

A Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*: Virmati, Ida and Shakuntala

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Abstract. Manju Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughters*, published in 1998, located against the backdrop of India of 1940's presents the problems of an upper middle class urban Arya Samaj Punjabi family in Amritsar. The novel went on to win the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1999 for being the best published book in Eurasian Region. Kapur speaks with great narrative eloquence on the idea of independence and the novel set against the background of partition deals with issues like women education and feminine freedom. She probes into the psyche of Indian women living in joint families under male domination and writes about the multi layered Indian experience in colonial and post colonial times, reflecting upon the holocaust of partition and the problems of women in particular.

Mary Ann Fergusson in her study of the *Image of Women in Literature* states 'One peculiarity of the images of women throughout history is that social stereotypes have been reinforced by archetypes.' (Fergusson, p 4) In every age woman has been portrayed either 'as a mother, a wife, a mistress or an object of attraction and their roles have been defined in relationship to male counterpart. Depictions of women as achievers or leaders have been comparatively few'. (Bhat, p ix) But even these exceptional depictions of power or strength also manifest the extraordinariness of women which tend to ignore the lives of the ordinary and average ones.

The search for control over one's destiny constitutes the key theme of the novel and refers to the Independence aspired to and obtained by a nation as well as by a woman residing in the same nation at the same time. The novel recounts the story of Virmati, a young woman born in

Amritsar into an austere Punjabi family, who did not wish to live her mother's life and went to study in Lahore rejecting the confinement of her mother's world which revolved around domesticity, marriage and child bearing. Virmati's history is reconstructed in retrospect by her daughter Ida who undertakes a journey to know her mother's past. Although her mother constantly reminded her that 'it is the duty of every girl to get married,' Virmati's dreams were influenced by her cousin sister Shakuntala who was a rebel and a liberated woman in her own regard. Virmati's mother Kasturi was brought up upon the conventional principles of patriarchal society where marriage was the ultimate destiny of a girl's life and marriage implied that a girl had to work tirelessly to please her in-laws.

During Kasturi's formal schooling it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued at home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by impeccable nature of her daughter's qualifications. She was going to please her in-laws. (Kapur, 58)

Commenting on her parental expectations, Virmati remarked, 'They want nothing from me but an agreement to marry.' (Kapur, 100) The women were compelled to think of nothing else and it seemed to Virmati that her family could talk of nothing but her wedding. They had no knowledge about her inner life and her mental turmoil but unlike other repressive patriarchal families her father was more liberated in his outlook and thinking. She refused to accept the groom chosen by her family and attempted suicide. Her sister was married off to the groom instead of her. Virmati expressed her desire to pursue higher studies and follow the lines of her cousin Shakuntala. For Virmati, education signified an escape from the reproaches of her family and freedom from her mother's control. Virmati and Shakuntala, the so-called 'difficult daughters' of the family, represents the evolving consciousness of the modern Indian woman of the forties. But unlike Shakuntala, Virmati was not serious about securing education and professional independence for her own sake. She sought it as a respite to escape from the pressures of the illicit love relationship she had entered into with her married

professor. When she informed her mother that she would like to go to Lahore to pursue further education, Kasturi reproached her daughter 'When I was your age, girls only left their house when they married. And beyond a certain age...' (Kapur, 111). Kasturi felt that Virmati had been sent to her as a punishment that she had to bear for life. She castigated her daughter for nurturing dreams which were unconventional and improper for a girl to cherish. She reminded her how 'a woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings,' and implored her to settle down into domestic life like other girls of her age did. (Kapur, p 111) Virmati rebelled against her mother's expectations and left for Lahore. Although she said to the world that she left to study in Lahore, yet in reality it was an attempt to find a respite from the professor. In an attempt to forget the man who had never acknowledged or recognized their relationship she wanted to explore the life beyond the mundane domestic sphere which no women in family except her cousin Shakuntala had access to. Shakuntala had described her liberated lifestyle in Lahore to her cousin, 'We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings; follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars.' The words enthralled and inspired Virmati, she blurted out in excitement, 'I want to be like you Behnji...'

Virmati desperately sought an escape from her meaningless life and thought that pursuit of higher education might enable her to do so. She coveted an independent life like that of Shakuntala. Despite her desperation to forget the professor she helplessly failed and became more entangled with him. Being away from her home, and moral control exercised by her mother, she succumbed to his passionate demands.

