

QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS***S. Prasanna**

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ABSTRACT

Quest for Identity in the novel *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur, refers to the theme about women on the margins and their quest for identity in the male dominated culture. Women under the patriarchal pressure and control were subjected to much more brunts and social ostracism. The life women lived and struggled under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society were reflected in the novel. Manju Kapur has her own concerns, priorities as well as their own ways of dealing with the predicament of their women protagonists. The title of the novel *Difficult Daughters* is an indication to the message that a woman, who tries in search of an identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well. The story tells how she is torn between family duty, the desire for education and elicit love. Professor however fails to accept her socially and continues his illicit love. The desire to be acknowledged as wife of professor tortures Virmati driving her to take refuge in Shanti Niketan. Professor recognizes the need of the hour and marries her in haste.

Keywords: Marginalization, Identity, Struggle for freedom, Socio-cultural Mechanism.

Beginning of the 20th Century had witnessed a great number of novels. However, one name that stands vitally in this phase is Rabindranath Tagore, he has the quality to write with equal felicity and grace in Bengali. As a matter of fact, he was not known as a writer alone but an equally accomplished poet playwright and painter, he was certainly assumed to be Leonardo Da Vinci of India with having more than one qualities within himself.

In the country like India where the portrayal of women was seen to be negatively viewed by the society and also they have been a victim of patriarchy, ruthlessness, domestic violence. Literature had eventually given them the exposure to express themselves from within, as apart from acrimonious remarks which were used for women.

B. K. Das in his *Twentieth Century Literary Criticism* explains: “Women have been present in literature from their (male's) view point but now women have taken

the reins in their hands and they are nowadays presented in the writings of female writers from their point of view” (143).

Our Indian English literature has gifted numerous enthusiastic women novelists such as Anita Desai, Kamala Markandeya, Kamala Das, Ruth Praver Jhabwala, Shashi Deshpande, Shobha De, Nayantara Sehgal, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Nair, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy, and Kiran Desai. Feminine and Feminist issues transcend all limits of geography and provide where the issues of gender/became pertinent. Women reflects the feeling of marginalise and in return express their result against the purely masculine world. Feminine and Feminist issues transcend all limits of geography and provide where the issues of gender/became pertinent. Women reflects the feeling of marginalise and in return express their result against the purely masculine world.

Manju Kapur was born in 1948 in Amritsar. She teaches English literature at Miranda House College, Delhi University. Her work has been translated into numerous languages including German, Portuguese, Italian, Spanish, Hebrew, Greek, Marathi, and Hindi. She lives in New Delhi. Her novels *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant*, *Custody* and *The Brothers* explore women's struggle in patriarchal setup. Most of her novels focuses on gender issues, political scenario as well as the whole issue of female identity. Her theme is the existential predicament embedded in the social milieu where males and females shown in contrastive terms-males being rulers, females being ruled over.

The 1947 Indian partition lingers as a pivotal moment in the modern world. As Seema Malik rightly observes, “The trauma of partition and its aftermath have lingered in the collective memory and have affected the present” (12). Kapur belongs to the category of the novelists who revisit the partition scenario from the vantage point of contemporary mind set. At a larger societal level, Kapur uses her novels to criticize the politics of partition and post partition events, especially contemporary Indian issues the fire of division in Indian society on the lines of caste, creed and religion prevail even today. Her protagonists get swayed by problems of loneliness, alienation and pessimism. When Kapur starts writing she has a theme in mind, not the story. The story takes shape gradually. Her work is transparent and seamless.

Kapur's first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, was published in 1998 and won the Commonwealth Prize for best first novel, Eurasia region. Her second novel, *A*

Married Woman, was published in 2002 and was shortlisted for the Encore Award; her third, *Home*, was nominated for the Hutch Crossword Book Award in 2006; and her fourth, *The Immigrant* (2008), was a finalist for the India Plaza Golden Quill Award and the DSC Prize of South Asian Literature. Her fifth novel, *Custody* (2011), has been optioned by Balaji Telefilms; her sixth novel *Brothers* was published in 2016.

The major portion of the novel, *Difficult Daughters* deals with Virmati's love affairs with professor and rest part describes fighting struggle for freedom. The whole novel shows the feminism of Virmati who opposes her all family and continues her study against the wishes of her family. There is an endless argument between Education verses Marriage. But nobody listens to Virmati. She struggles to acquire higher education and self-dependence. She had shamed her family, refused marriage and she never meant to marry. But in Indian tradition marriage is an important part of the life. Marriage in society is major issue in *Difficult Daughters*. The theme of marriage is central to the novel. Though the novel deals with childhood, youth, old age and education, marriage is the central theme. With her own narrative style, Kapur similarize the women problems in colonial India as well as the problems arises due to the partition. It locates the life of Virmati against a backdrop of political happenings before and after partition.

In her writing, Kapur focuses on the co-existence of past and present in the socio- political facts. The novel convey that there is a pull- push between desire and duty for Indian women. The novel is a reconstruction of the Indian history in the point of women during partition days. The very title of the novel is an indication to the message that a woman, who tries in search of an identity, is titled as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well. Virmati, who finds that battle for her own independence has created irrevocable lines of Partition and pain around her. The novel highlights the fictional representation of trauma and focuses on the theme of Partition. It narrates how Partition affects the characters as well as the society.

