

Women And Their Problems In Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters And A Married Women

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Abstract: Among the prolific women novelists in English in India, like Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Jhumpa Lahiri, Manju Kapur is a distinguished novelist, who deals with women and their problems and love, marriage and sex in all her novels. Manju Kapur a well known name in modern Anglo-Indian literature is widely known as the Jane Austen of India. Her novels deal with everything that is related to the modern family and the patriarchal society. Her novels present the contemporary picture of today's woman who is eager to break free from the domestic walls of their house to build a world of their own. Her novels are Difficult Daughters, A Married Woman, Home, The Immigrant and Custody. Even though she presents male characters, they are not up to that level to attract readers as that of her women characters-Virmati in Daughters, Astha in Woman and Nisha in Home, Nina in Immigrant and Shagun and Ishita in Custody. This paper brings out Women and their problems in Manju Kapur's "Difficult Daughters and A Married Woman". Through Virmati in Difficult Daughters Kapur deals with the theme of travails in self-identity vis a vis socio-cultural identity. By presenting Astha in A Married Woman, Kapur presents a lesbian world and challenges the traditional modes of love, marriage and sex.

Keywords: patriarchy, self-realization, education, infidelity etc.

Manju Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female psyche. She concentrates on women's issues. She writes about women and comments about the space which women occupy in domestic relationships. Her fiction stresses the women's need for self-fulfilment, autonomy, self-realization and a fight for her own destiny.

More than half of the population of the world is made of woman but she is not treated on par with man despite innumerable evolutions and revolutions. She has the same mental and moral power, yet she is not recognized as his equal. Actually in this male dominated society, she is wife, mother, sister, home maker etc. She is expected to serve, sacrifice, submit and tolerate each ill against her peacefully. Her individual self has very little recognition in the patriarchal society and so self-effacement is her normal way of life. In such conditions, the question of searching her identity is justified.

By the late seventies and eighties many women writers emerged with the issues related to women dealing with their family problem, domestic violence, the law, the household, health care, education, their work and their working conditions. Manju Kapur is one of the novelist who takes her protagonists one step ahead of the others with the burning issues of modern world varying from lesbianism, infidelity, infertility, divorce, adoption etc. Manju Kapur is a modern writer with modern views and notions. She knows that today's women are far more intellectual and mature than their predecessors. Her novels are chronicles of the Indian Middle Class society. Her protagonists are today's women who are not ready to submit to the old age traditions and customs of patriarchal society.

Manju Kapur's debut novel, Difficult Daughters won the 1999 Commonwealth Writers Prize. It was set against the historical background of India's partition. It is the story of a Young Woman named Virmati who falls in love with a

married man with two children. It is the story of love, sorrow and compromise. The story tells how she is torn between family duties, desire for education and elicit love. Virmati is the eldest daughter of Kasthuri and Suraji Prakash. Kasthuri has eleven children. One after another she gives birth to children and thus the whole burden of household work increases over Virmati, being the eldest daughter. Due to the busy routine she does not do well in her studies and fails. She falls in love with Harish, a professor who is already married with two children. Virmati parents decide to marry her to an Engineer, Inderjeet, but due to the death in his family marriage is postponed for two years. During this time Virmati passes her FA exam and denies for marriage. Now, Virmati becomes mentally disturbed and goes to Tarashika and drowns herself. She is saved by the servant of her grant father. Everybody enquires the reason, but finally she declares that she does not like the boy and wants to study further.

Now Kasthuri has to go with Virmati to Lahore for getting her admit in college and the Principal Sakunthala assures Kasthuri that there will be no problem and she has her eyes fixed firmly on the student. Here also, Professor's course of meeting to her has yet not stopped and during this period she becomes pregnant. She becomes restless and with the help of her room-mate Swarnalatha she gets abortion. After completing her B.T. course, she returns to Amritsar and is offered the Principalship of a college at Sulthanpur. She joins it, but here too Harish visits her and these meetings were observed by the manager of the college. She is dismissed. So she decides to go to Nainketan. But on the way, she meets a close friend of Harish, who is already aware of their intimate relationship. He calls Harish and performs all the rituals of marriage. Professor with Virmati returns home.

The life and marriage of Virmati shows that mere education and economic Independence are not enough to break the patriarchal structure. Virmati's married life with Professor in Amritsar turns to be a disaster. She wilts under the implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband's first wife. She loses all sense of identity. In the end, her individual history disappears and becomes all but irrelevant.

