

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

ISSN-2321-7065

IJELLH

International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed), UGC Approved Journal



Volume 6, Issue 12, December 2018

www.ijellh.com

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The 'Ideal' versus 'Difficult': Virmati's Conflict in Manju Kapur's

"Difficult Daughters"

Abstract: Manju Kapur is a feminist writer who endeavours to portray her women as rebelling against powerful challenges of tradition and patriarchy. The patriarchal society has carved out a definite image for a woman. According to it an 'ideal' woman is one that loves, serves, sacrifices and suffers but above all she is one that silently obeys. The moment she refuses to conform to societal norms she becomes a rebel or rather 'difficult'. Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* deals with the condition of Indian women who are victimized and marginalized in a patriarchal framework of things. It is the story of Virmati, a young woman torn between her family, her desire for education, the lure of illicit love and it's all encompassing political and communal connotations. It gives vent to the identity crisis faced by women and shows the protagonist's firm conviction to live life on her own terms by confronting the numerous challenges of patriarchy. In her desire for self-expression and self-actualization, Virmati turns defiant and assertive and is condemned by her family.

Keywords: identity, feminist, marginalized, patriarchy, tradition, victimized

“There is a stubbornness about me that never can bear to be frightened at the will of others. My courage always rises at every attempt to intimidate me”. These words by the noted 18th century feminist and novelist Jane Austen echoes the sentiments and feelings of the post-colonial women writers in India who are articulate on issues of gender discrimination and secondary status of women in society. Manju Kapur, the Jane Austen of modern Anglo-Indian literature is a unique mix of tradition and modernity, and convention and individuality. Kapur, through her fiction attempts to successfully raze the docile and weak image of Indian women and steer them to the forefront as strong independent individuals who break away from the barriers of subaltern status to build spaces for themselves in the highly competitive male world. A self-proclaimed feminist, Kapur probes into the issues of women’s insignificant status in society and depicts their battle for their right to self-respect and dignity of living. Her thoughts seem to converge on the manner in which power equations operate amidst shared relationships in society and monitor their course and flow. She attributes their continuance to cultural construct whose principles and dictates are used to subvert the female existence in the façade of the male judgment. She denounces a culture that thrives on masculinity and critically examines the position of women as ineffectual angels in society. She strongly protests against the marginalization of women at the hands of patriarchal regimes and the subsequent diminution of her ‘self’ into dogmas of fixed subject-hood. Kapur’s literary creations spawn issues related to disappointments, sufferings and ordeals of women under the repressive forces of a closed society. Placing women at the locus in all her novels, Kapur delineates the lives of middle class women, their dreams and aspirations, their powerless state and their downsized position in Indian society.

Set against the historical backdrop of India’s partition, *Difficult Daughters* (1998) ponders on the theme of feminist consciousness. The story revolves around the surge of freedom struggle in India and is based on the life of Kapur’s own mother. It is the saga of a young woman

Virmati, who falls in love with a married man, a cause of disapproval in her narrow social circle. Kapur's narrative presents a complete panorama of her protagonist's fortitude and courage to stand up against the umpteen familial and societal pressures and her ability to seize her destiny and existence with the power of education and enlightened thinking. Pitted against the background of the nation's freedom struggle and the heart-rending 'Partition', Kapur unfolds the story of Virmati with her dream of establishing her identity as an independent and educated woman. Virmati yearns for a life that is distinctly marked with her own efforts of sustenance achieved through education. However, in the journey of her emancipation she has to encounter several oppositions and face many trials and tribulations. It is thus, the story of the bloody battle of the country's freedom and the feud that arises in Virmati's life where she is made to oscillate between responsibility towards family and her love. Virmati is portrayed as rebelling against powerful challenges of tradition and patriarchy that has carved out a definite image for a woman. According to it an ideal woman is one that loves, serves, sacrifices and suffers but above all she is one that silently obeys. Manju Kapur has tried to capture these vulnerable spaces of women within the Indian society. In *Difficult Daughters* and all other novels Kapur vividly portrays conscientious women who desire to change their plight and proclaim their individuality by walking away from the social and traditional norms and the stereotypes of women. In doing so she occupies a prominent place in the category of gynocentric critics.

