

RE-DEFINING MARGINS AND REJECTING THE HEGEMONY IN MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

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Abstract

The Constitution guarantees equality of all persons before law and equal protection before law. The constitution of India has granted women equal rights but gender disparities remain. Women play important roles as mothers, wives, and sisters, but have faced discriminatory attitudes for generations. The space given to women is generally secondary, and their status marginal. Men are presumed to be physically strong and therefore associated with the world of labor, sport and physical combat and they are active in the public sphere. Women are considered physically weak and therefore, passive; their sphere is home, their bodies determines their roles as mothers and objects of male desire. But if gender is understood as socially and culturally defined, then it can be “re-defined” or “re-constructed” as well. The modern women are constantly striving to change their lot as ‘marginalized beings’ and are moving towards ‘centre’, deconstructing margin/centre binary. By rejecting patriarchal hegemony they are asserting their independent status, not governed by any oppressive structures. So, this paper is a sincere attempt to show the journey of female characters in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* from marginalized position towards centre and in this pursuit their rejection of male-hegemony.

Keywords: gender, centre, margins, patriarchy, hegemony, stereotypes.

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights,” the universal declaration of human rights began with these words. The Constitution guarantees equality of all persons before law and equal protection before law. The state cannot discriminate against a citizen on grounds of religion, caste, sex, or place of birth. Although the constitution of India has granted women equal rights but gender disparities remain. In India, women play important roles as mothers, wives, and sisters, but have faced discriminatory attitudes for generations. Discrimination against women begins very early from female feticides to incidents of infanticides, early marriage and emphasis on domestic activities. Very little importance is given to their education and career. Gender discrimination limits opportunities for women in the fields of education, health care services and job opportunities.

The space given to women is generally secondary, and their status marginal. In terms of human values, man seems to have perfected ways of aggression and violence. Gender gets linked to the masculine and the feminine, which in turn “naturalizes” the standard traits of sexual difference established in society. Men are presumed to be physically strong and therefore associated with the world of labor, sport and physical combat and they are active in the public sphere. Women are considered physically weak and therefore, passive; their sphere is home, their bodies determines their roles as mothers and objects of male desire. Chhaya Jain writes, It is since the beginning of the civilization that the biological difference has enabled the males to affirm their status as Sole and Sovereign subjects; woman’s place in society is always decided by men; at no time of history has she imposed her own law. She owns nothing and therefore woman does not enjoy the dignity of being a person. She herself became the part of her patrimony of man: first of her father and then her husband. (168)

The hierarchal binary opposition of male/female reinforces patriarchy and sexual privileges to the disadvantage of women. Due to it women are being marginalized since ages. But if gender is understood as socially and culturally defined, then it can be “re-defined” or “re-constructed” as well. As far as women are concerned, the stirrings of a revolution to break the distinctions and diminish the inequality, has started in the Victorian era. The twentieth century, with its feminist movements, brought significant changes in women’s life. The feminist movements have brought an unprecedented upheaval in the status of women. They brought significant transformation in gender relations in the world history. In India also women writers, like their western counterparts, have tried to project gender biases prevalent in our society. Indian women poets and novelist have daringly taken up an assertive stand against many patriarchal discrimination and subjugation of women. They attempt to foreground gender concerns, marginalization of women, voicing women’s subaltern status and women’s perpetual efforts to redefine boundaries of gender constructs.

The twentieth century is the century of woman, the modern woman. Today the woman is confident, assertive, intelligent and economically independent. Now she does not suffer from the dependence syndrome and rejects masculine – hegemony. She is not dependent on any man, whether he is her father or husband or anyone else. Now, with the emergence of educated and modern women, the patriarchal fabric of the society has started thinning out. Women are defying convention and social norms in order to create a better world for her class. Certainly there are many miles to travel before long entrenched patriarchal system can be completely ‘re-defined’, but the road has already been taken up by the modern woman. The modern women are constantly striving to change their lot as ‘marginalized beings’ and are moving towards ‘centre’, deconstructing margin/centre binary. By rejecting patriarchal hegemony they are asserting their independent status, not governed by any oppressive structures. Chhaya Jain also put forth similar views, Women’s oppression and suppression is now being thrown gradually to the margins by the marginalized creatures itself. (171)

So, this paper is a sincere attempt to show the journey of female characters in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* from marginalized position towards centre and in this pursuit their rejection of male-hegemony.

