

## FEMINISM VS MODERNISM IN MANJU KAPUR'S NOVEL "DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS"

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The paper is a study of the women characters in Manju Kapur's novel "*Difficult Daughters*". The novel can be studied on how tradition plays against modernity. This is an attempt to study the character of Virmati, the heroine of the novel, who has modern views; she is much against the traditional practises of her mother. But as a female, she gives in the oppression of Harish, a male. A modern female is portrayed through Swarnalatha, Shakuntala and Ida. These three characters don't fall blindly in love; they are modern- in education, acting according to their wish and in not falling a prey to the male dominated society.

The whole story is concentrated on Virmati, who has a wrong view of being modern. She is more fascinated by Harish's education and behaviour, that she is not able to look beyond this. Her education and modern views fail, when she falls in love with the already married Prof. Harish. She is too mean in usurping Harish, the husband of Ganga, a traditional and homely lady. The other characters who are depicted as bold, educated and emancipated are Shakuntala, the cousin of Virmati, Swarnalatha, Virmati's roommate at Lahore, and Ida, Virmati's daughter. These are images of modern women who are conscious; they have the zeal to assert their identity and to find their place in society.

The novel is a study of women of three generations – Ida, the girl of the present days, Virmati, who belonged to the days of Independence and partition, and Kasturi, who is a pre-Independent woman. Kasturi, the grandmother is very traditional; her world is her kitchen, kids and husband. Virmati; who belongs to the next generation is neither traditional nor modern. She dwindle between the two, accepting to be traditional at times and favouring modernism at her whims and fancies. Ida, the granddaughter of Kasturi, is self-made. Though she has love and respect for her mother, she never liked what her mother did. She had never wanted to be like her mother. Virmati had modern views when she went against the wishes of her mother; but tradition blinds her when she is not able to go against the words of Harish. In fact she lives as an illicit wife for five years. But Ida divorces her husband rightfully, when he wanted her to terminate her pregnancy. She knows her place in this world and is set to journey through it boldly.

The novel "*Difficult daughters*" is quite difficult to analyse. The novel has an umpteen number of woman characters, who are very different in their own way. There is a clash of tradition and modernity throughout the novel. The main characters – Virmati, her mother Kasturi and Ida, the daughter of Virmati weave a fence around them. Ida, has no second thoughts in breaking the fence and living her own way. Kasturi too never thinks of breaking the fence and hence is quite steadfast. But Virmati dwindle between the two. Ida is an example of a modern female; but Virmati has thoughts of tradition and modernism clashing with each other.

Elaine Showalter, a French Feminist Critic, has observed that the Marxist Feminist Criticism stresses ‘Oppression’ and the French feminist Criticism, essentially psychoanalytic, stresses ‘repression’. Manju Kapur has shown both, oppression and repression in her novel. Virmati belonged to a traditional Punjabi family, with her parents and ten siblings. A typical, traditional, Hindu family of the yesteryears, hers is a male dominated family; her father a rich and renowned jeweller, her mother an obedient and submissive wife.

It is really surprising that Virmati had been given the freedom to study, though she belonged to such an orthodox family. She is a typical example of feminist oppression. Virmati may be modern in her attitude, views and behaviour. But the feministic approach is lacking in her. Ida throws open her voice; when her husband Prabhakar forced her to undergo an abortion, she breaks up her marriage, gets divorce and moves to the future. She loves her mother as a mother, but chides her as a lady. Marxist oppression is seen in Prabhakar and as a Marxist feminist, Ida, attacks that oppression of her husband. In Marxist feminism personal identity is not seen as separate from cultural identity.

Male chauvinism and oppression of women by men are significant features of Indian culture. It is this oppression which made Virmati a puppet in the hands of Harish, Prof. and hero of the novel. Ida did not yield to Prabhakar; but Virmati falls a prey to Harish. As a girl, wanting to go for higher studies, she had the elements of oppression; she had fought with her traditional parents and had made them allow her to study. But she had failed in her behaviour with Harish. She should have taught a lesson to Harish by openly letting out the secret and commanding him to marry her; but instead, she continued the illicit relationship with the cowardly Harish, who kept postponing his marriage with Virmati.

The elements of repression are highly visible in Virmati, especially, when she hears that Harish’s wife, Ganga was to deliver her second child. Till then she had a feeling that Harish had completely abandoned Ganga for her sake. Thoughts of betrayal and isolation haunt her. She is unable to let out her thoughts. A girl who did not believe in arranged marriage, who thought that a woman’s role did not lie in domesticity alone and one who had pursued higher studies, had failed as a modern feminist.

The role of some men on women make them more feminine and elements of gender come in. In the novel, though Virmati is shown in the beginning as a self-made, strong and confident girl, she slowly loses her confidence for Harish. The attraction soon turns into friendship. Harish is superior as a man and is cunning enough to poison Virmati’s mind against her prospective groom. Here is where Manju Kapur brings in Freud’s views of psychoanalysis. Virmati is thrown between the conscious and unconscious state of her mind. To her, Harish is a representation of the western culture, which she thinks high of, as her days were under the colonial rule. She had been fascinated by his style, language and mannerism. Infact, she even tried to educate his wife, Ganga so as to make her in par with Harish. But, this innocent Virmati had unconsciously fallen into the trap laid by Harish.

