



PORTRAYAL OF WOMEN IN SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT: A STUDY OF MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur is a champion in analysing the problems of Indian women. Indian New Woman as an individual is protesting against the traditional role, ending the silence of anguish, trying to move out of the captive existence and affirming individual self. The representation of traditional woman in Indian English fiction is as the silent sufferer, upholder of the ritual and traditional values of family and society. The New Women have experienced remarkable changes in psycho-socio spheres and no longer bestowed as the passive characters. These women are trying to be their self and yet do not wish to break up the family promises. The present paper deals the issues of women that depicted in Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*.



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INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur while writing her novel introduces women who attempt to create their own identity and destiny. The fight for autonomy remains an unfinished combat. Her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* is set at the time of partition, the time when country was in unrest and eager to achieve independence. Kapur has given words to women's aspirations, achievements and limitations through depicting five different types of women of this era. All these women show us individual as well as types of this transitional period. Kapur is known for depicting women characters in a unique way. She presents her characters in the backdrop of a culture which suits the situation and surrounding. That's how

her characters become lifelike and vital. Kapur has taken deep vision into woman's inner chaos to discover a place, an identity and individuality of her own in society by projecting character journey as theme.

Manju Kapur's novels obtain a substantial new connotation when read out in the theme of understanding the interweave doctrines of socio-cultural critical thinking. Her novels provide illustrations of an entire series of attitudes towards the presentation of traditional women. Conversely, Kapur appears conscious of the fact that the women of India have undeniably gotten their success in sixty eight years of Freedom, but if there is to be a true female liberation, too many miles have to be taken.



The conflict for autonomy and independent identity is still an unfinished battle.

Women beneath the patriarchal demands and power are subjected to social isolation. The life of women survived and resisted below the tyrannical mechanism of a closed society is replicated in the novels of Kapur. Taking into account the complexity of human life, cultures and different structures of values, the women's question, despite basic solidarity, needs to be confronted in relation to the socio-cultural context. The influence of patriarchy on the Indian Culture differs from the West. Kapur has her own concerns, primacies as well as their own ways of dealing with the dilemma of their women protagonists. Her female characters are generally educated, ambitious individual confined within the limitations of a traditional society. Their education advances them to independent views, which are not happily accepted by the conservative male-dominated society. They tussle between tradition and modernity. It is struggle of individuality with family and society through which they lurch into a dedicated attempt to shape an identity for themselves as capable women with flawless backgrounds. The novelist has depicted her protagonist as a woman caught in the dispute between the passions of the flesh and a longing to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day.

DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS: IN A BIRD'S EYE VIEW

In *Difficult Daughters*, the protagonist Virmati, an educated middle class, restless girl expands her rebellious ideas against the male-dominated society and attempts to gain her identity. She experiences a journey of her inner self. It is the story of complex relationship between mother and daughters. Next generation women have problem with her older generation women. The novel's starting lines shows the complex relation between mother and daughter. Ida is talking about her mother Virmati and says 'The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother' (1). Generally a girl wants to resemble her mother but here things have changed the daughter does not want to be like her mother. There is a love- hate relationship between mother and daughter.

A mutual understanding does not found between Virmati and Ida. It shows when Virmati says what to do after her death and Ida responses by saying... 'Why bother having funeral at all'(1). And Virmati says ... 'Why you do deliberately misunderstood me?'(1). This conversation is enough to show how much misunderstanding lives between mother and daughter. A mother is talking about her death and her daughter not shows any affection or love or sympathy towards her. Lacks of emotion are visualized in the character of Ida by this conversation. Ida never gets delight of joyful moments with her mother. When she looks at the photograph of her mother's youthful age, she thinks that "I could not remember a time it had been right between us' (2). This rudeness towards her mother and society is the result of her being a childless, divorced woman. The emptiness and solitariness which she feels in herself, stops her from communicating at the emotional level with others even with her own mother. Ida misunderstood her mother by accusing her for a guilt which she did by marrying a married professor. This mistrust towards her mother forces her to go to the birth place of her and her mother. She wants to reveal the character of her mother by going to her birthplace and by asking with relatives and companions of her mother, which she fails to reveal by living with her in Delhi. It is a very strange thing mother and daughter live together but daughter wants to understand her mother character by others' opinions towards her. It shows the lack of understanding and complexities of human relationship between them. Misunderstanding between them is on this level that Ida doesn't believe on other as she says... 'My relatives gave me one view of my mother, I wanted another one.'(5)

Virmati, as Ida describes her by watching the youth photograph: "the girl is about fifteen, and stands stiffly before the camera. Her hair straggles untidily, her sari hang limp and careless on her. I peer at the face and see beauty and a wistful melancholy. Should my memory persist in touching her, the bloom will vanish into the mother I knew, silent, brisk, and bad tempered (2).

