

Women as Wives, Mothers and Daughters: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

Being a woman in this predominantly patriarchal world is as difficult as it is impossible. The female of the human species is never a woman alone. She must be something else before being that- either a mother or a daughter or a wife or, with a very limited chance of acceptability, a beloved. Seldom has the male been troubled by the predicament which has always beset his female counterpart. He does not need to be someone's son or husband for an identity. Now, a woman just can't be a woman alone. This has been the misery of female existence since the beginning of civilization. Even literature, to a great extent, can be accused of forwarding stereotyped images of womenfolk. Manju Kapur in her novel *Difficult Daughters* breaks the confines of this historical prejudice when her female characters trespass their well-defined social roles. This paper intends to present a study of the novel which takes the reader deep into the complex world of female psychology. Her ladies stand tall and emerge as social outlaws; but on the other hand, while moving about from kitchen to the backyard inside the four walls of the house, they appear as mere social archetypes.

Keywords: Women, Wives, Daughters, Social Roles, Trespass

Introduction

The male of the human species is lucky. Seldom has he been troubled by the predicament which has always beset his female counterpart. Hitler was, is and will remain one and only Hitler, no reference is required. Gandhiji will always be Gandhiji. Again, he does not, and did not, need to be someone's son or husband for an identity. The names suffice. Now, a woman just can't be a woman alone. She must be something else before being that- either a mother or a daughter or a wife or, with a very limited

chance of acceptability, a beloved. This has been the misery of female existence since the beginning of civilization. We are in the 21st century but little has changed- or only a little, may be. Even literature, to a great extent, can be accused of forwarding stereotyped images of womenfolk either as a mistress, a wife, a mother, or as an object of desire and attraction. Manju Kapur in her novel *Difficult Daughters* makes a brave effort to break the confines of this historical prejudice when her female characters try to trespass their well-defined social roles. This paper intends to present a study of the novel which takes the reader deep into the complex world of female psychology. On the one hand her ladies stand tall and emerge as social outlaws, on the other hand they are bogged down by the burden of collective consciousness and while moving about from kitchen to the backyard inside the four walls of the house they appear as mere social archetypes.

Difficult Daughters, published in 1998, was the first novel by the celebrated Indian novelist Manju Kapur. This novel established her as one of the major voices on the literary horizon. This novel was followed by other equally successful and critically acclaimed books like *A Married Woman*, *Independent*, *Home*, *The Immigrant*, *Custody*, and the recently published novel *Brothers*. *Difficult Daughters* received tremendous international acclaim and won the Commonwealth Prize for First Novels when a well-known English publishing house published it after its rejection by a number of Indian publishers. This novel tells us a simple story movingly. It takes the reader into the intimate world of its women where in the pre-partition Indian cities of Amritsar and Lahore these ladies deal with their sorrows, compromises and the intermittent moments of pleasure. The novel has a long list of characters but its whole spectrum is dominated by its female characters who come across the readers in various capacities. Kasturi, Virmati, Ida, Lajwanti, Shankutala, Ganga, Kishori Devi, Swarna Lata, Indumati, Gunmati, Hemavati, Vidyavati and Parvati are among the major and minor characters who tread the course of the action in the novel. These women in the novel are divided into three generations according to their values, mindsets and their reactions to different developments and situations in which they are placed. Among them are the women who are mere social archetypes. They also include those women characters who make a sincere effort in order to cross the patriarchal threshold but fall in line ultimately. Then there is a group of female characters who symbolise the new, outgoing and liberated India. These characters think for themselves and take their own decisions.

The very opening lines of the novel, "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she was gone and I stared at fire that rose from her shrivelled body..." (01), put a daughter and her mother in a sharp contrast. The daughter, despite her love and care for the mother and her being half-dead on the mother's death, does not want to be like her mother. This novel is in fact the story of Virmati, the protagonist, with whose death the novel opens. Ida, her educated and modern daughter, having cremated her mother feels an urge to know her mother more intimately. For

this purpose, she makes a visit to her maternal uncles and aunts, hoping that she would be able to find out more and more about her, and her tale of struggle and sorrows. This adventure, which is also a pressing moral and psychological need for a divorced and childless woman, takes us deep into the social, moral, financial and psychological world of its women characters belonging to different environments.

