

## RESEARCH ARTICLE



## THE INDIAN WOMAN IN A QUANDARY IN MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

**GHANTASALA SYAMALA**

Lecturer in English, Andhra Loyola College, Vijayawada



**GHANTASALA SYAMALA**

Article Info:

Article Received:04/03/2014

Revised on:20/3/2014

Accepted for Publication:23/03/2014

The status of women in India has not enhanced much even after six decades of Indian Independence. Repression and enslavement still compel her to lead a regulated life. However, education has come to the aid of women to move forward and they have endeavored to liberate themselves from the domination of men. In this context it is interesting to note that the last decade of the twentieth century witnessed a world of change in the literature produced in India in the English language. The novels of R.K.Narayan in 1930s presented Indian society in its traditional form. In his early works Narayan assigned man a predominant position to women. But in the recent past one finds feminine consciousness has led to a social change where search for an identity and independence for women took place

@ Copyright, KY Publications

Women writers have presented the world in a different perspective, through which one can understand the aptitude of human accomplishment. They have discussed the role and status of women in Indian society and their issues and difficulties at different phases of time. In the process, they have examined social, cultural ethos against which they have been brought up and the image that has been carved for women in the society. Their works portray the conflict of women to assert their individuality. Moreover, education has assisted them to raise their voice against maltreatment and suppression.

The first novel *Difficult Daughters*<sup>1</sup> by Manju Kapur was published in 1998 and it has been bagging many laurels since then. *Difficult Daughters* won the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the Best First Book Category in the Eurasia region and was also shortlisted for the Crossword Book Award in India.

Manju Kapur has the credit of publishing five novels till date – *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody*. Her works revolve around the status of middle-class women in Indian society. *Difficult Daughters* is portrayed against the background of India's freedom and partition. *A Married Woman* has the issue of

Babri Masjid – Ram Janmabhoomi and the frenetic reaction of the people as the focus of attention. Virmati and Astha oscillate between domestic duties and the desperate need to free themselves from the shackles of patriarchal set up. *Home* deals with two generations of women in a middle-class family in Delhi. The main concern of the men in the family is to make money. On the other hand, women are confined to the four walls of home and giving birth to a male heir is the be-all and end-all in life for women. *The Immigrant* examines the compromises and frustrations of a modern marriage. *Custody* deals with the disintegration of marriage and its repercussions on all the people involved in it.

Manju Kapur's works project women trying to create a space for themselves in a phallogocentric society. She depicts the agony of women because of the internal strife between their inner aspirations and the reality. Manju Kapur delves deep into the psyche of women. As Sangeeta Mehta appropriately remarks:

Like Anita Desai, Manju Kapur's main foothold is the exploration of the deep recesses of human psyche, going beyond the skin into the constant struggles raging the soul of human beings at the conscious level and describing the atmosphere of the mind. She is the pointer of moods and wills of desires and dreams of conflicting choices and inner experiences. She believes that woman needs something more than just food, clothes and accommodation.<sup>2</sup>

*Difficult Daughters* is a story written against the backdrop of the country's freedom and partition. Manju Kapur unfolds the story of Virmati, the eldest child of ten younger siblings of Kasturi. Virmati revolts against her family to marry the Oxford-returned Professor, Harish Chandra, her neighbor who is already married. The story of Virmati runs simultaneously with India's fight for freedom and finally this freedom followed by partition of the country, Virmati becomes the second wife of Harish Chandra culminating in her exclusion from family. The novel exposes a journey of Indian woman's honorable objectives, her revolt against the society steeped in tradition, uncertainty, determination and compliance.

*Difficult Daughters* depicts the picture of three generations of women. Kasturi who totally surrenders herself to tradition and accepts it without any question, Virmati torn by conflicts as a consequence from the conflicts between tradition and modernity with her strong desire for liberation and search for identity, and Ida, a completely independent woman of contemporary times without any appreciation for duty.

Ida is portrayed as a revolutionary modern woman. There is no healthy relationship between Ida and her mother, Virmati. The story opens with Virmati's death and Ida tries to recreate her mother's past in an attempt to comprehend their relationship. She travels to her ancestral home at Amritsar to unearth the history of her parents. Ida is ever conscious of her status as a divorcee particularly in the assemblage of her maternal kith and kin. She says:

I know my relatives feel sorry for me. I am without husband, child or parents. I can see the ancient wheels of my divorce still grinding and clanking in their heads. (4).

