

Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters: A Chronicle of Discovery and Resurrection

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Abstract

Difficult Daughters, which is about rediscovering the mother, Virmati and reinstating her place in society, involves three generations of mothers and daughters. Virmati remains the outcaste in her family as also in her husband's home. Later, her daughter's search takes her to her roots as she tries to excavate the buried past. Ultimately, she comes out of the shadows to mark her individuality

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Difficult Daughters by Manju Kapur is the story of a woman caught in the midst of multiple conflicts that grip her life. Her duty towards her family, her desire to be acquire a sound academic footing, her illicit love affair with a married man and her attempts to shape her own destiny stands at the heart of the novel. Virmati succeeds in breaking all man-made boundaries. Yet, there are certain priorities so deeply embedded within her that she struggles to shake through the shackles. She grows up from a naïve girl to a woman matured through suffering and experience. Throughout, Virmati fights to get what she wants. Although the novel is set against the political backdrop, the historical events recounted are purely imaginative reconstructions.

The novel Difficult Daughters is narrated in the flashback technique. The entire events are seen through the eyes of Ida, Virmati's daughter it is the daughter who attempts to investigate and reinstate the image of her mother, tarnished by those around her, to its true human qualities and emotions. The name of Virmati's mother is Kasturi. Thus the novel, which is about rediscovering the mother and restructuring and reinstating her place in society, involves three generations of mothers and daughters. In fact, the maternal line is even longer, if one considers the occasional references to Kasturi's childhood and her unnamed mother. The wide rift between Ida and Virmati, created during the mother's lifetime, is comparable to the distance between Virmati and Kasturi. The transgression of social norms and traditional ethical and moral codes by Virmati, for example, her decision to marry a married man carries a greater sense of sin and

stigma than the divorce of her daughter, whose experience of a less adverse and less rigidly patriarchal society is the outcome of the struggle of generations of mothers and daughters. The narrator makes an attempt to understand her mother in a way that the traditional family ignores. The rigid patriarchal society denounces Virmati's sentiments and it is for Ida to recreate her mother's history. She refuses to accept the family version of the mother's story and decides to probe deep into her past in order to discover a woman in the proper perspective of herself and time. The account grows out of interviews with people who knew her mother by reading newspapers of those times and by analyzing matter in an attempt to understand the prevailing socio-political circumstances of that earlier period. Her search takes her to her roots as she travels to Amritsar to excavate the buried past, to breathe life into the silence of her mother's history. She is alone in her search pitied by her relatives whose reaction to her divorced status is "... With Virmati for mother, it is not strange that such a thing should happen..." (pg.3). Even after her death, Virmati's image as an immoral, unethical woman does not fade. It is this misrepresentation of the image of her mother that Ida, the narrator, wishes to rectify. She takes the help of her Kailash Mama to retrace the steps that her mother took and begins with her visit to the AS college, where her mother had entered the bastion of male learning (pg.41) as a student, and where she met her father, a professor. "My history had started here, in this classroom....Virmati plus fiancé, the Professor plus wife. An invisible quadrangle in a classroom", says Ida (pg.49).

Dr. Anne John writes in the Indian Streams research Journal, "Manju Kapoor joins the group of women writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and many others who portray the image of suffering but stoic women who eventually break free from the traditional shackles and live life on their own terms and conditions. Women under the patriarchal pressures and control are subject to much burnt and social ostracism. They are discriminated and biased in lieu of their sex. These women live and struggle under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society.....Defying patriarchal notions they enforce themselves not only

towards domesticity but also assert their individuality and aspire self-reliance through education". (6)

The members of the family who only wish to emphasize her 'nurturing' role as mother never reveal her other aspects. They point out that she "studied more than any other girl in the family" (pg.5), but there is an unmistakable touch of awe, distance and even disapproval that makes her another in the family. Ida now wants to reconstruct her past in a language that would establish her mother as a woman with the fullness of an individual.... With her desires and aspirations, physical and mental, and not just limiting her to the conventional roles of 'nurture' and 'care'-from material that was available to her through her endeavors. She says, "I have pieced together materials from memories that were muddled, partial, and contradictory. The places I visited, the stuff I read tantalized me with fragments that I knew I would not be able to fully reconstruct. Instead, I imagined histories, rejecting the material that didn't fit, molding ruthlessly the material that did. All though I felt the excitement of discovery, the pleasure of fitting narratives into a discernible inheritance" (258). Ida recognizes the fragmentary nature of her material but nevertheless relies on memory, personal visits, etc. because these are indispensable components in reconstructing the past that is not recorded in the usual sense of the word. Through the act of reconstruction, she realizes her own 'inheritance' through her mother's lineage. "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with head and heart" (258).

