

Tradition and Modernity in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters

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Abstract

Manju Kapur is a remarkable personality and a significant contributor to Indian English fiction. She shines luminously in the galaxy of Indian women writers by virtue of her first novel **Difficult Daughters** (1998) which was an instant success. It won her the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1999 for the best first published book in the Eurasian Region. Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers on whom the image of the suffering but stoic women, eventually breaking down traditional boundaries, has had a significant impact. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas, and marital bliss and woman's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement.

Key Words:- Feminism, Patriarchal Pressure, Conflict, Self-affirmation

Difficult Daughters is set around the time of partition and shows the absorbing intelligence, sympathy and integrity of Manju Kapur with which she reconstructs the character of Virmati through the storyteller, Ida. The gamut of the story revolves around three women of three consecutive generations-Ida, the narrator and a divorcee; her mother, Virmati, who develops an illicit relationship with the professor, Harish Chandra, and marries him; and her grandmother, Kasturi, a traditional woman. Both Ida and Virmati are 'difficult daughters to their mothers. As Virmati was a difficult one for Kasturi, so Ida is for Virmati.

The title of this novel is suggestive because it shows how an educated girl is branded as a difficult daughter if she goes against the tradition, in search for her identity.

It is rightly observed,

"Psycho-analytically, Manju Kapur can be placed in the group of gyno-

critics who deals with the emotional and mental puzzling of an educated daughter in a traditional joint family."⁽¹⁾

The novel shows the conflict between daughter and mother in its natural form as the novelist herself accepts that

"Conflict between daughter and mother is inevitable and I suppose I was a difficult daughter. The conflict carries on through generations because mothers want their daughter, to be safe. We want them to take the right choices — right in the sense that they are socially acceptable. My mother wanted me to be happily married, I want my daughters to have good jobs."⁽²⁾

In the very beginning of the novel Ida expresses that she would not like to be a replica of her mother, as her mother did not like to be of her mother. The story moves forward through Ida's visit to Amritsar after her mother's death. Though Virmati's death is mourned, it leads to

something positive for Ida and gives her mental freedom to speak about her mother's past. By peeping into her mother's past she learns about the girlhood of Virmati and her typical motherhood, looking anxiously for her daughter's safety. The narrator collects the material from different sources, as she herself makes it clear in the Epilogue of the novel.

“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. The places I visited, the stuff I read tantalized me with fragments that I know I would not be able fully to reconstruct. Instead, I imagined histories, rejecting the material that didn't fit, moulding ruthlessly the material that did. All through, I felt the excitement of discovery, the pleasure of fitting narratives into a discernible inheritance.”⁽³⁾

The novel relates the story of the troublesome life and sad demise of a woman named Virmati, born in Amritsar in a traditional family. She has a great desire for achieving higher education and making her own identity but her mother, Kasturi, has a different concept of study than that of hers. She says, “Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family. 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.” (DD-p.14)

And she expects her daughter to act according to her wishes, as she acted according to her mother's. Unlike her mother, Kasturi, who thinks that it is the duty of every girl to get married, Virmati

is drawn towards her cousin, Shakuntala, whose responsibilities went beyond a husband and children. She wants to be like her who looks vibrant, smart and intelligent as though she had a life of her own. She was not confined inside her home and considered it useless to look for answers inside the home. She looked outside, broad-mindedly, to the bright lights of Lahore Colleges for education and freedom. She thought that women should make their own place in the world. She makes her priorities clear and resists the pressure of her family for her marriage, and gets freedom and takes her place in the world by making her own identity.

So, education versus marriage is one of the thematic concerns with which Manju Kapur deals in her **Difficult Daughters**. Being the eldest of her eleven siblings, Virmati has many responsibilities to perform. For them, she was second mother and for the whole family, she was indispensable. “At times Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special.” (DD-p.6). Her yearning for affection made her restless and rebellious “The language of feeling had never flowed between them, and this threat was meant to express all her thwarted yearnings.” (DD-p.11)

Her mother never showed love or affection for her, instead she ignored her and always kept her busy in the family duty.

