

**QUEST FOR IDENTITY IN MANJU KAPUR'S
*DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS***

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The question of identity has unexpectedly become a care point in the context of Indian English literature because an urge for identity has been a perennial force in a woman's successful existence. A woman's identity in Indian society has never been the primary concern due to the boundaries of culture. Though the circumstances and the perceptions are changing gradually and the educated section of society does acknowledge the change, yet women have much to do to establish an identity of their own. Tagore in his essay 'Woman and Home' has written:

Creative expressions attain their perfect form through emotions modulated. Woman has that expression natural to her a cadence of restraint in her behavior, producing poetry of life. She has been an inspiration to man, guiding, most often unconsciously, his restless energy into an immense variety of creations in literature, art, music and religion.
(87)

Women have been largely perceived as loving, caring, gentle, dependent and submissive. In family she is considered subsidiary to man. She is the mother of man, who afterwards rules over her. Manu, the first lawgiver of the world advocated in *Manu Smriti* that, "Day and night woman must be kept in dependence by the males of their families. The father protects her in childhood, husband protects her in youth and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence" (Vashista, 2-3).

Manju Kapur is one such writer who has joined the growing number of women writers from India. She is a widely traveled person. She is a professor of English Literature at Miranda House in Delhi. She wrote her first novel *Difficult Daughters* and received the Commonwealth Award. She wrote *Difficult Daughters* at the time of Independence struggle and is partially based on the life of Kapur's own mother. This novel was published in 1998. Her second novel *A Married Woman* was published in 2002. Her third novel *Home* was published in 2006 and her fourth novel *The Immigrant* was published in 2008. Her latest novel *Custody* got published in 2011. Manju Kapur is married to Crun Nidhi Dalmia.

A study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* reflects her close association with establishing a woman's identity. Manju Kapur presents a vision of life that is based on the contemporary reality. Her portrayal of characters is in accordance with the situation. Her novels illustrate various situations faced by women in and against the family as well as contemporary tradition. Her novels acquire a significant new meaning when read from the point of view of crisscross dogmas of cultural critical thinking. She is aware of the fact that Indian women have achieved success in sixty years of independence but if there is to be a true female independence

too much remains to be done because after independence of nation women did not achieve their freedom.

The novel is a story of a young girl named Virmati who is torn between her familial duties. Illicit love, a desire for education and her quest for identity establish the theme of this work. She was a rebellious girl given by the circumstances of her family. In the novel, we find a parallel comparison between Virmati's struggle for independence and India's struggle for independence. The two incidents are co-related. Virmati goes on suffering and struggling right from her childhood. But at the age of twelve she had to discontinue her education and learn household management until she gets married at the age of seventeen. She wanted to get herself liberated from the family bondage.

Virmati's mother Kasturi was brought up in a society where marriage was the final destination of a woman and marriage implied that a girl had to work for the happiness of her in-laws. Virmati says that her family wanted nothing from her but only an agreement to marry. When Virmati told her mother Kasturi that she would like to go to Lahore for higher education Kasturi objected to her daughter's decision and said that at her age girls usually get married. But Virmati desperately sought an escape from her meaningless life and thought that only higher education could enable her to become free from these restrictions. She adopts an independent life like that of Shakuntala.

Virmati nurses a desire of being as independent, defiant and assertive as her cousin Shakuntala and even Swarnalata, her roommate in Lahore who has also been portrayed as an awakened woman, who understands herself and lives her life in a very strong manner. Both struggle for independence and for equal rights of women. Virmati's cousin Shakuntala challenges the established norms with her independent views on marriage and education. For Shakuntala, the freedom of woman is synonymous with the freedom of India, "Here we are fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry and nothing else" (17). Virmati begins to think that her happiness lies outside the house.

Another source of motivation for Virmati is Swarnalata. She is an ultra committed feminist. She takes Virmati to a meeting of Punjab women student's conference where '...heavy applause broke out as Swarna finished speaking' (145). Her illicit relationship with Harish is also questioned by Swarnalata. Swarnalata makes an attempt to make her realize how she is wasting her life in this relationship. Swarnalata says, "Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war, the Satyagraha movement because of all these things women are coming out of their houses taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream" (139).

Though Virmati tries to justify her relationship with the professor under the guise of intellectual compatibility but as a matter of fact it is physical lust only. A hunk of turmoil follows after Virmat's denial for the nuptial relation arranged by her parents, her unsuccessful attempt to commit suicide, her survival and afterwards her being caged and ultimately her migration to Lahore for further education. The circumstances make her strong enough to overthrow the ongoing traditions of the so called 'society' to which she belongs. It implies that a woman has no free will and the idea of choosing her life partner is out of question.

She loses her stance and becomes insignificant, engulfed in the Partition tragedy. It is only after Virmati's death that her daughter, Ida, regards her as a lone figure who had been a sinner by trying to become an independent woman. Even her last wish is a witness of her unconventional thinking, discarding the funeral rites and rituals. Here also she becomes one of her own type. Ida conveys her mother's desire in the following words:

I stared again at my mother's ashes and wondered what memorial I could give her. She, who had not wanted to be mourned in anyway. When I die, she said to me, I want my body donated. My eyes, my heart, my kidneys, any organ that can be of use. That way someone will value me after I have gone. I glared at her, as pain began to gnaw at me. And she went on, when I die I want no shor shaar, I don't wan't a chauth. I don't want an uthala, I want no one called, no one informed. (1)

The novel illustrates that Virmati is just a representation of so many Indian women. Gur Pyari Jandial correctly observes, "It is a mistake to devalue Virmati's struggle just because she failed, for what mattered was to have made the attempt, to break the patriarchal mould, and for Virmati to have tried to do that in the forties was a great achievement" (47).

A parallel example can be discussed of Sarita, the female protagonist of Shashi Deshpande's *Dark Holds No Terrors* (1980) where Sarita, like Virmati goes her own way, binding herself in an inter-caste marriage against her parents' wishes but ultimately meeting the same misfortune as that of Virmati, a frustrated and shattered marriage. Sarita's revelation or her confession shows her surrender, "It seems to her some where a vengeful ghost breathed a sigh of satisfaction...There was only the relief that comes from surrender. Not to pretend any more, not to struggle - it brought nothing but solace" (198).

In a lucid way, it can be said that Virmati's expedition in search for her identity is a spiritual odyssey of the modern being who has drifted apart from her society. It would not be an exaggeration if we label *Difficult Daughters* as a novel about woman's exploration of her rights, her desires, her love, her rights to have a choice and a voice, a voice which could be suffocated under the burden of outdated customs and traditions. Virmati rebelled against the system and was cast as 'difficult' but she was daring enough to stand for what she believed in, whether right or wrong. She was of the view that nothing should be imposed upon her and she should be left free to choose. But, ironically, the society in which she lives, does not allow her this. She is instructed at every step. She is provided guidelines for becoming a perfect daughter, sister or wife. But what she is never told is to be her real self. Naturally she becomes a rebel. She wants to breathe freely, to follow the path she has chosen for herself and to fulfill her dreams and acquire happiness. Briefly to become what she wants to be irrespective of failure or success. It is a novel of a woman's pining for independence which remains unattained.

Works Cited

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