

THE TRAUMA AND FATE OF MANJU KAPUR'S PROTAGONISTS IN *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

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ABSTRACT

The main objective of the present paper is to highlight the complex intricacies of women in patriarchal society in meeting out their essential features of their life, where adjustments and compromises is as important as an autonomous and respectable status for women in society. Manju Kapur has her own concerns, priorities as well as her own ways of dealing with the predicament of her women characters. The women characters of Manju Kapur in *Difficult Daughters* do not merely confront male expectations or conflict with male world, but they seek to actualise their dreams as an individual being and not as a social being like a daughter, sister, wife or mother. Kapur's main characters like Virmati and Ida are advanced in the true sense of the New women. Kapur projects a new vision of Indian women in her novel wherein the women protagonists invariably have to make adjustments and compromises along with the proverbial home-maker. It is because of a woman's indomitable endurance and insight that a joint family becomes a force surviving through all the odds and storms. But the flip side is that the Indian society dominated by male chauvinism does not easily give an equal or due status to women at par with men

KEYWORDS: Manju Kapur, Women in Society, Literature

INTRODUCTION

Literature is a powerful tool in the hands of creative writers to modulate and change the societal framework. It reveals principally three sets of relationship: human being in relation to the universe, individual in relation to society, and man in always been a projection of a social situation and the reflection of social consciousness. In other words, the novel may be considered a document of social criticism. It tends to reflect the contingent reality in an artistic fashion.

Literature, being a subsystem of a culture, exemplification of some general pattern or syndrome. Minority discourse is characterised not only by an urge to adopt and assimilate but also by a culture of protest and resistance. Culture is not merely an organisational principle holding together the members of a community. It is also a means of establishing its separateness from and resistance to other communities. Indian English Literature refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in the English Language and whose native or co-native language could be one of the numerous languages of India. It is also associated with the works of members of the Indian Diaspora. Early Indian writers used English not mixed with the Indian words to convey an experience which was essentially Indian. Indian English fiction, today, is subjugated by the second generation of post-colonial writers, who were born after decolonization.

Women novelists have shown their extraordinary calibre and immutable imprint in the realm of Indian Fiction in English. Most of women novelists, especially those who have advocated feminism in their writings have graphically presented the clash of tradition and modernity through the actions and words of their characters. They have written about Indian women, their conflicts and predicaments against the back ground of contemporary India. While doing so, they have

analysed socio-cultural modes and values that have given Indian women their images and role towards themselves and the society. The changing context has placed these women writers in an unevenable position. The Characters created by them, like their creators were torn apart by the conflicting forces of tradition and modernity. The crises of values adaption and attachment with family and home have pulled them as under. The plight of the working women was still worse, aggravated by their problems of marital adjustment and quest for an assertion of their identity. These novelist however have generally concentrated on the plights and the problems of educated women mostly with an urban base.

In the prevailing social milieu of modern India, the status and the psyche of the Indian woman have undergone a metamorphic change, more in the urbanised middle classes than in rural ones. Moreover, the rise of the phenomenon of the New Woman which touched only the fringe of the urban world is also now impacting the woman folk in general in India. Indian fiction in English, like any other genres in the vernacular, truly reflects this socio-cultural trend, along with numerous other allied issues of the contemporary society in which the novels are set. Indian fiction in English has been enriched by several highly talented women novelists including Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Santha Ram Rau, Shashi Despande, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amrita Pritam and Mahashewata Devi and others sensitively portray the life of the protagonists which can relate and empathize with. Manju Kapur is one such unique writer who has most eloquently depicted the Indian middle class family and the constraints faced by the women of such families.

The fast growing class of educated and conscious Indian women, has given rise to their desires and aspirations, and more significantly so, to their determination to seek and establish their own self-identity- individual rather than social. Since ages woman is in negotiation with her male counterpart as well as our androcentric society. Down the ages women have been denied as a complete and independent human being; they have given secondary place in society and family. The quandary of women is that they have to endure, from birth to death, prejudice, oppression, slur, abuse and discrimination in the form of gender biasedness at the hands of the male dominated structure. It is in this context that Manju Kapur, takes up the cudgel to artistically portray the emerging actions and reactions of Indian women- their dream and desires as an autonomous being, on the one hand, and the reality of their circumstances and destiny, on the other and more often than not, the woman protagonists of Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters*(1998) experience the agony arising out of the circumstances in which their dreams perhaps seldom come true. The primordial importance of institutions like family and marriage, while not being denied altogether, gets a gerk at the hands of the novelist's women protagonists.

