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Freedom of Choice in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* - -  
An Existentialist Perspective

Abstract

Manju Kapur is an eminent writer of this century and occupies a prominent place in Indian English Literature. Her literary works deal with various important themes. All her themes can be clubbed together under the theory of Existentialism. Existentialism is 20<sup>th</sup> century ontological philosophy. It is a philosophical and literary movement that included philosophers, theologians and writers such as Soren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, Karl Jaspers, Miguel Unamuno, Rudolph Butmann and Franz Kafka. The word was coined by the French Philosopher Gabriel Marcel in 1943 and adopted by his compatriots. The Danish philosopher Kierkegaard is considered to be the father of Existentialism. This philosophy primarily deals with the question of human existence. Existentialism is a philosophical theory which maintains that man is a free agent responsible for his own action. It is not just an analysis of the human condition, but a passionate quest for authentic existence. This paper highlights the existentialist theme of freedom of choice in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*.

Key Words: Existentialism, freedom, choice, ontological philosophy.

Existentialism is a philosophy of existence and has its bearings on art and literature. The major point in existentialism is that human beings are free to decide for themselves what is right or wrong, good or bad. Rousseau rightly said that man is born free but is everywhere in chains. It means that though man is born free, he has to encounter and respond to various situations of life. J.L. Styan writes, "Existentialism proposed that man was a lonely creature of anxiety and despair living in a meaningless world, and that he was merely existing until he made a decisive and critical choice about his own future course of action. By such a choice, a person would acquire an identity, a purpose and dignity as a human being. For preference, existential man should adopt some social or political cause in order to acquire this dignity and purpose . . ." (118).

The theme of freedom is present in all the existentialist writers. Sartre and Camus are the two great advocates of freedom in the twentieth century. It is prominent in Kierkegaard's writings also. For him, to exist and to be free are almost synonymous. According to Sartre, freedom and existence are impossible to distinguish. Freedom plays a very important role in man's life. Macquarrie writes, "One does not first exist and then become free: rather to be human is already to be free" (177). Traditionally philosophers attempted to objectify freedom that could be somehow perceived. But for the existentialist, freedom could not be proved; it was a postulate of action. It is already there as a condition of our existence. In the words of Sartre, Man is condemned to be free (34). Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself. This is the first and foremost principle of existentialist philosophy. There is no humanity without freedom. Also, there is no human dignity without freedom.

Sartre claims that human beings have a special kind of reality-existence that distinguishes them from non-living things. Existence involves freedom of thought and action. Our ability to be self-conscious and to launch ourselves into action are aspects of human

freedom. Our freedom of action is the ability to choose an action and to act on our choice. Sartre's emphasis on freedom is not a recommendation that we do whatever we feel like doing. He does not recommend acting on our personal whims. Instead, Sartre's philosophical writings develop the idea of freedom as autonomy. It is the ability to guide and govern oneself by freely adopting principles. Autonomy is the freedom of being a self-legislator, who creates and follows laws governing one's own actions.

Existentialist writings abound in allusions to decision and choice which plays a very significant role in the existentialist philosophy. Freedom is revealed in the concrete and temporal decision of the individual. At the core of freedom lies decision. Human being is condemned to take his own decisions. Sonal K. Amin writes, Freedom is revealed in the concrete and temporal decisions of the individual. At the core of freedom lies decision. It is only when I choose that I enter the realm of Being-oneself from that of Being-there or Dasein. Being-oneself is the realm of Existenz or of the man awakened to himself, or of freedom. It is only in making a definite choice that I become aware of myself or of my original freedom. The basis of man is freedom. (127-128)

Man is responsible for every action and reaction. He cannot put the blame on others or nature. Sometimes it is a burden when he is free to choose and bound to face the consequences of that. It is to pledge or engage one's future. Such an engagement is always frightening with risk and anxiety, because one cannot foresee the future. Amin writes, "Existentialism has vividly depicted the agony a man undergoes when making a moral choice. Man's choice in a moral situation decides what he is to be, so that he must choose correctly, i.e. in accordance with what he desires to become" (16). Man has the liberty to choose from the alternatives but he does not have control over the future. He can struggle and strive but to achieve that goal is not in his hands.

Freedom of choice and responsibility go hand in hand in existentialist philosophy. Consequently, whatever we do depends on our choice. Therefore we are responsible for our choices and our actions. Thus an individual's responsibility extends to others, because man not only chooses for himself, but also for others. In this context, Sartre writes, "Man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders, he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being" (52).

