

Difficult Daughters: A feministic study of Manju Kapur's writings

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Abstract

Women are sometimes presented as goddesses; other times as subordinate beings but never as ordinary human beings. Feminism spreads awareness about injustice and oppression of women at the hands of patriarchy. In their writings, women describe and attack the suffocating conventions and norms that restrict women within the narrow world of morality. Manju Kapur penned her views and draws attention towards patriarchal society and need of universal freedom for women. She makes them realize that there are infinite horizons to spread their wings and dreams of liberty beyond the periphery of the household. Manju Kapur is a feminist writer because in all her novels she deals with the pathetic and oppressive situations of Indian women. Her novels denounce the socio-cultural predicament of Indian women imprisoned in a male-dominated patriarchal society. Her main novels are *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Homes*, *The Immigrant*, and *Custody*. Most of her main characters are educated wives and belong to the Indian middle class. They face struggles for freedom, identity, equality with people, and their own space. Her suffering and suffocation in her family and marital relationships are clearly reflected in her novels. This paper presents the woman as a person who fights against concealment and mistreatment of the male-controlled society.

Keywords: Silence, Suffocation, Emancipation, Modernity, Human nature, Tradition, Conjugal roles.

Introduction

Manju Kapur is a feminist writer because in all her novels she deals with the pathetic and oppressive situations of Indian women. Her novels denounce the socio-cultural predicament of Indian women imprisoned in a male-dominated patriarchal society. Most of her main characters are educated wives and belong to the Indian middle class. They face struggles for freedom, identity, equality with people, and their own space. Her suffering and suffocation in her family and marital relationships are clearly reflected in her novels. As a woman writer of the current era, Manju Kapur experiments human relationship in modern society. More particularly man-women relationship she illustrates through characters with different kinds of women-daughters, mothers, daughter-in-laws of the Indian society. Thereby she details the issues of womanhood in varying social circumstances, the bone of contention experienced by women between modernity and traditionality, the social miseries the women experience, the way in which the women folks encounter and battle the barriers they face, the male dominance in the society, the turmoil the woman folks experience in obtaining equality, the sufferings they experience because of the defined social conditions and culture, superstitions, belief, habits etc. *Difficult Daughters* seems to be the compassionate tale of three generations—Kasturi-Virmati-Ida. Certainly, the novel has the purpose—to show the pathetic lot of the women the male-dominated society. The struggles of women are very common in Indian society. They do not have equal status and equal right even after a number of years after independence. Kasturi suffered less because of her silence. Virmati's problems are also less in comparison of her daughter Ida. Thus we find that during the course of advance of time and space, the problems are going to be more complicated. Certainly, the novel throws light on the empowerment of woman in the patriarchal society in different social context.

Major Thrust

The novels of Manju Kapur voice out the sentiments of women, their search for identity and their aspirations. The points raised by Manju Kapur are quite comprehensive in the case of the study of the search of identity and recognition for woman. Kapur presents an ideal image of women who, on the one hand, are worried about maintaining their chastity and searching their self-identity, and on the other hand, they also never hesitate to go beyond the existed traditional norms of the society. In the novels of Manju Kapur, one can notice the extensive presentation of human relationships. In her novels human relationships are presented in different perspectives in order to throw lights on her motive to propagate feminism. Unlike the Western feminism where human relationships are less important, feminism in Indian can only be viewed through the making of proper human relationships. Manju Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughters* is certainly a pensive tale of discomfort in the life of a sensitive girl who seems to be struggling in the male dominated society which provides a little space to woman in general. In *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur presents the conflict between tradition and new outlook even at the time of partition. She ironically writes about the conflict between personal grief and the existing tradition of new woman. She thinks that there is relevance of personal emotion especially for women in the traditional family. In her debut novel, Manju Kapur seems to analyse a female character in the milieu of strong traditional family in which there is little scope for a girl to visualize her potentials. Kapur focuses her eyes on the character of Virmati too much in the way she writes every detail about her. Virmati seems to be the perfect exponent of Kapur's new woman this novel. Kapur has done this in very simple and realistic manner. This novel contains the emotional attachment of almost three generations. Amritsar is the place where almost all the events took place from time to time. Virmati has many sisters and brothers, all of them living together to share success and happiness, failures and frustration. Manju Kapur writes about the names of her brothers and sisters in poetic manner. Since Virmati was the eldest daughter of Kasturi, she was forced to look after all her brothers and sisters and she assisted her mother in the nourishment of all of them. During the pregnancies of her mother, Virmati was always busy in arranging the house-hold affairs and managing the thing as far as possible for her. It seems that Viramati was forced to tackle the responsibilities in her very early age. She was bound to assist her mother in her every pregnancy. On the other hand, the condition of Kasturi was also not better. She had to pass through pain and agony in her every pregnancy. She has to hear the

