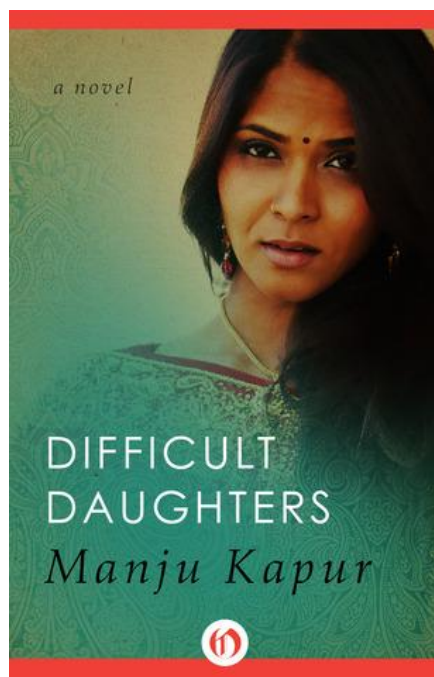


Daughter Writes Back: A Study of *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

The word *daughter* denotes in Indian culture a specific role played by a girl as the reservoir of family repute, a symbol of obedience and an embodiment of the mother's aptitude. The amount of closeness, ripened during the upbringing of the daughter, fixes mother and daughter in a relationship of its kind, glued with the knots of perennial dilemma. The present paper aims to bring into consideration Manju Kapur's debut novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998). Touching the fabric of mother-daughter bond, the novel is a kind of reaction of the daughter which travels through the sea of doubt, despair and disillusionment. The paper exhibits the questioning spirit of the daughter in relation to her self-doubt and self complacency which she receives as her asset from the mother. Woman as a daughter is in the whirlpool of conflicts, for along with biological changes she is expected to learn all the required attributes of a wife and mother. The paper is an endeavour to show the need for the daughter to write back to measure the effect of her suppressed emotions and to see what kind of relationship is shared by mothers and daughters.

Key words: mother, daughter, relationship, family demands, cultural restrictions

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 15:3 March 2015

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Meaning of *Daughter* and Relationship with Mother and Family

The word *daughter* denotes in Indian culture a specific role played by a girl as the reservoir of family repute, a symbol of obedience and an embodiment of the mother's aptitude. It seems as if every daughter is born with some kind of debt, owing to her mother, to be paid by reincarnating her mother's self and perpetuating the aspiration and values of the mother's private domain. The amount of closeness, ripened during the upbringing of the daughter, fixes mother and daughter in a relationship of its kind, glued with the knots of perennial dilemma. Stupefied by the mother's expectations and demanding nature, the daughter generally seeks a secure refuge, either in education or in a lover, not knowing the consequences of the impending separation.

Focus of This Paper - Manju Kapur's Debut Novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998)



The present paper aims to bring into consideration Manju Kapur's debut novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998). Touching the fabric of mother-daughter bond, the novel is a kind of reaction of the daughter which travels through the sea of doubt, despair and disillusionment. The paper exhibits the questioning spirit of the daughter in relation to her self-doubt and self complacency which she receives as her asset from the mother. Woman as a daughter is in the whirlpool of conflicts, for along with biological changes she is expected to learn all the required attributes of a wife and mother. The paper is an endeavour to show the need for the daughter to write back to measure the effect of her suppressed emotions and to see what kind of relationship is shared by mothers and daughters.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **15:3 March 2015**

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Ida, the Narrator

“Our inheritance from our mothers, then, is not of property . . . But instead, it is a longing for becoming, for a creation of ourselves, and an entitlement to discover, to recreate what surrounds us” (Bannerji 186). This is true in the case of Ida, the narrator, who attempts to reconstruct the history of her mother and thus seeks to discover identity for herself. Ida does not want to be like her mother because she cannot identify herself with her. An isolated being as she is, Ida, however, has only her mother to look for her identity. “The detachment enables her to start a journey that takes her two generations back (her mother’s and grandmother’s) and to build a tale, never told by Virmati herself, essential to give a sense of her life and define her identity” (Bruschi 235). Ida wistfully compares her own experiences with the experiences of her mother in order to recreate her identity.

