



MAJOR MOTIFS IN THE NOVELS *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS* AND *A MARRIED WOMAN* OF MANJU KAPUR

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ABSTRACT



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Indian writing in English has its own uniqueness. This new writing has enhanced the standards to reflect the changing objective of literature. Apart from the male writers of Indian English Literature, there were a number of women novelists who contributed to the literary field. Many women writers have made their voice heard through their writings in the literary world. They used literature as a weapon to express their thoughts, provoking ideas relating to the external and the inner conflict of their minds. Women writers are recognized for their creativity, versatility and the indigenous flavor of the soil that they bring to their work. Their writings are great works of literature in which they have portrayed the reality of women in the family and the society. A major pre-occupation in recent Indian women's writings has been a representation of inner life and sensitive relationships. In their writings, exploring identity and protest are alien ideas; whereas marital bliss and the role of women at home are given the central focus. It is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural diversion in women's writing. Many women writers like Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, Kiran Desai, Anita Nair and others have strived to assert their identity through their works by revolting against the traditional norms. They have left an indelible imprint on the readers of Indian English literature.

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Manju Kapur is one of the most acclaimed women writers of the contemporary era in India. Most of her female protagonists, not only try to maintain a balance in life, but also break the shackles of tradition and inequality. The factor behind their strength is their extroverted nature which assists them to revolt against the struggles that they encounter. Being a woman writer, she has focused on some of the common issues which are relevant to the life of women, especially Indian women. Various shades of relationship are projected and evaluated in her writings. Some of the most dominant motifs found in her fiction include marriage, family relationships, mother-daughter relationship, husband-wife relationship, separation and extramarital relationship.

The objective of this paper is to study the major motifs in the novels "Difficult Daughters" and "A Married Woman" of Manju Kapur. In her writings, Kapur explores the lives women live and struggle under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society. In her novels, Manju Kapur depicts the intellectual starvation, economic expression, domestic domination, physical abuse, and the lack of personal freedom of women.

In "Difficult Daughters", the protagonist is trying to find a place for herself in a world where her life is confined to familiar duties and becomes involved in a forbidden affair while the seismic disorder of the partition surrounds her. In "A Married Woman", the struggle to gain control of the disputed Ayodhya temple – a struggle which even persists today, years after 1992 destruction of Babri mosque – parallels Astha's emotional turmoil. This novel is a narrative of a woman in an incompatible marriage who is distressed with life and also the contemporary political turmoil in its historical context.

Manju Kapur is born in Amritsar and studied in Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, for her post-graduation in English. She wrote her first novel "Difficult Daughters" (1998) when she was a teacher of English literature at Miranda House College, Delhi University. It is a story of a young woman caught between sentimental attachment for family and her longing for education and affection. It is a skillful and fascinating novel which explores the family

relationships over three generations i.e. Kasturi, Virmati and Ida from upper middle-class urban Arya Samaj Punjabi family in Amritsar.

Kapur portrays the Indian women in joint families under patriarchal control through her own autobiographical experiences. Her protagonist, Virmati in search of identity, depicts the inner conflict of tradition and modernity. Virmati desires to be independent and considers education a tool to achieve her identity. Education enables women to realize the nature of subjugation, marginalization and suppression and helps find effective ways to acquire individuality. Virmati influenced by her cousin Shakuntala, desires to be independent, defiant, and assertive like her. She symbolizes modernity and doesn't limit herself to an early marriage and then home and family. Shakuntala encourages Virmati for freedom and for equal rights for women, symbolizing the 'New Woman'. Both Shakuntala and Virmati come out of this ideological framework of being typical Indian traditional woman. Whereas Kasturi's ideology is confined to patriarchy and she thinks 'marriage' as the duty of every girl rather than studies. She reflects –

"Hai re, beti! What is the need to do 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." (DD.16.)

For Kasturi, Education means developing the mind for the benefit of the family and nothing more than that. But Shakuntala symbolizing the new woman, shares her view with Virmati:

"These people don't really understand Viru . . . women are still supposed to marry and nothing else" (DD.17.)

