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Mother-Daughter Relationship in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

Mother-daughter relationships are long-lasting affiliations that have the potential of influencing adult development in significant ways. It is a relationship which requires that the language of feeling should flow between a mother and daughter. Gilbert and Webster observe "Each mother has to transmit the rules of femininity to her daughter(s) to help them survive in the world she knows it" ("The Mother/ Daughter Relationship in Young Adult Fiction" 1).

Women generally are portrayed to be better than men at maintaining relationships involving a high degree of understanding and mothers and daughters often share an investment in family that enhances their bond late in life. The mothers of the patriarchal society consider their daughters a burden due to the rigid public set up which makes them look at girls as a legal responsibility. They cannot see their daughters go ahead of them or become equal to them. The daughters are treated as helping hands in domestic chores. In similar, their daughters and the present mother and her daughters identify with each other, and because their individual boundaries are not always clear, daughters always struggle all their lives to separate from their mothers.

In Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, an effort has been made to trace out the multifaceted and varied relationships between mothers and daughters. *Difficult Daughters* is a hybrid form of autobiographical narrative containing a rooted narrative of the mother (Virmati) in which the daughter (Ida) attempts to talk about her mother and herself. In addition to this the relationship between Virmati and her mother Kasturi, Kasturi and her mother, Shakuntala and her mother Lajwanti, Swarn Lata and her mother is also underscored. This hidden statement is made by Virmati's only daughter, Ida, who is a childless divorcee.

Expectation engulfs the individuality of an individual. In the novel, Ida sets out on a journey into her mother's past by piecing together the fragments of her memory in search of a woman she now wants to know and understand. Ida could not develop her understanding with

her mother Virmati during her lifetime and after her death this realization engulfs her with guilt. She says, "I am guilty. I don't. The rawness I feel after my mother's death doesn't allow me to do anything that is not, in some way, connected with her" (48). Virmati shows her concern for her only daughter when she says, "What will happen to you after I am gone?" (279). Ida blames Virmati for repeating history and feels that she is "hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society" (279). She has grown up struggling to be the model daughter. Virmati provides her ample space but still carries forward the ideals of patriarchy in letter and spirit. When Ida tells her that she wishes to lead her life independently, she says "You are disappointing your father" (279). Ida protests against her mother and the latter tightens her reins because she is concerned about Ida's well-being. Ida alienates herself from her mother, tries her best to establish her own identity, takes her own decisions and leads her life according to the principles that she herself has made.

Ida and Virmati share similar kind of traumas and pain because like Prabhakar, Professor Harish had also forced Virmati to abort her child. The consciousness of the reader shuttles between the present and the past along with Ida who visits different places and meets her mother's relatives and associates to know more about Virmati whom she never bonded with when she was alive. At the end of the novel Ida rejects 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". (280)

Throughout her life Ida remains in a complex relationship with Virmati and after her death she thinks of giving her a memorial by describing her story so that someone may value her after she has gone. Kapur shows that under ideal circumstances the girl partially detaches herself from her mother. A girl needs to be able to shape her own identity but, at the same time, continues to need her mother throughout her life as a model and counsellor.

Virmati, the eldest daughter of a strict and high minded Punjabi family of Amritsar, is burdened with family duties because of her mother's pregnancies. She grows up with the conditioning that the duty of every girl is to get married and a woman's 'shaan' is in her home and not in doing a job. Virmati realizes that it is useless to look for answers inside the home as the "language of feeling had never flown" (12) between her and her mother. As Virmati's story unfolds, the relationship with her mother Kasturi is also revealed. Kasturi is

the mother of first generation a product of strict patriarchal system. She cannot tolerate her daughter to be her equal. She curbs Virmati's yearnings to attain higher education at every moment and feels that God has made Virmati on earth to punish her. Virmati fails to establish an ideal relationship with her mother and shows her protest by observing silence. She feels ". . . saying anything to her mother so difficult? May be it was best to keep silent" (12). However, seeds of aspiration are planted in Virmati when she meets her alter-ego, Shaku Pehnji (Shakuntala) at Dalhousie. She decides to taste the 'wine of freedom' and resolves, "I want to be like you, Pehnji . . ." (17).

Virmati's relationship with her mother is the most problematic. Being the eldest of the seven children she played the role of a second mother for her brothers and sisters:

She was impatient and intolerant of fuss. If they didn't eat their meals, and return home from school she would hunt out the offending brother or sister and shove the cold food down their throats. If they refused to wear the hand-me-down clothes she assigned them, she slapped them briskly. Usually once was enough. Sometimes she tried to be gentle, but it was weary work and she was almost always tired and harassed. (6)

There was no female bonding, no emotional depth in Virmati's relations with her mother. As natural consequence her unique position in the home is lost which she has to yield to her daughter quite unwillingly. Virmati thus becomes a substitute and not the double that every mother wants her daughter be. As a consequence, the relationship assumes hostile dimensions. The conflict reaches grater levels once Virmati begins to assert her independence.