Kasturi, Virmati's mother, represents the section of Indian women who made the first generation in the country to be exposed to formal education. The reforms carried out by Arya Smaj had started showing their impact in the early decades of the 20th century. Kasturi gets school education yet she is deeply steeped into traditions. This makes her a social and moral prototype. Her parents make it sure that she does not go to school after the age of twelve. They can never forget, nor do they allow the daughter to forget it, that despite all formal schooling, marriage was her destiny. Kasturi's school education is only a part of her accomplishments the purpose of which is to please her in-laws. Her mother counts the ways in which Kasturi was supposed to please her would-be husband and his family:

With all the breads she could make, puris with spicy gram inside, luchis big as plates, kulchas, white and long, tandoori rotis, layers of flaky flour, pranthas, crisp and stuffed. With all morrabas, never soggy, and dripping juicy sweets. With seasonal pickles of lemon, mango, carrot, cauliflower, turnip, red chillies, dates, ginger, and raisins. With sherbets of khas, roses, and almonds, with hot and cold spiced milk, with sour black carrot kanzi, with lassi, thin, cool and and salty, or thick and sweet. With barfis made of nut and grains soaked overnight, and ground fine between two heavy stones. With sweets made of thickened milk. With papad, the sweet ones made out of ripe mango, the sour ones with raw mango, the ones to be fried with dal and potato. With threads spun, with cloth woven, with duries, small stitched carpets, and phulkaris, with payjama kurtas, shirts, and salwar kameezes. (62-63)

The story does not stop here. With all these accomplishments, Kasturi spends her free time sewing and doing needle work. She makes fulkaris for her trousseau. Reading is only her clandestine activity which she sometimes does at night protected from all eyes. Despite her education, Kasturi genuinely believes that for a woman life does not exist outside the four safe walls of the house. She gives birth to eleven children and the level of her fertility pleases her in-laws. The novelist has portrayed very poignantly how every new birth takes the life away from the mother. When she has conceived for the eleventh time in sixteen years of married life, she prays furiously for the miracle of miscarriage. The novelist gives a moving description of the scene:

Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not tired, when her feet and legs did not ache. Her back curved in towards the base of her spine, and carrying her children was a strain, even when they were very young. Her stomach was soft and spongy, and her breasts long and unattractive. Her hair barely snaked down to mid-back, its length and thickness gone with her babies. Her teeth bled when she chewed her morning neem twigs, and she could feel some of them shaking. She had filled the house as her in-laws had wanted, but with another child there would be nothing left for her. (07)

But Kasturi accepts this all as a part of her destiny. She thinks that for a girl getting married is a duty which every girl must perform. She is also of the opinion that a girl, however educated she may be, should not leave the house after marriage for a job. She declares: “ Still, it is the duty of every girl to get married, ... 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.” (15-16)

Even when Virmati goes against the wishes of her mother and gets married to Professor Harish Chandra, Kasturi puts the blame on the college education which, according to her, has a corrupting influence on a woman’s mind. Kasturi, “Virmati’s mother, a construct of patriarchy, exercises her special prerogative to train her daughter into cultural mores so that she takes up her assigned role of a daughter, wife and mother without interrogation and learn the lore of self sacrifice, nurturance and devotion.” (Sharan)

Another character who makes an interesting study in this group of traditional women, who see themselves as merely wives or mothers, is Ganga. She suffers silently at the hand of her husband who is an England-returned, well-read professor. Ganga is the unfortunate, illiterate wife of Harish Chandra. Though she is a dedicated wife and house maker yet her husband never gives her the respect which a wife should get. So much so that, her husband brings a second wife only because Ganga can’t talk scholarly with her husband and she does not have an income of her own. The novelist portrays her as an obeying wife whose only accomplishment is her talent of housekeeping. Up to the two third part of the novel, even her name is not given. She is merely addressed as “the woman”. Her problem is that her household skills, her only treasure, don’t have any value in the eyes of her husband.

