

TELLING THEIR OWN STORIES: FEMALE NARRATIVE IN DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS BY MANJU KAPUR

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Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters* chronicles the life of three generations of women of a family who revolt against traditional roles of wives and mothers which women have to play forgoing their own identity and desire for love against the backdrop of contemporary socio-political issues, the trope of Pre-independent India, the Independence struggle and post-independent India. The novel explores the quest of a woman for freedom and independence, conflict between her identity and socio-cultural traditional role (Shree 163). Ida's narratives then becomes a revolt against 'master narratives' or 'metanarratives' which were created to legitimise dominant ideology, norms and values (Lyotard).

Ida, who is the narrator and Virmati's daughter, exclaims in the opening lines of the novel, "the one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother" (Kapur 1). The novel begins with funeral for Virmati and delves immediately to the complex and difficult relationship three generations of daughters of same family share with each other. There is a sense of bitterness in narrator's relationship with Virmati "who had not wanted to be mourned in any way" (Kapur2) as if unwillingness to have any 'shor-shaar' when she dies, denies Ida of emotional intimacy with her mother and she wonders "what memorial I could give her" (Kapur 3). She chooses to tell her mother's story and in process, trace the history of three generations of women in her family including her own. This act of writing is not only a tribute to her mother and an emotional attempt to understand her better and connect with her but also a bold act of subversion. Her writing subverts the traditional genres of writing, where men are the central figures and women play submissive and caricature roles. Ida and Virmati are branded as 'difficult daughters' because they attempt to create their own identity (Shree 167).

After the funeral, Ida travels in the second-class ladies' compartment of a train and ponders over what it is like to be a divorced, childless woman who is unable to engage in conversation with other women and is often lonely. She recalls how she was often isolated and sent away to her maternal grandmother's home to be kept away from the domestic disputes. When she reaches her maternal grandmother's home, she feels that her relatives feel sorry for her because now she's an orphan, childless and divorced. Her relatives often remarked about her 'pitiable' social and personal situation but justified it with comments like "But with Virmati for mother, it's not strange that such a thing should happen" (Kapur) or "he was such a nice man", "so educated" (Kapur). Throughout the novel, women face tremendous pressure to be ideal and an idol. Kasturi often scolded her daughter for not behaving appropriately and took it upon herself for not being a good

mother. It must be noted that nobody pointed fingers at Harish and Ida's husband for the scandal and failure of their marriages.

An exploration of mother-daughter relationship

Ida is extremely interested to know about her mother and her past meanwhile her relatives are trying to be respectful of the dead and do not speak ill of her mother. However, she can sense that they completely disapprove of her choices and lifestyle and believe that Virmati made choices which were not only morally ambiguous but brought disgrace to the family. There is also a lot of respect and regard for her since she practically raised them as Kasturi was almost always pregnant.

The narrative shifts from first person to third person in chapter two and we get a glimpse into Virmati's childhood. It recalls how she always looked after her siblings and played the role of a second mother. It took up most of her time, energy and patience. Looking after so many younger siblings while being a child herself made her bitter and impatient towards them and she would often lash out violently. Her yearning for maternal affection would be rejected by Kasturi and she would often be accused of being needy and insecure while so much work was left. It never occurred to Kasturi that Virmati is a child and taking care of and bringing up Kasturi's children were not her responsibility. Virmati would brush away her need and desire for emotional intimacy as 'silliness' and would focus on taking care of her siblings and other household responsibilities. What she fails to realize however is that unfulfilled desire for love and affection would manifest in her affection for Harish and she would be unable to break away from him despite the toxicity and co-dependence that dictated their relationship.

Meanwhile, the constant pregnancies took a toll on Kasturi's physical and mental health. She was unable to recall a time when she wasn't exhausted and her body did not hurt. She was hurt by comments like 'harvest time again', 'breeding like cats and dogs' etc. The eleventh time she was pregnant, she did everything that she could to get rid of the fetus. Unfortunately, the home remedies that was suggested by Pinnidatti, her dai did not work and she had to accept her fate. She realized that this pregnancy would deteriorate her health and convalescence would be difficult. Manju Kapur challenges the widely accepted and celebrated notions about motherhood and highlights the pain and trauma of childbearing. After Kasturi's eleventh child is born, she lies on the bed washed over by tiredness from "seventeen years of relentless childbearing" (DD). While the elders of the family celebrate the expansion of the clan, Manju Kapur highlights the way so many pregnancies deplete a woman's body and takes a toll on her health, self-esteem and her happiness. It can be seen when Kasturi is filled with restlessness and rebellion and she exclaims that, "why should she should look after her body? Hadn't it made her life wretched enough" (Kapur).

