

Morality and Redemption: A Façade for Traditions in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters

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Abstract

The pre-independent era sighted women as victims of patriarchal domination which made them silent and puppets in the hands of superiors. In the postmodern era the submissive women emerged as rebellious warriors revolting against their deprived rights and aspiring for individuality and self-reliance. These women were regarded as venoms for the traditional Indian women and trapped under the influence of morality and redemption. Manju Kapur has emerged as a ferocious writer in Indian English fiction who unravels the status of middle class women. She delineates her inner life and interpersonal relationship by delving deep into women's heart and help her cross the threshold of family life. Her woman manages to negotiate between the inner and outer space of their lives elevating their status equal to men. The paper attempts to study Manju Kapur's "Difficult Daughters" as the journey of three-generational women towards redemption.

Keywords: Emancipation, redemption, self-discovery, incompatibility, morality

Consolidation of women's position in the beginning of the twenty first century has paved the way to transformation in rapid changing society. The women through the social environment create a space for themselves by piercing through the age old system. Women in Manju Kapur's novels are rebel who with the help of education have enlightened themselves and gathered courage to question the validity of sati-savitri, roles of women. Unlike Anita Desai's women, Kapur's women fight back rather than facing neurotic dilemma. J.P Singh says "Manju Kapur has vividly presented the life of women struggling against the patriarchal system of society in order to claim her right place. The novels are rather a story of a woman's continuous struggle for her existential identity against the perception of domesticity."

This paper attempts to study Manju Kapur's "Difficult Daughters" the journey of three-generational women towards redemption. As the title suggests the protagonists of the novel are difficult daughters for their mother who struggle to assert their freedom and identity. Kapur here captures the desire of women to attain freedom from

chaotic Indian ethos and to break free from the cobwebs of her domestic responsibilities and patriarchal obligations. The meaning of redemption and morality changes in line with the representatives of three generational women Kasturi, Virmati and Ida. Kasturi is the traditional submissive woman captivated in shells of family responsibilities. Virmati acts as a limbo between tradition and modernity where her thoughts are modern but actions traditional. Ida represents the modern women who had analysed the status of her women ascendants and emerged as a new woman. The novel revolves round these three women characters who not only represent their generations but also create a link towards empowerment of women in post-independent India.

Difficult Daughters is a story of women from pre-independent to post-independent India whose lives were enthralled by the complexities of tradition and modernity. It presents three generations of mother-daughter relationship yearning to establish their identity and individualism. The daughters are generally way ahead of their generation and thus become difficult daughters for their mothers, family and society. They are unwilling to acquire the principals of their mother and desire for freedom of will. Manju Kapur through this novel unveils the Indian society and shows how women disintegrate family and society when subjugated.

Kasturi, Virmati's mother is a typical married woman in Indian orthodox family who has succumbed to her traditional role. Her role was confined to that of child bearing and kitchen work. There was no future for her rather than being a wife and a mother. Her life is trapped in motherhood. She is a silent sufferer of the Lala Diwan Chand's joint family. She bears eleven children of whom Virmati is the eldest and is made responsible to care for her siblings as second mother. Facing the realities of burdensome responsibilities, Kasturi as any mother-figure trains Virmati in all household chores which assumes hostile dimensions between mother-daughter relationships. Kasturi is always teased by her relatives as "harvest time" during pregnancy but finds herself helpless and consequently depends on Virmati unwillingly as 'the language of feeling had never flowed between them.....'

These circumstances create an unwanted emotional gap between mothers and daughters.

Virmati is the woman in question and the most difficult daughter in the novel. She was fortunate enough to receive education till she attains her age of marriage. Ida's maternal uncle informs that Virmati was "First FA, then BA, then BT on top of that. Even after her marriage, she went for an MA to Government College, Lahore, you know-very good college, not like nowadays. The Oxford of the East they called it. She studied more than any other girl in this family." She is difficult in the sense that she desired to fling from the clutches of her mother and pursue her ambitions only to bring disgrace to the family due to inner conflict. Virmati as a girl has always craved for her mother's love and affection which irritated her all the time." At times, Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she was Special. However, when she put her head next to the youngest baby. Feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away."

