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Confronting Patriarchy and Gender Inequality: The Challenge of 'Going Beyond' in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

The domination of the male gender over the female species has been one of the most recorded and contested fields of study in the history of mankind. For most social scientists and experts following demographic habits, the cult of male hegemony, also called patriarchy, has been ingrained within ourselves. For hundreds of years the question of the suppression of women has been taken to be a part of their lives---unchangeable, inevitable and therefore, to a certain extent almost accepted with a sense of fatality and docility. Thus, with time patriarchy has become a discourse.

Since the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the West in particular has created a counter discourse against the age-old practice of patriarchy and this counter discourse, often deliberate and powerful in its own way has come to be recognized as feminism. However, it is also true that through this consciousness of their own rights women across the world have begun to recognize the inherent prospects, dimensions and discrepancies regarding gender that reside in this world and has ruled over the position of women across centuries. Gender inequality has in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century called its bluff and has allowed the women to challenge the borders of patriarchy and in turn the women have tried to 'go beyond' patriarchy and in the process carved their own niche in this world.

This paper looks at the socio-cultural, economic and political challenges that patriarchy poses for women and how literature, particularly fiction, creates a space for women to challenge the age-old construct of patriarchy and to 'go beyond' patriarchy. As a case in point we shall be focusing on Manju Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) where three generations of women in a North Indian conservative Arya Samaji family

confront patriarchy and wish to go beyond their selves, the action being spread across Partition of India.

**Key words:** , *Difficult Daughters*, Feminism, Gender Inequality, 'Go Beyond', Partition, Patriarchy.

#### 1. Introduction:

Deepankar Basu and Robert de Jong in their article titled "*Son Preference and Gender Inequality*", contend that the term 'gender inequality' embraces an all-pervasive phenomenon across many developing societies and is based on indicators related to well-being like literacy, infant mortality, life expectancy, primary, secondary or college enrollment rates. According to them gender inequality is also a referential context for intra-household economic allocation and very obviously carries a deep sense of gender bias against the women in average households. It would perhaps seem to be very unusual that a paper which purports to focus on Manju Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters* and the struggle of three generations of women characters in the novel should begin with assertions from the field of economics. However, to understand the dynamics of the women characters in this novel within the boundaries of social order that they live in, the women have to be treated as victims belonging to shifting paradigms of socio-economic order across a wide time-frame of the history of India under the British Raj. The authors of the paper are of the view point that intra-household gender bias is one of the major concerns in a developing economy like that of India and therefore, patriarchy is able to take deeper socio-cultural roots in our national psyche. This results in the fact that fertility behavior in families is also dictated by patriarchal notions and so in the end the position of the girl child becomes even weaker. For the girl child the assertion of her individual and class identities are filled with an even greater struggle because the monster of patriarchy and its age-old norms culminate in what is known as son-fixation. .... in north Indian families it thus gives rise to the notion of the son being the 'ghar ka chirag'. The daughter of the house, often termed as the 'lakshmi', increasingly becomes relegated in social position and her needs, wishes, aspirations, ambitions are never given due credence. This discrepancy increases aspects of gender inequality.

#### 2. Behaviour Patterns among women:

The question now therefore arises as what can the daughter or the women do in this context. It is not unnatural for her to feel the pangs of this intra-familial distancing where every moment the son or brother or husband or father receives preferential treatment. For too

long women had taken such intra-familial distancing to be part of their fate. So marriage was taken to be her ultimate destiny. But history tells us that no exploitative mechanism can go on forever and therefore resistance to patriarchy and its various fixations too had to be challenged through the increasing consciousness about the rights of women. In the context of all this when we discuss fertility behavior patterns then we find that in North Indian families there are two sorts of such behavior patterns. The first is that girls born into relatively larger families sharing resources with a larger sibling cohort are known as the “sibling effect”. Secondly, boys born as relatively younger children within families are known to be part of the “birth order effect”. Both have important implications for gender inequality even in the absence of intra-household allocation biases. K. Yamaguchi, a renowned Japanese socio-economist while studying such behavioural patterns regarding son-fixation in certain Asian countries including India states that before the 1950s in particular and in certain societies even after 1950s, couples continue to have children until a certain number of sons are born in the household. In this process the girl child therefore increasingly becomes relegated and neglected, creating economic and social imbalances within families and even so in questions of inheritance. Whether, the wife/ daughter-in-law wishes to be a mother many times over is never asked, affecting in the process even her health. Basu and Jong even contend that regarding their study on India there is no significant variation in the preference of having son’s between urban and rural families as also between economically differentiated and stratified families.