When Kasturi along with her eldest daughter is sent to Dalhousie, Virmati sees this as an opportunity to connect with her mother. She hopes to form an emotionally intimate relationship with her mother. But once again Kasturi not only rejects her daughter emotionally but also sees her emotional needs as a disaster because she believed that

women should be passive and calm. Any form of passion and restlessness is seen as unbecoming of a young woman. Meanwhile, she fails to realize that her education again is neglected for she is sent to take care of her mother rather than Study for her FA exams.

The mother daughter stay in Dalhousie is interrupted by arrival of Lajwanti and later her daughter, Shakuntala. Shakuntala is educated, unmarried and living in Lahore by herself. She shows no interest in getting married and this causes a great deal of pain to her parents. For Virmati, Shakuntala is like a breath of fresh air and makes her realize that she can attain freedom through education and employment. Women's activities are limited to the domestic space and are hardly ever acknowledged, despite being crucial to the progress of society and history. The womanhood is constantly defined in the terms of male desire and male imagination. She learns that there were more roles to play than just being a wife and a mother throughout her life. Shakuntala is filled with confidence and independence which instills a longing in her for a life where she is loved, is self-reliant and free to make her own choices. When Virmati blurts out that she wants to be like Shakuntala, she has realized that it was no use looking for answers about her identity and future in her home. Unfortunately, she believes that her life with Harish would emancipate her from the shackle. She fails to realize that this love does not give her freedom. Instead, it puts her in a different kind of shackles which she is unable to break away from throughout her life. It fills her life with guilt, sadness and loneliness whereas Harish is unaffected and unbothered.

Manju Kapur manages to capture the essence of the novel's contemporary time. After living all her life in a joint family and constantly complaining about Kasturi's children, Lajwanti is unable to manage the calm and quietness that is brought by division and the separate house on Lepel Griffin Road. When her son, Somnath moves in and he brings with him his idea of modernity. He also rents out a section of their house to a foreign returned married professor. When Virmati and professor meet, she is in awe of his intelligence and education meanwhile he believes that she has potential. It's only later when she joins his class as a student that he feels attracted to her and she too acknowledges it. In one of the classes, Virmati sat on the floor and looked up at him with her large eyes. The symbolism of the posture was not unnoticed by the professor and it 'stirred in him the passion' that would result in the disastrous relationship.

When Ida visits the college where her father taught after her mother's death, Harish was remembered fondly as a good academician, competent principal and a kind individual. There seem to be no judgement on his action of taking up two wives and he is remembered for his teaching, knowledge and academic endeavors. Meanwhile, Virmati is unable to escape the stigma of marrying a married man even posthumously. Manju Kapur very competently exposes the double standards that exists within the Indian society which treats men and women very differently.

Notion of Marriage in the novel

The novel engages with contemporary socio-political issues like British rule, struggle for independence and diffusion of Arya Samaj. A Hindu reform movement founded by Dayanand Saraswati, Arya Samaj presented an alternative social order with focus on knowledge, morality and power of Dharma (Nayak). It condemned practices of caste discrimination, child marriage and discrimination against women. Born in 1897, Kasturi was educated and raised to become an ideal Hindu woman. Her education enabled her to be able to educate her children, manage her household efficiently and make morally sound decisions for welfare of her family. She was taught all the household work like cooking, cleaning, sewing to ensure that she marries a man from good family. Throughout her formal education, marriage as an end goal was always kept in mind. She was trained to be an ideal wife, daughter-in-law and mother. It was incomprehensible for her that a woman could or would want different things. Her inability to provide emotional support and validation to Virmati was one of the reasons that she would seek emotional validation from Harish.

In one of the most powerful scenes in the novel, we see the extend Harish would be emotionally distant and unavailable. He is unable to empathize with Virmati's situation and often abandons her emotionally and physically. When Harish and Virmati have a clandestine meeting at a friend's place few days before her marriage, Virmati begs him to help with her domestic situation. All he does was lead her to the bed against the wall requesting her to be firm at home, even if things were difficult at home for her. When she notes that she can protest as much as she likes, she will indeed be married off, he makes no suggestion and assures her everything will be fine. He asks her to smile for him. And she does, with great efforts. Returning home she realizes that she could not depend on Harish for any domestic situation.