Harish is shown as a man who utilises Virmati as well as Ganga. When Virmati marries Harish and starts to live in his home, she feels that she was going to have a difficult time living there.

“I should never have married you”, she said slowly, “and it is too late now.  
I have never seen it so clearly. It’s not fair”

(DD.212)

Many times she had wavered over this relationship. She had often uttered that it

would not be fair. And after marrying him, the old words were springing to her lips. Though married, she was dispossessed. She became tight-lipped, mute and walked on the path her destiny had carved out for her. Being brought up in a true, traditional Indian way, she should have had second thoughts. What began as a ‘feminist’ characteristic in Virmati, gives way to the ‘female’ and the ‘feminine’ in her. Manju Kapur shows that a female is ever suppressed and it is the male who oppresses her. The married days for Virmati had never been calm once; in fact, a feeling of guilt lingered over her.

Here is where we find Ida winning over her mother. Virmati had accepted to terminate her pregnancy for the sake of Harish – male oppression winning over female repression; Ida too had terminated her pregnancy for Prabhakar. But she had no feelings of repression like her mother.

Julia Kristeva, a psychoanalytic French Critic has argued that motherhood is the feminine status. But both, Virmati and Ida had let go their motherhood due to the patriarchal culture, which finding that society’s oppression of women came precisely from its need to romanticize the terrible and wonderful mythic powers of the mother. Both the ladies fall for this romanticism. But Ida, wakes up and gets divorce from her husband, where as Virmati leads a life of destruction. Harish married her after five years, that too under the compulsion of his friend.

Virmati, on being impressed by her cousin Shakuntala, leaves for Lahore. Shakuntala is another modern girl portrayed in the novel. She is firm in her ideas; her mother Lajwanti allows her to act as she wished, though she had comparisons of girls in older days who accepted in settling down to married life. Both Lajwanti and Shakuntala are complements of each other.

Lajwanti differs from Kasturi. She neither understood nor cared for her daughter’s achievement. Manju Kapur presents one more modern women through Shakuntala. Virmati is surprised in watching Shakuntala ride horses, smoke, play cards and badminton. She acted on her own wish without the interference of her mother and spent money without second thoughts. It was because of her that Virmati was sent to Lahore to pursue further education.

One more modern feminist is revealed through the character of Swarnalatha. She was Virmati’s roommate at Lahore. Feminist freedom through the characters of Swarnalatha, Shakuntala and Ida are shown in a positive and acceptable manner. Swarnalatha and Shakuntala use their modern views in coming out of the chains of the feminine gender; they never misuse their freedom; as modern girls, they are independent, staying away from home, involving themselves in the freedom struggle and taking part in political movements.

But Virmati’s views on modernism is entirely different. She breaks the female bond only to save herself from an arranged marriage; on the contrary, she picks up a relationship with Harish. Her attraction towards Harish was only because he was an Oxford scholar, who spoke fluent English, lived a highly sophisticated life and never cared for his uneducated wife, Ganga.

Kate Millett, a feminist Critic wrote that “the essence of politics is power” and the most fundamental and pervasive concept of power in our society is male dominance.[p.199,Guerin].

Manju Kapur leads not only the heroine, Virmati to male oppression, but makes the reader too legalize how women misuse their modernity in being oppressed by the male society. At such times, when a female is weak, her modern views yields to gender. Virmati who had argued with her mother, broken the old traditional code of saying ‘no’ to the prospective groom who had waited for her, had fallen into the trap of the so called modern and highly educated, Harish. Some feminists stress gender differences, others believe that the entire concept of female difference is what caused female oppression. Hence they wished to move beyond that

“difference” altogether. If not for that difference, Virmati would not have yielded to the wishes of Harish.

But to wipe away gender difference is not that easy. Shakuntalas and Swarnalathas may rise up now and then; but their freedom too is restricted. Feminist freedom is quite different from modernism. Feminist freedom differs from country to country. It depends mostly on culture and cultural studies. Cultural studies is not really a discrete approach; it is rather a set of practices.[Guerin,240]. So Swarnalatha and Shakuntala leave home for higher studies, they take part in the freedom struggle, they are free to do what they want, their mind had not been set on marriage. In that way they are modern feminist. But at the same time, they have their restrictions; they never blindly rush into the society, as Virmati had done.

Kate Millett in her *Sexual Politics* condemns Freud of the patriarchal attitudes against which feminists must fight. But Juliet Mitchell, a feminist critic in her *Psychoanalysis and Feminism* defends Freud against Millett. She uses Millett’s own concepts between sex and gender. “Sex” is a matter of biology while “gender” is something acquired rather than ‘neutral’. Simone de Beauvoir in her book “*The Second Sex*” writes that “one is not born a woman; rather, one becomes a woman”

While connecting all what these feminist critics have said, we can conclude that gender roles must be malleable and changeable, not inevitable and unchangeable. In the novel, we see that Ida, Shakuntala and Swarnalatha, though born as women, they are malleable and changeable. Though the latter two, belong to the pre-independent days, they do not give in to the cultural and traditional practices and are bold enough to partake in freedom-struggle movements and go in for higher studies. They never say ‘no’ to marriage; but they see that their goal is fulfilled first. Their female sexuality had been formed by early experiences and adjustments. As Freud says it is being produced and constructed. But in the case of Virmati it had been constructed only to be destroyed. This has shattered her to a great extent.

