

**FROM MARGINALITY TO CENTRALITY: A STUDY OF FEMALE
PROTAGONISTS IN MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS* AND
*HOME***

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In a country like India where patriarchy holds its sway to the deep archetypal level, the popular social stereotypes regarding women still exist in the collective consciousness of the people. Women's individual self has very little recognition and self effacement and self denial has, therefore, been a woman's normal way of life for ages. Women, no doubt, have acquired constitutional rights of equality with men but the change in social attitudes towards women is yet to be achieved. In such a scenario, her journey from 'margin' to the 'centre' becomes even more challenged one. With the evolution of society, of course, change is palpable. The development on all the fronts – economic, scientific, technical and industrial – has brought significant changes in the status and role of women too. The later part of last century has seen a remarkable shift in attitudes towards the role of women within a patriarchal society. One can see women holding responsible positions in public and private offices. As Namita Gokhale rightly avers: "It has been said that every absolute change in technology is also an absolute change in consciousness." (Gokhale 64)

World over, literature has recorded this transition in woman's stature. We have seen different phases of gender role determinations. For instance women writers like Mary Wollstonecraft to Bronte sisters and the similar writers belonging to other cultures and countries sowed the seeds of gender equality; then came the radical facet of feminism as in Erica Jong's *Fear of Flying*. In India too, writers like Shobha De and Namita Gokhle have shown the women in a bolder avatar, stepping out of the hushed silences of their drawing rooms.

The polemics of power between man and woman have changed beyond doubt. The spaces have been redefined. The margins and the centre are losing their axis in the modern reshuffle and readjustment of values. Visibly, the woman is no longer to be seen as purely marginal and man being totally on the pivotal position. Even the terms 'margins' and 'centre' probably need redefining. This is true, no doubt but represents only half the truth. One cannot miss the invisible or less visible area of gender issues and concerns. One cannot blind oneself to the fact that insidious, ingrained and subtle tactics are still being applied to put the women on the borderlines. Women are increasingly at the receiving end of subtler mode of violence as the society becomes more sophisticated. To quote Jaidev, an eminent critic: "Indeed any sophisticated structure today functions not by direct, visible exploitation, but by making the victims willingly, freely and happily give in to its imperatives, by subtly ensuring that the victims do not recognise that they are victims." (Jaidev 57). Way back, R. K. Narayan, one of the most celebrated Indian writers in English also expressed similar thoughts in his work *My Days*: "Man assigned her a secondary place and kept her there with such subtlety and cunning that she

herself began to lose all notions of her independence, individuality, stature and strength.” (Narayan 119)

Significantly, the entire popular media including the Indian movies, soap operas and even advertisements have to be carefully seen to validate the thesis on marginality of women. The columnist and author Anuja Chauhan attends to this issue in the popular weekly magazine *The Week*, January 20, 2013 issue in her article entitled “The Real Women Haters”: “it is not so much the obvious offenders we need to worry about.... The real enemies to gender equality in India are the more insidious ones – the seemingly inoffensive lyrics of mainstream Hindi movie songs.... Television serials again completely reinforce these ‘masterful man’ and the ‘weak-kneed besotted woman’ gender stereotypes, as do ads for anti-perspirants, fairness creams. We are being fed subservient women role models instead of food, morning, noon and night” (Chauhan 14)

Both Anuja Chauhan and Jaidev have tried to sensitise us to a realisation that the strategies and processes involved in gender marginalisation are so subtle that they are hardly visible to the naked eye. Nayantara Sahgal, another eminent writer and critic couldn’t have put it more succinctly when she said that it is a kind of violence “where blood and bruises don’t show.” (Sahgal 16).

This paper makes a humble attempt to discuss such issues about women marginality and their strive towards centrality with well-acclaimed modern day author Manju Kapur’s two novels viz. *Difficult Daughters* (1998) and *Home* (2006) as reference points. It is significant to point out that Kapur’s novels refuse to offer any obvious, explicit and readymade view points. To a casual reader, the predicament of Virmati, the female protagonist of *Difficult Daughters* and the choice made by Nisha, the central protagonist in *Home*, towards the end of the novel may evoke much wonder and to a certain extent, a sense of disappointment. Only after piercing through the deceptive simplicity of Kapur’s novels, much Frostian in nature, one is able to see these texts in their true perspective.

Kapur believes in ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’. She would rather problematise than provide solutions, as there are no easy ones, really speaking. Much in the manner of R. K. Narayan, she abstains from passing judgements. Her descriptive mode of narration combined with an air of detachment and open endings place her in the post modern domain. This paper catches hold of those patterns in her novels which underline constant attempt of Indian woman to budge from the margins, where all the ideological and epistemological structures wish her to place, heading slowly but surely towards the centre. The women in India have indeed achieved their successes in more than half a century of independence but the fight for autonomy remains an unfinished battle. In this light both *Difficult Daughters* and *Home* are simultaneously, both Indian and universal.

