

Women's Oppression of Women: Dismantling Gender in Difficult Daughters

Dr. Shreeja Tripathi Sharma

Assistant Professor of English,

Institute for Excellence in Higher Education

Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India

shreeja.sharma@gmail.com

Abstract

The discourse on gender relies heavily on transcendence over patriarchal structures of authority. The interplay of oppression and authority exercised by women on other women constitutes a rather silent aspect of the discourse. The quest for feminine identity is apparently incomplete without the amalgamation of disjoint fragments of femininity. This research paper explores the silent shades of gender and feminine power associations through a critical study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*.

Keywords: Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, Feminism, Gender

Feminist theories on Gender are replete with instances of dominion of patriarchal structure of power. However, the oppression of women by other women remains largely absent from the discourse. The hierarchical patterns of authority built by women-folk to control the degree of autonomy provided to other women looms like the shadowed facet of silent oppression. The feminine struggle for liberation cannot be implicated merely by the conscious departure from the patriarchal chains of restraint. A more inclusive pursuit of feminine sovereignty needs to be absolved of the unconscious shackles of feminine dominion within the 'intra-feminine' frame of reference.

This research paper seeks to study Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, by exploring its narrative of three generations of women during pre-partition, partitioned and post-partition India. The first generation of women Kasturi and Lajwanti are women bound to conventions of patriarchal authority. Not only do they refrain from breaking the norms in a quest to seek their identity, but they also refute the efforts of younger women from asserting their feminine identity. The younger ladies among the first generation of women, like Shakuntala and Swarnalata have a greater degree of freedom from patriarchal authority and are therefore more responsive and liberal towards the second generation of women. The second generation of women in the narrative finds a strong voice of expression in Virmati, who boldly defies the conventions of patriarchy and boldly steps out of the dominion of female structures of convention imposed upon her by the first generation of women. Virmati's daughter Ida, the most empowered woman, in the third generation, seeks to uncover the persona of her mother after her death and recounts story of the preceding generations.

Ida's quest for her mother's roots, takes her to Amritsar, "a place associated with her mother". Ida has been recently divorced and seeks to understand her mother in order to resolve the conflicts within her, "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother" (1). The relatives of her mother reveal her details of her dead mother's up-bringing in a huge patriarchal family.

The narrative recounts the life of Arya Samaji family of Lala Diwan Chand who runs a jewelry business with the help of his two sons, Chander Prakash and Suraj Prakash. His younger son and his wife Kasturi, have a large family. Their eldest daughter "an increasingly sensitive Virmati" is a simple homely girl who nurtures her ten siblings tenderly like a foster mother. Her mother Kasturi keeps frail, infirm and ill-due to repeated child births and has therefore delegated her domestic responsibilities to her daughter Virmati. Kasturi does not protest against the structures of male dominion nor makes efforts to stop the abuse of her frail

body. Perfectly reflecting the mindset of first generation of women, she accepts her role in the patriarchal set-up agreeably and dutifully. In fact, on similar lines, she expects obedience and servility from Virmati.

Virmati's life comes to a turning point after her encounter with her bold, defiant cousin sister Shakuntala Pehnji. Shakuntala is an unmarried, educated and bold woman who keeps herself in the company of women with an independent outlook: "we travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings, follow each other's work, read papers, attends seminar. One is even going abroad for higher studies" (17). She thus seems to break away from the collective identity of women who live by the command of patriarchal structure with absolute obedience. Her status of not having been married too matches her independent spirit. She likes to study, teach, and take part in the political Gandhian movement.

Virmati's association with Shakuntala inspires her to aspire for her own world of freedom - travelling, reading and learning. She begins to step outside the tethered domains of her mind, "It was useless looking for answers inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom, and the bright lights of Lahore college" (15). She gorges on the ambition to get proper education and comes to see it as a tool of mental emancipation. But pursuing the journey of education and freedom leads her to fighting her way out with her own family, "even if she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over" (17).

Virmati's mother barely understands her desire for education and is evidently more inclined towards getting her married. She typifies the concerns of the first generation of women-folk, who adhere to their feminine collective identity and detests any form of departure in the form of assertion of individuality.

