

The Dispute and Sensitive Atmosphere in *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract:

*Daughters suffer in silence but are not able to share their private sorrows with their mothers the absence of lack of mother's sympathetic shoulders at home forces these daughters to look for sympathy outside which leads to deception. Daughters become vulnerable to outside influences. The sense of belonging that is the essence of a good relationship is found sadly missing from this relationship which is most vital in the life of a woman. *Difficult Daughters* is the first novel of Manju Kapur. As Manju Kapur says: "That I rewrote the book eight times over seven years. And each time I thought I had finished the book" (106). Urvashi Butalia of *Kali for Women* was struck by the simplicity of Manju Kapur's writing style: "There is no gimmickry in the language, as we see in some other books" (106). The novelist Mukul Kesavan comments *Difficult Daughters* as: "a first rate realistic novel about a daughter's reconstruction of her troubled past, hinging on her mother's story"*

Keywords: Relationship, Dispute, Sufferings.

1. INTRODUCTION

The novel has certain autobiographical touches. Like *Virmati* Manju Kapoor teaches in a college. She had a traditional upbringing and her mother's priority for her daughter was marriage. Manju Kapoor has observed: "Conflict between daughter and mother is inevitable, and I suppose I was a difficult daughter" (107). The conflict carries on through generations because mothers want their daughters to be safe. We want them to make the right choices - „right“ in the sense that they are socially acceptable. My mother wanted me to be happily married; I want my daughters to have good jobs" (107). Her parents were well placed Arya Samajis, like *Virmati* relations. Her father, like *Virmati* husband, was a professor before he became a bureaucrat. *Ida*, the narrator is distanced from her mother *Virmati* in time and space.

Virmati remains a vibrating presence all through *Ida*'s life. The void in *Ida*'s life after her mother's funeral becomes more pronounced and unbearable. Nevertheless, the unconscious affiliation with the absent mother propels her to a relentless quest which is initially a mental search: "To be totally innocent . . . would be utterly unknown, particularly to one's self" (1).

So *Ida* determined to unveil her mother's past, experiences the "excitement of discovery" (258), which finally culminates in establishing a strong bond between the narrator and the mother with "each word a brick in a mansion" (259). Having accomplished this task, she seeks to be liberated and pleads earnestly to her dead mother: "Do not haunt me anymore" (259). *Ida* determined to unravel the truth about her mother, goes to Amritsar, a place associated with her mother and feels quite lost without

her. Virmati, the eldest of eleven children, didn't know what it was to be a child for she was always busy with work. But she was so keen to study. She studied F.A., B.A. then B.T. and M.A. in Lahore. Virmati watches her weak, ailing mother harassed by child birth and yet tolerant. The unmarried Shakuntala, her first cousin, appear to be Virmati ideal and Virmati soon realized that answer to her unhappiness lay outside the house: "To education, freedom and the bright lights of Lahore Colleges"(15).

The family disputes led to arrangement of separate establishments by Lala Diwan Chand and "What he thought was a final solution, however turned out to be the beginning of a long chain of partitions"(25). Virmati grandfather is a noted land- owner who strongly emphasizes on the education of women. His sons run a successful jewellery business. Virmati family considers her eligible for marriage as she is proficient in stitching, cooking and reading. The life of her mother and her education sow the seeds of her urge to break free from the patriarchal set up that denies her freedom and choice. She is engaged to Indrajit but the marriage is postponed due to the demise of his father. (Vasanthy and Jeganathan 2007, Vasanthy et.al., 2008, Raajasubramanian et.al., 2011, Jeganathan et.al., 2012, 2014, 2020 & 2021, Sridhar et.al., 2012, Gunaselvi et.al., 2014 & 2020, Premalatha et.al., 2015, Seshadri et.al., 2015, Shakila et.al., 2015, Ashok et.al., 2016, Satheesh Kumar et.al., 2016 & 2019).

2. WOMEN'S SUFFERINGS

Professor Harish Chandra at Arya Sabha College came to be her aunt's tenant. She joins college and she falls in love with him. The professor has an illiterate docile wife, a daughter and lives with his mother and daughter. The professor finds an intellectual companion, in Virmati and Virmati need for self-affirmation is aggravated by the Professor's love for her. Though she was already engaged, her inbuilt response to a person's need from a very tender age broke down her reserves when the professor cried out his need for her: "Eldest and a girl, she was finally turned to neediness, it called to her blood and bones"(50).