Even minor characters like Harish’s daughter, show construction of feminism. She studies to become a Civil Service Officer; never comes near her father, but is steady in her care for her mother and grand-mother. Manju Kapur as a feminist concentrates her novel more in exploring the nature of the female world and outlook, and reconstructing the lost or suppressed records, rather than attacking the male version of the world. The only highlighted male character is Harish, who is shown in the negative way as an attack; the other male characters highlighted are Virmati’s brothers who take part in the freedom movement.

A character who is shown in a real traditional manner is Ganga. A dutiful wife of Harish, she does all the menial jobs for him. When Virmati is brought home by Harish, she never said a word, but wept silently; to make matters still worse, Kishori Devi, her mother-in-law finds fault with her. She could do nothing. Her consoling words were “ 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 that we cannot have”. Ganga and Kishori Devi are perfect examples of traditional women who stick onto the habits of Indian Culture.

Studies of the social background of an author’s work and of the influence of that background on the work are of necessity when analysing a work. This involves the description of the background and then the investigation of the work with the background in mind. Though the historical events in the novel are knitted with imaginary description and stories, yet the author brings a picture of pre-independent India, India on the eve of independence and India during the days of partition.

Even in the early days of Independence, Punjabi girls had been more independent and literate; Virmati, Shakuntala and Swarnalatha are such characters in the novel. India in those days saw women of two categories; one was the affluent class which allowed the girls to venture out for education. They even participated, along with the men, in the freedom struggle. The other class was extremely traditional. A very appropriate outcome of this type is Ganga, the professor's wife. Though she was a possessive wife, she could do nothing against the oppression of her husband, Harish. Manju Kapur's description of Ganga and Harish at home, when Harish received a telegram from his friend that Virmati was on her way to Shantiniketan goes thus:

During dinner his wife noticed how preoccupied he looked. She associated his distracted air with the telegram. It must be something to do with that witch, what else.....She prayed to God, like she did every day, morning and night, to keep her home safe from outsiders, safe till her children grew up and married. Then God could do what he liked with her. She would accept (DD 199-200)

The thought of Ganga were the thoughts of most uneducated women then, as well as in the present. Unable to protest or raise her voice against the injustice being done to her, Ganga could only look up to her Creator. The prayers too were only for her children. Most women like Ganga depend upon the male members of the family for the upliftment of their children. The element of sacrifice lies in many women and Ganga is no exception.

If Ganga had a hatred for Virmati, it is natural; for, being a woman and that too an uneducated, traditional one, to whom Virmati and Harish were doing injustice. Ganga is a female, a feminine who is typical of the Indian tradition and culture. But, Virmati who is shown as a modern, educated lady also shows the traits of a female. She could not digest the words of Harish when he referred to Ganga and Virmati as "wives". Also, when he uttered that Ganga too had her claims over Harish as Virmati had, she felt that she was bowled over.

Manju Kapur has given us a trail of female characters; some are shown as highly modern, but who cannot come out of their feministic trait. If Virmati is taken in this cadre, she cannot be considered as a woman of Indian culture; modernity doesn't mean usurping another's husband! In Ida's words, she loves her mother as a mother, but not as a woman. A woman cannot be called simple or innocent when she can marry somebody else's husband.

When the Hindu-Muslim clash was at its peak, Kishori Devi, Ganga and the children leave Amritsar for the native Kanpur. In fact, Virmati was very happy to be alone with Harish at their home. The end of the novel narrates with what hatred and insolence, Virmati throws away the apparels of Ganga to the home for the destitute. Once again we see female traits overtaking modernity in Virmati. As a feminist, it is Ganga who wins over Virmati; while Virmati settles down with her husband at Delhi, Ganga lives with her daughter Guddiya, who was preparing for the Government service exams. As she had said, she accepted everything after her children were settled.

A novel which brings the political scenario before us with characters like Virmati and Ganga having psychological conflicts, and Kasturi, Lajwanti and Kishori Devi striving with sociological conflicts of the day.

Feminist criticism from the 1980s is more eclectic; it drew findings from other kinds of criticism – marxism, structuralism, linguistic and so on. *Difficult Daughters* is a novel which deals with all the above said elements. Marxism is revealed in chapters dealing with freedom movement. We also find elements of structuralism and linguistics. The novel begins with Ida

narrating the story after Virmati's death; then, it goes on to the epistolary style with Harish and Virmati exchanging letters.

Feminist critics say that feminist writers bring out characters of what they are not. So what is Manju Kapur? Opposite of Virmati or Opposite of Ganga, Kasturi and Ida?

The novel is a vast ocean of contradictory lady characters.

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