“As a natural consequence her unique position in the home is lost which she has to yield to her daughter quite unwillingly. Virmati thus becomes a ‘substitute’ and not the ‘double’ that every mother wants her daughter to be. As a consequence the relationship assumes hostile dimensions.”⁽⁴⁾

She could never realize that her daughter also needs love, affection, a separate identity and an independent existence. In this situation, when a man, professor Harish Chandra pays attention to her, offers his love and affection, she has no choice but to accept it. Although she was already engaged, she thinks little of her fiancé and is moved towards Harish because he accepts that she is special for him. She finds refuge from her yearning for love, in the love of the professor. “But to think of him was impossible, given the gulf between them, until he bridged it by crying out his need. Eldest and a girl, she was finely tuned to neediness, it called to her blood and bones.” (DD-p.50)

Now she finds herself in a state of dilemma. Her confusion grows, soul revolts and sufferings increase day-by-day. She finds herself torn between family duty, the desire for education, and love — that is illicit in the eyes of the society because the man she loves, is already married. She feels tainted by the moments spent with the professor. “The thought of her wedding was always at the back of her mind, splitting her into two socially unacceptable pieces.” (DD-p.51)

She is convinced by the professor that since neither she, nor her fiancé knew each-other personally, her refusal to marry him would not cause him any difference and that if not she, anyone else would do for him. Partly because of him and partly because of the desire for getting more education, she refuses to marry the man that her family has arranged for her to marry.

For them a woman or a girl as an individual is not important, it is the institution which is of paramount importance and that is very much male –

dominated. By rejecting their choice she is rejecting the dominance of male:

“Even though in this case it meant humiliating her grandfather, who was publicly associated with female education, betraying her father who had allowed her to study further, and spoiling the marriage chances of her siblings.” (DD-p.53)

How paradoxical it seems that though her grandfather is ‘publicly associated with female education’ yet she needs permission to study further!

She has to stand against patriarchal pressure and control as well as the oppressive forces of patriarchy, symbolized by the mother – figure, if she has to make her own identity. Like the representatives of the male members of her family, her mother scolds and even beats and abuses her for bringing disgrace to her family – name and fame. Her mother thinks, “What kind of learning was this, that deprived her of her reason? She too knew the value of education, it had got her husband, and had filled her hours with the pleasure of reading. In her time, going to school had been a privilege, not to be abused by going against one’s parents. How had girls changed so much in just a generation?” (DD-p.55) Kasturi’s conditioning of mind is moulded on patriarchal set-up of the society. So, she feels and acts on behalf of her husband and father-in-law. Like a hard-hearted man she warns her. “Remember you are going to be married next month, if I have to swallow poison to make you do it!” (DD-p.55)

Instead of treating her affectionately, Kasturi tries to force her. She does not show her motherly quality even once. Had she done so, had she behaved like a friend to her daughter,

Virmati would have been a 'different' daughter rather than a 'difficult' one. Kasturi fails to understand her daughter's need to be loved, to be needed meaningfully by the mother, simply as a daughter; not as a responsible creature for doing only her duties. She tries to remind Virmati about her duty to her family. She says that they had confidence in her for which she was given so much freedom. She thinks that it is her learning that has changed her mind and has deprived her of reason.

Here the discrimination between boys and girls can be seen very clearly. If there is a boy, he has full freedom to get higher education, to get married at the age that is convenient for him, to marry a girl of his own choice but a girl has no right at all, no freedom of any kind. If she is given the opportunity to get education, it is only the mercy of her guardians in this male-dominated society where even the mother is also supporting the male-members of her family. She does not want to support her daughter even when she is discriminated and treated in a biased manner because of her sex. If she has to survive, the daughter has to struggle under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society. A new urge and emotion is generated in Virmati to get herself free from the bondage of patriarchy that denies her right of freedom and choice. But she finds herself alone because there is not even Harish to support her from outside and when there is no way out for her, out of utter frustration and strain of daily life, she tries to commit suicide, to get rid of all these problems. But somehow she is saved. As G. Kumar rightly comments,

