

## MATRILINEAL PERSPECTIVES IN MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

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Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters*, features themes like love, sex and marriage in very bold and rather unconventional terms. The narrator, Ida, is a difficult daughter and she explores the life of her mother in the novel..it is the daughter who is trying to investigate and restore the image of her mother, sullied by those around her. The story of Virmati is told by her daughter Ida, one of the difficult and diffident daughters of the story, the other being Virmati, herself the daughter of Kasturi. Thus the novel, which is about rediscovering the mother and restructuring and reinstating her place in society, involves three generations of mothers and daughters. In fact, the maternal line is even longer, if one considers the occasional references to Kasturi's childhood and her unnamed mother. The wide rift between Ida and Virmati, created during the mother's lifetime, is comparable to the distance between Virmati and Kasturi. The transgression of social norms and traditional ethical and moral codes by Virmati, for example, her decision to marry a married man carries a greater sense of sin and stigma than the divorce of her daughter, whose experience of a less adverse and less rigidly patriarchal society is the outcome of the struggle of generations of mothers and daughters, a saga of which the novel is. The narrator makes an attempt to understand her mother in a way that the traditional family ignores. The mother's sentiments are rejected by the patriarchal society and it is for Ida to recreate her mother's history. She refuses to accept the family version of the mother's story and decides to delve deep into her past in order to discover a woman in the proper perspective of herself and time. The account grows out of interviews with people who knew her mother and by researching materials (like contemporary newspapers) to get a view of the socio-political events of the time.

Her thoughts and actions can be seen as questioning the traditional historiography that often marginalizes the roles of the oppressed, the subaltern and the caste-creed-gender-based, the 'other' especially that of women in the histories of national events like the freedom movement. Her struggle is against the politics of silencing women often adopted by such 'history', both oral and written, in familial and social levels. Her search takes her to her roots as she travels to Amritsar to excavate the buried past, to breathe life into the silence of her mother's history. She is alone in her search pitied by her relatives whose reaction to her divorced status is "... With Virmati for mother, it is not strange that such a thing should happen..." (pg. 3). Even after her death, Virmati's image as an immoral, unethical woman does not fade. It is this misrepresentation of the image of her mother that Ida, the narrator, wishes to rectify. She takes the help of her Kailash Mama to retrace the steps that her mother took and begins with her visit to the AS college, where her mother had entered the bastion of male learning (41) as a student, and where she met her father, a professor. 'My history had started here, in this classroom....Virmati plus fiancé, the Professor plus wife. An invisible quadrangle in a classroom.' says Ida (pg. 49).

The members of the family who only wish to emphasize her 'nurturing' role as mother never reveal her other aspects. They point out that she 'studied more than any other girl in the



family' (pg. 5), but there is an unmistakable touch of awe, distance and even disapproval that makes her an 'other' in the family. Ida now wants to reconstruct her past in a language that would establish her mother as a woman with the fullness of an individual.... With her desires and aspirations, physical and mental, and not just limiting her to the conventional roles of 'nurture' and 'care'—from material that was available to her through her endeavours. She says, 'I have pieced together materials from memories that were muddled, partial, and contradictory. The places I visited, the stuff I read tantalized me with fragments that I knew I would not be able to fully reconstruct. Instead, I imagined histories, rejecting the material that didn't fit, moulding ruthlessly the material that did. All though I felt the excitement of discovery, the pleasure of fitting narratives into a discernible inheritance' (258). Ida recognizes the fragmentary nature of her materials but nevertheless relies on memory, personal visits, etc. because these are unavoidable elements in reconstructing the past that is not documented in the usual sense of the word. Through the act of reconstruction she realizes her own 'inheritance' and gets connected to matrilinearity. 'This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with head and heart' (pg. 258).

Virmati remains the outsider in her family as also in her husband's home. The daughter who has thrown caution to the winds, who has no care for her younger sisters, who has brought only shame and sorrow to the family cannot be welcome. She is slapped and thrown out of the house by her mother when she visits her once after her marriage. But she feels the isolation most after her father's death when the most distant relatives have the right to enter the inner circle of the family and she has to watch from the fringes. She feels not only her mother's 'inaccessibility' (pg. 53) but also her exclusion from the 'protective ring' (pg. 119) that her children have formed around her. The position was similar in the Professor's household. His indignant and injured wife refused to yield an inch of her territory to her. His mother was more placating, but nonetheless could not really accept her. The professor was afraid of the whole situation and despite his show of bravado, his children by his first wife were not allowed to go close to her. A failed suicide attempt, the pain of conception and abortion before her marriage and of her conception and miscarriage after, further isolate her and make her retreat into her own shell. With no space to call her own, the feeling of suffocation is unbearable. With the nationalist movement, and the threat of imminent partition in the world outside as a backdrop, Virmati herself felt the partition that had been created between her and the rest of the world. She could relate neither to her families with their traditional norms, nor to the women who had in a sense broken away from the patriarchal system, for instance, her cousin Shakuntala or her roommate Swarnalata, both of them were unmarried and independent of male guidelines.

The narrator in her journey through her mother's life tries to bridge the gap that the two of them had in the letter's lifetime, by changing her perspective, moving the angle of her thinking, realizing her mother's anxiety for her. 'Now her shadow no longer threatens me. Without the hindrance of her presence, I can sink into her past and make it mine' (pg. 258). The paradox of this complex relationship continues when with the shadow of her mother lifted, Ida emerges as a new self, but also as a rootless one since the 'safety net' is removed and she is now left to fend for herself. The discovery of the mother, the fore-runner in the matrilineal relay-race, simultaneously captures her with a new sense of bonding and entrusts her with a sense of individual and social responsibility of carrying on with the incomplete task on her own. But her mother has paved the way to her future. "Your mother secures your future by



showing you what you will, in part, become. To be yourself you rebel against your mother, yet your opposing stance contains what it opposes”, says Dorothy Rowe (xii). Not having lived up to her father’s expectations of becoming an all-rounder and disappointing her mother with a broken marriage, Ida wants to be different, but regrets marriage as a means of emancipation. She understands the ‘trappings of a modern emancipated woman’ with a covert traditional agenda-work and be independent, but also get married and have children. Her decision to divorce and remain single competes a process in which she not only emerges as the concluding force in the long generational struggle of women, but also comes out of the shadow of the mother to establish herself as an individual. This is what Pam Morris calls for in her argument for the reconceptualization of the mother daughter relationship because she sees “women’s inability to represent their identity in positive terms as cause, in large part, by the deformation of the mother-daughter bond within the symbolic order” (Morris, pg. 129). ‘Motherhood’ in the larger patriarchal social structure has a very constricted meaning. Creativity/creation is the male domain, whereas care and nurture is preserve of the female. According to Luce Irigaray, as explained by Pam Morris, “because of this diminished value of the term ‘mother’, there is a risk for women of a compensating over investment in ‘self’-denial, in non-being, or in an over possessive maternity” (pg. 129).

The projection of mother-daughter relationships in Indian literature is hard to find. *Difficult Daughters* from this perspective is a landmark novel, exploring the extremely complex relationships of women of more than three generations, who carry a certain tradition with them, but also clash at every step. The daughters initially differ from their mothers but ultimately end up identifying with them. Mohanram’s comment about the representation of ‘mother’ in India literature being equated with ‘motherland’ becomes particularly significant in *Difficult Daughters*, written against the backdrop of the enslaved motherland and eventual partition of the nation.

#### **Works Cited :**

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