

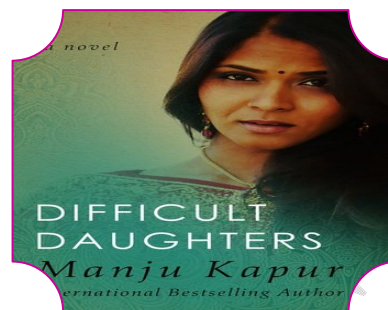


MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*: A CRITIQUE OF MOTHER- DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur belongs to the category of women writers such as Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan and Shobha De live in India and write in English. These novelists present in their writings the realistic social and political conditions which are very special to the Indian life and culture. Her debut novel Difficult Daughters, which won her the Commonwealth prize for first novel, (Eurasia Section), based in the late colonial period highlights the lives of four generations of women. Indian Women's fiction posits the varied relationships within the family and the mother-daughter relationship with its ambiguous pains and pleasures have become an integral part of women's fiction. The story of Virmati in Difficult Daughters is not all new; it almost happens in every household, where the eldest daughter has to carry on the lifelong duties of nurturing and looking after the younger siblings. Their education remains secondary. The mother-daughter relationship undergoes added conflict in the adolescent years. Thus Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters captures the complex relationship between mother and daughter over a period of three generations.

KEYWORDS: Indian, Tradition, mother, daughter, relationship, conflict subordinate role.

INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur belongs to that class of Indian Women Writers, who live in India and write in English, like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan and Shobha De. These novelists present in their writings the realistic social, economic, and political conditions which are very special to the Indian life and culture. The innumerable classes, caste, ethnic, religious stratifications which cannot be easily discerned, require a typical sensibility, the conditioning of collective consciousness and also the psychology moulded cognizance of the multiple indigenous influences of epics, folk tales, etc; Perhaps an Indian sensibility in its true sense is accessible only to such Indian writers. All the novels by Manju Kapur present the down to earth indianness through her characters, themes and setting. Her debut novel *Difficult Daughters*, which won her the Common Wealth Prize for first novel, (Eurasia Section), based in the late colonial period highlights the lives of four generations of women.

Manju Kapur, while presenting the Indian women and Indian modes of life, reveal their deep insight of Indian culture and tradition in which they are rooted. Indian women's fiction posits the varied relationships within the family and the mother-daughter relationships and its ambiguous pains and pleasures have become an integral part of Indian women's fiction. Mothers share a very complex and strange relationship among their daughters. The mother may be affectionate and may saddle the girl child with her own destiny and think that she can make a traditional woman of her daughter. But the mother can also be hostile towards her daughter and treat her with a sense of rivalry. The societal atmosphere which has moulded the psyche of the mother as a woman also makes the young uninitiated girl child a special object of

mother's persecution. Mother-daughter relationship forms the core of Manju kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. It is on the background of this relationship that the story is built and the resultant confrontation provides a backbone to the gripping story. The role of the mother achieves significance as she is solely responsible to build or destroy the life of her daughter.

In a recent Journal article, "Mothers and Daughters: A Discussion of Theory and Research," Carol Boyd reviewed theories that focus on the uniqueness of the mother-daughter relationship. She quotes Nancy Chodorow, "The mother is the early care giver and primary source of identification for all children...A daughter continues to identify with the mother." (p.292) This is true for a girl child who needs the constant support of the mother who would understand and help her to come out of the distress. But the question arises, are those women free in the prevalent patriarchal setup to raise their voices and let their daughters enjoy a life of freedom and assertion. The feminist writers of the 1960s and 70s have attacked the mother as a tool of patriarchy who socialized the daughter into a subordinate role. Indian society is essentially a male dominated society in which the ascribed status of woman has been very low. Even with educational achievement and economic independence, she continues to be subservient to men in almost all fields. In free India, Women are still bound by customs, traditions, which play an important role to keep their status low. The society has traditionally determined the role of the woman as a daughter, wife, and mother, confining, and constricting her to a family. A girl is denied freedom and liberty, unlike boys. A negative self image develops right from the childhood and the seeds are sown to make the girl - a woman, a mother, to carry on the drudgery of the family.

The story of *Virmati* in *Difficult Daughters* is not at all new; it almost happens in every other household, where the eldest daughter has to carry on the lifelong duties of nurturing and looking after the younger siblings. Their education remains secondary and from the very childhood, they are forced to accept the role of a mother. Thus their primary job is to look the household chores and caring for the children. Thus Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* captures the complex relationship between a mother and daughter over a period of three generations. Set in 1940's, the pre-independence India, the novel unfolds the story of *Virmati*, a daughter and mother. *Virmati's* relationship with her mother is the most problematic one as she has to play the role of a mother to her eleven siblings. As she is only busy doing the daily chores of the house, She has no time for her own self. The mother looks upon her daughter as the governess of her children. The daughter has lost her individuality. Her education is treated secondary. "She could hear her mother telling her not to waste her time; there were more important things to do, like looking after the children, thought, *Virmati* bitterly, and then she thought of *Paro's* clinging arms around her neck, she began to cry." (p.18)

Virmati considers her cousin *Shakuntala* as her ideal who is pursuing higher education at Lahore and wants to become like her. But her mother *Kasturi* has different plans for her where in studies find no place. Like other Indian girls she should be married and sent to her in-laws' place. " *Kasturi* found the fuss *Virmati* was making about failing unreasonable. It hardly made a difference to the real business of her life, which was getting married and looking after her own home." (p.19.) *Kasturi*, the mother sees a rival in her daughter, who would challenge her world in future. The mother remains confined to the bed as she is only involved in the work of procreation. Her unique position in the house is to be lost to *Virmati* and she has to yield unwillingly. As soon as *Virmati* shows signs of assertion, conflict develops between the mother and daughter. *Virmati's* falling in love with the professor makes the matters worse.