Virmati remains the outcaste in her family as also in her husband's home. The daughter who has thrown caution to the winds, who has no care for her younger sisters, who has brought only shame and sorrow to the family cannot be welcome. She is slapped and thrown out of the house by her mother when she visits her once after her marriage. But she feels the isolation most after her father's death when the most distant relatives have the right to enter the inner circle of the family but she is treated like an outsider. She feels not only her mother's 'inaccessibility' (53) but also her exclusion from the 'protective ring' (119) that her children have formed around her. The position was similar in the Professor's household. His indignant and injured wife refused to yield an inch of her territory to her. His mother was more conciliatory, but nevertheless could not really accept her. The professor was apprehensive of the entire state of affairs and despite his façade of boldness, his children by his first wife were not allowed to go close to her. A failed suicide attempt, the pain of conception and abortion before her marriage and of her conception and miscarriage after, further isolate

her and make her retreat into her own shell. With no space to call her own, the feeling of suffocation is unbearable. With the nationalist movement, and the threat of imminent partition in the world outside as a backdrop, Virmati herself felt the rupture that had been created between her and the rest of the world. She could relate neither to her families with their traditional norms, nor to the women who had in a sense broken away from the patriarchal system, for instance, her cousin Shakuntala or her roommate Swarnalata, who were unmarried and independent of male guidelines.

The narrator in her journey through her mother's life tries to bridge the gap that the two of them had in the letter's lifetime, by changing her perspective, moving the angle of her thinking, realizing her mother's anxiety for her. "Now her shadow no longer threatens me. Without the hindrance of her presence, I can sink into her past and make it mine" (258). The paradox of this complex relationship continues when with the shadow of her mother lifted, Ida emerges as a new self, but also as a rootless one since the 'safety net' is removed and she is now fighting her own battle. The discovery of the mother concurrently infuses her with a new sense of bonding and entrusts her with a sense of individual and social responsibility of carrying on with incomplete task on her own. But her mother has charted the way to her future. "Your mother secures your future by showing you what you will, in part, become. To be yourself you rebel against your mother, yet your opposing stance contains what it opposes", says Dorothy Rowe (xii).

Not having lived up to her father's expectations of becoming an all-rounder and disappointing her mother with a broken marriage, Ida wants to be different, but regrets marriage as a means of emancipation. She understands the 'trappings of a modern emancipated woman' with a covert traditional agenda-work and be independent, but also get married and have children. Her decision to divorce and remain single competes a process in which she not only emerges as the concluding force in the long generational struggle of women, but also comes out of the shadow of the mother to establish herself as an individual. This is what Pam Morris calls for in her argument for the reconceptualization of the mother daughter relationship because she sees "women's inability to represent their identity in positive terms as cause, in large part, by the deformation of the mother-daughter bond within the symbolic order" (Morris, pg.129). 'Motherhood' in the larger patriarchal social structure has a very constricted meaning. Creativity/creation is the male domain, whereas care and nurture is preserve of the female. According to Luce Irigaray, as explained by Pam Morris,

"because of this diminished value of the term 'mother', there is a risk for women of a compensating over investment in 'self'-denial, in non-being, or in an over possessive maternity" (Morris 129).

The projection of mother-daughter relationships in Indian literature is hard to find. *Difficult Daughters* from this perspective is a landmark novel, exploring the extremely complex relationships of women of more than three generations, who not only carry a certain tradition with them, but also clash at every step. Mohanram's comment about the representation of 'mother' in India literature being equated with 'motherland' becomes particularly significant in *Difficult Daughters*, written against the backdrop of the tortured and tormented motherland and the break - up of the nation; political history thus acts as an organic force inside the narrative and also as an objective critique of the social history- the history of gender relations in our country. Human desires, and the urge to lead a self-designed life very often creates an irrevocable line of pain which often imposes a heavy cost on oneself.

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