

A STUDY OF MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS
FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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ABSTRACT

Since it is patriarchal by nature, the Indian society has been ruthless in subjecting women to several social, physical and psychological harassments. The women have been treated as pleasure giving objects. Though they are expected to fulfill roles like a mother, wife, daughter and so on, they are forbidden from maintaining an identity of their own. From this traditional archetypal background, there has been a slow shift in the Indian women sensibility due to the influence of the revolutionary process taking place in the western countries against the social taboos and practices.

Due to their extra-ordinary perception regarding men and matters, the women writers in India have brought newer dimensions . Their works form a major constituent of contemporary writing in English. Their novels talk about the place and position of women in Indian society and the challenges and plights from time to time. The modern Indian women are vociferous in their demand. The protagonists depicted in the latest English novels are all educated intellectuals. They venture to seek self realization by analyzing their lives. The novelists of the present era take conscious efforts to cultivate a female selfhood which claims immunity from guilt and social stigma. This paper attempts

to study Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* novel from feminist perspective through the protagonist *Virmati* and the female characters she comes across in the novel.

K.W: Tradition, Convention, Social Codes, Rebellious Attitude, Existential Trend and
Feminist Views.

DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS- FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

Manju Kapur is a well known post-colonial writer who is good at writing novels with a traditional narrative mode. In both syntactic norms and nuances, the novel *Difficult Daughters* comes out with autobiographical data and dimensions. . The writer herself has been forthright in her comment that a quarrel between daughters and a mother is something unavoidable. The novel *Difficult Daughters* is a story based on the partition era and one *Virmati* who enters into an unholy relationship with a married man named Professor *Harish Chandra*. The novel offers a true picture of freedom, communal riots and the pre-partition era. The story partly reflects the autobiographical elements of Kapur's own mother *Virmati*. She is reintroduced in the novel in a phased manner before she disappears from readers' memory . The novel gives a good account of Indian women's aspirations, her rebellion against the tradition bound society, self doubt , resolution and acceptance.

The success of the author Manju Kapur could effectively be felt in her presentation of the three generations of women in a Punjabi family. The novel contains a beautiful character named *Ida* , the daughter of *Virmati* and she is the narrator of the novel. In the early part of the novel, she comments:

“ 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-cyed,
leaden, half dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept. (DD 01)

The chief protagonist, *Virmati* goes against the traditional conventions and settles for married life with a married man. Education was forbidden to women in those days. *Virmati* was clever enough

to obtain permission from her parents to continue her studies and later on she refused getting married to a gentleman fixed by her parents. During her education, she fell in love with a married man named Professor *Harish* “ to give legitimacy to her love , she strived for her marriage with him in spite of family opposition and became “the black sheep of the family” (DD 104). To show the importance of *Virmati* character, Manju Kapur had created another character named *Kasturi* : “ a mother of eleven siblings, who produce children like.... any dog or cat in season at the expense of her own health. (DD 24). *Kasturi* feels always tiresome with aching legs and hands.

Virmati happened to be the eldest of the eleven children and she literally took care of the other children. She kept herself busy by attending to her household chores. Both her sisters and brothers used to demand one thing or the other from her .One will demand sugar and the other will seek tablets. One sister will be crying whereas another will be making a complaint about her lost book. One of her siblings might have not home work and there might be a complaint from the school in this context. Because of all these tensions, *Virmati* fails in her F.A. exams.

She makes sincere efforts to protect herself from her aunty who has been living next door and making disparaging comments. She used to be kind and considerate towards her brothers and sisters. At some time *Virmati* used to long for her mother’s affection , yet she was never able to enjoy it and so she sought solace and comfort in the school books. Due to the back breaking work schedule she had, she is mostly found to be weary and run down. As she is torn apart between her responsibilities and her love for studies, she became a brisk and bad tempered girl. She went along with her mother to Dalhousie house to ensure her mother’s delivery. There also she became agitated knowing that her mother does not need her. Without being aware of *Virmati*’s mental state, *Kasturi* was wondering , “ why was her daughter so restless all the time? that spelt disaster. “ (DD 12). Seeds of aspirations were planted in the minds of *Shakuntala* during her visit to Dalhousie’s house. *Shakuntala* never relished the idea of getting married to a man and this very idea is stoutly opposed by her mother. It was *Lajwanri* trying to pacify things at home by saying that “ with all this reading-writing , girls are getting married late.”(DD 18). *Shakuntala* decks herself with any dress she likes and has become a confident, glamorous and independent person in Lahore. *Virmati* has only admirations for her as she appears to be , “one whose responsibilities went beyond a husband and children.” (DD 14).

