

Search of Identity: A study of Manju Kapur’s novel “Difficult Daughters”

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ABSTRACT: *This paper presents the woman as an individual who fights against suppression and oppression of the patriarchy. The novel Difficult Daughters sensibly shows the position of women and her longing struggle to establish an identity. Manju Kapur has come out as serious social thinker in her novels because there is a purpose behind her writing. All her novels have been written with a definite purpose because the novelist tries to analyze issues related to the middle class or upper middle class women. Manju Kapur is much interested to present the questions and problems related to women in a larger perspective. In her novels, the women’s questions have emerged essentially in the context of the identity of the new educated middle class. Manju Kapur’s female protagonists are mostly educated. They are strong individuals but imprisoned within the boundary of conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerable to them, in their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunged into a dedicated effort to search an identity for them as qualified women with faultless background. The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as women caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual society of today.*

Keywords: *Marriage, Education, Male Dominance, Struggle for Identity, New Woman*

I. Introduction

More than half of the population of the world is made of woman but she is not treated on par with man despite innumerable evolutions and revolutions. She has the same mental and moral power, yet she is not recognised as his equal. In such conditions, the question of searching her identity is justified. Actually in his male dominated society, she is wife, mother, sister and home maker. She is expected to serve, sacrifice, submit and tolerate each ill against her peacefully. Her individual self has very little recognition in the patriarchal society and so self-effacement is her normal way of life. The illustration of Sita, Savitri and Gandhari are always expected to be followed by her. But the noticeable point is that these ideal women existed only in epics, they were princesses and queens and much far from the pains and sufferings in modern world in which modern woman has no identity of her own. She lives for others and breathe for others. And the situation becomes more deadly when we take it in Indian context where women must defer to her husband and make the marital home pleasant for him.

Manju Kapur, a world acclaimed writer is known for her feministic vision. The women in her novels seem to be the personification of new women who have been carrying the burden of inhibition since ages and want to break that tradition of silence now. In the traditional social milieu of her novels she shows the existence of mothers and daughters, it is the same society where marriage is regarded as the ultimate goal and destiny from which these women cannot escape. Manju Kapur’s female protagonists are the representatives of that female folk who long to be free from the stale social customs and traditions but are never allowed. Her female protagonists are mostly educated. Their education leads them to independent thinking, for which their family and society becomes intolerant towards them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunge into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds.

Her novels tackle the identity problems faced by the educated Indian woman with authenticity and insight. These novels symbolize a fight against taboos, social restrictions and manmade code of conduct in a traditional society. Her heroines are the symbol of female imagination responding to pressures and oppressions of patriarchal culture where marriage is seen only as a compromise. Her novels are a story of struggle for freedom and search for an identity at various levels. She endeavours to bring out significant new meanings in the changed exemplar of culture encounters in which conjugal roles, dual burdens, equal opportunities and social constraints are seen from the existential point of view. The protagonists of her novels are trying to maintain a balance all the time. Their sufferings amidst the dual standards have made them strong and they constantly struggle to exist, to free themselves from the shackles of tradition and various prejudices. Her heroines offer, “A frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization and control mechanism.”¹

In the novel Difficult Daughters the novelist has portrayed her protagonists as a woman caught in the conflict between the passion of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the

day. The central character of the novel, rebels against tradition. The title of the novel *Difficult Daughters* is an indication to the message that a woman, who strives in search of an identity, is branded as the difficult daughter by the family as well as society. *Difficult Daughters* presents the women who try to establish their own identity. According to Sunita Sinha, "Kapur speaks of the idea of independence- independence aspired to and obtained by a nation and also independence yearned after by a woman."²

The story of *Virmati* is narrated by her own daughter, Ida. The novel begins with the death of the protagonist, *Virmati*. Ida explains the story of her dead mother. Manju Kapur, in order to know about the story, unfolds the tale of *Virmati*. The novelist also describes the nature of *Virmati* and her desire after death shows her attitude. She says: 'When I die, she said to me, I want my body donated. My eyes, my hearts, my kidneys, any organ that can be of use. That way someone will value me after I have gone.'³