Difficult Daughters marks a glide from the earlier individualistic existential novels which came up in the 60s and 70s. We have the entire era of Anita Desai’s early novels and also the novels by Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandya, more pinned upon the females caught up in the labyrinths of their selves. Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* as well as *Home* are set on a canvas as large and wide as can accommodate a few generations. Both the novels exhibit big joint families. These family sagas facilitate the reader’s comprehension of the present filtering through the past and therefore the predicament of characters is rendered legitimate and authentic when seen in the light of historicity. It also creates a sense of continuity. To quote English literature teacher and

critic Jasbir Jain: “History and family sagas also facilitate an analysis of institutions like family and marriage, institutions linked ever so closely to the question of gender, institutions which establish connections with the ground realities.” (Jain 13)

Marginality can be defined as a social process of being relegated to the fringes of society. Earlier writers like M R Anand, R K Narayan, Manohar Malgaonkar, Raja Rao, Bhabani Bhattacharya and the next generation writers like Anita Desai, Nayantara Sahgal, Kamala Markandya and still later Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Namita Gokhale, Vikram Seth and Githa Hariharan have all sensitised the issue of gender marginality, looking at it from different perspectives. Manju Kapur has joined the bandwagon rather recently and shot into limelight through the Commonwealth Writers’ Prize for the Best First Book (Eurasia region) that she received for her debut novel *Difficult Daughters*.

Difficult Daughters records the predicament of Virmati on a canvas displaying three generations of which Virmati belongs to the second one. Virmati asserts her will to be educated. She manages to leave home to study in Lahore. She falls in love with an Oxford returned teacher known as ‘the Professor’, a married man who had been once her parent’s tenant. After a number of vicissitudes, she finally chooses to marry him but life awaits her with a series of disappointments. To her shock the Professor refuses to leave his first wife. She ends up being marginalised by her own family and despised by her husband’s. Virmati’s story is told from a present day perspective by Ida, her only daughter who ventures to investigate and reconstruct her late mother’s life story out of the folds of past and set against the backdrop of independence movement of the 1940s and the subsequent trauma of Partition.

Virmati couldn’t enjoy her married life with the Professor because she couldn’t withstand the rancour of Ganga (Professor’s first wife) towards herself: “When Ganga saw her, she would turn her face away or what was worse, would stare intensely at her, her eyes moist, her lip trembling, her big red bindi flashing accusingly” (Kapur 219). Virmati was not allowed to participate in either the kitchen that was solely Ganga’s territory or move about freely in the central living area of the house. The whole day she had to be confined to the dark, sullen dressing room with occasional visits to the main house to do her daily chores. She would wait restlessly for Professor to come back home. The corner location of the room symbolically testifies her marginality. In the balance of power between Professor and herself, she yields to the superior power i.e. Professor. She obviously loses all notions of her identity. Through her continuation of studies at Lahore on Professor’s insistence, she finds the city offering her the much needed escapade from the unbearable conditions of her home, not precisely her own. But that stay is also short lived.

The whole life of Virmati turns into a trail of adjustments, compromises and humiliations. Virmati awakens to the mistake she has committed on the very first day of her marriage. But it is too late: “I should never have married you, she said slowly, ‘and its too late now. I have never seen it so clearly. It is not fair.’” (Kapur 212). She couldn’t free herself from the pain and the sense of shame throughout her life. It is this sense of shame that doesn’t allow her to open up even to her daughter Ida, who takes an expedition to Amritsar and Lahore (now in Pakistan) to find answers to the quizzical life of her mother, perplexing enough to unnerve her and disturb her. Though Virmati faltered but she did make an attempt to uplift her marginal status at the risk of disturbing the status quo.

With a view to put Virmati's plight in sharp relief, Kapur presents parallel narratives of Swarnlata, Virmati's roommate at Lahore and Shakuntala, her cousin who is a lecturer. Both of them are also 'difficult daughters' but manage to achieve what they aspired to without disturbing the social structures. During the turbulent times of independence struggle, Swarnlata deliberately chose to rise above her personal concerns and connected herself to the larger issues of the nation at the call of Mahatma Gandhi. This strategy of offering multiple perspectives makes the reader look at the issue of marginality in a balanced and a more generalised way. It makes us see that Virmati's case is representative, no doubt, but only to a certain extent. It helps us realise that life, with all its diversity, refuses to be defined in terms of a fixed formula as Rollason quotes Dora Sales Salvador to articulate the same thought: "In this novel one needs to stress that the disjunction between the weight of gender-determined tradition, on the one hand, and they yearning for independence and self affirmation, on the other, does not appear as a simple dichotomy of life choices. In no case are things black and white. There is a whole range of complex emotional shades of grey between the two alternatives." (Rollason 7) .

Moreover, Virmati's alliance with the Professor serves as a key to unearth certain epistemological structures about the society. It exposes the double standards and hypocrisy of the society that dictates different norms for men and women. Whereas Virmati receives hostility for marrying the Professor, the latter, despite having played equal role, receives not much antagonism either from his own family or that of Virmati's or from the society either. As for Professor's own family's response to him is concerned, after initial anger his mother as well as his wife reconcile and grant him the luxury of bringing a second wife home, though reluctantly. As for Virmati's family, they treat him cordially when he visits them on her father's and later her grandfather's death. There are no signs in the novel to show the social hostility towards him. Even at the professional front he is promoted to the post of Principal of the same college. But the entire social machinery is churned to spit anger and aggression-- vocal or gestural towards Virmati. Her mother disowns her. When she makes her first visit home after marriage, not only is she ostracised but also shabbily treated by her mother. In Professor's home she is treated as an outcast and denied any participation in the drama of the family. So far as societal response is concerned, she is eyed by people as if she is a culprit, not deserving their cordiality or warmth. The whole onus of a wrong decision falls on Virmati whereas the Professor goes scot free.

