

Resilient Spirit of Women in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters

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Abstract

Manju Kapur, a distinguished woman novelist in the contemporary literary arena, is preoccupied with the depiction of the pitiable plight of Indian women owing to gender politics. In her literary creations, she delineates the innate desire of Indian women to create an identity of their own. She artistically articulates her feminist concerns and accordingly, suggests suitable remedies for the myriad maladies women suffer from during their struggle for survival. In her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*, the author effectively interprets the gynocentric struggle of Indian women for liberation and existential identity. She depicts how women belonging to three different generations -- Kasturi, Virmati, and Ida, resist the patriarchal pressures and emerge as self-assertive women by affirming their individuality, realizing their potentiality, and undergoing the process of self-actualization, in different ways. All the three women differ in their conceptualization of values, mindset, perceptions, and reactions to societal expectations. Since they represent different generations, they move in different directions in the attainment of their liberation, adopt various survival strategies, and vary in their struggle for self-assertiveness. This research paper explores how the resilient spirit of women in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* helps them to emerge as assertive individuals and endure a progressive journey from the state of innocence and victimization to self-actualization and empowerment. The novelist adeptly depicts how women with indomitable will and resilient spirit dauntlessly encounter the trials and tribulations imposed on them by men and society. She incessantly underscores the fact that education liberates women from the shackles of patriarchal ideology and subsequently makes them more self-assertive, self-expressive, and agnize their strengths and capabilities.

Keywords: self-actualization, gender politics, resilience, victimization, empowerment, marginalization.

INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur, a torch bearer of women's emancipation, gives expression to the innate desire of her female characters who attempt to establish a unique identity and thereby affirm their individuality in the patriarchal society, in her works. In her literary compositions, she delineates the miserable plight of Indian women who are subjugated and marginalized by the rigid restrictions and social constraints. The patriarchal society deters women from realizing their aspirations by curbing their freedom and impeding their growth. Though victimized by gender politics, traditional

societal norms, and physical, psychic, and domestic violence, Kapur's women aspire to articulate their voice of individuality by enduring the journey of self-discovery. Most of her women hail from middle-class family and are pressurized to follow the stereo-typical images of women from myths and legends. They are constantly reminded of their subjugate status in the society. However, Kapur's women strive hard to carve their own destiny by shattering the patriarchal notions regarding the conventional roles of women and their responsibilities in the family and society, and eventually emerge as "New Woman." They

undergo a series of transformation and finally venture a journey from the state of innocence to self-actualization.

Quest for a Unique Identity

In her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998), which won her the Commonwealth Writers' Prize in 1999, the novelist accentuates the oppression and marginalization of Indian women and explores their quest for a distinctive identity. The novel illustrates the intricacies in the life of Virmati, the protagonist of the novel, who oscillates between a life of tradition and modernity. It also focuses on the resilient spirit of Virmati, who differs from other women in the novel by aptly and firmly resisting the existing double standards. Challenging the established conventional socio-cultural norms, she emerges as an aspiring individual possessing the traits of "New Woman."

The title of the novel *Difficult Daughters* seems to reverberate the patriarchal notion that daughters who attempt to chisel their destiny by resisting the patriarchal beliefs are considered to be "difficult" by the family members and the society. Daughters are expected to strictly adhere to the societal norms, emulate the ways of an "ideal woman," and remain passive, obedient, dependant, and subordinate through out their life. On the contrary, when they deviate from patriarchal expectations and desire for an individual self, they are regarded as "difficult daughters." Daughterhood in a patriarchal society is synonymous with "difficulty." In this regard, Elisabetta Marino in "Negotiating Femininity, Moulding a Nation in *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur," aptly interprets the meaning of the title:

The protagonists' constant struggle with one another, their different, opposing perceptions of femininity (ranging from the traditional role of women as nurturers, homemakers, carers and life givers to a new, still faltering model of intellectual, emancipated womanhood), as well as the frequent breakdowns of communication between mothers and daughters seem to perfectly justify the title. (15)

Nevertheless, the novelist opines that "daughters" have to be strong, audacious, and self-reliant with determination to materialize their dreams and aspirations..