Quest for identity in the male dominated culture and marginalization are the major themes in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. Women under the patriarchal pressure and control were subjected to much more brunt and social ostracism. They were discriminated and were biased in lien of their sex. The life women lived and struggled under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society were reflected in the

novel. Taking into account the complexity of life, different histories, cultures and different structures of values, the women's question, despite basic solidarity needs to be tackled in relation to the socio-cultural situation. The impact of patriarchy on the Indian society varies from the one in the West.

The portrayal of woman in Indian English fiction as the silent sufferer and upholder of the tradition and traditional values of family and society has undergone a tremendous change and is no longer presented as a passive character. The women characters in *Difficult Daughters* are divided into three generations, with their values, mindsets and relationships. Virmati's history is reconstructed in retrospected way by her daughter Ida. Virmati is depicted as a new woman of colonial India and her urge to acquire education and freedom resembles the nation's quest for identity and selfhood, but she fails to completely live up to her wishes.

Although she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she gets caught into another, where her free spirit is curbed and controlled. The Novelist sets Virmati's story against the background of changing India. The air was filled with political affairs like the Anti-Pakistan Conference, the Urdu Conference, and the All-India Sikh League. Virmati came across women like Mohini Datta, Sita Rallia, Mary Singh, Mrs. Leela Mehta, all engrossed in the National Movement. They all appeared remote to Virmati for she was enmeshed in her own problems and trials. She reflected in regret and guilt, "I am not like these women. They are using their minds organizing and participating in conference, politically active, while my time is being spent in love. Wasting, it" (142).

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The protagonist of the novel Virmati is born in a joint family of Amritsar,

being born in a family of high reputation leads life with high morals. However the course of her life changes from the moment she comes in contact with Professor. He is a man already married and lives as a tenant in their house. Her young age and less exposure, draws her physically close to the professor who is mature. All that follows-abortion, alienation, dejection and reunion leaves permanent scars on her mental frame. She is devastated by illicit love affair; like the partitioned nation she ends up paying price for the act “Virmati realized and thought how stupid she was not to have realized earlier- that to have a man stay with you is to invite certain consequences...”(194). She enjoys the events of physical consummation with the professor; even their remembrance, “Last night has been so wonderful, she wanted that bliss to continue” (193). The guilt in her conscience never makes her free from the clutches of shame- “That was all she wanted to do. Forget. Forget, forget, forget” (173).

There is a constant struggle for Virmati who is haunted by a deep sense of guilt. The formal marriage, a social and public statement, is a must for her. It is this which 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. The earlier generation of her mother saw no reason to rebel. There was complete acceptance in life. Kasturi is an example of the typical feminine attitude—to procreate in order to bring about life and pleasure. To run her home, first a joint family and later her own, is happiness for her. Like Kasturi, for Ganga the Professor’s wife, marriage is a religious and a social institution, where love is not the basis of marriage. She too has a domestic sensibility. Her cooking is enjoyed by her educated husband anglicized to a point, and who is otherwise very aloof. Just living with him, and bearing his children is enough for her. However in Virmati, there is a struggle between the head and the heart, the physical and moral; Virmati gives way to her heart and body.

Virmati falls prey to his charms and charismatic persona. Professor though married, is deeply attracted towards Virmati and motivates her to pursue studies. She is a loser whose acts totally alienate her from her own family and she fails to create a space for herself for which she had been striving all along. Rollason Christopher rightly says in ‘Women on the Margins: Reflections on Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*: In the micro-state to which her destiny leads her, she has no family or close friends.

She attains a near-exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, Virginia Woolf's famous 'room of one's own': and yet she falls. (2)

The protagonist Virmati is torn between the family pressure and her love. She is unable to comprehend her longing for professor. The family convinces her to get married and settle down. But Virmati badly in love with the professor; goes against the wishes of her family and shifts to Lahore. She does try to distant herself from Professor but fails. Throughout the novel Virmati leads a homeless life. Her journey though starts from Amritsar, but shuttles between Lahore, Nahan and Amritsar. Virmati is never able to settle down and fix her roots at one place.

The character of Virmati is shown to be different from the other two close characters Shakuntala her cousin and Swarnlata, Virmati's roommate who gets out of life for what she wants, without compromising too much. Shakuntala and Swarnlata in Lahore, are strong headed women who channelize their energies in different directions and hence adapt well to the change that they now belong to "Virmati stared at Swarna. "What a girl! Her opinions seemed to come from inside herself, her thoughts, ideas and feelings blended without any horrible sense of dislocation" (135). Virmati on the other hand is a sharp contrast to these successful women "I can't be like you, knowing what to say. I do not know how to convince people. I'm not clever" (132). She does not know how to manage with these strong waves of change once she had decided to leap. Rollason has pointed out:

The psychological annihilation of Virmati, at the hands of her own family and her husband, should not be read as a fatality. What happens to Virmati is no doubt the most representative destiny of the Indian women (even if educated), quantitatively or statistically, but Manju Kapur's novel shows that other paths also exist, while further stressing that choices are by no means simple or either. There are types of female negotiations that work, and others that do not: but nothing is predetermined. (4)

The psychological treatment of female characters and the concrete development of the plot make up the entire strength of the novel. All female characters in the novel stand out and are able to live with the associated complexities, but for Virmati things are not the same. She is bound by the staunch foibles in



tradition soaked society.

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