Eminent feminist Elaine Showalter defines 'gynocriticism' as:

In contrast to [an] angry or loving fixation on male literature, the program of gynocritics is to construct a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories. Gynocritics begin at the point when we free ourselves from

the linear absolutes of male literary history, stop trying to fit women between the lines of the male tradition, and focus instead on the newly visible world of female culture (131)

Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters* deals with the condition of Indian women who are victimized and marginalized in a patriarchal framework of things. It is the story of a young woman torn between her family, her desire for education, the lure of illicit love and its all-encompassing political and communal connotations. It gives vent to the identity crisis faced by women and shows the protagonist's firm conviction to live life on her own terms by confronting the numerous challenges of patriarchy.

Difficult Daughters is a simple story narrated in an artistic style with a lasting appeal on human emotions. It is, at once a touching saga of ambition and struggle, love and lust, defiance and compromise. Virmati, the protagonist of the novel, falls in love with a neighbor, Professor Harish Chandra who is already married and has a family. Although after days of illicit relationship, the Professor finally marries her and gives her a place in his house as a co-wife to his first wife Ganga, life for Virmati wells up with endless miseries. The Professor distances her from her family on the pretext of encouraging her for further studies in Lahore. Virmati who is sensible and intelligent soon realizes that the price she has to pay for her fight for freedom involves enduring the pangs of separation which she has to face bravely by challenging the existing and accepted traditional norms of society. Virmati establishes her identity as an educated woman and as a wife through a self-conscious struggle.

Difficult Daughters is a powerful caricature of a society where shame gains prominence over grief, pragmatism moves hand in glove with superstition and a pregnant wife has to share a bed with her mother-in-law. The story which revolves around three generations of women brings to light their utter sense of disillusionment. The three generations of women act as a

metaphor for the three stages of Indian independence. While Kasturi, the mother represents the pre-independence period and is shown as a victim of the oppressive power of patriarchy, Virmati, the daughter represents the country's struggle for independence- where she stands to rebel against the conventions of morality. Ida, Virmati's daughter is the product of post-independence era and is independent in thought. *Difficult Daughters* is about the struggles and anxieties of all the daughters. It is not just about daughters but also mothers who are difficult to please. Simone de Beauvoir's observation is most pertinent here. She says:

Sometimes she {the mother} tries to impose on the child exactly her own fate. What was good enough for me is good enough for you, I was brought up this way, you shall share my lot (533-34).

Kapur's protagonist Virmati, the eldest of eleven children is born in Amritsar in a family of jewelers. She soon becomes a 'second mother' to her siblings and an attendant to her ever-pregnant mother Kasturi. She feels suffocated trying to satisfy the ever growing needs of her family and her ceaseless efforts to please everyone around her. She misses out on her childhood as all her time is spent in the role of a young mother to her brothers and sisters. Although she grows up to believe that "marriage was her destiny" (62), her desire for education remains firm and she refuses to conform to traditional norms. On many occasions Virmati craves for love and affection from her mother, and yearns to be treated as special only to be disappointed because Kasturi, her mother sees in her a rival with the ability to topple her world-the world of patriarchy. With education being a powerful weapon for women to speak out their minds and express themselves, Meena Shirwadker observes,

As women received education they began to feel an increasing urge to voice their feelings. The awareness of individuality, the sense of compatibility with their tradition-bound surroundings, resentment of male dominated ideas of morality and

behavior problems at home and in place of work or in society- all come up in a welter of projection (201).