"Virmati like Manisha in Anita Desai's **The Voices in the City**, raises a million-dollar question

through her endurance, passive suffering and suicidal attempt. Virmati's case is very akin to Manisha's. Virmati attempts suicide and survives but Manisha commits suicide. Both the protagonists around whom the story rotates have their own urge and argument shaking and stirring the contemporary social engineering." ⁽⁵⁾

"Subsequently Virmati is imprisoned in the storehouse and her younger sister Indumati is made to marry Inderjit to save the prestige of the family. Vir and the professor send letters to each-other through her youngest sister Paro and Kanhiya Lal, her brother's friend. Meanwhile Kasturi tries to enable Vir to succumb to the expectations of her family, but in vain.

Suddenly, one day she is told by her mother that the professor's wife, Ganga, is pregnant, and she is shocked. She feels hurt and thinks that he is cheating her in the name of love. In her letter to the professor she writes: "It seems to me....that you can do what you like so long as you go on saying you love." (DD-pp.98-99)

She wants to close the chapter of her relationship with the professor. All that she wants now is a change from her old life and a chance to do something useful. She does not want to marry ever. She is sent to Rai Bahadur Sohan Lal Training College for Women at Lahore at the suggestion of Shakuntala and the approval of her guardians. She conveys these feelings to the professor through her last letter before leaving her home for Lahore.

The principal there was a lady who was a staunch supporter of the struggle for Swarajya, of Gandhi, of female education

and of everything being bettered. “She assured Kasturi that all the girls staying there were like her daughters and consequently she had her eyes firmly fixed on each one. This was a respectable institution, with a reputation to maintain.” (DD-p.105)

Still Kasturi is not fully satisfied and she meets the principal personally so that Vir would be ‘supervised like a jailbird on parole. Marriage was acceptable to her family but not independence.’ (DD-p.106)

In spite of all these things Vir was able to feel autonomy and freedom that she longed for, and the ache in her heart lessened a bit.

After sometime the professor visits her there and finally gets success in getting her favour. The professor frequently visits her and she loses her virginity. At first, she cries and feels guilty but just after that she overcomes by thinking, “...he was right, she was meant to be his, what was the point in foolishly denying it on the basis of an outmoded morality?” (DD-p.114)

Suman Bala and Subhash Chandra rightly analyse the man-woman relationship in their theoretical formulation and argue:

“But her acceptance of the treatment meted out to her by her lover, the professor, totally belies these expectations. The professor’s pursuit of Virmati even after she has been sent to Lahore as a part of punishment to study in women’s college, his renewing sexual relation with her with full ardor, but his reluctance and constant postponing of the marriage in spite of her frequent entreaties to do so, are instances of the gratifications of the male ‘desire’. Male ego-centricism

blinds men to the situation of women, who may be placed in agonizing circumstances on account of their relationship with men.”⁽⁶⁾

Difficult Daughters is not only a post-modern feminist novel, but also a post-colonial work of art. As a noted critic remarks,

“As a post colonial creative writer she delves into the deep of the male chauvinistic society and offers an authentic conflict between tradition and post-modernity. The tapestry of the novel is structured around the postcolonial perspective though the novel bears the partition overtones.”⁽⁷⁾

Manju Kapur is not the first or the only writer who has dealt with this theme in her writings; there are many others who have also exploited this theme in their novels.