Kapur presents the psychic distress of women through the rebellious character of Virmati



when she appallingly declares, "we have to accept this is our lot in life". In the first phase, the women's demand developed basically in the framework of the identity crisis of the new cultivated middle class. Kapur's female characters are mostly cultivated, ambitious individual captive within the restrictions of a traditional society. Their education leads them to self-governing idea. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they pitched into an enthusiastic determination to shape an identity. The novel not only refers to the difficult daughter Virmati but also refers to the numerous other difficult daughters who left the boundaries of their home and involved themselves in the national struggle for freedom.

Difficult Daughters is set at the time of partition in Amritsar and Lahore with a very strong and influential portrayal of a society. In which hollow honour is more important than personal misery; the novel covers three generations of women and reveals their sense of disillusionment. The three generation of women Kasturi, Virmati and Ida symbolizes the three stages of Indian independence. Kasturi, the mother represents the era of pre-independence and is shown as an object to follow all the traditional values and norms in the aggressive control of patriarchal society. At the starting of the novel, Kasturi is being depicted as an archetype of motherhood who born to feels pain and suffering. "Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not tired, when her feet and legs did not ache" (7). Through these three female protagonists of three generation, Kapur has exposed the whole life of a woman who is made for others' happiness from beginning of her life. As a child, a girl has to do domestic works, as Virmati does, after marriage, serve the husband without questioning anything as Ganga does. She has to bear pain to give birth to child as Kasturi's who is breeding like cats and dogs given birth to 11 children and after being mother, her whole life is dedicated to her family. Then when does a woman get time to live her life for herself? A very striking comment brings attention: "How trapped could nature make a woman? (7)"

Virmati, the daughter, resembles the country's fight for freedom on individual level.

Psychologically, she reveals her rebellious nature against age old biased norms and rituals of our culture especially against a girl. She takes the road which should not be taken which leading her to one's own individuality but not to others, it leaves her in the middle with nosuccess. But her image is of a woman unfettered.

Virmati, being the eldest daughter she is burdened with family duties because of her mother's never-ending pregnancies. "Ever since Virmati could remember she had been looking after children. It wasn't only baby Parvati to whom she was indispensable; to her younger siblings she was second mother as well" (6)...Virmati was never remained free. At times Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special. But —. . . 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?' . . . 'I am just going', protest Virmati finally. 'Why can't Indumati also take responsibility? Why does it always have to be me?' 'You know they don't listen to her', snapped Kasturi. 'You are the eldest. If you don't see to things, who will?' (6-7). Looking back she has nowarm memories of her past. "At times Virmati yearned for affection for some sign that she was special (6). Virmati grown up into that age in which girl education was not given much importance. She was taught by her mother there is lots of other things more necessary than mere education. Marriage, setting up a new home, bearing and rearing children, striving for domestic bliss and marital contentment are the many things that a woman should strive for which resembles the traditional set up for Indian women made by male dominated society. Kasturi starts concerning about Virmati when she was just 13 year old. Very often she felt like revolting and breaking the age old traditional barriers and doing something different. Virmati's marriage was fixed. No amount of persuasion could make her mother see reason. She irritably shouts: "At your age was already expecting you, not fighting with my mother". (19)

An endless victim of bad circumstances Virmati cherishes an aspiration of being as self-regulating, self-confident and bold as her cousin



Shakuntala, who is independent. She holds inner strength and prefers to stay at hostel alone. She is also daughter of same family, Arya Samaji. She has all the valour of a modern woman. She is an educated girl who can shape herself as she wish, in the context of personal as well as social. For Virmati, she is model. In Shakuntala, she sees the images of 'Modern Woman', conscious, thoughtful, educated liberated, driven by the enthusiasm to proclaim their independence and separate identity and find a place for herself in society. She represents modernity, as not following the conventional norms which limits daughter to an early marriage and then home and family. She encourages her for independence and for equal rights for women, thus characterizing the 'New Woman'. New woman breakdowns the customs of the tradition bound society. Since the formation of the society, women don't given importance in politics, economic liberation and not even social justice. In this background, Simone De Beauvoir remarks: "The situation of woman is that she - a free and autonomous being likes creatures - nevertheless finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assure the status of the other (Beauvoir 167). Shakuntala and Virmati come out of this conceptual agenda of being typical Indian woman. Shakuntala is an active member of the political Gandhian movement whereas Kasturi's ideology is narrowed to patriarchy and she thinks 'marriage' as the duty of every girl rather than educations. She remarks - "Hai re, beti! What is need to so a job? A woman's shaan is in her home. Now you have studied and worked enough Shaadi. After you get married, Viru can follow.' (16) For Kasturi, Education means developing the awareness for the profit of the family and nothing more than that. But Shakuntala, like new woman, shares her view with Virmati: "These people don't really understand Viru . . . women are still supposed to marry and nothing else" (17). Shakuntala's ideas are totally opposite of the nature of Lajwanti and Kasturi, They belongs to the conventional school of thought that only a man is permitted to do a job, to go outside and to do his chosen duty whereas a girl has to take every step according to the norms of society. She does not have her own life. In one of the passage Kasturi says: "All

the time in lab, doing experiments, helping the girls, studying or going to conferences, I tell her she should have been a man (16).'

