

## EXPLORATION OF THE ‘NEW WOMAN’ IN MANJU KAPUR’S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

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### Abstract

The centrality of the projection of women in Indian narratives has been a common phenomenon. However, this portrayal has undergone a drastic change over the years. Manju Kapur in all her novels delineates the new image of today’s woman. Kapur’s heroines are rebellious and not ready to be tied to the shackles of the patriarchal society. They seek for independence and go through tremendous hurdles in order to attain mastery of their own selves. *Difficult Daughters* (1998), Kapur’s outstanding book, narrates the story of one such rebellious woman, Virmati, who defies the traditions and customs of her family and opts for a life of her own choice.

This paper is an attempt to study Kapur’s views on the changing facets of the image of woman. The study critically focuses on whether Virmati finally blossoms into a ‘new woman’ in the true sense of the term or not. In the process the study employs comparison of Kapur’s heroine to the other women of the novel, women of the older generation as well as her own contemporaries. The paper also focuses on the attitude of the men of the time towards the education for women. Virmati’s progress as a ‘new woman’ is looked at critically from various angles – her relationship to the Professor, her urge for higher education, seriousness towards career, social and political involvement, etc.

The projection of women in Indian narratives has undergone a drastic change over the years. The coy, introvert, seemingly ignorant, domestic woman picture has been transformed to the bold, decision maker, educated and economically independent, and very much in league with the men of the society. This ‘new woman’ is portrayed in the fictional world of most of the contemporary Indian writers. Manju Kapur is one such author who in all her novels has projected this new image of today’s woman. Kapur’s heroines are rebellious and not ready to be tied to the shackles of the patriarchal society. They seek for independence and go through tremendous hurdles in order to attain mastery of their own selves. *Difficult Daughters* (1998), Kapur’s outstanding book, narrates the story of one such rebellious woman, Virmati, who defies the traditions and customs of her family and opts for a life of her own choice. This paper attempts to bring forth Kapur’s views on the changing facets of the image of woman. The study would critically focus on whether Kapur’s heroine finally blossom into a ‘new woman’ in the true sense of the term or not.

Set during the time of Partition, *Difficult Daughters* focuses on the story of Virmati and her journey towards attaining self-identity. Even though it is primarily Virmati’s narrative, Kapur

portrays the story of three generations of women and showcases the difference in their ideas and attitudes towards life. Kapur's women characters in all her novels "are mostly educated, aspiring individual caged within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society becomes intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity." (Azhar & Ali) Virmati is portrayed from the point of view of Ida, her daughter, who marks out her difference with her mother in the very beginning of the book by stating, "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother." (DD, 1) Kapur's portrayal of Virmati can be better comprehended by comparing her with the other women in the novel, of the earlier generation as well as her own. Virmati stands unique in her defying of traditions and acting her mind. Kapur sets her apart from not only her mother and aunt who follow the age old customs and traditions, but also from her own contemporaries.

Kapur sets the space for Virmati to emerge as a 'new woman' by portraying women like Kasturi, her mother and Ganga who belong to a different time all together. Kasturi keeps the family tradition alive and expects her daughters to get married and perform their primary duties of bearing children. Her own life had been spent on continuous child bearing affecting her health. However, her family understood the importance of education for girls and Kasturi remained unmarried beyond the usual prescribed age by societal norms. Differences though abound in her upbringing with that of girls of later generation. Even though her marriage was postponed to facilitate her education, 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 assertion. She learned reading, writing, balancing household accounts and sewing." (DD, 62) Kasturi's mother, made of the same mould, ensured that her daughter is trained properly in order to "please her in-laws." (DD, 62) Kapur gives an elaborate description of Kasturi's training to become an appropriate daughter-in-law highlighting the relative importance of education and household work:

"With all the breads she could make, puris with spicy gram inside, luchis big as plates, kulchas, white and long, tandoori rotis, layers of flaky flour, paranthas, crisp and stuffed. With morrabas, never soggy, and dripping juicy sweet. With seasonal pickles of lemon, mango, carrot, cauliflower, turnip, red chillis, dates, ginger, and raisins....With all these accomplishments under her belt, Kasturi spent her free time sewing. If she wasn't doing the family stitching, she was working on the phulkaris for her trousseau....Her clandestine activity was reading, which she protected from comments about self-absorption by gratifying it at night." (DD, 62-63)

With such kind of training, Kasturi invariably finds her eldest daughter, Virmati, incomprehensible. When Virmati argues and pleads to be allowed to study further, her mother is resolute about the family's decision and yells at her, "At your age I was already expecting you, not fighting with my mother." (DD, 19) For Kasturi, a woman's primary duty is to get married and manage her home. She is unable to comprehend Virmati's urge to study further, thereby, neglecting her marriage. Trying her last attempt to make her daughter see reason, she says, "If you cannot consider your duty to us, at least consider yourself. There is a time in the cycle of life for everything. If you wilfully ignore it like this, what will happen to you? A woman without her own home is a woman without moorings." (DD, 102)

