

MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*: A TALE OF FEMALE SUPPRESSION AND SUBJUGATION

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Abstract:

*Manju Kapur is a prolific writer. She is one of the well-known women writers writing in English. As a woman writer, Manju Kapur has a deep knowledge of women's psyche and look deep into the depth, in their psychological mind and throws light on the different issues concerned with them. When, we go through the story of her best-selling novel *Difficult Daughters*, we come to know that it's the story of women's suppression and subjugation in patriarchal society. It's a story of the life of some prominent female characters including *Virmati, Ida, Swarnalata, and Shakuntala* who brake the tradition. Contrary to this there are other female characters who are conventional i.e. *Kasturi, Gnaga, Lajwanti and Kishori Devi*. It is a story of women's search for self-identity and self-liberation. In this research paper attempts have been made to discover how *Virmati*, the female protagonist of '*Difficult Daughters*' turns rebellion for liberating herself from the subjugation and suppression of patriarchal society.*

Key Words: Patriarchy, suppression, rebel, freedom, self-identity, etc.

Introduction:

The position of women in every age is typically looked upon as marginalised section of society. They are considered as suppressed, subjugated, submissive, sensitive, scared, and the underprivileged. They are considered as the victim of discrimination and suppression. They are dominated by a particular group of male in the society. Always, they are shown dominated by males in patriarchal society. In most of settled societies of the world, they have unfair and prejudiced experiences at every stage of life. They have to fight for their rights and freedom from societal norms and they want to establish their own identity.

In 20th Century feminist writers like Kamla Markandaya, Anita Desai, Nayantara Sheghal, Shashi Deshpande, Bharti Mukerjee and so many others have publicized a new dimension of women's search for freedom and self-identity through their works. Manju Kapur, a post-modern feminist writer portrays a true picture of women psyche in her works. Her novels are female centred and through her works, she brings out female issues like-suppression, subjugation, discrimination, bias, self-identity, struggle for freedom, etc.

Manju kapur is one of the prominent female writer's writing in English. As an eminent novelist, she has gained popularity with the publication of her seven novels namely *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006) and *The Immigrant* (2008), and *Custody* (2011), *Brother* (2016), *The Gallery* (2023), etc. and achieved various awards for her



work.

Manju Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters* was published in 1998. It was awarded with Commonwealth writer's Prize for Best First Book (Eurasia Section) in 1999. The novel is the story of suppressed and subjugated women. There are prominent characters struggling to set their own identity.

Virmati is the eldest daughter of Kasturi and Suraj Prakash in Lala Diwan Chand Family. The novel presents a story of a daughter's journey towards self-realization through the mother's attainment of selfhood. Being the eldest daughter of the family, Virmati has to bear the entire burden of the household chores. Her performance in study is not so good due to her busy schedule. She dedicated herself to the care of remaining other ten younger siblings. Even though she is very hard working she is impatient also, expecting more from her family and especially her mother which she was unprivileged. Her insufficient education and financial insufficiency is the main obstacle in her way of breaking the patriarchal traditions. She thinks the purpose and the sturdy willpower is essential to assert one's self-identity.

In Indian patriarchal system women are driven and governed by Indian tradition and customs. Marriages being the subject of social pattern were conducted within a caste and love marriages and the inter-caste marriages were regarded as a social crime and owed as chargeable offence.

In India the most people chooses to live in joint family in which the woman has to suffer with nastiness and oppressiveness from her in-laws side. The female protagonists in Manju Kapur's novels rebel and triumph over the ideological suppression and redefine ethics and presented the value system themselves to imitate in a noteworthy manner and Virmati is not exception to this.

Even though Virmati is victimized by the situations, she rebels and attempts to win over. Her love affair with the professor Harish Chandra brought her nothing but the long succession of suffering. In the name of family honour, her advancement toward him is criticised by everyone in her family. Her imprisonment inside the storeroom in her own house was one of the incidents, she has also to rebel against it. Since, Harish was a married man, her relations and her marriage with him brought nothing but disgrace to their family. Virmati has to face many problems due to this relationship and her marriage with the professor. Her termination from the school is also the outcome of this affair.

Manju Kapur's focus is on the modern new woman, who is educated and aware of her rights and protesting against her social exploitations. Her central point is on the complexities of Virmati's life considering the culture and the social values besides her struggle under the unfair mechanism of locked society. The female protagonist in Manju Kapur's novels demonstrates a question of tradition and modernity frequently faced by them in Indian society: their inner struggle between the aspiration to take care of their family; and the aspiration to discover deeper modes of accomplishment that fall outside the traditional social norms and Virmati is not exemption to this also.

