

Emergence Of New Woman: A Study On Woman Characters In Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters

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Abstract:

The new woman refuses to be unvoiced under oppressive restrictions. Feminism intends to rebel against the hostile environment in which a woman is forced to live. It is the struggle against the hardships, neglect and dual moral standards to which women are subjected. The new woman's demand for her rightful place, recognition and respect due to her is prompted by an inner urge to make her a meaningful one.

Key Words: Feminism, Patriarchy, Emergence, Identity, womanhood, self-reliance.

A woman is new if her basic concerns are deeper than merely seeking equality with men, asserting her own personality and insisting upon her own rights as a woman. Among the writers who have portrayed the "New Woman" and are inclined to take the 'road not taken' and walking on their 'own road', Manju Kapur undoubtedly arrests attention. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* (1999) received huge international acclaim. The purpose of this paper is to study woman characters of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* as a "New Woman" and deals with emergence of New woman to establish an identity and liberation from fear to freedom and the choices they make and choices made for them. Her novels comprehend into the hope of Indian Women. Choice indicates generally the freedom to choose. To accomplish that, choosing is an important activity. Indeed, Actions must be united to attain freedom and

freedom of thought. The perception of choice plays main role in Robert Frost's poem in *Road Not Taken*: Two roads diverged in a wood, and I took the only less travelled by, and that has made all the difference (18-20) Here, the road signifies the choice every individual faces some day or the other in his/her life. As adjusted life never comforts them in some point of time, they come out of that life to live the chosen actuality. The choice of a career, the choice of a life partner and all big choices man or woman makes constitute the components of life. One never knows whether the decision he/she is taking will prove to be good for them in the long run or will leave them with regret at not having chosen the other. Still one has to make a choice and this is the irony of life. Human beings have the power to freely choose between alternatives and shape their destiny.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a feminist discourse not because she is a woman writing about women's issues, but because she tries to understand a woman both as a woman and as a human being pressurized by visible and invisible contexts. (Jaidev , p 68) She presents a glimpse of feminism keeping in mind the Indian context. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* manages to be simultaneously both Indian and Universal. Kapur states that in India modern liberated women have started to choose their own lives and to decide for themselves, whether they want to be homemakers or more. In her first novel, *Difficult Daughters* she talks about the choices made by Virmati, the protagonist of the novel in the postmodernist manner. She is unable to make up her mind regarding what to do and what to achieve in her life. She has choices open for her. Her desires are multifarious and she has no idea about the priorities of her desires. For her the family name is prestigious, she is proud of her roots. The novel has undeniably an autobiographical touch. Sumita Pal rightly focuses the autobiographical elements in the novels:

"Like Virmati, Manju Kapur was born in Amritsar and teaches in college. Her family was victims of partition and was Arya Samajis like Virmati's family. Manju Kapur's father too was a professor, like Virmati's husband. Manju Kapur admits that she herself had been a difficult daughter for the mother whose priority was marriage and she, in turn wants her daughter to have good jobs. The novel illustrates the life of Virmati through her daughter Ida and her family members. Ida finds that her mother struggles between the choice of living a

traditional life and leading a life of modernity. The novel is a powerful tale of three generations

Difficult Daughters has been well-received by one and all, Urvashi Butalia of *Kali for Women* was struck by the simplicity of Manju Kapur's writing style. "There is no gimmickry in the language, as we see in some other books". The novelist Mukul Kesavan commends *Difficult Daughters* as "a first-rate realistic novel about a daughter's reconstruction of her troubled past, hinging on her mother's story." Actually it is a story of a daughter's journey back into her mother's past to reconstruct memories of her mother as the daughter she had been. The narrator visits the houses where her mother had breathed, meets her friends and acquaintances to retrace the dead mother's footsteps through time and space to tell a story that is unique and yet quite familiar. Based on the factual events of India's partition, the story inextricably weaves the fictional tale of a Punjabi family covering three generations of women. Ida, the narrator, daughter of Virmati is left behind with a disastrous marriage, and is a divorcee. Virmati, the protagonist marries an already married professor for the sake of love. And Kasturi, mother of eleven children, who comes to terms with her daughter, Virmati who insists on studying and spurns marriage. The very title of the novel *Difficult Daughters* subtly alludes to the patriarchal convention that a woman, who undertakes a quest for an individual identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well. "Although Virmati succeeds in breaking all man-made boundaries, there are certain priorities so deeply embedded within her that she, grows up from a immature girl to a woman matured by suffering and through experience." (John, 1) Indian's victory against the imperial rulers is mirrored through Virmati's life. No doubt India attained freedom from colonial rule but at the cost of partition and communal hatred. Virmati was victorious in breaking the age old shackles of patriarchal society in a tradition bound country but at the cost of much mental, torture and constantly struggling but failing to be erase the tag of being the 'other' woman.

