
ROLE OF WOMEN AND QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS



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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to study the role of women in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters. This novel won her the Commonwealth Writer's prize in the year 1999. This paper is an attempt to study the evolution of new woman in India after the partition. It is pertinent to note that throughout the history of mankind, from its Paleolithic civilization, Goddess worship was widely prevalent, and families were matriarchal in their structure. But in the course of time civilization was overtaken by patriarchal dominance, and worship of the male deity became the dominant concept. In social set up, male ego acquired control and predominance in all spheres of social activities such as ritualistic performances, politics, religion and ethnic which in turn submitted women to the place of utter subordination, a secondary place; the insignificant. The novelist presents the range of women and their problems of equal opportunities, equal access to education and identity for their life. The protagonist of the novel, Virmati, wants to live a free life, want to taste freedom and prove her identity. But whenever she crosses the boundary she is caught by the patriarchal clutches. She dares to cross the patriarchal threshold but gets caught into another, where her spirit is curbed and controlled. Her life is oppressed by two forces namely colonialism and patriarchy.

Key words: Matriarchal, Patriarchal, Paleolithic.

Difficult Daughters by Manju kapur gives us a clear vision of the women during the partition of India. The novelist gives us the impact of colonialism in India. Against the backdrop of the social scenario of India's Independence the evolving consciousness

of modern women is presented through the women characters such as Virmati, Shakunthala, Swarnalatha and Ida. Manju kapur presents the distressed life of Virmati, though she is rebellious, she reproaches herself for herself made sufferings in the name of love. When the nation is being swept by the heat of the freedom struggle, Virmati fails to get out of her emotional craving for the professor and dies an insignificant death. The life of Virmati is the mere representation of the mixture of colonialism and patriarchy. The women characters in the novel are divided into three generations, with their values, mindsets and relationships. Virmati's history is reconstructed in retrospect by her daughter Ida. Virmati is depicted as a new woman of colonial India and her urge to acquire education and freedom resembles the nation's quest for identity and selfhood, but she fails to completely live up to her wishes. Although she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she gets caught into another, where her free spirit is curbed and controlled. Kapur sets Virmati's story against the background of changing India. Virmati was a child of an orthodox Punjabi family who lived in the age of turbulent and optimistic changes of 1940's. Virmati is the eldest and passes her time by helping her ever pregnant mother, doing household works and taking care of her siblings and studying. Her family believes that she is eligible for wedding as she is proficient in cooking, stitching and reading. According to them the duty of a girl is to accept the groom selected by them as her husband and do household works. Virmati is engaged to a canal engineer Inderjit. She rejects the marriage, attempts suicide and bears imprisonment. She aspires to be like her cousin Shakunthala who tastes independence. She desires to lead a life according to her priorities. She wishes to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond satisfying her proposed husband and family. She is aware that there is no use in discussing this with her mother, Kasthuri. To liberate herself she looks to education and joins Lahore College. Virmati's neighbour, Harish, an Oxford returned professor is influenced by her and opens his heart to her. She is attracted by Harish's life, his language proficiency, his style and manners and the way he moves with her. She aspires to marry Harish who is already married and has two children. Harish marries her after five years as a socially accepted second wife. She is caught in the passion towards the professor who is already married. When she learns that the professor's wife is pregnant, she is puzzled how the professor has professed his love for her on the one hand and has been close with his wife on the other hand. She loses hope and goes to Lahore for further studies. She realizes the male chauvinistic attitude of the professor and tells him, on his face,

"You think you can do what you like so long as you go on saying you love"(63).

Virmati challenges the patriarchal ideas by rejecting arranged marriage. She doesnot accept that a woman's role is towards domesticity and pursues higher studies. She is not at all a silently suffering traditional women. When she realizes that she cannot

depend upon her husband to sort out her domestic problems she tackles situations on her own and acts decisively. She gains economic independence as a teacher in a school at Nahan. She displays her mental stamina and overcomes dejection. She does not get agitated and burns the professor's letters and closes the matter and looks forward to a meaningful life in Lahore. At the end, the partition of India unites her with the professor. She finally gets her place as wife and mother at Delhi. This shows her determination and resoluteness in asserting her individuality. Other women characters in the novel Lajwanti, Kasturi, Kishori Devi, Ganga conform to patriarchal system of family. They take pride in being submissive to men. According to them domesticity, marriage and child bearing are the duties of women. Kasthuri was brought up upon the tradition that marriage is the ultimate destiny of a girl and she has to please her in-laws. According to her a woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings. She feels grateful to her mother for those long hours she spent in the kitchen cooking. When Virmati wants to go to Lahore to pursue higher studies she says,

"When I was your age, girls only left their house when they married, and beyond a certain age"(72).