Virmati, the eldest daughter is weighed down with domestic chores because of her mother's ceaseless pregnancies. She looks after her younger brothers and sisters but "it was weary work and she was almost always tired and harassed." (6) The reader is dismayed when her mother, Kasturi, asks her ten year old daughter, Virmati – "Have you seen to their food-milk-clothes-studies?" (6) Virmati herself is a kid and her mother expecting the duties of an adult from a young child is pathetic. Virmati is torn between family duty and her passion for education. Consequently she turns out to be "a brisk and bad tempered." (2) Sometimes she craves for love from her mother but in vain. She wants her mother to consider her as unique but this is not acknowledged.

Kasturi's health is on the decline due to pollution and repeated pregnancies. In order to recover from ill health she is sent to Dalhousie. Virmati follows her mother to take care of her. Kasturi is always irritated with Virmati when she is put off by the restlessness of her daughter. The arrival of Shakuntala changed Virmati's attitude towards life. Shakuntala crossed the marriageable age but she had decided not to marry. She plants

the idea of education and the benefits that ensue it in Virmati. Virmati is "almost breathless with admiration and love"(18) for Shakuntala when she realizes that here is something significant "beyond a husband and children"(17) Her persistence to pursue higher studies even if it demands rebelling against her mother exposes her strong-willed nature.

Meanwhile, a part of Lajwanti's house is rented to England-returned Professor, Harish Chandra, who moves with his family consisting of two children, his wife and his mother as a neighbour to Virmati. Virmati goes through her FA exams but her marriage which is fixed with Inderjit, a canal engineer, is postponed due to his father's death. To fill this time period she is sent to AS College for further studies. The Professor works in the same college. The Professor sees her in the classroom – "flower-like, against a backdrop of male students."(46) He initiates topics like the beauty of English literature, the great Western civilization and subtlety of cultivated living in his discussions with Virmati. The Professor triumphs in creating a dubious impression of woman's freedom. On the completion of her B.A., Virmati decides to continue her studies. She feels that by continuing her studies she could postpone marriage. She expresses her desire to continue studies and Kasturi is indignant. Kasturi could not tolerate Virmati's foolishness. "She grabbed her by her hair and banged her head against wall. Maybe this will knock some sense into you!" she said. (59)

No amount of persuasion could change Virmati's decision. Failing to get any suggestion from the Professor, she decides that she had to solve her problem by herself. Ultimately she attempts to end her life by drowning herself into the canal at Tarsikka but is saved by her grandfather's servants. Through this incident she communicates her yearning for further studies and her dislike for Inderjit, the boy to whom she is to be married. Her parents lock her in the godown but of no use. They desperately try to put sense in her mind by saying that the Professor who is already married "is a worldly person caught in his own desires. Nothing solid." ( 93) But Virmati is head over heels in love with the Professor and she turns a deaf ear to the

advice of her family. Her submission to Professor's love exposes her emotional feeble personality.

Her passion for education and her entanglement with the Professor led to an excommunication. The Professor is seen quite self-centered. He maintains a relation with his wife, Ganga, as well as with Virmati. When Virmati comes to know that his wife is pregnant she makes up her mind not to intrude between the Professor and his wife. She decides to uphold her family traditions. She is intent to forget the Professor and to commence a new life within the ethical system. She decides to go to Lahore to complete the B.T. course, despite a strong protest by Kasturi, her mother.

The Professor follows her to Lahore also and makes her the victim of his sensual passion. Virmati is projected as a typical new woman in the beginning, in course of time she disappoints the readers. Harish exploits her by lavishing his love on her and interprets social traditions to suit his convenience. She gets involved in a physical relationship with the Professor which exposes her weak self. She is exhausted of her emotional toughness and is left vulnerable who terminates her child due to the fear of society in which she has to live. Virmati reflects like a characteristic Indian woman steeped in traditions:

She was his for life, whether he ever married her or not. Her body was marked by him, she could never look elsewhere, never entertain another choice. (177)

After much pain and disapprobation she marries the Professor. She "was sure that neither parents nor grandfather would ever forgive her. The process of rejection that had started with Tarsikka would be completed. Let them damn her as they might, at least she had this new life." (207) She does not care if her family rejects her for her ultimate goal is to get married to the Professor so that she can create a space for herself in his family. She thinks that her marriage would bring comfort but she is thoroughly mistaken. Despite her education, Virmati thinks on the lines of patriarchal structure. She believes: "Her husband would be everything to her."(207) When the newly married couple reaches home, Giridhar (the Professor's son) remarks, "Who is this *gandi* lady? Send her away." (208) Her happiness of getting married to the