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Women under the patriarchal pressure and control were subjected to much more social ostracism. They were discriminated and were biased in lieu of their sex. The life of women who lived and struggled under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society was reflected in the novels of Manju kapur. Taking into account the complexity of life, different histories, cultures and different structures of values, the women's question, despite basic solidarity need to be tackled in relation to the socio-cultural situation. The impact of patriarchy on the Indian society varies from the one in West. Manju Kapur has her own concerns, priorities as well as her own ways of dealing with the predicament of her women characters. The women characters of Manju Kapur in *Difficult Daughters* do not merely confront male expectations or conflict with male world, but they seek to actualise their dreams as an individual being and not as a social being like a

daughter, sister, wife or mother. Kapur's main characters like Virmati and Ida are advanced in the true sense of the New women.

Kapur projects a new vision of Indian women in her novel wherein the women protagonists invariably have to make adjustments and compromises along with the proverbial home-maker. It is because of a woman's indomitable endurance and insight that a joint family becomes a force surviving through all the odds and storms. But the flip side is that the Indian society dominated by male chauvinism does not easily give an equal or due status to women at par with men. Consequently, a conflict of struggling values arises for the 'speaking' gender-subaltern(women), to use Spivak's phrase, whereby all their dreams, images and ideals are ultimately shattered against the stony wall of reality which they perform have to accept as their destiny.

Probing the female psyche in her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) not only won Kapur the Commonwealth Prize for the best first book (EURASIA), but also gave some food for thought to her readers. In *Difficult Daughters* one reads a strange story of mother-daughter bonds. Kasturi does not appreciate the freedom that her daughter Virmati demands and craves for. The mother thus, unwittingly, becomes the voice of patriarchy. Later on, the same attitude is followed by Virmati also for her daughter Ida who says in the incipient lines of the novel, "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother"(*Difficult Daughters* 1). Ida also suffers alone in silence as she is not able to share her complexes with her mother, the same had happened with Virmati also twenty years ago. The absence of a positive support and sympathetic shoulder of her mother leads Virmati to look for love, sympathy and warmth of feelings outside the home.

Two pairs of mother-daughter bonds are subtly delineated in the novel and both are invaded with conflicts and compromises. Virmati, the protagonist is a traditional woman who wants that after death her body organs should be donated to the needy people so that in this way she would be valued by someone at least: "I want my body donated. My eyes, my heart, my kidneys any organ that can be of use. That way someone will value me after I have gone"(*Difficult Daughters* 1). Unlike others, she is inspired by Swami Dayanand's concept of women's education. Kapur denounces the persistence of the traditional idea that marriage is essential for women. She, therefore, deliberately depicts the characters of two girls who are poles apart – Virmati who is conventional in outlook, and her westernised cousin Shakuntala modern in outlook. Shakuntala's carefree and independent life opens up before Virmati the prospect of huge arena which could be a part of women's destiny. Shakuntala deprecates the concept of marriage as the *summum bonum* of life and her advice to Virmati reflects her rebellious attitude against the servitude of women.

Virmati's negotiation with this world for selfhood and identity continues even after her death, by her daughter Ida who has tried to rediscover her mother's life to give her deserved respect and value. But the everlasting conflict between dream and destiny leaves Ida, too, feeling forlorn and vulnerable. Virmati, despite her dream-come-true marriage with Harish, the Professor, could not get the rightful place as his wife, since his first wife Ganga would not allow it. Virmati was given a pariah status and faced exclusion from her natal as well as marital hearth. Ida gets divorced from her selfish husband. Virmati the difficult daughter of Kasturi, is the mother of another difficult daughter Ida-'difficult' because they tend to create uncomfortable, sometimes, unpalatable situations for the male dominated society. Virmati,s escape from familial lovelessness and neglect causes her to dream of finding self-identity and love in marrying Harish but in vain. Her feminine suffering is also largely due to the 'noises'(the socio-economic and cultural constraints), to use Spivak's phraseology again. Thus, *Difficult Daughters* represents the trivials of a woman, torn between conflicting dream and destiny, who, nevertheless, attempts to overcome the straitjackets of social types and cultural identity and instead forge a

'self-identity' of an autonomous individual.

Virmati could not accomplish her dream of snatching a 'deserving space', yet the fact that she was an iconoclast-shattering the mute mumbling-grumbling image of a woman-cannot be challenged. The novelist, through her character portrayal seems to insinuate that identity, loyalties, norms and notions are becoming a matter of personal choice rather than convention. The title of the story signifies a message that a woman who tries to forge 'a self-identity', impelled by her unique needs, is branded 'a difficult daughter' or 'a problem daughter' by the immediate family and the society as well. Both Virmati and Ida have had more than their due of woes for their alleged non-conformist stand vis-a-vis traditional values of family and marriage. Hence, under circumstantial pressure, when the woman protagonist Virmati ultimately readjusts to her life situation and surroundings, her quest for self-identity comes to halt. Despite Virmati's struggles and her subsequent sufferings in her identity-quest, she prefers compromises to be in a state of exile, although as a difficult daughter. Thus, *Difficult Daughters* represents the turmoil of a woman who seeks to forge a self-identity of an educated modern woman, forsaking the cultural identity of traditional Indian womanhood of a most humble, obedient, servile daughter, wife or mother. But, ultimately, she comes down from her flights of freedom on the wings of imagination to the bedrock of hard realities, as it were. This is so, basically because she is not satisfied in her free and innovative voyage to the outer or other world, unless and until society approves and acclaims it. Implicit, therefore, in the Indian New woman's situation is the quintessential discrepancy between the potential outer trappings of liberation of the protagonist and her actual lack of inner freedom or strengths. In the end, one finds that Virmati's life is readjustment with tradition and a painful transition, a loss of familial love, and modern reality of lonesome individual awareness.