Seema Malik, too, sympathizes with Virmati when she says, "Though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is caught into another where her free spirit is curbed and all she does is 'adjust, compromise and adapt'"

Virmati was ostracized by her family, and forced to compete for her share of her husband's love along with his first wife, Ganga. Virmati was forced to compromise and adjust in order to adapt herself into her husband's family and eventually died an insignificant death. At the end of the novel Ida says,

'This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word—brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it Mama and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore'. (G.Kumar 108). She wanted to bury the ghosts of her mother's past behind her and move on in life.

Manju Kapur appositely projects her position in the family,

"Though not overtly hostile, in the warring factions that existed in the house, she belongs to the opposition side". Nobody wants her, nobody likes her. Her melancholy cross all limits when she reaches her home to attend the funeral

ceremony of her father. Her mother happens to see her standing there, she hurls all possible harsh words and blamed on her for her father's death and asks her to get out of the house when she says:

You've destroyed our family you badmash!.....you have blackened our face everywhere! For this I gave you birth? Because of you there is shame on me, shame on Bade Pitaji! But what to you care, brazen that you are!(221).

Virmati is pierced at heart to think how only one fault of hers has distanced her from everything. It is to be realized that despite all talks of equality and freedom, Indian Society has not been able to forsake patriarchal influence. Kapur's Daughters is a feminist discourse. It not only deals with Virmati and her problems arising out of her marriage to a Professor, but also related to the problems of Virmati's daughter, Ida, who breaks up her marriage as she is denied maternity by her husband. The forced abortion is the termination of her marriage. She has that strength that Virmati lacks. Swarnalatha, Virmati's friend, is also clearheaded, strong woman. She too experiences tension with her parents over the issue of marriage. But unlike Virmati, she channelizes her energy into the new direction which gives her a sense of group identity.

Ida could not accept her mother's decision to abort the foetus and terminate the life growing within her, for she. She had broken her relationship with her husband Prabhakar for he had forced her to go for an abortion-

'I knew Mother, What it was like to have an abortion. Prabhakar had insisted I have one. In denying that incipient little thing in my belly, he sowed the seeds of our break up' (Kapur, P 156) Ida had never shared this secret with her mother. She confessed how the death of the foetus haunted her and how she had endured the trauma of her loses alone.

Mother, I never told you this, because you thought Prabhakar was so wonderful, and I was glad that in the choice of my husband I had pleased you. Why should I burden you with my heartaches when you had enough of your own? (Kapur 156-157)

The novel not only refers to

The title of the novel, Daughters suggests that Virmati is not only the daughter who is difficult to handle. The novel covers three generations of daughters starting from Virmati's mother, Kasturi, through Virmati and ending with Ida, the difficult daughter of Virmati, who is also a difficult daughter of a difficult mother, Kasturi. Each of these daughters never shares a happy relationship with their respective mothers and always remains alienated.

As Daughters is based on the theme of generation gap, an endless argument between marriage and education hovers over the novel. In the course of the novel, Virmati shows her courage to fight against male chauvinism for her right of education, right of choosing her mate in life and economic independence. In Virmati, one can see the incipient new woman, who is conscious, introspective, educated and wants to carve out a niche for her.

The search for control over one's destiny is the theme of Daughters. Virmati seeks human relations that would allow her to be herself and to exercise the degree of control over her life. However, when she is asked to accept a typical arranged marriage, she rebels against that destiny. Insisting on her right

to be educated, she manages to leave her home to study in Lahore. In Lahore, she falls in love with the Professor, a married man. In the end, when the Professor refuses to leave his first wife, she ends up being marginalized by her own family and despised by her husband's family too. Virmati's married life with the Professor turns out to be a disaster - a fiasco.

In *Daughters*, Kapur's female characters involve themselves not only in a revolt against male - dominated traditional world but also suffer from generation gap. Kasturi, Virmati and Ida belong to three different generations, whose relationships are much affected with the ailment of generation gap. In the novel, Virmati, a difficult daughter of Kasturi, becomes a mother of another difficult daughter, Ida. The continuity of clash between tradition and modernity among the women of three generations from Kasturi through Virmati to Ida ends both in admittance and rejection. Kasturi yields to tradition, while Virmati and Ida do not succumb themselves to follow the ancient social values, customs and systems and suffer maladjustment.

