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Catastrophic Amalgamation of Desire and Duty in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract:

Manju Kapur's maiden novel *Difficult Daughters* won her international acclaim and common wealth prize for the best first book (Eurasia), which was published in 1998. The novel seems as Kapur's tribute to her country's celebration of 50 years of independence in which she makes her Virmati, a cult figure to fight against taboos, social and family restrictions and the man-made rules for women. The novel highlights the issues like the awakening of the country for freedom, women education and feminine freedom. Her women characters in the novel are divided into three generations, with their values, mindsets and relationships. The novel presents larger issues of patriarchy, which denies woman's voice and freedom set around at the time of partition. The novelist expresses her absorbing ideas of women relationship, women sexuality, love, infatuation, jealousy, marriage, gender roles, self-discovery and other problem with intelligence and sympathy.

Keywords: Women education, feminine freedom, mother- daughter, Manju Kapur relationship, patriarchal society, gender.

Difficult Daughters reminds with some of the situations during the independence war when the socio-political condition of the country was totally ravaged by the communal fire and partition policy. In this kind of social surrounding Kapur presents the problem or an upper-middle class urban Arya Samaj Punjabi family in Amritsar in purely imaginative reconstructions. Bhagabat Nayak says on the theme of *Difficult Daughters*: "*Difficult Daughters* presents larger issues of patriarchy, which denies woman's voice and freedom set around at the time of partition". He further adds "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).

Kasturi, Virmati and Ida are three chief female characters whose relationships are much pretentious with the weakness of generation fissure that is another adapted tenure which depicts the conflict between patriarchal and modern woman's views. Virmati, the protagonist is a ten year old girl and the eldest daughter of a Punjabi house-hold who from the very inauguration clarifies a tale of rebellion against cavernous embedded family custom and later on thrives to certain level. Through her very first protagonist Virmati, Manju Kapur has dealt with the premise of travails in self-identity vise a versa socio-cultural identity. In the same novel, the second protagonist, Ida again revolts against the ways and follies of her mother Virmati. She embarks on her search to know her mother's legacy after she dies. The novel *Difficult Daughter* opens with the anguishing voice of Ida.

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 shriveled body, dry-eyed, leaden, half dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept (01).

Virmati is in an unvarying effort with the world for searching her own self in her patriarchal family. She has eleven siblings and being the eldest child, the saddle of household work and younger brothers-sisters was plummeted upon Virmati's tender shoulders. Thus, she accomplishes maturity at a very younger age of her life.

The continuity of clash between tradition and modernity in the women of three generations form Kasturi to Ida ends both in admittance and rejection. Kasturi yields to traditions while Virmati and Ida do not succumb to follow ancient social values, customs and system and suffer maladjustment, malcontent, and male prejudice and are ruined at last. Another significant point is that female characters of Manju Kapur are more influenced with the thought of Modernity. Contrary to this, men have been still similarly ailed with male-chauvinism, averse to all progressive ideas and indifferent to any type of such clash as they are panicked to lose their dominion as well as position in society where they have been ruling the women for centuries.

Difficult Daughters clearly hints at the strange, unmanageable behavior of Virmati and Shakuntala (but Swarna Lata cannot be placed beside them, a compassionate nationalist girl that she is). Shakuntala, a M.Sc. in Chemistry, is a girl who has tasted 'the wine of freedom' (17). The very word 'shaadi' (marriage) makes her miserable and desperate. Her mother, Lajwanti, wants her to marry and settle down. Her auntie, Kasturi says to her as under: Hai re, beti! What is the need to do a job? Though Virmati wishes to be like Shakuntala, "I want to be like you" (15), she is certainly not like her. Her mother, Kasturi, feels the pinch of it when she bitterly says, "Really, I give my daughters too much freedom. And this is the result!" (72). The hint here is at the attempted suicide by Virmati in the canal waters. In the mother's eyes, she is stubborn, independent and ungrateful; she is too whimsical and wayward in her behavior. Her love for Harish overpoweringly haunts her wherever she goes. She is earthly and sensuous in her emotional response to this man. Commenting on her peculiar nature, Kapur observes: "The daughter had been bad enough" (112). One has to

attend to moral, social, political and economic responsibilities too. With due regard to Virmati's romantic longings and her intense, unwavering love for Harish, she does not carry out these responsibilities in a proper manner. Very rightly does Swarna Lata suggest to her:

Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war-the Satyagraha movement- because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, and going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream (139).

Her intense love for Harish shows that she is a strange ('difficult') girl. Her mother, father and grandfather are terribly upset over it. Her mother, in a furious mood, rudely remarks about Virmati (the eldest of her six daughters) thus:

... the girl was so stubborn and independent, no matter what they did for her, she wasn't grateful. When she had been young eighth-class pass had satisfied her, but her daughter thought she was too special to follow family ways (104).

