

Patriarchal Hegemony in Manju Kapur's 'Difficult Daughters'

V.N.CH. Ranganath

Research Scholar

Rashtrasant Tukadoji Maharaj Nagpur University

Nagpur

Dr. (Mrs.) Rini S Dwivedi

Associate Professor

Shivaji Science College

Nagpur

India

Abstract

For many hundreds of years, women have strived for gaining equality with men. They have been held back and their opportunities taken away from them because of the fact that they were women. Feminism is the belief in social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. And it is the feminist movement that has been trying to give these rights to women who have been deprived of their equality and privileges that men have never given them. Women all over have suffered the brunt of patriarchal control. Right from birth, a woman is thrust with social images, rewards and punishments that are carefully designed to ensure that she does not develop and quality associated with the other half of humanity. Although *Difficult Daughters* is not overtly a feminist text but nevertheless brings forth the issues of gender discrimination and the struggle of the suffering Indian women under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society. They struggle to maintain their dignity and ultimately retrieve the autonomy of their selfhood. The narrative fabric of *Difficult Daughters* set around the time of partition is the story of a woman whose battle for independence engulfs her, leaving a contour of partition and pain on her

outwardly calm face. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* makes an absorbing reading and pushes the reader to break through the silence of suffering Virmati, who is seen struggling with her desires for education and illicit love in the face of hardship that threaten to destroy her inner self. The aim of this paper is to make a study of the novel where a woman bound in tradition seeks to satiate her unsuppressed desires and is ultimately devoured by pain and isolation.

Key Words: feminism, family, patriarchy, life, play, modern society, relationship, women

Introduction

Manju Kapur is an Indian Novelist, born at Amritsar in 1948, graduated from the Miranda House University College for women and went on to take on M.A at Dalhousie University Halifax Nova. She was a professor where she teaches English literature at her alma mater Miranda House College, Delhi. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* won the 1999 commonwealth Writers' Prize, best first book, Europe and South Asia. Manju Kapur is well known for her sharp-eyed, catching her character portraits in tricky situations. When one reads her novel, a new significant meaning can be viewed of crisscross dogmas of cultural critical thinking. The life women lived and struggled under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society are reflected in the novels of Manju Kapur. Taking into account the complexity of life, different histories, cultures and different structures of values, the women's question, despite basic harmony needs to be tackled in relation to the socio-cultural situation. She is successful in scrutinizing the insight conflicts of her characters.

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). Virmati, the heroine, seeks human relations that will allow her to be herself and to exercise the degree of control over her life which, as an educated woman, she knows she deserves. Born in Amritsar in the Punjab in 1940, the daughter of a father of progressive ideas and a traditionalist mother (Kasturi, obliged to give birth to no less than 11 children), she aspires to a freer life than that offered her by those around her. This aspiration is condemned to failure. Thanks to the

incomprehension she receives from both her own family and that of the man she marries - but also thanks to her own mistakes, for no-one obliged her to marry who became her husband, and she was free not to make the choice she did.

Ida, the narrator seems distanced from her mother Virmati in time and space and yet Virmati remains a vibrating presence all through Ida's life. Although not physically present, Virmati hovers close to Ida's surface of consciousness and is often a cause of inner turbulence. The void in Ida's life at her mother's funeral becomes more pronounced and unbearable. Apparently Virmati's presence has failed to provide Ida with a sense of fulfillment and security during her life and thus Ida made every effort to stay clear of the image that she had of her mother. Nevertheless, the unconscious affiliation with the absent mother propels her to excavate the other unknown view of her mother and she sets out on her journey. Her restlessness had led her to a relentless quest which is initially a mental search: "To be totally innocent.....would be to be utterly unknown, particularly to one's self." The concept of a 'good' and 'bad' mother is a worldwide phenomenon and acquires an added significance in the Indian strengthens her. In Ida's case, she reminisces that she "could not remember a time, it had been right between us"(Pg. No.2) which naturally left her rebelling and struggling along with an in-built in- firmity just as a cripple without crutches. Ida may not have been consciously aware of this deficiency for the simple reason that the image she carried of Virmati was of a woman who was "silent, brisk and bad-tempered."(2)

Ida, determined to unveil her mother's past, experiences the "excitement of discovery"(258) which finally culminates in establishing a strong bond between the narrator and the mother with "each word a brick in a mansion"(259). Having accomplished this task, she seeks to be liberated and pleads earnestly to her dead mother. "Do not haunt me anymore".(259) The anxiety thereby bringing an end to the traumatic transition period. The "escape routes"(258) she had been looking for all her life came in the form of the book. The melancholy and despair is caused by knowledge "I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society" (258) appear to be dispelled having sunk into her mother's past without Virmati's hindering presence. Ida, groping for the 'self' lost in an attempt to be a model daughter under pressure from her parents, tried to

“bridge the contradictions in her life by marrying a man who was also an academic”(258) to end up in a “disastrous marriage”.