Recapturing the History

Ida, a divorcee and childless lady, with a heavy heart after her mother’s death, confesses: “Without her, I am lost. I look for ways to connect” (Kapur 4). Ida remains a difficult daughter for her mother throughout her childhood and after. The fundamental conflict in Ida’s life is what she declares in the very first sentence of the novel, “The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother” (Kapur 1), and what she accepts in the epilogue, “I grew up struggling to be the model daughter” (279). What makes Ida a difficult daughter is her negation of the ideal daughterhood, which has supreme value in her mother’s estimation. Moreover, being husbandless, childless and parentless, Ida has “no brave causes left” for her to live. To add to this, her mother’s painful memories keep haunting her. Therefore, she makes an insightful attempt to recapture the history of her mother’s life; so that she can have a better understanding of her relationship with her mother and of herself.

In this context Kusum Lata Sawhney’s observation is worth quoting:

When you are a teenager, she [mother] is the most out-of-touch person who just does not understand you. We want her approval all the time and become irritable and disappointed when she is critical, for, she seems to only notice our flaws! When we are in our twenties and thirties, we again change and, hopefully, we become friends again. This is because you have matured or because marriage and childbirth also make you understand yourself better and in doing so you also have further insight into your relationship. (1)

Searching for the Roots

Hence, when the daughter takes to writing about her mother, this is actually her attempt to search out her own roots, identity and strength. Looking from a daughter's perspective, here it can be said that hitherto Ida has a partial view of her mother's life; but now she wants to know the daughterhood of her mother, the shaping mechanism in a woman's life, and thus tends to identify herself with her. Thus, this study will look forward to the conflicting paradigms of a daughter's reconstruction of her mother's past.

A Difficult Daughter since Childhood – Adjust, Compromise and Adapt

Since childhood, Ida has remained difficult daughter for her mother, as Virmati was for Kasturi. Moreover, in trying not to be like her mother, and to portray herself as the sheer opposite of her mother, Ida confirms her inheritance. She herself says, "She couldn't have, because when I grew up I was very careful to tailor my needs to what I know I could get. That is my female inheritance. That is what she tried to give me. Adjust, compromise, adapt" (Kapur 256). After reconstructing her mother's past, Ida realizes that Virmati too had protested against her mother, much like herself. "Yet travelling backwards in time complicates the figure of Virmati, which gains depth as Ida reads her life through her own experiences and, little by little, finds her own sensations reflected in her mother's; when she learns about Virmati's rebellion against Kasturi" (Bruschi 250). Ida can relate herself to the image of her mother that she has captured through her memory and imagination. She can feel the pain that her mother had to undergo while aborting a child. "I knew mother, what it was like to have an abortion. Prabhakar had insisted I have one" (Kapur 156). After knowing about her mother's marginalized position in the in-laws' house, Ida cannot help relate it with her own married life. She painfully addresses her dead mother:

Now I have nothing. Mother, I never told you this, because you thought Prabhakar was so wonderful, and I was glad that in the choice of my husband I had pleased you. Why should I burden you with my heartaches when you had enough of your own? You believed too strongly in the convention that a mother has no place in a daughter's home to stay with me, so you never really got to see the dynamics of our relationship close at hand. (Kapur 156-57)

As Virmati kept her life a secret to her daughter, similarly Ida never shares her tensions and worries with her mother. Ida concludes about her mother, “She was, after all, a woman who had defied her own family for many years” (Kapur 256).

Emotionally Disturbed Daughters

There are daughters who feel guilty and emotionally disturbed at the hands of mothers who keep their daughters in subordinate status and make them do their bidding. Such mothers reason that since they gave birth to their daughters and made the prerequisite sacrifices for them, their daughters should be grateful and be glad to do whatever mother wants. This is because the mother represents patriarchy and expects from the daughter to conform to the norms and values of this system. These values are transferred from the mothers to their daughters, generation after generation. When the daughter, Virmati, who was difficult for her mother to handle, herself becomes the mother of a daughter, then she realizes the meaning of being a mother. She imposes the same restrictions over her daughter, Ida, which were once imposed upon her by her own mother, Kasturi. Ida states candidly: “My mother tightened her reins on me as I grew older, she said it was for my own good. As a result, I am constantly looking for escape routes” (Kapur 279).

