

Deciphering Difficulties: A Reflection on the Notions of Femininity and Womanhood in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract: Among the many contemporary women writers in India writing in English, Manju Kapur holds a prominent position and her novels have carved a niche for herself in the terrain of women's emancipation. Set around the time of Partition, Kapur's first novel, *Difficult Daughters* published in 1998, raised issues of women's education and liberation amidst the shackles of patriarchal hegemony. This paper explores the different and emerging facets of feminism in India during two different time periods. The characters of Virmati and Kasturi have been selected as subjects for analysis. The paper also looks at the socio-political structures that dominate the female space and the predicament of women in this biased and patriarchal construct. This paper traces the characters' growth and their path to various degrees of self-realization. Ideas such as feminine struggle, education and emancipation will be detailed with appropriation.

Keywords: feminism, gender, emancipation, nationalism, family, society, patriarchy.

DISCUSSION

Every great movement has had a lasting impact on human society. One just has to flip through the pages of time to discover that these movements have reshaped the basic core of every social structure and ideology. They are each unique in their own way and have served a lot of purposes. Since the advent of enlightenment, every ideology that has ever come to surface has brought about revolutionary and contradictory changes. Perhaps the most significant of all has been the feminist movement. Born out of the necessity of womanly sufferings, this movement brought about radical changes while also moulding and reforming itself. Often categorised as the First wave, Second wave and Third Wave movements, Feminism became the war cry for many aspiring writers and activists which also provided the required platform for women to come out of the orders and limitations set by patriarchy. Simone de Beauvoir observes, "the first time we see a woman take up her pen in defense of her sex" was when Christine de Pizan who wrote *Epitre au Dieu d'Amour* (Epistle to the God of Love) in 15th century. As a result of such a radical probing into the true situations of women, the world was taken aback, and probably for the first time there came into existence the intense questions regarding the other sex - the one of Women. From Marry Ellman's *Thinking About Women* (1968) to Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics* (1969), followed by Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) or Elaine Showalter's *A Literature of Their Own* (1977); Feminism rose, interrogated, dictated, disregarded, and

shook the very foundations of patriarchy and by default, the society at large.

In India, the true colours of Feminism rose around the era that experienced the riveting events of partition and pre-independence chaos. In the early 1920s, the nationalist movement revealed many aspects of gender related issues. It is not the first time that an issue like this had been posed. Often deemed central to many conversations and controversies, the issue of gender unabashedly gave birth to the 'women's question' that was a pre-requisite of the 19th century social reform movement. Everything that carried the flag of anti-nationalism in the chaotic socio-cultural and political sphere also directly opposed the idea of feminism. Naturally the main focus for the women's movement in India became the struggle for gender recognition. Out of the many issues, the most prominent was that of status. It was an important question. While India made its journey through self-determination and sacrifice and gloriously looked forward to the establishment of statehood and democracy in order to attain progress and modernity, the issue of the woman now had to be dealt with. Nationalism gave birth to a new country and a 'New Woman', but how far was the society willing to go to change the very basis on which their foundation was built! Indian feminists beginning from Sarojini Naidu, Nayantara Sahgal, Rama Mehta, Kamala Das, Kamala Markandaya, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Ruth Jhabvala, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri have revolutionized

Indian writing and the image of the woman. Of these writers, one of them – Manju Kapur – aptly captures the essence of familial space. “I am interested”, says Kapur, “...in the lives of women, whether in the political arena or in domestic spaces. One of the main pre-occupations in all my books is how women manage to negotiate both inner and outer spaces in their lives - what sacrifices do they have to make in order to keep the home fires burning and at what cost to their personal lives do they find some kind of fulfilment outside the home” [1]. The independence struggle projected in *Difficult Daughters* (1998) is a representative of the deeper struggle within. The plight of women was only an aspect of a larger social pattern, namely the construct of a nation that is perhaps perfectly explained by Benedict Anderson. He states, “...it is imagined as a community, because regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship” [2]. It is comradeship that resulted in India resenting all things British. India as a nation revolted not just against the British supremacy but also against tools such as sati, caste system, widow remarriage; all the tools the British used to exploit the obvious causes of uncivilization in the natives. In the inevitability of a looming Partition, India was represented as a woman who mothered and protected i.e. Bharat Mata as a response to British accusations. Yet, years of deep-rooted patriarchal dominance, could not be easily shrugged off. The very idea of Mother India, is reflective of the social status of a woman defined as the ‘bhadramahila’: a 19th century counter-British image of women. The kind of education that women received was limited to the purview of the home and the requirements of the family.

Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* captures the essential dynamics of the workings of the Indian family; a miniature of society which is in turn a miniature of the nation. The roles of Kasturi and her daughter Virmati are well-defined and are designed to breed from generation to generation. While both women are living in the pre-independence era, only one woman’s struggle is reflective of the Indian struggle to come out of the colonial grasp. Virmati’s story as narrated through her daughter Ida, a by-product of the feminist revolution that had already spread its wings and given birth to a whole new generation of women. Set in Lahore and Amritsar, the book offers a fundamental insight into the first generation woman of the novel – Kasturi – who is the matriarch of the family. She has been adept in the art of cooking and childbirth – two qualities that basically summed up her choices in life. When her formal schooling is over she trained in marital duties. Kapur states that, “With all the breads she could make, puris with spicy gram, luchis as big as plates, kulchas, white and long, tandoori rotis, layers of flaky flour...” [3]. She is conditioned to believe that this is her only role and this is the only choice even at the cost of her

health - “Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not tired, when her feet and legs did not ache. Her back curved in towards the base of her spine, and carrying her children was a strain, even when they were very young.” [ibid.3]. The feeling of motherly love is absent from Virmati’s life. Kasturi’s relentless years of childbearing had taken toil over her body as well as mind. In the cacophony of daily household struggles, her eldest daughter was only a helping hand. Just like her own mother had trained her, she too wanted Virmati to learn the art of being the ideal wife. Even in the naturally blessed environment of Dalhousie, Virmati could not ignite the flames of affection that existed between mother and child. When she did try all she got in return was, “Why can’t you make yourself useful? There is so much sewing to be done for the baby?” [ibid.3]. The mother daughter relationship here can be best summed up in Simone de Beauvoir’s words where she states that,

“Some women feel their femininity as an absolute curse; such a woman wishes for or accepts a daughter with a bitter pleasure of self-recognition in another victim, and at the same time she feels guilty for having brought her into the world... Vexed at having produced woman, the mother greets her with this ambiguous curse: ‘You shall be a woman.’ She hopes to compensate for her inferiority by making a superior creature out of one whom she regards as her double; and she also tends to inflict upon her the disadvantages from which she has suffered [4].

Kasturi represents a woman who is bound by family structures that dominated a woman’s life. Bharat S. had stated “In Indian families sex roles are well differentiated and influence the socialization process from birth onwards” [5]. Both boys and girls according to Choudhury “Grow up with the knowledge of special preference attached to the male child and often experience blatant expressions of this preference through parental reactions, behaviour; family rituals, practices; social customs and traditions” [6]. Kasturi grew up with this idea and she had a basis from which all her ideas about a woman’s life were theorized. Virmati does receive basic education from her family since they believed in modernizing their girls. What is ironic is that they did not really expect her to act upon it. It is interesting to note here that this decision too is made by the men of the family. Virmati is alienated and this leads to her finding the Professor. When she refuses to marry Inderjit, because of her love for the Professor, she is thrown into the ‘kotha’ room where she frustratingly describes herself in the letter thus, “Each time I hear the door shut, I burn with anger and humiliation. What have I done? I am just like the sacks of wheat and dal here, without my own life” [ibid.3]. Adding to this, when she meets her cousin Shakuntala, who studies in Lahore, she finds an alternative to

escape. The seed of the 'New Woman' is sown in her as is the opportunity to be free. When Viru expresses a wish to be independent like her cousin she responds with the fact that "times are changing and women are moving out of the house, so why not you? Why not, indeed, thought Virmati looking at her, almost breathless with admiration and love" [ibid.3].

The Professor's introduction as a man of intellect is like a spark that is somehow formed in the wet bunch of logs that quickly dies out. His wife Ganga does not challenge him intellectually and ironically neither does Virmati. Yet, in the hopeless din of slogans, shouts and protests of independence he is enamoured by her zeal to learn something, so that she could be free of the burden that was thrust on her. Virmati is a very conflicted character. In the hustle and bustle of Lahore she manages to rekindle her love and relationship when the Professor visits her. The result is a very scary and pregnant Virmati tricking her father into giving her gold bangles which she uses to get the foetus aborted. What is tragic here is that she actually goes against her family and reaches for a man to claim her freedom, without providing him with any significant hints of her plan. Guilt consumes her and she wonders if, that when her roommate, Swarnalata, states "Men take advantage of women" [ibid.3], she is echoing her own fears or whether she is just caught up in the emerging movement. Despite these subliminal messages a certain thought keeps recurring, "By this time tomorrow it will all be over, over" [ibid.3]. The physical connection will Harish had established an unbreakable bond and Virmati held onto the conventional view of purity and chastity of woman's body - "She was his for life, whether he ever married or not. She could never look elsewhere, never entertain another choice" [ibid.3].