Ida, Virmati's daughter is the narrator of the story. She is a modern girl who seems more focused on herself rather than her family. Her father pressurizes her to acquire the traits of an "ideal" woman as coded by the man-made constructs. When Prabhakar, her husband, compels to abort her baby, she divorces him and liberates herself from the patriarchal pressures. She is a strong woman who breaks up her marital bond, when she is denied the right to decide matters on child bearing. She often reminisces how her parents pressurized her to "bridge the contradictions in her life by marrying a man who was also an academic" and how it ended up in a "disastrous marriage" (258). Ofttimes, she experiences an unbearable void in her life: "I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society" (258).

Reminiscence of the Past

In the beginning of the novel, Ida is found attending the funeral of her mother, where she candidly makes an assertion that she does not wish to be like her mother: "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" (1). Probably, she perceived that her mother lacked the autonomy to make decisions in her life. She wanted a more emancipated life than her mother. The generational gap between the younger and the older generation is quite discernible. Being reminiscent of her mother, she reconstructs the difficult past of her mother and recollects the memories associated with it. With an "excitement of discovery" (258), she traces and unveils the past of her mother by visiting her maternal house, meets her friends and relatives in Amritsar, and skillfully weaves a tale about it: "I can sink into her past and make it mine. In searching for a woman I could know, I have pierced together material from memories that were muddled, partial and contradictory" (280).

In addition, she also analyses her relationship with her mother, compares and contrasts her attitude towards life with her mother's, and explores the spirit of her mother: "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 line in it, and leave me. Do not haunt me any more" (280).

Patriarchal Hegemony

The novel is set against the background of pre-partition India. Virmati, the eldest daughter of Kasturi, from her childhood days, is saddled with the responsibility of taking care of her siblings and aiding her mother during her pregnancies. Her additional role as a caretaker of her siblings slackens her educational pursuit:

Ever since Virmati could remember she had been looking after

children. It wasn't only baby Parvati to whom she was indispensable, to her younger siblings she was second mother as well. She was impatient and intolerant of fuss. If they didn't eat their meals, on her return home from school she would hunt out the offending brother or

sister and shove the cold food down their throats... it was weary

work and she was almost always tired and harassed. (DD 6)

By depicting the life of Kasturi, Virmati's mother, a victim of patriarchal hegemony, who gives birth to eleven children incessantly, the author hints at the excruciating predicament of women who were denied the right to decide on child bearing. The helpless situation of Indian women wherein men decide on how many children women must bear is clearly comprehensible. Born into an austere household, Kasturi passively accepts the established socio-cultural norms encoded by men and perfectly plays the traditional roles assigned to her by the patriarchal social set-up. An upholder of orthodox values and beliefs, Kasturi, fails to understand the significance of education in her daughter's life and hence, insists Virmati to get married at an early age. She believes that education which offers emancipation and empowerment to women

may be detrimental to Virmati's marital life. She inculcates stereo-typical Indian feminine roles in Virmati and doesn't approve and promote modernization of women. Nevertheless, Virmati, with strenuous efforts, postpones her marriage with Inderjith, a canal engineer and enters a college to pursue her higher studies. With undaunted spirit, she leaves her home with an intention to find happiness and emancipation through education and audaciously demands her right for education: "to education, freedom and the bright lights of Lahore colleges" (15).

Destiny chases Virmati in the form of Harish Chandra, a married professor, who with his charismatic personae and his captivating poetic descriptions during his lectures trickily distracts her attention from studies and coerces her to develop an illicit affair with him. Unsatisfied life with his illiterate wife Ganga, makes the professor fall in love with Virmati, who has a fervent interest in studies. The care and concern showered by the professor hinder Virmati from accepting the marriage proposal of Inderjit. The illicit relationship devastates the psychic and physical condition of Virmati and lands her in frustration, isolation, dejection, and chaos. When Virmati's family comes to know about the illegal affair, they ill-treat her and compel her to marry Inderjit. She refuses to marry Inderjit saying, "And not marry... I don't want to marry... the boy, I do not like the boy" (87). Cognizant of the fact that the institution of marriage remains the destiny determining factor and occupies a special place in the life of any Indian woman, Kasturi goes to the extreme of threatening her daughter that she would swallow poison if Virmati denies her marriage with Inderjit: "Remember, you are going to be married next month, if I have to swallow poison to make you do it" (60). Harish, a self-centered figure, seems unaffected by the extra-marital affair, and hence keeps writing fascinating love letters and spoils Virmati physically and psychically. After going through a series of hurdles, Virmati is reminded of her negligence of her filial duty, which lands her in a state of alienation, emotional estrangement, and disappointment. Whenever Virmati expresses her confusion regarding her

relationship with Harish, he convinces her by asserting: “Darling Vir, I know how difficult it is for you, but you must be firm. Soon things will be alright. Then you will see. We will one day be together” (67).

