

TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY IN MANJU KAPUR'S DEBUT NOVEL, DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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ABSTRACT

This research paper attempts to explore the novel *Difficult Daughters* of Manju Kapur published in 1998, which fetched her Commonwealth Prize in Eurasia Section, with the view to study tradition versus modernity. Further the research shows how Manju Kapur depicts the clash between tradition and modernity in her works through her characters and how her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* discloses life of Indian middle class women who fight for their basic rights for education, search for identity and survival. The novel opens with the honest speech of the narrator, Virmati's daughter Ida, a childless divorcee, who undertakes a journey to know her mother's past. The name Ida implies a new state of consciousness, a fresh beginning. Through Ida's conscious decision to be different from her mother we are introduced to the question of defiance and generation gap. Every new generation seeks to defy its predecessor, and fight against the anxiety of influence, Virmati challenged Kasturi's ideology, Ida could not accept Virmati's. Although Virmati's case may be representative up to a point yet she could not live up to it fully. It is true that she represents the spirit of "New Woman". The story begins with Ida's narration about her mother Virmati who has passed away. Ida recalls her mother's sayings what she had said before her death that there should not be any shor-shaar and her eyes, heart, kidneys and other useful organs should be donated. But here Ida observes all rituals contrary to her mother wish. So, in the beginning of the novel we see conflict of tradition and modernity. Later we see Ida's relatives at her birth place welcomes her and she tries fully to know every aspect of her mother's life. Now relatives disclose about the life of Virmati and highlight even the minutest things about her. Virmati, a young woman born in Amritsar into an austere Punjabi family. The family comprises of Lala Diwan Chand who has two sons Suraj Prakash and Chander Prakash. Suraj is married to Kasturi and Chander Prakash is married to Lajwanti. Basically the story is of three generations- Kasturi (the mother of Virmati), Virmati (the main protagonist), and Ida (the daughter of Virmati). The third generation is the protagonist of the novel. So, present research work seeks to study the concerns of Indian middle class women trapped between tradition and modernity. All the protagonists of Manju Kapur's novels namely, Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, Astha in *A Married Woman*, Nisha in *Home*, Nina in *the Immigrant* and Shagun in *Custody* revolt against tradition and seek to fulfill their desire of freedom following modernity.

Keywords: Tradition versus Modernity, Education, New Woman, Conflict, Protagonist, Freedom.

INTRODUCTION

The women's question nowadays is no longer an issue confined to the position of women within the family or their rights to equality with men in diverse aspects of social life. It is a part of the total, far broader question regarding the course of the change that our society is taking – social, economic, political and the intellectual perception and the study of that process. It is in this milieu that the role of women is discussed in the novel *Difficult Daughters*. Manju Kapur presents women's liberation and striving for some space in such a way that we read not only just with our eyes but also with our heart. The novel starts with death and continues through a journey of a series of painful episodes transcending through three generations of 'Difficult Daughters' to end in loss and despair. It is almost an "inheritance of loss". Every situation in the novel is viewed from personal, social and historical angles depicting different feminine faces. Spanning over three generations Kasturi (the mother of Virmati), Virmati (the main protagonist), and Ida (the daughter of Virmati); the narrative weaves an inextricable interdependence of fates. Kasturi accept her traditional roles and surrenders to the social norms, whereas Virmati displays assertiveness and is torn by the consequent conflict in her quest for identity. However, Ida, having the benefit of rebellious precedence emerges as an independent and a freethinking woman in tune with the times yet fails to understand and appreciate her own mother's actions and compulsions. The present lines from novel shows the inner planning of Virmati.

'Maybe I will also one day come to Lahore, Pehnji', she wept. 'I wish I too could do things, But I am not clever' – 'Arre,' exclaimed her cousin patting her on the back, 'times are changing and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?' Why not, indeed, thought Virmati looking at her, almost breathless with admiration and love' (Kapur 1998: 18).

Virmati decides to become like her cousin. Virmati's mother Kasturi was brought up upon the conventional doctrines of patriarchal society where marriage was the final destiny of a girl's life and marriage implied that a girl had to work diligently to make happy her in-laws.

