

Patricentric Conformism: an Exegesis of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Literatures being the reflection of life, the Postcolonial women writers often represent the new women of India and their quest for identity in their novels. While portraying the confident, ambitious, enterprising and individualized women who demand attention, equality and peace, Manju Kapur, in her novels, has dared to trespass the set doctrines of gender inequality. Her novel the *Difficult Daughters* focuses on the struggle of an educated young woman of middle class against the norms of a family that cherishes the old values of arranged marriage. The protagonist is a woman who is shredded by conflictual forces and torn apart by oppositional structures in real life and caught between the dilemma of family duty and personal desires. The novel draws a parallel between Virmati's struggle for freedom and identity along with India's struggle for freedom. Feminism as a social movement challenges the patriarchal orthodoxy by bringing to the limelight the imbalance in society and by providing women with the same rights and opportunities as men, in order to take their rightful place in the world. Intellectual starvation, economic exploitation, commercial exploitation, domestic domination, physical abuse, sexual harassment, and lack of personal freedom continue to affect the lives of women in spite of laws to the contrary. Against such a backdrop, this paper tries to explore the patriarchal orthodoxy present in society reflected in the novel *Difficult Daughters* in the light of the Postcolonial feminist theories. The paper also attempts to unravel the physical and psychological imprisonment of women in the society in the light of the character, Virmati.

Feminism as a social movement challenges the patriarchal orthodoxy by bringing to the limelight the imbalance in society and by providing women with the same rights and opportunities as men, in order to be able to take their rightful place in the world. After the feminist reawakening in the 1970s, feminists began to realize that equal rights alone cannot free women from sexual and social subordination.

The image of women in fiction has undergone a change during the last four decades. Women writers have moved away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women, towards conflicts, female characters searching for identity; no longer characterized and defined simply in terms of their victim status. A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing

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has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the woman's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to note the emergence of not just an Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Women's presentation is more assertive, more liberated in their view and more articulate in their expression than the woman of the past.

Women writers of post-colonial India have created a literature of their own, placing women in the context of the changing social scenario, specially concentrating on the psyche of such women. True that the Indian women have consciously accepted the supremacy of the patriarchal value system by surrendering meekly to their traditionally assigned roles and allowing themselves to be dominated, but higher education, better job opportunities and awareness of rights and privilege of women have forced her to contemplate. Indian women today are exposed to new set of values with education and economic independence putting them in a rather conflicting state where they desire independence while they dread their traditional role but are still not courageous enough to walk out of the situation. At this juncture, woman has to redefine herself. Women writers have caught women in this flux and have portrayed them realistically both psychologically as well as physically in their novels. Such literature has certainly contributed to a fresh exploration of the role and status of women in the coetaneous Indian society.

Feminism in India, besides being a political crusade, attempts to study and solve the various gender based problems. In India, patriarchal orthodoxy is one of the hierarchies which keep females oppressed by traditional system. As an impact of this orthodoxy, women are always defined in terms of men. Hence, unwed mothers, separated, single or unfaithful women are considered outcast. Living out of wedlock with a partner is still unheard of and stared upon. An unmarried daughter even in her early twenties brings shame upon her parents and is a burden; and once married she becomes the property of her in-laws. The marriage of the bride and groom requires the bride's father to pay dowry to the bride groom. All such aspects of patriarchy are challenged in the works of post colonial Indian novelists along with the women's desire to liberate themselves from the clutches of the traditional patriarchal definition of womanhood.

Among the novelists from the eighties onwards, women writers like Manju Kapur have had considerable success in portraying woman as the protagonist in plots centered on issues such as female marginalization, marital discord, sexual suppression, alienation and the search for identity. Manju Kapur is an Indian novelist, born at Amritsar in 1948. She graduated from the Miranda House University College for women and went on to take an M.A at Dalhousie University Halifax Nova. She was a professor of English literature at her alma mater Miranda

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House College, Delhi. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* won the 1999 Commonwealth Writers' Prize. When one reads her novel, a new significant meaning can be viewed that crisscross dogmas of cultural critical thinking. The oppressive mechanism of a closed society is reflected in the novels of Manju Kapur. Taking into account the complexity of life, different histories, cultures and different structures of values, the women's question, despite basic harmony needs to be tackled in relation to the socio-cultural situation.

In order to grow one must cross the social and psychological thresholds. Biological and chronological growth are inevitable and the social movement involved in passing from the role of the daughter to that of a wife or of mother are all part of society's institutions. Psychological growth and the crossing of threshold are however choices that a woman makes by utilizing her personal qualities and by investing herself and redefining her roles. The struggle for the free thinking woman begins here. Up to this point she has either contained herself within or negotiated with the legitimate social and psychological role space. However, impelled by the awareness of the lacuna and detrimental forces in her life that limit and restrict her, she starts seeking a space where she can redefine her role, find new meanings and greater fulfillment and claim herself to be a person beyond the given role so that she can reach out into the limitless potential and meaning of being alive.