comments of her sister-in-law's every time when she becomes pregnant. Manju Kapur writes about such things in pensive manner. Virmati had to watch these things a like silent spectator. Manju Kapur writes about Kasturi's pathetic lot. Virmati seemed to be the second mother of her brothers and sisters. When she was only seventeen, she was sent to Dalhousie with her mother to look after her. Virmati was also trained in order to learn cooking and housekeeping which she had to do after her marriage. It is the fate of each and every Indian girl and the novelist seems to be aware with the reality. Viramati has some different notions in her life. She does not seem to be of compromising nature. She seems to be always involved in tussle with Lajwanti. Even the small things disturb her too much. Her study in Amritsar also puts her in conflicting situation. Living in Amritsar provides Virmati an opportunity to enter in the new realm of freedom of which she was deprived for a longer period. Here, Manju Kapur seems to narrate a story of a girl whose journey is quite symbolic due to her transformation from "innocence to experience". Manju Kapur also attaches the theme of feminism with the character of Virmati. Virmati seems to be the champion of feminism in this novel. In Amritsar, her dresses, her outlook, her appearance and her style - everything changes in a stroke. Kasturi is also aware of the transformational attitude of Virmati. She realizes the inevitable changes in her growing daughter. But she is in dilemma whether to free her daughter or to check her advance. Kasturi seems to be in hesitation. She does not allow Virmati to enter in the realm of education with such freedom. Virmati's companionship with Shakuntala provides her an opportunity to dive deep into nectar of freedom which she realizes outside the house. For her, education means the realization of freedom and new outlook and attitude. Virmati and Shakuntala always involve in discussion on the issue of education and freedom. In Shakuntala, Virmati sensed the real clues of happiness which could only be realized through freedom. She watches the activities of Shakuntala with carefulness. She dreams to be with Shakuntala one day. She thinks that she will be no more in Amritsar because there is no real freedom in Amritsar for her. Virmati meeting with the professor provides him an opportunity to realize her dreams. Her family appointed Harish to look after her study. Virmati develops intimacy with him as it is quite natural. The professor also found the perfect student in Virmati who was quite eager to realize her dreams at any cost. The professor also finds the perfect companionship in Virmati. He is now ready to grab the occasion with smartness. The glimpse of Virmati gives the professor a real pleasure and emotional fulfilment. Manju Kapur narrates the affair between the professor and Virmati graphically and

with full detail. In the typical traditional society in India it is impossible to think about such kind of relationship between the teacher and the girl student. The professor is quite aware of his own limitation. He knows the consequences of such kind of affair and society which does not allow him to do so. Manju Kapur narrates the confusion of the professor in these questioning words. Virmati began to find a rare kind of pleasure and happiness in the company of the professor. Her emotional need seems to be satisfied by the professor although it is not acceptable by the moral standard of the society. Virmati and the professor both are in confusion regarding the fate of such kind of human relationship. Several letters were exchanged between the professor and Virmati. All the time, Virmati thinks only about the professor. Virmati is in dilemma what she should do. It was very difficult for her to tell in the family anything between her and the professor. On the other hand, the professor's attitude was becoming romantic. He wrote many letters to her in which he unfolds his heart with the help of the words. On the other hand, Virmati does not respond to the professor's advance quickly. A sense of outrage seems to be influencing the attitude of Virmati. She is no more the same girl as she was before meeting with the professor. She has developed her own sense and attitude. She is not ready to accept the words of her elders especially in her marriage settlement. She has developed her own likes and dislikes. Virmati herself realizes the fact. But Virmati's problem is something different. Although externally she has been inspired by Shakuntala, but her problem is multiple. Virmati has also to adjust her five sisters waiting for their marriage. Her family is quite conscious because she is the eldest one. Her mother is also of the same opinion. She would like to perform the marriage of her daughter as soon as possible. Kasturi reveals her situation before Virmati pathetically. Virmati becomes passionate in her love with the professor. She tells her parents about her decision not to marry other than the professor. All the family members are against her decision but what could they do. Their own girl became hostile against them. On the other hand, the professor was also in search of her all the time. He began to write many letters. In one of his letters to her, he reveals his heart and situation. The professor shows his sexual inclination with Virmati. On the other hand, Virmati could not decline the advances of the professor. Virmati is conscious of the nature of her relationship with the professor but her resistance is not long. The professor succeeded in persuading Virmati in sexual involvements. Manju Kapur also hints about the gulf between the boy and the girl. In the typical traditional society, it is unimaginable for a boy to stay with girl. It is considered as taboo. People think and consider it as bad. But real education might bring the

change in the outlook of the people. Manju Kapur realizes the same thing. Both the professor and Virmati become the victims of their own cobweb. They have committed something beyond imagination but do not able to stand at their sides. Particularly the professor was in utter distress because he had to face the double strokes - society is not going to accept him and his act easily and Virmati is not able to leave him easily also. He could not decide what he should do. He was in dilemma and seeks advice from many people. He met with a poet who advised him to marry Virmati as soon as possible. He showed his sympathetic consideration towards Virmati and professor both. In reply, the professor reveals his heart in compassionate manner. Virmati is conscious about the future of her own daughter as her own mother Kasturi was conscious about her. Ida has the disastrous marriage. Like Virmati, Ida is also the victim of time and space. She suffers from the same stroke as her own mother suffered.

Conclusion

Manju Kapur displays the restricted condition of patriarchal society and celebrates woman's resistance of norms and boundaries. By voicing out women's lived experiences, the writer enounces the culture of patience and silence. She valorises female body in its rawness. She undermines the traditional hierarchy of mind/body division by valorisation of female body, the demystification of the phallus and the deconstruction of heterosexuality as the norm. She speaks of extramarital relationships, sexual experiences, adultery and even of promiscuity, without the conflicts of patriarchal moral principles. The distinctive way in which Kapur theorizes woman's defiance through her body provides evidence that female body is capable of adapting to subjective and emancipatory insight. In the novel the women are found at marginality level in the society. This novel does not approach the women of a family or a single state of Punjab; rather it has wide dimensions. Sudha Shree comments; "*Virmati represents the Indian woman's psyche, which depends on social approval of the family and man*" (Sudha Shree 167). The suffering of women is very common in Indian society. They do not have equal status and equal rights even after a number of years after Independence. Kasturi suffered less because of her silence. Virmati's problems are also less in comparison of her daughter Ida. Thus it is found that during the course of advance of time and space, the problems are going to be complicated more and more. Certainly, the women emerge as the new women with the novel throwing light on the empowerment of woman in male-dominated society in different social perspectives.

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