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A Movement towards Individualism in *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur

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Abstract:

Indian women novelists have been sketching the portrait of women in various manifestations. But recently, a tremendous change has been witnessed in the delineation of women characters by the remarkable range of India's most accomplished women writers of post colonial strand. Manju Kapur is one among this range of women writers from India, like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, Shobha De who portrayed suffering but steady image of woman, presented them as an individual who fights against suppression and oppression, eventually coming out as a challenge to hegemony. Patriarchal pressure and control subjugated women to the extent of strangling their identity. Apparently the life women lived and struggled under the oppressive mechanism of patriarchal society is reflected in the novels of Manju Kapur but Kapur has her own way of dealing with the predicaments of her women protagonists. The present paper studies individualism and self-assertion of women in the two novels of Manju Kapur- *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*. The present paper focuses over the patriarchal norms and restrictions challenged by her two women characters- Virmatti and Astha. Apart from the protagonists, a few women characters in the novels come out to be the defiant of society's unjust norms. Both Virmati and Astha are educated and aspiring beings caged within the confines of a conservative society. It is their education and career that lead them to an independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. They raise a voice against male chauvinism to claim the rights of economic independence. They wage an individual war against family and society carving an identity for them.

Keywords: Education, Marriage, Independence, Autonomy, Patriarchy.

About The Author:

Manju Kapur is the author of four novels. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) won the Commonwealth Writers Prize. *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2009) and *Custody* (2011) are her other subsequent novels. Women's emancipation is hallmark of her novels and she draws her female characters always in a fight for autonomy and freedom. So, woman's attempt to succeed in her fight brings esteem to her position in society, though at certain levels she fails, but she has made an

attempt. Manju Kapur always delineates her protagonists considering the value of education and the higher things in life. Her heroines crush and give a severe blow to the patriarchal restrictions and in this way assert their identity and achieve self-satisfaction and self-fulfillment in their lives.

Introduction:

In Indian culture where individualism and assertion of women have often remained alien ideas and woman is only destined to be confined to the four walls of the house carrying out the vows of marriage, Manju Kapur, the modern day India women novelist, expresses herself freely and boldly on women's independence without adopting feminist postures. Education, career, marriage and economic independence of women as thematic concerns, have won world wide acclaim in English literature; but receive justified representation from women novelists' perspectives.

The post Vedic period denies the right of education to women for the simple reason to curb her individuality and independence- the two promises which are held by education. Thus education has always been a tool for change in women's social position. Marriage is the other most important issue in the lives of women. Marriage is a turning point in a woman's life and affects the subsequent life of a woman in many ways. Many educated women who are married think about their career. Women's desire to seek career is also another problem in the male driven society. Kapur illustrates the woman's ambition and will of self actualization with a sharp focus on man –woman relationship.

Writing about women is not a new trend in India English fiction. The pre-independence period of Indian English writing witnessed the advent of Indian women novelists in English, who wove the theme of women related issues in their novels. Raj Lakshmi Debi, Toru Dutt, Krupabai Sathianadhan and Kali Krishna Lahiri are the prominent Indian women novelists who tried their pen before independence. But at that time women's voice was not audible since it was under the influence of male pen and moreover women was presented as a sufferer only, with no individual will of her own and totally under the control of patriarchy. Indian English fiction before 1960 witnessed the dominance of male perspective. M. K. Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao gave new direction to Indian fiction in 1930 but their writing was the voice of male. They wrote about the concerns of women but their portrayal of women was quite stereotypical. Meena Shirwadkar observes that early works of M. K. Anand and R.K. Narayan are dominated by the male point of view. They have both shown girls as subordinate creatures, as pictures of pity and suffering (47). Even before 1960, women used to write about a woman's perception and experiences within the enclosed domestic arena. Women novelists' voice was inaudible for the dominance of male culture in literature which makes the heroine an object of pity and "the treatment and fate of the heroine is

controlled by conventions that inherently impose a sexist view on the author and the reader, male and female” (Lieberman 328). The upcoming surge of reformist movements, economic independence and influence of Western feminist movements in the colonial period played significant role in bringing a change in the attitude and position of women in India, which had undergone a terrible phase of deterioration from post Vedic period to post - colonial period. Women’s entry into the writing arena after 1960 made way for the shattering of the *Sita* and *Pativrata* image, of late the only fixed role assigned to woman by early Indian English novelists. Women’s perspective made it easier to articulate many an emotional and significant aspects of women’s life, which were not acknowledged in the body of literature hitherto. B. K. Das says, “Apart from love, sex and contemporary reality Indian English novelists have written feminist novels. Women novelists assert the rights of women to live their life in their own way” (Das 57).