The continuum in patriarchal hegemony can be acutely observed in the power politics of women trapped in domestic circle. Home politics also comes into the picture when Virmati is treated as the 'other'. Her isolation heightens after her marriage when she is treated as an outcast by Ganga. She is not allowed to enter the kitchen, wash, cook or clean. Out of one patriarchal setup she moves to another where her spirit and freedom was curbed. Before her arrival, Ganga, the first wife would serve her husband by washing his clothes, ironing them, pressing his feet, keeping his things ready and cooking his favourite dishes etc. which is a common practice for wives. Virmati, having observed these rituals, felt the urge to do the same. But, in her own way, Ganga had dominated the home space and refused to move from that position, since that was where her strength lay. When Virmati did try to enter the kitchen, "...there had been such weeping and wailing that day, such ritual cleansing of every pot and pan to wash away her polluted touch, that she felt

intimated. It was clear that not an inch of that territory was going to be yielded. If Virmati had the bed, Ganga was going to have the house" [ibid.3]. Even Harish discouraged her from entering into that forum and in the end she had to yield. In spite of the growing restlessness of the social condition, this game of endless repetition of patriarchal instrumentation continues. In fact, when the riots had begun in 1946 his mother suggested that they return to the known safety of their ancestral place with both his wives and though Harish did not want to and knew that Virmati did not want to either, he was confident that the power of patriarchy would prevail. In his thought process he knew that, "She might protest but ultimately she had to do as he said" [ibid.3]. In this connection, Chandra Nisha Singh makes an observation about Nayantra Sehgal's writings that can be equated with Kapur's work. She states, "Women constantly suffer sexual subjugation and the burden of patriarchy which underscore their own individual will and autonomy" [7]. Virmati and Ganga are caught in the complex web of several layers that have been created to keep a strict check on the already limited movements of women. One might even say that the British policy of 'Divide and Rule' formed the very basis of this rift amongst women which is why Virmati and Ganga never find a common issue to bond over. Singh observes, "...other women are basically individualists with their own paradoxes and character complexities. Unable to relate with each other and suspicious of each other they establish 'horizontal hostility' as defence mechanisms" [ibid 7]. Kapur uses time-lapse as a narrative device so that the narrator, Ida, could discover her mother bit by bit. The various revelations that are made by the surviving family members expose an entirely different side of Virmati. Her own troublesome relationship with her mother especially after her divorce was now better understood by her. Ida had the advantage of a more evolved society and the changing face of women's society on her side to help her survive. Virmati had to succumb to societal fickle-mindedness. Yet towards the end Ida makes peace with her mother's memories and urges Virmati to leave her and not haunt her anymore. Perhaps this space to breathe is what Virmati too had yearned for and had had the luxury of experiencing it, albeit for a brief while when Ganga return to her hometown and she comes to live in an empty Moti Cottage. The narrator finally adds a voice to her subdued desire by stating, "Maybe this was really what she had fought for all along, space to be" [ibid.3]. When Indian Nationalism was at its peak, many ideologies were questioned and reformed. The women's reformation movement too was much talked about in India. Perhaps this change has been well summed up in Shantha Krishnaswamy's book *The Woman in Indian Fiction in English*, where he states that changes in a woman's identity occurs "Due to the changing urban setting, the new rural scene, the disintegration of traditional values, and the comparison and evaluation of

western values vis-à-vis the indigenous” [8]. While Virmati was a representative of the beginning of this change, Ida symbolizes a more advanced societal development. Across a span of fifty odd years Kapur depicts the main ideology of patriarchy that stereotypes women as mother, wife, daughter and whore. Virmati was the main sufferer of this transition. Women’s identities are often linked with self-respect. Clifford actually captures their struggle to balance everything by being attached to a “home” culture and yet being encapsulated in “patriarchies, ambiguous pasts, and futures”. The struggle is real even today where gender assigned roles are the norm and individual freedom is not only frowned upon but also discouraged. In an age where women have taken up more challenging roles and have defied all odds to be at par with men, the basic requirement in India is largely that of the homemaker. An education given to a woman is not meant to benefit her or her dreams; instead it should ensure the functioning of the family as a unit. The kind of education and role imposed on women are very carefully constructed, to serve certain requirements. The main identity of a woman is only found in the home space, and not in the larger set up of the world where she will be an individual. This systematic oppression results in loss of an identity that a woman can make if she sheds aside gender assigned roles and discovers her true potential.

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