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**MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS***

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**Abstract:**

Indian Women novelists have been portraying women in various manifestations. But recently, during the Post-Colonial period a remarkable and tremendous change has been brought by the great Indian women novelists such as Kamala Markandaya, Nayanthara Sehgal, Anitha Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharathi Mukherjee, Manju Kapur, Githa Hariharan and so on. They have portrayed the women characters as individuals who fight against suppression and oppression of women by the patriarchal society. They portray women as rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the shackles of exploitation and oppression, awakening with search for identity, to assert their individuality. Manju Kapur is one of the prominent new voices making her presence felt. Her novels speak about women's frustration, refusals, retaliations, and their breach of conventional expectations. She raises the voice against male chauvinism to claim the rights of economic independence of women. The present paper explores the utmost excitement and anguish of the protagonist Virmati of *Difficult Daughters* in her quest for Self-Identity and Emancipation and protest against the blind dogmas of socio-cultural as well as patriarchal clutches disguised as traditional customs.

**Key Words: Self-Identity, Oppression, Emancipation, Exploitation.**

Manju Kapur's debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*, was published in (1998) and it has been winning several accolades since then. It was short-listed for the Cross word Book Award in India and also earned the prestigious Common Wealth Writer's Prize for the Best First Book category in the Eurasia region in 1999. The novel is set at the time when India was to face the struggle for independence and the holocaust that followed in the wake of the partition of the country in 1947. The turbulent days that preceded and followed the partition of British India as India and Pakistan, were fraught with political hatred and violence, with passions which had seized people in a communal frenzy. Meenakshi Mukarjee in her article, "Readability of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*" (1998) states that it has been hailed as "an impressive novel" and Nira Gupta Casale also calls it "a novel about female desire and entrapment, about compromise and compliance". (2003:173)

The Central theme of Manju Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters* is Struggle for Freedom. On the one hand it is the freedom for one's country, the back drop of the novel on which it is set and on the other it is the freedom for one's self. It is the story of a woman, narrated by another woman, who is criss-crossed by contradictory and conflicting concepts, ripped by two disjunctive (doctrines/dogmas) structure that systematize the human life. Virmati in the *Difficult Daughters* is caught between the dilemma of obedience to traditional family duty to keep up the family prestige and subjugation or surrender to self - sensuous desires. It is praise worthy and admirable to have a passionate longing for freedom of one's a legitimate and laudable passion. Whereas a passionate longing for freedom for fulfilling filial desires with a married Professor of English is illegitimate, unethical and everyone considers it a sin, a reprehensible and repressive affair in the traditionally bound patriarchal society. At the time, the novel is set, there was the conflict of partition of large British Indian nation into India and Pakistan and the consequent rift prevailed among the people. This conflict is a symbolic implication of the split of one's heart and soul between sensitive and sensuous tradition and temptation, filial relation and fair relation. Manju Kapur's skill and ability is vivid in her effort to narrate the contradictory and conflicting modes of an individual's sensitive situation at the back drop of the country's freedom struggle underlining the transformation of the Indian women's search for self-identity and raising their voice in protest of male chauvinism, claiming freedom for physical and passionate as well as sensitive

and sensuous. The author also makes an effort to reflect the theme of discriminating socio-political resistance in the gender perspective.

*Difficult Daughters*, brings forth the issue of gender discrimination and the struggle of the suffering Indian women under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society. It is an issue based on the crisis in the value system of the modern society and we cannot just shrug it off.

Virmati, the protagonist of the novel is shown to have been brought up under the care of an educated and cultured family she has grown to be a responsible girl, looking after her younger siblings as a surrogate mother due to her mother's successive pregnancies and consequent sickness. She is portrayed as a woman totally in control of her body and mind despite her exasperating physical and emotional rifts. However, during and in the end, she realizes that her reactions to those rifts and the remedies. She ransoms have rendered further emotional rift between herself and others related to and surrounding her. Interestingly, it is her daughter Ida's quest to trace her mother's past that brings out the intrinsic struggle to attain selfhood and the realisation of the ultimate fact of her life, that everything in this world is relative, nothing or nobody can stand apart on his/her, own, however strong or weak he/she might be.

One is sensitively struck by the skillful narrative technique adopted by the adorable native author with a fine fabrication of fiction and facts reflecting the distinctive feminist aspect. It is the story of a woman, Virmati, narrated by another woman, Ida, Virmati's daughter. Ida under an emotional trance after her mother's death, opens up an entire genealogy of narrative and filial relationships of her mother in trying to know her past. However, her search doesn't provide her to find the facts that she wants as she claims: "My relatives gave me one view of my mother, I wanted another" (5) it can be understood that the other side of the story that Ida wanted has been lost in the reluctant informative views revealed by the relatives. Ida, not being content with the views of the relatives about her mother, makes further efforts to reconstruct her mother's story. The novelist has been able to maintain authorial distance, as the story of Virmati also relates to the narrator's life in some aspects. So, Ida as the interpreter of her mother's story creates a problematic relationship between the author and the reader. This relationship is problematic because in a sense it facilitates one with understanding of a woman's way of experiencing another woman's life.

