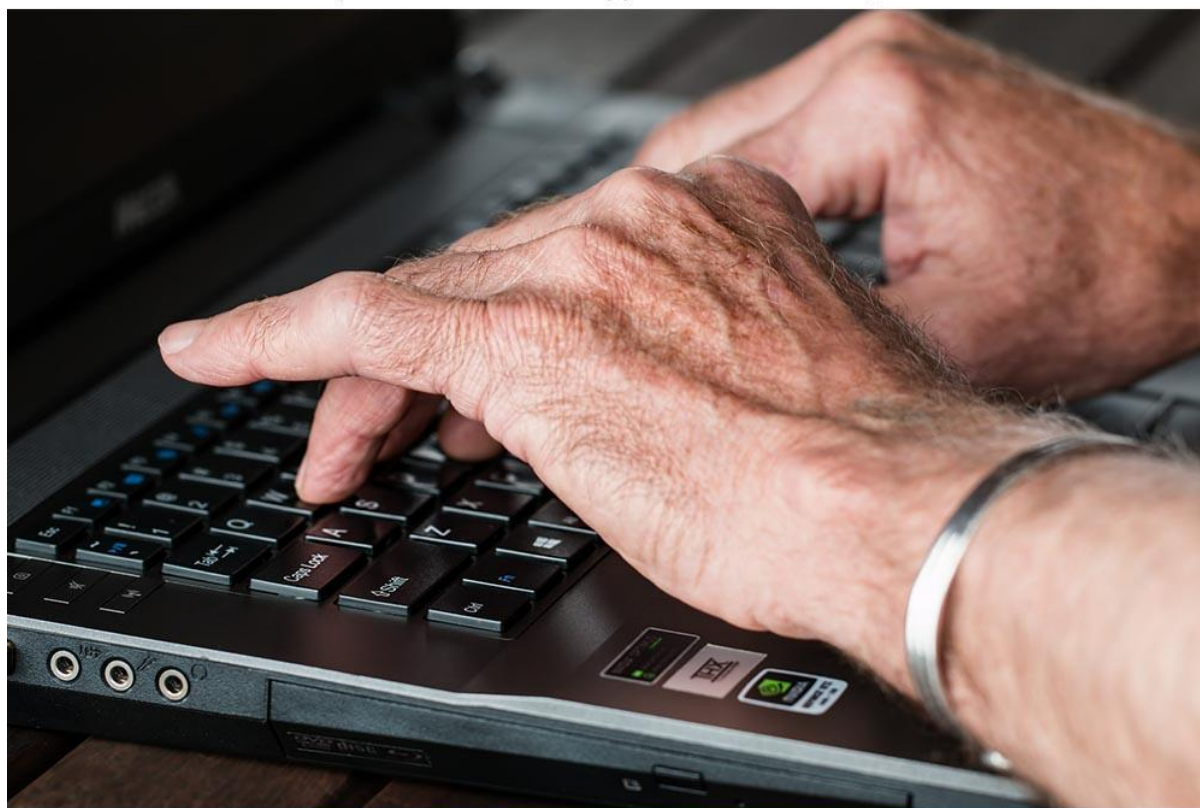


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A Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* in The Context Of Identity Crisis

Abstract

Identity is an ineluctable necessity for the human beings. Every human being spends his/her whole life searching for identity or creating one's own identity as per his/her wish. Each individual possesses two types of identities: one is personal identity (personal traits) and the other is social identity (social roles). When an individual's personal identity comes into conflict with the social identity, it results into identity crisis. Women are more at the receivable end of identity crisis in comparison to men. Manju Kapur, one of the leading figures of the contemporary Indian English fiction, has dedicated all her novels to the discussion of women's suffering and struggling due to the clash between their personal identity and the identity assigned by the society. The present research paper attempts to explore the psycho- social causes of identity crisis through the analysis of the major women characters in Manju Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters*.

Key Words: Identity, Identity crisis, Women, Society, Manju Kapur.

'Identity' is perhaps one of the most discussed and concerned topics for the thinkers as well as the writers of the age. One cannot live without identity because it is a psycho-sociological urge to survive. According to Oxford dictionary the semantic meaning of

‘identity’ is “the fact of being who or what a person or a thing is”. When a person refuses to accept the conventional identity given by society he /she faces identity crisis- a situation of discord between the person and the society or of clash between the desired identity and the decided (by the society) identity. Till the time, several theories on personality and identity have been proposed in the history of the literary criticism. But, the most convincing one is given by Erik Erikson. Erik Homberger Erikson (1902 – 1994), a German born psychologist and humanitarian known for his theory on ‘psychological development of human beings,’ coined the term ‘identity crisis’ which is defined as a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person’s sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in his/her expected aims or role in society.