Mother – An Enigmatic Personality for Daughters

Thus, for daughter her mother remains an enigmatic personality. In childhood, she is too caring and full of affection that it makes the daughter wonder is she her mother or an angel incarnated. Whereas when the daughter reaches her adolescence, the same mother becomes too obnoxious, making it difficult for the daughter to breathe freely in the wake of the restrictions strictly imposed upon her. Then, in search of understanding such enigmatic behavior of the mother, daughter takes to writing and writes back in the light of her own reactions and responses the tale of their untold and unshared mutual sufferings and dilemmas. The same search is undertaken by Ida, daughter of Virmati, to figure out what was wrong with her mother, why was she always so fussy, and how could anyone be so much opposed to one’s own blood. To find answers to these pestering questions, Ida with the help of the available evidences furnished by her mother’s relatives, recreates the life of her mother in her memory. The sole justification for undertaking this recourse can be that Ida seeks explanation for those untold questions which neither she could ever ask nor Virmati could ever answer. It’s a worthy attempt to define the limitations of the woman in the role of a mother and a daughter that constitutes the core of this journey. Dwelling back into the past of her mother,

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1750-2740 15:3 MARCH 2015

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Ida seeks reconciliation if not in the role of a mother or a daughter, then at least as a woman. And this attempt, thus, makes her search genuinely fruitful.

Reconciliation and Better Understanding

The daughter who first felt alienated from her mother, now, by reconstructing the past of her mother, arrives at a better understanding. Isabella Bruschi observes:

Ida's search in the past allows her to come to terms with the haunting memory of her mother. She realizes Virmati has been, like her, a difficult daughter, who has tried to challenge patriarchy, despite her failures; the distance between the two of them is reduced by the many experiences Ida discovers they have in common. (252)

Transformation from Protest Submission

The transformation of a protesting daughter, Virmati, into a submissive mother makes the whole matter clear for Ida in particular and for readers in general; that is, mothers are not wrong in exercising certain control over their daughters. In patriarchy, it is their attempt to keep their daughters safe. To put it differently, by imposing certain restrictions over their daughters, mothers show their concern for the safety of their daughters. At the end of the book, understanding takes place between Ida and her mother. She declares: "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me any more" (Kapur 280).

Various Dimension of the Mother-Daughter Relationship

Manju Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters*, thus touches various dimensions of mother-daughter relationship. Initially, the daughter, belonging to the same sex, identifies herself with the mother. "Women as children are able to identify with their mothers quite strongly" (Panja 61). Then a stage comes when in her attempt to assert her identity, the daughter breaks away from the mother and feels alienated. However, when the same daughter, after being an experienced self, looks back at the past of her mother, she realizes what it is to be a mother in a patriarchal society. In this way, again an identification and understanding takes place between the daughter and the mother. In this regard, Asha Choubey's observation is worth quoting:

As a child she [Virmati] keeps craving for a little understanding from her mother but with the passing of time she learns to accept the situation as it is. This mother-daughter relationship marches from identification to alienation. Years after Ida – the daughter of Virmati – relives her relation with her mother, marching from alienation to identification. (110)

The Need for Daughter to Write Back

Therefore, Manju Kapur's present novel faithfully foregrounds the need for the daughter to write back. Writing for the daughter is a brave act of expressing her hidden fears and inhibitions that are the constituents of making her a difficult daughter. Sometimes, this journey of writing back is a voluntary action and sometimes a result of forceful situations. But whatever be the case, woman as a daughter invariably gives a vent to her pent-up feelings by devouring her embarrassment and writing down the story of her hitherto untold suffering.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 **15:3 March 2015**

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