“A number of novels were written on the theme of partition, the destruction it brought and the plight of the refugees. They faithfully recorded the reign of violence that characterized the period and provided a sad, telling commentary on the break-down of human values. A strain of despair and disillusionment is predominant in these novels.”⁽⁸⁾

What differentiates it from other novels is its story, theme and tone. It presents the realistic picture of pre-independence era, freedom struggle, the contribution of women in this struggle, partition and women’s experience in feministic perspective to these issues. It shows how freedom is necessary for the development of the human spirit, how war especially affected women, how progress

was their object so that freedom could be enjoyed by all classes of people, including women, without any discrimination. They became conscious of their roles and right in independent India. Women like Swarna and many others in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, broke the traditional image of woman by participating in the freedom struggle, they demanded the right, the privilege of doing something for their country. All of them had such strong opinions. Their voices made a great influence upon Virmati's mind. She thought, "This is the life I should be involved in. Not useless love and a doubtful marriage." (DD-p.122)

She was amazed at how large an area these women wanted to cover and how broad their thinking was! "Strikes, academic freedom, the war, peace, rural upliftment, mass consciousness, high prices due to the war, the medium of instruction, the Congress Committee, the Muslim League, anti-imperialism, Independence Day movement rally, speeches. Virmati's head was swimming. They were talking a language she had yet to learn. She began to feel stifled... She felt out of place, an outcaste amongst all these women. She thought of Harish who loved her. She must be satisfied with that. These larger spaces were not for her. She felt an impostor sitting in the hall." (DD-pp.132-133)

Virmati saw how they were fighting for a greater cause. The communal riots and the turbulent days that procreated and followed the partition of India were fraught with political hatred and violence. Swarna tries to draw the attention of the people to the unity of the country. She says, while delivering a speech at women's conference meeting: As women, it is our duty, no not duty, that word has unpleasant

connotations. It is our privilege to be able to give ourselves to the unity of our country. Not only to the unity between rich and poor, but between Muslim and Hindu, between Sikh and Christian. Artificial barriers have been created amongst us to gain power over insecure and fearful minds. Let the politics of religion not blind us to this fact." (DD-p.133)

Virmati sometimes meditates over her past, sees her present and thinks about her future — the discontentment that she gets in the result makes her restless. She bursts out before Harish.

"I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family's name, am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people will say if they find out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace...and why? Because I am an idiot." (DD-p.137)

It seems as if she has become tired of this life of uncertainty. She wants to get married and she says it clearly before him:

"Now you want to prolong the situation. Why don't we get married? You say your family makes no difference. But still you want to continue in this way. Be honest with me. I can bear anything but this continuous irresolution. Swarna is right. Men do take advantage of women." (DD-pp. 137-138)

To Harish, these are tantrums, sulks and sly accusations. He thinks of his own difficulties, turns away and drops his head in his hand. She feels trapped. She thinks, "What had she been saying, was it so unreasonable? Why was he looking so

sad? How could she leave him like this?" (DD-p.138)

But what can she do? She shows her weakness, moves towards him and slowly she takes him in her arms.

Again when she is going back to her hostel he asks her what is she going to do after her degree. She feels 'again the cold, despairing recognition that her future plans must not include marriage. Only this series of furtive meetings in borrowed places.' (DD-p.138)

And she ponders over the lives of those women participating in the freedom struggle; she muses, "Far better to be like Swarna, involved in other people, and waiting for no man." (DD-p.138)

In this state of agitation, when Swarna asks her the cause, she says "... I have to think about the future, even – if he doesn't. If we don't get married it cannot go on. I have to consider. My family has been so patient." (DD-p.139)

She says, "But I can't go on waiting. And I can't – don't want to – marry anybody else." (DD-p.139)

Swarna here proves to be a friend in need. She shows sympathy and consoles her: "Marriage is not the 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." (DD-p.139)

Swarna's words undoubtedly comfort Virmati's trouble, when she says, "We are lucky we are living in times when women can do something else. Even in Europe women gain more respect during wartime. And here we have that war, and our satyagrah as well." (DD-p.140)

But Vir is not fully satisfied. Perhaps, these ideas seemed to her lopsided. She thinks over it and to her "that meant thinking of a life for herself without marriage, which was strange and not quite right. It meant she would be alone and she wasn't sure she was capable of it." (DD-p.140)

She is portrayed here as a woman caught in the conflict between the physical passion and a yearning to be a separate identity – a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. Under the influence of Swarna — who has come there to do her M.A. against the wishes of her parents (who wanted her to get married) because she wanted to do something with her life first — Virmati realizes the meaning of life. Swarna was fighting for her country, its unity and Swarajya. Vir comes to realize how she was wasting her life in trivial things.