On seeing Shakunthala attired in modern dress she says,

"I studied too, but my mother would have killed me if I had dared even to want to dress in anything other than was bought for me"(54).

When Virmati marries Professor Harish she says,

"You have blackened our face everywhere! For this I gave u birth? Because of you there is shame on me, shame on Bade Pitaji(35). Shakunthala's mother Lajwanti never understood or cared for her daughter's achievement. She says aggressively,

"And with all this reading-writing, girls are getting married late. It is the will of God"(105).

When Shakunthala refuses to marry, she says disapprovingly,

"When this girl will settle down... I tell her she should have been a man"(180).

Ganga is a dutiful wife of Harish doing all jobs for him from washing his clothes to polishing his shoes, to tidying his desk, dusting his precious books, filling his fountain pens with ink, putting his records back in the jackets, mending his clothes, hemming his dhotis and seeing that they are properly starched. When Harish brings Virmati to the home she cries silently. Harish's mother Kishori Devi thinks wearily that there is no use in saying anything and sighs heavily. She finds fault with Virmati. Ganga breaks out of her suppressed sob. Kishori Devi consoles her saying,

" Serve our elders, look after our children, walk along the path that has been marked for us, and not pine and yearn for those things we cannot have"(65).

When Ganga continues crying she sympathetically, " We have to accept – this is our lot in life"(67). On the other hand, some other characters of the novel represent the modern development of women in both physical and mental. In Shakuntala,

Swarnalatha and Ida we see the images Modern Woman, conscious, introspective, educated, emancipated, driven by the zeal to assert their autonomy and separate identity and find a place for themselves in society. Manju Kapur's novel brings out glimpses of women of the forties in India trying to assert to establish their own identity. Shakunthala has done M.Sc in Chemistry and tastes the wine of freedom. To Virmati, Shakunthala looked vibrant and intelligent, as though she had a life of her own; her manner was expansive, she didn't look shyly around for approval when she spoke or acted. When they take evening walk Shakunthala says, "Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else" (39). Virmati watched Shakunthala ride horses, smoke, play cards and badminton, act without her mother's advice, buy anything she wanted without thinking it a waste of money, casually drop in on all the people the family knew. Shakunthala tells Virmati,

"Times are changing, and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?"

Shakunthala describes her liberated lifestyle in Lahore,

"We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings; follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars" (43). Swarnalatha is Virmati's roommate at Lahore. Swarnalatha is a freedom activist and engages herself in the political and intellectual movements. According to her men take advantage of women. She tells Virmati,

"It is people like you who create trouble by letting others do your thinking? Marriage is not only thing in life, Viru. The war – the satyagraha movement - because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream" (49). Ida is a difficult daughter for Virmati. Ida is a divorcee and has no child. She sets out on a journey to collect information about her mother's past from her mother's relatives and acquaintances. She says, "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother" (65).

When she hears about her mother as a simple girl at heart, she says, "I hate the word 'simple'. Nobody has any business to live in the world and know nothing about its ways". She could not accept her mother's decision of aborting the foetus. Her husband, Prabhakar had forced her to undergo abortion. She says, "In denying that incipient little thing in my belly, he sowed the seeds of our break up" (73).

She rejects Virmati not as a mother but as a woman. She does not make compromises like her mother. She leaves the past and resolutely moves on to live for her future. She represents the real face of a liberated modern Indian woman.

In the pre – independence era, woman's liberation was nascent. Though Virmati has failed, considering the situation in the 1940's, her attempt to assert herself is to be respected. She tramples upon the age old notions of patriarchy. When woman's education is a dream she pursues higher studies. When women are expected to be passive members in marriage, she chooses her husband. She meets more failures but she becomes more matured. Manju kapur gives us a starting point for the development of

women particularly from their social and religious norms that suppress their freedom. The novel also gives us that though women have attained education and social experience, they are emotionally bounded to their families and husbands.

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