Kapur portrays another important character in the novel, Ganga, the Professor's wife, to highlight the differences with Virmati and the other women who can be termed as belonging to the 'new' league. Unlike Kasturi, Ganga belongs to Virmati's generation and yet lives in the past

traditions and ways of life. Married off as a child, her condition is quite pathetic. She is uneducated and therefore, lacks the respect due to her as a wife and companion by her husband. Ganga is an excellent home maker, but lacks the interest in knowing the outside world. Even though the Professor tries to teach her, she lacks the interest and therefore remains the way she is. In various ways, the Professor justifies his relationship and marriage to Virmati quoting Ganga's illiteracy as the primary reason as he is not able to identify her as a companion.

Kapur's emphasis is however, on the women of the next generation to focus on the way they differ from the older one. These women break the shackles of patriarchal domination and meaningless age-old customs and conventions. They value education and are aware of the social and political upheavals of the country. Foremost in the league is of course Kapur's central protagonist, Virmati. Right from her childhood days, she questions and defies customs which differentiate between the two genders. Being the oldest of eleven siblings, she is thrust with the responsibilities of looking after the younger ones from a very tender age. She plays mother to all of them and in the process cannot even concentrate on her studies. In her family, much importance was not given to her education and having been loaded with domestic responsibilities, very soon lost out on her childhood. Kapur portrays her as an impatient girl but nevertheless, who is tolerant and a hard taskmaster. As Virmati grows up, she is fascinated by her cousin, Shakuntala, who is another manifestation of the 'new woman'. Virmati dreams of becoming one day like her sister, independent, career oriented, and focused in life. Shakuntala is the first masters' degree holder of her family who has left home to establish her career and stays in Lahore all by herself. On Shakuntala's visit back home, Virmati finds her as a role model, as one who is completely in control of her life, and craves to become like her one day. It is due to Shakuntala's influence, in fact, that Virmati decides to go against her family's wishes to be married and starts seeing the dreams of taking studies seriously. Later in Lahore, Virmati comes across Swarnalatha, her room-mate, another larger than life role model for her, who going one step ahead than Virmati's cousin is socially and politically active. She is a part of many women's organizations and works towards "...academic freedom, the war, peace, rural upliftment, mass consciousness, high prices due to the war, the medium of instruction..." (DD, 144) and is in league with many other prominent women voices of the time. She ushers Virmati into a new world hitherto unknown to her and in one of the women's body meetings where Virmati accompanies her, she is astounded to see women speaking a new language, one of freedom, political and social rights, which she had never come across.

Virmati like Shakuntala, Swarnalatha and many such women of her times prefers to take the road less travelled and is thus, labelled as a rebel by her family. Not only she values education more than a domestic life, but also breaks off her engagement. She goes to Lahore for higher studies and joins the league of women like Shakuntala who cross the boundaries of their hometown in search of an identity of their own. In addition to higher education, Virmati also listens to her mind in the quest of love and marriage. Her love affair with the Professor, a married man and father, is not only forbidden by the strictures of her family and society but also leaves her an outcast. She is rebuked, beaten up and locked in the basement by her family. Discussing the social environment for women's education during that time, Manju Kapur in an interview says, "The Arya Samaj concept of female education was big in Punjab. Virmati, deviating from tradition and falling in love, was not just about the family getting a bad name. The Samaj would get a bad name, education for girls would get a bad name and so in their eyes her crime was doubly unforgivable." (The Commonwealth Review) The relationship of Virmati and the Professor, considered an illicit one, does not receive any social, legal or moral sanction.

Nevertheless, Virmati chooses to break from all man-made shackles and remains steadfast in her relationship with the Professor. However, a relationship like theirs has its own pitfall and Virmati has to undergo all the trials and tribulations of an abortion, loses all touch with her family, and remains an outcast in the Professor's house even after their marriage. Her brief stint as the Principal of a girls' school also comes to an end because of her relationship with the Professor. An understanding of Kapur's portrayal of men vis-à-vis the women becomes necessary to explore her idea of the 'new woman'. The men in Virmati's family, her father and grandfather, are definitely ahead of their times. They value education for girls and are more or less tolerant about women's progress. Virmati receives the support of her grandfather as well as her father when it comes to her education and later on her career. Virmati's mother too was fortunate to get the support of her father and uncle who valued her education and therefore, postponed her marriage. Kapur appropriately hints at the influence of various social reform movements and the teachings of reformists like Swami Dayananda Saraswati during the pre independence time on girls' education which had obvious influence on many. The environment of girls' schools and the system of education was also dictated mostly by the teachings of the reformists. Thus Kasturi's education is described as fit for her with a "...the school ground the rituals of Arya Samaj havan, sandhya and meditation so deeply within her that the rest of her life she had to start and end the day with them." (DD, 62)