Virmati is a character which represents her own age but at the same time shows qualities of new woman through her thought and action. Her thought process does not match with her time, her unorthodox thinking puts her into a new category of woman who thinks for self not for family, as of that time women and girls did. Her way of looking world takes her ahead from her time and age. She is rebellion in nature. She wants to control the things as she wish but it was not possible at that time and not even present time, incident happen as time passes and we all has to live our life as it's occurs. She wishes to live her life as an individual but she belonged to a colonized British India where country was not free than how can a woman be. In forming the character of Virmati family plays an important role. For the sake of family's name, Virmati is forced to sacrifice her study, her freedom which makes her rebellious because form inside she is not that type of girl who don't dare to utter a single word against the family will. She is girl who can sense of her existence, feel it and overall a self -belief to achieve what she desires she does not want to give her study its shows that she has sense of what is right for her and what is wrong which her mother, Kasturi fails to understand. She is taught to be an ideal daughter. Family is central unit of society, generally understood as executing the larger patriarchal power structure on its member, especially on women. If we look at marriages as an institution, in socio-political and economic position, it makes woman an object of trade and subverts the right of woman to name children after the man. A whole gender lost its identity and became vulnerable to exploitation. Virmati rejects both institutions. She rebels against conventional concepts of relating the honour of family with daughter's deeds.

Virmati came to this conclusion that there is no identity of her in this arena-"this lager spaces were not for her" (144) and she holds no identity in her family where she feels like outsider. While Swarnalata arises as a confident character: "I was very clear that I wanted to do something, besides



getting married. I told my parents that if they would support me for two more years I would be grateful. Otherwise I would be forced to offer Satyagraha along with other . . . but they agreed because they knew. I meant what I meant" (107-108). In Lahore, Virmati, very innocently, influences at Harish's words. She spirits to meet him but she retorts unpleasantly on Harish's vacillating behaviour. She frankly rebukes him when he shows his vulnerability into marrying her: I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family's name, am locked up inside my house, and get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering 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 . . . I can bear anything but this continuous irresolution. Swarna is right. Men do take advantage of Women! (149). It reveals a new look of Virmati who can fight against all odds, even with her love who seems to ditch her. Virmati dreadfully wanted an escape from her worthless life and thought that chase of higher education might empower her to do so. She desired an independent life like that of Shakuntala. Despite her anguish to forget the professor she vulnerably unsuccessful and became more trapped with him. Being away from her home, and moral control applied by her mother, she submitted to his passionate demands. Compelled by the hands of her illicit love, Virmati gets pregnant and due to this alarmed discovery in her belly, she does not perform well in her exams. Manju Kapur has equalized her condition to that of 'Fool' character of Shakespeare's plays:

Now, each of Harish's words echoed in her mind with an irony he had taught her to recognize in Shakespeare's texts, Tragic irony, comic irony, how he had loved to expand on them. Which species was this? It lacked the epic proportions of tragedy, and the love-courtship-marriage theme of comedy. In either case, she was the fool, that much at least was certain. (154)

Even though Virmati achieves that she wishes unconsciously, in violation of all man-made boundaries, there are some primacies even intensely rooted within her that she fights to shake through the shackles. She sprouts up from an innocent girl to a woman qualified by misery and through experience. During her life span, she journeys through the realms of numerous experiences. In accumulation to higher education and a much gossiped about illicit love affair, Virmati recognizes that there are other things also to be done. She is in the quest for true love, freedom and for the realization of the self --- the quest does not stop. Later on Virmati considers: Was life really worth the quest? Did she really succeed what she targeted at? Virmati comprehends that life is really not worth all struggle. Things are not always as they appear or seem. Throughout Virmati contests to acquire what she desires. She lives life on her own stipulations and conditions; but in the process loses a significant part of herself and realises the insignificance of things. P. Shuda Shree rightly says: "She is an example of feminine suffering. This suffering is also largely due to the individual awareness in a conservative community, becoming an outcast in a family, as if in exile, due to a woman's rejection of the mythical model of an ideal daughter." (Shree 175)

CONCLUSION

In her fiction Kapur treats the gendered body as both empowered and disempowered, subject and object, a source of rejection and celebration in socio-political culture. In brief the body is treated as the center of existence, consciousness and identity. Yet, the body is constantly called into doubt in the writer's novels, which depict protagonists trapped between asserting their identity and submitting to cultural dictates of society. Her novels can be read as a record of woman's struggle for control of her body, both in social and biological sense.

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