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is set against the backdrop of partition in the cities of Amritsar and Lahore. The novel spans three generations of women - - Kasturi, Virmati and Ida. They symbolize the three phases of Indian Independence. Kasturi represents pre-independence and is shown as a victim of patriarchy. Virmati, her daughter, symbolizes the country's struggle for independence. Ida, Virmati's daughter, is the product of the post-independence era and establishes herself as an independent woman. Virmati's history is reconstructed by her daughter Ida who undertakes a journey to know her mother's past. Virmati is portrayed not only as a revolutionary woman who has the freedom of choice to educate herself but as one who manages her situations in moments of crisis. Askok Kumar in "Portrayal of New Woman: A Study of Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*" writes "Modern woman prefer to exercise her choice and break away from her traumatic experiences" (194). The struggle for freedom from the British, the quest for identity and the sense of oppression had become a shared experience for both the nation and women in India.

Virmati did not want to live like her mother and made her own choice to study in Lahore. She rejected her mother's world which revolved around domesticity, marriage and child bearing. Being the eldest daughter, she was burdened with family duties because of her mother's continuous pregnancies. The major cause for her frustration was her mother's continuous breeding. The focus is on the futile attempts she made to succeed in her life. The constant sufferer, Virmati, wanted to be independent, rebellious, and assertive as her cousin

Shakuntala who sowed the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. Shakuntal symbolizes modernity and encouraged her to be independent. Both Shakuntala and Virmati came out of the ideological framework of being a typical Indian woman. Thus Shkuntala had the freedom of choice to take part in the Gandhian movement. Kasturi's ideology was confined to patriarchy and she remarked, "*Hai re, beti!* What is the need to do a job? A woman's shaan is in her home" (16). Her mother constantly told her that it is the duty of every girl to get married. But for Virmati, education meant developing the mind for the benefit of the family. Virmati said, "I want to be like you, Pehnji . . . I wish I too could do things. But I am not clever" (17-18). Thus Shakuntala's visit planted the seeds of aspiration in Virmati.

Virmati had to take care of her siblings. Eventually she failed in her FA. She was outraged and frustrated at her failure. At that time Kasturi said, "Leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first" (21). Virmati was engaged to a canal engineer, Inderjeet, at the age of 17. She was against her family's wish of an arranged marriage and fell in love with her professor Harish who was already married. He was a man of intellectual pursuits. He was aware of the importance of education. According to him education is the tool of freedom. He wrote about the importance of education in one of his letters to Virmati:

Darling, you say your family is questioning your years of studying. One of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves. Even if we arrive at the same conclusions that have been presented to us, our faith in those beliefs is stronger for having been personally thought out. If, as sometimes happens, our education leads us to question some of the value systems by which we live, that is not to say that we are destroying tradition (102).

Virmati decided to go to Lahore for her higher studies. All her family members are against her decision. But they could not do anything before the will of Virmati. She was caught in a psychological conflict, as on the one side there were family customs, norms and

traditional values, and on the other was her illicit love for her professor. Jeevan Kumar in his article, "Conflict between Family and Self: A Study on Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*" writes, "*Difficult Daughters* is a gripping story that ably captures Virmati's conflict between her duty to her family, her desire for education and independence, and her illicit love for a married man" (210).

Like Shakuntala, she decided to go to Lahore for higher studies. But when she found no solution to her problem, she tried to commit suicide thinking that death can solve her worries: "Now that she was actually going to merge her body with the canal she felt her confusion clearing" (76). She hoped that the professor would forget, her and her family would forgive her. Thinking that she drowned herself, but fortunately she was saved. At that time she revealed her decision to study further. As a result of that she was locked in the godown and her sister Indumati's marriage was arranged with Inderjeet.

In her final letter to her professor, Virmati changed her mind and tried to forget him. She wrote in her letter, "All I want is a change from my old life and chance to do something useful. I do not mean ever to marry . . . I do not think we need to write to each other after this" (110). But her professor did not want to forget Virmati and also his devoted wife. Finally, Virmati decided to go to Lahore to do her BT in spite of several hurdles. Kasturi cursed her by saying, "God has put you on earth to punish me" (111). This was a new beginning for Virmati. Shakuntala consoled Kasturi by saying that her daughter would become a teacher to help others and stressed the importance of education. Virmati was trying to live within a moral code, but her mother would never understand that. Thus Virmati made her own choice to pursue her higher education for the good cause of the society and went to Lahore.

The next day Virmati met her room-mate Swarna Lata. Her parents wanted her to get married. But she wanted to do something useful in her life. So she decided to do her MA. In

Lahore when Harish took Virmati to the guest room in Syed Husain's house and tried to seduce Virmati, she asked "Then marry me, trying to push him away. Marry me and make it clear to everybody" (125). Afterwards she cried, but not much, she thought that she was meant to be his lady love. The professor met her in Syed Husain's guest room after two months. Virmati drew away from him and scolded him when she showed his helplessness to marry her. She cried,

I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family's name, am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people will say if they find out not being able to live in peace, study in peace . . . and why? Because I am an idiot . . .