The paper depicts that a critique of mother-daughter relationship, tracing it through three successive generations. We see that each succeeding generation of daughters takes a step further to conflicts between them. Further she remarks that the novel is a pointer to how a mother's influence could be unsettling to the daughter under different circumstances; how a mother, traditionally an epitome of sacrifice and goodness, could become a symbol of selfishness and resentment to her children. (2001:58-65)

As the novel moves on, various contradictory aspects of two oppositional factors of female and male, individual and society and to say broadly, between feminism and patriarchy. Virmati the protagonist of the novel was born and brought up in a family which is orthodoxically bound to patriarchal domination. As she grows, she struggles with the oppositional aspects of domination and resistance as well as freedom and bondage. She finds her space, in which she struggles to negotiate, compelled to accept but ultimately defies, transgresses and revolts to the patriarchal norms of family and the oppressive norms of the family and society. The story of Virmati is of transgression committed at diversified levels. Yet her story has many similarities with the stories of other characters of Kasturi, Ida, Lajwanti, Shakuntala, Inder, Swarna Latha and Ganga as well as other female characters. All of these women may be marked as *Difficult Daughters* in general as well as individual ways. The common similarity among these characters that one can find is their subjugation and resistance to the patriarchal norms to which they are compelled to yield, particularly to the male chauvinism. Despite being messed up with the social havoc in their relationship, there is commonness in their sufferings under the oppressive patriarchal shackles cuffed by men. Almost all of these characters have borne their suffering in silence. It is only their silences have spoken rather than their voices that are articulated by the male chauvinistic values. The relationship between mothers and daughters is found to be more interesting in which the subjugation of women by men is implied. This kind of relationship has become distressed with scorching opinions and crippled at different dimensions. It interrogates the fallacies of feminism but continues to have an alliance with it, as it intersects the patriarchal domain and the particularity of women's experience.

Virmati having attained the age of seventeen looks attractive with her long face. Lala Divan Chand, her grandfather tells his widowed sister, who thought "Marriages are in the

hands of God” (23) meanwhile, their fortunes were getting deteriorated and the family was compelled to ration their expenditure on observing festivals and on new clothes. Lajwanti, Kasturi’s co-daughter – in - law who thinks that Kastrui, “is no better than a dog or cat in the season”. (24) disagrees with her father-in-law’s statement and further remarks, Kasturi’s children bring “raunaq in the house” (25). Consequently, Lajwanti thinks that their needs were limited and so she wanted him to divide the properties of the family. She is more discontent because Kasturi who had more children would have a lion’s share while she had only two children her share would be less. This feeling of discontent made Lala bewildered, puzzled with her thought. Lala firmly says, ”As long as I was alive, everybody would be provided for. But with each new child Kasturi produced, the murmurs of discontent became louder and more persistent.” (27) Then Lala’s eldest son and Lajwanti’s husband, Chander Prakash did have the same discontent. He tells his father-“ Baoji, they are eleven, and we are two. How will everything be equal-equal?” (28). having understood the agony of his son, Lala ultimately gives in.

After long discussions and arguments among them, it was decided to construct a new house at Lepel Griffin Road. All the members of the family moved to the new house. Somnath, Chander Prakash and Lajwanti’s son get a tenant to the house, He thought “even the best families in Lahore take tenants” (35). The new tenant was an England returned professor of English by name Harish. It is revealed that he unwillingly returned to India but, being the only son, he was compelled, by his mother to return to India. Otherwise, he felt- “Her death would be on his head if he did not come back” (36) Very soon the families became friends and the Professor’s wife become Virmati’s bosom friend and Virmati frequently visits the Professor’s house followed by her shadow, Paro. They go shopping together and enjoyed each other’s company. When his wife introduces Virmati to him, the Professor sensed that, “This girl has potential he found himself thinking”, (39). He is impressed and get attracted to her, while listening to the music at professors house. “She was dreaming more intensely than she ever had of her fiancé.” (39). She too sensed that the Professor was paying attention to her and the very thought of her own wedding was at the back of Virmati’s mind. It was rather splitting her into two unacceptable pieces. She considered, “it was very noble of the Professor to try and teach his wife. It showed that he

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really cared for women's education, just like her grandfather" (39). But the Professor's wife was not able to learn. The professor's efforts to make his wife learned were of no use. His desire of sharing his views on literature and others and to have discussions with his wife could not be fulfilled. He was longing for a companion with whom he could share and discuss his literary knowledge, and Virmati was found to suitable. Meanwhile there is an endless debate on education versus marriage to quench his thirst for literature.

In Virmati, one finds the incipient 'New Woman' who is conscious, introspective, educated and wants to carve out a life for herself. Virmati's desire for establishing self-identity is "A value changed, almost a charismatic term, with its secured achievement regarded as equivalent to personal salvation" (1970: 77). And her quest for identity is the spiritual odyssey of the modern man who has lost his social and spiritual moorings and who is anxious to seek his roots.

Virmati having born and brought up in an orthodox educated and cultured Arya Samaj family should not have committed this sin of loving a married person. It's nothing but betraying his own family, particularly her parents who complete trust her. Moreover when she has been engaged to some other person, chosen by her grandfather and parents. She refuses to marry that 'Canal Engineer' as she had sensually yielded to the professor who always tried to induce her. This is nothing but her voluptuousness, her passion for mundane lust. Her quest to quench her physical lust at the cost of her family reputation and at the risk of her life, denying the traditions and ethics.

Her longing for her mother love and affection, her craving to be loved by someone in her family to share her views and feelings draw her towards Prof. Harish, who shows more concern and interest in her with his alluring looks and words. The incessant inducing words of the Professor make her yield to him and ultimately succumb to his and her physical and sensuous lust. She loses her morality, tradition, wisdom and at last her complete self to her and the Professor's lust although she knows that it was an illicit and immoral as well as unsocial and unethical love affair. This is all because of the communication gap between Virmati and her mother, who always reminded her of her responsibilities and burdened her with the task of taking care of younger siblings.

Virmati is rejected as a cult and impugns the set taboos imposed on women in male dominated Indian society. Manju Kapur has successfully presented this metamorphosis by drawing a parallel between Virmati's struggle for self-liberation and the freedom movement that was prevalent during that then. The suppressed and subjugated world of Indian women comes to full light in the character of her protagonist Virmati. She dexterously delineates all kinds of visible and invisible pressure that kept Indian women suffocated for long.

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