Ida, ever aloof daughter, goes to Amritsar to reconstruct her mother's memory. The novelist adeptly manages the past and present in the novel. Ida a divorced girl tries to recollect the memory of her mother. She informs that her mother is a bold and aggressive woman who fought against the evil customs of the society. Her mother is in search of her own identity in conventional Indian society. *Virmati* was brought up in the traditional Indian family. She is engaged in the household duties. She lost her identity in the family responsibility. The Novelist through *Virmati* exposes the reality of Indian woman in the family. She is simply a puppet in the hand of male. *Virmati* had always told by her mother that the marriage is the ultimate fate of woman. Since *Virmati* was the eldest daughter of Kasturi, she was forced to look after all her brothers and sisters and she assisted her mother in the nourishment of all of them. During the pregnancies of her mother, *Virmati* was always busy in arranging the house-hold affairs and managing the thing as far as possible for her. Kapur writes about her duties in these words: '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. She was impatient and intolerant of fuss. If they didn't eat their meals, on her return home from school she would hunt out the offending brother or sister and shove the cold food down their throats. If they refused to wear the hand-me-down clothes she assigned them, she slapped them briskly. Sometimes she tried to be gentle, but it was weary work and she was almost always tired and harassed.' (*Difficult Daughters*, p.6.)

It seems that *Virmati* was forced to tackle the responsibility in her very early age. Thus, *Virmati* is portrayed as a common Indian woman. She has spent most of her time in the household duties. Though she wishes to spend her life freely without taking any responsibility, she is bound in the household duties. She represents the modern woman. She fights against the conventional Indian male dominant society. Sanjay Kumar explores: 'On the surface though, *Virmati* seems to represent the women of 1950's who, in a patriarchal society of that period were subjugated to man-made injustices and indignities.'⁴

Living in Amritsar provides *Virmati* an opportunity to enter in the new realm of freedom of which she was deprived for a longer period. Here, Manju Kapur seems to narrate a story of a girl whose journey is quite symbolic due to her transformation from "innocence to experience". Manju Kapur also attaches the theme of feminism with the character of *Virmati*. *Virmati* seems to be the champion of feminism in this novel. In Amritsar, her dresses, her outlook, her appearance and her style –everything changes in a stroke. Manju Kapur writes: 'Her dress too had changed from her Amritsar days. When they went visiting she wore her saris in Parsi-style, as Shakuntala called it, with the palla draped over her right shoulder. The saris were of some thin material, foreign, with a woven silk border sewn onto them. The blouses were of the some thin material, with loose sleeves to the elbows- she wore her hair with a side parting, smoothed over her ears into a bun at back. Her shoes were black, shiny, patent leather with high heels. Her jewellery consisted of a strand of pearls, a single gold bangle on one arm, and a large man's watch on the other.' (*Difficult Daughters*, p.16.)

Manju Kapur seriously elaborates the facts of traditional Indian family. It is the family where the woman is inferior. Shakuntala, a cousin of *Virmati*, who studied at Lahore, is modern in behaviour and life. But the family of *Virmati* is also against the modernization of female. Even, they cannot accept the change in the life of woman. But, *Virmati* is attracted towards the life style of Shakuntala. She thinks that Shakuntala's life is free. She is not bound in the conservative thinking. And she is free from the family responsibilities. Here, the author represents the two different women. Shakuntala is advanced and educated. She is aware about her duties. She is not bound in the cage of old tradition and family responsibility. On the other hand, *Virmati* is a typical Indian girl. She is bound in the family responsibility. Her desires are always, vanished in the day to day struggle. Her dreams and hopes are merged in the old tradition. Shakuntala comments on it: 'These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else.' [*Difficult Daughters*, p.17.]

