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Subversion-Containment Dialectic in ManjuKapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract:

Now it is considered that equality of sexes is achieved to a great extent and the feminist movement passing through first, second, and third wave of feminisms, is now at a stage designated as “post-feminism”. Post-feminists view contemporary society as one in which goals of feminism have been achieved. For them now women have achieved equality in all spheres – be it educational, professional, legal, domestic etc. But if we observe facts of real life, we find that equality of sexes is only a matter of rhetoric, it has become only a focal point of literary and political discussion. The relationship between the marginalized and the dominant group by and large remain same. But in reality the marginalized are controlled through the power of the dominant group maintained more subtly, by seeming to secure internal consent of its citizens, using what Althusser calls “ideological structures” or what Antonia Gramsci termed as “hegemony”. Foucault’s ‘discursive practices’ has close affinity with ‘hegemony’ and ‘interpellation’. Stephan Greenbalt has developed Foucault’s thought of power (discursive practices) into the “subversion-containment dialectic” in his essay “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion”. He has examined the “subversion” and “containment” of power and employed them as feasible tools to expose the system of power and its operation. While subversion means a reaction to dominant power structure, containment is the control of those subversive forces. The authority permits and encourages their coexistence to stimulate appropriate subversion to the ruling system from the ordinary or the oppressed. This paper shows the survival situation of the female under the control of the male and mainstream patriarchal culture, to display the subversion of pre-dominant norms by women and to prove how they have been contained by the mainstream patriarchal ideology.

Keywords: subversion, containment, hegemony, ideology, consent, post-feminism.

Since eighteenth century the position of women began to change in India because of constant endeavour of social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Debendranath Tagore, MahadevGovindRanade, RamkrishanBhandarkar etc. Their efforts to promote education of women, widow remarriage, bane on child marriages, end of *pardah* tradition, etc – brings a positive change in the lives of women. On the international level the western thinkers like Virginia Woolf, Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millet, Juliet Mitchell, Elaine Showalter, Helene Cixous, etc highlights suppression of women over the ages in patriarchal society and challenge representation of women as ‘other’, as ‘lack’, as pure ‘nature’. The Feminist movements aim at providing women with full freedom in all respects—sexual,

professional, personal, educational, political, cultural, religious, etc.—and thus liberating them from all conventional, cultural, and political restrictions.

Now it is considered that equality of sexes is achieved to a great extent and the feminist movement passing through first, second, and third wave of feminisms, is now at a stage designated as “post-feminism”. Post-feminists view contemporary society as one in which goals of feminism have been achieved. For them now women have achieved equality in all spheres – be it educational, professional, legal, domestic etc. According to post-feminist the ultimate goal of feminism now should be to enable woman to achieve self-realization, self-definition, self-actualization, self-emancipation, self-fulfillment, etc. by having freedom of choice- i.e. freedom to live a life of her own.

But if we observe facts of real life, we find that equality of sexes is only a matter of rhetoric, it has become only a focal point of literary and political discussion. It is only in theoretical discourses that we appear to have achieved those goals enshrined by the early feminist thinkers. There is a marked difference between theoretical and political assertions and lived experiences. The lived experience is still more and less same for women. The relationship between the marginalized and the dominant group by and large remain same. The marginalized are continued to be oppressed and exploited by the dominant group in one way or other, or, the womenfolk are continued to be exploited by their menfolk. The only difference that all these talks and movements of equality have brought is that the marginalized are made to believe that they are free to govern themselves. They are made to feel that they are independent entities, free to mould their lives as per their wish. But in reality the marginalized are controlled through the power of the dominant group maintained more subtly, by seeming to secure internal consent of its citizens, using what Althusser calls “ideological structures” or what Antonia Gramscitermed as “hegemony”. “Hegemony is like an internalized form of social control which makes certain views seem ‘natural’ or invisible so that they hardly seem like views at all, ‘just the way things are’” (Barry 164). Althusser has also coined another term “interpellation” for the ‘trick’ whereby “we are made to feel that we are choosing when really we have no choice” (165). It is the way – “the individual is encouraged to see herself or himself as an entity free and independent of social forces. It accounts for the operation of control structures not maintained by physical force, and hence for the perpetuation of a social set-up which concentrates wealth and power in the hands of the few” (165). Foucault’s ‘discursive practices’ has close affinity with ‘hegemony’ and ‘interpellation’. Discursive practices concern- “the way power is internalized by those whom it dis-empowers, so that it does not have to be constantly enforced externally” (176-77). Similarly patriarchal ideology achieves consent of the marginalized womenfolk by making them feel that whatever is happening is in their goodwill and natural to occur.