Virmati longs to break away from the clutches of tradition in search of an identity of her own and a meaning in life. She does not subscribe to her mother's ideologies and revolts against her, who like every mother desires to see her daughter marry and settle down in life. But when Virmati refuses to get engaged to Inderjeet, a canal engineer, the mother feels betrayed. Virmati, the rebel raises her voice against patriarchy that is symbolized by her mother Kasturi. Her passion for education draws the Professor's interest in her and he wants to have Virmati in his life not as his wife but as a woman to gratify his intellectual needs. But it is not just their common interest in intellectual pursuits but physical lust which overpowers them. When she finally marries the man she loves and starts living with his family, she is made to feel like an outsider, marginalized by her in laws. Her relationship with the Professor strips her of her sense of identity completely. In abject humiliation as the second wife of the Professor, Virmati resolves to "walk tight-lipped, mute, on the path her destiny had created out for her" (196).

Virmati's story thus revolves around several other women who cling to traditions in society and never make an attempt to break the chains of freedom from patriarchy. To this category belong our mothers and grandmothers who struggle to obey the dictates of the men who surround them and please them whatsoever. Manju Kapur effectively portrays the lives of such women who remain entrapped in the power structures of society and delineates their life full of sufferings and agonies. These women believe in traditional womanhood. There are also others with modern perceptions. And there is Virmati and her class of women who are neither traditional nor modern.

Binod Mishra's observations gain prominence here when he says:

However educated or innovative an Indian woman is, her Indian background and psyche cannot feel satisfied, unless society approves of her endeavors and her relationship. Virmati's tragedy is the tragedy of ambition, obsession and un-acclaimed ovation (151).

Virmati belongs to a typical traditional family that holds on to conventional values and beliefs and upholds accomplishment in household duties as the most desired qualification for girls. Education for them loses its significance amidst orthodoxy and tradition. Virmati's life of an 'ideal' daughter is dotted with the act of selfless service right from her childhood for which she never earns a credit. She hopes to be valued when she is gone and strangely though for her, it is only after her death that she earns it.

Virmati's life can be charted out into three distinct phases. The first phase begins when she rebels against her family, the religious and political ideologies that impede her desire for liberty and identity. The urge for autonomous existence, unfortunately pinfolds her in the Professor's love. Although her relationship with Harish provides her an escape from a loveless traditional arranged marriage, it ends up being a furtive and painful affair with moments of togetherness only behind 'curtained windows'. The second phase in Virmati's life expresses her desire to unite with her mother whose love she betrays in order to escape her engagement with a man chosen by the family. Virmati fails in her attempt and sighs, "Will there be any change in my life. I wonder"(255). In the third phase Virmati resolves her crisis in the backdrop of the nation's trial and makes up her mind to take a firm stand.

Virmati's initial years are spent being mother-surrogate to her siblings. In spite of her keen interest in studies, she is forced to carry out her responsibilities as the eldest daughter and shoulder the burden of a second mother to her siblings in earnest. As a result she is unable to

justify her studies and fails in F. A. Her childhood days are not spent in happiness. She longs for her mother's love and attention but fails to get any.

Women, in a patriarchal society have always been accorded with a relational identity as an ideal daughter, a devoted wife, a caring sister and so on. Her image is synonymous with 'goodness' and in her effort to prove her virtuosity, she is often reduced to a puppet in the hands of her oppressors.

It is observed that all the girls in *Difficult Daughters* share relational identity with the men. Virmati and her likes however, yearn to deviate from this traditional image of a daughter, mother or wife and create a space of their own. They believe that it is education alone that will emancipate them from their long term sufferings- both physical and psychological and help them in their exploration of their true identity. The 'difficult' daughter that she is, Virmati questions the oppressive voices and encounters them with indomitable courage. She is, according to Harit,

A woman who stands for Triumph and must accept the ordeals of life with fortitude, playing a role with mild, gentle, smiling dispositions, forbearing the imminent authority of patriarchy by virtue of culture and also in terms of knowledge (42).