This marginal state of women is underlined in the novel through Virmati with much care. Manju Kapur has shown mirror to the state of affairs without giving any subjective opinion. That Virmati was punished, duly or unduly, is not a contention here. What is remarkable is her capacity to recognise her marginal status, an urge to move towards the pivot – her will to get educated against all odds is enough of a vindication to this. That she falters mid-way should not be much bothering as : "Virmati's psychological annihilation at the hands of her own family and her husband's should not be seen as a fatality. What happens to Virmati is no doubt the most representative destiny of the Indian woman (even if educated), quantitatively or statistically, but Kapur's novel shows that other paths also exist, while further stressing that choices are by no means simple or either-or. There are types of female negotiations that work and others that do not, but nothing is pre-determined." (Rollason 7)

Home (2006) can be read as a sequel to *Difficult Daughters* though there is another novel *A Married Woman* (2002) by Manju Kapur in between. All the efforts of Virmati to find a 'home' were crushed but Nisha, the central female protagonist of *Home* is able to find her nest. *Home* bears symbolic connotations in the novel. It stands for security, belongingness, a sense of

rootedness and most importantly it stands for an extension of one's self. *Home* again is a story of a business class joint family with Banwari Lal as the patriarch. His two sons assist him in the cloth shop in Delhi. The story travels down to three generations providing enough idea of our fundamentally traditional and orthodox society being in churn. That woman can indulge in a power politics against other women bringing the relationship deliberately to the victim-victimiser, oppressed-oppressor level is best exemplified in *Home*. Here we have Banwari Lal's elder daughter-in-law Sona being marginalised by her mother-in-law. The punishment for marrying by love and not bringing any dowry are enough pretexts for the mother-in-law to spew all her venom on her daughter-in-law. To cite the words of her mother-in-law in one such situation: "What can you know of a mother's feelings? All you do is enjoy life, no children, no sorrow, only a husband to dance around you." (Kapur 18) Sona is marginalised by the system which treats women harshly whereas her husband is spared of this maltreatment being a male and, most of all, the financial supporter of the family. Sona loses all sense of dignity and self esteem and becomes enough thick skinned to swallow the taunts of her mother-in-law as a given thing in the life of a woman. She is further subjected to verbal assaults for not being able to bear children even after ten years of her marriage. Her sister-in-law gives birth to a son just after one year of marriage for which reason she is adorned and well accepted. This discrimination and favouritism continues till Sona is able to give birth to a daughter Nisha and later a son Raju. Womanhood is virtually synonymous with motherhood in our society. And a woman is not considered complete unless she procreates.

But major portion of the novel is devoted to Nisha, granddaughter of Banwari Lal through whom Kapur carries forward the picture of our society which nurtures the image of a woman as marginal being, as a taken-for-granted aspect. However, Nisha's response to these antithetical forces presents another facet of the novel. When as a small child, she becomes a victim of the carnal desires of her young cousin, Kapur brings forth the inherent, deep rooted social stereotypes regarding women. If a male child could attempt to sexually assault a small girl, this speaks of the dynamics of power between man and woman – that Nisha being a girl is weaker and he being a boy is powerful, Nisha being an 'object' and he being a 'subject'.

Too young to articulate the terror, Nisha stops eating and can't sleep well at night. Gauging the severity of the situation, she is shifted to her aunt's house for a change. Her admission to college also entails paramount difficulty. Her own mother, being herself marginalised decides the same fate for her daughter and impedes her way to higher education. After an unsuccessful affair with a college fellow, Nisha does pass through a phase of disappointment but then emerges as a business woman running her own boutique. Given the hard core patriarchal structure of Banwari Lal family that presupposes marginality as a given fact in a woman's life, Nisha's movement from border to the mainland cannot be under estimated. What makes this journey even more admirable is that Nisha doesn't thwart or disrespect the long prevailing hegemonic structures or systems.

Even her marriage and subsequent pregnancy that impels her to handover her business to her sister-in-law is not seen as a backlash or a retrograde step. Kapur take a broad view of the notion of female fulfilment which does not necessarily means stepping out to work. Aastha of *A Married Woman* is an example. Her job as a school teacher hardly could provide any fulfilment to her in a true sense. The most important thing is to prove one's credentials which both Nisha and Virmati had done already.

The end product of the respective plights of Nisha and Virmati cannot be seen in relative terms as merely 'victory' or 'defeat'. At least Manju Kapur refrains from passing such judgements. She is rather more inclined towards underlining the inner urge, the strong desire of women to renegotiate their spaces which exemplify their mobility from margins to centre.

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