When she rejects this marriage proposal, she is treated more harshly. She just beholds each happening occurring around her and keeps mum but soon she takes her decision in spite of several unprecedented hurdles:

I am going to Lahore to do my BT. I want to be a teacher like you and Shakuntala Pehnji. Perhaps my family will also benefit by what I do, as yours has done. As for me, I never stopped learning from you, whether it was in the classroom or outside. Mati says at least I wouldn't be at home to remind her of the eternal disgrace I am to everybody. I too, want a fresh start. It will be a great relief for me to leave this house. May be Bade Baoji will consent to come here after I have gone (107-08).

Virmati's illegitimate relationship with professor makes her life more decisive. One more phase arrives to her life when she revealed that she is pregnant and come across the reality that her beloved Harish for whom she protested against each emotional and social factor of her life is apathetic to her situation, she breaks into pieces. She herself goes for an abortion to be done. After abortion she appreciates half the meaning to be called woman and the fantasy of dreamy love. After facing much obscurity and criticism she is married to the Prof. Harish, and after her marriage with him, the subsequent phase of her life's misery begins. After passing through a series of confinements, Virmati manages to marry the Professor and settles down in his house along with his first wife Ganga. However, this much sought-after marriage does not bring any solace for her, as she is being neglected by Harish's mother and Ganga. Having occupied Ganga's bed, she longs to have a share in her kitchen also, but it does not materialize. Even her sense of fulfillment is not met, as Harish still teaches her about how to act in life. Being a male, Professor Harish plays the role of a dominant partner in this incoherent love affair as Virmati becomes a source of carnal pleasure for him. Whenever he wants her, she is supposed to be with him, disregarding the various social and familial restrictions inflicted upon her. But when it comes to his marriage with Virmati, he takes a step back due to the fear of the same restrictions and never dares to face her parents. Harish refuses to abandon his first wife Ganga but expects Virmati to share the same bed with her.

He tells her: "Co-wives are part of our social traditions" (112). Realizing her position in all artificial barriers she complains to Professor.

I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family's name, a locked up inside my house; get sent to Lahore because no one knows what do with me. Here, I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wandering what people will say if they find out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace... and why? Because I am an idiot (137).

Soon Virmati gets pregnant, but the joy of her pregnancy is short-lived as it turns out to be a case of miscarriage. Evidently, we see that Virmati has to suffer both physically and mentally owing to her marriage with Harish; she has to suffer an abortion and a miscarriage and she is also under constant pressure from her spousal and parental families: "Virmati became better, but not less dull. One abortion and one miscarriage....Years of penetration, years of her insides churning with pregnant beginning" (246). In spite of Ganga's hostility she thinks "a woman's happiness lies in giving her husband happiness" (110) and likes to enjoy love, sex, children and right to do odd jobs of her husband. When she thinks of being deprived of these things she broods over some sinful doings in her past life. Both Virmati and Ganga accuse each other of snatching away each others' rights. While Ganga is more aggressive due to her possessiveness in the family Virmati become more passive due to her civilizing influence of education, winning favor of the professor and may be due to her cultural background. On this, Vandita Mishra rightly comments in *The Pioneer*:

Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power or freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she locked into newer ones. Her relationship with the professor, for instance. While it does provide an escape from a loveless arranged marriage, it is itself furtive and claustrophobic, offering only a stolen togetherness behind curtained windows. Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow. She hovers uncertainly at the age of new world, never entering, lest the professor should call and not find her near. Eventually, marriage to the man of her choice is no triumph either. As second wife, she must fight social ostracism outside the house, and compete for the kitchen and conjugal bed with Ganga, the first wife inside it. (Milhoutra169)

At the close, the tragic end of Virmati determines the idea that even in post-independence period of modernization the two poles tradition and modernity are making the man more and more pendulous. It also reminds us that 'Indian Background and Psyche' will hanker after the Modern Indian Mind, sometimes even overpower him/her though he/she may try much to peel off these multiple layers set deep on the mind and soul. Usually, the victimization gives birth to the voice of protest and if we look deep into the life of Virmati the protagonist, we will find that it is smeared with the pressure of family responsibility from her childhood that is lost in being a young mother to her siblings'. However, the indomitable will power to continue her studies and her realization and despise of the idea of being an ideal tradition-bound housewife mirror her defiance of the established institution called marriage. "Days passed, and Virmati's confusion grew. She would sometimes wish that - but what could she wish? Early marriage, and no education?- Her soul revolted her sufferings increased."