When Virmati moves to Lahore for her higher studies, the reader hope that she will be able to attain the independence and freedom she has longed for since she met Shakuntala in Dalhousie. Unfortunately, Harish, anxious and insecure, constantly turns up and distracts her. At this point, readers are left disappointed in Virmati as she barely managed to pull through her studies. She escapes the loveless arranged marriage and traditional role it endorses but ends up in an abusive, traumatic relationship with Harish which not only affects her relationship with her family and her social reputation but also stunts her academic and professional growth.

The unwanted pregnancy in Lahore took a toll on Virmati's emotional health and all she wanted to do was "forget. Forget, forget, forget" (Kapur). To pay for the medical termination of unwanted pregnancy, she had to sell her bangle which were gifted by her father. Harish as usual had left after one of their rendezvous without leaving any address or contact details. She goes through the process alone. She wondered with pain about the fate of the child who was the result of a union that was filled with many speeches on freedom and right to individuality and human love. She felt totality of nothingness in the pool of shame and guilt. Her decision to terminate the pregnancy does not stem from her desire to not have the child but is a desperate attempt of social preservation marking her adherence

to the social norm of moral respectability where a child born out of wedlock is socially and morally unacceptable.

When she went back to her home her mother's remark on her independence causes her a lot of pain and she wonders with sarcasm that she was indeed very independent after going through the knives and abortion. "Why didn't you at least inform me?" is all Harish had to say once he got to know about the unwanted pregnancy and its termination. Somehow, he manages to portray himself as a victim of being caught up between his family which includes his first wife and children and Virmati. He exclaims with helplessness that what could he do if something like this happened since he was always so careful. Virmati felt more alone than ever and realizes that she belonged to him for life even if he did not marry her. She believed that his body was marked by him and she could not make another choice. It is evident to the reader that she is unable to escape the shackles of her relationship with Harish as Kasturi was unable to escape the traditional role she was molded for throughout her life. Her relationship with Harish is an act of submission, not freedom and independence that she believed love would enable her to exercise. It's only Ida who is able to disengage herself and divorce the husband who tries to own her body and dictate her motherhood. Even though she does not tell anyone, Ida's husband forced her to get an abortion as he did not want a child. She divorces him soon after. She is able to set herself free.

The only time Virmati truly touches her potential is when she is appointed as a headmistress of a girls' school in Nahan. Even though there are rules and regulations to be followed and a strict code of conduct, she is able to exercise her freedom and independence. It is one time in her life when she has control over her life and can make choices her own choices. She has her own house, a promising career and time for herself (Woolf). Harish shows no regard for her career and ruins her professional prospects and reputation. He exhibits no remorse when she is fired for letting him stay in the house overnight repeatedly without being married to him. Virmati's belief that she 'needs' him and her inability to turn him away results in her return to a relationship that has brought her nothing but pain, suffering and humiliation. He is reluctant and afraid to marry her. He only does so after his friend suggests him to do so. After the marriage he installs her in the household as a co-wife and leaves her to deal with his mother and first wife, Ganga.

Victim of child marriage, Ganga is married off to Harish when she was three years old. She spent her entire childhood learning to be an ideal wife, daughter-in-law and mother. She is adept in cooking, sewing and other household activities. Unfortunately, she is unable to be an intellectual partner for her husband because of her illiteracy. While she was being trained to be an ideal housewife, her formal education was neglected. Very conveniently Harish dismisses her as an illiterate and incompetent wife who is unable to provide him companionship. However, he likes his house clean, desk organized and ink filled in pens regularly. He never acknowledges all the housework done by Ganga and take her for granted. He feels entitled to the attention and affection by Ganga and intellectual and physical companionship offered by Virmati. He does not feel responsible for their emotional and physical needs and often acts oblivious to their pain and sufferings.

Once married, Virmati does not receive the social status of a married woman. Since she is the second co- wife- the homewrecker, she is marginalized within her household. She

feels this 'otherness' every day and her days are long, empty and lonely. Meanwhile, Harish goes about his life unbothered and oblivious to the sufferings of his wives. Virmati is in awe of Harish and justifies her affair believing that he deserves better than a non-intellectual and illiterate wife. After her marriage, she is able to look at Harish as the kind of person he is and how he mistreats Ganga and takes her for granted. He never appreciates the work Ganga does to make his life more comfortable.

