

RESEARCH ARTICLE



INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER
INDIA

2395-2636 (Print); 2321-3108 (online)

MANJU KAPUR'S "DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS": A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

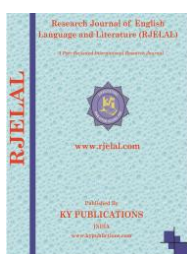
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doi: doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.73.206



ABSTRACT

In spite of the fact that women constitute almost fifty per cent of the global population, they are not free to lead their life at their will. The rules that govern their life have been made by the male members of society. As a result, they suffer just because of being women. Manju Kapur's "Difficult Daughters" deals with the plight of women belonging to three different generations in the Indian socio-historical context. The beauty of Manju Kapur's fictional narrative lies in the way she has entwined the social history with the political history of the time. Kasturi and Lajwanti belong to the first generation. They are females by birth but patriarchal by temperament. They accept the rules of patriarchal society and also expect the others to adhere to them. Virmati, Shakuntala and Swarna Lata belong to the next generation. They assert their individuality to some extent and refuse to follow the rules laid down by the patriarchal social set up. Ida, daughter of Virmati, belongs to the third generation. She is the most emancipated of women presented in the novel. She refuses to follow the patriarchal code in connection with her dress and behavior. She leaves her husband when he forces her to abort the child in her womb. In this way, the novel shows the changes that have come in the position of women over the passage of time.

Keywords: Femininity, Patriarchy, Generation, Individuality, Emancipation.

This paper is an attempt to trace the various shades of gender inequality spread over a period of time in Manju Kapur's fictional narrative "Difficult Daughters". Historically, the exchange of women has been one of the three fundamental exchanges for the growth of society, the other two being the exchange of goods and services and exchange of ideas. This exchange has led to the growth of kinship system. But it has also sown the seeds of inequality for the female gender. It has also begun to be treated as commodity like goods and services by the male gender. As the females are to be uprooted from their place of birth and to be settled somewhere else, their sense of

belonging is lost. Not only this, the male gender has also constructed rules for this exchange i.e. who should be exchanged and with whom. The females who conform to these rules are accepted by the society and are denoted by positive attributes like devi and savitri. But those who refuse to follow these rules are dubbed as mistress and prostitute.

In the novel under study, Manju Kapur traces the life history of women belonging to three different generations and the way they suffer the pangs of being women. Kasturi and Lajwanti belong to the first generation. They accept the rules of patriarchal society and lead a kind of contended life.

Virmati, the protagonist of the novel, her cousin, Shakuntala and her friend, Swarna Lata, belong to the next generation. They try to assert their individuality and refuse to follow the rules laid down by the male-dominated society. Their happiness or misery depends upon the degree to which they conform to or move away from the accepted norms. Ida, the daughter of Virmati, belongs to the last generation. She asserts her individuality and decides to leave her husband because he forces her to abort the child in her womb. In a way, she is the most emancipated of the women presented in the novel. The difference in the predicament of these women, belonging to different generations, is partially the result of their own temperament and actions and partially because of the changes in the socio-historical context.

Kasturi, Lajwanti and Kishori Devi belong to the first generation of women represented in the novel. They are traditional women imbued with patriarchal values. They think that the prime purpose of a woman's life is to get married and produce children. Following this patriarchal tradition, Kasturi has given birth to eleven children, six daughters and five sons. She gets greatly upset when her eldest daughter, Virmati, refuses to marry the match chosen by her elders. Being a product of the patriarchal culture, she fully believes in the matrimonial laws made by it. It is the right of the parents to choose the life-partners of their daughters. She loses her temper when she comes to know that her daughter, Virmati has entered into a love marriage that too with an already married man. She hurls the choicest abuses at her and calls her 'badmash' and 'randi'. She shoves her away never to see her face again. Similarly, her sister-in-law, Lajwanti, is the product of patriarchal socio-cultural set up. She herself has given birth to two children and has suffered three miscarriages. Like her sister-in-law, Kasturi, her greatest worry in life is her daughter, Shakuntala, who has refused to get married and has decided to lead a life of freedom in Lahore. Like other traditional women, she believes that a girl is not settled in life till she is married and has produced children. Kishori Devi, Professor Harish Chander's mother, is another traditional woman presented in the novel. She feels greatly upset when she comes to know about her son's clandestine affairs with Virmati. She is shocked when her son

suddenly appears before her with a newly married second wife. But when she finds that there is no other option, she accepts Virmati as her daughter-in-law. Eventually, she enters into the role of an affectionate mother-in-law, when she comes to know about Virmati's pregnancy.

