



Vol.5. S1., 2018

INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA
2395-2628(Print):2349-9451(online)

MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS* : A STUDY OF THE FEMALE PSYCHE

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Manju Kapur is a popular Indian novelist. Most of her novels illustrate the real life of her characters. In her first novel *Difficult Daughters* Kapur has vividly portrayed the struggle of three major female characters who try to assert their freedom and identity namely Virmati, Ida and Swarna Lata. In a patriarchal society like India, Kapur has presented women prototypes to represent a variety of female predicaments. The novel is set near the Vagha Border in India during the period of India-Pakistan partition. The story is narrated by Ida, a divorcee, the daughter of the deceased protagonist Virmati. Kasturi was her grandmother who belonged to an extremely orthodox joint family. Virmati was also brought up as a traditional Indian girl, where she was denied education beyond 8th standard and she could not voice out her feelings.

Virmati who represents the title character proves to be a rebel and troublemaker (difficult daughter) for her. She completes her undergraduation and worked as a B.T. She loved her professor who was already a married man and had got two children. In this way the three women represent three generations. They struggle to carve a unique identity for themselves but in the due course lose themselves in the fight. Women who go against tradition are sure to be singled out and rejected by their own families and society. Kasturi was deep-rooted in superstitions and had strongly accepted the patriarchal setup without any questions. She had never voiced out her opinions in the family. Virmati revolted against the clutches of her mother and strove to pursue her studies. Eventually she was considered to be a misfit in her own home and later was rejected by her own mother too. She fails to understand that true identity or individuality cannot be gained by violating or destroying the family structure. Virmati's name itself suggests 'courage' and 'intelligence' as she remained adamant till the end but failed to be shrewd or intelligent in choosing her life partner. As a sharp contrast, she idiotically chose a married man for a husband and destroyed her own life as well as the life of the first wife of the professor named Ganga whose name is a symbol of purity and redemption.

Difficult Daughters is a story of women whose lives were caught up in the complexities of social positions, identity, personal desire and quest for education. The novel presents the yearning of female psyche to establish an identity, a major preoccupation in recent Indian women writings. In the recent times Indian writers have started focussing on issues related to inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In the past Indian culture and heritage, individualism, quest for identity, protests of rebelliousness have remained alien ideas as far as women are concerned. Women were not supposed to fight for their rights, protest against injustice or question the existing beliefs, customs, rituals and superstitions. Women have to be obedient, quiet, submissive and passive not claiming any of their rights neither as women nor as human beings. The novel revolves around complex relationship issues between mothers and daughters and husbands and wives. In the words of Dr. Ruby Milhotra:

"However, Virmati is not the only difficult daughter in the novel, her daughter Ida turns out to be equally 'difficult'. The novel begins with the death of Virmati....The narrator Virmati's daughter can speak only because her mother is no more, only because she is now mentally unshackled" (New Lights 166)

Virmati's family is an orthodox Punjabi family. The mother Kasturi is submissive and spends her life in giving birth to children continuously. But her daughter Virmati values education as a liberating tool. She manages to revolt against the traditional confinements and leaves behind her home. She gains permission to study in Lahore. Kapur expresses the plight of women even to study. When arranged marriage is the social norm she violates it and falls in love. But when she falls in love with an already married man, Virmati fails miserably. Kasturi could not accept her love and Virmati became a fallen woman. Harish falls in love with Virmati since his wife Ganga is an illiterate and fails to be his soul mate. Ganga is a dutiful housewife and performs all the household duties sincerely. Virmati could not establish a good rapport with Ganga and Harish's mother where she understands that she has failed miserably. Again she undergoes miscarriage and later an abortion. Unable to tolerate both physical and mental trauma she is forced By Harish to pursue M.A. in Lahore but soon she was forcibly sent back to Amristar due to communal riots. When her friend and roommate Swarna Lata motivates her to join her in the political campaign, Viramti became too obsessed with the thoughts of her useless husband Harish. She destroys her parental home, marital home and fails to build a good future for her daughter Ida. Ida is a difficult daughter for Virmati. Ida also grows up like Virmati, a rebel and ends up as a divorcee without any child. She sets out on a journey to collect information about her mother's relatives and acquaintances. She concludes by saying, "this book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and heart. Now live in it, mama and leave me. Do not haunt me anymore" (Kapur 280).