But Virmati is under family responsibility that she eventually fails her FA (Fine Arts). Kasturi tells her that it is over now. Virmati revolted and was disappointed at her failure, on this Kasturi remarks:

"Leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first" (DD.21.)

Thus, during her search to find an individual space, Virmati had to face many obstacles. The life of Virmati shows that mere education and economic



independence are not enough to break the patriarchal norms. What is necessary is the determination and strong will power to assert one's self-identity.

Shakuntala, SwarnaLata and Ida are represented as 'modern women' conscious, introspective, educated, emancipated, struggling for autonomy and separate identity whereas Kasturi, Ganga and Lajwanti are traditional women following patriarchal norms. Virmati's daughter Ida, is also strong and clearheaded, who breaks her marriage bond and frees herself from patriarchal domination. She has that strength which Virmati is bereft of. Ida declares that she doesn't want to be like her mother and wants to assert her freedom and separate identity. She wants liberty and doesn't want to compromise, adapt and adjust like her mother. The relationship between the mother and the daughter with marriage as the ultimate goal is focused.

Kasturi, the mother of Virmati complies with social norms and patriarchal society and also compels her daughter, Virmati to accept the traditional norms. Kasturi considers marriage a significant responsibility, "*It is the duty of every girl to get married*".(DD.15.)

But Virmati doesn't care for the traditional norms and rejects her mother's view. Virmati has grown up seeing her mother's restricted world and miserable plight which make her protest against the system that does not allow a woman to be capable of being something else than a wife only. Virmati has been taught and made to believe marriage is the ultimate fate of women. Kapur focuses on the fact that although Virmati is educated and financially independent, she still suffers by being the second wife to the professor. Virmati enters into a scandalous relationship with her married neighbor Harish, the professor. It is impossible for her to accept a physical relationship. She is haunted by a deep sense of guilt. The official marriage, a social and public acknowledgment, is a must for her. This approval will establish her identity even if it is as the professor's second wife. Marriage thus for her means deliverance from the fear of being socially condemned, a possibility which will perhaps bring her back into the fold and relieve her from the sense of

insecurity and uncertainty. Marriage seemed to be the ultimate goal of existence for Virmati. Even though Harish married her and takes her to his home, their relationship was neither accepted by her family nor his family. After all years of care, concern, sacrifice, and responsibility, all her ties with her family have broken. Whenever she visits her first home to see her family, she is beaten by her mother. Even the step-wife does not allow her into the kitchen or talk to the family members in the professor's house. Virmati was astonished to think how Harish was accepted everywhere though he had been wicked to his first wife. The writer through Virmati brings out the motif of the husband - wife relationship and extra - marital relationship. Kapur presents how Virmati is caught between family duty and love for education as well as for her illegitimate love with a married man. Virmati urges the inner need to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. The lives women live and the struggle under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society are reflected here very beautifully. The protagonist nurtures the desire of being independent and leading life on her own. Though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is caught into another, where her free spirit is curbed and all she finally does is "adjust, compromise and adapt." She is marginalized and alienated by her own family in this struggle of identity.

In her novel, "A Married Woman" Manju Kapur from the point of a woman's experience, protests against patriarchal norms. This novel is the protagonist's confession of her emotions in a bad marital life. It's a beautiful story of deep love, set up against political and religious turmoil.

Astha entered prime of her youth in her college days. She got emotionally and physically engaged to Rohan. For her, he was the physical realization of her dreams. But for Rohan, Astha was just a pleasure seeking commodity and this relationship ended as soon as Rohan moved to Oxford for further studies. It is noticed that for Manju Kapur, marrying off her female characters is of utmost importance. As Astha's mother is primarily focused on pivotal parental obligation of getting her married. She tells Astha -



When you are married our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth.(MW.01)

Like any other woman of her age Sita, Astha's mother, believed in the old, traditional norms. She regularly prayed to God to marry off Astha to a good husband. But Astha's father believed in the –the new. He felt that his daughter's future lay in her own hands, and these hands were to be strengthened by the number of books that would pass through. He always kept himself updated about Astha's studies. He never wanted his daughter to be disappointed in future. He always encouraged her about her potentials, her flair for painting and her way with the words; he insisted that with a bit of practice in Mathematics, her weak point, she could sit for the competitive exams. Her father feels that with a good job comes independence. But this is just paving way for finding a good match for his daughter. He too never thinks beyond the boundary of marriage. He consoled his wife in private that if Astha did well in her exams, she could perhaps sit for the IAS and find a good husband there. Thus, the final destination fixed for their daughter is - marriage, only their aspects differed.