Ida, determined to unravel the truth about her mother, goes to Amritsar, a place associated with her mother and feels quite lost without her. Virmati, the eldest of eleven children, didn't work. Despite the encumbrance of the household activities and her brothers and sisters, she found time to study. The first in the family to become a F.A, B.A, B.T. and finally M.A. In the process of endowing responsibilities, she acquired the feeling that she was “indispensable.” (6) Virmati watches her weak, ailing mother harassed by child birth and yet tolerant. The unmarried Shakuntala, her first cousin, appear to be Virmati's ideal and Virmati soon realized that answers to her unhappiness lay outside the house: “To education, freedom and the bright lights of Lahore Colleges.” (15)

The family disputes led to arrangement of separate establishment by Lala Diwan Chand and “what he thought was a final solution, however, turned out to be the beginning of a long chain of partitions.” (25) Professor Harish Chandra at Arya Sabha College came to be her aunt's tenant and later seized the young heart of Virmati despite his married status. As fate would have it, Virmati's marriage had to be postponed due to the death of the canal engineer's father and thus Virmati entered the college, the seventh girl among four hundred boys. Her open myopic stare at the Professor was misinterpreted but the “dead was done” (43) prior to the realization. The rawness and restlessness in Ida persists and she further digs and goes to the fateful college where her father was the principal. While walking, she “felt the past hovering, cliché-like, over that run down building, beckoning me into its orbit.”(46) She went to the particular classroom where he taught and the realization dawned that her “history had started here, in this classroom. Here it was that my parents must have looked at each other significantly, doomed love in their eyes.”(49) Ida recalls her father mentioning her mother's fiancé but never his wife: “Virmati plus fiancé, the Professor plus wife, an invisible quadrangle in a classroom.”(49)

The cultural conditioning had initially prohibited Virmati from getting involved with the Professor. She was already engaged. At the same time her in-built response to a person's need

from a very tender age broke down her reserves when the professor cried out his need for her: “Eldest and a girl, she was finally tuned to neediness, it called her blood and bones.”(50) confusion bred, “her soul revolved and her suffering increased.”(50) The professor continued to pressurize her to do away with her finance and Virmati torn between duty and love along with a strong desire for education continued to be agonized. The dryness of the canal engineer’s letter, in comparison to the warmth of the professor’s letter gave her strength to seek permission to study further for she claimed that she was not really ready for “initiation into womanhood, intimacy, procreation”(60) and her mother wondered as to how her sensible dutiful daughter had “changed so much in just a generation.”(55) The incessant talk of her marriage in the house and the knowing full well that “she could not depend upon the professor to sort out any domestic situation”(63) she decided to go to Tarsikka, to her Bade baoji, Lala Diwan Chand and drown herself in the canal. “The brave thoughts of renunciation”(79) over, She mutely faced her mother’s anger “but her silence though was locked in the godown and her younger sister married to Inderjit,

Ultimately one does bow down towards one’s fate or karma and so did Virmati in her newly acquired situation. May be what is happening to me now is part of it, and there is no use protesting.”(85) Paro, her five year old sister, is the sustaining force for Virmati in the family. Although the “enforced stillness”(84) helps her to build her self-control yet she burns with anger and humiliation for the little relevance given to her life.

To elevate the society “above the practical and the convenient”(86) was impossible for the realization has yet to dawn that “what is society made up of, but individuals.”(90) Education for Kasturi (Virmati’s mother) was just a destruction”(91) of the family. The indecisive state of living finds an alternative in continuing her studies in Lahore to do B.T. after learning that the Professor’s wife is pregnant. His justifications appear futile and weak “and in this moment of weakness it seemed I could not in all conscience ignore the claims of those around me.”(97) The “autonomy and freedom”(125) the place provided helped her to overcome the pain and the illusion of love. The sisterly bond established between the unmarried cousin Shakuntala and Virmati, placed in a more or less same situation afforded solace despite the

concept of the traditional family: “A woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings.”(102)

The Professor’s persistence and his friend Syed Hussain’s help and encouragement finally enabled the professor to get Virmati around. He dinned it into her: “Co-wives are part of our social traditions.... I don’t live with her in any meaningful way.”(112) Virmati too justified herself in the illicit relationship by consoling herself that there was “no point in foolishing denying it on basis of an outmoded morality.”(114) Nonetheless the trouble had been created by “letting others do your thinking.”(121) Her individual self told her that she ought to be doing something like Swarna Lata, her room-mate whom she admired so much rather than being involved in a “useless love and a doubtful marriage.”(122) It was a self-revelation that she could not express but cherish nonetheless. Pining for a life beyond, she acknowledges her limitation that “these larger spaces were not for her.”(133) Torn between her passion and what she would really want to do; the guilt of all those wrongs come to her mind with the blunt observation that the ecstatic begging of illicit relationship had no future plan of marriage. Despair was all that was hers and the thought that it would be far better to be like Swarna “involved in other people, and waiting for no man.”(138)