Throughout her life, she attempts to assert herself only to find herself in an inescapable and emotionally tumultuous relationship. She constantly attempts to assert her independence from social norms and structures and at some points also tries to withdraw from Harish but she always ends up helplessly choosing him. This act of submission does not make her empowered woman who makes her own choice. This 'helplessness' which dictates her relationship with Harish, disables her freedom and choice.

Trope of Freedom and Independence

Indian authors have made tremendous contribution in the genre of novel. Since the release of *Rajmohan's Wife* by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee in 1864, Indian novels have markedly expanded in diversity and maturity of content and narratives. Through their excellent understanding of the world and its issues, Indian women writers have given Indian-English fiction a new depth. A significant portion of English-language contemporary writing is fiction. It offers perception, comprehension, a storehouse of meanings, and a starting point for dialogue on various socio-political issues. Often, they have discussed the condition and status of women in Indian society as well as their challenges and daily struggles. They have also examined how Indian women have worked to develop a harmonious relationship with their environment as well as the sociocultural patterns and values that have shaped their role and image. Elaine Showalter (1941) an American literary critic, feminist and writer who coined the term 'gynocritics' comments "to their contemporaries, nineteenth century women writers were women first, artists second" (Showalter).

Through three generations of women in a family, Manju Kapur manages to portray the life circle of a woman who is devoted to her traditional roles throughout her life. From childhood, she is supposed to assist her mother in domestic chores, take care of the younger siblings and train herself to fulfil her social and filial roles. Virmati's relationship with Harish parallels India's struggle for freedom and the independence and later the partition of country. Virmati becomes Harish's second wife resulting in her social ostracism. The novel is a story of Indian woman's aspirations, failures and her rebellion against the tradition-bound society. It also narrates her self-doubt, resolution and acceptance of her fate. She has successfully portrayed a middle class Punjabi family with three generations of women.

Manju Kapur employs the trope of 'angel in the house' and 'madwoman in the attic' (Gilbert and Gubar) while portraying treatment of women within the family. Locking up daughters in the attic who are 'difficult' is one of the traditional practices to condition the daughters into fulfilling traditional roles. Lack of space and this constant feeling of not

being free and being under lock and key is something that bothers Virmati. She looks for a space where she is free and independent. Her quest for freedom and independence leads her from her parents' home to another kind of imprisonment as the second wife of Harish. The novel also explores the relationship between the co-wives and provides a sympathetic portrayal. An analysis of her relationship with Harish exposes her dependence on him for her sexual, intellectual and social awakening. This dependence deprives her of the freedom that she has been looking for throughout the novel. Virmati acknowledges in the novel that as long as she is in love with the professor, she will never be truly free.

Conclusion

From the moment she was inspired by Shakuntala, Virmati wanted to study because she believes education will empower her to assert her freedom and independence. Yet her relationship with Harish never enables her to focus on her studies. She barely manages to pass every exam. The unwanted pregnancy, the emotional turmoil and Harish's frequent visits never allows her to concentrate on her studies. When presented with a wonderful professional opportunity, this relationship causes her to lose her job. Harish on the other hand, never faces any disruption and disturbance in his professional and academic progress. It must be noted that Virmati never received any disturbance to her studies from her own family. Despite their initial inhibitions, once she is in Lahore for higher studies, her family is quite supportive of her education. They never attempt to disrupt her education. It is only her relationship with Harish that doesn't let her concentrate on her studies along with the emotional turmoil, guilt, the moral and ethical dilemma of an unplanned pregnancy. Most importantly, she is constantly choosing him over her education and career.

Mothers hope that their daughters meet their expectations and be more like them meanwhile daughters attempt to assert their own individuality and independence. Virmati and Ida both marry men in reputed academic professions who remain oblivious to the pain they cause their wives. Both women are denied motherhood and forced to have abortion under different circumstances. Virmati is forced to terminate her pregnancy due to unacceptability of unwed motherhood and Ida is forced to have an abortion by her husband as he is not ready for the responsibility of the fatherhood. Meanwhile, Kasturi bears eleven children wreaking her physical health in order to adhere to her traditional role of bearing as many children as possible.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughter* portray three generations of women in a middle-class Punjabi family. Ida journeys into her mother's past to understand her as a daughter, wife and mother. She exposes the double standards of society where her mother was ostracized, marginalised and blamed for her relationship with Harish meanwhile he is uninvolved, indifferent and unaffected. Ida manages to chronicle her mother's story and other women in her family with affection and sincerity.

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