(54).She, when writes a letter to the professor and shows her anger in a mixed tone of protest, states:

When I first heard, how I suffered, how I cried. I thought, this is the real punishment for what I have done. I had to be strong to bear the pain, silently, without anyone knowing. I did not want them to believe I was so stupid that no matter what you did, I would go on fighting with them over you (109).

Besides, Manju Kapur provides sufficient reasons for the protest of the woman. She mirrors the careless attitude of the parents who fail to cultivate human values in their daughters. On the other hand, it also relates the sad story of a woman who wishes to soar in the heaven of imagination and live a life of liberty. Thus it is not only about difficult daughter but also about difficult mothers. About mothers who do not understand their daughters, about daughters who want to break out into new paths. Virmati, at times protests against her lover and says about him, “As a man who is already married and a traitor to his wife can never give happiness. Though her agitation grows louder when she realizes the hopelessness of her illicit love with Professor and when Ganga is pregnant again, she says:

How could it be true? Man professing his love for her on one hand and making his wife pregnant on the other at this juncture decisively and brusquely, she cuts him saying: you think you can do what like so long as you go on saying you love (86).

Manju Kapur, successfully depicts the predicament of women psychology. She has also portrayed that human character is a creation of circumstances as a woman can in chorus be feeble as well as sturdy and she successfully illustrates this eternal dilemma which all human beings struggle to conquer. Virmati has been represented a sturdy woman and she successfully comes upon all the troubles in her life and accomplishes her desires, to go for higher education despite all probabilities. She has audacity and confidence to rebel against her family, the social standards and rules and she comes out successfully in her altercation with all social forces. Time and again Virmati elevates the question of their marriage but Professor usually seduces her through his lustful images and convinces her while saying, “Viru, I love you more than you love me, that much is obvious,' panted the professor. It's been almost six months – I can think of nothing else and here you torture me with your questions and answers!” (174). Virmati becomes irritated on the repeated words of professor and pours out her annoyance while culpability him, “It is you who are torturing me!' She cries almost in a fit”(174). Mythili observed that:

Virmati wants to free herself from the family bondage, commits an irrevocable mistake and has to suffer throughout her life. Knowing full well that Harish is impractical, irresponsible, unethical and insincere why should Virmati bear with all his idiosyncrasies? Because with the passage of time, she comes to know that no matter what the consequences are she has to respect the traditional values and norms. No one would marry her after what has happened. The one wise decision taken by Virmati is to marry Harish. She knows that if she rejects Harish, the decision would be self- destructive (Mythili 160-161).

The life of Virmati is burdened both with the responsibilities of upholding the culture of a Hindu Punjabi family as well as nourishing the traditions and customs in an austere and upper class manner. The title of the novel is pointer to the fact that the woman who tries to raise a voice of protest in the male-dominated society is leveled with the charge of difficult daughter and has to lead a life full of trials and tribulations. Even Ida, the narrator of the novel and the daughter of Virmati says at the very outset: "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother" (01). Ida again narrates the bold and assertive words of Virmati when she and her uncle went to the ghat to collect the cold ashes of her dead body:

She, who had not wanted to be mourned in any way. When I die, she said to me. I want my body donated. My eyes, my heart, my kidneys, any organ that can be use. That way someone will value me after I have gone....and, she went on, when I die I want no shor-shaur, I don't want a chauth, I don't want an uthala, I want no one called, no one informed (01).

The novel is a graphic capture of complex relationship among mothers and daughters and husbands and wives. It clearly justifies its title when we go through the comment of Dr. Ruby Milhoutra:

However, Virmati is not the only difficult daughter in the novel, her daughter Ida turns out to be equally 'difficult'. The novel begins with the description of death of Virmati. Her death though mourned, leads to something positive too. The narrator, Viramti's daughter can speak only because her mother is no more, only because she is now mentally unshackled (Milhoutra 166).

In the end of the novel, Ida says: "Now her shadow no longer threatens me, Without the hindrance of her presence, I can link into her past and make in mine" (280). The 'lack of love' is also a genuine cause of Virmati who in a man-dominated world fails to find any feeling of love and adoration the hearts and behavior of the near relatives and even in her husband. In fact, the love-lost Virmati struggles in pressing conditions of freedom-struggle before independence.

As Kapur's modern women, Virmati is disillusioned with the ideologies of satyagraha movement, strikes, academic freedom, the war, peace, rural upliftment, mass consciousness, high-prices, congress committee, the Muslim League, anti-imperialism and realization of her lot in love as "men do take advantage of women" (138) and her suffering is a tragic irony. She realizes her predicament when "male egocentricity blinds men to the situation of women, who may be placed in agonizing circumstances on account of their relationship with men." (Dhawan 108). Kapur's Virmati is a new woman of colonial India and stands as a metaphor to explore the possibilities for modern women in education and economic independence who experience humiliation and disillusionment in their colonial matrix. The novelist has raised the 'question of women' during a political and social movement in colonial India for which:

.....We may turn a novel "feminist" for its analysis of gender of socially constructed- for its understanding that change is possible and that narrative can play in it. Feminist fiction is the most revolutionary movement in contemporary fiction-revolutionary

both in that it is formally innovative and in that it helped to make a social revolution (Bassnett 1).