Thus Far we see the budding of a 'New Woman' in Virmati who does not want 'to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed' (DD 85) Defying patriarchal notions that enforce a woman towards domesticity, she asserts her individuality and aspires for self reliance through education. She is not a silent rebel, but is bold, outspoken, determined and

action-oriented. She knows she cannot depend upon the professor to sort out the domestic situation and proceeds to tackle it on her own way. Later, she very resolutely and coolly shuns the professor, ignoring his plea and keeps the reins in her hand. She displays a marvellous strength of mind in overcoming her dejection. She is 'strong to bear the pain, silently without anyone knowing'. (DD 101) The determined and unperturbed manner in which she burns the professor's letters shows her resolution to close the chapter and look forward to a meaningful life in Lahore.

In spite of her initial revolt against the family and firm stand against the professor, she succumbs to his implorations and passion in Lahore. Loss of virginity pricks her conscience but then she overcomes the guilt by rationalizing it as "outmoded morality". (DD 114) She had come to Lahore to broaden her horizons but instead she gets involved in useless love, doubtful marriage and unwed pregnancy. The initial determined and self-confident identity gradually decline away into a pawn whom the Professors tells "just what to look for, what to admire, what to criticize".(119) She wants to spread her wings like Swarna Latha, her roommate, who is committed to "meaningful activities" regarding the freedom movement and women's emancipation. But her emotional dependence on the Professor who constantly evades the question of marriage, stops her from doing anything that he disapproves – "May be I could be like Swarna from the inside, secretly". (DD 124) At the Punjab Women's Student Conference, she is amazed at "how large an area of life women wanted to appropriate for themselves". (DD 132) But these large spaces are not for her. She wastes her time awaiting the furtive meetings with the Professor in spite of the awareness that there were "myriad instances of where she felt she had been weak or wronged". (DD 129) she is being used and the Professor wants to have the cake and eat it too. He enjoys the better of the two worlds and is not there even at the most crucial time when she undergoes the termination of the pregnancy. Even afterwards when the Professor eventually marries her very unenthusiastically, she is given pariah status and faces exclusion from hearth etc. which is the sole domain of the Professor's first wife, Ganga. Virmati lives in a cramped space and is forced into submission though in a very subtle manner as Jaidev(1952:57) writes in another context "Indeed, any sophisticated structure today functions not by direct, visible exploitation but by making the victims willingly, freely and happily give in to its

imperatives....”Professor Harish’s attitude towards her is patronizing and demeaning. His interest in her is an extension of self love- awakening her intellect and emotions inflates his ego. Undergoing a gradual process of self-effacement, her energies are directed towards pleasing him while she herself remains parched. She finds M.A. in Philosophy dull, abstract and meaningless but studying it was her only means of escape. She wished “Harish had though another subject suitable for her. She also wished it was not such an uphill task, being worthy of him”. (DD 237). In fact, she remains ‘difficult’ only as a daughter towards her grandfather who always championed her cause, her father who was very understanding and allowed her to study further and towards her mother who certainly had Virmati’s good at heart.

Thus, though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is caught into another where her free spirit is curbed and all she does is ‘adjust compromise and adapt.’ She could have put her foot down saying she will be her own mistress and relate to him with dignity or not at all. Perhaps the words were at the back of her mind, teasing her tongue with their shadowy sounds’ (DD 236). Thus, in Virmati we see the incipient New Woman who is conscious, introspective, educated, and wants to carve a life for her. To some extent she even conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social codes yet she lacks confidence, self control, and far-sightedness and is psychically imprisoned with an underlying need to be emotionally and intellectually dependant on a superior force – Professor Harish and it is precisely this knowledge through which the patriarchy works. She fails to break the ‘dependence syndrome’ (Nahal: 1991:17) and halts on the path to full human status.

