

MOTHER – DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur's novel Difficult Daughters is a story of a daughter's journey back into her mother's painful past. It spans the genres of fiction and history and falters in both. The dream of independence and decolonization were portrayed clearly. Ida, the protagonist's narrator and daughter, tries to reclaim her mother, Virmati's secret life, which is the main story. Virmati belongs to a conservative Hindu family and came of age in the turbulent and optimistic 1940s. It was a time of transformation for the educated Indians. Exposed to the taste of new freedom, Virmati encounters freedom fighters of all religions and persuasions, falls in love, and marries a previously married professor. Sequestered with mother-in-law, co-wife and stepchildren, Virmati uses advanced education as an escape route. Her progress parallels the new-found freedoms of educated Indian women, but double standards prevail, increasing awareness of the ties that bind. The present paper brings out the mother-daughter relationships in the novel.

Keywords: Mother–Daughter Relationships, Difficult Daughters, Patriarchy

The last quarter of the twentieth century was a milestone for the theoretical upsurge in general and creative writing in particular. Indian English writers through Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and Manju Kapur hold centre stage in the modern literary ambit. Manju Kapur's debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*, is a feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial work of art. Psychoanalytically, She can be placed in the group of gynocritics who deals with the emotional and mental puzzling of an educated daughter in a traditional joint family. As a postcolonial creative writer, she delves into the deep of the male chauvinistic society and offers an authentic conflict between tradition and postmodernity.

Manju Kapur is a noteworthy storyteller who presents the postmodern novel in a traditional narrative thread without linguistic jugglery and

gimmickry. *Difficult Daughters* manifests autobiographical data and dimension in its syntactic norms and nuances. The novelist herself asserts that "conflict between daughter and mother is inevitable and I suppose I was a difficult daughter. The conflict carries on through generations because mothers want their daughters to be safe. We want them to take the right choices-right in the sense that they are socially acceptable. My mother wanted me to be happily married and my daughters to have good jobs" (Bala & Chandra, p. 107)

The beginning of patriarchy, as everybody knows, represents man as the legal head of the family and coincides with the weakening of the female-female bond and especially the dissolution of the mother-daughter relationship. In this solid framework, the novel's texture has been knitted around a Punjabi family consisting of women of

three consecutive generations. The novelist begins the story unconventionally with a cryptic statement: "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother."

Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is the story of a young woman Virmati who falls in love with a married man, hitherto a condemned passion in her narrow social circle. It is not only about the *difficult daughters* but also about the difficult mothers of the changing times. The novelist deals with the leading themes of the times where the description of love, sex and marriage is bold and somewhat unconventional. The narrator, Ida, is a difficult daughter, and she explores her mother's life in the novel. Kapur uses three generations of daughters, who exhibit three sets of notions. The novel presents the paradigm of two mother-daughter relationships where the daughters differ from their mothers and never want to be like them, but in the end, they cannot but identify with their mothers.

This story is about three generations of women: Ida, the narrator, is a divorcee; Virmati, her mother, who marries an already married professor for love; and Kasturi, her grandmother. This was not a fictional family but the story of a real, middle-class home with fathers, mothers, brothers, and sisters that one had seen and lived with. Merging them was the background of the Partition, which 70 years later seems to be the watershed event of modern India. Their popularity rested on accurately documenting the life and times of this nation's early years, providing us with a picture like going through a family photo album where half-forgotten people and events leapt into our consciousness.

Difficult Daughters is set at the time of partition in Amritsar and Lahore. Virmati's life would have ended at a critical point had she agreed with herself to be married to the highly suitable boy, a canal engineer, her family found for her. Virmati spent her time helping her ever-pregnant mother with the household work taking care of the younger siblings and studying. Virmati's family considers her eligible for marriage as she is proficient in stitching, cooking and reading. At the same time, Virmati is fascinated by the young professor from Oxford. The

sophistication that she sees in the Professor's life – his ability to understand English Literature, particularly poetry, his preference for tea in delicate china cups, and his gramophone attracted her very much. She realizes that it is useless to look for answers inside the home. This illegitimate affair leads to much trouble. Virmati has to bear the brunt alone. She is forced to abort her child as the professor is reluctant-rather afraid – to marry her. Finally, at the insistence of a friend, the professor is forced to marry her. But Virmati's hardships do not end here; they change colours. Most of her sufferings are caused by maternal apathy. Virmati does not have a sympathetic shoulder to weep on, aggravating her agony. She suffers at the hands of the parochial society, her family, and her paramour.