Kasturi is least sympathetic towards Virmati's demands for a quieter atmosphere which is conducive to studies. When Virmati fails in her FA exams, her mother bursts out:

Now it is you who are eating my head. What good are Shaku's degrees, when she is not settled? Will they look after her when she is old? ... At your age I was already expecting you, not fighting my mother (19).

Such arguments reveal the bitterness, lack of understanding and compassion between Kasturi and Virmati. It is evident that Kasturi's outlook, strongly governed by patriarchal conditioning, distances her from her own daughter. Her lack of maturity makes her think of Viramati's as a wayward young woman who is at odds with the decorum and code of expected conduct for women. It is apparent that a 'modal woman' must clearly pursue her marriage prospects meekly and make herself tamable enough to run a household as per the conventions like Kasturi. Kasturi regards her daughter's aspirations to get educated as 'useless' and 'unnecessary' and holds her efforts towards betterment in low esteem. There seems to be an extreme lack of feminine bonding and emotional depth in Kausturi's relationship with her daughter.

Virmati adopts unconventional ways to complete her education, despite the impediment of the household activities which included taking care of her ten siblings. She becomes the first in her family to become a post-graduate in a masculine bastion of learning. Her talent and commitment towards empowerment through education is markedly unappreciated by her parents and kin who fail to understand her disgust for conventional arranged marriage. They get her engaged to Inderjit a Canal engineer, son of a respectable family. But their marriage is postponed twice due to deaths in the family.

The plot gets complicated when Virmati begins to idolize Professor Harish who teaches her literature. She is much impressed by his eloquence and sensitivity towards art and literature, though on his part she is merely an object of infatuation. In spite of the fact that he is already married Harish professes his love for her and seduces her. He wants to have Virmati not as his wife, but as a woman to gratify the intellectual needs. But Virmati wants to

marry him. The Oxford educated Professor Harish has little to share with his homely, illiterate wife Ganga; who typifies the dutiful collective women-folk belonging to the first-generation mindset. What starts as an intellectual relationship becomes his intense infatuation. He and is unable to resist Virmati's charms. Virmati's innocent quest for knowledge paradoxically lands her into an unpleasant situation. At this point we come to the foreseeable question: Does loving a man bring about a false feeling of a woman's emancipation?

Virmati fancies that the Professor would marry her and in turn violently protests against her family's decision of marriage to Inderjit. When forced by her mother, she even undertakes a suicide bid but is luckily rescued and given permission to study further. The family arranges an alternative, Indumati Virmati's younger sister is married to Inderjit .

Virmati, ensures she clears all hurdles which stand between her and Harish who is in fact underserving and in contrast, lacks Virmati's sincerity. It is evident that he is untrustworthy and nurtures dubious intentions. Virmati discovers that he has locked his pregnant wife in a dark room and questions him about it, but he evades her good sense by charming her with his so-called 'love poem' and thus manages to brainwash her with his sweet-talk.

Virmati drifts towards Harish is primarily due to the condescending attitude of her family, particularly her mother. Professor Harish is the person who appreciates Virmati's assertion of identity, who makes her feel wanted and becomes her intellectual companion in her quest for knowledge. He displays patience, sympathy and love, feelings which her mother could never generate. For her, the bond of Harish comes as the only escape in the otherwise dull convention patriarchal world. In fact, "it is not love but the lack of love that turns her life upside down" (116).

Parental apathy, particularly Kasturi's authoritarian oppression of Virmati instigates her towards the path of self-destructive love affair. Virmati impulsively enters into

a questionable alliance with Harish which is sure to bring her misery. Even after she comes to know of Virmati's feelings for Harish, Kasturi makes no effort to counsel her. Her autocratic attitude in place of care or concern stirs Virmati to marry a married man, as if it in an act of rebellion.

They carry on a clandestine love affair which results in Virmati's pregnancy. She finally marries the man she loves and comes back to Amritsar to live with him. He however, refuses to leave his first wife and the consequences for Virmati are severe. She ends up being despised by her own family and being treated with hostility by her husband's. She becomes lonely, isolated and depressed. When her father dies in communal riot, Virmati comes to see him but is not accepted by her family. Kasturi speaks to her in the following words. "Would your pitaji have gone if he didn't have to live with the disgrace his daughter caused him?"(240).