With the advent of the twentieth century, the thematic concern of Indian English novelists has shifted from outer to inner world; from public to private sphere. As a result, the patterned themes of social issues, struggle for freedom, communal problems, miserable conditions of untouchables and women, etc. came to be replaced with the modern themes of human existence, absurdity, quest for self and identity crisis. The novelists moved towards the psycho-sociological assessment of their characters; expressing their thoughts, emotions and mental turmoil. It paved the way for the new generation of Indian English novels and that is the third mode of “Psychological novels- showing an introspective concern with the individual”, Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks thus,

The serious Indo-Anglian novelist no longer seems interested in simply documenting or hopefully improving the country, but in trying to depict the individual’s groping towards self-realization. (23)

To this third mode of novel, women novelists of the age brought out a phenomenal success and constituted a significant sub-genre of women’s writings. Prominent among these are

Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Das, Jhumpa Lahiri, Gita Hariharan, Rama Mehta, Manju Kapur and Arundhati Roy. Their works have proven to be an evidential record of a woman's position, situation and condition in the society that has partially changed but not significantly. A woman suffers from dual identity crisis- as a woman and as a human being and therefore the question of identity in women and of women has always remained an unsolved puzzle. Above women novelists have imparted a psychological depth to their writings by projecting female psyche, inner aspirations, hopes, desires and anxieties while talking about the female quest for identity. As Dr. Ashok Kumar says,

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. (48)

Manju Kapur, one of the leading women novelists of the age, is a versatile genius who in her novels presents various facets and colours of modern Indian life in socio cultural context with special attention given to women. Kapur, born on 25th October 1948, was a professor of English literature at Miranda House College, Delhi University. Kapur is known for her in depth observation, style of writing, art of characterization and pre-meditated subjects. She is frank in her opinions and bold in her expressions. Though she has also experimented with short stories and poems, her fame mainly rests upon her five novels: *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody*. In her novels, women are of core importance and are delineated from head to toe including their hopes, aspirations, frustration, feelings and thoughts. Her female protagonists are mostly educated women from the middle class or upper middle class family, struggling for freedom and rights. They are trapped midway between tradition and modernity, between society and self. In her novels, women are shown to be the victims of the so called male chauvinism but at the same time her women do not sit back keeping mum rather they turn out rebellious or dare to speak

out their minds. The present research studies Manju Kapur's premier novel *Difficult Daughters* and attempts to analyze the circumstances and incidents responsible for identity crisis in the major women characters.

Manju Kapur's maiden novel *Difficult Daughters* published in 1998, won her the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the best first book (Eurasia). The story is about a woman split among family duty, desire for education and illicit love. Set around the turbulent years of World War II and partition of India, the novel depicts the women of three generations – Kasturi, the mother, Virmati, the difficult daughter of second generation and Ida, Virmati's only daughter, a childless divorcee who is unable to develop an understanding with her mother during her lifetime. The story of the novel largely revolves around Virmati tracing her quest for identity, for space to study, for attention and love, for freedom to live as per her likes.

Like Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson has also stressed the importance of early childhood experiences in the formation and development of personality. According to Erikson, a mother is a significant person in her child's life whose love and responsiveness develop trust and security in a child. If the child is inadequately handled, the child becomes insecure and mistrustful which results in identity crisis. This is the case with Virmati too. She never receives any love or attention from her mother. Being the eldest daughter, she is burdened with the family duties of looking after her ten younger siblings. Because of her mother's incessant breeding, Virmati never gets free time; she can't play or study. "Ever since Virmati could remember she had been looking after children. It wasn't only baby Parvati to whom she was indispensable; to her younger siblings she was second mother as well" (Kapur 6) At times Virmati constantly yearns for her mother's love, for her attention and affection but-

"When she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away. 'Have you seen to their food-milk-

clothes-studies-?'...Protest Virmati finally. 'Why can't Indumati also take responsibility? Why does it always have to be me?'' You are the eldest. If you don't see to things, who will?" (Kapur 6-7)

