

Portrayal of Rising Never Identities in *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

The impact of patriarchy on the Indian society varies from the one in the west and therefore, the Indian women novelists have tried to evolve their own stream of feminism, grounded in reality. They have their own concerns, priorities as well as their own ways of dealing with the predicament of their women protagonists. Manju Kapoor's *Difficult Daughters*, recipient of the commonwealth writers' prize for best first book (Eurasia region), is a significant contribution in this direction.

Patriarchy, Mangal Sutra, Victim, Marginalized, Women's Oppression

In *Difficult Daughters*, her first novel, published in 1998 and located primarily in the India of the 1940s, Manju Kapur speaks, with great narrative eloquence, of the idea of independence. The search for control over one's destiny, surely the key theme of *Difficult Daughters*, refers to the Independence aspired to and obtained by a nation (despite its cruel division by a fateful Partition), but also to the independence yearned after (and finally not obtained) by a woman and member of that same nation (or of one of its rival communities). The dramatic and brutal story behind the partition of India, as played out in the region of Punjab is the compelling backdrop of Manju Kapur's '*Difficult Daughters*'. In the novel brutality and mayhem arising out of the Partition comes to us, through the accounts of various characters in the novel. These accounts recall the horror and brutality which it resulted in, and murder of a large number of people on both sides of the border.

Arya Samaj Family – Marriage in the Indian Context

Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* focuses on the Arya Samaj Family of Lala Diwan Chand. She also employs a narrative technique that deliberately traces out a generational progression with respect to the genealogical table of the family, especially referring to the women folk of the second and the third generations. The central character, Virmati belongs to the second generation. The dominant narrative voice in the novel is that of Ida. She delivers the same solely based upon her own past experiences, reminiscences, and plenty of information that she gathers from Kailash Nath and Gopi Nath, her maternal uncles and her Parvati Masi and all the close associates, friends and colleagues of her parents, well after the death of the couple. Besides, a thorough and comprehensive study of the novel obviously exposes the treatment of three separate composite sets of Indian women. All the three sets categorically centre around the very idea and spirit of marriage in the Indian context.

First - Ganga

The first one consists of Lajwanti, Kasturi, Harish's mother, Kishori Devi and his first wife, Ganga. Their marriages decidedly date back to the pre-Independence era. They seem to be behaving uniformly. To them, it is the moral aspect that counts. Naturally they glorify the institution marriage as the "be-all and end-all" for themselves. Ganga is seen as another victim of the traditional society. During her childhood, she was married to Harisol when he was three years old. She was never sent to school by her mother, but she had trained her in good housekeeping. When Ganga was 12 years old, she entered her in-laws' house and tried to prove herself as a good housewife, but she could never become an intellectual companion to her husband. As he felt lonely and desolate among his family members, he drew towards Virmati through her desire to learn and fell in love with her.

Ganga is also at fault for her plight, because in spite of Professor's attempts to teach her, she never tries to improve herself, to become a literate woman and share intellectual companionship with her husband for which he aspires. Due to Ganga's illiteracy, he brings home her rival Virmati. Distress envelops her, but she continues with domestic routine and her role as a wife, a mother and a daughter-in-law. Her ill-feelings for Virmati is quite natural, because no wife would like interference in her married life. She wishes for Virmati's death when she hears that she has gone to drown herself. After Virmati's pregnancy she wishes for the birth of a baby girl. At the resolution concerning Virmati's further learning, Ganga resents her studying the most. She thinks that if that much attention has been given to her, she would not be in the position she was that time. She smiles at the short while Virmati has lasted in the house and thinks "She herself would never clear the field for anyone". (*Difficult Daughters* 250) Kapur records Ganga's lookout and outlook in the following words: "Her husband continued to the Ganga's public statement of selfhood. Her bindi and her bangles, her toe rings and her mangal sutra, all managed to suggest that he was still her God". (DD 278) They are virtually the inseparable part of the tradition of weeping brides and her sorrow is not taken seriously". (203)

Virmati, Shakuntala and Swarna Lata

The remaining two sets, comprising the second and the third generations of the womenfolk of the family, vividly visualize the social scenario round about the Independence of India and onwards. Virmati, her cousin Shakuntala and her hostel room-mate, Swarna Lata constitute the second set. Virmati, like so many other sub-continental women, is asked to accept a typical arranged marriage. She rebels against that destiny, to the lasting shame of her family, above all, of her mother. Insisting on her right to be educated, she manages to leave home to study in Lahore. Nonetheless, she falls in love with the Amritsar Professor, Harish Chandra, a married man who first appears in her life as her parents' tenant. After numerous vicissitudes, including a period as a school principal in a small Himalayan state, she finally marries the man she loves and returns to Amritsar to live with him. However, he refuses to leave his first wife, and the consequence for Virmati are harsh indeed; she ends up being marginalized by her own family and despised by her husband's.