Manju Kapur deliberately uses the independent world. In the novel, she uses the struggle for independence. She also describes the freedom struggle of nation and *Virmati*. The author exposes the situation of women during the freedom struggle of India. The nation has changed during the freedom struggle. But, the plight of woman is unchanged. *Virmati* actually thinks that she should live her life like Shakuntala. She desires to live free life

without any burden and responsibility. She wishes to break the shackles of family responsibility and live free life like her cousin. But, there is difference between dream and reality. Virmati's companionship with Shakuntala provides her an opportunity to dive deep into nectar of freedom which she realizes outside the house. For her, education means the realization of freedom and new outlook and attitude. Virmati and Shakuntala always involve in discussion on the issue of education and freedom. Virmati tells Shakuntala: "No, no really", said Virmati, catching her hand. May be here was the clue to her unhappiness. It was useless looking for answers inside the home. One had to look outside to education, freedom, and the bright lights of Lahore Colleges. (Difficult Daughters, p.17.)

In Shakuntala, Virmati sensed the real clues of happiness which could only be realized through freedom. She watches the activities of Shakuntala with carefulness. She dreams to be with Shakuntala one day. She thinks that she will be no more in Amritsar because there is no real freedom in Amritsar for her. Manju Kapur writes: "Through the ensuing day's Virmati followed Shakuntala around. She watches her ride horses, smoke, play cards and badminton, act without her mother's advice, buy anything, she wanted without thinking it is a waste of money, casually drop in on all the people the family knew. Above all, she never seemed to question or doubt herself in anything." (Difficult Daughters, p.18.)

Shakuntala's visit planted seeds of aspiration in Virmati. It was possible to be something other than a wife. Images of Shakuntala Pehnji kept floating through her head, Shakuntala Pehnji who having done her M.Sc. in Chemistry had gone about tasting the wine of freedom. (Difficult Daughters, p.19.)

But Virmati's problem is something different. Although externally she has been inspired by Shakuntala, but her problem is multiple. Virmati has also to adjust her five sisters waiting for their marriage. Her family is quite conscious because she is the eldest one. Her mother is also of the same opinion. She would like to perform the marriage of her daughter as soon as possible. Kasturi is also aware of the transformational attitude of Virmati. She realizes the inevitable changes in her growing daughter. But she is in dilemma whether to free her daughter or to check her advance. She seems to be in hesitation. She does not allow Virmati to enter in the realm of education with such freedom. but at the same time, she does not want to put the burdens of traditions and conventions on her daughter. But, Virmati wished to study further, rather than marriage and giving birth to children. According to Vera Alexander, "In the juxtaposition of marriage and education, education is either described in terms of a threat, or portrayed as a dead end, reducing accomplished female characters to obedient wifehood and dependency rather than enabling them to make a living out of their training"⁵

Her family rejects her wish. Even, her mother has never supported her. Virmati's mother, Kasturi, also suffocates between her feelings and family responsibilities. The novelist, through these women characters, exposes the reality of Indian society. The women in the customary Indian family never recollect their identity. She is daughter, sister, wife and mother of someone. They have no self identity. And if she tried to establish her own identity the society never accepts it. Difficult Daughters is certainly a pensive tale of discomfort in the life of a sensitive girl who seems to be struggling in the male-dominated society which provides a little space to woman in general. Vikram Chandra writes: "Difficult Daughters is intensely imagined, fluidly written, moving. Through our struggles with our parents, it flings us into their own momentous times, their youthful yearnings for love and independence and life. And so it becomes an urgent and important story about their family, partitions and love."⁶

There was an endless argument between 'education verses marriage'. But nobody listens to her. Virmati wants to give practice to her English, while her mother considers it insignificant. To Kasturi, looking after the needs of family, husband and children are the most important duties than anything else. Virmati doesn't get success in convincing her mother and gets herself engaged with a irrigation engineer Inderjit. Her marriage is final with Inderjit but it is postponed because of the death of his father. She does not think of the marriage and child bearing just after the high school qualification. She joins A.S. College, to do B.A., where she falls in love with a professor, Harish Chandra, who is already married, lives next door and finds an intellectual companion in him. Virmati, like many other Indian girls, is expected to accept arranged marriage. However, she rejects it and decides to continue her studies. Joya Chakravarty observes that "the dismal state of Virmati's mind cannot be fathomed by her people."⁷ Virmati refuses to marry Inderjit. This bold step by Virmati upsets everybody in her family. They feel that she has disgraced the family and ruined her sister's chances of marriage. After the denial of the marriage proposal, her condition gets critical. The novelist profoundly delivers the issue of woman inadequacy. She defines that the position of degraded due to dependability. She has no right to take her own decision. The male supremacy creates hurdle in their lives. Virmati never decides to choose her love or further education. But disappointed with her love, Virmati makes an attempt of suicide. Finally they lock her in the godown and arrange for Indu, her younger sister to marry Inderjit. Maria Elena Martos Hues points out that; "Virmati's quest for freedom from the patriarchal moulds of tradition casts upon her eventually proves an erratic one, for she gets caught in the net of allocated female role that she was trying to evade."⁸