The crux of the novel is the troublesome life and sad demise of Virmati, the central character. Ida wittingly expresses that she would not like to be a replica of her mother as her mother did not imitate her mother. So, the novelist, in her narrative schema, weaves the novel's plot and tells the story of Ida's mother Virmati. By giving complete honour to Virmati's will, her dead body has been consigned to flame. Virmati, in her life, used to utter "that someone will value me after I have gone." The story moves ahead when Ida, the ever-lonely daughter, visits Amritsar and peeps into the past of her mother's life. She acknowledges her mother's girlhood and typical motherhood, looking for her daughter's safety. Uniquely narratology develops by co-existing past and present. Ida collects clippings and cuttings of Virmati's life from kith and kin.

Virmati is the eldest daughter among her ten brothers and sisters. Thus, Kasturi, the mother of Virmati, is addressed as an ever-pregnant woman. Ida's grandfather was a reformer and renowned landowner who attached much importance to education for women. In a traditional pattern, Virmati assists her ever-pregnant mother in domestic affairs, caring for the younger children and their studies. The family set-up is thoroughly conservative, so Virmati's family takes her to be eligible for marriage as she has expertise in stitching, cooking and reading. This is the focal point where

the novel takes a dynamic turn. Kasturi's new education and lifestyle generate a new urge and emotion in Virmati to free herself from the bondage of patriarchy that denies or deserts her freedom and choice. Her marriage with Inderjit was final but postponed because of his father's death. She does not think of marriage and child-bearing just after the high school qualification. She falls in love with the romantic Oxford-returned professor Harish Chandra who lives next door and is already married. The professor has an illiterate but gentle wife and a daughter and lives with his mother and daughter. The professor seeks an intellectual companion in Virmati, and the professor's passion for her accentuates Virmati's self-affirmation. Their love blossoms and, after a hitch, culminates in marriage. Before marriage, Virmati finds herself in a quandary because of her monotonous family duties, the desire to study and illicit affair.

The story takes a new turn when Virmati, out of utter frustration and strain of daily life, attempts suicide but is rescued. Her younger sister Indumati unites in wedlock with Inderjit, and Virmati is confined in a storehouse. Virmati and the professor continue their exchange of love letters through the youngest sister Paro. Kasturi tries her best to enable Virmati to succumb to the wishes of the family, but of no use. Virmati is committed to continuing her studies at Lahore. She becomes the centre of focus because of her revolutionary zeal and enthusiasm. She neither yields to the age-old traditions of the Arya-Samaj family nor marries the person she is engaged with. Once the professor visits her in Lahore and Virmati becomes pregnant. Virmati contemplates her love while the entire nation is entrapped by the fret and fever of the freedom movement. The novelist says:

'Strikes, academic freedom, the war, peace, rural upliftment. Independence Day, Movement, rally, speeches... an outcaste amongst all women. She thought of Harish, who loved her, and she must be satisfied with that.'

Virmati finds that women around her are sincerely engrossed in the freedom struggle, and she is absorbed in her business of love with professor

Harish Chandra. She thinks of abortion and then goes to Amritsar and joins as a principal of a school where the professor continues his visit. Virmati resolves that if the professor does not accept her, she will desert him for good, but eventually, he gives his consent, and both unite in a marital tie, and she comes to Harish Chandra's house as his second wife. Virmati's humble and heroic suffering to secure her love and marriage with the professor, who is already married to Ganga and has a child, symbolizes her assertiveness and 'self', destined to carve out a niche for herself.

The professor's pursuit of Virmati even after she has been sent to Lahore as a part of the punishment to study in women's college, his renewing sexual relations with her with full ardour, but his reluctance and constant postponing of the marriage despite her frequent requests to do so, are instances of the gratifications of the male 'desire'. "Male ego-centrism blinds men to the situation of women, who may be placed in agonizing circumstances on account of their relationship with men." (p. 194)

It can be argued that the professor enjoys the bliss of both worlds. Ganga, his first wife, as a maidservant who fulfils his everyday needs, keeps his house tidy and his clothes washed, and Virmati satisfies his academic urge, which the professor cannot seek in his meek and mild Ganga.