Trampling patriarchal norms, Virmati defies societal expectation to assert her individuality and hopes to achieve self-fulfilment. But what does she really get? 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. Perhaps it is this inability of Virmati to strike independent roots and grow that makes Ida remark.”The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother”. (DD P1)

It is possible to trace the feminism implicit in the novel through Ida’s impatience towards her mother’s weaknesses. When her Parvati Masi says that Virmati was

a simple girl at heart, Ida says “I hate the word ‘simple’. Nobody has any business to live in the world and know nothing about its ways”. (DD 224) No woman, who dares to spurn patriarchal protection, can afford to be ignorant, simple or naïve. Surely, Virmati’s unwed pregnancy and then its heartless termination are unpalatable to Ida who finally breaks up with her husband, Prabhakar, because he had forced her to have an abortion – “In denying that incipient little thing in my belly, he sowed the seeds of our break up”. (DD 156) and then, does passion so transform an individual that Virmati fails to see things in the right perspective? She not only disregards her filial duty but also becomes a victimizer by usurping what rightfully belongs to Ganga, the Professor’s first wife, thereby giving a setback to the much needed feeling of sisterhood among women. The concluding lines of the novel reiterate Ida’s rejection of Virmati, not as a mother but as a woman. “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 anymore”. (DD 280) Ida, who grew up struggling to be the model daughter, does not have the heart to reject Virmati, the mother, but her head, the retinal, rejects her as a woman after having an insight into Virmati’s past.

Through Ida’s admiration for Swarna Latha, who enters into a wider socio-political sphere, the novelist seems to be saying that a woman can maintain her individuality and pursue her interest without threatening the family structures. Thus a woman should basically strive towards a fine interdependent partnership. But if she feels suffocated, then a voice ought to be raised and there should be a total breaking away, like Ida. But merely transcending societal norms is not enough. A woman should be aware, self controlled, strong willed, self reliant and retinal having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense. Thus Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* is a feminist discourse not because she is a woman writing about women but because, as Jaidev puts it she “has understood a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible contexts”. (68) She presents feminism at its most same keeping in mind the Indian context.

The happiest and perhaps the most successful phase of her life was the episode at Nahan, when she became the headmistress of a girl’s school. She almost attained

the autonomy over her life, which she had craved all along and eventually discovered her own space to live, something similar to what Virginia Woolf identified as a ‘room of her own’. But she failed to restrain herself from succumbing to the demands of the relationship which she knew was doomed from beginning, but did not have the heart to deny. Despite the shock and disapproval of both families the Professor eventually married her but Virmati’s married life was a sheer disaster. She was ostracized by her family, and forced to compete for her share of her husband’s love along with his first wife, Ganga. Virmati was forced to compromise and adjust in order to adapt herself into her husband’s family and eventually died an insignificant death. At the end of the novel Ida says” This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word-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 anymore. (DD 280) .She wanted to bury the ghosts of her mother’s past behind her and move on in life.

Kapur presents the psychic distress on women through the rebellious character of Virmati when she desperately proclaims ‘we have to accept this is our lot in life’. The novel not only refers to the difficult daughter Virmati but also alludes to the several other difficult daughters who left the confines of their house hold and engaged themselves in the national struggle for independence. Gur Pyari Jandial felt that despite the failure to attain completely autonomy Virmati’s efforts to break the confinement of the patriarchal world is not insignificant altogether; ‘what Virmati tried to do in the forties was a great achievement in itself’. In the novel *Difficult Daughters* we do not listen to Virmati s’ voice. What we have is her daughter’s reconstruction and representation. Although Virmati does not speak out, yet it is clear that her character is located at the juncture of two oppressions; colonialism and patriarchy.

Shakuntala and Swarna latha are presented as truly ‘modern’ or ‘liberated’ women. However it is actually Virmati’s difficult daughter, Ida who in her determination to live life despite all odds represents the real face of a modern woman. Ida could not accept her mother’s decision to abort the foetus and terminate other life growing within her, for her. She had broken her relationship with her husband Prabhakar for he had forced her to go for an abortion – “I knew Mother, what it was like to have an abortion Prabhakar had insisted I have one. In denying that incipient little thing my belly, he sowed the seeds of our break up’.

(DD 156) Ida had never shared this secret with her mother. She confessed how the death of the foetus haunted her and how she had endured the trauma of her loss alone. 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? (DD 156-157)

She knew that her mother liked Prabhakar and since she never came to stay with her daughter Virmati was not aware of the real dynamics of their relationship. Ida goes on to vent her feelings about her mother. “He was what you respected, a successful academic, a writer of books, a connoisseur of culture, a disseminator of knowledge. Like my father? My father was on a pedestal so high that to breathe that rarefied atmosphere was an honour.” (DD 156-157) Ida was resolute to leave her past behind and live for the future. She did not wish to make the compromises which her mother had made.

In Shakuntala, Swarnalatha and Ida we see the images Modern women, conscious, introspective, educated, emancipated, and driven by the zeal to assert their autonomy and separate identity and find a place for them in society. Hence it is concluded that Manju Kapur explores the pivotal issues related to women like –education, marriage, motherhood, identity crisis, economic freedom, self reliance and ultimately women’s independence.

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