Difficult Daughters presents, Virmati as an assertive and bold women on patriarchal culture. Even though she is born and brought up in a traditional household in Amristar. Her love for Professor is rather a search for self-autonomy. She struggle for tradition and modernity. With their education, they become aware of their self-reliance which is proved in concern with new women. Although she is educated and financially independent, she suffers by being a second wife to the Professor. The life and marriage of Virmati shows that mere education and economic Independence are not enough to break the patriarchal structure.

The novel not only refers to the daughter Virmati but also alludes to the several other difficult daughters who left the confines of their household and engaged themselves in the national struggle for Independence. In *Shakuntala*, *Swarnalatha* and *Ida* we see the images of modern woman, conscious, introspective, educated, emancipated, driven by the zeal to assert their autonomy, separate identity and find a place for themselves in society.

Manju Kapur's second novel is "A Married Woman" is called "fluent and witty". It is the story of Astha an educated, upper middle class, working Delhi Woman. As a girl, she is brought up with large supplements of fear. She is her parents' only child. Her education, her character, her marriage these are her parents' burdens.

Her mother often declared, 'When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the *Shastras* say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?' (p.1)

But like a common school going girl she often imagines of romantic and handsome young man. In her adolescence she falls in love with a boy of her age. Day and night the thought of him keeps her inside churning. In the mean time she is emotionally engaged with Rogan and they enjoy physical relationship. The relationship is finished within a few days as Rohan moves to oxford for further studies. Later she marries Hemant, the MBA, and foreign returned son of the bureaucrats. Initially their married life runs smooth and they have two children, a son Himanshu and a daughter Anuradha.

Astha imbibes middle class values and seems to enjoy her mental bliss for a long time, but slowly feels that there is something certainly lacking in her life. She suffers from a sense of incompleteness, repression and anguish, which is further aggravated by her involvement into the outer world of rebellion and protest.

Astha has everything that a woman could ask for-a dutiful husband, children and a nice surrounding to live. But Astha wants to emancipate herself from these constraints / chains. She becomes an artist to express herself and begins to teach in a school. Gradually, she turns to writing poetry, which is considered by her husband, Hemant, as "positively neurotic". Then she gives up writing and begins sketching and drawing.

Their conventional marriage is smooth, sound and healthy till Astha meets Aijaz Khan, a secular Muslim involved in Militant left wing theatre group. After few month of their marriage, Astha's life becomes dull and dry. Her husband ruins her dreams as well as happiness of her life. She begins to hate her husband who has a mechanical way of sex. Although she finds herself trapped between the pressures of the modern developing society and shackles of ancient biases. She sets out on her quest and falls in love with another woman Peeplika, the widow of Aijaz. Astha resorting to a strange way of life, projects against her subordination under patriarchy.

A Married Woman is a feminocentric protest against the phallogocentric patriarchal culture. The male world imposes unlimited controls over women. But this type of lesbian relationship breaks over the male dominance. The novel raises the controversial issue of homosexual relationship in a challenging way. After all gay and lesbian relationships are not mere fancies, this is getting more and more visible in modern societies though we may or may not accept it. In this novel, Kapur empowers her protagonist, Astha, to give a strong resistance to patriarchy by denouncing the prescribed forms of the society.

Manju Kapur is the first Indian feminist to introduce the lesbianism and lesbian love as an important question to be discussed by the advocate of women rights. Kapur's assertion of sexuality in the form of lesbian relationship may create much hue and cry. Kapur told in an interview to Ira Pandey about the introduction of this plot clears all confusions:

This relationship suggested itself to me as an interesting means of making Astha mature and change. An affair with a man would have been the classic..... and so I ruled it out and tried out a same sex affair, I don't know how successful. I have been nor is this based on any real life relationship. It is as I said a writers experiment with a lot.

When Astha gives birth to a boy child, everybody is very happy. Her mother observes:

"When Astha's son was finally born she felt a gratitude as profound as it was shamed. 'The family is complete at last' said Astha's mother piously feeling her own contribution. Hemant's mother agreed, too happy in the birth of her grandson, carrier of the line, the seed, the name, to respond with her usual reserve to someone she increasingly felt was her social inferior.(p.68)

Unfortunately in our society, if a woman is unable to give birth to a bob child, she is regarded as socially inferior. The conventions of the patriarchal society make her husband go by

his wishes and Astha is not treated as his equal by him. Even in money matter, he does not consult her. Once while unpacking the travel suitcase of Hemant, Astha was shocked to find a condom. Hemant tries to convince his wife, but the discovery gave a big jerk to her marital life.