In all her novels, Manju Kapur highlights on how women in the Indian society are deprived of proper education in the name of tradition. Lack of education makes them dependable and vulnerable in the world. Through her novels, Kapur raises the important issues of women and portrays the harsh reality of Indian women. She also promotes the plausible reality that education brings dignity, honor and power. Hence progress and development of a society depend on the liberty given to both the sexes. In her search for a groom, Astha's family selects Hemant, who belongs to a well-to-do bureaucrat family. The marital bliss for Astha ends soon and she starts feeling entrapped and disinterested.

In "A Married Woman" Astha, the protagonist becomes an enduring wife and a sacrificing mother. Her husband compels her to play the role of "mother and father" for her children. She gives birth to a daughter and a son but disapproves

any discrimination made by her in-laws regarding children on the basis of gender. Disappointment has led her to contempt and unrest in her marital relationship which developed the feelings of guilt, negativity and lack of self-esteem in facing the challenges of her life. Astha feels entrapped in the family and oppressed and urges for freedom. She feels suffocated with the growing needs of her family and "always adjusting to everybody's needs". (MW 227) After few months of their marriage, Astha's life becomes dull and dry. Hemant ruins her dreams as well as all happiness of her life. She demands him to give some time to their relationship, but he replies that he has no time for such games. He isn't capable to satisfy her. Astha understands a married woman's place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death in her Indian status. She feels for herself that "A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth", (MW. 231) are the necessary prerequisites of a married woman. She reflects on marriage as a terrible decision as it vents out anger, pain and uncertainty in her life. Being torn between her duty and responsibility, faith and fact, public ethos and personal ethics, she thinks "a tired woman cannot make good wives", (MW.154.) and struggles for an emotional freedom to assert her identity.

The married woman Astha questions the established norms in search of her identity. Astha who has been brought up in a conservative and a protective environment ends up in the most turbulent times in her struggle to prove herself. Astha's assertion of individuality is mostly depicted through choice of her partners. In her teenage years itself she has tasted the sense of freedom by being with Rohan. Being in a relationship that too physically intimate in nature, is an outward act of disregard of social traditions.

She tries to voice out her feelings through poems, but that were coldly disregarded by Hemant. Her poetry reflected the external and the inner conflict of her feelings which Hemant refused to acknowledge. Her paintings gave her the vent to be herself and form separate identity from her husband and family.



Astha's husband, Hemant and her in-laws disapproved of her involvement in social processions and told her that a woman's place is within the confinement of the house not on the roads and politics in not a field where woman should participate. "Her mother-in-law looked at her. 'It is not a woman's place to think of these things', she said firmly." (MW.186.) Their resentment made Astha more determined to strive for identity. Although Astha had been a mother of a son and a daughter, she was fascinated by the multifaceted personality of Aijaz, the founder of 'The street theatre group'. But soon her fascination comes to an end with the end of the workshop and Aijaz's assassination which deeply moves her. Kapur presents the relationship of man – woman through the protagonist.

The life of Astha as represented by Manju Kapur reveals her torrential quest for equality. She feels shattered as she was not consulted before taking any major or minor decisions. For instance, the books had been donated to the library without her consent only because Hemant didn't like them. She argues with Hemant and shouts at her mother, which shows her distress. "Why did you do that, they were mine as well, I loved them" (MW.87.)

One more instance is when Astha's mother sells the plot and gives the balance amount to Hemant to manage. Her statement testifies it when she says, "Really Ma, don't you think women can be responsible for their own investments?" (MW.97.)