Virmati, being the eldest in the family of eleven children is made to play a second mother to her siblings. She is reminded of the incomplete sewing and knitting, or the food, milk, clothes and studies of her brothers and sisters by her mother. Education was important as educated boys asked for educated girls; it therefore was important only from the matrimonial point of view. Naturally in this set-up and with this social requirement, the role of education neither aimed at the growth of the individual, nor did it promise

independence to women. Virmati's mother had been dutifully spinning cotton to make a quilt for her to be given as dowry for her impending marriage. She was visibly exasperated at Virmati's refusal to consider the marriage. When Virmati mentions Lahore for her further studies, Kasturi becomes violent with rage and frustration. She grabs her daughter by her hair and bangs her head against the wall, expressly to knock some sense into her. She declares that she would readily consume poison if that would make her daughter marry the man her parents had chosen for her. Kasturi's feelings are revealed which show the anguish of an average mother:

What had come over the girl? She had 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 time, going to school had been a privilege, not to be abused by going against one's parents. How had girls changed so much in just a generation? (*Difficult Daughters* 60)

This is a question that haunts every generation of mothers when they see their daughters rebelling against the imposition of values of their earlier generation upon them.

Education versus Marriage

The "education versus marriage" argument is reiterated many times in the novel. Virmati's engagement and subsequent postponement of marriage gives her the opportunity to study further and thus begins the illicit relationship between her and the married Professor.

Through most of her life, Virmati is torn between family loyalty, her love for the Professor, which is a social aberration and her desire to be educated and independent. Soon after marriage, Virmati finds that everybody becomes hostile to her in the new environment. It is amazing to see that Virmati who was first attracted to the Professor for his love of freedom and individuality, willingly loses her identity into that of the Professor. Not that she does not understand the wrongs done by the Professor, but she is not prepared to face the situation. She, who had evinced much spirit in defying her parents and the parochial society, gets mired in the principles of patriarchy that suit the Professor. The harbinger of emancipation reduces Virmati to the position of a concubine.

Quest for Identity

After her marriage, Virmati's quest for identity is replaced by the struggle for existence. The woman who was supposed to be an intellectual, keeps craving for an opportunity to wash her husband's clothes. Her notions of self-assertiveness become confined to that of domesticity. Washing Harish's clothes becomes an important matter, whereby Virmati has to assert her right as a wife. Love, naturally, acquires another synonym for her -that of servitude. She has accepted everything as her lot and completely surrenders to it. Indian women take care of everybody in the family except themselves. Bhagbhat Nayak remarks:

The novel evokes some concern over the problems of women in a male-dominated society where laws for women are made by men in its social matrix and a husband stands as a 'sheltering tree' under which a woman proves her strength through her suffering. (103)

Vahdita Mishra rightly argues:

Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power or freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones. Her relationship with the professor, for instance. While it does provide an escape from a loveless arranged marriage; it is itself furtive and claustrophobic, by offering only a stolen togetherness behind curtained windows. Even years of studying and working alone does not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow. She hovers uncertainly at the edge of each new world, never entering, lest the Professor should call and not find her near. 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 the conjugal bed with Ganga, the first wife, inside it.

Advanced Women

Shakuntala and Swarnalata belonged to the type of advanced women in society, Shakuntala after doing her M. Sc, in Chemistry had experienced the joys of independent life. Her decision of not getting married during those days shows her strong character. When Kasturi says to Shakuntala "What the need to do a job? A woman's shaan is in her home." (16) She becomes the mouthpiece of the traditional society of contemporary India. At this Shakuntala responds by criticizing the social custom of marrying the daughters:

These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are- still supposed to marry, and nothing else. (17)

Shakuntala sowed the seeds for further studies in Virmati and invited her to Lahore saying "[...] times are changing, and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?" (18). It is only because of her inspiration that Virmati could aspire to soar very high in the sky, defying her traditional family and get herself highly educated, with the potential of being economically independent through her life — a rare accomplishment for the women of the times. Shakuntala is well over the marriageable age, but she has chosen not to marry. This is causing a headache for her mother Lajwanti, who wants her to be married and settled though she tries to hide the fact. Shakuntala is a fearless woman who opens the doors of Virmati's mind to worlds other than mere marriage.

To Conclude – Marriage as a Central Issue

Marriage is a very central issue in every Indian family. In Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati is brought up to be a wife and a mother, on the consciously inculcated idea of Indian feminine role. Her resolution not to marry the man of her parents' choice, but to marry the Professor or no else, is taken as a rebellious act against her upbringing in an austere family, where high ideals like morality, virginity and chastity are considered necessary virtues for an unmarried girl. The formal marriage, a social and public

statement, is a must for her. Marriage thus for women means deliverance from the fear of being socially condemned. The earlier generation of her mother saw no reason to rebel. There was complete acceptance in such a married life. Kasturi is an example of the typical feminine attitude - to procreate to bring about life and pleasure. To manage her home, first a joint family and later her own, is supposed to be happiness for her. Like Kasturi, for Ganga, marriage is a religious and a social institution, where love is not the basis of marriage. She too has a superb domestic sensibility.

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