In *Difficult Daughters* we see the traditionally glorified woman replaced with the real modern one. Here Virmati attempts to through off the burden, she has been carrying. The image



of new changing woman is perceived with the passage of time. The character of Virmati is the portrayal of self-assured, assertive, educated, protesting and ambitious ones, making society aware of her needs and proving her identity. She rebels to find solace, understanding both the worlds i.e. traditional and modern.

Virmati is caught in a oscillation between the responsibility to herself and the traditional role of a daughter, wife and mother. Even after coming as a rebellion against her victimization, she has to negotiate for the sake of her domestic harmony. She fights against patriarchal notions in which woman's voice, choice and freedom is restricted. She is expected to marry Indrajeet, an engineer, a boy chosen by her family but she says no to do so. Her mother deters her but she wills to study further after completing her school education. Her cousin Shakuntala is her ideal. Virmati becomes successful in convincing her family for that but unluckily, falls in an illicit love relationship with Harish, a married professor. All through her life, whenever Virmati dares to cross the patriarchal threshold, she finds her free spirit controlled.

Kasuri is another female character and the mother of Virmati. She is tradition bound woman in the novel *Difficult Daughter's*. She is the firm believer of the fact that for her life means being tied to family and for the happiness of family one must do everything. Grown up in tradition bound family her ways of living are completely traditional even though she is well educated. She compels her daughters to follow the tradition and give importance to the family values. She forces her daughter to be domesticated and Virmati, the protagonist of the novel is not exception to this.

Kasturi is of the opinion that a girl in Indian patriarchal society is born to be married and it is the ultimate goal of her life. Moreover, she believes that it is the duty of every girl to get married. She prepares her daughters to be fit for that purpose. She dedicated her whole life to her family performing her duty and ignoring her individual self. She has given birth to eleven children. Her child birth is considered as a harvest time. She faced the comments passed to her very boldly but being a graduate she did not use her common sense. Her studies could not keep her away from this. Instead she has given much importance to being a traditional woman.

Her traditional views are apparent when she does not appreciate the idea of young girls going out for work or pursuing a career. Kasturi forces her daughter Virmati to follow knitting and sewing: "*Why can't you make yourself useful? There is so much sewing to be done for the baby. There are sweaters to be made for the children.*" (*Difficult Daughters*, p.11)

She is very disturbed at the response given by Virmati. She had never disobeyed her own mother and she expects her daughters should follow her. She stayed a silent sufferer of all the discomfort but once she had tried to voice her concern about the incessant pregnancies. At this time her aunt-in-law replied angrily saying: "*Don't talk such rubbish, beti, God has favoured you.*" She was unable to do anything as she was conditioned by the tradition. She had to tolerate all this in the name of tradition and patriarchy.

In India the bondage of marriage is considered significant traditionally. Kasturi is concerned, she being a member of patriarchal traditional family of Lala Diwanchand and she does everything for the sake of her family sightlessly following the tradition of her family. She does everything and get exhausted. She does not remember the day in her married life when

she was not weary by the household chores. *Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not tired, when her feet and legs did not ache. (Difficult daughters, 7)*

During her childhood Kasturi used to go to the Mission School, but she has to leave her school for she was found praying before the picture of Christ. But after some time she was admitted to a college for Hindu girls and she, "...became the first girl in her family to postpone the arrival of wedding guests by tentative assault on learning." (*Difficult daughters, 62*)

It is the requirement of tradition that every woman should marry the man that her parents choose for her. She has no right of choosing a man of her own choice. Her approval or disapproval in this regard is not given much value. To make the matter worse, traditionally girls were not shown to the grooms until they get married but she was permitted to see her husband but in the presence of the family members. She wordlessly married the man of her parent's choice. But her daughter's case is different. Kasturi is the embodiment of old traditions and patriarchy. Kasturi is dutiful woman paying special attention to her family members.