The novel opens with the frank declaration of the narrator, Virmati's daughter Ida, a childless divorcee, who undertakes a journey to know her mother's history, 'the one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother.' (Kapur 1) The name Ida implies a new state of consciousness, a fresh beginning. (Prasad 163) Through Ida's conscious decision to be different from her mother we are introduced to the question of defiance and generation gap. Every new generation seeks to defy its predecessor, and fight against the anxiety of influence, Virmati challenged Kasturi's principles, Ida could not accept Virmati's. Although Virmati's case may be seen as representative up to a point yet she could not live up to it completely. It is true that she represents the spirit of "New Woman" in

India with her assertion of individuality, and yearning for education but she fails to show her strength of mind in love. She was caught in whirlpool of misplaced passion towards the Oxford returned Professor who already had a wife. Virmati was burdened with family duties from childhood because of her mother's incessant pregnancies and had a repressed craving for love and affection. Professor Harish had filled her emptiness with love and she helplessly fell in love with him. Despite his education and understanding Harish lacked the courage and ability to support Virmati for despite the fact that he could not love his illiterate wife, yet he could not leave her. Virmati too was aware of the hopelessness of the illicit love affair. She reproached him with harsh words when she heard the news of his wife's pregnancy as well as his simultaneous confession of love for her, 'You think you can do what you like so long as you go on saying you love'. Her decision to go to Lahore was prompted by the desire to forget him.

But Virmati failed in her mission. She succumbed to the professor's implorations and passions in her loneliness during her stay at Lahore and helplessly yielded to the temptations of the body. Consequently she realized that she had become pregnant and was left with no other alternative but to go in for an abortion. She knew that the professor would not render any support to her in her hours of crisis and left with no other alternative she decided to take the action to save her family from shame. She regretted the fact that she who had come to Lahore for expanding her mental horizons had done nothing but ended up getting more and more helplessly involved in a useless and meaningless love relationship which had given her nothing but pain. She wanted to do 'something meaningful' in her life like her roommate Swarnalatha, who was a freedom activist, but she failed to transcend her underlying need for love and emotional dependence. (Malik 135) Kapur's novel shows Virmati vacillating between the demands of her heart and her yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of her time. She was moved by Swarnalatha's words, who professed,

Marriage is not the only thing in life Viru. The war, the Satyagraha movement because of all these things women are coming out of their houses – talking jobsfighting,, going to jail.

She asked Virmati to wake up from her 'stale dream' and told her how plenty of married women were also involved in the freedom movement. But Virmati found herself locked in new prisons even as she broke old ones. She silently endured her pain and frustration. She reproached herself for being selfishly engaged in her own world of love and miseries when the entire nation was being swept by the heat of the freedom struggle but failed to get out of her emotional craving for the professor.

She felt out of place, an outcaste amongst all these women. She thought of Harish who loved her. She must be satisfied with that. These larger spaces were not for her. She felt an impostor sitting in the hall. Again, scenes from her private life came unbidden before her eyes. (Kapur 144)

The happiest and perhaps the most successful phase of her life was the episode at Nahan, when she became the headmistress of a girl's school. She almost attained the autonomy over her life, which she had craved all along and eventually discovered her own space to live, something similar to what Virginia Woolf identified as a 'room of her own'. But she failed to restrain herself from succumbing to the demands of the relationship which she knew was doomed from beginning, but did not have the heart to deny. Despite the shock and disapproval of both families the Professor eventually married her but Virmati's married life was a sheer disaster. She was ostracized by her family, and forced to compete for her share of her husband's love along with his first wife, Ganga. Virmati was forced to compromise and adjust in order to adapt herself into her husband's family and eventually died an insignificant death. At the end of the novel Ida says 'This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word-brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it Mama and leave me be. Do not haunt me any more.' (G. Kumar 108) She wanted to bury the ghosts of her mother's past behind her and move on in life.

Kapur presents the psychic distress of women through the rebellious character of Virmati when she desperately proclaims 'we have to accept this is our lot in life'. The novel not only refers to the difficult

daughter Virmati but also alludes to the several other difficult daughters who left the confines of their household and engaged themselves in the national struggle for independence.