She was cognizant of the idea that it was possible to be an individual than being a wife. Through her fierce determination, it is possible to understand her assertive nature and the readers are made to believe that she will be successful in making her presence felt.

At this juncture, Professor *Harish* returned from England and started living next door to *Virmati*. As his wife *Ganga* is no match to him intellectually and emotionally, he starts flirting with *Virmati* and very soon it turns into a romantic affair. In the mean time, *Virmati* had passed her B.A. exams and wished to pursue her studies. On the contrary, her parents nurtured a different opinion about her studies. They felt, :

“ she was already well qualified to be the wife of their son, the canal engineer. They did not want too much education in their daughter-in-law, even though times were changing .(DD 45).

An opportunity came in the form of canal engineer's death and it postponed the marriage and enabled *Virmati* to seek admission in A.S. college. Both Professor and *Virmati* met each other only in the class room. They fell in love with each other when they went together to test *Virmati's* eye sight. The doctor recommended glasses for *Virmati*.

“ yes, she needed glasses. Not strong ones, just a mild prescription. with them, she looked more studious, less flower like and appealing . But by then, the Professor's desire to possess had extended to her heart and mind .” (DD 47).

Virmati was lead astray by Professor *Harish*, by getting her sensitized to the canons of western literature and making her nurture false ideas about woman's emancipation. After completing her undergraduate course, she quarreled with her mother for not entering into married life at that time. Kasturi pondered in her mind,

“ What had come over the girl ? She has always been so good and sensible . How could she not see that her happiness lay in marrying

a decent boy, who had waited patiently all these years, to whom the family had given their word?

What kind of learning was this that deprived her of her reason? She too knew the value of education, it had got her husband, and had filled her hours with the pleasure of reading . In her times, going to school had been a privilege , not to be abused by going against one's parent. How had girls changed so much in just a generation? (DD 60).

After her personal meeting with the Professor, she understood that

“ It was clear to her that she could not depend upon the Professor to sort out any domestic situation. It was up to her. At home, everybody assumed that her listlessness had to do with bridal nerves, and treated her with a tact rare in her family. Even Paro and Vidya , wild with excitement , were subdued before their sister's absent-mindedness. (DD 68).

Unable to overcome her grief, she tries to commit suicide by drowning into a canal at Tarsikka, but she failed miserably in her attempt as she was rescued by her aunt. After regaining her consciousness, she told the family members that she wanted to study further and is not interested in the marriage with *Inderjit*, her prospective groom fixed by her family members. The family members turn hostile and put her in a locked room. Instead of *Virmati* marrying *Inderjit*, the family members arranged *Indu* to marry him to preserve the family integrity” (DD 90). Her mother *Kasturi* squarely blamed her by saying that “ she had given... ‘ a set back to the Arya Samaj's effort to educate girls”. (DD 93). As per *Virmati*'s parents, professor happened to be :

“ a man who is already married and a traitor to his wife

can never give happiness to any woman. He is a worldly person caught in his own desires. Nothing solid. (DD 93).

Virmati had blind love towards Professor and she was in no mood to listen to the Professor. Due to the reciprocal love from professor, she had become emotionally weaker. The readers were unable to notice an assertive *Virmati*. Due to her insistence on pursuing her studies, she suffered from ostracism. She had to take it as a part of life. She felt:

“ This long period is the first time in my life I have been left completely to myself. Away from my brothers and sisters , away from household activities, I feel strange , one pea alone in a whole long period, no use to anybody . I have to get used it, for this is my fate.(DD 100).

The Professor is caught between a devil and deep sea. He has to do the tight rope walking of continuing his relationship with his wife and *Virmati*. At the time when *Virmati* comes to know the pregnancy of Professor’s wife, she decides to stay away from the family’s tradition.

She makes her mind to forget her relationship with the professor and decides to lead her life based on the social codes. She moved to Lahore to do her B.T. as she wishes to become a teacher very much like Shakuntala Pehnji and the professor. She stated:

“ It is small, attached to a school in the same compound, and away from the fashionable part of the city... All I want is a change from my old life and the chance to do something useful. I do not mean ever to marry.” (DD 110).