At a particular point, Virmati is unmoved by the inspiring words of Shakuntala, daughter of her father's elder brother who urges her to study further. Virmati has brought shame and remorse to her otherwise renowned Lala Diwan Chand family as her mother retorts : "You have destroyed our family, you badmash, you randi. You've blackened our face everywhere! (Difficult 204) She even fails as a good teacher and a Principal of a Primary School. She rejects the marriage proposal with an Engineer boy and ultimately her father Suraj Prakash dies followed by the death of her grandfather Lala Diwan Chand. Though Harish is educated and knowledgeable, he fails to support Virmati. He marries Virmati as his second wife after five years but at the same time impregnates his first wife Ganga also. Virmati understands that Harish's love for her is also fake so she loses all hope and moves to Lahore for further studies. Her decision to move to Lahore is attempt to forget him fails as she is sentimentally bound to him blindly. She realizes the meaninglessness in her life and ultimately dies pathetically. Her failure in choosing true love makes her life end as a disaster. Both Virmati and Harish have only physical attraction and there was no real emotional attachment. She is a complete contrast to her roommate Swarna Lata who proves to be a successful social reformer. She remains a spinster and an active political reformer. She is actively engaged in various intellectual discussions and socio-political revolts. She is economically independent and leads a contended life. Virmati tries to emerge as Swarna Lata and succeeds to some extent when she supports herself by working as a school teacher. In this sense Swarna Lata proves to be a true rebel and worthy to be called as the real protagonist of this novel. We can clearly understand that Virmati is a woman with instable psyche and she can be considered only a pseudo-rebel.

Difficult Daughters is an unquestionably a powerful work of art which acclaims her as a staunch feminist writer. Virmati in her quest for identity rebels against her family tradition but eventually loses herself miserably like a true tragic hero. She is impelled by her inner urge to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. The very title of the novel *Difficult Daughters* subtly alludes to the patriarchal conventions that a woman, who undertakes a quest for identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well. India's victory against the imperial rulers is mirrored through Virmati's life. No doubt India attained freedom from oppressive colonial rule but at the cost of partition and religious/communal hatred. Virmati was victorious in breaking the age-old shackles of the patriarchal society in a tradition-bound country but at the cost of much mental torture and constant struggle but failing to erase the tag of being the other woman. At times Virmati herself shouts at Harish "As a man who is already married and a traitor to his wife can never give happiness to any women. " (Difficult 85)

Kapur presents the psychic distress of women through the rebellious characters of Virmati, Ida and Swarna Lata. Virmati's distress is mostly self-inflicted rather than by the male characters like Harish. Only

because of her selfish and radical nature she had to undergo such pains right from birth till death. The novel does not have a single protagonist Virmati as a difficult daughter but also alludes to several other difficult daughters leaving the confinements of their household and are actively engaged in the national struggle for independence. Swarna Lata and not Virmati is depicted as a new woman of colonial India and her urge to acquire education and freedom resemble the nation's struggle for identity and selfhood. But due to the flaw in Virmati's character she fails to emerge as a successful social activist like Swarna Lata who had clear moral insights. In the words of Christopher Rollason: The woman of India have indeed achieved their success in half a century of independence, butis to be a true female independence too, much remains to be done. The fight of our autonomy remains an unfinished combat (Reflections). Thus Manju Kapur has successfully depicted the psyche of Indian women through these unique characters like Virmati, Swarna Lata, Ida and Ganga.

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