

Glimpse of New Women in Manju Kapoor's "Difficult Daughters"

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The paper attempts to study and analyse main women characters in Manju Kapoor's first novel, "Difficult Daughters", which was published in 1998. It is located against the backdrop of India of 1940s and presents the problems of an upper middle class urban Arya Samaj Punjabi family in Amritsar. Kapoor speaks with great narrative eloquence on the idea of independence. She has realistically depicted women of three generations, but the main focus is on Virmati, the difficult daughter of the second generation. The novel deals with issues like women education and feminine freedom. The novelist probes into the psyche of Indian women living in joint families under male domination and writes about the multi layered Indian experience in colonial and post colonial times.

Virmati, the main woman character, represents the spirit of "New Woman" of India with her assertion of individuality, and yearning for education. But due to circumstances, she fails to show her strength of mind in love. She is caught in whirlpool of misplaced passion towards the Oxford returned Professor who already had a wife. Ida is the daughter of Veermati and the Professor and the novel reflects Ida's opinion about her mother. She could not develop an understanding with her mother in her lifetime. Manju Kapoor, in "Difficult Daughters", has tried to portray a new woman of India, who is just at the initial stage of her journey towards independence and freedom from patriarchal society. She has to learn to keep equilibrium between her dreams and her responsibilities as a woman.

Women's writing in India is consistently evolving, redefining itself through newer perspectives and the changing role of women in the modern world. So much has been written on women's writings and so much still remains unsaid. With the rise in the levels of literacy and

exposure to multiple media, women in India have become more and more vocal and uninhibited about their experiences and expressions. The realm of women's writing in India, as such, is a last ocean where many a pearl still remains hidden in its bosom. One of such gems is Manju

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Kapoor's "Difficult Daughters", recipient of the common wealth writer's prize for Best Book (Eurasia region).

"Difficult Daughters" was Manju Kapoor's first novel which was published in 1998. It is located against the backdrop of India of 1940s and presents the problems of an upper middle class urban Arya Samaj Punjabi family in Amritsar. The novel won the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1999 for being the best published book in Eurasian Region. Kapoor speaks with great narrative eloquence on the idea of independence and the novel set against the background of partition, which deals with issues like women education and feminine freedom. She probes into the psyche of Indian women living in joint families under male domination and writes about the multi layered Indian experience in colonial and post colonial times, reflecting upon the devastation of partition and the problems of women in particular.

The novel is set around the turbulent year of World War II and the partition of India. Manju Kapoor has realistically depicted women of three generations, but the main focus is on Virmati, the difficult daughter of the second generation.

The opening line of the novel gives a jolt to the reader: "The one thing had wanted was not to be like my mother", says Virmati's only daughter Ida, a divorcee and childless lady. During her mother's life time she could not develop an understanding with her and after Virmati's death, she realizes it which engulfs her with guilt. She sets out on a journey into her mother's past.

Being the eldest daughter, Virmati was burdened with family duties because of her mother's incessant pregnancies. Virmati's mother Kasturi was brought up upon the con-

ventional principles of patriarchal society where marriage was the ultimate destiny of a girl's life and marriage implied that a girl had to work tirelessly to please her in-laws.

"During Kasturi's formal schooling it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued at home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by impeccable nature of her daughter's qualifications. She was going to please her in-laws."¹

Commenting on her parental expectations, Virmati remarked, "They want nothing from me but an agreement to marry."² The women were compelled to think of nothing else and it seemed to Virmati that her family could talk of nothing but her wedding. They had no knowledge about her inner life and her mental turmoil but unlike other repressive patriarchal families her father was more liberated in his outlook and thinking. She refused to accept the groom chosen by her family and attempted suicide. Her sister was married off to the groom instead of her. Virmati expressed her desire to pursue higher studies and follow the lines of her cousin Shakuntala. For Virmati, education signified an escape from the reproaches of her family and freedom from her mother's control. Virmati and Shakuntala, the so-called "difficult daughters" of the family, represent the evolving consciousness of the modern Indian woman of the forties. But unlike Shakuntala, Virmati was not serious about securing education and professional independence for her own sake. She sought it as a respite to escape from the pressures of the illicit love relationship she had entered into with her married professor. When she informed her mother that she would like to go to Lahore to pursue further education, Kasturi reproached her daughter, "When I was your age, girls only

left their house when they married. And beyond a certain age..."³ Kasturi felt that Virmati had been sent to her as a punishment that she had to bear for life. She castigated her daughter for nurturing dreams which were unconventional and improper for a girl to cherish. She reminded her how "a woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings, and implored her to settle down into domestic life like other girls of her age did."³ Virmati rebelled against her mother's expectations and left for Lahore. Although she said to the world that she left to study in Lahore, yet in reality it was an attempt to find a respite from the professor. In an attempt to forget the man who had never acknowledged or recognized their relationship she wanted to explore the life beyond the mundane domestic sphere which no women in family except her cousin Shakuntala had access to. Shakuntala had described her liberated lifestyle in Lahore to her cousin, "We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings; follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars." The words enthralled and inspired Virmati, she blurted out in excitement, "I want to be like you Behnji..."