Virmati is committed to continue her study at Lahore. Virmati decides to go to Lahore for her further study. All the family members are against her decision but they would do nothing before the will of Virmati. As decided

by the family elders, Kasturi has to accompany Virmati to Lahore for assisting her to take admission in RBSL College and the principal assures Kasturi that there will be no problem. Virmati becomes the centre of focus because of her revolutionary zeal. She does not yield to the age old traditions of her Arya-Samaj family. In Lahore, she finds the company of Shakuntala who always inspires her to be free and vibrant in her outlook and manner. Shakuntala tells Virmati about the people of Lahore that they are not narrow-minded: "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." (*Difficult Daughters*, p.115.)

She starts a meaningful life in Lahore with her roommate Swarna Lata. Swarna Lata is an active participant in the political and social movements of the day. Swarna Lata, an active activist for women's liberation and freedom struggle movement. She is a modern woman with her own views and opinions. She thinks independently. She wants to do something more than just marrying. Rather than waiting for any man she involves herself in other people. Asserting the importance of these marginal characters in the novel Christopher Rollason writes: "The pages of *Difficult Daughters* speak not only of Virmati, but of other 'difficult daughters', who succeed better than she did in their parallel struggle for independence in their lives. At the centre of the narrative, we are confronted with a woman who fights but falls by the wayside; but at its edges, as no doubt less representative but still symbolic figures, we encounter- as will be seen below-other women, whose relative success points the way to the future"⁹

Under the shade of friend like Swarna Lata, Virmati attempts to analyze the communal tension involved during the Indian freedom struggle. But the professor's thoughts keep circling around her mind. Harish comes to meet her in Lahore. They meet and enjoy their life. The professor shows his sexual inclination with Virmati. On the other hand, Virmati could not decline the advances of the professor. Virmati is conscious of the nature of her relationship with the professor but her resistance is not long. After this act of sexual involvement, Virmati seems to be caught in the sense of guilt. She realizes the moral lapse in her heart and a sense of guilt runs through her mind.

Manju Kapur beautifully linked the character of Virmati in the activities of freedom movement which was on climax those days. Virmati attended many conferences organized by various parties in which the topic related to the woman empowerment was also discussed. She attended those conferences and heard many speeches delivered by Leela Mehta from time to time. Virmati could not really make out the freedom she was aiming for. She craves in her inner self to be like Swarna Lata, her roommate. When she goes for a meeting organized by women for the freedom struggle, observing all the women actively participating in freedom struggle she thinks herself "Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent in love. Wasting it." (*Difficult Daughters*, p.142.)

In-spite of her frequent requests, Harish is reluctant to marry her. He seems just another chauvinist steeped in patriarchal traditions. He is a hypocrite who, at his own convenience, has moulded his opinions about social traditions and sexually exploits Virmati. 'Now you want to prolong the situation. Why do not we get married? You say your family makes no difference. But still you want to continue in this way. Be honest with me. I can bear anything but this continuous irresolution. Swarna is right. Men do take advantage of woman; (*Difficult Daughters*, p.149.)

Virmati gets pregnant. Then she goes to Amritsar and manages a gold bangle from her father but only to sell it for her abortion. After this depressing incident, she decides not to entertain the professor any more. Virmati blames the professor for this mishap in her life. She says to the professor:

'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? Because I am an Idiot.' (*Difficult Daughters*, p.149.)