Virmati is not allowed in her parental house even when her father dies in a communal riot, where as her husband is quite welcome there. Apart from the ambience of political and communal hatred and violence, the partition-related issues had a gender perspective too. The ghoulish partition era seemed to have been clouded by the sinister inter-relation between gender and socio-historical processes. Ida, the narrator of the novel, struggles to remain free from the influence of her difficult mother Virmati all through. And as her name suggests she was like a clean slate on which could write anything one wants. Ida yearns for an altogether different persona of a New woman unlike her mother Virmati's who, nevertheless, remains the pivot around which the entire story moves. Virmati, despite her playing the role of a household manager, remains uncared, unloved and maltreated by her mother Kasturi. Being a woman naturally gifted with the virtue of patience, Virmati stood physical and mental pain and agony quite stoically as she had the tenacity in passive resistance even though she lacked aggressive audacity. Virmati's death is even a more potent impact than Virmati alive on Ida who, after the death of her mother, feels liberated.

Nonetheless, the centrality of Virmati is inescapable not only for Ida who tries to be the antithesis of her mother in vain, but also for the entire generation of aspiring New woman in India. The castaway nonconformist Virmati of the social periphery comes to the centre of the social mainstream, allowing the positive reconstructions by Ida. Virmati in her zest for education, freedom and modernity, blooms into an existential image of a 'New Woman', whose conscience is not pricked by Toss of virginity. But Virmati's premarital affair with the married professor and her consequent pregnancy starts telling upon her initial confidence, tenacity and assertiveness. Her guilty conscience for rebelling against her mother, family and tradition somehow veers her round traditional notions and values as when she concedes in a moment of helplessness and self-revelation.

Virmati seems to have lost both the worlds- the traditional and the modern, the social and the familial, the parental

and the marital almost at one go because of her decision to go for higher education and to marry the professor as per her choice. This was something too much for her as if she had become a pariah bitch. Although, she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is seen caught into another trap where her free spirit is curbed and where she is forced to fight social ostracism outside the house, on the one hand, and compete for the kitchen and conjugal bed with Ganga, the first wife of the professor, on the other. Ida gets separated from her husband when she realises that she can no more continue the marital alliance than suffer it. As it usually happens in such cases of marital discord, both husband and wife are to blame for it because of lack of feeling and love, lack of understanding and adjustment and a chronic inability to forget and forgive on their part. Although, Ida is an absolutely liberated modern new woman unlike her grandmother Kasturi who was entirely traditional, or her mother Virmati who was rather balanced between tradition and modernity; yet she seems to be cursing her single womanhood.

The problem is that while woman, especially the urban upper and middle class educated women have become somewhat modernised in outlook, their corresponding men-folk at best flaunt only a modern demeanour outwardly because they know that by modernising and bringing about the equality of sexes they stand to lose their well entrenched patriarchal status and power. So, in the guise of being modernised, men have devised other means of exploiting women. Women, the 'enlightened' one at least go on flaunting their new womanhood, angling for singular existence. And, as a result this war of one-up-manship, gets fuelled and nosedives into a void where none gains but everyone loses- love, affection, trust, warmth, understanding, patience and sanity. Unless both their attitudes change, and both are prepared for the real embrace, an embrace of their minds and hearts, the man-woman relationship will remain bereft of love and harmony. And the tragedy of all is this is that it is mostly the women who find themselves at the receiving end.

Thus, Manju Kapur's protagonists want to reconstruct their own separate identities, they want to assert for their rights, they struggle for the respect and importance they truly deserve. But all the same they are not heartless feminists who adopt extreme aggressive and drastic ways of rebellion against mores, norms, customs and traditions. The heroines are rather pragmatic personae who return to their roots whenever required by their families; they are balanced personalities who realise their potential and their circumstances, of conflicting dreams and destinies, and successfully emerge as aesthetically and logically satisfying negotiators in this post-colonial Indian society. What Manju Kapur intends to highlight through the struggle of her women protagonists who tactfully and sensibly negotiate with the quintessentially conflictual relationship between dream and destiny, is how the common women realise their rights, priorities, freedoms, little victories, identify suppressed desires and work towards their resolution.

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