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Manju Kapoor's *Difficult Daughters* A Saga of Feminist Autonomy and Separate Identity

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Abstract

Manju Kapur presents the yearning for autonomy and separate identity in her women protagonists in this post-modern novel in a traditional thread. The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as women caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. 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 as well as Ida for her.

Stoic Women in *Difficult Daughters*

Manju Kapur in *Difficult Daughters* presents the image of the suffering but stoic women eventually breaking traditional boundaries in the backdrop of traditional narrative thread. In post-colonial era, partition (traditional narrative thread) has ever been the most prolific and prominent area for creative writers. "A number of novels were written on the theme of the destruction it brought and the plight of the refugees. They faithfully record the reign of violence that characterized the period and provide a sad, telling commentary on the breakdown on human values". (Dhawan 14)

The Traditional Narrative Thread

Using the traditional narrative thread, Manju Kapur has invigorated the English language to suit narration of what she felt about her women and their lives in post modern India in a

culture where individualism has often remained an alien idea and marital bliss—the women's role at home is a central focus. Dora Sales Salvador (356), in her note to her Spanish translation of the novel, appropriately stresses: 'Kapur emphasises the efforts made at that time by numerous women who, while demanding equal opportunities, equal access to education and life-opportunities going beyond convention, were a visible force in the non-violent resistance to the British'.

Likewise Christopher Rollason (2004) comments that the search for control over one's destiny, surely the key theme of *Difficult Daughters*, refers to the Independence aspired to and obtained by a nation (despite its cruel division by a fateful Partition), but also to the independence yearned after (and finally not obtained) by a woman and member of that same nation (or of one of its rival communities).

Manju's Women Characters

Manju Kapur, in her novels, presents women who try to establish their own identity. In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati, in her quest for identity, who is also the central character of the novel, rebels against tradition. She is impelled by the inner need to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. Mrs. Kapur herself asserts that “conflict between mother and daughter is inevitable and I suppose I was a difficult daughter. 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 107)

The very title of the novel 'Difficult Daughters' is an indication to the message that a woman, who tries in search of an identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well.

Women in Patriarchal Society

Indian society is a patriarchal one. Women under the patriarchal pressure and control were subjected to much more brunt's and social ostracism. They were discriminated and were biased in lieu of their sex. In patriarchal system, man is the legal head of the family or state coincided with the weakening of female–female bond and especially the dissolution of mother-daughter relationship (Irigaray 30). Irigaray further comments that such a system ensured that property and children belonged to the same genealogy. The same life women lived and struggled under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society is reflected in *Difficult Daughters*. The conflict for autonomy and separate identity remains an unfinished combat in *Difficult Daughters*.

The Story

Difficult Daughters is the story of a young woman, named Virmati born in Amritsar into an austere and highly reputed household. The story tells how she is torn between family duty, the desire for education and elicit-love. This is a story of sorrow, love and compromise.

The major portion deals with Virmati's love affairs with professor and rest part describes fighting struggle for freedom. The novel ends with the birth of Ida. This girl Ida grows and asks to her relatives more & more about her mother. Her relatives especially her Kailash Mama narrates the whole aspects of Virmati to Ida. Ida is the narrator of *Difficult Daughters*.

Narration is developed by co-existing past and present side by side. *Difficult Daughters* is not a pure third-person narrative. Rollason (2004) writes that Virmati's story is told mostly in the third person (with some recourse to the epistolary mode), but is framed by the first-person narration of a search. The search is that of Virmati's daughter, Ida, as she seeks to reconstitute her mother's history.

Ida, an educated woman, divorced and childless, apparently leads a freer life than her mother's in external terms; yet inside her she feels, even if not quite so acutely, some of the same anxieties as had plagued her mother: 'No matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately' (3).

Virmati is the elderest daughter of Kasturi and Suraj Prakash. Kasturi has eleven children. One after another she gives birth to children and thus the whole burden of household work increases over Virmati, being the eldest daughter. Her grandfather is a reformer and renowned landowner who attaches much importance to education with women. The family setup is thoroughly conservative. Virmati's family takes her to be eligible for marriage as she is skilled in stitching, cooking, reading and other household duties which a girl of her age must know before marriage in Indian tradition. At this stage, Virmati's parents decide to marry her to an engineer, Inderjeet, but due to the death of his father their marriage is postponed for two years.

The New Education

The new education and the life of Kasturi generate a new urge and emotion in Virmati to get herself free from the bondage of patriarchy that denies or deserts her freedom and choice. She falls in love with a professor, Harish Chandra, who is married, lives next door and finds an intellectual companion in him. When the time for her marriage with Inderjeet comes, she uses a hitch of suicide to avoid it and declares that she does not like the boy and wants to study further. So marriage is settled with Indumati, the second daughter. Virmati is committed to continue her study at Lahore. As decided by family elders, now Kasturi has to go with Virmati to Lahore for helping her to take admission in RBSL College and principal assures Kasturi that there will be no problem. Virmati becomes centre of focus because of her revolutionary zeal. She doesn't yields to the age old traditions of Arya-Samaj family. Professor's course of meeting to Virmati has yet not stopped and during this period she becomes pregnant. Virmati thinks of her own love while the entire nation is busy in freedom movement. Mrs. Kapur writes:

“Strike, academic freedom, the war, peace, rural uplift-ment....Independence Day, Movement, rally, speeches..an outcaste among all women. She thought of harish who loved her. She must be satisfied with that.” (Kumar 104)

After feeling restless with his relationship with Harish, she aborts her child. After completing her B.T. she returns to Amritsar and is offered the headmistress ship of a school, she joins it. The happiest and most attractive period in Virmati's life is, beyond doubt, which she spends in Nahan, 'clean and prosperous, was ruled by an enlightened royal couple' (182), the capital of Sirmaur, the small Himalayan state run by an enlightened maharaja which gives her refuge for a while as the headmistress of a girl's school.