Stephan Greenbalt has developed Foucault’s thought of power (discursive practices) into the “subversion-containment dialectic” in his essay “Invisible Bullets: Renaissance Authority and its Subversion”. He has examined the “subversion” and “containment” of power and employed them as feasible tools to expose the system of power and its operation. While subversion means a reaction to dominant power structure, containment is the control of those subversive forces. The authority permits and encourages their coexistence to stimulate appropriate subversion to the ruling system from the ordinary or the oppressed. Stephan Greenbalt’s thesis is summarized by M.H. Abrams as,

In order to sustain its power, any durable political and cultural order not only to some degree allows, but actively fosters “subversion” elements and forces, yet in such a way as more effectively to “contain” such challenges to the existing order. (188)

So, this paper is a sincere attempt to show “subversion-containment dialectics” in ManjuKapur’s *Difficult Daughters*. Here, I wish to show the survival situation of the female under the control of the male and mainstream patriarchal culture, to display the subversion of pre-dominant norms by women and to prove how they have been contained by the mainstream patriarchal ideology.

ManjuKapur’s debut novel *Difficult Daughters*, received the Commonwealth Award for the Eurasian region in 1999. *Difficult Daughters*, in flashbacks, relates the story of Virmati, the protagonist, born in Amritsar, the daughter of a father of progressive ideas and a traditionalist mother, she aspires to have a freer life than that offered to her by her culture. Her grandfather—a follower of concepts of DhayanandSaraswati ji was “publically associated with female education” (Kapur 57), supported Virmati’s yearning for education. As per pre-independence scenario, Virmati is highly educated, as her brother tells Ida, “first FA, then BA, then BT on top of that. Even after marriage, she went for an MA to Government College, Lahore, you know – very good college, not like nowadays. The Oxford of the East they called it” (5). She is assertive, rebel and strong willed. Yet she became victim of patriarchal hegemony. On the one hand she is given chances to subvert accepted norms for women of her time, on the other – her subversion is contained within patriarchal ideology. She ends up being “being marginalized by her own family and despised by her husband’s” (Agrawal 145), even by her own daughter, as Ida says, - “the one thing I wanted was not to be like my mother.” (Kapur 1)

Kapur adroitly hints at the male hegemony in Indian society at every instance in the novel. Throughout the novel we have hints that patriarchal notions guide the laws made for women and these are oppressive at the most elementary level. First of all we have Kasturi, Virmati’s mother, who “became the first girl in her family to postpone the arrival of wedding guests” “and graduated at the age of twelve” (Kapur 62). She has been provided education, very unlikely for girls of her times. In this way she would have a chance to undermine and oppose the patriarchy. But her conditioning from the very beginning is done in a way that education also helps her to become, “one of the finest flowers of Hindu womanhood” (62) nothing more than that. As is narrated in the novel,

Her father, uncle and teacher made sure that this step into modernity was prudent and innocuous. Her head remained modestly bent over her work. No questions, no assertions. She learned reading, writing, balancing household accounts and sewing. (62)

To search the best bridegroom for Kasturi, her uncle flapped the advertisements in the *AryaPatrika* and she is married to SurajPrakash, who belongs to a respectable and rich *Samaj* family of goldsmiths. Kasturi is educated, beautiful, good at house-hold chores, but all her qualities prove of no avail to her. She is treated as a child rearing and house-keeping machine. It is her husband’s intense carnal desire that derives her to incessant childbearing, which proves

hazardous to her health. Seventeen years of relentless childbearing makes her life wretched, but still it's the impact of the masculine hegemony at the time of her upbringing that she never blames her husband for her pathetic condition. Even after getting education at a time when girls are hardly allowed to study, she ends up as "an ordinary Indian housewife, to whom education in women meant accommodating, and associating with the assignments of the house" (Mishra 191). Kasturi's identity is limited to true womanhood, which "defines women as nurturers and caretakers" (Singh 28). Patriarchal discourse hails a separate religion and caste for women, i.e. the *stridharam* and the *strijati*. Women are made to feel that they are moving towards liberation, towards independence but their conditioning is done in a way that lead them to value timeless feminine symbols of Indian womanhood like Sita and Savitri. Under the influence of patriarchy Kasturi ends up tugged to conformity.