Suddenly she discovers she has become pregnant and she is afraid of the society, the people around her and there is no one, not even Harish to give her any kind of support. At this juncture she feels helpless for a moment but at the next moment she becomes confident of her own power:

"Whatever it was, she thought she would be able to tackle her problem on her own. She had lived away from home for almost a year, she had seen women growing in power and strength, claiming responsibility for their lives, declaring that society would be better off if its females were effective and capable. Why has she been so upset to learn of Harish's absence? She would solve her problems on her own. She was worthy of independence." (DD-p.150)

And with these thoughts she helps herself at this time of hardship — time of abortion. She feels very sorry for this type of end of her innocent child. How ironical it was: “That a child of their union, the result of all those speeches on freedom and the right to individuality, the sanctity of human love and the tyranny of social and religious restraints should meet its end like this!” (DD-p.157)

And when everything was finished, she got the opportunity to meet Harish. After a little discussion about what happened and how, they stopped because there was no use of such discussion; because what had been done, could not be undone.

In the meanwhile she had done her BT which left her restless and dissatisfied at home; hungry to work, and anxious to broaden her horizons. She had a taste of freedom in Lahore. So it was hard to come back to the old life when she was not the old person anymore. Fortunately, the prime minister of Sirmaur state comes to her home and praises Suraj Prakash, father of Virmati, for giving higher education to his daughter and says that he has set an example for others to follow. Suraj Prakash becomes very happy and says proudly, “Bhai Sahib, you know how times are changing. With the boys becoming educated, and often opting for professional careers, there is the need for girls to keep up with them. Otherwise where is the compatibility?” (DD-p.165)

It shows how liberal he is for girls but the next moment he changes his colour when the prime minister asks him to send Virmati to join the post of principal in the school at Sirmaur state. His wife, Kasturi, is also frightened at this further, unlooked for development in her daughter’s educational career. He says, “Bhai Sahib!

we did not educate her to send her away to work. She is still so simple and inexperienced,” (DD-p.165)

Much time is spent before deciding to send her. Virmati says that she would be very glad to serve the cause of the nation’s literacy. At last they send her there. She finds the school surprisingly easy to administer. After all, she had grown up shouldering responsibility and her past experiences help her very much. She manages everything well and feels the satisfaction of achievement. But even this satisfaction is not long – lasting for her. There too the professor visits her secretly. But it could not remain a secret for long and once discovered, it becomes sufficient reason for her removal from that place. Now she decides to leave Nahan and to go to Shantineketan. During her journey she ponders over the situation. “How many new beginnings had her relationship with the professor led her to? That sense of hope was beginning to feel stale. Still with every mile she traveled she felt stronger. There was a life of dedication and service ahead of her, and in that she would forge her identity.” (DD-p.182)

At Delhi, she had to wait for seventeen hours for the connecting train to Calcutta. So she decides to visit Harish’s poet-friend. There she tells him about her future plan; she also says that she cannot delay her departure for a few days and calls Harish and presses him to marry her. Finally, the relationship between Virmati and the professor culminates into marriage. Though Virmati marries Harish and goes to his house as his second wife, she fails in securing a place for herself in his house. She feels like an outsider and is compelled to lead a suffocating life in a limited place. At times, she complains to Harish and he consoles her: “Poor thing!

you have me, let her have the kitchen.”
(DD-p.213)

Virmati looked at the domain of her kingdom and was forced to be content. She saw that if she had the bed, Ganga was having the house. It was only when Harish was with her that she felt free to move about in the house. Otherwise, she passed her days “alone in a place where her pariah status was announced with every averted look.” (DD-p.198)

After marrying Virmati the professor tries to install her in his home. But the result is not very satisfactory. He tries to satisfy her by sending her to Lahore for further studies. Still, it is only a small consolation to her.