The professor continued to pressurize her to do away with her fiancée and Virmati torn between duty and love along with a strong desire for education continued to be agonized. The dryness of a canal engineer's letter, in comparison to the warmth of the professor's letter gave her strength to seek permission to study further, for she claimed that she was not really ready for "initiation into womanhood, intimacy, procreation"(60). Her mother wondered as to how her sensible dutiful daughter had "changed so much in just a generation" (55). The incessant talk of her marriage in the house and knowing full well that "She could not depend upon the professor to sort out any domestic situation"(63). She decided to go to Tarsikka, to her Bade Baoji, Lala Diwan Chand and drown herself in the canal, but she is rescued. Indumati, her younger sister, is married off to Indrajit and Virmati is shut up in a storehouse. Virmati and the Professor exchange love letters through the youngest sister, Paro. Kasturi tries hard to make her daughters succumb to the wishes of the family, but in vain. Virmati decides to go to Lahore to study further, after learning that the Professor's wife is pregnant. His justifications appear futile and weak: "and in this moment of weakness it seemed I could not in all conscience ignore the claims of those around me" (97). The "autonomy and freedom" (125), the place provided helped her to overcome the pain and the illusion of love. The sisterly bond established between Shakuntala and Virmati, placed in a more or less same situation afforded solace despite the concept of the traditional family: "A woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings"(102).

The Professor's persistence and his friend Syed Hussain's help and encouragement finally enabled the Professor to get Virmati around. He dinned it into her: "Co-wives are part of our social traditions . . . I don't live without her in any meaningful way" (112). She decided that

finally her studies would be “her passport to Independence” (140), but fate had it otherwise. She was pregnant. Virmati story is ironically juxtaposed with the national struggle on the large front: “Strikes, academic freedom, thewar, peace, rural upliftment. Virmati was able to revive the courage that she possessed in doing away her unwanted pregnancy by herself in absence of Harish. SwarnaLatha was the sturdy pillar in that hour of need. She achieved independence by paying a heavy price along with the realization that now she could endure any pain for none could be greater than the one her body underwent “through knives and abortion” (161). B.T. had made Virmati “anxious to broaden her horizons” (167) and she took Principal ship at Nahan. But the Professor has not allowed her at peace. After his visit she loses her job. She decides to go to Shantiniketan. She perceived that “there was a life of dedication and service ahead of her, and in that she would forge her identity” (182). Fate had it otherwise. Now it was Harish to face the dilemma and agony of being torn between his family duty and illicit craving for Virmati. No escape, so he married her, breaking the last thin tie with her own family. In face of all hostility at her in laws, she moved with a determination on the path of her destiny and carved out for her. She wonders whether this isolation would continue till the end of her life. Virmati trying to establish “the domain of her kingdom” (213) beside her husband, felt strangely “isolated from women” (211) since her marriage.

Virmati is not accepted by Harish’s mother and his first wife Ganga. She tries to be friendly with children but is insulted. She loses all sense of identity. The continuation of her education feeds no more dreams of independence. The highly educated and economically independent Virmati fights social ostracism outside her house and struggles with Ganga to perform the household chores. The professor asks her not to bother about other things and asks her to read more. He seems to enjoy both the worlds: Ganga as a servant who fulfills his mundane needs and Virmati as an intellectual comparison. Virmati again pregnant but this time she loses her child. She feels that God is punishing her for her sins. Her father is killed in riots but she is not allowed to go near his dead body and weep. Interestingly, the Professor is accepted and allowed to attend the last rites. Kasturi accuses her of disgracing the family and being the cause of her father’s death. Virmati is shattered at the pain and decides to go to Lahore to do an M.A. Probably once again education was a means to revitalize her: “May be this was really what she had fought for all along: space to be” (253).

After completing her post graduation, she comes back and finds that the rest of the family has been sent to Kanpur due to the riots. Virmati enjoys the bliss of being alone with her husband and so, Ida, the narrator is born. Despite defying the family and the traditions, Virmati ends up in becoming another who insists her daughter to adjust and compromise. She tries hard to keep her daughter in control, but to no avail. Virmati wants her daughter to be settled peacefully in marriage. But Ida’s marriage is unsuccessful and the narrator is left without husband and child: “engulfed in melancholy, depression and despair” (258).