Difficult Daughters: In *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur’s Protagonist Virmati, an educated middle class girl represents her rebellious ideas against male-dominated society and tries to establish herself as an individual and independence woman. The novel has been written in the backdrop of independence movement but ironically for women marriage was acceptable, but not independence and education. The freedom movement of India symbolizes the desire for the freedom of women as well.

The novel is woven in the texture of three generations. Virmati does not want to be like her mother Kasturi and Ida, Virmati’s daughter, does not want to be like her mother. The novels *Difficult Daughters* begins with the assertion of Ida, “the one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother” (1). In this connection Christopher Rollason says:

“Virmati’s tale is told, from a present day perspective, by Ida, her only daughter, who seeks to reconstruct her late mother’s life story, against the backdrop of independence movement of 1940 and the subsequent trauma of partition (3).

But the struggle of Virmati cannot be overlooked in the assertion of Ida. Virmati enters into a combat with the orthodox notions that deny right to education to women. Virmati exhibits her determination to choose education than marriage. Virmati’s role model is not her mother Kasturi, but her cousin Shakuntala, who preferred to pursue career than to get married and “whose responsibilities went beyond a husband and children” (17). Virmati desired to become “something other than a wife” (19). Virmati passed her F. A with good marks and entered AS college for further studies. Although all through the novels she undergoes an inner journey of conflict - marriage and education. But she strongly asserts herself and always adopts her way to get more and more education. Once feeling helpless and unable to realize her wish to continue with her studies, she tries to drown herself in the canal. Virmati asserts her individuality and

refuses to get married. She preferred studies and then career in her life. On the other hand Virmati's affair with a married man once again confronts her before family and social taboos. Professor himself had great respect for education and it was the intellectual faculties of Virmati that he felt drawn towards her. Kasturi blames education and freedom allowed to Virmati for the disgraceful act she was going to commit by drowning herself. Virmati plainly refused to marry and insisting on study manages to go to Lahore for BT. She experiences an air of autonomy and independence once left for Lahore. Ashok Kumar says right in his essay *Portrayal of New Women: A Study of Manju Kapur's A Married Women*:

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the women's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact (194).

Virmati pursues her career as a principal of college but meanwhile her marriage with professor becomes priority for her. She relates her desire to marry professor with her independence and individuality. Eventually Virmati gets married to professor. Still Virmati is not the only assertive character in the novel; the novel is also the reflection of other difficult daughters, who did better than Virmati in the struggle of freedom in their lives. These women are Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin and Swarna Lata, her roommate in Lahore. From the very beginning Shakuntala is presented as an emancipated and liberated woman who prefers education to marriage. She is the one who never loses control over her individualism and freedom of thought and action. She says to Virmati, "These people really don't understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else" (17). Unlike Virmati she is never distracted by the idea of marriage rather she leads a liberated life with her friends and tells Virmati about her life style, "we travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings, follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars" (17). Swarna Lata shares the same life style and even carries the same spirit of independence after marriage.

What differentiates Virmati from Shakuntala and Swarna is her non participation in political activities of organizing seminars and conferences for freedom movements. The path she chooses leads to professor that never allowed her to partake in autonomy forever. The strength of Virmati's portrayal lies in the fact that whatever Virmati wants, she achieves, although the patriarchal forces deter her way to perfection. In spite of the

fact that she feels lost and suffocated after marriage, she remains stick to the chosen path, continues with her study in masters, and at last gets rid of professor's first wife. Virmati struggles but falls in the traps of love and marriage, yet she becomes a symbolic character for the future women.

A Married Woman: *A Married Woman* is a story of a good middle-class girl, Astha, growing up in late 1970s in Delhi. She is artistic, dreamy, sheltered, obedient and a powerful character as her predecessor. Her progressive father wants to educate her; her mother just wants to see her settled in a safe arranged marriage. Like other fathers of Manju Kapur's novels, Astha's father also protests her wife in getting Astha married at an early age. His priority is Astha's education and career. The peculiarity of Kapur's novels lies in the fact that mothers becomes the spokesman of patriarchal norms. Her parents did their best to give best parenting to her. Astha never wanted to get trapped in arranged marriage rather she wants to have an air of freedom. Her affair with Rohan has been pointed out but under the influence of her parents she gets married to Hemant whom she finds to be the best husband in the world. As a married woman, Astha "felt a woman of the world, the world that was covered with the films of her desire, and the fluids of her sex" (46).

