

## **Kitchen as a Battlefield in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*: A Psychological Study**

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### **Introduction**

Postmodern literature has been greatly influenced by food images and the usage of food as a metaphor. Theme of food takes a major role in Literature especially in women's writings. In ancient literature, theme of food is used to show the manifestation of togetherness. On the contrary the theme of food in contemporary literature is used to show emotions, character of a person and personal vengeance. Food image also shows one's emotional, psychological and social disorders. Food symbolises identity and culture. Food is essential to life. No one can survive without food. In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, Duke Orsino says, "If music be the food of love, play on" (1). Here, he compares music to food which is essential to life. To Orsino, music is essential to his life. To all human beings, food is essential to their life. If there is no food, no life and no happiness. If there is no kitchen, no women, and then no life.

Eating is a human activity. Eating habits and eating with friends and relatives helps to understand human society. Recent psychoanalytic theory suggests that eating practices are essential to self identity. There is no culture without food. One can gain identity through our food. The well-known saying stresses the idea of food and identity as, "You are what you eat." Food gives energy and power. One who does not have enough to eat is powerless. So, food and kitchen are inseparable. Kapur uses the image of food and kitchen to show the distinct identity of her characters.

### **Metaphor of Food in *Difficult Daughters***

Social and psychological factors have influenced people's food habits and choices. Food and domesticity have been a central place in many works of women's literature. Food metaphors are used to characterize people and their position in society. Food shows one's personality, mood and temperament. In order to strengthen their theme, writers use food images in their works.

This paper tries to analyse the metaphor of food presented by Manju Kapur in her novel *Difficult Daughters* and to connect personal identity. Manju Kapur used food as a vehicle to express Ganga's emotion. Food and its preparation dominate Kapur's books. It brings forth various connotations of food in relation to individual and familial identity. The popular saying is, "The best way to reach man's heart is through his stomach." Majority of women agree that food plays an important role in their relationship. Because food helps to stabilize emotions and balance psyche. To Kapur, kitchen is an important place where various power plays are enacted. Food in Kapur's novel shows the cold war between two characters Ganga and Virmati.

To show the life of women Kapur uses the image of food. The significance of food is explained by Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esteric in *Food and Culture: A Reader* as: "Food is life and life can be studied and understood through food. Food is both a scholarly concern and a real-life concern." (1). In *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur takes up the issue of the necessity of

women's mastery of cooking in Indian scenario. Kasturi is an expert in cooking. Her training in culinary skill makes her a good housewife. Kapur explains the skill of Kasturi as:

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, paranthas, crisp and stuffed. With morrabas, never soggy, and dripping juicy sweet. 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 kanji, with lassi, thin, cool and salty, or thick and sweet. With barfis made of nuts 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 . . . ” (*Difficult Daughters*- 62-63).

It not only shows Kasturi's skill in cooking but also shows her family status in society. From this, it is clear that her family is a wealthy one and they eat and enjoy all the dishes they like. In *Difficult Daughters*, Kitchen is a metaphor for the daily life of the women in the household. It is a very important place in Kapur's fictional world and plays a dominant position in establishing power rules in the house. In this novel, often the kitchen becomes a battlefield and family politics take shape there. Ganga, the first wife of Professor takes revenge on Virmati, her husband's second wife.

Virmati occupies herself with her studies, does not know cooking well. She often cuts her hands while peeling and chopping vegetables. Whereas Ganga is an expert in cooking. Ganga shows her hatred by adding extra sugar and salt to Virmati's food. Virmati finds out this and complains it to her husband. Her husband complains it to his mother Kishori Devi. She replies that because of Virmati, Ganga's work is increased. Virmati should understand and tolerate it. Virmati explained the result of this issue as: “ In the end Virmati gave up drinking lassi, or eating anything that her husband didn't eat, because hers was always too sweet, too salty, too fried, too soggy, too stale and, if possible, too dirty.”(*Difficult Daughters* -230). Here, Ganga wins the battle. Virmati who spends her time in studies has to depend on Ganga and her mother –in –law Kishori Devi for food.

After some days, Virmati plans to go to kitchen and to prepare the food for her. Ganga establishes her superiority by not allowing Virmati to use the kitchen. The reaction of Ganga was portrayed by Kapur as: “She had once tried going into the kitchen, but there had been such weeping and wailing that day, such ritual rinsing of every pot and pan to wash away her polluted touch, that she felt intimidated. It was clear that not an inch of that territory was going to be yielded.” (*Difficult Daughters* - 230). As a traditional wife, Ganga wants to dominate by taking the kitchen in her hand. Her only weapon is kitchen. She feels that Virmati already conquered her husband. So, she does not allow Virmati to prepare anything for her husband. Kitchen is the only weapon she has in her hand. So, Ganga never allows Virmati to prepare her food. Again, Virmati complains it to her husband. He consoles her by saying, ““Poor thing, you have me, let her have the kitchen.”” Again, Virmati loses her kingdom of kitchen. Virmati is not satisfied with his answer. She wants to share food with the family. Because dinning together at the table has some significance. It strengthens relationship. Relationship towards food symbolizes relationship towards life.