Thus, as a young child, both crave for their mothers love but when it seems impossibility, their yearning for it dies down. Thus, maternal alienation leads to strong changes in the lives of daughters. Identity crisis is considered a preposterous concept for women. A daughter’s quest for identity begins with her identification with her mother. Daughter’s search for self-realization is through their mothers. Ida in *Difficult Daughters* begins a journey into the history of her mother with a purpose to discover herself. What started as alienation ends up in complete identification? But not all daughters are as fortunate as Ida. Virmati herself could never belong to her mother. Her pleasures, her pains, her pathetic life as a mistress and then a second wife, all remained her private sorrows. She could never share them with her mother. Kasturi never attempts to understand her. There seems a barrier between them which Virmati fails to pull down. Ida tells the readers: “From time to time, Virmati glanced furtively as her

mother and the wall she encountered forbade her from making the attentive gestures that might make the journey bearable for both” (102). So many promising lives go down the drain due to maternal apathy. Virmati would not be a victim to a much married man like Harish. Authoritative and Autocratic attitude of the mother may influence the very personality of daughters as in case of Uma and it may make a pseudo-rebel out of anotherwise disciplined and motivated daughter as in the case of Virmati. Alka Singh in an article “Exploring Possibilities beyond Traditions, Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*” says: “Virmati’s journey is in three stages, the first when she deserts her family, religions and political authorities who appear as captors. The Freedom and unlimited possibilities drive her to the powerful figure of her educator. She thus awakens in a world of experience achieve wholeness and autonomy. She then makes the final journey back home to be united with the family and discovers that it is the mother with whom she wishes to be rejoined” (138). Sumita Pal in an article “The Mother-Daughter conflict in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*” says: “*Difficult Daughters* is set around the time of partition but does not directly deal with partition and its trauma. It is a love story of Virmati, who in her own struggle for Independence creates lives of partition around her” (134) she had been a difficult daughter for her mother, her daughter turns out to be a difficult one for her too. This novel is a powerful tale of self-affirmation, man-woman relationship, family ties and above all the universal mother-daughter conflict. R.K. Dhawan in an article “Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*: A Saga of Conflict and Crisis” says: “A number of novels were written on the theme of partition, the destruction it brought and the flight of the refugees. They faithfully record the reign of violence that characterized the period and provide a sad, telling commentary on the breakdown of human values. A strain of despair and disillusionment is predominant in these novels” (14). The novelist herself asserts: “Conflict between daughters and mothers is inevitable and I suppose I was a difficult daughter. The conflict carries through generations because mothers want their daughters to be safe?” (107).

Vandita Mishra rightly argues, “Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion of power of freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones. Her relationship with the Professor, for instance, while it does provide an escape from a loveless arranged marriage is itself furtive and claustrophobic, offering only a stolen togetherness behind curtained windows. Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow. She hovers uncertainly at the edge of each new world, never entering, best the professor should call and not find her near. Eventually, marriage to the man of her choice is no triumph either. As second wife, she must fight social ostracism outside the house, and compete for the kitchen and conjugal bed with Ganga, the first wife, inside it” (The Pioneer, New Delhi, 1 August 1998).

The tapestry of the novel is structured around the dooms day of partition but it does not explicate the tragedy of it. Magically the novel purports a romantic story of Virmati but the heroine herself creates a scene of partition. In the chain growth of events and eventualities Virmati becomes the difficult daughter for her mother as well as Ida for her. In its stylistic devices the novel is straight-forward, starting and evocative of Virmati’s pains, puzzling and torn personality. The uses of Punjabi idioms and phrases manifest the linguistic color and contour of the novel and make it a wonderful work of art. It is rightly examined by Gajendra Kumar that, “Indo-English is developing a distinct character and identity as distinct as American English, British English, Australian English Style. It generally depends upon the writer’s settled conviction of the single, unambiguous nature of his materials and of the novel’s adequacy as a vehicle for their serious presentment (4). It is a troublesome task to analyze and estimate the relationship between Virmati and the Professor, whichever, has been passionate yet misleading and mismatching. Whenever