During Kasturi's formal schooling it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued in the home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by impeccable nature of her daughter's qualifications. She was going to please her in-laws (Kapur 1998: 62).

Commenting on her parental prospect, Virmati remarked, "They want nothing from me but an agreement to marry" (Kapur 1998: 100).

The women were forced to think of nothing else and it seemed to Virmati that her family could talk of nothing but her marriage. They had no knowledge about her inner life and her mental restlessness but unlike other repressive patriarchal families her father was more liberated in his attitude and thinking. She rejected the groom chosen by her family and attempted suicide. Her sister was married off to the groom instead of her. Virmati expressed her wish to pursue higher studies and go after the lines of her cousin Shakuntala.

My parents are unwilling to send me to Lahore to study further, but when a girl has been educated so far, it is foolish to not pursue the subject, and I am so far determined that nothing should stop me (Kapur 1998: 121).

For Virmati, education signified an escape from the reproaches of her family and liberty from her mother's control. Virmati and Shakuntala, the so called difficult daughters of the family, signify the evolving awareness of the modern Indian woman. Here we see Manju Kapur takes into account the complicity of life, diverse histories, cultures and different structures of values in her plots. Her women under the patriarchal force and control are subjected to physical torment and social ostracism. They are more discriminated and are biased in lieu of their sex. As discussed above whether it is legal, socio-political or economic matter, women are the ones who suffered in the hands of patriarchy. Patriarchal system never allows women to expand their prospect. It is always the women who are asked to cut their wishes to fit into the frame designed by men. Legally females are suppressed because patriarchal system termed them as gentler sex or weaker sex, and incompetent of taking decision. Further, they need the protection from men to live on the earth. Socially, they are suppressed because in their childhood their backbone is overloaded with numerous orders. They are trained to live in the system framed by men in order to please them. Economically, they are suppressed because they are never allowed to live independently. But Kapur's heroines do not want to be rubber dolls in society rather they continuously struggle to assert their identity. The main points investigated by Kapur here are education, marriage and polygamy. In *Difficult Daughters*, there are two kinds of women traditional women like Kasturi, Ganga and Kishori Devi, the 'New Women' like Shakuntala, Swaranlata and Ida. The traditional women described in the novel are covered by the clouds of unawareness, but the New Women are enlightened, they are constantly engaged in a battle against ideological imposition and power oppressions of patriarchal system but lastly come out with what they claim to attain. The majority of the female novelists, who have advocated feminism in their writings, have graphically presented the clash of 'Tradition' and 'Modernity' with the support of their characters. Let us now analyze the traditional and modern characters of the novel (*Difficult Daughters*) briefly.

Kasturi, Ganga and Kishori Devi -Symbols of Tradition

Kasturi is a true fan of tradition. Any deviation from the so-called path is not suitable to her. Her entire being is devoted to the cause of keeping the customs of her family and she tries to drill and impose the same feelings in her daughter Virmati. Open display of feelings was not considered to be right and Kasturi never did so with her daughters. The language of feeling never flowed between them. Kasturi wanted her daughter to be closely controlled and to prepare for married life by learning sewing and knitting but Virmati would not listen. Kasturi wondered, why was her daughter so restless all the time? Kasturi was an educated woman unlike the other women in those times and she wanted her daughters too to be educated. At the same time, she even wanted them to hold on to their roots and not start soaring high in the sky on the wings of education. Her eldest daughter, Virmati was in opposition of Kasturi's thoughts. For Kasturi, Virmati's defiance to sew and knit is restlessness and she feels that it would be disastrous for her as traditionally a woman was supposed to be competent at such jobs.

For Kasturi, getting married is the aim of every girl's life. She does not support the single status of her niece and tells her sister-in-law that studying and doing professionally well is another thing but the actual beauty of a girl is in getting married. Her traditional view makes her think that "A woman's shaan is in her home" (Kapur 1998: 16). She has very strong views about the

fact that the final aim of every girl should be to get married and have a family. Kasturi derives satisfaction from fulfilling her family obligations. She is a dutiful daughter-in-law, an affectionate and concerned wife and a doting mother. Apart from just kind attention and treatment to her younger children, she even showed them the way of life. She is a simple woman whose pleasure lies in seeing her family joyful. Not once can she imagine of alienating and hurting them. Even the thought of something happening to the family alarms her.