This paper traces the journey of such a woman, Virmati from Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters*, who does not merely acknowledge the existence of cross roads of choices in life but evolves to explore an abstract meaning of various existing thresholds of patriarchy and beyond. She transgresses the boundaries of old patriarchal system in the context of her unending quest to understand and locate the identity of womanhood. Her attempts to redefine the patriarchal matrix; places her in the category of non-conformists or deviants. Traversing into a conscious domain rather than unmindfully practicing the outer world for survival is a phenomenal endeavor commonly observed in such characters. Their behavioral patterns also highlight the childhood dismay, physical and mental suffocation at adolescence due to patriarchal notches as well as irreversible dogmatic forces of a traditional marriage in the lives of these emergent women. In the *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati, under situational demands acts in a deviant manner against the desires of her family. She gradually falls in love with the Professor who lives next door though cultural conditioning had initially reminded her against getting involved with the professor who was already married. But, though already engaged to the canal engineer, Indrajith; she in built response towards a person's need from a very young age broke down her reserves when the professor cried out his need for her, "eldest and a girl she was finely tuned to neediness, it called

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her blood and bones.”(50) As a result, “her soul revolved and her suffering increased.”(50) The professor continued to pressurize her to give up her engagement with the canal engineer which further agonized Virmati. Perplexed, she held both the letters- the canal engineer's letter and the professor's letter – in her hands. The matter of fact dryness of the canal engineer's letter when compared to the compassionate and love fluttering words of the professor's letter gave her the courage to break up her engagement. This left her mother painfully wondering about how her dutiful daughter has “changed so much in just a generation”(55). Shattered by the strain and cursing of her family and understanding well that she could not depend upon the professor “to sort out any domestic situation” (63), Virmati decides to go to Tariska and drown herself in the canal. After the unfruitful “brave thoughts of renunciation”(79), she faced her mother's anger and remained silent when she was locked up in the god own and mutely witnessed the marriage of her younger sister to the canal engineer, still unwilling to submit herself to the dictates of her patriarchal family and her passion for the professor.

Right from birth a woman is thrust with social images, rewards and punishments that are carefully designed to ensure that she does not develop any qualities that are associated with the other half of humanity. The novel, *Difficult Daughters* exposes the issues of gender discrimination and the struggle of the suffering Indian woman under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society. The search for control over one's destiny being the central theme of this novel, Virmati, the heroine, seeks human relations that will allow her to be herself and to exercise the degree of control over her life which as an educated woman, she knows she deserves. Virmati, the eldest among the eleven children grows up in a conservative Punjabi family of Amritsar only to fall in love with a professor who is already married. This turns out to be a reason that is strong enough to disgrace the family and society. What follows is a tale of separation, pain, emotional outbreaks, an abortion and finally a marriage that doesn't have customary happy ending.

In the novel Virmati's mother is a strong agent of patriarchy. She desires to transmit the patriarchal ideals, which she has internalized during the process of her socialization, to her daughter. She wants her daughter to be her replica, as rigid and conservative, not having her own independence and individuality, resultantly subjecting the daughter to psychological torture. As the traditional woman considers marriage as the ultimate destiny that may lessen a woman's miseries and misfortune, Virmati's mother's concern is to get her married off. Here Manju Kapur presents vividly the ways of a patriarchal family in which the woman has no claim on her own body and she cannot assert her sexuality.

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Virmati is an educated, strong willed and action oriented woman who defies the patriarchal ideals boldly and effectively and plunges into efforts to carve a separate identity for her. In *Difficult Daughters* Virmati rebels against her conservative parent's will, goes to Lahore for higher education and marries a man of her choice. She aspires for a freer life than that offered by the patriarchal society. Similarly the character Shakuntala flouts the normative rules of patriarchy that consider marriage as the final and the only goal of woman's life. Her education and career extend her horizons beyond the confines of home and marriage. Though creating a woman's personal identity is a social stigma, she emphasizes exclusively on her career and economic autonomy. Once awakened to her personal potential and having tasted the "wine of freedom" (*Difficult Daughters* 19), she is not willing to be confined in the patriarchal limits. It is her life style and confidence that fascinates Virmati. When Virmati expresses her desire to go to Lahore, "Maybe I will also one day come to Lahore, Pehnji. I wish I too could do things." Sakuntala replies, "... Times are changing, and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?" (18)

In the fiction of Kapur, the role of women has undergone a significant alteration. Her writing is an analysis of female subjectivity and cultural identity. Her novel show case female characters that struggle against social custom and break the tradition of silence. Dr. Gupta comments on *Difficult Daughters* as:

"*Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur is an absorbing story of a woman torn between opposite forces of society and her ardent desire to break that silence. Though she does her best to break the silence and to raise arms against social customs and norms but social norms are cruel enough to allow her to succeed. The story tells how she is torn between her family duties, the desire for education and illicit love." (Dr. Gupta, Rani Poonam: 2013:109)

Women's lament and her struggle to break up the shackles of tradition continue into her second novel, *A Married Woman*, as well. Dr. Kumar explains:

"*A Married Woman* (2002) was the second novel by Manju Kapur once again underlining and articulating the central concerns of Indian woman. In this novel Astha, the young heroine is the representative of the woman striving to gain their space in life and socio-cultural domains. Like *Difficult Daughters* (1918) the theme of patriarchal bondage runs deep in the story." (Kumar, Satendra: 2012:99)

Illustrating on the same fiction and exposing the struggle of women against the traditional patriarchal society, K M Kavita says:

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A Married Woman is a story of an educated upper middle class working woman, Astha, one such a person who's in search of her soul and soul mate. In quest of her identity, she forges many relationships with different person. She represents the whole woman race, the changing Indian society where the upper middle class educated woman who although financially independent is still facing the problems of adjustment between idealism and pragmatism. It explores the space of such woman through Astha and boldly represents new perspective.”(Kavita, K M: 2013:58)

As a renowned writer Manju Kapur envisions a society which is based on equality, sharing and understanding. Her protagonists rebel against the age old tradition and assert their identity through self-reliance, participating in political and social activities and by asserting the claim of the body. In this fiction she depicts the psychological trauma of modern woman living in a society which seldom allows her to articulate herself. She makes the readers analyze the difficulty of a woman to establish her personal identity and recognition as she is trapped within the matrix of religion, tradition and social norms. *Difficult Daughters* makes an absorbing reading and takes the writers beyond the silence of suffering Virmati who is torn between her desires for education and illicit love in the face of life that threaten to destroy her inner self reinforced with female subjectivity and cultural identity.

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