Manju Kapur’s debut novel *Difficult Daughters*, received the Commonwealth Award for the Eurasian region in 1999. *Difficult Daughters* in flashbacks, relates the story of Virmati, the protagonist, born in Amritsar, the daughter of a father of progressive ideas and a traditionalist mother, she aspires to have a freer life than that offered to her by her culture. Her grandfather—a follower of concepts of Dayanand Saraswati, was “publically associated with female

education” (Kapur 57), supported Virmati’s yearning for education. As per pre-independence scenario, Virmati is highly educated, as her brother tells Ida, “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” (5). She is assertive, rebel and strong willed. Her efforts to subvert accepted norms for women of her times, are really praise worthy.

In *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur adroitly shows her women character’s movement from dependence to autonomy, from subjugation to liberation, from restraints to emancipation, and from margins to centre. Throughout the novel we have hints that patriarchal notions try to guide the laws made for women and these are oppressive at the most elementary level, but the educated-modern women somehow managed to over-though patriarchal notions. First of all we have Kasturi, Virmati’s mother, who “became the first girl in her family to postpone the arrival of wedding guests” “and graduated at the age of twelve” (Kapur 62). She has been provided education, very unlikely for girls of her times. In this way she would have a chance to undermine and oppose the patriarchy. But her conditioning from the very beginning is done in a way that education also helps her to become, “one of the finest flowers of Hindu womanhood” (62) nothing more than that. As is narrated in the novel,

Her father, uncle and teacher made sure that this step into modernity was prudent and innocuous. Her head remained modestly bent over her work. No questions, no assertions. She learned reading, writing, balancing household accounts and sewing. (62)

To search the best bridegroom for Kasturi, her uncle flapped the advertisements in the *Arya Patrika* and she is married to Suraj Prakash, who belongs to a respectable and rich *Samaj* family of goldsmiths. Kasturi is educated, beautiful, good at house-hold chores, but all her qualities prove of no avail to her. She is treated as a child rearing and house-keeping machine. It is her husband’s intense carnal desire that derives her to incessant childbearing, which proves hazardous to her health. Seventeen years of relentless childbearing makes her life wretched, but still it’s the impact of the masculine hegemony at the time of her upbringing that she never blames her husband for her pathetic condition. Kasturi’s identity is limited to true womanhood, which “defines women as nurturers and caretakers” (Singh 28). Patriarchal discourse hails a separate religion and caste for women, i.e. the *stridharam* and the *strijati*. Women are made to feel that they are moving towards liberation, towards independence but their conditioning is done in a way that lead them to value timeless feminine symbols of Indian womanhood like Sita and Savitri. Hence, even after getting good education, under the influence of patriarchy Kasturi ends up tugged to conformity and was not able to uproot patriarchy. It is to the credit of Virmati (Kasturi’s eldest daughter) to erode the boundaries of female marginalization even further.

Virmati, right from beginning aspires for a free and independent life where she can take her own decisions. Shakuntala, her cousin, was her initial inspiration, who convinces her that in the changing times, real answers to women’s problems lay ‘outside’ the domains of home, in the active participation for social change. Following Shakuntala’s footsteps Virmati also challenges the traditional family set up where “marriage is the only choice in life” (Kapur 15). From this point onwards Virmati start to re-define the margins set for woman in the traditional believes. She strengthens her passion for higher studies and she struggles hard to get her arranged marriage to a canal engineer postponed and ultimately cancelled so as to successfully pursue her studies. Not only that, she also succeeds in breaking the “bastion of male learning” (45) by joining the Arya Sabha College in Amritsar which “had a ratio of four hundred boys to six girls. Virmati was the seventh” (45). For a girl like Virmati, who had been neck deep in “weary”

household work, and who, being the eldest, had looked after her ten younger brothers and sisters like a “second mother”, this sort of rebellion speaks volumes about her firm determination to define her life outside the traditional barriers of home and marriage set for women by cultural constructs.