Virmati's yearning for education and her desire to be learned and cultured so that she may have a distinctive identity and not just be a mere wife or mother reeks of a rebellious nature in her. Her fight for independence annoys her mother and grandmother for whom the sole purpose of education is just to create awareness about the importance of adhering to rules, traditions and ideologies in life. Virmati's adamancy in the matter spells disaster for her mother Kasturi. Kapur seems to draw her reader's attention to the India of the 1940s when it was almost a fad for mothers to prefer early marriages for their daughters. But Virmati's passion for higher learning gains intensity the day she meets her cousin Shakuntala who is a

teacher. Like an enlightened woman, she craves to explore the outside world through education in Lahore College even if she must defy her mother who was so sure that “Virmati’s education was practically over” (106).

Virmati is engaged to Inderjeet, an engineer and a boy of her parents’ choice much against her wishes. Due to an unforeseen death in his family, the marriage is delayed. It is much around this time that she is entangled in a hopeless love with an Oxford educated and already married Professor who lives as a tenant in their house. For a girl brought up with strict norms in a family that upholds ideals like morality, chastity and virginity as necessary virtues in an unmarried girl, Virmati’s resolution to break off her engagement and marry the Professor is not only a shocking revelation for the family but also one that brings shame and disgrace.

In his article titled “Feminine Identity in India”, Sudhir Kakkar elaborates how Hindu myths have a significant influence on the female psyche and adds that stories and legends about mythological women like Damyanti, Sita and Savitri “leave indelible traces in the identity formation of every Hindu woman” (57). Virmati is left hanging in the crossroads without being able to choose between her studies, a lover and an arranged marriage. She is highly confused and traumatized and unable to make a choice.

Kapur expresses Virmati’s mental tussle:

“But what could she wish? Early marriage and no education? No Professor and no love? Her soul revolted and her sufferings increased” (54)

With no help from Harish in solving her problem, Virmati attempts suicide. Virmati’s impudence withdraws her family from forcing marriage upon her. However, she is locked up in a godown for refusing to be an ‘ideal’ daughter who would have silently surrendered to her parents’ desires. Kapur has, on several occasions in the novel, presented the conflict of

“education versus marriage” (41) which points towards the changing scenario in the country which is on the verge of achieving independence. She also draws our attention to the impact of globalization and modernization on Indian society and culture that carried with it western ideals like free will and liberty. Kapur’s protagonist Virmati is unable to adjust to societal pressures of marriage thrust upon her. A ‘difficult’ daughter that she is, she does not relent easily. She is finally allowed to pursue her degree in BT from Lahore, “the Oxford of the East” (4).

The thrust of Feminists have been on the importance of women’s self-awareness as individuals. They emphasized upon woman’s ability to shape their own destiny and exert themselves through “feminist consciousness” or “consciousness rising”. Juliet Mitchell defines conscious rising as:

The process of transforming the hidden, individual fears of women into a shared awareness of the meaning of them as social problems, the release of anger, anxiety, the struggle for proclaiming the painful and transforming into the political”(61).

Traditional women in society are programmed to subordination and subjugation to men without demur, but those who are aware, rebel against the established norms and traditions so as to assert their identity and individuality. Standing on the threshold of the country’s freedom Virmati, who is sensitive and aware of her needs as an ‘individual’ decides to rebel against tradition. She takes her first faltering step towards independence without being aware of the pitfalls or the fact that freedom always comes with a price. She expresses her desire to be loved and not just assume the role of a responsible daughter that she has been ever since her childhood.

Virmati is caught in the continuous dichotomy between her personal desires and dreams and the institutional and social obligations and responsibilities thrust upon her. She is seen

oscillating between fulfilling the demands of a dutiful daughter and also seeking her own identity by turning rebellious. Her conflict between the 'ideal' and the 'difficult' is a never-ending ordeal. She tries to challenge the male domination and patriarchal mechanism of surveillance and control over woman's body. However, her life is dotted with the existential dilemmas and predicaments of a lacerated 'self' and brings out her traumatizing experiences in a stifling socio-cultural environment. Under such circumstances, all Virmati does is "adjust, compromise and adapt" (Malik, 135).

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