Virmati gets herself in emotional crisis the psychotherapy of the professor meted out to her is not titillating. In his love letter to Virmati the professor does not think of necessary to mention Ganga and her pregnancy. Infact, Virmati visits to Lahore and Nahan have been sensitized and scandalized by a trip of the Professor. Virmati academic temperament goes in oblivion before the intellectual height of the professor. The professor neither visualizes the sociological fact nor emotional intensity of Virmati. Helack correlation in the game of love and everyday life. Virmati like Manishain Anita Desai's "The Voices in the City" (2005) raises million dollar question through her endurance, passive suffering and suicidal attempt. Woman's voice against injustice and in equality tends to unravel the fact that feminism is the consequence of the culture or society shaped and governed by men to suit their needs and interests regardless of women's basic needs and happiness. In this man made society everything is meant for the pleasure and profit of male sexuality. (Manikandan et.al., 2016, Sethuraman et.al., 2016, Senthil Thambi et.al., 2016, Ashok et.al., 2018, Senthilkumar et.al., 2018, Sundar and Jeganathan 2019 & 2020, Anandan et.al., 2019, Murugavel et.al., 2019, Arokiaswamy et.al., 2019 & 2020, Ganesh Babu et.al., 2020, Gomathi et.al., 2019 & 2020, Manju et.al., 2020, Leema Rose et.al., 2020).

3. CONCLUSION

This novel is mainly about putting the ghosts to rest. The sentences at the very end are: "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word is a brick in a mansion - I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama and leave me. Do not haunt me anymore (259). Thus, if it is not only about difficult daughters, but also about difficult mothers. About mothers who do not understand their daughters, about daughters who want to break out into new paths. It starts very well and is quite gripping at the beginning: a daughter going on a quest to understand her mother, after the mother has died. This book also comes out very negatively about Indian male. Perhaps there is no book where the Indian male earns any respect. It is also not very flattering about what happens to young Indian girls when they are allowed some „freedom“. Any parent, who believes what is written in the book, would lock up daughters again, because it is better not to give the daughters any freedom because it will be so grossly misused. The glaring and most interesting thing about the book is the unresolved dichotomy about the character of Virmati. On one hand, she is very weak, because she just cannot kick the Professor out of her life. The reason for this behavior is not love, but the lack of love. The Novelist scrutinizes pertinent and persuasive subjects like self affirmation, man woman relationship and family feud and above all the mother daughter conflict and contradiction. The novel without any literary snobbery deals with a daughters reorganization of her fractured and fragmented part hinging on her mother's story. The writer has all the fact and finesse of the great classical masters like Dickens, Jane Austen and Emily Bronte in creating and producing officious result. So ultimately we can conclude that daughters are difficult only when life becomes difficult for them. The writer's sensitivity is reflected even in the other issues that she dresses.

Whether or not a girl has the right to make her own choices in life is an issue dragged this way and that, for a long time in our country. Facing equal assault from the chauvinists who declare that woman's place is inside the house, and the feminists who condemn the idea of taking the husbands surname after marriage, the idea finds a middle path here. There is after all a difference between possessing and protecting. The book deals with the idea of education for a girl for her sake, not just to enable her to have a suitable match.

Difficult Daughters is the story of a freedom struggle. While India fights for freedom from the British Raj, Virmati fights for the freedom to live life on her terms. Like so many other Indian girls, she wants to decide what to study and where, whom to marry and when. In

the end, it appears that she might have achieved all that but it ceases to be important. For in the throes of the struggle, she loses apart of herself. She is torn in two halves, one of which is the side she is fighting against. When India attains freedom. But at the cost of partition at the cost of losing half of its soul. At the cost of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives, lost in the fire of communal hatred. India's hollow victory is mirrored in Virmati. In all this the professor wields considerable influence, although in a catalytic sort of way. Just as British did in the tragedy of Partition. Today things might have changed, but how much really? Even today, thousands of girls sit within the four walls of their houses and wonder why they do not have the right to choose their own lives, decide for themselves whether they want to be homemakers or more. Marriage is still the reason for their birth. Freedom is more than just being aloud out for a pizza with friends. Let us not fool ourselves. We haven't really obtained political freedom either. If it were so, there would be no Jam Masjid, no Godhra. What is freedom but a state of mind? We may have our land to ourselves but our minds are still locked up in the confines of colonial British India.

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