

SHIFTING PARADIGM OF GENDER IDENTITY IN MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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The pendulum of shifting paradigm related to gender identity has been swinging between the male and the female sex since times immemorial; what has escaped the attention is that Man is man and woman is woman, never the twains shall meet; having suppressed the patriarchal instinct of supremacy, a man adores, loves, and submits to a woman, when some selfish interest is involved, but when once the axe is grinded, he does not hesitate to send her back to the stone walls that make an eternal prison for her; at least this is the approach of Manju Kapur in her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*, which bagged for her the Commonwealth Prize and which exemplified the concept that “A free and autonomous being like all creatures, a woman finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other” (Beauvoir 85).

The book follows a strange technique; it is the story of three women; Kasturi represents what had been, Virmati displays what is; and Ida is symbolic of what shall be; the basic problem in all the ages, past, present, and future, has been one and the same—how to up a daughter; after having crossed the threshold of girlhood, she becomes a woman, and by trying to search a space for her, looks for her own identity, based upon negotiation; the author is conscious of it, when, in an interview, she says:

One of the main occupations in all my books is how women manage to negotiate both the private and public spaces in their lives—what sacrifices do they have to make in order to keep the home fires burning—and at what cost to their personal lives do they find some kind of fulfillment outside the home. They have to play so many roles, and there is a lot of stuff to say about women. And it is also what I know. (Pande)

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An awareness of the concept of gender is inevitable in order to analyse the shifting paradigm; masculine and feminine are the two groups constituting human society; in India, marriage orientation is the prime factor of feminine existence; in *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati's mother says, "Still, it is the duty of every girl to get married" (Kapur 15). The social groupism is a wider range, as it includes social life, cultural interpretations, sexual division of labour, for

An individual's self conception as being male or female, as distinguished from actual biological Sex, for most person, gender identity and biological characteristics are the same. There are, however, circumstances in which an individual experience little or no connection between sex and gender . . .

.Gender identity is not fixed at birth, both physiological and social factors contribute to the early establishment of a core identity, which is modified are expanded by social factors as the child matures. (<http://www.britannica.com>)

There has been seen a radical change in the approach towards gender identity in the novel, *Difficult Daughters*. Of the three generations, that the book proposes to give an account of, Kasturi represents the first one; in her period, gender identity was not known, rather it was a sort of gender discrimination; a woman, was treated as the weaker sex, and had to lead the life of a class-two citizen; Ida's wish, that she did not want to be like her mother, reveals that she did not like her grandmother Kasturi too; Virmati had to take care of her younger brothers and sisters, while Kasturi was prone to successive pregnancies; it was a time when a woman was nothing more than child bearing machine; hence Virmati was forced to suppress emotions by Kasturi. "At times Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special. However, when she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away. 'Have you seen to their food—milk—clothes—studies?'" (Kapur 6)

When it comes to Virmati, the ken is widened; the illicit affair is highlighted; political and social implications become a provoking issue; the novelist remarks: "Virmati passed her FA with marks that were respectable enough for a girl, her parents thought. She now wanted to study further. Her parents thought that she had gone far enough" (Kapur 45).

The paradigm of gender identity reveals that it is the story of a daughter's sojourn towards the quest of self reminiscences and critique of what type of a woman her mother had been; when the grandmother had been put to the litmus test, Virmati is compelled to neglect her studies; yet

she gets inspiration from Shakuntala, her cousin; the maternal disapproval is turned down and the girl is admitted to A.S. College, “the bastion of male learning” (Kapur 45).

Gender identity becomes assertive, when it is juxtaposed with marriage, sex and extra marital relationship; Virmati is engaged to be married to Inderjeet, a canal engineer; she joins A.S. College, Amritsar, and for the sake of change, she falls in love with Harish, an Oxford returned professor, who thinks that an illiterate wife cannot prove to be good life companion, hence he falls in love with Virmati, though she does not know that the professor’s wife is pregnant.