Ganga is another traditional type of woman following the Indian customs and tradition with full belief. She is beautiful Indian woman. *The wife fair, face like the moon, short, round, plump, with her sari covering her head, and falling below the waist. (Difficult daughters, 35)*

She is not an educated woman, however married to highly qualified person Prof. Harish Chandar. Her husband tries to teach her but she does not give much importance to education. Her own mother was illiterate. She does every household chore dutifully. She is also good at cooking as well as in hospitality. But being uneducated and dutiful type of woman she becomes the victim of the patriarchal society. She gives much significance to the traditional ways of living. She gets surprized at Harish's illicit love affair and marriage with Virmati and tries to find fault with herself. But she is unable to get the answer. She remains calm and bears all the consequences mutely. The tears roles down her face at this. She helplessly suffers all these things.

Shakuntala, is the daughter of Lajwanti and Virmati's first cousin. She lives in Lahore for doing M. Sc. in Chemistry and teaches at Lahore College. She is born and brought up in Arya Samaj family under strict code of conduct. She is liberal and lives her life at her own conditions. She is also modern in her outlook about everything. She is standing as an inspirational force for Virmati to rebel against the tradition of the family. Virmati gets her inspiration from Shakuntala for studying further. She tells about her life and about those friends who are not happy with their families but satisfied working with her group. She advocates the unmarried status of woman if they want to follow higher studies. To her marriage seems to be barrier in the way of learning as it takes freedom. According to her freedom is much more important than anything else. Shakuntala's role is significant as she motivates Virmati for higher studies and coming out for the purpose. She is not dependant for anything on others. She is free to do, as she wishes. Virmati is surprised at her looks and manners; she looks confident and intelligent though she is not beautiful. She remains busy in conducting political meetings, demonstrations and rallies. Virmati is very much impressed by Shakuntala - "*These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry and nothing else.*" (P.17) Shakuntala is bold and beautiful as well as

intelligent and lives glamorous life in Lahore. She notices a change in her personality as she lives in city.

Swarnalata is another modern woman character. She is also an educated girl and is active in politics. She also lives her life on her own terms and conditions. She is liberal in her thinking. She rejects the bondage of marriage and wants to do something more than just marrying. Thus patriarchal norms are denied by her.

She is the roommate of Virmati and has many things to offer to her. She becomes motivational force for Virmati's rebel. She talks to her parents about her own thinking freely. In this matter, she goes beyond tradition of the family. She herself rebelled and left home for her own progress. She also helps Virmati in her difficulties. In a sense, she is helping and cooperative by nature. When Virmati returns from Nahan, She finds her pregnant and helps her in aborting child.

Ida is the daughter of Virmati, the protagonist of the novels. She is a rebel and modern in her thoughts as she does not want to be like her own mother. She is the narrator of the book who understands her family structure. She says: *"When I grew up I was very careful to tailor my needs to what I knew I could get. That is my female inheritance. That is what she tried to give me. Adjust, compromise, adapt. Assertion, though difficult to establish, is easy to remember."* (DD, 256) Ida becomes the typical daughter of a 'difficult daughter' Virmati, the protagonist of the novel. She is not successful in developing an understanding with her mother during her lifetime and after the death of her mother this realization engulfs her with guilt. Ida sets on a journey into her mother's past in search of a woman she could know and understand. Ida rebels against Virmati who reject her own womanhood and follows her own whims. But she experiences a strong bond with her mother, *"without her I am lost, I look for ways to connect"* (D.D.4).

Another female character is Lajwanti, the mother of Shakuntala. She is the follower and gives utmost importance to the institution of marriage. She is very concerned about the marriage of her daughter Shakuntala. She is disappointed at her daughter's bachelor status. She feels very miserable at her condition. She is obviously a traditional woman. Even though, she is traditional in her ways and wants her daughter to get married traditionally, she is waxed and leaves the matter to the will of God. We find her becoming hysterical about children's unmarried status.

Kishori Devi is the mother of Professor Harish. She is also traditional woman in her ways of living. Under the patriarchal pressure, she is forced to accept the second wife of Harish. She believes horoscope that her son would have two wives. When Harish brings Virmati, she is convinced to this. She compromises with the situation. She loves and gives much respect to Ganga, the first wife of Harish as she considers her as a perfect traditional house-wife and embodiment of all domestic virtues. In this regard she contemplates: *"Her daughter-in-law was exemplary, thrifty, efficient, industrious and respectful, but if this was to be her fate, what could anyone do? She should have to accept it."* (DD- 210) Thus, Kishori Devi also projects herself as a traditional woman, suppressed under patriarchy.

Conclusion:

Manju Kapur has been successful in presenting a female protagonist as well as some of



the female characters as suppressed and subjugated in the traditional Indian family. The special attribute - adjustment, compromise and adaptation seems evident.

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