Few women during the 40's would have dared to come out the privacy & secularism of their sweet home climate & cried their heart out. Iron-willed as she was, she displays marvellous strength of mind when she keeps Harish's request at bay and overcomes her dejection and strikes out an independent root as she takes the role of a headmistress of a girl's school at Nahan. The happiest and most attractive period in Virmati's life is, beyond doubt that which she spends in Nahan, 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. Sirmaur existed in reality, and is now part of the federal state of Himachal Pradesh. It is there that she achieves the greatest degree of control over her life: there are rules she has to obey (and breaking them proves her fall), but she is able to teach inside an ordered framework, and her performance wins her a deserved respect. It is true that the single or widowed lady teacher or headmistress is something of a stock figure in modern Indian literature (as in the spinster lecturer Bimala, in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* or the grandmother in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*), but the particularity of Virmati's destiny, at this stage of her life, is that she has to exercise her

responsibilities entirely by herself. 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. She believes she needs a man, and she makes the wrong choice, returning to a relationship that had already brought her nothing but suffering. The repeated clandestine visits of the fatal Professor lose Virmati her employers' confidence and she is obliged to quit her school, house and employment. From Nahan her journey to Shantiniketan, to get greater freedom is again of alienation cut off from her dear ones until she is bound in a wedlock with Harish.

Suman Bala and Subhash Chandra rightly analyses the man-woman relationship in their theoretical formulation and both of them argue: "But her acceptance of her treatment meted out to her by her lover, the professor totally belies these expectations. The professor's pursuit of Virmati even after she has been sent to Lahore as a part of punishment to study in women's college, his renewing sexual relations with her with full ardour, but his reluctance and constant postponing of the marriage in spite of her frequent entreaties to do so, are instances of the gratification of the male — desire'. Male ego-centralism blinds men to the situation of women, who may be placed in agonizing circumstances an account of their relationship with men. Intellectually it can be argued that the professor Harish Chandra enjoys the bliss of both the worlds: Ganga as a maid servant who fulfils his clothes washed and Virmati who satisfies his academic urge which the professor cannot seek in his meek and mild Ganga."¹⁰

Though Virmati succeeds to marry the professor yet she does not secure any space for herself in the family. Ganga and Harish's mother compel Virmati to lead a suffocating life in the tight walls of the house. It is significant to note that Virmati who gets high education despite social odds and obscurities aspires to play the traditional role of a house wife so that she may look after the mundane needs of her husband but she is not allowed to. She is not even acknowledged for her intellectuality on the other hand Harish commands respect for his scholastic ideas and ideologies. At times it seems that Harish and Virmati as a couple does not have mutual companionship. In a wife-husband gossip when Virmati suggests a name for their forthcoming baby that has been dispassionately rejected by the professor. The professor was not considerate and calm in his decision and he also inflicts a long lecture on Virmati in order to silence her. Vandita Mishra rightly argues: "Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power of freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones her relationship with the professor, for instance. While it does provide an escape from a loveless arranged marriage; it is itself furtive and claustrophobic, offering only a stolen togetherness behind curtained windows. Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow. She hovers uncertainly at the edge of each new world, never entering, lest the professor should call and not find her near. Eventually, marriage to the man of her choice is no triumph either. As second wife, she must fight social ostracism outside the house, and contempt for kitchen and conjugal bed with Ganga, the first wife, inside it."¹¹

II. Conclusion

Thus, one can conclude that Virmati being brought up in a progressive family is educated and exposed to western ideas. She defies the family and follows her heart. She struggles a lot to get his own identity. In her quest of Identity, she loses it at every stage and struggles to make space for herself on her own. Her rebellious attitude takes back stages whenever it has to be strong to refute Harish's sexual oppression. Manju Kapur shows constant effort to consolidate the position of woman in Indian society. The beauty of her novels certainly lies in her unique presentation in which she seems to present conflicting situations in which woman are in search of their own self-made identity and location. According to N.P. Sharma: "Virmati has to fight against the power of the mother as well as the oppressive forces of patriarchy symbolised 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. Once she succeeds in doing that, she gets her husband all by herself, her child and reconciliation with her family."¹²

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