It is true that Virmati represents the spirit of "New Woman" of India with her assertion of individuality, and yearning for education. But due to circumstances, consequently she fails to show her strength of mind in love. She was caught in whirlpool of misplaced passion towards the Oxford returned Professor who already had a wife. Virmati had to bear lots of family duties from childhood because of her mother's incessant pregnancies and had a repressed craving for love and affection. Professor Harish had filled her emptiness with love and she helplessly fell in love with him. Despite his education and understanding Harish lacked

the courage and ability to support Virmati for despite the fact that he could not love his illiterate wife, yet he could not leave her. Virmati too was aware of the hopelessness of the illicit love affair. She reproached him with harsh words when she heard the news of his wife's pregnancy as well as his simultaneous confession of love for her, "You think you can do what you like so long as you go on saying you love". Her decision to go to Lahore was prompted by the desire to forget him. Virmati desperately sought an escape from her meaningless life and thought that pursuit of higher education might enable her to do so. She aspired to an independent life like that of Shakuntala. Despite her desperation to forget the professor she helplessly failed and became more entangled with him. Being away from her home, and moral control exercised by her mother, she succumbed to his passionate demands.⁴

Through Ida's conscious decision to be different from her mother we are introduced to the question of defiance and generation gap. Every new generation seeks to defy its predecessor, and fight against the anxiety of influence. Virmati challenged Kasturi's principles, Ida could not accept Virmati's. Virmati failed in her mission. She succumbed to the professor's implorations and passions in her loneliness during her stay at Lahore and helplessly yielded to the temptations of the body. Thereupon she realized that she had become pregnant and was left with no other alternative but to go in for an abortion. She knew that the professor would not render any support to her in her hours of crisis and

Left with no other alternative she decided to take the action to save her family from shame. She regretted the fact that she who had come to Lahore for expanding her mental hori-

zons had done nothing but ended up getting more and more helplessly involved in a useless and meaningless love relationship which had given her nothing but pain. She wanted to do something meaningful in her life like her roommate Swarnalatha, who was a freedom activist, but she failed to transcend her underlying need for love and emotional dependence. Virmati doesn't blossom into a "New woman" in the real sense. Her emotional dependence on the professor, who constantly evades the questions of marriage, stops her from doing anything that he disproves. She is being used by the professor and he enjoys the better of the two worlds. Even when professor eventually marries her very reluctantly, she is given an outcast status and faces exclusion from hearth etc. which is the sole domain of the professor's first wife, Ganga. Professor Harish's attitude towards her is patronizing and arrogant. Undergoing a gradual process of self-effacement, her energies are directed towards pleasing him while she herself remains parched and ultimately gets an insignificant death.⁵

Thus, though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is caught into another. Her free spirit is curbed and all she does is "adjust compromise and adapt". We find in Virmati incipient new woman, who is conscious, introspective, educated who wants to carve a life for her. Although she represents womanhood by violating current social codes yet she lacks confidence, self-control and farsightedness. She is physically imprisoned with a need to be emotionally and intellectually dependant on a superior force Professor Harish. It is perhaps this knowledge through which the patriarchy works. She fails to break the "dependence syndrome." She defies social expectation to assert her individuality and hopes to achieve self fulfillment.

But what does she really get? She is a loser whose acts totally separate her from her own family and she fails to make a space for herself for which she had been striving. Thus, it is this inability of Virmati to strike independent roots and grow that makes Ida remark "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother."

We find the trace of feminism in the novel through Ida's impatience towards her mother's weakness. When parvati, her Masi says that Virmati was simple girl at heart, Ida says "I hate the word simple. Nobody has any business to live in the world and no nothing about its ways." No Woman, who dares to spurn patriarchal protection, can afford to be ignorant and simple. The concluding lines of the novel reiterate Ida's rejection of Virmati, not as mother but as a woman. "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a 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".⁶ Ida, who grew up struggling to be the model daughter, does not have the heart to reject Virmati, the mother, but her head, the rationale, rejects her as a woman after having an insight into Virmati's past. Ida admires Swarnalata who enters into a wider sociopolitical sphere. Through her the novelist seems to say that a woman can maintain her individuality and pursue her interest without threatening the family structures. A woman should be aware, self controlled, strong willed and self reliant having faith in the inner strength of womanhood.⁷

Thus Manju Kapoor, in "Difficult Daughters", has tried to portray a new woman of India, who is just at the initial stage of her journey towards independence and freedom from patriarchal. She has to learn to keep equilibrium between her dreams and her responsibilities as

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a woman. She represented feminism keeping in her mind Indian Context. She has depicted the new woman and her complex psyche not only as a woman but also as a human being.

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