### 3. Traditional family structures:

Whenever we discuss the question of patriarchy in India it is but inevitable that somewhere down the line we should go back to Manu’s ancient treatise called *Manusmriti* or *Manav Dharam Shastra*. Hindu apologists consider the *Manusmriti* as the divine code of conduct and, accordingly, the status of women as depicted in the text has been interpreted as Hindu divine law. While defending *Manusmriti* as divine code of conduct for all including women, apologists often quote the verse: “*yatr naryasto pojyantay, ramantay tatr devta*(where women are provided place of honor, gods are pleased and reside there in that household) [3/56]. However, it is a well known fact that certain sections of the *Manusmriti* are completely derogatory towards women and indicate that mostly women were taken to be the second sex. The *Manusmriti*, therefore, can obliquely be held to be responsible for creating a sense of disparity among men and women which had been dictated by patriarchal norms. The noted feminist Kate Millet observes that the family has to be naturally the most

important play-ground where patriarchy can function. She says, “Patriarchy’s chief institution is the family. It is both a mirror of and a connection with the larger society; a patriarchal unit within a patriarchal whole”. Thus, the family can be the site of power play and manipulation of a dangerously subtle nature. In his article “*Policy advocacy on Women Issues in India: Exploring Challenges to Social Work*”, Govind Dhaske of the University of Indiana argues that the sub-ordination of women in India has arisen due to the age-old religious-based patriarchy which has colluded with the male-dominated social-political system which has thus made women the most vulnerable social group in the country. Such type of historico-structural vulnerability has impeded their development across generations. He also feels that the subordination of women has delimited political and structural spaces for advocating their development and needs. He also goes on to investigate that policy changes have not taken place over a long time in India to address to these needs of women, thus allowing patriarchy to take stronger socio-political roots over ages. The efforts of Pandita Ramabai, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Begum Rokeya Shakhawat have only been occasional in their foray on emancipation of women and breaking through patriarchal barriers or ‘going beyond’ has not at all been easy for women in India. However, it is also true that the challenge to patriarchy and its norms has almost been silent, individualistic and sometimes women inside a particular family have been responsible in generationally opposing patriarchy and its hegemony, not overtly politicizing this resistance to patriarchy through a very well-constructed feminist movement. Among the recent thinkers who have theorized on the position of women in India, Uma Chakravarti holds an important position and in an article published in the *Economic and Political Weekly* she says that patriarchal construct in our country is based on caste, class and varies with religious and regional dimensions.

#### 4. The Women in *Difficult Daughters*:

Indian English fiction has responded to the call of feminism wonderfully well over the last half-a century and a number of women writers and their works have caught the eye of the readers. Among the women novelists who have made conscious efforts to chalk up a resistance to patriarchy in their works and have created strong women characters and advocated women-oriented themes in their works are Kamala Markandaya, Bharati Mukherjee, Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan and of course Anita Desai. Very naturally, these writers have inspired other writers to concentrate on themes in their fiction where the women characters break open the mould and cross the barriers of social order around them so that they can ‘go beyond’ patriarchy and its tenacious roots. One

of the novelists who has successfully performed such a thing through her novels repeatedly is Manju Kapur and this sequence of setting up a feminist resistance against patriarchal norms started with her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998). Anjali Rai and Dr. S.C. Pathak in their article *Feminist Mode in Major Indian English Fiction: - The Analytical Review* contend that recent Indian English women writers through their works question, project and interpret experience through a feminist consciousness and sensitivity. There is a trend to make a concerted attempt to create a resistance to patriarchy and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a prominent case in point in this regard. The novel is set in Amritsar in undivided India at a time when Arya Samaji values were almost rampant in parts of North India. Despite Dayanand Saraswati ji's liberalist Hindu thinking, many families of the belt used the value system preached by the sect to consolidate patriarchal values and inculcate in women the thought that education was only to be given to young girls and women so that they would be able to fetch a good bride-groom in the marriage market. An educated girl would therefore be a decorative instrument in families and naturally their education was not to be used for their emancipation but for a lesser amount of dowry at the time of marriage. G. Ruby Davaseeli in her thesis *Woman and Family in Recent Indian Feminist Fiction in English: A Select Study* deals at length on Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. According to her Kapur's novel has plenty of parallels which work to show how the central character of Virmati struggles to break free from the strangulating chains of patriarchy and in turn carves out a niche for herself. It is of course true that patriarchy does everything within its power to chain down Virmati but her courage takes her beyond these limits of imposition. It is also true that whatever Virmati is able to achieve in her life is because she is able to drive herself with zeal to excel beyond what life has on offer for her. In the context of north Indian Hindu social life from 1935-1950 her decisions at charting her own pathway seem to be very outlandish, rampant and she does run the risk of being branded as the veritable black sheep of the family. It is not lost on reader that the partition of India is also in a sense a partition of Virmati's own self where she is completely ostracized by her conservative family for first falling in life with her teacher (the 'guruji' figure) and then marrying him as his second wife—the other woman. The revolutionary idea behind such an act reflects on to the next generation as well when her daughter, Ida, also poses to be a difficult daughter because she decides to dissolve her marriage and to stay single---a fact which has never before happened in her family tree. But of course, her people, her family tree can sympathize with her because after all she is Virmati's daughter and something of this sort is to be expected from her as she possibly never has been given good values by her parents.

