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www.the-criterion.com

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Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*: A Postmodern Feminist Urge for Autonomy

Dr. Rajneesh Pandey

Assistant professor
SVDV, BHU, Varanasi

Many gifted and brilliant woman novelists have emerged as a crucial vibrating and dominating factor in postmodern scenario of Indian English fiction and they have given a new turn to the art of fiction writing in India. The focal point of these women writers is their art of portraying the female characters to suit their socio-cultural, political and psychological ends. Their works spotlight the complex quandary of Indian woman who has to undergo the anguish resulted from her psycho-sexual and physical troubles on the one hand and socio-cultural establishments on the other. The present paper is a sincere effort to discuss the emergence of new woman in contemporary India. The genesis of a new woman in India is a glaring veracity heralding a dynamic change in the concept and condition of feminist urge for socio-cultural, political and financial autonomy. Obviously, a temperamental swing can be observed in contemporary woman who no longer hesitates to take initiatives regarding the important decisions of her life. This feminist urge for socio-cultural, political and financial autonomy, has been undeniably the core thematic issue of these women writers.

The present paper is confined to Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* which revolves around the ceaseless striving of the protagonist against the conventional impediments of established socio-cultural setup which is deadly against such daring desires for autonomy and dignified existence of contemporary woman. The present paper intends to raise a genuine discussion through the character of Virmati i.e. is a contemporary woman in Indian socio-cultural setup really competent enough to rebel against the overriding patriarchal attitudes and practices? Can she really unshackle herself of the age long fetters of the 'dependence syndrome' so intensely ingrained from the time immemorial in the inner and outer psyche of human mind and social configurations in various forms of subordination? The question is how far she is able to preserve her individuality and autonomy amid the conservative push and pull forces and what price she is compelled to pay to her striving for transformation.

Manju Kapur is known for his four novels *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006) and *The Immigrant* (2008). The prize for the Commonwealth writer for the best book (Eurasia region) 1999 goes to the credit of *Difficult Daughters*. Manju Kapur is a prominent name among the postmodern Indian female novelists. She was born in Amritsar in 1948. Her working place is Miranda House College in Delhi. Like her contemporaries the thrust area of her concern is the nebulous entity of women in the family and society where painful experiences are always ready to embrace them. The broad societal issues regarding the vulnerability of woman have been raised emphatically in her novels with the specific purpose to ridicule the deep-rooted social tribulations in our contemporary society. Her female characters well represent the contemporary female psyche plunged between the contrary push and pull forces.

The novel scrutinizes in a well structured manner the postmodern feminist urge for autonomy and the issue of identity by narrating the divergent viewpoints of mothers and daughters of three generations who fall a prey to the afflicting circumstances of life. According to novelist the historical events of this novel have been used in purely imaginative reconstructions. The novel dexterously narrates the tale of a damsel torn between her domestic expectations, her education and the alluring illicit love affair against the backdrop of Partition. Commenting on the theme of *Difficult Daughters* Bhagabat Nayak states that

“*Difficult Daughters* presents larger issues of patriarchy, which denies woman’s voice and freedom set around at the time of partition”. He further says “the novelist expresses her absorbing ideas of woman relationship, woman sexuality, love, infatuation, jealousy, marriage, gender roles, self-discovery, and other problems with intelligence and sympathy”(209).

The novel is the story of woman’s struggle for freedom. On the one hand, there is India’s freedom fight; on the other we see Virmati’s strife for a liberated life of her own desires. Virmati’s desire to command over her providence is the axis point of the novel. The theme of the novel refers to the Independence desired and attained by India despite its cruel division by partition, but at the same time it also spotlights the autonomy yearned long after the independence of nation but still not achieved by a woman and member of so called independent nation. Thus the struggle of the protagonist of the novel for freedom is as Agrawal emphasizes an independence from “dreadwood of traditions and taboos engulfs her, leaving a contour of partition and pain on her outwardly calm face”(239). Even the opening of the novel avers the pursuit of freedom as its main theme in the following words: “the one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she was gone and I stared at the fire that rose from her shrivelled body, dry-eyed, leaden, half dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept” (*Difficult Daughters* 1)