The Mother-daughter relationship endures added strain and conflict in the adolescent years because the mother is the prime role model and teacher of cultural values. Margaret Notar and Susan Mc Daniel wrote an article in the journal *Adolescence* describing the mother- daughter relationship as "...often conflictual, particularly during their daughter's adolescence, and (it) manifests many of the ambiguities and confusions about the social meanings of womanhood and motherhood. (Feminist attitudes and Mother-Daughter Relationship in *Adolescence*, pp.11-21.) *Kasturi* does not want her daughter to form a separate identity which would make her identity fragmentary. The mother does not appreciate the freedom that the daughter demands and craves for. In this way unknowingly, the mother becomes the voice of patriarchy. She

holds these values as ideal because she has been taught so, in the patriarchal setup. Virmati find herself in deep trouble and crisis. She tries to commit suicide and fails miserably due to the growing affection of the professor and her imminent marriage. She becomes vulnerable to the outside influence. Virmati is compelled to suffer alone in silence as she was not able to share her sorrows with her mother. The absence or lack of mother's sympathetic shoulders at home forces Virmati to look for sympathy outside. Since Virmati does not have the support of a sympathetic mother her agonies are aggravated. Instead of showing compassion, the mother disowns her daughter altogether. Thus the mother –Daughter relationship marches from identification to alienation. The chord that binds them together is already broken and broken forever. The mother does not realize that the daughter wants a separate identity and freedom, she wants her own existence. Since the daughter has no other option than to rebel- so she rebels. Virmati's rebellion is the result of her mother's tendency to ignore her. Hence, she rejects the world of domesticity, marriage and things associated with marriage and all that her mother stands for. She wants to transport herself into a new world, a world of knowledge and self assurance. Virmati thus excels in the end and fights against the engulfing and oppressive power of patriarchy. It is not important here that her voice was not heard, what is more important is that she at least tried to raise her voice.

However Virmati is not the only difficult daughter in the novel, her daughter Ida also turns out to be equally difficult. The novel begins with the death of Virmati, the rebel who cannot be an ideal mother. The narrator Virmati's daughter, Ida can speak only because the mother is no more. Thus the novel presents the paradigm of two mothers –daughter relationships. "Now her shadow no longer threatens me. Without the hindrance of her presence, I can sink into her past and make it mine." (p.258.) The very first sentence of the novel reflects her antagonism for her mother, "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother." (p.1)

Estrangement between a daughter and a mother is a combination of familial, individual and societal factors, and the reasons why daughters and mothers become estranged can be complex and varied. Like the daughter Ida can also have no escape from her mother, just as Virmati the daughter could not have from her mother, Kasturi. Ida, never the less, confirms as the centrality of her mother which brings about the positive stature of Virmati in the novel. She may be a rebel, an outlaw, the cast away to her relatives, but for Ida she must be the Centre and thus she reconstructs the story of her mother and allows her imagination to flow:

In searching for a woman I could know, I have pieced together material from memories that are muddled, partial and contradictory. The places I visited, the stuff I read tantalized me with fragments that I know 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 through I felt the excitement of discovery, the pleasure of fitting narratives into a discernible inheritance. (p.258)

Ida in her search for identity begins the exploration of the person who was her mother. In order to survive Ida must strive for centrality. She fights against the society and rebels against it and in the process free her mother from the bounds of periphery, and in doing so, asserts her own individuality. She becomes Virmati's creator and thus frees herself from the dominance of her mother. Thus the daughter escapes the mother's engulfment by recreating her mother. "This work weaves an association between my mother and me, each word a brick, in a mansion I made with my head and heart. Now be alive in it, mama, and leave me be. Do not bother me anymore." (pp.258-259)

Thus a mature understanding is formed between the daughter and the mother. While it is interesting to note that in the mother –daughter relationship, just as virmati does not want to be like her mother, Kasturi, so also Ida the daughter of Virmati resents being like her mother. It started as alienation and ends up in complete identification.

CONCLUSION

Thus the novel reveals the mother –daughter relationship depicting the trauma of the daughters who are compelled to suffer at the hands of their own mothers. It is the mother who saddles their own child with her own identity and thinks it wiser to make a traditional woman out of her. The daughters on the other

hand do not want to be like her mother. It is the role of the mother which becomes significant as she has to mould the daughter to help her find a new meaning in life and also nurture a balanced perspective towards the diversified role that she has to take up in near future. Thus the novelist assertively exhibit that women should have an assertive individuality which includes the ability to take decision about their life and carry out a sense of responsibility.

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