Her married life with the Professor Harish turns out to be a disaster. Unfortunately, she goes through an abortion and a miscarriage. She receives bitter treatment by Harish's first wife, Ganga who represents a typical conventional wife who is "meek", financially dependent and barely in a state to revolt against the injustice inflicted upon her by her husband. However, her behavior towards Virmati is insulting and spiteful which highlights another aspect of the patriarchal set-up where a man could get away scot-free despite his misdeeds but a woman had to bear the burnt for hers. Though Ganga is not in a position to usurp the authority of her husband, she leaves no stone unturned in bringing misery to another woman, who like her suffers.

Paradoxically, Virmati loses her sense of identity through her marriage, which was the reason for which she had decided to get married. She comes to realize, "nothing was hers, her body, her future not even a pair of paltry, insignificant gold bangles" (174). Her individual story of loss resonates with the collective tragedy of India's partition. The pursuit of freedom

ends with a sense loss for both Virmati and the people of her country. She becomes the embodiment of an emancipated woman, who ironically gives away her happiness accruing from the state of being in union to being ripped away in part in the journey towards freedom. Virmati breaks away from her collective identity which identifies her with her own family or even with her husband's. But this process of liberty is apparently painful, severe and clearly come at a cost.

Virmati breaks away from the patriarchal structures of dominion as well as the code of conventions imposed upon her by the women with patriarchal inclinations when she is offered the principal-ship of the school at Nahan. This marks the happiest and the most blissful period in her life and she completely enjoys her autonomy as the headmistress of a girl's school. It is at this point, that she achieves the greatest degree of control over her life and begets the respect which she deserves.

The mother-daughter association represents the attitudinal change in India with the passage of time. Kasturi represents the pre-independence times and is under the dominion of patriarchal order. She lives by the conventions in a society where women's education and employment were a rare phenomenon and finds herself completely dependent and in subordination to the masculine structure of authority which mirrors the situation of India during the colonial era. Virmati represents India's struggle for independence, and hence lives a life full of struggles and conflict. Ida, represents the country with new-found freedom, full of promises of a new beginning she is set to etch her identity by revisiting and transcending her mother's past. The relationship between women, particularly the 'mother-daughter bond' becomes a metaphor for liberation in the novel. The successive generations of daughters despise the tyrannical sufferings face by their mothers and struggle to transcend their collective fate by a fighting fierce battle of freedom to assert their individuality which in-turn comes at a cost.

Virmati reconciles with her mother when she herself becomes the mother of a 'difficult daughter', 'Ida', whose name signifies 'a new slate and a blank beginning' (277). Her struggle seems to conclude with a sense of completion when Ida seeks to reconstruct her mother's life. The identifier 'Difficult Daughter' which befittingly and howsoever silently becomes the title for the work thus which recounts the struggle of a woman seeking freedom from patriarchy. The interplay of relations of oppression and authority exercised by women on other women becomes an inextricable part of her struggle. Simone de Beauvoir's remarks on the mother-daughter relationship become relevant in this regard, "Sometimes she tries to impose on the child exactly her own fate. What was good enough for me is good enough for you, I was brought up this way, and you shall share my lot." (*The Second Sex*)

It becomes apparent that it is not a mere disassociation with Professor Harish, the 'male oppressor' who brings a resolution to Virmati's struggle. Her freedom from the male dominion is symbolized by Harish is a significant, yet insubstantial part of her spiritual evolution. The resolution in the novel is offered when Virmati is reconciled first with her mother and finally with her own daughter. Likewise, when the novel opens Ida despises the idea of 'being like her mother' but reaches a resolution finally by identifying with her. She says, "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each a word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and heart...Now live in it, mama and leave me be. Don't haunt me anymore."

The daughters endeavor to live lives different from their 'mothers' in an effort to absolve their mothers from the tethers of subservient existence. The quest for feminine identity thus seems to come towards a sense of completion not with the mere transcendence over male strictures of authority rather than with the amalgamation of disjoint fragments of feminine identity.

Works Cited

Kapur, Manju. *Difficult Daughters*. UK: Faber and Faber, 1988. Print.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. London, England: Vintage Classics, 2015. Print.

IJELLH