Erikson firmly believes that adolescence is an important stage for the development of personality. It is during this stage that the adolescent will reexamine his identity and try to find out exactly who he or she is. During this period, one starts exploring possibilities and begins to form one's own identity based upon the outcome of their explorations. Failure to establish a sense of identity within the proper time can lead to identity crisis. Also, pressuring someone into an identity can result in rebellion in the form of establishing a negative identity, and also in the feeling of unhappiness. Virmati, an adolescent is also passing through the process of identity formation. Meanwhile Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin and her role model influences her a lot. She, who is doing her M.Sc. in Lahore, inspires Virmati for further study. Now Virmati too, wants to be self-dependent, defiant and assertive just like her cousin Shakuntala and therefore, she also tries to find out her identity and independence outside the home i.e. through her education at Lahore College. To study further, Virmati fights with her mother and her family. When she fails her exam, she is engaged to a canal engineer. But, She boldly refuses her family's decision of her arrange marriage. "The family brands her 'to be restless, sick and selfish' and locks her up." (Sudhashree 165) Being deprived of love and care since her childhood, Virmati enjoys the attention given to her by Professor Harish. She finally chooses to marry Harish. After five years of ups and downs, Harish marries her and she becomes his second wife, an illegal wife. Virmati is not unaware of the consequences she has to face after her marrying a married man; both her family and society are not going to accept their marriage.

“Virmati was sure that neither parents nor grandfather would ever forgive her. The process of rejection that had started with Tarsikka would be completed. Let them damn her as they might at least she had her new life...” (Kapur 207)

However she gets shocked as the Professor refuses to leave his first wife. She ends up being marginalized by her own family and despised by her husband's. Now for Virmati circumstances have become even more difficult to live in; here as well, she has to struggle for the sake of her rights and recognition. Virmati faces rejection and hatred from both her family and her husband's family. Feelings of guilt and insult hover around her every time. Gradually, she feels lonely, depressed and dissatisfied. Her constant struggle for identity puts her in a state of mental unrest. She then starts her further education in Lahore to regain her lost self-esteem and selfhood but, she fails to revive herself; she still feels desolated and misplaced. The author writes as, “Virmati's life in Lahore was isolated. She was married with a husband, a co-wife and two stepchildren. She had one abortion and one miscarriage. These barriers divided her from her fellows...” (Kapur 250) Throughout the novel, Virmati keeps searching for her own space and identity, first in her family and then in her husband's family. Her incessant attempts to find a valuable recognition for herself in society are also suggestive of her identity crisis. Ultimately, she stands bewildered and dissatisfied; spends rest of her life in restlessness and endless anxieties. Just because she elects a life of her choice which is against the social norms and traditions, Virmati has to suffer identity crisis till the end of her life.

In the novel, both Kasturi and Ganga (Harish's wife) devote their entire life to their families as they strongly find their social role- identification with their personal identity. Kasturi does not even think of self- identity nor does she have any knowledge of the word. After her marriage, she finds her identity only in her social duties towards her husband and her family. She is not educated and does not know the way of fighting for her rights. On the

other side, Ganga is treated like an all-purpose servant in her own house by her own husband. Even after her husband's injustice to Ganga, she never sees him wrong. Her husband continues to be her public statement of identity as a wife. Her bindi on forehead, her bangles and mangalsutra are still suggestive of her wifehood and her husband is still her god. Erikson has said that at each stage of the development of human personality an individual should resolve her crisis within the proper time and if not so then the individual may suffer from irresolvable problems. It remains applicable for both Virmati and Ganga; one fails to resolve the crisis within the time and later does not even recognize the crisis.

Virmati's daughter Ida is no exception. She confronts failure in marital relationship for which she directly blames her mother. She utters, "The only thing I had wanted was not like to be my mother" (Kapur 1). Ida's words are enough to show her feelings of crises due to her shattered identity. "I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like pencil notation on the margins of society" (Kapur 258) She goes through her past where her mother always insists her to be the model daughter. Just to please her father, she is supposed to look pretty, neat and clean. She is also forced to do well in studies, to read classic literature and to discuss them with her father. She is always advised by Virmati to obey her father in every way. Ida now wishes to please herself at least for sometime. She protests Virmati but, by the time she is not sure about her own self which she wants to please. Confusion and illusion take place in her mind. Ida feels herself as a personality fragmented into parts, whether she is her parents' daughter or a toy to please them.

To sum up, the friction caused in the life of Virmati and Ida is the resultant effect of the factors like tyranny of patriarchal hierarchy, mother- daughter relationship, social roles, individual talent and personal ambitions. All these stimulate none but identity crisis in their mind.

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