The reader, with a critical acumen, should not ignore the fact that gender identity is not the monopoly of womankind only; when a man asserts his identity, the instinct of patriarchy dominates the male psyche; he thinks that keeping a woman other than his legitimate wife is the assertion of masculine virility; Prof. Harish Chandra comes back from Oxford; he develops extra-marital relationship, more for pleasure than for a sense of responsibility; in Virmati, there is seen the “budding of a ‘new woman’ who is bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. Very coolly and confidently she manages to leave home to study in Lahore and spread her wings in the new horizon” (Bhatnagar 19). The question arises as to whether she blooms into a ‘new woman’. There is a sense of protest, when she revolts against the norms of a patriarchal family; the *Ars Amatoria* of the Professor’s implorations works upon her mind; the seemingly assertive woman has to bear the anguish of useless love, doubtful marriage and unwed pregnancy; the Professor uses and enjoys her; yet there comes a time, when the bastion of female gender identity is dismantled: “Even when he marries her reluctantly, she wilts under the implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband’s first wife, and loses all sense of identity. She is given a ‘pariah’ status and is forced to live in a cramped space” (Bhatnagar 19). From the point of view of structuralism also gender identity has a significant role to play; the novel begins with death; the feeling of melancholy consumes the identity like a caterpillar in the rose bud; the structural pattern is a sort of travelogue, analytical and historiographic as well. But this is essentially a story of three generations and is interspersed with historical facts. The regional culture of Amritsar and Lahore can be felt in some of the specific actions performed by the characters; the words are loaded with meaning in conformity with the prevalent values.

The irony is that female identity is not acceptable in a patriarchal society; woman is treated as a commodity; she is meant for being used/ misused; her emotions and spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings are always ignored and neglected; on the other hand, the possessive instinct of a man knows that the unrestricted passion of a woman will bring her under his complete control; the most critical position comes in the life of a gender identity oriented woman, when she finds herself contrasted with the wife of the person, whom she loves; in *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati finds herself in such a condition, when she has to face the gazes of Ganga, the Professor's wife; she tries to drown herself in the canal at twilight; Virmati becomes the professor's second wife and this formal stamp to her relationship brings her back into the social fold. As a heroine of the novel, Virmati turns out to be self dependent, and is aware of her existence and ceases to be submissive; she represents the ideology of woman's emancipation and thus heralds a change in the society; such discontent and retaliation, the desire and demand for freedom is evident in Manju Kapur's Novels. Thus, women characters, created by the novelist, reflect her sense of isolation, and by virtue of evoking an unending discussion of social values, become the focal point of contact between the writer's perception and the unfamiliar world.

The paradigm of gender identity shifts backward with Kasturi; here is a traditional woman given to bringing up of children; there is sourness in the voice of Kasturi, to which Virmati is accustomed. Ida says: "From time to time Virmati glanced furtively at her mother, and the wall she encountered forbade her from making the attentive gestures that might have made the journey bearable for both" (Kapur 111).

In *Difficult Daughters*, it has been displayed that pre-Oedipal relationship of mothers and daughters are mentioned against Kasturi bearing children and feeling 'churning inside her' ". . . the heaviness in her belly, morning and evening nausea in her throat while eating, hair falling out in clumps, giddiness when she got up suddenly. How trapped could nature make a woman?" (Kapur 7)

It is to be noted that gender identity leads towards feminine emancipation; the underlying inherent cause is that feminism is not a doctrine but a consciousness in touch with reality, which happens to be a mental cosmos:

Feminist consciousness is a little like a paranoia, especially when the feminist first begins to apprehend the full extent of sex discrimination and the subtlety and

variety of the ways in which it is enforced. Its agents are everywhere, even inside her own mind, since she can fall prey to self doubt to a temptation to compliance. In response to this the feminist becomes Vigilant and suspicious. Her apprehensions of things especially of direct or indirect communication which other people is characterized by what I shall call 'wariness'. (Bartky 14)

In the quest for gender identity, the stumbling block comes in the form of a distinction between gender discrimination and sex discrimination; the one is abstract and the other is concrete; a woman has to suffer a type of victimization and male domination is a hard nut to crack for her; Virmati is successful in achieving a superficial freedom on individual level, and becomes an instance of uxorial pecuniary autonomy, "once (a woman) ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumble; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator" (Beauvoir 412).

whenever there is a conflict between a concubine and a legitimate wife, the paradigm of gender identity shifts towards finding a "room of her own" for the former; Virmati is faced with this difficulty; she has to share the dressing room in her new 'home' with Ganga, the first wife of the Professor; she celebrates her feminine self through adjustment rather than withdrawal; this is the space that she gets, though she is no better than a nun that is cloisterless; her education and academia have proved to be useless; her introvert psyche has taught her to live together with other women fighting with jealousies over the space occupied by them:

Even in her own room she felt raw and exposed. . .it was clear that not an inch of territory was going to be yielded. If Virmati had the bed, Ganga was going to have the house. . . .In the short time since her marriage she had learned to look at space in a new way, to define it and mark it, to think of what was hers and what wasn't in ways that would have been unthinkable in the fluid areas of her maternal home. She felt contrite. (Kapur 217-227)

Further, gender identity depends upon the dictum that woman is womb and pregnancy is its consequence; a woman should be allowed to carry on or terminate the pregnancy; the decision should be her own; it is ironical that either the boon or the curse of pregnancy is thrust upon a helpless Indian woman; Virmati's tragedy of ambition is typical; she has to suffer obsession and disapproved abortion; in her own words: "her body had gone through knives and abortions, what

could happen to her now that she could not bear?" (Kapur 175) The Professor makes Virmati pregnant without entering into the sacrament of marriage; this is a cruel stroke of sin upon the pure gender identity of a woman in Indian peninsula:

For if there's one thing that's been repressed, here's just the place to find it: in the taboo of the pregnant woman. This says a lot about the power she seems invested with at the time, because it has always been suspected, that, when pregnant, the woman not only doubles her market value as a woman in her own eyes and, undeniably, acquires body and sex. (Cixous 346)

The vicissitudes in the love life of Virmati narrate a number of shifting paradigms of gender identity in various aspects; a girl passes her F.A. examination, and, in spite of maternal protests, continues her studies in A.S. College, Amritsar; a certain Professor of English comes to live in her house as a tenant alongwith his mother and his wife, who is uneducated; Virmati attends the class of Harish, the Professor, and has a bed room experience with him:

The Professor tried to turn her rigid face towards him. Not succeeding, he took her hand and spreading her fingers, pressed his lips to the white spot where they joined. Virmati tried to snatch her hand back, but the Professor laced her fingers with his own so tightly she could feel the blood going from them. . . . Her situation was hopeless. Even crying was no good. She pulled away her hand and this time he let go, laying it gently in her lap. . . and she grew less rigid. He transferred his kisses to her eyes. (Kapur 67-68)

The sky changes from April to December when Virmati comes to know that the Professor's wife is pregnant; this incident has a mixed reaction; Kasturi thinks that her "daughter is safe. Now she has to come to her senses." Virmati's possessive instinct is hurt; her gender identity has been shattered by the pregnancy of a legitimate wife; it was a news which the beloved "did not believe it. How could it be true?" (Kapur 104) The Professor's letter reveals that "He does what he can to bring back domestic harmony. He feels guilty about ignoring the suffering of one who is also in a way blameless. An act is performed mechanically, with what result you have already seen" (Kapur 106). Such a shift in attitude towards gender identity becomes an eye opener for Virmati, when she writes the epilogue of her love letters; it is akin to the lot of Clytaemnestra,

who is not ready to share her blanket with Cassandra; no two women can live together in one man's heart:

Now I know there is still some life in your feelings for your wife—as it is proper there should be—it would be very wrong of me to come between you, especially when there is going to be another baby. But the pregnancy, I would never have known.

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I do not think we need to write to each other after this. (Kapur 107, 110)

However, after a considerable passage of time, the Professor marries Virmati and brings her to his house as the second wife; his mother is not happy as she considers Ganga to be a good wife; she does not blame her son; according to her, the Professor was a noble person. How was it his fault if he was caught in the trap of some shameless, young Punjabi? Virmati is full of revenge, for she gets cold treatment; hence she uses her husband as an invincible weapon, “. . . cruelly, in an attempt to get back at Ganga, rubbing the salt of sexual victory mercilessly into her wounded spirit” (Mishra 101). Manju Kapur thinks that sex is the woman's weapon and her existence asserting gender identity depends upon captivating and possessing a man on sexual level. Virmati still holds her right over the Professor's mind, “In later years when the Professor would tell his daughter, Ida, of his love affair with Virmati that began in the college class room, he would say, “*Imagine my plight. . . your mother engaged to someone else!*” He said nothing about his wife” (Mishra 149).

The critique and analysis shows that the paradigm of gender identity keeps on shifting and will remain so, but the path to be furrowed with the eternal wheel of Time and Love will be circular, suggesting ‘and having writ moves on’:

So rounds my love, returning where begun,

And still beginning, never most nor least,

But fixedly various, all love's parts in one. (Kapur 107)

Ida's experiences opened an altogether different panorama of gender identity: "I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society" (Kapur 107).

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