In regard to equality, Astha sadly finds fault with her father also who thought his wife, i.e. her mother, inferior in managing money matters. She finds fault in her mother – in-law also who brought up her son, "for bringing Hemant to never regard women as beings to be consulted in their own lives" (MW 98). Astha is hurt again and again by the male dominated society. Even Astha's mother didn't give money to her, rather trusted Hemant with it; this attitude echoes the age old notion that women are not to be involved in money matters. "Your mother gave me money to manage, I didn't ask for it", said Hemant coldly. "She trusts me even if you don't" – making a sarcastic remark on Astha. The reality of the Indian women who bear the atrocities caused by their husbands is depicted here.

In spite of being economically independent, Astha is not able to do things for herself. The trip to Goa that family takes was sponsored by Astha's money and it is Hemant's decision to waste that money on air tickets. But on the same trip when Astha asks for a certain box she is denied and when Astha retaliates by saying, that, "I also earn; can't I buy a box if I want, even if it is a little overpriced?" You earn', Hemant snorted.' What you earn that is really something, yes, that will pay for this holiday' (MW.165). This satirical tone of Hemant reflects his perspective towards Astha's economic independence. He sees it in a sarcastic manner and this view of Hemant changes drastically when Astha's paintings are sold for lakhs. This shows how money changes the attitude of people around you. The amount of money you earn decides your position in the family and in the society. Astha claims for a separate space to paint, and this very act of hers defines her identity. Having space of one's own is definitely the biggest assertion in the spatial sense. Hemant even comments the space that she possesses would be the source of envy for many women. Man wants a woman as a wife, mother but when she becomes independent and respected, the scenario of the house changes. Whenever Astha is a house wife, things are intact but when she is recognized as a social reformer and a painter, her husband starts to dominate. Manju Kapur focuses on the aspect of Astha's suffocation and suffering in being an independent woman.

Kapur presents complexities between traditional way of living and modernity. Her female protagonists are from middle – class educated families from metropolitan cities. They are hard workers, creative, enthusiastic and actively participate in political and social movements but they don't disregard the values of Indian middle – class families. Though Astha gets married according to traditional rituals, she is distressed and disappointed in her married life. But she never opts for a divorce. She struggles against the restraints of the traditional society and emerges as a 'New Woman'.

Kapur also focuses on the Hindu-Muslim conflict around the Ayodhya/Babri Masjid issue. This novel has depicted the love affair between two



women, but less attention has been paid to the historical and political context in which that relationship develops. Manju Kapur depicts the lesbian relationship between Astha and Pipeelika (widow) which ends with women's sexuality within the framework i.e. relationship within marriage and with opposite sex.

Astha happens to meet Pipeelika, Aijaz's widow in the religious harmony and social integration processions. She feels empathetic towards Pipeelika; her free and assertive nature attracts Astha towards her. In Pipeelika, she finds her true companion and an intimate emotional and physical relationship sprouts between them. But her relationship fails to see full bloom as Pipeelika leaves India for studying abroad.

Astha's slow discovery of her differences with her husband, her change from tender and hopeful bride to shattered wife and her meeting with Pipeelika makes her realize the other state of woman in their 'familiar distress' (MW.188).

Manju Kapur emphasized on women transformation through three generations in "Difficult Daughters"; Kasturi as surrendered and victimized by patriarchal forces, Virmati as a rebel against social conventions and Ida as an independent divorced widow whereas women in "A Married Woman" are struggling for autonomy and empowerment in a patriarchal family setup. In both the novels, patriarchal agents in the form of family members affect the upbringing of the central women characters, and shape their attitudes towards their religious and national identities.

Both the novels had women who were identity achievers and had set an example for Virmati and Astha who were in state of identity diffusion. In case of Virmati, it was Swarnlata and Shakuntla who showed her path of independent identity. In a similar manner Astha, looked up to Pipeelika, a woman who was liberated and had carved a place for herself well within the patriarchal construct of the society. A woman who lived alone, asserted her choice by marrying a Muslim against the choice of her family and the society. Even after her husband's death Pipeelika carried on with her mission without any apprehensions. She was a woman who never needed

a man to tell her what she wants to do. This was Pipeelika's assertion of Independence which attracted Astha towards her Identity at a glance.

Manju Kapur's novels present the changing image of women; moving away from the traditional representation of enduring woman, assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands and in this way providing a medium of self-expression.

"One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society; it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature"(Beauvoir, Simon, 1949, *The Second Sex*)

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