

Search for Self-identity: A Study of the women characters in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

Mrs. D.N.P. Prema Ponmani M.A. B.Ed. M.Phil. Ph.D (pursuing)
Assistant Professor
Department of English
East Point College of Higher Education, Bangalore, Karnataka, India.

Abstract: Manju Kapur is a post-colonial writer who examines the position of women in a patriarchal society and deals with the problems of women. Kapur, with her sharp understanding of human nature, vividly portrays the theme quest for identity in the novel *Difficult Daughter*. It is her first novel published in 1991, won the Commonwealth writers' prize. Kapur has presented the problems of the Indian middle class women in a joint family in a male dominated society. She offers an insight into the middle-class ethos and culture and projects serious issues and problems existing in society and also tries to offer a solution. The novel, set against the background of partition, deals with issues like women education and feminine freedom. This paper attempts to analyse the problems of women with reference to Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*.

Key Words: Problems of women, Education, Family, Love, Marriage, Freedom.

Contemporary woman novelist Manju Kapur arrests attention when she deals with every day issues faced by people, especially Indian middle class women, in her novels. The most prominent aspect of her novel *Difficult Daughters*, is its being rooted in the milieu, in which the novelist herself was born and brought up. Since her first novel *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur has established herself as a chronicler of Indian middle-class manners and ethos. In this novel, the novelist shows that marriage is the central issue in every Indian middle class family. Education is important and educated boys prefer educated girls. It is, therefore, important from the matrimonial point of view.

The novel spans three generations of women – Kasturi, Virmati and Ida. Sunita Sinha in her article “Discovery of Daring and Desire in Manju Kapur's Fiction” writes:

The three generation of women symbolize the three stages of Indian independence. Kasturi the mother represents pre-independence period and is

shown as victim of the offensive control of patriarchy; Virmati her daughter, represents the country's struggle for independence . . . Ida, Virmati's daughter, is the product of the post-independence era and she established herself as an independent woman. (162)

The theme of the novel describes the independence acquired by the nation and the independence desired by the protagonist Virmati. Her life is described in a realistic way. The aspiration of the girl to be free is linked with the values of a traditional middle-class joint family; a very significant aspect of Indian social life. Virmati rebelled against the patriarchal set up to pursue higher studies and marry Professor Harish. Thus Singh writes,

Manju Kapur dives deep in to human emotions and passions of modern life and presents different colours with minute observation and detail also. She seems to be the novelist of modern Indian woman who is in the state of transformation in woman's voice I modern Indian English writing. Her novels are able to present the picture of human life in detailed manner. (10)

The Indian middle-class values and culture are prominently depicted in the background of Arya Samaj. Education is the only source she can turn to in all her crisis. The quest for identity is another important feature of Kapur's novel. Identity crisis is a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in their expected aims or role in society. Yael Tamir writes, "The quest for identity exhibits a basic human need, the need to structure one's personal identity in relation to others, to identify oneself with what lies outside the self, to find roots and establish connections to the past as well as to the future". (175)

Theme of search for self-identity is present in all her novels. *The Immigrant* is another novel in which Kapur talks about the protagonist's search for self-identity. Vinita Singh Chawdhry in her article, Acculturation, Identity, and Adaptation in Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant*, writes, "*The Immigrant* centers on what has frequently been called an 'identity quest'. It is identity that differentiates individuals; identity is constructed on an individual basis – but within a given social structure. The alienation from one's own society could lead to a corresponding alienation of identity" (8).

The novel spans three generations of women - Kasturi, Virmati and Ida. They symbolize the three phases of Indian independence. Through these three female protagonists, Kapur has revealed the life cycle of a woman from the beginning of her life. As a child, a girl has to do house hold works as Virmati does. After marriage, she has to bear pain to give birth

to child, as Kasturi's condition reveals. After having 11 children her whole life is dedicated to her family. Kasturi, the mother, represents the pre-independence and is shown as a victim of patriarchy. Virmati, the daughter, symbolizes the country's struggle for independence. Ida, Virmati's daughter, is the product of the post-independence era and establishes herself as an independent woman.