She is a staunch feminist and continues her ultra-committed political activities even after her marriage. She spearheads the women's front, collecting funds and donations, clothes and jewellery, for freedom-fighters against the British Empire. She takes Virmati to a meeting of the Women's Student Conference, and the lectures of various luminary women expose her lacuna, as Virmati finds them "talking in language she had still to learn" (144). In such a time, Virmati contemplates: "Am I free thought Virmati. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing participating in conference, politically active, while my time is spent in love" (142). Virmati's own daughter has been a convoluted daughter for her but Virmati too demonstrates to be a difficult mother as she fails to ascertain strong place for their relation. As Ida complains, "I grew up struggling to be a model daughter. Pressure, pressure to perform day and night" (259).

Thus while concluding this chapter; the researcher has observed that in the whole novel *Difficult Daughters* Virmati's craving for identity and her struggle for the same. The budding of a 'New Woman' in Virmati who does not want "to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed" (85). But though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is caught into another where her free spirit is curbed and all she does is to amend negotiation and acclimatize. She could have put her foot down saying "she will be her own mistress and relate to him with dignity or not at all. Perhaps the words were at the back of her mind, teasing her tongue with their shadowy sounds" (236) but she does not. May be her mind had gone "soft and pulpy with repeated complying" (236).

Virmati's desire for establishing self-identity is "a value charged, almost a charismatic term, with its secured achievement regarded as equivalent to personal salvation" (Wrong 52). Her quest for identity is "spiritual moorings and who is anxious to seek his roots" (Pathak 52). In love making and relationship both the families in the novel suffer and women characters search for self identity and desire to assert their rights. Virmati's struggle in the Darwinian theory for existence is only for her love with the professor and "it is not a mere physical experience. The man and the woman experience a feeling which everything, including their individualities ceases to exist" (Reagacharya 140-141). Her love and marriage with the professor has led him to intellectual and scholastic perfection. The novel evokes some concern over the problem of women in a male dominate society where laws for women are made by men in its social matrix and a husband stands as a 'sheltering tree' under which a woman proves her strength through her suffering. Kapur has defended this through her Virmati with an idea that:

The Emergence of feminist ideas and feminist politics depends on the understanding that, in all societies which divide the sexes into differing cultural, economical or political spheres, women are less valued than men. Feminism also depends on the premise that women can consciously and collectively change their social place (Greene 2).

For Prof. Harish, Virmati is an enigma, a riddle and an essential partner for his physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual scarification. While Professor's love with Ganga is secured and unsatisfactory, with Virmati it is platonic and based on intellectual understanding. The 'winds of misfortune' in both the families blow for Virmati for which she has a 'bizarre obsession of grief' and in a human predicament she searched for her self-autonomy. They are caught between culture and modernity, self-aggrandizement and self-realization and between self-assertion and confrontation. Virmati's problems and conflicts are existential and her struggle for self-assertion leads her to self-alienation. Virmati, the protagonist undergoes alternative fission- fusion as her identity is by turn and divided and enlarged by various family and national problems. She "seeks human relations that will allow her to be herself and to exercise the degree of control over her life which, as an educated woman, she knows she deserves" (Rollason 2). Chatterjee describes in her words, "Women are in bondage even during the period of transition in roles, in ideologies about the woman question. Besides, there is tremendous conflict that arises out of the positive and normative roles – what woman is within the present social framework" (Chatterjee 195).

Difficult Daughters is a literary work distinctly in the existentialistic trend and it involves a creative interaction between the writer and the social milieu. Kapur has given her feminist views as the "Indian women novelists have concentrated on women's problem in their work and have given vent to a new approach to and consciousness of emerging phenomenon" (Pathak 147). Throughout the novel, Kapur has made matrimony and sex a vital subject. The novelist represents Kasturi as typical Indian mother, a symbol of Indian motherhood and by disobeying her commandments Virmati has gone through the travails of a dantesque hell made by her society. Kapur honestly says some of the scandalous and embarrassing things in Virmati's life. Kapur like, her contemporary feminists presents the injustice done towards her woman in the name of religion, god, morality, honesty and other taboos. She has made 'marriage' as a security for women, a conjugal compromise, transforming a fugitive desire into a lasting emotion for both.

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