Virmati is influenced by her courageous cousin, Shakuntala who is unmarried, highly educated and lives independently in Lahore. Seeking Shakuntala's endeavour towards freedom, Virmati is inspired to attain higher education as a single way to get rid of her miserable life. Virmati is able to discover that marriage is a hindrance towards her liberation which constantly leads to conflict with her mother. Although at the beginning Virmati rejects marriage proposal yet towards the mature years of life falls in love with her Professor Harish. Harish, a married man with a child too gets inclined towards Virmati but is negligent for accepting her socially. She was constantly pursued by Harish when she reconciles with her family by leaving Harish. In this conflict she gets pregnant with Harish's child but later aborts and surrenders her love. With her constant provocation Harish willingly marries her but is unable to grant her the respectable position of wife just as of Ganga, his first wife. Virmati feels outcaste and alienated in her home because - "All the efforts of pounding, grinding, mixing, chopping, cutting, shaping, frying was hers. Was this Harish's idea of nothing much? And what about her? What kind of wife was she going to be if everything was done by Ganga?"

Virmati is never recognised as a legal wife by Harish's family. She always questions her own credibility. She is deprived by her own mother who feels - "God has put you on earth to punish me." She destroyed her paternal and maternal home failing to build a good future for further generations. Depression engulfs her making her suspicious of marrying the man of her choice. Her thoughts become unconventional and she feels being cursed for

disobeying her family traditions. Christopher Rollanson writes, "She wilts under the implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her Husband's first wife, with whom she has to live. She loses all sense of identity: the continuation of her education (she studies for a higher degree in philosophy, but without enthusiasm) feeds no more dreams of independence. In the end her individual History disappears and becomes all but relevant, swallowed up in the greater and more resonant collective tragedy of Partition."

In the wake of communal riots, Virmati leaves Lahore forever and returns to Amritsar. Immersing herself into the social work she breaks away from traditions but finds solace on reuniting with her family. Virmati finally gives birth to a baby girl, Ida who in turn becomes difficult daughter for her mother. When viewed through a bird's eye view, Virmati's life moves in opposite direction, the more freedom she gets the less happy she becomes. Her manifestation into a new woman results in a state of constant dilemma, confusion and lack of self-control. In order to gain outward happiness she loses inner peace and tranquillity. The struggle for space and identity makes her hollow from inside. Thus, Virmati in defying tradition is never able to achieve emancipation in her life.

Ida and her step sister, Chotti are the third generational new women of Manju Kapur completely aloof from traditions. Ida is distinct from other women of novel imbued with the spirit of new times. She narrates the similarities and dissimilarities between her and mother. Ida is a rebel and frees herself from the marital bond when denied by her husband. She had struggled intensely to be a model daughter when her freedom is curtailed and grapples for escape - "My mother tightened her reins on me as I grew older, she said it was for my own good. As a result, I am constantly looking for escape routes." Ida possesses the courage and mental strength which Virmati lacks and is not ready to accept any social conventions and customs imposed by society. Ida fails to understand her mother all her life but at the end becomes like her mother. One thing that remains same through generations is the incompatibility between mother and daughters. Ida reconciles, "For long periods I was engulfed by melancholy, depression, and despair. I would lie in bed for hours, unable to sleep, pitying myself for all I didn't have, blaming my mother, myself. Now her shadow no longer threatens me. Without the hindrance of her presence, I can sink into her past and make it mine. In searching for a woman I could know, I have pieced together material from memories that were muddled, partial and contradictory."

Manju Kapur by discovering the themes of barrenness, desires and longing, extrication from societal norms liberates a woman's life from these oppressive measures. Most of her novels somewhat describe her autobiographical stance as a victim of the same society. She stresses on identity issues, existential crisis, and alienation even after enormous affirmation from the women characters who struggle to achieve them till end. Her women face double exploitation, at first, subjugated and marginalized at maternal home to fight for their rights and second, at in-laws' home suffering from the shattered dream of ideal married life. With advancement in generations, patriarchy has manifested into different forms of exploitation and domination resulting from ignorance, traditional customs, prejudices, unsuitable environment and extra-marital relationship. The women are addressed as 'other' and face both physical and mental

violence. But the women of Kapur through recognition of self- discovery cross these boundaries and create a new path towards emancipation.

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