



FEMALE EXPLOITATION: A STUDY OF MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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Abstract

Women writers like Manju Kapur, Kamala Markandaya, Gita Hariharan and Arundhati Roy have dealt with the gender issues disturbing women and presented women fighting against male chauvinism and domination of the patriarchal system. The present paper highlights the thesis and anti-thesis of feminine sensibility in Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters*. The novelist has focused on women characters that raise female anxiety due to the feelings of courage and determination. Kapur has brought into light the female class of 1940's when woman had no right to assert her identity.

Keywords: Patriarchal system, Identity Crisis, Thesis and Anti-thesis, feminine sensibility

Feminism in Indian English novel is a very sublime concept. However, feminism seems to refer to an intense awareness of identity. The exploitation of woman is a well known fact even recognized by History. Einstein interprets the term feminism as, "In my understanding the term 'feminist' then I see an element of visionary futurist thoughts. This encompasses a concept of social transformation that as part of the eventual liberation of women with change all human relationships for the better. Although centrally about women, their experience and condition. Feminism is also fundamentally about men and about social change."¹ Suma Chitnis has described the distinctive feature of feminist movement in India:

The most distinctive feature of this movement is that it was initiated by man. It was only towards the end of the century the women joined the fray. The list of who champion the cause of women is long- Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwarachandra Vidyasagar, Keshav Chandra Sen, Matahari Phule, Agarkar, Ranade, Karve to mention a few. Their record of the reform they undertook to achieve is impressive. It reveals that their efforts spanned action to abolish the practice of Sati, the custom of child marriage, custom of distinguishing widows, the ban on remarriage of the upper caste Hindu Widows and a lot of other evil practices that affected women.²

A plethora of Indian Female writers have tried to depict the female exploitation and suffering of women in the male dominated society. Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy and Gita Hariharan are prominent writers occupying rank with other Indian female writers who have expressed their feelings in the form of fiction and exposed the harsh and bitter realities of female psyche. Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters*³ (1999), focuses on sturdy self-assured women characters who raise anxiety and show courage and determination to apprehend their goals in life. This paper is an attempt to reveal profound insight of female's inner conflict and carve a way out of the dilemma in order to find an amicable solution. Women have been lagging behind in world literature for centuries. On the one hand, there are examples of Sita, Gargi, Rani Laxmi Bai and others who have

followed their own paths but on the other if one violates the traditional norms, one is subjected to bitter criticism by the society.

Manju Kapur has realistically depicted the female consciousness in *Difficult Daughters* and tried to show the struggle a woman has to do in order to prove her identity in the male dominated society. Virmati, the protagonist in *Difficult Daughters* struggles hard for her existential identity in adverse circumstances. The novelist has woven into text the story of three generations of the family in order to bring to fore the female exploitation not only by the male members but even by the female members. Tennyson's famous lines are applicable in the context, "old order changeth yielding place to new and God fulfils himself in many ways lest one good system should corrupt the world" (In Memoriam). Ida, the daughter of Virmati, belongs to the modern advanced generation. She goes to the native place of her mother in order to find out the real circumstances and happenings related to the life of her mother. Virmati comes in contact with Professor Harish who has returned to India to fulfill the desire of his mother to stay with the family, "His heart he had left in England, returning to India reluctantly, and only because of his mother's insistent demands" (36). Here one can very well assess the position of Professor's wife who is illiterate: "It had also been five years since he had seen his wife, but his wife had been in no position to enforce her claims" (36). He falls in love with Virmati at first sight when he meets her:

The Professor drank in the symbolism of her posture greedily. It moved him so deeply that he remembered it in all its detail even when his children had grown up. The murmur and rustle of students with scratching pens, their heads receding in rows, the whirr and the click-click of the fans overhead, and the stillness at the heart of it, enclosing him and Virmati, Virmati with her offering eyes in her open face.(47)

Virmati finds herself in no position to reveal her love for Professor to the family members who fix her marriage with an engineer: it seemed to Virmati that her family could talk of nothing else but her wedding. Every word they said had so little relation to her inner life that she felt fraudulent evening listening to them, passively, immorally silent"(70). The woman has to undergo pain and torture in order to tackle the

peculiar situation. But the norms of patriarchal social system do not allow her to expose her feelings of love in order to select a suitable man for her as her life partner.

Struggle yields results in life if it is pursued with firm conviction to achieve the desired goal. As a result of Virmati's keen desire for higher studies in Lahore, her cousin Shakuntala plays a pivotal role and proves herself to be the real mentor ; "Shakuntala's visit planted the seeds of aspiration in Virmati" (19). She intends to go to Lahore for higher education 'even if she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over' (19). The old fashioned mother Kasturi represents the generation that follows the fundamental dictum of society and is ready to sacrifice her daughter at the altar of marriage for good reputation and attach little importance to education of a girl:

'Mati, please, I want to study...' Virmati faltered.

'But you have studied. What else is left?'

'In Lahore...I want to go to Lahore.....'

Kastur could bear her daughter's foolishness no further. She grabbed her by the hair and banged her head against the wall.