It is also important to note that, “the most important transmitter of the patriarchal ideology is the mother and if the daughters have any inclination towards self-discovery or self-assertion, it generally led to confrontation” (Singh 76). Schooled in the traditional image of womanhood, Kasturi saddles Virmati with her own patriarchal beliefs: “It is the duty of every girl to get married . . . what is the need to do a job? A woman’s shaan is at home” (Kapur 13). But Virmati with firm determination has decided to look outside for the education. “She had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over”(15). It is the denial of Virmati for arranged marriage which strained their relation for the whole lifetime. Here her mother is an agent of patriarchy and Virmati’s disapproval to follow her mother’s dictates is symbolic of her rejection of patriarchal hegemony. Virmati’s attempted to break the patriarchal mould and to do that in forties was a great achievement.

Education has always been a tool for social, political and economic changes of any country, especially with regard to change in women’s social position. For Virmati also education is a stepping-stone for alertness, readiness, confidence and independence. Education prompts her to respond to real-life situations and alter her lifestyle according to her own choices. In one of the letter which the Professor wrote to Virmati, he also writes, “One of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves” (Kapur 102). Being educated Virmati also protested against her system and decided not to marry the canal engineer. Pursuing her will she tried to be the sole owner of her life. In her Nahan school principal period she feels “autonomy and freedom” (115) to a great extent. But the Professor here also entangles her by his as usual sugar-coated talk, as, “You are everything to me. All the sons and daughters in the world are nothing next to you”(122). Her marriage to the Professor proves detrimental for her liberation. Though Viramti dared to cross one patriarchal threshold, she was seen caught into another. Virmati’s aspiration for an independent life does not bear full fruit due to the longings of her own heart for the already married professor – Harish. Anuradha Verma also expresses her views in the following words,

The agent of patriarchy is the professor who plays with the emotions of Virmati. The Professor for five years had relation with her, satisfied his lust and didn’t even marry her. He delayed in marriage for on the practical ground he was aware of that his family won’t accept his illicit love. . . It could be argued that the Professor enjoyed the bliss of both the worlds. Ganga was like a maid servant who fulfilled his everyday needs, kept his house tidy and washed his clothes and Virmati satisfied his academic urge which the professor could not seek in his meek wife Ganga. (159)

In Virmati we see the developing New Woman who is conscious, introspective, educated and wants to carve a life for her. She even conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social codes. Yet she lacks self control and farsightedness. She is also sensitively imprisoned with an underlying need, which are emotionally and intellectually dependant on a superior force. She fails to break the ‘dependence syndrome’ and halts on the path to full human status. Trampling patriarchal norms, Virmati challenges community expectation to assert her individuality and hopes to achieve self- fulfillment. But she fails to create a space for herself for which she had been striving all along. She is not fully successful in re-defining the margins and

to some extent remained marginalized. She ends up “being marginalized by her own family and despised by her husband’s”. (Agarwal 145)

In Indian culture, marriage is a sacred institution, where the wife is the half of man, *ardhangni*, but ironically submits completely to the husband for he is *pati parmashwar*, an earthly substitute for God, around whom her whole being revolves. The dignity and destiny of a woman is seen in marriage. As Beauvoir observes, “Marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (Beauvoir 444). It is this patriarchal conditioning which make Ganga so traditional kind that she “was determined not to show anybody” her tears (Kapur 194). For her, her husband who starts referring to her as ‘she’ and never talks to her, is still her God and she never harbours a “thought that did not directly pertain to his well being” (242). In this novel, the man (Harish) has nothing to lose and everything to gain whilst the two women vying for the same man (Harish) have everything to lose starting from love, respect and worst of all happiness. Ganga (Harish’s wife) dumbly suffers the indifference of her husband.

The patriarchal hegemony sets different roles, responsibilities and rules to be followed by man and woman. It is surprising that if a woman makes mistake she has to face harsh consequences even from her own people, while man’s blunders are readily acceptable in the name of ‘man’s need’. Women have to face some sort of banishment if they do something not acceptable for their gender, but men are accepted everywhere with their follies also. In *Difficult Daughters* this bias seems to be at work when cremation of Virmati’s father and grandfather is described in the novel. Virmati has been thrashed by her mother and blamed for her father’s death. She attends neither her father’s nor her grandfather’s funeral ceremony. She is shocked to see that Harish attends the cremation in a freshly starched dhoti and kurta with a white waistcoat and a long white shawl flung around. In words of Binod Mishra, The novelist perhaps has an implicit hint at the way society looks at women’s faults. Virmati is pierced at heart to think how only one fault of hers distanced her from everything. (199)

Virmati once again gets chance to end her marginalization when she is sent to Lahore to pursue M.A. after her miscarriage. As per the cultural taboos women are expected to limit themselves only up to their household responsibilities once they get married. Harish allows Virmati to undermine these taboos by studying after marriage. He wants her to be happy in her life and so he wants her to feel rejuvenated in the world of learning in Lahore.