Virmati's history is reconstructed by her daughter Ida who undertakes a journey to know her mother's past. The name Ida implies “a new state of consciousness, a fresh beginning” (Prasad 163). The novel opens with the declaration of the narrator, Ida, “The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she was gone and I stared at the fire that rose from her shriveled body, dry-eyed, leaden, half dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept.” (Difficult Daughters 1)

The novel retells the story of Virmati, a young woman born in Amritsar. She did not wish to live like her mother's life and wanted to study in Lahore. She rejected her mother's world which revolved around domesticity, marriage and child bearing. Being the eldest daughter, she was burdened with family duties because of her mother's continuous pregnancies. The girls: Virmati, Indumati, Gunvati, Hemavati, Vidyavati and Parvati. The boys: Kailashnath, Gopinath, Krishnanath, Prakashnath, and Hiranath. A constant sufferer Virmati, wanted to be independent, defiant, and assertive as her cousin Shakuntala. Shakuntala sowed the seeds of freedom in Virmati. She symbolizes modernity and encourages her to be independent and fight for equal rights for women. The new woman breaks the customs of the tradition bound society. Both Shakuntala and Virmati came out of the ideological framework of being a typical Indian woman. Shakuntala takes part in the political Gandhian movement, whereas Kasturi's ideology is confined to patriarchy and she remarks “Hai re, beti! What is need to do a job? A woman's shaan is in her home. Now you have studied and worked enough shaadi. After you get married, Viru can follow” (DD 16).

Her mother constantly told her that it is the duty of every girl to get married. Virmati's mother, Kasturi, was brought up in the conventional principles of patriarchal society where marriage was the ultimate destiny of a girl's life and a girl had to work tirelessly to please her in-laws. But for Kasturi, education means developing the mind for the benefit of the family and nothing more than that. Virmati, under the influence of Shakuntal thought “I want to be like you, Pehnji . . . I wish I too could do things. But I am not clever” (DD 17-18). Virmati came to know about her inner desire to find an identity for herself. Thus, Shakuntala's visit planted the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. She failed in her Fine Arts. At

the age of 17, she was engaged to a canal engineer, Inderjit. Virmati was outraged and frustrated at her failure. At that time Kasturi says, "Leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first" (21).

Family plays an important role in this novel. For the sake of the family's name, Virmati was forced to sacrifice her study, her freedom. R.J. Kalpana in her article "Feminism and Family" writes: "The family is at once the source of women's affirmation as well as their subordination. They are heralded as martyrs of the struggle and as a source of regeneration and yet they are denied leadership position" (30).

During her search to find an individual space, Virmati faced many obstacles. She was against her arranged marriage with an engineer Inderjit and fell in love with Professor Harish who was already married. He first appeared in her life as her parent's tenant. He was married to an illiterate woman. Her mission was to cook and feed her family and keep the house clean. So, the professor fell in love with his student Virmati who was passionately interested in studies. She was caught in a whirlpool of passion towards the Oxford returned professor. She reproached him with harsh words when she heard the news of his wife's pregnancy as well as his confession of love for her. She was caught in a psychological conflict as on the one side there were family customs, norms, and traditional values, and on the other was her illicit love for Professor. Virmati defied her marriage. Her ideas came into conflict with Kasturi. Jeevan Kumar in his article "Conflict between Family and Self: A Study on Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*" writes, "*Difficult Daughters* is a gripping story that ably captures Virmati's conflict between her duty to family, her desire for education and independence, and her illicit love for a married man"(210).

Virmati finished her BA and her marriage date was fixed. Professor insisted Virmati to tell Inderjit, about their relation. When Virmati found no solution to her problem of taking decision, then in the last she tried to commit suicide thinking that death can bring solution to her worries: "Now that she was actually going to merge her body with the canal she felt her confusion clearing" (DD76). But she was saved. She revealed her desire to study further. Virmati was locked up and her sister Indumati's marriage was arranged with Inderjit. She communicated with her Professor through letters carried by Paro.

Virmati decided to do her Bachelor of Teachers' Training in spite of several hurdles. Her decision to go to Lahore was prompted by her desire to forget him. But she failed in her mission. She yielded to the Professor's passions in her loneliness during her stay at Lahore and helplessly succumbed to the temptations of the body. Consequently, she realised that she had become pregnant and was left with no other alternative but to go in for an abortion. She

knew that the professor would not render any support to her and was left with no alternative.