Though Virmati succeeds in marrying the professor, she does not secure any space for herself in the family. Ganga and Harish's mother compels Virmati to lead a suffocating life in the tight walls of the house. It is significant to note that Virmati, who gets high education despite social odds and obstacles, aspires to play the traditional role of a housewife so that she may look after the everyday needs of her husband, but she is not allowed to. She is not even acknowledged for her intellectuality. On the other hand, Harish commands respect for his academic ideas and ideologies. It seems that Harish and Virmati do not have companionship as a couple. When Virmati suggests a name for their baby in a wife-husband gossip, the professor dispassionately rejects it. The professor was not considerate and

calm in his decision, and he also inflicted a long lecture on Virmati to silence her. The novel does not seem to profess or propagate a feminist outlook, but there is an undercurrent feminine point of view which gives a serious touch to the story. Vandita Mishra rightly argues: "Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of the power of freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones. Her relationship with the professor, for instance. While it does provide an escape for a loveless arranged marriage, it is itself furtive and claustrophobic, offering only a stolen togetherness behind curtained windows. Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow. She hovers uncertainly at the edge of each new world, never entering, lest the professor should call and not find her near. Eventually, marriage to the man of her choice is no triumph either. As the second wife, she must fight social ostracism outside the house and compete for the kitchen and marital bed with Ganga inside it."

Virmati's father becomes a victim of communal frenzy, but she is not allowed to attend and mourn. Ironically, the professor participates in the funeral ceremony but not Virmati, the daughter of the deceased. Kasturi blames Virmati for the trauma. In a topsy-turvy situation, Virmati plans to do her master's degree. After completing her M.A., when she returns, she comes to know that all the family members have gone to Kanpur because of communal tension.

Meanwhile, Virmati gives birth to her daughter Ida, the narrator. Virmati never corresponds to the age-old family tradition, but paradoxically she persuades Ida to make herself fit into the channel of the family. In her futile attempt, she tries to keep her under control. Ida emerges as a woman of uncontrollable person who is left alone, having no issue, "engulfed in melancholy, depression and despair."

Thematically the novel purports a romantic story of Virmati, but the heroine herself creates a scene of partition. In the chain of events and eventualities, Virmati becomes the difficult daughter

for her mother, as was Ida for her. *Difficult Daughters* has undeniably an autobiographical tinge and touch. Sumita Pal rightly focuses on the autobiographical element in the novel: "Like Virmati, Manju Kapur was born in Amritsar and taught in college. Her family was a partition victim, and Arya-Samaji was like Virmati's family. Manju Kapur's father, too, was a professor, like Virmati's husband. Manju Kapur admits that she had been a difficult daughter for her mother, whose priority was marriage, and she, in turn, wants her daughters to have good jobs."

In its stylistic devices, the novel is straightforward, startling and evocative of Virmati's pains, puzzling and torn personality. The use of Punjabi idioms and phrases manifests the linguistic colour and contour of the novel and makes it an excellent work of art. It is rightly examined that "Indo-English is developing a distinct character and identity as distinct as American English, British English, Australian English. Style in a novel generally depends upon the writer's settled conviction of the single, unambiguous nature of his materials and the novel's adequacy as a vehicle for their serious presentment." (p.197)

It is troublesome to analyze and estimate the relationship between Virmati and the professor, which has been passionate yet misleading and mismatching. Whenever Virmati gets herself in an emotional crisis, the psychotherapy the professor gave her is not titillating. In his love letters to Virmati, the professor does not think it necessary to mention Ganga and her pregnancy. Virmati's visits to Lahore and Nahan have been sensitized and scandalized by the professor's trip. Virmati's academic temperament goes into oblivion before the intellectual height of the professor. The professor neither visualizes the sociological fact nor the emotional intensity of Virmati.

Throughout the novel, Ida's declaration echoes that she does not want to be like her mother. The novelist scrutinizes pertinent and persuasive subjects like self-affirmation, man-woman relationships, family feuds, and the mother-daughter conflict and contradiction. The novel, without any

literary snobbery, deals with a daughter's reorganization of her fractured and fragmented past hinging on her mother's story. The writer has all the facts and finesse of the great classical masters like Dickens, Jane Austen and Emily Bronte in creating and producing the productive result.

We find that Manju Kapur presents the longing for autonomy and separate identity in her female protagonists in this novel in a traditional thread. She has depicted her protagonists as women caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a thirst to be a part of the political and intellectual movements. Thematically the novel supports a romantic story of Virmati and her intellectual yearnings. In the chain growth of the events, Virmati becomes the difficult daughter for her mother and Ida for her mother.

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