Professor was in no mood to let her go free. He went in pursuit of her to satisfy his carnal desires. In spite of her numerous pleadings, he was not ready to marry her and instead preferred to give her a co-wife status which is part of the tradition. He was a hypocrite and he exploited *Virmati* for his physical needs. He was a male-chauvinist in the patriarchal society. This unholy relationship exhibits the weakness of *Virmati*. Her sojourn at Lahore is not only meant for studies, but also for

nurturing a secret relationship with Professor. On the contrary, Professor went on exploiting her for a longer period. Unable to convince the professor for a married life, she decides to lead a life “ it would be better to be like Swarna involved in other people , and waiting for no man” (DD 150). But the fate had decided otherwise, Of all the sorrows she had undergone, pregnancy was something new. She was compelled to abort it when she understood that waiting for Professor any more will be a futile exercise. The traditional Indian woman in her made her think :

“ Thought that now he hardly needed letters to attach her to him.

She was his life, whether he ever married her or not. Her body

was marked by him, she could never look elsewhere , never entertain

another choice. (DD 177).

Eventually, their marriage was enacted in Professor *Harish*’s friend’s home. After marriage, *Virmati* perceived that, “ the burden of the past five years had lifted” (DD 202) and “ she was pleased to finally detect a recognizable pattern in her life.”(DD 206). *Virmati* knew very well that both her parents and grandparents will not forgive her. The family will continue with the process of rejecting *Virmati* like it had rejected *Tarsikka*. Having reached home, the family members and others started calling her ‘ gaudy lady’. (DD 208). *Virmati* was made to realize “ I should never have married you ... and its’ too late now. I’ve never seen it so clearly. It is not fair’ (DD 212).

On the very first day in their married life, she realized that she needs to adjust with others and ,”she would walk tight –lipped , mute , on the path her destiny had carved out for her”(DD 212). Therefore, *Virmati* entering into a wedlock with Professor *Harish* has not brought any improvement in her position in the family. Her all movements have been regulated by *Ganga* and *Kishore Devi*. She feels like being treated as a pariah in the family and feels” whether this isolation would continue till the end of her life’ (DD 215). She was made known that not even an inch of the family property will be given to her. “ If *Virmati* had the bed, *Ganga* will have the house. “ (DD 230). To have an interim relief, *Ganga* was send to Lahore to do her M.A. Professor suggested her doing M.A. in philosophy. *Ganga* felt happy in *Virmati*’s absence. In her stay at Lahore, *Virmati* was able to attain freedom. Although she was free, she was against *Swarna* in protesting against the Draft Code Bill. Such an act , she knew that will incur the wrath of her husband. After some months, *Harish* was having problems in

maintaining two separate households. He started becoming very insensitive to the problems she had been facing. He leaned on the side of *Ganga* and started neglecting *Virmati*.

Virmati became very particular in improving the percentage of her M.A. results and was against going to Amritsar. She started non-cooperating with Harish. In spite of it circumstances impelled her to move to Kanpur leaving Harish behind. *Virmati* was under the opinion that this shift in abode will bring good luck to her. She wanted to go back to Lahore in the month of March to do her exams. She moved all things belonging to *Ganga* to the dressing room and thus “... felt light hearted, as though she had conquered and won” (DD 252). May be , it was for this she had been fighting all along. When she entered into family way, she became mentally stronger. She delivered a baby girl and wished to name it *Bharathi*. But Harish was against it and opined that

“ I don’t wish our daughter to be tainted with the birth

Of our country. What birth is this. With so much hatred?

We have not been born. We have moved back into the dark ages.

Fighting, killing over religion. Religion of all things. Even

the educated. This is madness, not freedom. And I never ever wish to be

reminded of it. Harish’s voice rose hysterically, and the girl was named Ida.

But what does it mean? Asked *Virmati* doubtfully. People might

Think it is Persian name.’

‘ This is the very attitude that has led to Parttion’ said Harish irritably.

‘ Let anybody think what they like. For us , it means a new

State and a new beginning’. (DD 276).