Virmati, right from beginning aspires for a free and independent life where she can take her own decisions. Shakuntala, her cousin, was her initial inspiration, who convinces her that in the changing times, real answers to women's problems lay 'outside' the domains of home, in the active participation for social change. Following Shakuntala's footsteps Virmati also challenges the traditional family set up where "marriage is the only choice in life" (Kapur 15). From this point onwards Virmati start to subvert the traditional believes. She strengthens her passion for higher studies and she struggles hard to get her arranged marriage to a canal engineer postponed and ultimately cancelled so as to successfully pursue her studies. Not only that, she also succeeds in breaking the "bastion of male learning" (45) by joining the Arya Sabha College in Amritsar which "had a ratio of four hundred boys to six girls. Virmati was the seventh" (45). For a girl like Virmati, who had been neck deep in "weary" household work, and who, being the eldest, had looked after her ten younger brothers and sisters like a "second mother", this sort of rebellion speaks volumes about her firm determination to define her life outside the traditional barriers of home and marriage set for women by cultural construct. For Virmati Gur Pyari says, "What is necessary is to break the patriarchal mould and for Virmati to have tried to do that in forties was a great achievement."

Though Virmati dared to cross one patriarchal threshold, she was seen caught into another where her free spirit was curbed and all she did was "adjust, compromise and adapt" (Kapur 256). Virmati's aspiration for an independent life does not bear full fruit due to the longings of her own heart for the already married professor – Harish. Vandita Mishra rightly argues, "Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power or freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones" (Srivastava 74-75). Anuradha Verma also expresses similar views,

The agent of patriarchy is the professor who plays with the emotions of Virmati. The Professor for five years had relation with her, satisfied his lust and didn't even marry her. He delayed in marriage for on the practical ground he was aware of that his family won't accept his illicit love. . . It could be argued that the Professor enjoyed the bliss of both the worlds. Ganga was like a maid servant who fulfilled his everyday needs, kept his house tidy and washed his clothes and Virmati satisfied his academic urge which the professor could not seek in his meek wife Ganga. (159)

In a patriarchal society it is the woman who always suffers and compromises everywhere. Here Virmati is provoked by the Professor not to marry the canal engineer by making her feel that she should be the sole owner of her life and must pursue it as per her will. But in real sense it is “interpellation” of the Professor to hold Virmati in his life, even without marrying him, just to satisfy his male desires. In one of the letters which the Professor wrote to Virmati, he writes, “One of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves” (Kapur 102), but he works on her mind in such a way that she is hardly able to understand what is good for her in true sense. It is only her Nahan school principal period when she feels some sort of “autonomy and freedom” (115). But again the Professor here also entangles her by his usual sugar-coated talk, as, “You are everything to me. All the sons and daughters in the world are nothing next to you” (122). And when finally she gets married to the Professor, it is the impact of patriarchal hegemony that she willingly dissolves like a salt doll, as she herself uttered in a language learned long ago that, “a woman’s happiness lies in giving her husband happiness” (227). Whatever identity she has in her father’s family, she loses it and is unable to make space for herself on her own. She remains on the fringe, marginalized, so called companion as boasted by the husband.

Further, the Professor who wants Virmati to be educated and independent, gets irritated when he learns of Virmati’s involvement with Swarnalata. He gave reason that Virmati should not waste her time in such activities and better concentrate on her studies. But he does not mind if her time is wasted from her study, by being with him.

In the entire novel, the man has nothing to lose and everything to gain whilst the two women vying for the same man (Harish) have everything to lose starting from love, respect and worst of all happiness. Ganga (Harish’s wife) dumbly suffers the indifference of her husband. In Indian culture, marriage is a sacred institution, where the wife is the half of man, *ardhangni*, but ironically submits completely to the husband for he is *patiparmeshwar*, an earthly substitute for God, around whom her whole being revolves. The dignity and destiny of a woman is seen in marriage. As Beauvoir observes, “Marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (Beauvoir, 1997:444). It is this patriarchal conditioning which makes Ganga so traditional kind that she “was determined not to show anybody” her tears (Kapur 194). For her, her husband who starts referring to her as ‘she’ and never talks to her, is still her God and she never harbours a “thought that did not directly pertain to his well being” (242).