This novel is the portraiture of three generations represented by Kasturi, Virmati and Ida. The play revolves around Virmati, a young Panjabi damsel from a respectable ‘Arya Smaji’ family in Amritsar. Love, infatuation, duty and compromise are the various hues of this narrative. She is an inexperienced girl who is oscillating between domestic duties, ardent desire for education and illicit love affair with a married professor who is a father of a child. Virmati is the eldest daughter of Kasturi and Suraj Prakash and she has ten siblings. Kasturi is sick because of her every year pregnancy. Her sickness and frequent pregnancy forced the whole burden of domestic affairs and younger brothers and sisters on the delicate shoulder of Virmati who is entirely compelled to live under the extreme pressure of domestic duties and restrictions at an early age. All her childhood is somewhere lost in domestic affairs and nurturing of her siblings causing a prematurity to her at an early age. The strangulating pressure of domestic responsibilities has made her very hard and rigorous to her other brothers and sisters. Ida, the daughter of Virmati comes to know about this reality of her mother after her death. “You know, our mother was always sick, and Virmati, as eldest, had to run the house and look after us. We depended on her, but she was free with her tongue and her hands. One tight slap she would give for nothing. She would lash out if we didn’t listen. We used to run from her when she came. She was only sister, but she acted very bossy. We were scared of her. She never rested or played with us, she always had some work. She was so keen to study, bap re. First FA, then BA, then BT on top of that. Even after her marriage, she went for an MA to Government College, Lahore” (*Difficult Daughters*5).

Ironically enough, Virmati could not get the love and affection from her mother which is the birth right of every child. Kasturi being busy in her pregnancies has no time to show her love and pampering to Virmati who is really hungry for it. Ultimately her craving for love leads Virmati fall in love with a married man from whom she gets love and encouragement for study. All this shows that too much imposed restrictions on a child will only ruin him and always lead to a wrong way. Virmati actually acts like a second mother for her siblings but Kasturi has no time to pamper her obedient daughter. One day when Virmati puts her head in her mother’s lap, Kasturi rebukes her very insensitively as reflected in the following lines: “At times Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she 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?’ ‘Arre, you think there is all the time in the world for sitting around, doing nothing?’ ‘You know they

don't listen to her , ' you are the eldest. If you don't see two things, who will?' (*Difficult Daughters* 6).

Kasturi is utterly traditional in her outlook as far as the girl-education is concerned. She does not see any good in educating Virmati more than required to read and write. For her, the training of a girl into knitting, sewing, cooking and all the traditional household works are rather important to a girl before going to in-laws home. She expects the same from her daughter Virmati as every typical Indian girl is expected to be subservient to the household conventions of parents before marriage, and after marriage to the desires of husband and his families. But Virmati like a contemporary modern woman shatters all the conventional confines. In the words of Dr. Shilpi Rishi Srivastava: "Kasturi is a traditional woman and she wants that her children must take interest in Pooja – Path and traditions. But her daughter Virmati breaks all die chains of traditionalism and looks like new woman"(16).

Shakuntala, the cousin of Virmati represents the attitude of a progressive woman who totally discards the convention of early marriage and believes to be something other than a wife "whose responsibilities went beyond a husband and children"(*Difficult Daughters* 17). Shakuntala is a unconventional woman who has her own idea of independence which come out of her mouth in this way: "...much satisfaction there can be in leading your life, in being independent. Here we are, fighting for the freedom of nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else"(*Difficult Daughters* 17). In short she is progressive in all her activities and leading an unconventional life on her own terms. Speaking about her life in Lahore to Virmati, she says: "We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings, follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars. One of them is even going aboard for higher studies.' (*Difficult Daughters* 17). All the activities of Shakuntala regarding study and life style put a deep impact on the mind of Virmati. In fact every statement of Shakuntala for Virmati "were the most vivid things on the horizon"(*Difficult Daughters* 17). After this meeting we see a new woman in Virmati as novelist states: She wants to be like her cousin and leads an independent life. She hopes: "May be I will also one day come to Lahore, Pehnji, she wept. 'I wish I too could to things. But I am not clever". (*Difficult Daughters* 18). When Virmati insists to go further for study, the traditional Kasturi does not agree with her because for her the primary qualification to read and write is sufficient for a girl. Kasturi persuades her to get married in a good family but Virmati saturated with the aroma of autonomy like her cousin has a long debate with her mother regarding her marriage and study "Now it is you who are eating my head. What good are Shaku's degrees when she is not settled? Will they look after her when she is old?" demanded Kasturi irritably. 'At your age I was already expecting you, not fighting with my mother.'" (*Difficult Daughters* 21). We thus see that the novelist has raised one of the most rampant and crucial issues of contemporary Indian society i.e. 'girl's education versus marriage'.