Female Autonomy

Rollason (2004) comments, "In the micro-state to which her destiny leads her, she has no family or close friends. She attains a near-exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, Virginia Woolf's famous 'room of one's own': and yet she falls". But in Sultanpur too Harish visits her and there meetings are observed by Lalaji. She is dismissed so she decides to go to Nariniketan but on the way she meets Harish's close friend Poet who is already aware of their intimate relationship. She resolves that if professor doesn't accept her she will desert him for good but eventually he gives his consent. So Poet does not let her go and calls Harish. He performs all the rituals of marriage. Professor with Virmati returns home. During her conjugal life Virmati feels that it would have been better if she had not been married with Harish. Suman Bala and Subhash Chandra rightly analysis the man-woman relationship and argue:

"But her acceptance of the treatment meted out to her by her lover, the professor totally belies her expectations. The professor's pursuit of Virmati even after she has been sent to Lahore....reluctance and constant postponing of the marriage in spite of her frequent entreaties....Male geocentricism blinds them to the situation of women." (Bala and Chandra 108)

It can be argued that Professor Harish Chandra enjoys the bliss of both the worlds: Ganga as a maid servant who fulfils his everyday needs, keeps his house tidy and Virmati who satisfies her academic urge. She succeeds to marry Harish but doesn't secure any place for herself in the family. She is not even acknowledged for her intellectuality.

Fight Against Mother Figure

Apparently the novel doesn't seem to profess or propagate feministic outlook but there is undercurrent of feministic autonomy and separate identity. After sometime she gives birth to a daughter Ida. And at the beginning of the novel this girl Ida ponders over her mother's life. Vandita Mishra comments in *The Pioneer*:

"Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power or freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones. Her relationship with the professor, for instance.Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow.... Eventually, marriage to marriage to the man of her choice in no triumph either..."

Virmati has to fight against the power of the mother as well as the oppressive forces of patriarchy symbolized by the mother figure. The rebel in Virmati might have actually exchanged one kind of slavery for another. But towards the end she becomes free, free even from the oppressive love of her husband. Virmati is even not allowed to attend the funeral of her father. In this traumatic situation, Virmati plans to pursue M.A. When she returns she comes to know that all members of her family have gone to Kanpur because of communal tension. Meanwhile Virmati gives birth to her daughter Ida, the narrator.

Struggle to Assert Separate Identity

Virmati never corresponds to the age old tradition but makes Ida to fit in the channel of the family. In her futile attempt she tries to keep her under control. But Ida emerges a woman of no passion. Virmati was a difficult daughter for her mother and Ida is for her. Sumita Pal rightly focuses on the autobiographical nature of the novel:

“Like Virmati, Manju Kapur was born in Amritsar and teaches in college. Her family was victim of partition and was Arya-Smajis like Virmati’s family....Manju Kapoor admits that she herself has been a difficult daughter for her mother whose priority was marriage and she, in turn wants her daughters to have good jobs.” (Pal 137)

Well it is a troublesome task to estimate the relationship between the professor and Virmati. But one can clearly see that whenever Virmati tries to assert her autonomy and separate identity, she is repulsed and ordered to be part of the contemporary society, its culture and rituals by psychotherapy of the professor. Virmati’s academic temperament and achievements also do not help her to assert her separate identity in front of the intellectual height of the professor.

Feminism – Unfruitful Attempt

This shows that feminism is the consequence of the culture or society shaped and governed by men to suit their needs and interests regardless of the women’s basic needs and happiness (Kumar 108). The aspiration of Virmati is condemned to failure, thanks to the incomprehension she receives from both her own family and that of the man she marries - but also thanks to her own mistakes, for no-one obliged her to marry who became her husband, and she was free not to make the choice she did. Gur Pyari Jandial (2003), correctly points about the unfruitful attempt of Virmati: 'what is necessary is to break the patriarchal mould, and for Virmati to have tried to do that in the forties was a great achievement'. Dora Sales in an essay on the novel in English comments: 'In *Difficult Daughters* we do not listen to Virmati's voice. She could not speak out, being certainly situated at the juncture of two oppressions: colonialism and patriarchy. What we have is her daughter's reconstruction and representation'.

Tradition and Modernity – An Unfinished Combat for Feminist Identity

The novel is straightforward, startling and evocative of Virmati’s pains and torn personality. Manju Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individual caged within the

confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunged into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds.

The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as a woman caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. The women of India have indeed achieved their success in half a century of Independence, but if there is to be a true female, independence, much remains to be done.

The fight for autonomy and separate identity remains an unfinished combat and a million dollar question. Throughout this novel Ida's declaration echoes that she doesn't want to be like her mother and wants to assert her autonomy and separate identity. Ida wants liberty and doesn't want to compromise as did her mother. This idea of the novel can be summed up in the utterance of angry Ida:

“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 anymore.” (Kumar 108)

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