Virmati's main problem is that she comes from an upper class Hindu family who are essentially very conservative. It is also a fact that in that family gender inequality runs through the blood-stream of the family and as Basu and Jong have pointed out in their article, the family suffers from an immense son-fixation. Lala Diwan Chand the family patriarch is a well-to-do business man of Amritsar and in the years before India's independence lives in peace with a large family, a proud father of two obedient sons—Suraj Prakash and Chander Prakash. The problem in the family starts from the fact that Chander's wife, Lajwanti, is envious of Suraj's wife Kasturi, as she receives much attention because true to the spirit of an upper class Hindu family is the forbearer of a large line of children—the Lala himself glamorously once proclaiming with pride, “the more the merrier”. Kasturi is therefore relegated to the position of a child-bearing machine, something which becomes terribly ashamed of and hates her own body for its sinister betrayal of trust. In an effort to have a long line of sons (she does give birth to five of them), she also ends up having six daughters and therefore as they grow up their marriage becomes a major challenge for her. Virmati's father comes under the category of a benign patriarch, unlike the domineering fathers of other protagonists in the novels under study. In Virmati's Arya Samaj family, patriarchy operates in a different manner. Virmati is sent to an Arya Samaj school and then to a Samaj College. In her case, therefore, the values taught outside the home are not at all different from those insisted upon at home. There is no clash between the individual needs and the family as there is no two worlds with conflicting values. The inequality of attention and resources towards Virmati and her sisters therefore become part of existence from the second generation itself, a fact which can never be corrected within the family. Lala Diwan Chand's wife, Kishori Devi, understands the gender inequalities within a Hindu patriarchal family and laments:

“In this life we can do nothing but our duty. Serve our elders, look after our children, walk along the path that has been marked for us and not pine and yearn for those things we cannot have. Since our destiny is predetermined, that is the only way we can know any peace. Duty is our guide and our strength. How can we control the things outside us? We can only control ourselves”. (194)

Lajwanti on the other hand has only two children----a daughter called Shakuntala and a son called Somenath. As Kasturi goes on with her seemingly endless litany of child-birth the eldest of them, Virmati, is thrust into the role of foster mother, a role which hates and then feels tired of, much to the chagrin of her mother. Her needs are pushed into the background from a young age and Kasturi like all other members of her family feels that Virmati should better concentrate on house-hold activities---after all daughters arte only born as

'paraya dhan' and at some stage will inevitably be married off according to the wishes of patriarchy. The challenge that lies before Virmati is thus immense. On one hand she has to feel that she needs her education to be complete because that is perhaps the only way for her emancipation but she can hardly construct a mechanism to come out from the mould--- intelligence and time as a resource are never complementary for her in a happy ratio. The charms of a different life which only education can give to her further encouraged by the fact that her cousin Shakuntala has not only completed her education but works in a girls' college in faraway Lahore---a life aspired and dreamt by her but never quite controlled. Shakuntala's role in Virmati's life is immense---an inspirational fountain-head who gives her the license to think differently and act so. Her first attempt at clearing the F.A. examinations very naturally ends in failure and introduces her to her new teacher, Harish Chandra, a married man with an illiterate wife and old mother who has just returned from a teaching stint in England and is highly regarded in academic circles. Virmati is completely taken up by the considerate and soft-spoken nature of Harish and he on the other hand finds in the much younger callow girl the softness and intelligence that he had always wanted from a woman who might be part of his life. His wife Ganga's inabilities become magnified in front of Virmati make him completely enamoured of her. Her marriage to Harish Chandra is against all sorts of social order, legality and for the rest of her life despite whatever she achieves in terms of academic excellence she has to crave for credence in her relationship.

Another notable context of our understanding of oppressive patriarchy and gender inequality in *Difficult Daughters* arises from the fact that for Virmati her mother Kasturi is equally an oppressive rampant force. The mother-daughter relationship in the novel is based on complete deficit of trust and suffers from large and generous dollops of lovelessness between the two. After one of her child-births, Kasturi's failing health demands that she should go for rehabilitation in the hills and during that visit Virmati accompanies Kasturi and the new-born child and yet the trip proves to be a complete failure. Virmati, since her childhood, had never had Kasturi only to herself and yet during the course of the trip Kasturi fails to respond to Virmati's emotional callings and the moment of reconciliation between the two women is lost forever in the novel. Virmati and Kasturi drift apart from each other, a break-down which is a life-long subjection. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* recalls that such mother-daughter relationships are nothing unusual and is in fact one of the factors upon which patriarchy banks on to take even deeper roots and to continue to perpetrate gender bias, gender discrimination and gender inequality. The inequation between Kasturi and Virmati seems to happen because most unfortunately the former perceives from the latter