The patriarchal hegemony again seems to be at work when cremation of Virmati’s father and grandfather is described in the novel. Virmati has been thrashed by her mother and blamed for her father’s death. She attends neither her father’s nor her grandfather’s funeral ceremony. She is shocked to see that Harish attends the cremation in a freshly starched dhoti and kurta with a white waistcoat and a long white shawl flung around. In words of Binod Mishra,

The novelist perhaps has an implicit hint at the way society looks at women’s faults. Virmati is pierced at heart to think how only one fault of hers distanced her from everything. (199)

When Virmati is sent to Lahore to pursue M.A. after her miscarriage, Harish attempts to show that he really cares for Virmati. He wants her to be happy in her life and so he wants her to feel rejuvenated in the world of learning in Lahore. As per the cultural taboos women are

expected to limit themselves only up to their household responsibilities once they get married. Harish allows Virmati to undermine these taboos by studying after marriage but at the same time he contained her subversion by not letting her choose her course subject herself, as is narrated,

Harish chose philosophy for her subject. It would be a civilizing influence and induce a larger perspective on life. Part of his extensive library was devoted to European, British and Hindu thought, and Virmati could use those very books, (Kapur247)

Again it is masculine “interpellation” which made her accept “Ida” as the name of her daughter, when she herself wanted to name her “Bharti” on the name of the newly independent nation. Harish manipulates his reasons that he does not wish their daughter “to be tainted with the birth of our country” (Kapur276) as it is marred by hatred and bloodshed. He easily convinces Virmati to name their daughter “Ida”, which means “a new slate, and a blank beginning”(277).

It is also important to note that, “the most important transmitter of the patriarchal ideology is the mother and if the daughters have any inclination towards self-discovery or self-assertion, it generally led to confrontation” (Singh 76). Schooled in the traditional image of womanhood, Kasturi saddles Virmati with her own patriarchal beliefs: “It is the duty of every girl to get married . . . what is the need to do a job? A woman’s shaan is at home”(Kapur13). It is the denial of Virmati for arranged marriage which strained their relation for the whole life. To Ida also Virmati was an engulfing mother, who often insisted that it was for her own good that she was training her. Ida, in her protest, was constantly looking for escape routes. The last lines uttered by Ida in the novel vehemently assert Ida’s quest for freedom to be what she wants and not to be dictated by her mother. She intends handling the reins of her life herself and thus asserts:

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 be. Do not haunt me anymore. (Kapur259)

It is to the credit of the emancipated women militant like Shakuntala and Swarnalata who appear as the exemplar of the ‘modern’ or liberated women, to make the “subversion-containment structure” more dialectic. Shakuntala, is a lecturer in a college at Lahore. She has chosen to remain a spinster to pursue her career and is happy. She does not care for the traditional views where a man who do not want to marry is acceptable, but not women. Her mother seems unhappy with her and is scoffed at by her aunt and others, “What good are Shaku’s degrees when she is not settled? Will they look after her when she is old” (Kapur21-22), but she hardly cares for all this fuss. BinodMishra writes for her, “Shakuntala’s wearing ‘a single gold bangle on one arm and a large man’s watch on other,’ are highly symbolical. She winces at the mention of the word marriage and doesn’t shy around for approval when she speaks or acts.” In a way she transcends the traditional barriers set for women, as her mother says angrily, “I tell her she should have been a man”.

Swarnalata is also an emblem “of the educated, politicized and emancipated women” (Agrawal 148). Like Shakuntala, Swarnalata also satiated her quest for identity. Swarnalata is an ultra-

committed activist, actively participates in Punjab Women's Student's Conference and shines as an orator. She even tries to take Virmati out of her submissive cocoon,

Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war – the satyagrah movement – because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream. (Kapur151)

Swarnalata continues her political activities post marriage also.

Further, Chhotti and Ida have also got new voices in the wake of freedom and oppose the patriarchal taboos with their determination to lead their life independently without being contained by any patriarchal oppressive forces. "Ida's ire and Chhoti's celibacy indicate that a revolution is at hand" (BinodMishra 202).

In the end we can say that the novel presents an attempt of subversion of the masculine order by women. In the process of this subversion some women like Kasturi, Virmati, Ganga—are contained by their own consent by the patriarchal hierarchy, they are still convinced that a husband stands like a "sheltering tree". While there are others like Shakuntala, Swarnalata, Chhoti, Ida, who proves to be a strong opposition to the masculine hegemony and are not contained by the latter. Thus Kapur hints at the indecisive position of the dominant power structure. She shows that the marginalized are always in opposition to the dominant. They seek to undermine the established order. To some extent they are allowed to do so also but that is only the manipulation of the working ideology to acquire the marginalized consent without any coercive force. The marginalized are given some sense of freedom, liberty, emancipation—but all this talk of equality and freedom is delusive at its very base. The dominant ideology continues to contain the subversion of the marginalized with its limits, even while giving some sort of autonomy to the marginalized.

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