Virmati gets admission in A. S. College despite her mother's protests. Here she develops her relationship with Professor Harish Chandra, her neighbour who notices her particularly, and soon both realize that they are made for each other. Virmati refuses to marry Inderjit, a canal engineer to whom she is betrothed. She tries to commit suicide but is saved by the servants of her grandfather Lala Diwan Chand. Kasturi's reaction to this is typically inspired by the male-oriented environment.

Kasturi unknowingly becomes the voice of patriarchy. She holds those values as ideal which patriarchy has taught her to be so. And when her daughter rebels against such values she takes it to be a rebellion against her own self. Virmati is sent to Lahore for higher education and Kasturi regardless accompanies her. Virmati tries to live within a moral code, but her mother would never understand that. Later, when Kasturi sees the hostel premises of RBSL School and College, she becomes soft and poignant. However, Virmati's desire to be in Lahore is not for academics but for her passionate desire to be with Professor Harish Chandra without anyone's interference.

Harish marries Virmati at the request of his friend Syed Hussain. But she does not get the status of a legally wedded wife. Thus, though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold against the wishes of her family, she is caught up in another agency of patriarchy, a marriage in which her free spirit is curbed and all she does is adjust, compromise and adapt. Virmati's parents are shocked at her marriage and her father dies of heart attack. Kasturi blames Virmati when she comes for the cremation of her father:

As the body burned, the family members silently kept adding ghee and samagri, the havan process that Kasturi had performed . . . When the last outsider had left, Virmati approached her mother. Her mother turned and looked past her. Virmati, choked with sorrow, gazed at her mother mutely, misery and pleading in her eyes. Trembling, she tried to touch her. Kasturi shook the hand off. 'Why are you here?' she managed, her eyes red and swollen. 'Because of you he died. Otherwise is this age to go?' (239).

Virmati remains a subaltern and is now not only alienated from her own family but also, remains ironically, a deprived creature that is denied the very space for which she undertook to strive and rebelled against her near and dear ones. Kasturi compares her daughter with herself and yet does not value her perspectives. *Difficult Daughters* speak not only of Virmati and Ida, but of other *Difficult Daughters* also. Shakuntala and Swarna Lata who succeed better than the former did in their parallel struggles for independence in their lives.

Swarna Lata, Virmati's room-mate is a social activist. She is a daughter of third generation and establishes her own distinctiveness. Her mother is against her education as she feels that marriage is the only destiny in a woman's life. Swarna Lata is, however, determined to achieve the heights and leaves her parents in Amritsar and takes admission in a prestigious

institution at Lahore. She participates in various seminars, conferences and contributes to the freedom movement with Congress co-workers. It is she who gives support and confidence to Virmati in her hard times.

Kasturi and her mother's relationship are also described briefly. Kasturi also appears as an unconventional girl to her mother because she is drawn towards another religion. Kasturi is married at the age of twelve as she starts worshipping Christ at the age of seven. Kasturi's mother had calls her a witch. Her mother had quarreled and was worried over her leanings towards Christianity as she had studied in a missionary school. In the eyes of her mother, she has committed disrespect by worshipping the prophet of another religion. Like all the stereotypical mothers, she worries primarily about Kasturi's marriage and education is the secondary thing for her.

She is a typical traditional mother who does not take even a drop of water from her daughter's house. She brings her own servant and groceries along with her at the birth of Virmati. It is under her influence that Kasturi develops herself and carries the patriarchal order forward which is why she cannot probably understand why Virmati- her daughter- wants to break traditions.

The conclusion that emerges out of the novel is that for one reason or other mothers and daughters are not compatible and it is only in retrospect that the daughters develop better understanding of their mothers' attitude. Mother-daughter relationships are complex, but can be filled with compassion and love. Mothers and daughters often seem farther away from each other than they really are. The relationship between mother and daughter is characterized by tenderness, love and affection. It is generally conceived as the most sacred bond replete with care and concern.

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. 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. Ida's reconstruction of her mother's past life has a wider significance in the field of feminist literary studies.

A mother's love for her child is like nothing else in the world. It knows no law, no pity; it dares all things and crushes down insistently all that stands in its path. The world is full of women blindsided by the constant demands of motherhood, still stunned by how a job can be terrific and twisted. In the novel *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur disproves the above said lines. She presents not a beautiful or imaginary relationships but a realistic one. She depicts the practical world where mother-daughter relationship is considered as a relationship which is full of jealous, irritation against daughter's education and rejection of daughter's modernized thought.

The daughters in the novel are restricted under tradition and forced to follow the restriction. When Virmati married a professor who is already married she was rejected by her mother saying that she spoiled her family's name. It is clear that here only the name is important but not her daughter's happiness.

In the same novel Shakuntala who is an unmarried one and focus only on her education and also achieved in her profession is accepted by her mother. Another daughter is Ida the narrator who rejects her mother, Virmati, as she married an already married man and also as she aborts her first child before marriage. This mother and daughter never had an understanding. The daughter feels irritated on her mother because of her illegal relationship. Thus this novel presents the realistic nature between a mother and a daughter. Kapur portrays both a loveliness and bitterness relationship between mother and daughter.

Works cited

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Nadeau, Frances A. *The Mother/ Daughter Relationship in Young Adult Fiction*. The Alan Literary Review.22.2 Winter, 1995.