a sense of threat to her hold on the family tree. Virmati's rejection of proposal to a canal engineer is taken as an act of gross betrayal and humiliates Virmati, shattering her completely. Kapur shows that the voice of patriarchy need not be always male; even women in the family can act as the substitute voice of patriarchy and thus the levels of neglect for women can become increased manifold. The stands taken by both Kishori Devi and Kasturi somewhat are time-bound. With their lack of education, the two women cannot even think of the fact that they can carve out a space for their own selves. Very naturally for them the family system is the only course of sustenance. To nourish the family values they unwittingly do a service to oppressive patriarchal norms, perhaps even hardly realizing that the wishes of Virmati and of Shakuntala and other girls belonging to the third generation of the novel are also bound in time and demand change of mind-set as such. Virmati refuses to fall into the fold that has been followed by the women of the previous generation and therefore proves to be a 'difficult daughter'.

One of the things to be kept in mind while re-reading Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, is that it is a novel of multiple shades. The question of gender inequality in the family is not too obtrusive and remains at the level of subtlety. One of the things which create gender discrimination within the Indian family structure is the investment of emotion on a child. Lala Diwan Chand as a father invests a lot of emotion on his sons, Suraj Prakash and Chander Prakash. This trend is carried forward in case of the second generation also. Chander Prakash has two children---Shakuntala and Somenath, as has been mentioned previously. Shakuntala is the first of the women folk in the family who decides to forsake early marriage, as is the norm in the family. Her academic brilliance allows her to conquer the struggle that lies ahead and because she is brave enough to go off to Lahore, away from the gaze of the men-folk of her family, she is able to lead a life of independence. Her mother Lajwanti laments about the fact that Shakuntala refuses to get married and yet has a sense of pride in the fact that her daughter is able to lead a life which is so unconventional, a life she herself aspires for but shall never be able to follow because of the want of education. Somenath, on the other hand, is a lawyer by profession and leads almost a lecherous and bohemian life. Yet he receives preferential treatment in the hands of his family simply because he is a son, a species to be looked after and whose defects are never to be highlighted or corrected. The preferential treatment that he receives in the family comes to the fore-front when Suraj Prakash and Chander Prakash decide to make separate houses for their families. Somenath is summoned by Suraj Prakash to help out in the supervision of the construction work. Somenath goes on splurging money which horribly over-budgets the entire construction and

yet no one holds him to account for his spend-thrift ways, again simply because of the fact that he is the son of the family and is heir apparent. This is also a classic example of patriarchy allowing the son to hold sway for its age-old culture of son-fixation.

##### 5. Conclusion:

*Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur is actually a water-shed novel in many ways. Kapur through this novel was able to construct her identity as a major Indian English novelist. She also was able to carry forward a legacy of feminist consciousness which so magnificently was created by Anita Desai. Like Desai, her primary objective is to tell to us a well-told story, a characteristic which was to become a defining trend in her novels to follow. *Difficult Daughters* became the first of the novels in which Kapur was able to look at the milieu in which she herself had grown up in-- -a middle and upper-middle class setting that was to be repeated in all her novels. And yet in each of her novels including the novel under discussion she projects patriarchy in Hindu households to be an observant, omnipresent force---unchanging in its precepts where the word of the family head and his wishes is binding and final and often even egoistic. Yet, in this novel Virmati and Shakuntala are able to create a resistant feminist force against the men-folk, their generationally unchanging ideas and go beyond those huge walls that patriarchy builds around them. The challenge thrown to patriarchy by Virmati and Shakuntala is not as much against the men-folk of their family; it is in many ways a proof unto themselves that they can go to those heights where women in their family have never reached before. They are able to cross the borders of their family dimensions and restrictions and come out from behind the suffocating shadows of patriarchy. Virmati, in fact, even goes beyond Shakuntala because she combines career with marriage---a marriage which is unconventional because it is with a married man who has children, a marriage which promises her a world of academic, intellectual and emotional fulfillment. She rises up to these challenges knowing completely well that her steps would move her away from the patriarchal umbrella and its shielding. She does not baulk away from the challenge and in the end comes up trumps against patriarchy. The gender inequality which she faces in her childhood and early youth are slashed away by her enterprise; the love that she hankers after, she gets in the form of Harish Chandra. The attention that she had always hankered for is given by Harish to her, although in the latter part of the novel she has to fight with Harish's first wife Ganga tooth and nail to gather a sense of legitimacy to her relationship with Harish. Even there it is a question of going beyond, of breaking through barriers. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is thus an immense novel in every regard which magnificently discusses

gender inequality and patriarchy as cohorts in an oppressive social structure called Hindu society.

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