When Astha and Hemant planned a family trip to Goa, the ticket was arranged by the money earned by the sale of one of Astha's paintings. Astha's desire to buy a carved silver box was ruthlessly crushed down by Hemant. He says:

'You earn!' snorted Hemant. 'What you earn, now that is really something. Yes that will pay for this holiday.' (p.165)

The tone of refusal hurt her. The male dominance was clear. Astha searches a place for herself in the male dominated society. Society, morality, values are like bondage to her. She is leading forward in an ambiguous manner in the midst of relentless urbanisation and the far reaching western influences.

Astha understands a married women's place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death in her Indian status. She realizes for herself that, "*A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth*" (231) are the essential prerequisites of a married woman.

In *Woman*, Kapur has taken writing as a protest, a way of mapping out life from the point of a woman's experience. It is a seductive story of love, passion and attachment. Driven by a powerful physical relationship with a much younger woman, Pipeelika, Astha risks herself losing the acquisitions of her conventional marriage and safe family. The novel raises the conventional issue of lesbian relationship in a challenging way.

The novel ends with Pipeelika leaving for the USA to do her Ph.D as suggested by her brother who sponsors her. Astha sees her off at the airport and returns to the fold of her family. In the end Astha reaches nowhere. Ultimately, she has to come back to her family and readjust herself in ancient traditions. Indian women are respectful of their marriage and even though alternatives are available, they are neither acceptable nor fulfilling. Ultimately she has to surrender herself in the name of culture, tradition, religion and family.

Most of her woman characters marry for different reasons and fall out of marriage one by one for different reasons too. They are caught in the vortex of love, marriage and sex. In *Daughters*, marriage to Kasturi is responsibility; for Virmati, it is to love and attachment; and for Ida, it is to carry the line. In *Woman*, Astha's parents want Astha to be married because they consider it as their duty.

In *Daughters*, Kasturi becomes a passive sufferer being exploited in a patriarchal society. Virmati is alienated and Ida remains single and childless. In *Woman*, Astha, in her restlessness, turns out to be a lesbian and becomes an irresponsible woman to her husband and children. Kapur's *Daughters* is a tale of its protagonists struggle for career and identity against the ideology of domesticity. It is a story of a woman torn between family duty, the desire for education and illicit love. *Woman* explores Astha's longing for purpose in her life other than being a wife and a mother. It also presents a lesbian relationship between Astha and Pipeelika.

Difficult *Daughters* and *A Married Woman* show that the female characters born out of typically Indian situation, they are caught between tradition and modernity, self-

aggrandizement and self-realization and self-assertion and confrontation. It only results in self-alienation and they become a symbol of female imagination responding to pressures and oppressions of patriarchal culture where marriage is seen only as a compromise

Once the women were silent and remained only as rubber dolls for others to move as they wanted. But now they are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action oriented. Defying patriarchal notions that enforce women towards domesticity, they assert their individuality and aspire self-reliance through education. They nurture the desire of being independent and leading lives of their own. They want to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond a husband and children. The protagonists know she cannot depend on others to sort out the domestic situation and proceed to tackle it on her own.

In spite of getting education and freedom the woman protagonist of Manju Kapur's novel does not blossom into new woman in the real sense. All of them fall in love first and their search for their self-identity becomes the second thought. They struggle between tradition and modernity. Marriage proves to be disastrous plunging them deep into melancholy, depression and despair. But in some place, the mere education and financial independence are not enough to tackle the problem, to come out of the caged life, to lead their independent life, to lead their life successfully and to lead their family life successfully.

The novelists wish is not to break the family. They show the way to lead an independent life. Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande and many other woman writers as an individual rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the silence of suffering, trying to move out of the caged existence and asserting the individual self.

A close study of Manju Kapur's novels reveals that through the story of her female protagonists in all her novels, she projects the view that when an Indian woman in spite of her education, status and intelligence, tries to marry according to her own choice and spoils her prospects in both the world. Marriage proves to be disastrous plunging them deep into melancholy, depression and despair. Kapur in her novels presents the position of women in Indian social culture. Women have been marginalized. They try their best to liberate themselves from the trap of Patriarchal structure despite being subjugated and dominated by male chauvinism.

Kapur's women are totally obsessed with fulfilment rather than accepting the submissive domesticity. Her women are from middle class status. They are educated, modern, intelligent, bold and assertive. But the protagonists in her novels sustain a lot of physical, emotional and psychological sufferings. On the whole, women in Kapur's novels challenging the existing socio-cultural patriarchal system. Kapur's basic approach to women's life in her novels are to liberate them from oppressive measures of the patriarchy.

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