The woman’s own mother had never read, nor ever felt the need. She had taught the woman everything she knew. By the time she was ready to leave for her husband’s house at the age of twelve, she had mastered the basic items of pure vegetarian diet. She was quick and inventive with embroidery and knitting needle ... All this was part of growing up, she knew, but how was she ever to dream that without the desire to read and write, she was going defenceless into union with a man so unlike the others she knew, who didn’t seem to care about her household skills at all ? (40)

This all results in her undoing. Her husband knows that she is a good woman. She keeps the house to perfection. But his infatuation for a younger, educated and more beautiful girl results in her hellish married life. As she has no other place to go, she must share her small house with the second wife. She knows that she can't get the husband back, so she makes it a point to keep the kitchen under her control. If the educated wife controls the bed, the illiterate one runs for the kitchen. Her sense of insecurity makes her do all the household work more vigorously than ever before which includes preparing meals and doing washing for her husband. This is how she tries to find meaning in life.

From washing his cloths to polishing his shoes, to tidy his desk, dusting his precious books, feeling his fountain pen with ink, putting his records back in their jackets, mending his cloths, stitching his shirts and kurtas, hemming his dhotis, seeing that they were properly starched- Ganga did it all ... All the efforts of pounding, grinding, mixing, chopping, cutting, shaping, frying was hers. (216)

Kishori Devi also emerges primarily as a mother and a mother-in-law. She can't imagine her existence outside these relations. Though she feels for her daughter-in-law Ganga when Virmati enters the house as the second wife, yet she is very much aware of her helplessness. She thinks that it is her fate and she asks Ganga to bow before the inevitable, and does so herself. Manju Kapur has given a psychological treatment to this character. Kishori Devi's motherly instincts are aroused the moment she comes to know about Parvati's pregnancy. She, going against her favourite bahu Ganga's wishes, makes it sure that Parvati gets a healthy diet. After all, the foetus belongs to her son.

Parvati is one of the difficult daughters who make the title of the novel, her own daughter Ida being the other. She, being the eldest child among the eleven siblings, has had added responsibilities since her early childhood. She is supposed to look after her younger sisters all the time. She is inspired by Shakuntala, her cousin, who is pursuing her M.Sc. in Chemistry from a college in Lahore. Shakuntala has an independent personality and she, unlike her mother and aunt, does not think that it is the duty of a girl to get married. Virmati too joins a local college and later on goes to Lahore for higher education. She falls in love with a married professor and thus disturbs many lives, including her own. But at the same time, she emerges as the voice against the tradition in which patriarchal mindset dominates the daily life. She undertakes a painful journey to reach her own individuality. Though her achievements in life can't be termed as something great, yet she succeeds in breaking the prison of feudal setup to some extent and emerges as a "live woman". She is a woman who has the nerve to "look outside" (17). It is she who raises the question of "actual choosing" (151). It is through her character that the novelist gives the idea that education is a powerful weapon. Education teaches us to think about ourselves and it also teaches us to have doubts and raise questions.

Ida goes a step further as she can't take an abortion lying down as her mother did. Besides Virmati and Ida, there is a bunch of strong and independent women like Shakuntala and Swarna Lata in the novel who, as it has been remarked in a different context, know "how to step out of the framework defined by men and patriarchal values and how to identify and create a tradition of their own." (Jain 50)

Difficult Daughters is the story of daughters and difficulties, and also of difficult daughters, as the title suggests. It is also the story of freedom and partitions (both at national and individual level) as the intended title - The Partitions – suggests. The analogy is too stark and visible to be missed. India got freedom in 1947 but not without bloodshed and partition. Women too get education, freedom and equality in this novel but the scene remains dismal to a great extent. With so many instances of rapes, molestations, abductions, honour-killings etc. happening all around us on daily basis, the novel becomes a telling comment on the present national as well as international scene when in the concluding part Harish tells Virmati expressing his fears regarding the future of their newborn daughter, "What birth is this? With so much hatred? We haven't been born. We have moved back into dark ages. Fighting, killing over religion. Religion of all things. Even the educated. This is madness, not freedom. And I never ever wished to be reminded of it". (276)

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