Professor is ephemeral. Reality dawns upon her, she reflects she should not have married him and regrets for not giving a thought of the far-reaching effects that her marriage would have. We see the Professor does not take any measure to defend her instead he says, "It will take time to adjust, dearest. Naturally you feel strange." (212) The first lesson she learns on the first day of their marriage is adjustment. In no time she realizes she is undesirable by the members of Harish's family. Ganga, Harish's first wife and his mother force Virmati to lead a stifling life in the constricted walls of the house. Life for Virmati has become an encumbrance. Though Virmati is educated she thinks like a typical Indian woman. She complains to Harish that she is deprived of her right to wash his clothes. He tries to convince her saying, "I don't want a washerwoman. I want a companion."(217)

Her marriage alienates her from her family. Kasturi, her mother is enraged at the sight of Virmati. She hurls abusive language against her, calling her – "*badmash*," "*randi*" (221) She also raises her slipper to hit her but Virmati bends and takes the blow on her back. After this incident she feels she has no blood relation.

Ganga feels that her rights are confiscated by Virmati. Virmati feels free only in the presence of Harish. She finds herself an untouchable in the house. Once Virmati ventures into the kitchen but that is followed by a hue and cry: "....but there had been such weeping and wailing that day, such ritual rinsing of every pot and pan to wash away her polluted touch, that she felt intimidated. It was clear that not an inch of that territory was going to be yielded." (230). Thus Harish says, "Poor thing, you have me, let her have the kitchen."(230)

Later there is a miscarriage. Virmati is sad and thinks God is punishing her for the first time. The death of her father and grandfather change her drastically. She becomes passive. "Even his ardent caresses could not arouse her." (246) But Harish is not bothered about her suffering and pain. We find Virmati suffering both physically and mentally. She becomes silent and reserved. She becomes dejected. In order to bring her out of her loneliness, she is sent to Lahore to do an M.A. in philosophy. On hearing this news Ganga is delighted since the home would be all hers as it used to be. After

leaving for Lahore Virmati once again regains her freedom which she fails to have in Harish's house. Virmati's frailty in individuality is revealed when she turns down the offer made by Swarnalatha to protest against the Draft Hindu Code Bill on the pretext that Harish would not approve of her participating in it. After a year Harish requests Virmati to return home as it is increasingly difficult for him to stay without her and maintaining two households is expensive. Harish becomes inconsiderate to her problems. He speaks in support of Ganga. Virmati feels miserable. She decides not to return home but stay at Lahore to improve her result. However, she could not stick to her decision for long as there is unrest due to Partition and the family moves to Kanpur leaving Harish alone in Amritsar. Virmati is enforced to go home. She begins her life as a housewife.

The first task Virmati does after reaching home is to displace all the things related to Ganga to the dressing room. She feels relaxed since it is for this space in the house she has been battling all along. She conceived but this time she is strong and confident of her position in the house. She gives birth to a baby girl. Virmati suggests her name "*Bharati*" as India is getting freedom but Harish does not accept it. He prefers the baby to be named *Ida* which means "a new slate, and a blank beginning."(277)

Kasturi belongs to the first generation of women who believes marriage is the final goal in a woman's life. She strongly believes a woman's life is fulfilled when she is married and has a family of her own. On the other hand, Kasturi is portrayed as a fractious mother who is always annoyed with her daughter, Virmati. As a child Kasturi is sent to a mission school. One day Kasturi's mother finds her offering prayers to Christ. She is disturbed and forewarns to marry her off before she brings disrespect to the family. But Kasturi belongs to a progressive Arya Samaj family in which child – marriage is considered as a sin. Her uncle starts a separate school for girls and "Kasturi became the first girl in her family to postpone the arrival of the wedding guests by a tentative assault on learning. (62). She receives formal education but at the same time "it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny." (62). Her mother took every care so that

Kasturi could “ please her in-laws.” (62). She is trained in the skills of cooking, sewing, stitching and needlework. She is an avid reader of books and read them during nights to avoid comments from others. At seventeen she is married to Suraj Prakash. She gives birth to ten children and this drains the strength out of her body. “She had filled the house as her in-laws had wanted, but with another child there would be nothing left of her.”(7). She is exhausted after so many children and a feeling of revolt fills her that she starts pondering that there is no need to take care of her body. One cannot hold Kasturi responsible for her short temper and bitterness which she directs against Virmati. Virmati wins the empathy of the readers who is sandwiched between the domestic duties and her zeal for education.