For how long Astha could live with the sexual charms of married life? There are other issues that confront women after marriage. Encouraged by her husband Astha gets a job of teacher in a school and meets Aijaz there, a local political activist. In the words of Ashok Kumar and Roopali:

Manju Kapur perhaps believes that the woman needs more than bread, butter and physical comfort. And only these women can think of love and marriage according to their liking who are economically well off. Astha's diversion towards Aijaz is due to her dislike for a routine life of a married woman in Hindu society. She does not get attracted towards Aijaz because she finds any type of shortage in her life. Her individuality, longing for liberty carry her far away from her family obligations. It is here that wings of feminism flutter in the actions of Manju Kapur's heroines (48).

Astha starts feeling herself subservient when Hament doesn't pay any attention to her concerns for him. Between their first and second child, Hemant changes from being an All-American father into an all-Indian one. She pushes her frustrations aside, and focuses on her duties as mother, wife, and daughter. Job becomes refuge for Astha from all these headaches. Moreover, her job was the only thing with which she relates her independence. According to Astha, "It represents security, not perhaps of money, but of her own life, of a place where she could be herself." (149). R.J. Kalpana in her article *Motherhood* writes: "The family is at once the source of women's affirmation as well as

their subordination. They are heralded as martyrs of the struggle and as a source of regeneration and yet they are denied leadership position” (Kalpana 30).

Astha’s love and interest in art also does not receive favourable response from her husband. But she was not discouraged and devotes her free hours in drawing paintings to donate for exhibition, the job assigned to her in Sampradayaka Mukti Manch. Hemant thinks that money brought by Astha does not justify her going out of the house regardless of what she wants. Astha yearns for her independence and says:

“You were the one who thought I should work”

“But now you need not, dearest I am making enough money.”

“I want something of my own”, murmured Astha (148).

Astha proves herself and ‘hugged the vision of herself as a woman who had sold two paintings in one year’ worth thirty thousand. Astha feels ‘rich’ and ‘powerful’ as she could call this money her own although she was denied a space of her own while painting. In spite of the international fame by the sale of her paintings, Astha gets cold appreciation from her husband. Astha is now face to face with the harsh realities of marriage:

She put out of her mind an idle romance, that he would be the one to buy it, give it pride of place in house or office, and tell everyone that this was an example of his wife’s work. She knew this was impossible . . . (159).

Astha asserts her individualism with her involvement in a theatre troupe run by Aijaz, a local political activist and later with her participation in Babri Masjid issue. It is her individuality that forces her to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. Meanwhile she met Pipeelika, widow of Aijaz. Astha entered into a secret relationship with Pipeelika. She was in love with her and started to ‘fantasize about her touching’. Although Astha felt strange and guilty in loving a woman still she preferred her own happiness, the happiness, and contentment she felt in the company of Pipeelika. Kapur writes *A Married Woman* from the perspectives of a feminist; therefore it is a step forward to *Difficult Daughters*. Astha wanted to be like Pipeelika ‘free and independent’. Pipeelika, another woman character in the novel becomes the representative of rebel feminists and the lesbian relationship between Astha and Pipeelika is an example of it. She is confirmed in her relationship with Astha whereas, Astha is somewhat confused.

But Astha is not uncertain to get a recognizable position in society. To Hemant, Astha says very boldly “I am thirty- six. I need to be independent. I am always adjusting to everybody else’s needs” (227). Astha wants to know how much money her mother gave to Hemant. She wants to become independent and asserts:

“That’s not what I mean. I know she trusts you, certainly much more than she trusts me, but is it such a bad thing if I know how much is in my name and how I can have access to it?” “She meant nothing personal. She didn’t want to feel dependent, that was all. Surely equals could relate better than master and slaves?” (99)

Astha refuses to be curbed down by the restricting norms of patriarchy. Astha feels the loss of identity after marriage but succeeds in attaining self fulfillment through proving her worth in the fields of her interest. Her association with Manch and her paintings bring out her sensibilities and political consciousness. Although surrounded by the family responsibilities, yet she gets an air of independence with her intellectual involvement in political issues. Astha achieves self- contentment in her relationship with Pepeelika.

Conclusion:

Manju Kapur as a ‘chronicler of Indian families’ puts forward the realistic picture of woman in Indian families. Astha carries forward the war initiated by Virmati. Both Astha and Virmati have their own world of problems- Virmati fights for education though falls in the traps of flesh and Astha fights against the oppressive patriarchal culture and her imagination and sensibility is brought out. In his process both become a cult figure that declare a war against taboos, social and joint family restrictions and constraints laid by patriarchy in the tradition. Facing the challenges of patriarchy her protagonists break the bondages of oppression and exploitation and assume the role of a ‘new woman’ with all her individuality and assertion.

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