The mal-treatment given to the female gender comes to the fore when we look at the predicament of women belonging to the second generation. Virmati, the protagonist of the novel, suffers the most in life because she decides to tread the un-trodden path. She refuses to follow the orthodox tradition of early marriage and decides to go for higher studies. She becomes the victim of her infatuation for Professor Harish Chander and enters into illicit sexual relations with him. But she is also conscious about her position in her lover's life. She does not spare him when she feels doubtful about his intentions. She lashes out at him, "I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family's name, 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 the people will say if they find out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace. And why? Because I am an idiot." (Kapur 149) She plainly asks the Professor about her position in his life. She demands socially acceptable position in the form of matrimonial alliance, "why don't we get married? You say your family makes no difference. But still you want to continue in this way. Be honest with me. I can bear anything but this continuous irresolution. Swarna is right men do take advantage of women." (Kapur 149) Eventually, she becomes his second wife. But this marriage alienates her from her parents who consider her to be a slur on the family. She could not attend her father's and her grandfather's funeral ceremony. Even in her husband's home, she is not welcomed. His first wife, Ganga, further tightens her grip on the household. She starts performing her duties with additional fervor towards her husband and children. Commenting on the plight of Virmati, Seema Malik remarks, "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." (Malik) It is ironic that Harish who is

guilty of betrayal to his first wife is accepted everywhere in his social and professional life.

Shakuntala is another woman belonging to the second generation. She is more liberated than her mother. It is she who has sown the seeds of aspiration in Virmati's mind. She has done M.Sc. in Chemistry and is working as a lecturer in a college in Lahore. She is the one who has tasted the wine of freedom and has a strange kind of confidence in her. She dresses smartly, rides horses, smokes, plays cards and badminton, buys anything at will and goes about meeting the family relations. She tells her cousin, Virmati, how she and her friends travel, entertain themselves in the evenings, follow each other's work, read papers and attend seminars. It is she who encourages Virmati for breaking the traditional barriers that push women to the margin and says, "times are changing and women are moving out of the house and why not you?" (Kapur 18) When Virmati comes to Lahore for higher studies, she supports her there. She proves to be a big emotional support for Virmati when all other members of the family turn away from her. But she also rejects the patriarchal family norm that requires her to get married and attains motherhood.

Swarna Lata is another woman belonging to the second generation of women depicted in the novel. She asserts her identity, revolts against her parents, comes to Lahore to pursue higher studies and lead an independent life. She becomes a champion for the rights of women. She fights against the draft of Hindu Code Bill that excludes women from parental property rights. Ultimately, she marries the man who promises her not to interfere in her social activities and also agrees to help in the household affairs. In the novel, she serves as a foil to Virmati, the protagonist of the novel. Virmati's struggle for independence lands her into illicit sexual relationship with Harish Chander and unwed pregnancy. She puts her freedom at stake when she enters into a matrimonial alliance with Professor Harish Chander, an already married man. On the other hand, Swarna Lata enters into marriage at her own terms. It is only she who comes to Virmati's rescue and helps her in obtaining a secret abortion. In the novel, she becomes an embodiment of an emancipated woman.

Ida, daughter of Virmati and Professor Harish Chander, belongs to the third and last generation of women depicted in the novel. She is presented as a radical modern woman of the present day India. Like other women, she also suffers from the dictatorial attitude of her parents. But she revolts against the familial and social pressures and asserts her freedom. When she is asked to live up to the expectations of her father, she retorts, "Why is it so important to please him?" Ida does enter into matrimonial bond but she does not allow marriage to make compromises with her freedom. She decides to divorce her husband when he forces her to abort the child she has conceived. Ida's modern outlook towards life presents a contrast with her mother who lived in the transitional phase between tradition and modernity. Ida also draws a parallel between her husband and her father. Both of them were intellectuals and men of wide learning. But whereas Virmati submitted herself before her husband, Ida refuses to do so.

An analysis of the women presented in the novel reveals that all of them are subject to gender inequality in one way or the other. But as they belong to different generations, the level of inequality varies in each case. Each succeeding generation is a bit more liberated than the previous one. Kasturi, Lajwanti and Kishori Devi belong to the first generation. They are females by birth but they are patriarchal by temperament and upbringing. They not only themselves adhere to the patriarchal value system but also want their progeny to follow the same. Virmati, Shakuntala and Swarna Lata belong to the next generation. They try to assert their individuality in their own way. Virmati refuses to marry the bridegroom chosen by her parents. Instead, she marries an already married man. It is another matter that out of one patriarchal structure she enters into another. Her cousin, Shakuntala, becomes a lecturer in a college in Lahore and leads an independent life. She attends seminars and reads papers. Swarna Lata, Virmati's roommate in Lahore, becomes a model for the modern day women. She succeeds in striking a healthy balance between matrimony and her independence. Ida belongs to the last generation of females depicted in the novel. She is more liberated than the others. She refuses to follow the patriarchal

code in connection with her dress and behavior. She decides to leave her husband because he does not allow her to keep the baby in her womb.

In this way, the novel portrays gender inequality spreading over three generations. It also shows that positive changes in the position of women are coming with the passage of time. Women have started expressing and asserting themselves. But freedom and equality in the real sense of the term is still a mirage for them.

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