Virmati never taught Ida to assert her independence but it was the other way round – she tried to teach her how to “adjust, compromise, adapt.” (256 ) Ida strived to be a perfect daughter. She did not take after mother and father in their scholarly pursuits. Her father attached much importance to her external appearance. He liked her “looking pretty, neat, and well-dressed, with kaajal and a little touch of oil in my sleeked-back hair.”(279) Further, he also anticipated her to perform well in school, learn classical music, take dance lessons and change her awkwardness into elegance. The Professor wished Ida to read all the classics of literature, like Virmati who had participated in intellectual conversations, so that she could display her “accomplishments graciously before his assembled guests at parties.” (279) As Ida grew older, Virmati imposed restrictions on her but she was “constantly looking for escape routes.”(279) Ida detested the idea of pleasing her father. She rebelled against the patriarchal structure by making it very clear that she wants to live for herself rather than pleasing her father.

Another victim of the conventional society is Ganga. Kapur brings the issue of child-marriage prevalent during the pre-independent era through the character of Ganga. She was given in marriage to Harish when she was three years old. She was an illiterate who had never been to school but her mother took every measure to coach her in the art of household management. At the age of twelve

she left for her husband’s house, groomed in cooking, embroidery and knitting needle as well as with the sewing-machine. She tried to prove herself a good homemaker but failed to be an intellectual companion to her husband. He craved for a company in his intellectual discourses and this he found in Virmati who had a strong desire for education. This drew him towards Virmati, eventually fell in love with her and brought her home as his wife. This sparked animosity in Ganga towards Virmati. But Ganga is so innocent that she holds her husband in high esteem even after his marriage with Virmati. Manju Kapur says:

Her husband continued to be Ganga’s public statement of selfhood. Her bindi and her bangles, her toe rings and her mangalsutra, all managed to suggest that he was still her god.(278)

Ganga disapproves of Virmati going ahead with her higher studies. At the same time, she is happy that Virmati would leave the house but her happiness is shortlived. In the wake of Partition there was violence and due to security reasons Harish sends his mother, Ganga and the children to Kanpur. She leaves the home with the hope that she would return when circumstances would become normal but that day did not arrive in her life.

Shakuntala and Swarnalatha are illustrative of uprising “New Women.” Shakuntala is Virmati’s cousin. After completing M.Sc in Chemistry, Shakuntala enjoys the pleasure of a free life. Shakuntala gives voice to women’s freedom at a time when the country is battling for independence. She emphasizes the significance of selfhood and forces Virmati to look beyond mundane matters like marriage, husband and children. Virmati wonders at Shakuntala’s independent lifestyle. She is inspired by Shakuntala that she decides to go for higher studies, thus disregarding her conventional family.

Swarnalatha is Virmati’s roommate in Lahore. She postponed her marriage for the sake of doing M.A. She aspired to achieve something besides getting married. She gently threatens her parents if they refused to co-operate with her she would participate in Satyagraha along with other Congress workers against the British until the latter takes them to prison. Later she becomes a teacher

in the college where she had studied earlier and got married. Her husband consents to her participation in other political activities – working for the Party, as a treasurer of the Women’s Conference and also volunteers to share the domestic duties with her. With the encouragement of her parents and husband she remains a spirited social activist. She builds a way for herself in life.

A few years later after their marriages when the two friends meet Virmati finds Swarnalatha has not changed. She has been taking part in political activities. There is a stark contrast between Virmati and Swarnalatha. A strength of character has always been the forte of Swarnalatha. On the other hand, Virmati plays the role of a traditional Indian woman after marriage.

It can be concluded that Virmati revolted against the patriarchal system but did not succeed in making her life a fruitful one. Her struggle to assert her identity resulted in uncertainty in life, the dishonor of being the second wife and ill-treatment from the society. One should not overlook the fact that her attempt to raise her voice against the patriarchal setup at that time is highly appreciative. The story of Virmati conveys charm, acumen and economic self-reliance are necessary for women but they should be directed towards a right act. Mere independence is not enough; a woman should have self-discipline, self-confidence and self-assurance to transform her life in the best manner.

#### REFERENCES

1. Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, 1998. London: Faber and Faber, 1999. (All textual citations in the article kept in parentheses are from this edition of the novel.)
2. Mehta, Sangeeta. “Women’s Odyssey of Liberation In Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*.” *Contemporary Vibes* 5. 17 (Oct – Dec 2009): 12 – 13.