Ganga is seen as one more victim of the traditional society. She has entered her in-laws' house at the age of twelve and tried to prove herself to be a good house wife but she could never become an intellectual friend to her husband and this leads to her plight. We really feel sorry for the sad position of the Professor. The adverse effects of early traditional marriages have their own evil consequences on society at large.

Kapur presents Ganga as a thorough-going traditional wife; Ganga is in all aspects a traditional wife and she attends to every trivial duty not to win her husband's love or affection but as a part of her duty as a traditional wife:

From washing his clothes to polishing his shoes, to tidying his desk, dusting his precious books, filling his fountain pens with ink, putting his records back in their jackets, mending his clothes, stitching his shirts and kutras, hemming his dhotis, seeing that they were properly starched—Ganga did it all (Kapur 1998: 216).

Since Ganga is a traditional wife, she wails reluctantly accepting her fate with no question to her husband when the professor brings Virmati home as his second wife. "What have I done, that God should punish me like this?" (Kapur 1998: 211).

Shakuntala, Swarnlata and Ida - Symbols of Modernism

In Shakuntala, Swarnalatha and Ida we see the images of modern woman, conscious, thoughtful, educated, liberated, cultured driven by the enthusiasm to assert their autonomy and separate identity and find a place for them in society. Manju Kapur's novel brings out glimpses of women of the forties in India trying to assert to show their own identity. Kapur presents feminist autonomy through the characters of Swarnalata, Shakuntala and Ida, shown in a positive and acceptable manner. Swarnlata and Shakuntala use their modern views in coming out of the shackles of the feminine gender; they never misuse their liberty; as modern girls.

A lot of Indian women writers have explored female subjectivity in order to set up an identity that is not imposed by a patriarchal society. A number of Indian women writers have created novels highlighting the true state of Indian society and its behavior towards women. Current novelists depict both the diversity of woman and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. A picture of changing images of Indian women who are under a voyage struggling to come across their identity is exhibited by Rama Mehta's *Inside the Haveli*, Nayantara Sehgal's *Rich like us*, Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*, Anita Desai's *Cry, the Peacock*, *Where Shall We Go This Summer?* *Voices in the City*, Ruth Praver Jhabvala's *To Whom She will*, Kamala Markandya's *Two Virgins* and Santha Rama Rau's *Remember the House*. These are some examples which bring to light the status of a woman in Indian societies. Among these Indo English novelists, the novels of Manju Kapur swing between the imitation and protest stage, and reaching finally to the self-discovery.

The heroines in the works of Manju Kapur reflect the conflicts and tensions arising out of the attempt to negotiate between tradition and the desire to lead a new life that education has empowered them to imbibe. In Kapur's work the female characters are distanced from their homeland; they think more reasonably, but they mentally retain some of the traditional beliefs. Whereas the protagonist women on the other hand resist all traditions, but subconsciously they too, remain tradition-bound. Kapur wants to put into words that now with the spread of education, the present situation has changed. Now the women are struggling hard to find their own self in the family and the society. They can also live according to their own to get autonomy. This is not the time to keep the women behind the curtains or in four walls or to crucify. The traditional thinking of the male sphere is clearly required to be changed. Women at the moment desire their due to rightful place in the society. If they don't get what is their goal, they rebel against that and get whatever they want.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Thus from the above discussion Kapur seems to intimate that, even with education and economic independence, what is important is to face that there is more to life than depending on marriage, parents and other such institutions. It is not simple to find a tangible answer to the woman question. In this novel of Kapur one can discover pictures of women who are rebellious, intelligent, educated and self-assertive. Finally they crush the external forces which seek to suppress their nature and individuality. The restoration of their lives seems to take place because of their inner vigor, determination and, lastly, their ability to rely on themselves.

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