May be this will knock some sense into you! She cried. 'What crimes did I commit in my last life that I should be cursed with a daughter like you in this one?'(59)

This is how a woman stands against her daughter and forces her for marriage, 'Remember you are going to be married next month, if I have to swallow poison to make you do it!(60). Mother's only concern is her daughter's marriage. Kasturi herself has meted out the same harsh treatment at the hands of her mother when she is 'caught praying to a picture of Christ'. The fundamentalism of society can be observed in the reference of a mother to a daughter 'But this witch sitting at home will have nothing better to do than think she is a Christian. Who will marry her then, I would like to know'.(61) During Kasturi's formal education, marriage is the only aim of her parents while educating their daughter in a missionary school of Punjab. Virmati's firm determination for getting higher education becomes fruitful after she goes to drown herself in a bid of frustration and disillusionment. The family members realize the need of the hour and

send her to Lahore in the company of her cousin Shakuntala who has been a source of inspiration for her by extending her a helping hand in critical moments of Virmati's life:

'You will find Viru that in Lahore people are not so narrow-minded. It is a pity the man was married, but you have done the right thing. Together we will face the family. After all I have experience in resisting pressures. Don't worry I am on your side.' (115)

The family plays crucial role in many ways in the development or fall of a female. Virmati's family especially her mother behave rudely and confine her to a go down of the house like an animal in order to keep her away from the matrimonial ceremony of her sister's marriage. She is compelled to leave the house for the sake of her freedom and education in Lahore. Ida, Virmati's daughter represents modern woman that does not follow the traditional path blindly but chooses the rational approach to discover reality behind her mother's troublesome past. She is keen to visit the place where her mother 'was educated after so much trouble' in order to know the reality about her mother's past life:

I want to see the place that had been the Mecca for all Punjabis. Lahore, where students gathered on the river, around the mausoleums, through the mall, in the gardens, the shopping areas, the eating places, the theatres. Where anybody with their brains went to study. To learn, to meet people, hear leaders, be in contact with social, political, fashionable trends. The centre of Punjab, its heart and soul, and how much else besides.(137)

Sense of emotional attachment to a man is a female's quality. Virmati's miserable plight is that she is in a fix to assess her real condition after being secretly married to Harish, the Professor in Lahore:

But when Harish is here I stop thinking of other things. And when he is not here, all I do is to wait for him to come. How long do we have to be secret man and wife, hidden from the eyes of the world? I hate it, but what can I do? (140)

Manju Kapur has put forth the predicament of a woman in peculiar circumstances imposed by patriarchal system of society. Virmati finds herself in difficulty to articulate her feelings. She can't discuss about the relationship with her

roommate Swarn Lata: "In a dim obscure way, Virmati longed for that open-hearted conversation between friends that relieved the mind, and strengthened faith in one self, but she had always found it difficult to articulate her feeling."(141)

Virmati's friend Swarn Lata reminds women of their duty for the country in times of struggle:

As women' it is our duty, no, not duty, that word has unpleasant connotations. It is our privilege to give ourselves to the unity of our country. Not only to the unity between rich and poor, but between Muslim and Hindu, between Sikh and Christian. Artificial barriers have been created amongst us to gain power over insecure and fearful minds. (145)

Virmati's life moves to and fro like a wheel as time and fate play crucial roles in her life and she becomes the victim of adverse circumstances even after going to Lahore for her bright future. She can't spend money for the newspaper 'if I start spending one anna on the newspaper, my mother will kill me'.(146) On the other hand, her roommate Swarna Lata does not prove to be a good companion in the hostel 'In her heart, she despises me, but we are living together, she has to pretend'.(147) She is ready to face any untoward happening in her life instead of going back to her parents in Amritsar even when the doctor prescribes medicines for her weak liver and fever. She somehow or the other wants to remain away from her family and equest the hostel authorities:

She begged them not or disturbs her parents, she was sure she would get well soon. Privately she hid the medicine; she didn't want any drugs suppressing her symptoms. Let it all come out. Nature cure was what her family believed in, and she had never in her life taken anything remotely resembling a pill. She drank lots of water to wash away the fever. (147)

Social barriers cause suppression in man-woman relationship. The Professor makes extramarital relationship with Virmati out of his deep love for her but the society in the form of wife, mother, and sister doesn't allow converting this relationship into marriage. And a girl has to undergo much humiliation and face difficulties more than a boy due to patriarchal structure of

society. Virmati realistically puts her real picture before her lover:

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.....(149)

It is marriage which matters for a girl like Virmati who is not in a position to understand the real factor behind the excuse of delay in marriage ceremony. Indian social barriers and legal parameters don't permit a man to marry many times. After her involvement with Harish, Virmati realizes the fact that he wants to 'prolong the situation' of marriage. Here is the realistic portraiture of a married man falling in love with the other:

How do you know of them Viru? I come to you as a haven. Except for this, my life is hell! Hell! Tantrums, sulks, sly accusations. (149-50)

The very reality of her lover's behavior is just like 'an act of treachery' for a girl who has not taken care of her parents and stood against the system with the hope of her marriage to her lover.

Manju Kapur focuses our attention to the fact of fast changing scenario from the view point of women when they can participate even in the freedom struggle and the activities like education for the sake of their better future.

To conclude, Manju Kapur has vividly presented the life of women struggling against the patriarchal system of society in order to claim her right place. The novel is rather a story of a woman's continuous struggle for her existential identity against the perception of domesticity. The novel is the miserable tale of a woman torn between her family responsibility, the passion for education and her illicit love.

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