Being a male chauvinist, Harish designs the course of her destiny and keeps her under his dominance. Virmati is sand-witched between her attachment to the inherited cultural ethos and the intense longing to lead a life with an already married man. Psychic conflict owed to her inability to take an appropriate decision, a sense of having betrayed her family, and the desire to lead an emancipated life, drive her to attempt suicide by drowning herself in a canal. Caught in a whirlpool of mental chaos, she opts suicide as an appropriate end to her unresolved psychic conflict: “Now that she was actually going to merge her body with the canal she felt her confusion clearing” (76). However, she is rescued by the servants of her grandfather. In this sense, she remains a difficult daughter to her father and grandfather who constantly encourage her to pursue higher studies, and her mother who loves her daughter heartily. Virmati herself becomes the cause of her hapless and agonizing plight.

Assertion of Individuality

Virmati wishes to be emancipated, assertive, and resistive like her cousin Shakuntala. Shakuntala represents modernity and inculcates the desire of emancipation through education in Virmati. Rejecting patriarchal ideologies, she leads an independent life making her own choices in all circumstances. She liberates herself from the influences of stereo-typical images and denies social taboos. Virmati expresses her desire to be a liberated woman like Shakuntala : “I want to be like you, Pehnji... I wish I too could do things. But I am not clever” (17-18). Shakuntala encourages and motivates Virmati to shatter the factors leading to her marginalized status in the society: “Times are changing, and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?” (18) and adds, “these people don’t really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are fighting for the freedom of the

nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else” (17). Likewise, Virmati seems inspired and influenced by the lifestyle and attitude of her roommate, Swarnalatha. She “stared at Swarna. What a girl! Her opinions seemed to come from inside herself, her thoughts, ideas and feelings blended without any horrible sense of dislocation” (135). Like Shakuntala and Swarnalatha, Virmati is in a constant quest for identity, survival, and emancipation in all walks of life. They exert powerful influence on the emergence of Virmati as a resolute and an aggressive individual. They make her understand that it is education that blesses women with the nectar of emancipation, pleasing outlook, and attitude.

The novelist drives home the message that education is an effective tool that facilitates women to attain empowerment and emancipate themselves from the social, economical, cultural, and political constraints that impede their progress and deter them from realizing their aspirations and exploring the possibilities. Education enhances women’s status in the basic power structure of the patriarchal society and brings about constructive alterations in the established framework of social patterns. Moreover, it helps them ameliorate their economic condition and sustain control in designing the course of their life.

In the novel, when Virmati becomes aware of Ganga’s pregnancy, she feels totally deceived: “...in this moment of weakness it seemed I could not in all conscience ignore the claims of those around me” (97). The justifications given by the professor regarding his relationship with Ganga and Virmati clearly echo the notions of androcentric culture: “Co-wives are part of our social traditions... I don’t live with her in any meaningful way” (112). However, Virmati boldly refuses to accept his notions and determines to free herself from the illusion of “useless love and a doubtful marriage”(122) and eventually, avoids his incessant interferences in her life. Stuck between her passion to continue her studies and the feeling of guilt owing to her unwed pregnancy and its termination, she believes education to be “her passport to independence” (140) that could “broaden her horizons” (167). However,

destiny continues chasing Virmati in the form of the professor, who wishes to keep her under his control forever without entering the institution of marriage. His reluctance to marry her symbolizes the kind of oppressive mechanism that men exercise on women. Simone De Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*, opines a similar notion:

...since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of racial minorities in spite of the fact that women constitute numerically at least half of the human race, and further that the secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural 'feminine' characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men. (9)

Despite the several hardships Virmati encounters, she emerges as a progressive woman who breaks the shackles laid by the man-made constructs. In a resolute manner, she avoids meeting the professor, brushes aside his request to continue the illicit affair, and firmly decides to tune her destiny according to her will. Even when the professor pleads her to accept him, "curse me, berate me, not punish me so harshly as to deny me yourself. If I have sinned against you, it has never been in spirit, my darling never that, my love and devotion has remained ever yours" (106), she declines him. Unable to completely shed off her inherited ethos, she, at times, requests him to give her the socially approved marital status: "marry me, she said, trying to push him away, marry me and make it clear to everybody" (127). In such instances, she overcomes her dashing hopes with her mental strength: "strong to bear the pain, silently without anyone knowing" (101). Krishna Rathore in "Inching towards Freedom: Women in Victorian England," echoes a similar notion regarding the societal expectation that a woman is expected to be fragile and passive:

A woman was not supposed to voice her experiences and anguish in public. She was indeed free to record them in her private diaries or confine in one or two intimate women friends. There are strong taboos against sharing them with men. It was her sole duty to make her marriage successful even if the husband strayed. (54)

Unwilling to be an obstacle in the life of Ganga, by becoming her competitor, Virmati burns the enchanting love letters of the professor and thereby psychically prepares herself to put an end to the professor's fake love and the associated memories. Resolutely, she articulates her stance to Harish: "just as you must do your duty to your family, and your wife, so too. I must do my duty to mine... I, too want a fresh start. It will be a great relief for me to leave this house"(107). It is her passion to pursue education that facilitates her transformation. She decides to begin a new life in Lahore. It is in Lahore she metamorphoses from subjugation to empowerment. She decides not to acquire the traits of an "ideal woman" as formulated by the androcentric culture. Restrictive patriarchal ideologies pressurize her to realize the need for empowerment. At this juncture, her stay at Nahan as the headmistress of a school offers her solace, inner peace, and satisfaction. However, at the end, Virmati's emotional craving and blind love for the professor ends in her marriage with him, for which she laments in her later years: "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). It has to be admitted that the rebellious and resilient nature of Virmati at times fades owing to her longing for the intellectual and emotional companionship of the professor. Her married life with the professor ends in utter failure. Her subjugate place in the household of the professor as his second wife lands her again in alienation, marginalization, a feeling of insecurity and incompleteness, and dependency. The professor who once adored and recognized her intellectual pursuits, now abandons her. Probably, Virmati misconstrues that shedding off one's inherited traditional

values and cultural ethos would lead to the path of modernity. Hence, she chooses a married man and thus encounters its consequences. Whenever she crosses one patriarchal threshold, unknowingly she gets trapped into the other wherein her freedom is curbed, her dreams fettered, identity shattered, and caged within the ambit of an orthodox society. It is the society that dictates her choices. She develops self-consciousness only when she realizes that unlike her friends who actively involved in freedom movements, she had wasted her life in a loveless marriage which had earned her the wrath of her family: "I am not like these women. They are using their minds organizing, participating in conference, politically active, while my time is being spent in love. Wasting it" (142). Though late, this state of self-awareness marks the beginning of her transformation.

Resilient Spirit of Virmati

Nevertheless, amidst all odd situations in her life, she transforms herself into a self-reliant, strong-willed, and determined woman with resilience. Resilience is the ability to recover rapidly from intricate situations. It is the capability to return back to original state and resist any kind of difficult situations. Here, Virmati withstands trauma of all kinds and bounces back to normalcy with her resilient nature. With optimistic attitude and inner strength, she develops self-awareness, with which she emerges as a self-assertive woman. By doing so, as Jandial observes in "Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* : A Study of Transition from Chaos to Integration," Virmati strives hard "to break the patriarchal mould, and for Virmati to have tried to do that in the forties was a great achievement" (47).

Conclusion:

To sum up, the novelist encourages women to realize their aspirations and dreams by acquiring survival traits like resilience, bravery, indomitable will, hopefulness, self-consciousness, ebullience, inner strength, optimism, decision-making skills, self-esteem, psychic toughness, adaptability, self-reliance,

readiness to accept change, rebellious attitude, etc. Such traits will facilitate the emergence of "New Woman." In the novel, the writer reflects her feminist mindset and brings to limelight the feminist issues and the different forms of resistances adopted by women. With a keen sense of observation and fine aesthetic sense, she chronicles the lives of Indian women from middle class domesticity. Her women transform from being silent sufferers to emboldened women exhibiting traits of "New Woman."

The writer strongly believes that realization of inner potential and assertion of individuality create the possibility of the establishment of an "ideal" society which is devoid of gender discrimination and oppressive constraints. She vehemently attacks the phallogocentric culture and eventually nurtures the notion that education will certainly help women attain personal recognition and rightful place in the society. With her unique presentation, she delineates that education is indeed an emblem of emancipation, empowerment, economic liberty, independent thinking, social security, and equality. Education will certainly support and strengthen women to voice out their grievances, assert their rights, gain economic emancipation, and accomplish their dreams.

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