Thereafter we see that against the wishes of Virmati, Kasturi arranges her marriage with Inderjit, a canal engineer. In the meanwhile Harish Chandra, a professor at Arya Sabha College, returned from Oxford "bringing back as much of England as he could" comes into the scene. He along with his family including mother, sister, and wife and girl child comes as a tenant in the house of Virmati's aunt. By chance Virmati's marriage with Inderjit is postponed and during this period she gets an opportunity to study at A. S. College where she meets Professor Harish Chandra who falls in love with her and his "desire to possess had extended to her mind and heart"(*Difficult Daughters* 47). Virmati in her constant pursuit of a meaningful life, independence and love responds to the love of professor revolting against the domestic expectations. When her illicit love affair with professor comes to light she is even locked in the storehouse but she did not surrender herself before the traditional outlook of her family. Thus she comes before us as a new woman who does not want "to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed"(*Difficult Daughters* 85).

Revolting against the desires of her family she decides to go to Lahore to pursue a B.T. course where she meets another uncompromising, bold, frank, and indomitable woman Swarna Lata who continues to live her life at her own terms even after marriage. One day Swarna Lata takes her to a conference where she hears the lectures of leading women on freedom which compels Virmati to ask herself: "Am I free...I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent being in love"(*Difficult Daughters* 142). She could not keep herself away from the love of professor and all the thriving buds of individuality, independence and self-dignity are eclipsed by her cranky attitude and emotional infatuation leading her to yield before the pressure of professor's implorations when he visits to Lahore. When she is back to Amritsar for the preparation of exam, she comes to know about her pregnancy and she is compelled for abortion. But professor is not with her at this crucial moment of abortion. She is left in the feelings of deep emptiness and loneliness and thinks: "she was his for life, whether he married her or not. Her body was marked by him, she could never look elsewhere, never entertain other choice"(*Difficult Daughters* 177). The irony of a difficult daughter gets full vent in the apt remarks of P.Sudha Sree: "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"(166).

Thereafter in the next course of action we see the marriage of Virmati and the professor and her entry in his house as his second wife where she is treated as a disgusting sinner by everybody including Ganga in a very aggressive manner. She however has no other option but accept her decision and destiny. She totally surrenders herself before new circumstances with this feeling in her mind that "a woman without her home and family is a woman without moorings"(*Difficult Daughters* 111). Vandita Mishra dextrously hits the truth when she says: "Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power of freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prison, she is locked into a newer ones. ...As a second wife, she must find social ostracism outside the house, and compete for kitchen and conjugal bed with Ganga, first wife". Throughout her life she has to endure the pangs of abortion, miscarriage, and her father's death. All these afflictions and the negligence of her mother compel her to go in depression. Thus the circumstances inside and outside the house never permits her to achieve the independence in her life span. Obviously, Virmati's all the efforts to cross one patriarchal threshold lead her to be caught into another one where she finds nothing but surrender and compromise. Through the character of Virmati, Manju Kapur has depicted the psyche of Indian women who are forced to seek the endorsement of family and society.

Through the episode of Ganga and Harish the novelists has attacked the silly and disgusting custom of child marriage. Harish is a very progressive man unlike to her wife who is fully devoted only to the household affairs having no interests in intellectual activity. On the other hand Harish wants an intellectual life-partner which is totally absent in Ganga. Consequently they are coupled together with a loveless marriage string. Harish is paying the cost of the socially imposed child marriage on him about which he writes a letter to Virmati: "Who is responsible for this state of affairs? society, which deems that their sons should be educated, but not their daughters. Society that decides that children - babies really - should be married at the age of two and three as we were. As a result, both of us needlessly suffer for no fault of ours".(*Difficult Daughters* 103).