She decided that finally her studies would be “her passport to independence”(140) but fate had it otherwise; she was pregnant. Ida identifies this situation to a similar disaster of her licensed married life. This symbolic identification is fortifying. It was also probably one of the reasons that had been the root cause of the termination of Ida’s marriage: “in means of denying that incipient little thing in. my belly, he sowed the seeds of our breakup.”(144) Virmati was able to revive the courage that she possessed in doing away her unwanted pregnancy by herself in absence of Harish. Swarna Lata was the sturdy pillar in that hour of need. She achieved independence by paying a heavy price along with the realization that now she could endure any pain for none could be greater than the one her body underwent “through knives and abortion.”(161) The body was scarred by the Professor to deprive her of “another choice”(163) ever in her life. Her B.T. had made her “anxious to broaden her horizons”(167) and she took up Principal-ship at Nahan. But the Professor was not to allow her peace. His visit there cost her job. She decides to go Shantiniketan, Every mile strengthened her. She perceived that “there

was a life of dedication and service ahead of her, and in that she would forge her identity.”(182) Fate had it otherwise. Now it was Harish to face the dilemma and agony of being torn between his family duty and illicit craving for Virmati. No escape, so he married her, breaking the last thin tie with her own family: “this separation is ordained from birth.”(187).

Virmati’s sojourn is in three stages; the first when she deserts her family, religious and political authorities who appear as captors. The freedom and unlimited possibilities drive her to the powerful figure of her seducer. She thus awakens in a world of experience to achieve wholeness and autonomy. The realization dawns there after that the seducer too is a captor. She then makes the final journey back home to be united with the family and discovers that it’s the mother with whom she wishes to be rejoined. This rescue figure helps her to free herself, from the myth of female inferiority and in identifying a valuable female tradition. The rejection too enables her to discover the strength within herself got from self-determination. She thus appears to be in tune with herself, her desires and careful not to succumb that valuable self to any external pressure.

Simone De Beauvoir observes:

..... that since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race, and further that the secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural ‘feminine’ characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men. (9)

Western feminism promoted Women’s Education and freedom from oppression. It also administered necessary social changes to embrace the nation of equal rights for women and equal participation in all aspects of society. Women’s emancipation and education became an overbearing issue for the women and reformers as well as leaders. Western Education produced an enlightened woman, an emblem of emancipation and equality. She has ceased to be illiterate, secluded and veiled and no more liable to die on husband’s funeral pyre. In *Inside the Haveli*,

Geeta the educated new woman shatters the patriarchal dominations realizing that time has come to rid the Haveli from some of its outworn practices. Betty Friedan, in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), challenged women subjugation, patriarchal ideologies, gender-stereotypes and expounded that

Under the impact of sound education, women would no longer require “*the regard of boys or men to feel alive*” (331)

Virmati is portrayed as a progressive woman who desires for higher education, breaking the age old shackles of family, male dominations and tradition bound society and leads a self designed life. She not only stands for her individuality but also serves as a companion to her husband and satiates his intellectual gratification. The educated bourgeoisie men yearned for companionship at personal level. Educated wives supported and accompanied them in their services.

Mary Wollstonecraft in her pioneering work, *Vindication of the Rights of Women* writes:

I, therefore, will venture to assert that till women are more rationally educated, the progress of human virtue and improvement in knowledge must receive continual checks. (45)

The east-west confrontation gave way to crucial changes in the attitude and outlook of Indians. Female education and emancipation was the first step towards progress. Women stepped out of their homes demanding equal rights with men. The educated woman gained confidence and believed that she can lead a financially independent and fulfilling life. Through education women voiced their condition and needs, asserted their rights as an individual. They moved forward to empower their contemporaries building a bridge between the urban middle-class women and rural masses. The deep-rooted stereotypes like Sati, Purdah, and Child-Marriage were also questioned. The new woman stands as an educated, rationalizing, self-sufficient formidable woman-who is the maker of her own destiny.

Conclusion

I believe that women have every right to be equal with men and feminism is what is slowly accomplishing this. Feminism is beneficial to men, women, and their families because it is allowing mothers, daughters, and sisters to have an equal opportunity in life to achieve all they can without any discrimination based on their sex. It is a human right to be equal to others around you and it does not matter if you are male or female. They should both receive the same opportunities and privileges given in life and feminism helps women accomplish this task of equality. Feminism is allowing women to expand their careers and businesses that they never were able to have before. Women now have power in government and they hold high and powerful jobs. They have gained their independence from a male dominated society and are rising to become less dependent on their husbands for financial support. Many women are now even managing their own families, without the help or support of a man. Men are also being helped because their wives are now able to help with financial needs; they are not depended on for the only source of income for their family anymore. Feminism is allowing women to have better high paying jobs that are allowing them to have greater incomes.

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