In the entire novel, the readers find *Kasturi* as an ill-tempered mother who is in the process of curing her daughter *Virmati*. In her childhood, *Kasturi* used to visit the Mission school. One particular day, *Kasturi* found her daughter *Virmati* offering prayers to Jesus. *Kasturi* threatens her with dire

consequences in the event of continuing her belief in Christianity. Yet , she was broad-minded and was not willing to settle for an early marriage. Very shortly, a Hindu Girls' school was built.

“ She (Kasturi) became the first girl in the family
to postpone the arrival of the wedding guests by
tentative assault on learning . (DD 62).

She acquired reading and writing as well as balancing household accounts and needle work. Performing Sandhya and meditation became a part of her life in Arya Samaj. After attaining puberty at twelve years of age, her mother had trained her in household activities. She won the appreciation of her parents for her qualities such as gentleness, tranquility, beauty as well as modesty and they were of the belief that such qualities will bring her a good husband. As she had the habit of reading; she kept away from others comments by enjoying reading by night time. She got married to *Surya Prakash* who was very busy in impregnating her every year and she was left with , “ ... the tiredness of seventeen years of relentless child-bearing wash over her.” (DD 09).

It is a weakness in her make up to have a rebellious attitude and started worrying about her body very much. Kasturi could not be blamed for her bad temper and frustration on Virmati. Virmati is able to win the sympathy of her readers as he is torn between her longing for her studies and household responsibilities.

In the modern India, Ida is considered as a radical modern women. She enters into a divorce without any issues in the marriage . Since she is not in good terms with her husband she moves to her ancestral home to know her ancestry.

“ I know my relatives feel sorry for me. I am without husband,
child or parents. I can see the ancient wheels of my divorce still
grinding and clanking in their heads... Now I show curiosity about
them. I wonder how they remember their past (DD 04).

She understood the manner in which her mother challenged her own orthodox family for more than a decade to which her wedlock was acceptable, but not her independence. Virmati never

expressed her desire to Ida in asserting their identity and from her mother, she was able to acquire qualities such as “adjust, compromise, adopt” (DD 256). Ida was brought up to be a struggling daughter. She did not have scholarly attributes like her mother and father.

Virmati's father had high hopes on her and wanted her to do well in school, learn classical music, undergo dance lessons and be smartly dressed and give up her clumsiness and become a graceful girl. *Virmati* had a role to play in the intellectual conversations and likewise he wished his daughter Ida also to join the fray. He expected her to exhibit her, “accomplishments graciously before his assembled guests at parties.” (DD 279). Ida looked for all possible escape means from her mother's tyranny and was not willing to exhibit any intelligence in her activities and gave preference to other things in life. She made sincere attempts to bring down the indifferences by marrying *Prabhakar* who was “... a successful academician, a writer, a disseminator of knowledge” (DD 157) quite akin to her father. *Virmati* became upset due to the cancellation of Ida's marriage as she was not aware that her daughter had “... compromised the higher things in life”. (258). By getting the baby aborted, *Prabhakar* had created strong cause for cancellation of married life. Ida has a date with reality when she understands the veracity of her parents' statement that:

“Like my father. How many times had you declared that I would be
lucky if I found a husband like my father.

My father was on a pedestal so high that to breathe that
i rarefied atmosphere was an honour.”(DD 157).

There is a healthy interaction between the author and the social milieu all through the novel *The Difficult Daughters* and the novel is a very good example for the existential trend. Like many other women novelists in India, Manju Kapur has also aired her feminist views focusing on challenges pertaining to women and has introduced a newer approach in the emerging trend similar to Shoba De and several others.

Through her expertise in narration, Manju Kapur is able to bring out her total understanding regarding women and the challenges they are confronted with. The novel *The Difficult Daughters* delves into some problems faced by contemporary women in a forceful manner and therefore it is

called “ an enticing first novel by an Indian writer who prefers reality to magic realism”. (Sunday Times).

Finally, it is evident that the author very diligently registers her concern for women in this novel. She harps on several feminist issues such as female education, economic independence and women empowerment. By virtue of characters such as Virmati, Ida, Shakuntala and *Swarnalata*, the writer forcefully enables the readers to understand that education is a weapon which can alone wipe off these social evils. At present, women have been facing several challenges in establishing their own identity in the family and society. Simultaneously , it is possible for them to lead a life according to their interest and retain their liberty. The message conveyed by Kapur is loud and clear and the final punch by her is “ the society would be better off, if its females were effective and capable.”

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