Coming to Ida, the third generation woman, who grew up struggling to be the model daughter, is more ahead of Virmati in redefining margins set for women. She loves Virmati as a mother, but her head, the rational thinking part of her, rejects her as a woman as she says, “the one thing I wanted was not to be like my mother” (Kapur 1). She rejects her mother as a woman because even after getting a chance to re-define boundaries, Virmati somehow fails. The concluding lines of the novel retell Ida’s rejection of Virmati not as a mother but as a woman, This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore. (Kapur 259)

Through Ida’s admiration for Swarnalata, who enters into a wider sociopolitical sphere, the novelist seems to be saying that a woman can maintain her individuality and pursue her interest without threatening the family structures. Thus a woman should basically strive towards a fine interdependent partnership. But if she feels suffocated, then a voice ought to be raised and there should be a total breaking away, like Ida. Ida has the strength which her mother lacks as she frees herself from the marital bond when she is forced for abortion. Virmati merely transcended societal norms which is not sufficient

It is to the credit of the emancipated women militant like Shakuntala and Swarnalata who appear as the exemplar of the ‘modern’ or liberated women, to re-define margin/centre binaries more profoundly. Shakuntala, is a lecturer in a college at Lahore. She has chosen to remain a spinster to pursue her career and is happy. She does not care for the traditional views where a man who does not want to marry is acceptable, but not women. Her mother seems unhappy with her and is scoffed at by her aunt and others, “What good are Shaku’s degrees when she is not settled? Will they look after her when she is old” (Kapur 21-22), but she hardly cares for all this fuss. Binod Mishra writes for her, “Shakuntala’s wearing ‘a single gold bangle on one arm and a large man’s watch on other, are highly symbolical. She winces at the mention of the word marriage and doesn’t shy around for approval when she speaks or acts” (192). In a way she transcends the traditional barriers set for women, as her mother says angrily, “I tell her she should have been a man”.

Swarnalata is also an emblem “of the educated, politicized and emancipated women” (Agrawal 148). Like Shakuntala, Swarnalata also satiated her quest for identity. Swarnalata is an ultra-committed activist, actively participates in Punjab Women’s Student’s Conference and shines as an orator. She even tries to take Virmati out of her submissive cocoon, Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war – the satyagrah movement – because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream. (Kapur 151)

Swarnalata continues her political activities post marriage also. What is admirable in Swarnalata’s case is the fact that she can build her ideas of independence into her marriage without destroying the structure of the family. Her marriage rests on the condition that it would not hamper her work. Swarnalata and Shakuntala are the two women, who achieve success in transcending their marginal status and becoming central in margin/centre discourse.

Further, Chhotti and Ida have also got new voices in the wake of freedom and oppose the patriarchal taboos with their determination to lead their life independently without being contained by any patriarchal oppressive forces. “Ida’s ire and Chhoti’s celibacy indicate that a revolution is at hand” (Binod Mishra 202). Ida like the meaning of her name, i.e. “a new slate, and a blank beginning” (Kapur 277), stands for ‘a new beginning’ for the emancipated womanhood. This new beginning is attainment of central and dominant position in society, transcending the traditional or marginal one.

In the end we can say that the novel presents an attempt to re-define margins set for women by the patriarchal society. Kasturi starts redefining these margins with her educated status; Virmati went many steps ahead—as she is highly educated and takes her decisions independently, rejecting any external supervision; then there are others like Shakuntala, Swarnalata, Chhoti and Ida, who proves to be a strong opposition to the masculine hegemony. They persistently strive to shift their position from margins to centre. Thus Kapur hints at the shifting position of the dominate power structure. She shows that the marginalized are always in opposition to the dominant. They seek to undermine the established order. The marginalized are shifting towards centre and are becoming dominant. The marginalized are achieving sense of freedom, liberty and emancipation. The centre/margin stratifications are wearing out and re-established by the previously marginalized class. Rejecting the masculine hegemony, women are coming out of the traditional stereotypes of *Sita* or *Savitri*. Now they are attaining a status which is more akin to *Shakti*, self-reliant, independent and liberated.

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