duty, emotion and reason. When he is around she cannot think of anything else. But when she is away from him she questions the sanctity of their relationship. At one point of time she is even grateful that they lived in different cities for being at the same place would mean that she would be "completely engulfed" (131). Yet at other times she yearns for his company. She feels out of place amongst married women and longs for marriage, marriage that she had rejected earlier. For some time she enjoys her pseudo-married status but soon sees the futility of it and her whole being aches for a marriage that has the approval of the society. She revolts again and voices out her concerns to the professor

I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family name,
get locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one
knows what to do with me... and why? (137)

She realized that the Professor has no intention of marrying her and once again doubts raise their ugly heads. In her moments of doubt she thinks that it was "far better to be like Swarna, involved in other people, and waiting for no man." (138)

Virmati's difficulties know no end. There are times when she is guilt-ridden and feels that she had "given a setback to the Arya Samaj effort to educate girls." (85) She feels that she had failed in her duty. She is considered a bad influence not just for girls but for boys also. Her visit to Kanhiya's house, unaccompanied, is not appreciated by his mother who thinks Virmati to be a shameless woman and worries that she needs to protect her son from Virmati. Vandita Mishra comments in *The Pioneer*:

"Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power of freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones. Her relationship with the professor, for instance...Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow.... Eventually, marriage to marriage to the man of her choice is no triumph either..."

The difficulty of a difficult daughter is that she wants to live life of her own, on her own terms. In the process, she suffers pain and humiliation and is rejected by all. Virmati is caught up in a dilemma and knows not what to do. Swarnalata tries to make Virmati understand the other options that life has to offer but Virmati, though a rebel, is still a woman bound by the societal norms and cannot imagine a life without marriage to Harish. She was like a moth drawn towards fire and was "his for life." (163) Virmati wants to take things in her hands and solve her problems but always gives in to desire. She was independent yet totally dependent on Harish.

She who had opted out of marriage was now desperate to get married. Virmati moves to yet another place, Nahan, but her stay there is just “a period of waiting rather than the beginning of a career.” (170) She is waiting to get married. Rollason says, “In the micro-state to which her destiny leads her, she has no family or close friends. She attains a near exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, Virginia Woolf’s famous ‘room of one’s own’: and yet she falls.”

Virmati’s difficulties do not end even when she finally gets married. Marriage which had seemed to be a panacea proves to be very hollow and brings in new difficulties. Marriage makes her a guest in her husband’s home. She is “dispossessed” and her “outsider position was trumpeted in thousands of ways.” (212) Virmati once again breaks the norms and questions her mother-in-law’s changed attitude when she discovers that Virmati is pregnant. She is hurt for she has no identity of her own yet, “was she such a personless carrier of her husband’s seed?” (224) She is once again marginalized and reality stares in her face that her identity was only because of her husband. She has her moments of doubt and guilt when she suffers from a miscarriage. She thinks that this was God’s way of punishing her for aborting her baby three years ago and also for robbing another woman of her husband. She feels that “she was left with nothing... and flaunting Harish seemed a pathetic gesture, signifying her emotional poverty.” (228) She is alienated from everyone and “nothing was hers, not her body, her future...” (161) Virmati feels alone even in Harish’s presence and soon faces another difficulty - that of keeping Harish attracted to herself. She realizes that her charm was fading, “all that had made Virmati dear to him seemed to have vanished completely” (228). Virmati who was “the wife and Ganga was the pronoun” (241) is in for a shock when she realizes that for Harish, Ganga and Virmati were just “wives” and equal.

The story of India’s struggle for independence forms the backdrop of the story and Virmati draws a parallel between her and the nation. Both of them want to have their own identity and in the quest are shattered by the turn of events. “The loss is mine as well as theirs” (247). Both of them achieve independence but pay a heavy price for it and lose a part of them in the process. Partition and suffering were a part of the “package deal” (248). Virmati shifts Ganga’s belongings to the dressing-room and “doing this she felt light-headed, as though she had conquered and won.” (252) But this victory, just like the nation’s victory, was hollow and brought in its wake pain, suffering and unhappiness. Virmati struggles throughout her life for love, freedom, identity and ends up losing a part of herself. She wonders if life was really worth the quest and realizes belatedly the insignificance of things. Gur Pyari Jandial, though, has a word of appreciation for Virmati. She applauds Virmati for trying to break away from the confinement of the patriarchal world and says “what Virmati tried to do in the forties was a great achievement in itself.” (108-128)

Virmati is blamed for her daughter, Ida, being without a husband or a child to take care of her

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

is the natural conclusion that people draw. Ida is as difficult a daughter as Virmati and she is equally marginalized. Ida boldly states, “But my tastes are different” (4) and this embodies the

difference in the mindset and life of Ida which is not just different but difficult also. Ida says about her life

