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THE ANGUISH OF VIRMATI IN MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

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ABSTRACT

Women struggle everywhere under the domineering system of a closed society. They struggle to maintain their dignity and in doing so, every woman undergoes alienation, commitment, sense of loss and boredom, the feeling of nothingness and so on. Their fight for freedom remains an unfinished combat and it is from this perspective Manju Kapur narrates the issues of women in her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* through her protagonist, Virmati. This paper makes an attempt to show Virmati, bound in tradition, who seeks to satiate her unsuppressed desires and is eventually devoured by pain and isolation.

**Key words** : Anguish, Alienation, Isolation, Frustration.

Introduction

Manju Kapur is an accomplished Indian writer of English language. She was born in 1948 and she lives in Delhi. Manju Kapur teaches English literature in Miranda House college, New Delhi. She has so far written five novels – *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2003), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008) and *Custody* (2011). Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* received huge international acclaim and was awarded the Common Wealth Writers Prize for the First Book (Eurasia) and has earned her very substantial success. Manju Kapur is deeply influenced by feminist thinking and she declares herself to be a feminist which is clearly evident in her *Difficult Daughters*. The search for control over one's destiny which is the key theme of the novel *Difficult Daughters* refers to the Independence yearned by Virmati. The novel has undeniably an autobiographical tinge and touch. Sumita Pal in her essay in *Indian English Literature : A New Perspective* rightly focuses the autobiographical elements in the novel:

Like Virmati, Manju Kapur was born in Amritsar and teaches in college. Her family were victims of partition and was Arya – Samajis like Virmati's family. Manju Kapur's father too was a Professor, like Virmati's husband. Manju Kapur admits that she herself had been a difficult daughter for her mother whose priority was marriage and she, in turn wants her daughters to have good job. (Kumar 107)

Though Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* has an autobiographic touch, it highly portrays the suffering of Virmati, who is seen struggling with her desire for education and illicit love which later destroys her inner self. Virmati, the protagonist in *Difficult Daughters* is the eldest daughter among her ten brothers and sisters. Being the daughter of a father with progressive ideas and a traditionalist mother, Virmati aspires to a freer life than that offered to her by those around her. As the eldest daughter of the family, she always feels tiresome and exhausted since she has to assist her mother and sisters in the domestic affairs. Though

Virmati has responsibility towards her family, her passion for education never gets decreased and Virmati is not ready to sacrifice her studies for anything.

Virmati's life of anguish starts when she falls in love with Harish, who works as a Professor in her college. Harish, who is already married and has a family of his own seeks an intellectual companion in Virmati and Virmati's self-affirmation is accentuated by the professor's passion for her: "her soul revolved and her suffering increased" (DD 50). As Virmati's love blossoms, she is torn between the thoughts of her lover and her responsibilities towards family. The pain becomes worse when her family starts seeking groom for Virmati : The thought of her wedding was always at the back of her mind, splitting her into two socially unacceptable pieces. (51) Virmati cries within her for she doesn't know how to tackle her problems and remains in utter chaos. Virmati's strong desire for education also gets shattered here because her family members talk only of her marriage which Virmati wants to stop: 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 even listening to them, passively, immorally silent. (64) To escape her marriage, Virmati, out of sheer frustration and strain of daily life attempts suicide but is rescued by her family members. She takes this extreme step as a result of her anxiety. Virmati after being rescued, chooses education as a means to escape from her family and Virmati feels a little relieved when her sister marries the person with whom Virmati was fixed but since then she finds her life miserable and alienated from everyone and everything when she is locked in the godown. Though Virmati finds herself in an alienated world she slowly starts recovering from the untoward actions and makes up her mind to accept her life as it comes : Nobody can escape their karma. Maybe what is happening to me is part of it, and there is no use protesting. (85)

Virmati starts realizing that it is she, who is responsible for her life of alienation, anxiety and humiliation. Though Virmati starts a new career in Lahore as a B.T. student, she never forgets her secret love with Harish and she often attends secret meetings with Harish. They spend time making love in his friend's home and Virmati never fails to compel Harish to marry her. Since Harish procrastinates marriage, Virmati finds herself in a desperate state without any legal bonding. Though Virmati always lives with the thought of Harish, she hates being "secret man and wife". (129) Virmati has discussed with him over this issue many times before but when she gets ill, her pain grows severe. She feels unable to tolerate her mental agony and feels helpless:

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. (137)

All Virmati's secret meetings and secret life come to a forefront when she comes to know that she is pregnant, and at this stage Virmati doesn't know what to do but cries in agony. Virmati's agony doesn't get settled and her restlessness and sufferings are compared to that of Lady Macbeth of William Shakespeare's play *Macbeth* : The other sleepers had long since come and settled down. She was the only one awake. Like Lady Macbeth, she had murdered sleep. (149) Virmati loses her mental peace and regrets for what she has done to her family. When Virmati returns to Lahore to seek the help of her friend and aborts her child, she feels "more alone than ever". (163) But Virmati feels a little happy when Harish after a long wait agrees to marry her and when she goes to Harish's home as a second wife Virmati begins to feel isolated with the way everyone behaves to her. When she gets conceived and it results in miscarriage after three months of pregnancy, Virmati's mental pain becomes severe. Her condition becomes worse and her "only response to the world was the passive oozing of tears" (228). To give her a change of mind and place, Harish decides to send Virmati to do M.A. This paves way for Harish's leaning towards Ganga, his first wife which in turn leads to Virmati's extreme anguish:

Virmati's head was spinning. Distress enveloped her heart. She tried to think, but it was too painful. Whatever else she did, she would not go back to Amritsar during the holidays. Direct action was needed. She refused to fight Ganga with cunning, guile or seduction. If Harish's love for her wasn't strong enough to survive an M.A, it certainly wasn't going to survive a lifetime. (242)

Virmati, who deserts her own family, her culture and tradition for the sake of her love at last realizes that she is being deserted by the love itself. The rejection, pain and sufferings make Virmati realize that she should reconcile with her mother and after doing so Virmati discovers that it is her mother, with whom she wishes to be rejoined.

#### **Conclusion**

In depicting the inner subtlety of Virmati's mind, Manju Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female psyche. *Difficult Daughters* is a well balanced depiction of the anguish of a woman's unrest – her complexities, fears and frustrations which are the outcome of self-centered activity. By depicting the tormented psyche of Virmati and her restlessness, Manju Kapur has vividly portrayed the plight of women all over the world. Throughout their lives they have been undergoing a state of mental depression caused by various means and at times by themselves too. The modern civilization and the formal education have not given any solace to women. Instead women are tormented and are oscillating between their tradition and their sufferings out of emotional craving and it is evident from this study that Virmati is one such. The anguish, pain and utmost suffering that travel throughout in Virmati's character give a clear picture of women who struggle for their freedom everywhere. It is of no doubt that Manju Kapur leaves the reader with their heartfelt feelings for Virmati, who faces nothing but anguish in all sorts throughout her life.

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