Ganga's traditional outlook and paucity of progressive consciousness gives space to enter Virmati as the second wife of her husband. Virmati finds in this married professor the reflection of her aspirations and the materialization of her dreams of love, marriage and study. She believes that she can live a life of liberty and love with the professor so she allows

a married man to enter into the deep core of her heart quite contrary to the traditional expectation of Kasturi who is entirely obedient to the rules of patriarchal society and expects the same from her daughter. She does her best to induce Virmati to accept the household conventions which are totally rejected by her. Virmati is not even friendly to Ida who is the daughter of the professor and Virmati. Ida says that she has no memory of the happy moments with her mother. Thus Ida becomes what Kahlon says a typical daughter of a “difficult daughter”. She could not develop an understanding with her mother in her lifetime and after Virmati’s death this realization engulfs her with guilt”.

The conflict between Virmati’s inner desires and the scorching reality of society is the actual cause of her incessant afflictions. Her inner desires to unshackle herself from the festering fetters of society and restraints of endorsement of family and society for every decision are fully reflected in her statement that she will try non-cooperation. She decides to partake in Mahatma Gandhi’s non-cooperation movement for the sake of freedom even against the desires of Harish. Her own daughter Ida also follows the same track of life and declines to follow the dictates of dominant patriarchal setup and does everything for her love of personal freedom. Ida retorts to Virmati’s insistence not to disobey and disappoint father and says why it is so important to please him. When Ida’s husband insisted her to abort her child against her wishes, she boldly decides to divorce her husband Prabhakar. Thus she achieved the objective which her mother failed to achieve in her life. In other words as a true daughter she completes the unfinished works of her mother. When she comes to know about Virmati’s past from her maternal uncle she concludes in the following words: “this book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me any more(*Difficult Daughter*280).

It is obvious in the novel that Virmati exercised all her powers to cross one patriarchal verge but she is ironically plunged into another web of miseries where her fortitude is restrained and cramped and she is compelled to enter into the doors of surrender and compromise. Apparently Virmati seems to have taken free initiatives to achieve the land of her heart’s desires but the fact is she is the ironical victim of her own land of heart’s desires. Her relationship with her daughter Ida is another example of constant misapprehension. She lays blames on Ida for living just for herself without having any regard for the expectations of her parents and thus tries her best to put the same parental pressure on Ida to be an ideal and typical Indian daughter which Virmati herself defied in her past life as a difficult daughter. Now she has changed her outlook just because of her personal disappointing and afflicting experiences of past. It is obvious that Manju Kapur has used the character of Virmati just to portray the psyche of Indian woman who either willingly adores and seeks the endorsement of patriarchal family and society or is compelled to do so like Virmati who learns from her own past life experiences the futility of any notion to confront the approbation of Indian family and society. But there is another important aspect of Virmati’s failure in her own life i.e. her laudable spirit and strength to strive against male-chauvinism to establish a woman’s genuine right for education and freedom to take decision about her life’s important issues. In fact the message of Manju Kapur is very clear and loud that we cannot sit aside to surrender ourselves without struggle just because of the fear of failure. It is always better and appreciating to be failed and disappointed after struggle than timid succumb to the fear of failure.

Conclusively, it can be said that *Difficult Daughters* is a narrative of constant struggle for female autonomy which is forbidden to woman in the patriarchal set up of Indian society. The dilemma of contemporary Indian woman finds its emphatic manifestation through the characters of Virmati, Ida, Shakuntla and Swarna Lata. Without any misgiving the novelist takes up the intrinsic contradiction of established social institutions and their emptiness with

this clear objective to shatter the nonsense and age-old socio-cultural conventions which are almost futile in the postmodern era. It would be worthwhile to conclude with the words of novelist who herself has emphasized in an interview with Jai Arjun Singh: “ Literature by women, about families, always has these larger considerations. With years of studying texts, it becomes almost second nature to look beneath the surface at social and economic forces, gender relationships and how they are played out in an arena that, in my writing, happens to be the home. But then, all sorts of things happening outside do affect what is happening inside the home”.

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