She decided to take the action to save her family from shame. She regretted the fact that she had come to Lahore for expanding her mental horizons but ended with meaningless love relationship. She wanted to do something meaningful in her life like her roommate Swarnalatha. She was a freedom activist, but failed to transcend her underlying need for love and emotional dependence. She was moved by Swarnalatha's words. She asked Virmati to wake up from her stale dream and told her how plenty of married women were also involved in the freedom movement. But Virmati found herself locked in new prisons even as she broke old ones. She silently endured her pain and frustration and failed to get out of her emotional craving for the professor. She reacted adversely on Harish's irresolute attitude. She scolded him when he expressed his helplessness to marry her:

“I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family's name, and am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people will say if they find out, not being able to live peace, study in peace Because I am an idiot.... I can bear anything but continuous resolution. Swarna is right. Men do take advantage of women!” (DD149).

The most successful moment in her life was the episode at Nahan, when she became the headmistress of a girl's school. J.L. Styan writes,

“... man was a lonely creature of anxiety and despair living in a meaningless world, and that he was merely existing until he made a decisive and critical choice about his own future course of action. By such a choice, a person would acquire an identity, a purpose and dignity as a human being. For preference, existential man should adopt some social or political cause in order to acquire this dignity and purpose ...”

She attained the autonomy over her life, which she had craved all along and eventually discovered her own space to live.

It is important to note that Virmati lacks resistance. She resisted family and society, but failed to resist Harish's love. In spite of the shock and disapproval of both families, the Professor married her. But Virmati's married life was a sheer disaster. Her mother-in-law believed that “He was a good son. How was it his fault if he was caught in the trap of some shameless young Punjabi” (DD 193). Virmati realised that she had done wrong. She felt, “I should not, cannot, will not marry you. It will not be fair. And now she had married him, but the old words were still springing to her lips, so many futile noises in the air “(212). She was

excluded from her family, and forced to compete for her share of her husband's love along with his first wife, Ganga. She was forced to compromise and adjust in order to adapt herself into her husband's family and died an insignificant death.

The story tells the tale of a difficult daughter Virmati. This kind of daughter is difficult to rear. According to Ruby Milhoutra:

“It is only Virmati who is the difficult daughter in the prosperous merchant family Of Diwan Chand. While in the generation of Kasturi, woman's role was confined to childbearing and kitchen work, the generation of Virmati took some bold and radical steps in joining the political movement for India's freedom, asserted the need for women education and independence. As a nonchalant representative of the middle generation, Virmati breaks away from the tradition bound limits of Indian women.” (Milhoutra 164).

The story tells the tale not only of Virmati but also about other difficult daughters who succeeded better than she did in their parallel struggle for independence in their lives. Shakuntala and Swarnalatha are presented as modern or liberated women in this respect.

At the end of the novel, Ida says, “This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a 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” (DD 280). In *Difficult Daughters* we do not listen to Virmati's voice. She could not speak out. What we have is her daughter's reconstruction and representation. At the centre of the narrative we see a woman who fights, but falls and fails. Kapur's novel shows that what happens to Virmati is the representative destiny of the Indian middle-class woman.

Virmati's tragedy is the tragedy of ambition, quest for freedom and identity. However, Gur Pyari Jandial points out that it is a mistake to devalue Virmati's struggle just because she failed, for what mattered was to have made the attempt “to break the patriarchal mould, and for Virmati to have tried to do that in the forties was a great achievement” (Jandial 47). Education is the only source she can turn to in all her crisis. The women of India have indeed achieved their success in half a century of Independence; but if there is to be a true female independence, too much remains to be done. The fight for autonomy remains an unfinished combat. Thus, kapur in her novel *Difficult Daughters* projects different issues and problems of Indian middle class women.

Though the literacy rate is gradually increasing, the female literacy rate in India is less than the male literary rate. In urban India, girls are nearly on a par with boys in terms of education. However, in rural India girls continue to be less well-educated than boys.

According to the National Sample Survey Data only the states of Kerala and Mizoram have approached universal female literacy. According to scholars, the major factor behind improvements in the social and economic status of women in Kerala is literacy. No development tool is more effective than the education of girls and empowerment of women.

There were times when a woman was considered to be different but the emerging and developing nations have proved beyond doubt the economic potential and corporate stature that women possess. Every woman can have a positive impact not only on her family but also on the entire society. She has the power to transform the society. The UN women Organisation had re-energized the vision and picture a world where women have equal rights, freedom and opportunity in every sphere of life. It is quite apparent that urban women are increasingly assuming leadership in the global economy, as both employees and entrepreneurs. Education has indeed given a huge breakthrough to a large number of women to take a lead in enhancing the economy and stimulating growth.

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