This earnestness for girls' education is seen in the Professor too who looks at Virmati as an ideal life partner because of her knowledge and similar tastes. He takes it upon himself to fill her mind with news of the outer world. His letters to Virmati are not mere epistles propounding his love towards her, but contain informed communication about happenings in the nation and outside. Thus one letter states, "After ten weeks of war, Britain remains strong, at least according to Churchill, and they might be successful in convincing Germany about a cease-fire. I hope this time peace will emerge as a result of these efforts." (DD, 97); another one informs Virmati of the war thus, "Moral polarities become more evident to all, from Gandhi to Malik. How can the British claim to be sincere about defending democracy when they refuse to give up their control over India....Malik, our economist, remarked yesterday that whether we turned our backs on Britain or not, we were going to end up financing this war, in one way or the other." (DD, 98-99) These extracts from the Professor's letters show his craving for a life partner who can equate his sensibility and therefore, he looks at Virmati more as a companion than just a lover or a wife. He tries a lot to teach the uneducated Ganga but her disinterestedness and lack of ability do not bear any fruit. He reveals to Virmati his true feelings for his first marriage:

"Then Vir, consider, what is it that takes me away from the woman I live with? Apart from the planets in the house of marriage, of course! She is a good woman, runs the house to perfection, looks after my family as though they were her own. Despite all this, I am lonely, lonely, lonely. We have nothing in common. I once wanted to share my interests with my wife, felt her pain at my estrangement from her. But she will not change. Will not – cannot – I do not know." (DD, 103)

His idea of companionship abounds in the book in many such instances where he keeps Virmati occupied by giving her an article or a poem to analyze in his absence and discussing with her on his return back home. When his friend comes to visit them after his marriage to Virmati, he takes immense pride in showcasing her talents to participate in the discussions on poetry and such topics usually reserved for men. However, Kapur also highlights the duality in Professor's character in terms of his idea on women's education. Virmati's training leads her to

become more of a follower in awe of her husband rather a companion. She makes earnest efforts to read the intellectual stuff her husband provides her with, but more as compulsion to make him happy rather than her own interest. Later on, it is the Professor who chooses her subject for a master's degree rather than leaving it to her own free will, and it is seen that Virmati neither takes an interest in Philosophy nor develops a liking for the subject.

An analysis of Kapur's portrayal of Virmati as a 'new woman' brings into light her rebelliousness to follow her mind and break the shackles of the norms of the society. However, in labelling her as a representative of the category of 'new woman' poses a problem in certain instances when her actions prove to be merely towards the goal of being the Professor's wife rather than attaining an identity of her own. Her insistence for higher education is more for whiling away time as she awaits her lover to propose marriage rather than an inclination for a prospective career. While in Lahore and in the company of Swarnalatha and many prominent women, she realizes "...I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent being in love." (DD, 142) When she opens her heart to Swarnalata, revealing the secret of her illicit relationship with the Professor, her friend advises 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....We are lucky we're 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 satyagraha as well." (DD,151, 152) Virmati understands the importance of Swarnalata's words, her prolific ideas, but at the same time knows that she is not cut out for such things. She had been a rebel at home, but that was again dedicated towards one particular goal and when her family insists on her marriage to the boy of their choice, she attempts suicide. Even a career is not what she craves for; when she gets the chance of working in Pratibha Kanya Vidyalaya as the Principal, a rare situation for a woman of her times, she hardly takes it seriously and instead spends her time craving and pining for the Professor.

Thus, Kapur's portrayal of Virmati has many shades and her identity as a 'new woman' is debatable. No doubt, she is rebellious, and acts her mind, but at the same time she succumbs to the patronising of the Professor. Virmati may be regarded as the 'New Woman' "who is conscious, introspective, educated, wants to carve a life for herself, to some extent she even conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social codes yet she lacks confidence, self control, farsightedness and is physically imprisoned with an underlying need to be emotionally and intellectually dependent on a superior force." (Nahal) Thus, she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, but is caught in the mire of another where her free spirit and dignity is curbed leaving her no choice other than to compromise and adjust.

### Notes:

1. Azhar, Sheeba & Syed Abid Ali. "Portrayal of Indian Middle Class Women in Manju Kapur's Novels: Aspirations and Realities." *Lapis Lazuli – An International Literary Journal*. Vol II, Issue I, Spring 2012, ISSN: 2249 4529. <http://www.pintersociety.com>
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4. Nahal, Chaman. "Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and Variations" in Singh, Sushila (ed) *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991.