Gur Pyari Jandial felt that despite the failure to attain completely autonomy Virmati's efforts to break the confinement of the patriarchal world is not insignificant altogether: 'what Virmati tried to do in the forties was a great achievement in itself'. In the novel *Difficult Daughters* we do not listen to Virmati's voice. What we have is her daughter's reconstruction and representation. Although Virmati does not speak out, yet it is clear true that her character is located at the juncture of two oppressions: colonialism and patriarchy.

Shakuntala, Swarnalatha are presented as truly 'modern' or 'liberated' women in this respect.

The women characters in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* are divided into three generations, with their values, mindsets and relationships. Virmati's history is reconstructed in retrospect by her daughter Ida. Virmati is depicted as a new woman of colonial India and her urge to acquire education and freedom resembles the nation's quest for identity and selfhood, but she fails to completely live up to her wishes. Although she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she gets caught into another, where her free spirit is curbed and controlled. Kapur sets Virmati's story against the background of changing India. The air was filled with political affairs like the Anti-Pakistan Conference, the Urdu Conference, the All-India Sikh League. Virmati came across women like Mohini Datta, Sita Rallia, Mary Singh, Mrs Leela Mehta, all engrossed in the National Movement. They all appeared remote to Virmati for she was enmeshed in her own problems and trials. She reflected in regret and guilt, 'I am not like these women. They are using their minds organizing participating in conference, politically active, while my time is being spent in love. Wasting, it.' (Kapur, p142).

However it is actually Virmati's difficult daughter Ida who in her determination to live life despite all odds represents the real face of a modern woman. Ida could not accept her mother's decision to abort the foetus and terminate the life growing within her, for she . She had broken her relationship with her husband Prabhakar for he had forced her to go for an abortion – 'I knew Mother, what it was like to have an abortion. Prabhakar had insisted I have one. In denying that incipient little thing in

my belly, he sowed the seeds of our break up'. (Kapur, p 156) Ida had never shared this secret with her mother. She confessed how the death of the foetus haunted her and how she had endured the trauma of her loss alone,

Mother, I never told you this, because you thought Prabhakar was so wonderful, and I was glad that in the choice of my husband I had pleased you. Why should I burden you with my heartaches when you had enough of your own? (Kapur 156-157)

She knew that her mother liked Prabhakar and since she never came to stay with her daughter Virmati was not aware of the real dynamics of their relationship. Ida goes on to vent her feelings about her mother

He was what you respected, a successful academic, a writer of books, a connoisseur of culture, a disseminator of knowledge. Like my father...My father was on a pedestal so high that to breathe that rarified atmosphere was an honour. (Kapur, p 156-157)

Ida was resolute to leave her past behind and live for the future. She did not wish to make the compromises which her mother had made.

In *Shakuntala*, *Swarnalatha* and *Ida* we see the images Modern Woman, conscious, introspective, educated, emancipated, driven by the zeal to assert their autonomy and separate identity and find a place for themselves in society. Manju Kapur's novel brings out glimpses of women of the forties in India trying to assert to establish their own identity. In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati, in her quest for identity, rebels against her family tradition. She is impelled by the inner need to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. Manju Kapur herself asserted that 'the conflict between mother and daughter is inevitable in all ages. I suppose I was a difficult daughter myself. The conflict carries on through generation because mothers want their daughters to be safe. We want them to make the right choices—"right" in the sense that they are socially acceptable. My mother wanted me to be

happily married; I want my daughters to have good jobs.’ (Bala and Chandra, p 107) The very title of the novel *Difficult Daughters* subtly alludes to the patriarchal convention that a woman, who undertakes a quest for an individual identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well. ‘Although Virmati succeeds in breaking all man-made boundaries, there are certain priorities so deeply embedded within her that she struggles to shake through the shackles. In the course of the novel she grows up from a naïve girl to a woman matured by suffering and through experience.’(John, p 1) India's victory against the imperial rulers is mirrored through Virmati's life. No doubt India attained freedom from colonial rule but at the cost of partition and communal hatred. Virmati was victorious in breaking the age old shackles of a patriarchal society in a tradition bound country but at the cost of much mental, torture and constantly struggling but failing to to erase the tag of being the 'other' woman.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a feminist discourse not because she is a woman writing about women's issues, but because she tries to understand a woman both as a woman and as a human being pressurized by visible and invisible contexts.(Jaidev, p 68) She presents a glimpse of feminism keeping in mind the Indian context. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* manages to be simultaneously both Indian and Universal.

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