Indian women's world is around family and Kitchen. Kitchen plays an important role to bond a family. Moreover, Kitchen and food are linked to identity. Virmati tries to share her rights in the

kitchen but it was a failure. She wins the favour of Professor. But she wants to win the favour of others by doing household duties. She expresses her position in Professor's house as:

When his friends came, he sent orders to the kitchen that their favourite samosas – kachoris-pakorras –mathris should be made. Along with the khas, almond or rosewater sherbet of the season. All the effort of pounding, grinding, mixing, chopping, cutting, shaping, frying was hers . . . And what about her? What kind of wife was she going to be if everything was done by Ganga?'. (*Difficult Daughters*-216).

Though Virmati is Professor Harish's favourite mistress, she wants to show her skill in cooking and to win the favour of others. But she fails miserably. Virmati tries to forget everything that Ganga did for her. But she could not. To take revenge on Ganga, Virmati started behaving cheap and mean to Ganga. She asked her husband Harish to get sweets for her and then asked him to share the remaining thing with others. Kapur explains Virmati's state of mind as:

While she was working, she felt herself strong, and when she thought about home, ideas of revenge came into her mind, which she slowly put into practice. Her only weapon was her husband, and she started to use that. She displayed her power over him, needling him about Ganga, so that he would lose his temper with his mother over her. She asked him to get sweets and savouries for her, and then magnanimously made him share them with the others. She would make a show of dressing up to go out with him, and he loved flowers in her hair, asked him to tuck a sprig of jasmine or a rosebud into her bun, just as they were leaving. She even took care to dress better than she usually did and smiled seductively at Harish at least once a day in full view of others. (*Difficult Daughters*- 232-233).

Because she does not know what is happening to her. She loved everyone in the house. But no one talks with her except her husband. Moreover, she realized very lately that Ganga did all the works for Harish. Virmati started searching her identity as a wife. According to Vandita Mishra,

Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power of freedom. Because, even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones. . . Her relationship with the Professor, for instance, . . . Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow . . . Eventually, marriage to the man of her choice is no triumph either, As second wife, she must fight social ostracism outside the house, and compete for the kitchen and conjugal bed with Ganga, the first wife, inside it. (4)

Obviously, Virmati fails in the battle of life. Ganga, an expert in cooking fails to win the favour of her husband. Though, she does all the works for him, he treats her as his maid servant. Ganga learnt cooking and Virmati learnt books, but both fail to learn life. They are psychological and social victims. As an illiterate wife, Ganga needs financial support from her husband Harish. As a modern wife, Virmati needs some emotional support from Harish because her family avoided her for her marriage with a married man.

## Summation

In the battle, neither Ganga nor Virmati wins. The winner is Professor Harish. Kapur portrays the real attitude of the Professor Harish who enjoys his life with two wives. His first wife Ganga serves him like a maidservant and fulfils his needs. His second wife Virmati satisfies his academic

urge. Even though he is an educated person, he never cares for moral values. He emotionally threatens Virmati as: “Co-wives are part of our social traditions. If you refuse me, you will be changing nothing. I don’t live with her in any meaningful way”. At first Virmati fights. Later on, she accepts. Because she has to live with him because of a single word “marriage”. Moreover, she does not have the guts to live alone.

Through the image of kitchen and food Mukherjee presents the world of traditional and modern women through Kasturi, Ganga and Virmati. From this metaphor it is clear that whether they are traditional or modern, they are cheated by men in the name of marriage. Both Ganga and Virmati love each other. In the course of the novel, Virmati feels sorry for disturbing Ganga’s life. She feels for Ganga and expresses it to her husband as: ““I should never have married you,’ she said slowly, ‘and it’s too late now. I’ve never seen it so clearly. It’s not fair.” (212). It shows her good nature. In the beginning her intention is to marry Professor Harish and to get social recognition. After marriage she realized the truth that she is disturbing the life of innocent Ganga. When Virmati goes for higher studies leaving her husband Ganga says, “Poor Virmati. What woman wants to exchange a home for a classroom?” (29). Both Ganga and Virmati love each other. But without knowing his true nature they fight for “Professor Harish”, who is the villain in this novel. To explain the nature and feelings of two women Ganga and Virmati, Kapur uses food metaphor in this novel.

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