I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society. (258)

Ida asserts firmly at the beginning of her narration that she did not want to be like her mother yet she is just like her mother. She is a rebel, a difficult daughter, who tries to break free from the clutches of the patriarchal society and fails miserably. “No matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately...” (3) Virmati tightens her reins on Ida and laments her single status. In doing so Virmati becomes the mouthpiece of the patriarchal society just like her mother, Kasturi. Virmati, who had never taken her mother’s advice that a woman’s place was in her own home with a husband and children, now wanted the same for her daughter. The roles had reversed. Perhaps she had learnt her lesson. Perhaps she had acquiesced. Virmati did not wish to be “like the sacks of wheat and dal here, without my own life.” (85) yet passes on the same legacy of “adjust, compromise, adapt” (236) to her daughter. Sumita Pal throws light on the autobiographical nature of the novel:

“Like Virmati, Manju Kapur was born in Amritsar and teaches in college. Her family was victim of partition and was Arya-Smajis like Virmati’s family....Manju Kapoor admits that she herself has been a difficult daughter for her mother whose priority was marriage and she, in turn wants her daughters to have good jobs.” (137)

Virmati was a difficult daughter for Kasturi and Ida is one for her. Kasturi failed to understand her daughter’s need for love and desire to be an individual rather than a “rubber doll for others to move as they willed.” (85) As a mother she could have been a support system for her daughter when she was going through trying times but she is locked up in her own world where “a woman’s shaan was in her home” (13) with her husband. Virmati fails to see beyond Harish and is pleased that Ida has a husband like him. She fails to sense the insensitivity of Prabhakar and the discord between Ida and him. Though Ida tries reconciles with the mother because she feels that “without her I am lost, I look for ways to connect” (3) yet she rejects Virmati and urges her not to “haunt me anymore.” (258)

Virmati wishes to have a life of her own, life which is beyond just husband and children but fails miserably in her attempts. She is constantly torn between desire and duty, head and heart and finally gives in to heart. P. Sudha Sree says:

“There is an unresolved dichotomy in the character portrayal of Virmati, the female protagonist .While she is strong willed to resist all kind of social and family pressure, she is not strong enough to stay away from Professor’s influence.” (164)

Her life is ruined because of her choice. She is alienated from her family, husband and even her daughter who does not fulfill her last wish also. Even her story is narrated to us by her daughter.

Dora Sales in an essay on the novel in English comments: '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'. (126)

Virmati proved to be difficult for all around her and is rejected by all. She lacks self-control, is myopic and depends completely on someone else for her happiness. She suffers from "dependence syndrome" (Chaman Nahal 17) yet desires for an independent identity. Virmati had the opportunity to be free but she overlooks it. She crosses one threshold only to enter another where she feels equally restrained and nameless. Her desire to assert and affirm her independence remains unfulfilled. The search for her identity takes her on a journey where there is only pain and rejection.

Works Cited:

- Kapur, Manju.(1998) *Difficult Daughters*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Bala, Suman, Subash Chandra. "Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*: An absorbing Tale of fact and Fiction." *50 Years of Indian Writing*. Edited by P. K. Dhawan. New Delhi: IAES, 1999.
- Milhoutra, Ruby. "Existential Images of Women in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*." Prasad, Amar Nath. *New Lights on Indian Women Novelists in English*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2005.
- John, Annie. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. *Indian Stream Research Journal*, Vol, Issue 1, February 2011
- Mishra, Vandita. *The Pioneer*. New Delhi: 1 August, 1998
- Rollason, Christopher. Women on the Margins: Reflections on Manju Kapur's '*Difficult Daughters*'. January 2004. 26 June 2010
- Jandial, Gur Pyari. "Evolving a Feminist Tradition: The Novels of Shashi Deshpande and Manju Kapoor." *The Atlantic Literary Review* 4.3 July-September 2003
- Pal, Sumita. "The Mother-Daughter Conflict in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*". *Indian Writing in English in the New Millennium*. Edited by R. K. Dhawan. New Delhi: I.A.E.S. 2000
- Sree, P Sudha. "*Difficult Daughters*: Travails in Self Identity." Prasad, Amar Nath. *Indian Women Writing in English: New Perspective*. New Delhi: Sarup and Sons, 2005.
- Sales, Salvador, Dora. 'The Memory of Desire in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*: In Past and Future Tense'. In Constanza del Rio and Luis M. Garcia Mainar (eds.), *Memory, Imagination and Desire*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2004.
- Nahal, Chaman. "Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and Variations", *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*, ed. Sushila Singh, New Delhi: Prestige, 1991.