Now you want to prolong the situation. Why don't we get married? (149)

Later she realized that it was better to be like Swarna, involved in social activities, and waiting for no man.

One day, after dinner they started discussing the Professor's visit and his unwillingness to marry her. Swarna advised her, "Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war-the Satyagraha movement - because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, and going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream. . . So here we are. Responsible for our own futures" (151). Swarna's words gave her comfort. But the next morning Virmati discovered that she was pregnant. Really it is very difficult for any girl to pass through such circumstances. She suffered because of her own choice and decisions. But now she could not take a decision. It is beyond her imagination. Swarna was aware of this fact. She felt pity and compassion for Virmati. At this juncture Kapur writes, "Poor Virmati, I thought, how she must have suffered. Whatever did they do in those days when those accidents occurred? How was it kept secret, when women could smell pregnancy a mile off, just as Virmati smelt Ganga's or Lajwanti smelt Kastur's" (155-156). She realized her

mistake and thought that Mati was right that she could not escape punishment for what she had done. Her body had gone through knives and abortion.

After Virmati completed her BT she got a job as the Principal of Girls' school in Nahan. She was glad to serve the cause of the nation's literacy. This was the next choice that she made in her life after her education. Meanwhile Harish wrote to her every day but they could not be contented with words alone. Harish came to Nahan and they spent the night together. The Diwan Sahib called her and enquired about the Professor's visit. As a result of that she lost her job. Virmati realized how stupid she was to have a man stay with her. She resisted her family and society, but failed to resist Harish's love. Education is the only source she could turn to in all her crisis, as a solution to her problems. She found refuge as the headmistress of a Girls' school in the hill station. For the first time she had her own space. However by encouraging the secret visits of Harish, she was again trapped in sexual oppression and once for all loses the chances of getting an individual identity.

When she left her job she decided to go to Shantineketan and never go back to Amritsar. But on her way to Calcutta, she met Harish's poet-friend. Meanwhile the poet argued with Harish and finally their marriage was arranged. The next choice that she made in her life was to marry her Professor. Her marriage with her Professor turned out to be disastrous. Though she became his second wife legally, she desperately struggled for self-assertion. Lack of love and humiliation from the family made her uphold her right to self-assertion through education and economic independence.

When she gradually withstood and got accustomed to her new surrounding after her marriage she again suffered due to a miscarriage. So Harish decided to send Virmati to Lahore to do an M.A. Once more she finds consolation by choosing to pursue MA Philosophy at Lahore. Kapur writes, "Thus was born the idea of sending Virmati off to

Lahore to do an M.A. Harish chose philosophy for her subject . . . Virmati acquiesced. That is, she said nothing when Harish suggested the idea to her” (247-248).

At the end, the partition of India ironically united Virmati with Harish. Ganga left her house temporarily but could not return. After Independence, Harish worked as the principal in one of the new colleges of Delhi University. More promisingly, she acquired her desired place of wife and mother in Delhi. In her pursuit of identity, she lost it at every stage and struggled to make space for herself. Her rebellious attitude faded whenever it had to be strong against her Professor’s sexual oppression. She became passive under the patriarchy.

Palakurthy Dinakar in his article “Odyssey for Women’s Liberation: Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*” writes, “Virmati proves to be a difficult daughter in the novel as she does not act upon the advice of her parents and tries to find different parameters to lead a life of her own” (181).

Virmati’s daughter Ida had no sign of intellectual brightness. She married a man who was also an academic, but it was a disastrous marriage. After her divorce, Virmati spent her life in sadness and disapproval. Ida had nothing in life; she was husbandless and childless. For a long time, she was overwhelmed by melancholy, depression, and despair. She would lie in bed for hours, unable to sleep, pitying herself for all she did not have, blaming her mother and her self. Singh writes,

Manju Kapur dives deep in to human emotions and passions of modern life and presents different colours with minute observation and detail also. She seems to be the novelist of modern Indian woman who is in the state of transformation in the era of globalization. She seems to be the real spoke woman of modern woman’s voice in modern Indian English writing. Her novels are able to present the picture of human life in detailed manner. (10)

Kapur has presented a vivid portrayal of women of 1940s and the choices they made in their lives. The novel revolves around the protagonist Virmati's choices in her life against the backdrop of Indian Independence. The endless ups and downs of life made her a mature woman. She rebelled against patriarchal constraints to assert her identity and achieved self-fulfillment in life. Thus we note that the novel *Difficult Daughters* clearly brought out the existential dilemma of the protagonist Virmati. In the words of Dipika Sahai, "*Difficult Daughters* is the story of a young girl's desires and the existential frustrations of a second wife, the dilemma of being rejected by her own parents" (8)

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