She finds that the battle for her own independence has created irrevocable lines of partition and pain around her. Had she known about the result of her battle earlier, perhaps she would have never wanted freedom. As Dr. Ruby Milhoutra puts it:

“The climax of the story occurs at a crucial time of Indian history... the period of communal turmoil, which claims the life of Virmati the protagonist, creates line of partition in her parental family as well as in the family of her husband. She painfully realizes that independence and partition are mutually generative. The novelist very well combines the story of India’s partition and the family partition.”⁽⁹⁾

In the novel, Virmati’s brother, Gopinath also comments on the partition of the country. “The British left us with a final stab in the back. We didn’t want freedom, if this is what it meant. But we were forced to accept Partition and suffering along with Independence, as a package deal. ...But ultimately, the fault

was ours. If we were stupid, greedy and uncivilized enough... on a smaller scale even now, when there are no British around.” (DD-p.248)

Though Virmati has got higher education (and it is because of this quality that she was liked by the professor, who was in search of an intellectual companion that he could not seek in Ganga), her academic temperament is not highly praised before the intellectual height of the professor. Vandita Mishra has rightly put that Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power of freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones. Her relationship with the professor, for instance. While it does provide an escape from a loveless arranged marriage, it is itself furtive and claustrophobic, offering only a stolen togetherness behind curtained windows. Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow. She hovers uncertainly at the edge of each new world, never entering, lest the professor should call and not find her near. Eventually, marriage to the man of her choice is no triumph either. As second wife she must fight social ostracism outside the house, and compete for the kitchen and conjugal bed with Ganga, the first wife, inside it.

Though Virmati rebels against tradition in quest of her identity the situation in which she is trapped never allows her to assert herself as independent woman in her life time. She does not live her life without adjusting, compromising and adapting. But if we think practically, everybody has to make certain adjustments, compromises and adaptations in his/her life in order to survive. So it does not mean that she achieved nothing.

It hardly matters that she could not assert herself as an independent woman. She at least tried to be so and it is enough.

Towards the end she becomes free even from the oppressive love of her husband. She has her husband all to herself, along with her child Ida and her family. It symbolizes her true emancipation.

Dr. Ruby Milhoutra opines,

“The novelist scrutinizes a pertinent and persuasive subject like self – affirmation, man – woman relationship and family and, above all, the mother – daughter conflict and contradiction. The novel, without any literary snobbery, deals with a daughter’s reorganization of her fractured and fragmented past hinging on her mother’s story. The writer has all the fact and fineness of the great classical masters like Dickens, Jane Austen and Emily Bronte in creating and producing efficacious result.”⁽¹⁰⁾

It is really paradoxical that even Virmati who herself went against tradition

Notes and References:

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3. Kapur, Manju: *Difficult Daughters*: p.258. All further textual references are from this book, from this edition.
4. Dr. Ruby Milhoutra, “Existential Images of Women in Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters” in *New Lights on Indian Women Novelists in English : Part III* edited by Amar Nath Prasad Sarup & Sons. New Delhi, 2005 (p.165).
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9. Dr. Ruby Milhoutra, (opp. cited), (p.164).
10. Dr. Ruby Milhoutra, (opp. cited), (p.169).

becomes traditional for her daughter, Ida. She tries to teach her to adjust compromise and adapt. She tries to keep her under her control. As a result, she also becomes a rebel, as she says; “I grew up struggling to be the model daughter. Pressure, pressure to perform day and night... . 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.” (DD-p.258)

Just like Sarita in *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, Ida also tries to be different from what her mother stands for and by doing so she confirms the central status of Virmati. She cannot escape her because Virmati is her creator as she is of Virmati. So, she accepts her superiority and concludes by saying:

“This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me any more.” (DD-p.259)