

## Difficult Daughters : A Critical Appreciation

**Lavi Sharma\* & Prof. Vikas Sharma\*\***

*\*Research Scholar, Mewar University, Chittorgarh (Rajasthan)*

*\*\*Principal, D.A.V. (P.G.) College, Bulandshahr*

***Abstract :** Manju Kapur is the most famous contemporary Indian English woman novelist. She is a great realist as her main concern is to draw the attention of society towards various oppressive measures of patriarchy. She possesses the power to captivate the attention of the reader from the beginning to the end of her writing. Her novels present an idea of the feminist struggle against patriarchy, oppression, exploitation and other social biases.*

***Keywords :** Feminist, patriarchy, oppression, exploitation, politics of gender, tradition and modernity, nationalist.*

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**Lavi Sharma\* &  
Prof. Vikas Sharma\*\*,**

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Manju Kapur presents the politics of Gender and examines the role of women in home and society. As a woman, she has the strong belief in the equality of the gender and in the rights of both male and female to live on the equal terms. As a creative writer, she ponders over the rights of woman as she believes that women have the same rational human nature as men have and woman is an equal partner of man in the journey of life.

As a woman she is against the gender politics in society as due to this gender politics a woman has to struggle hard to establish her position as an individual. Regarding gender discrimination, Swami Vivekananda remarks:

It is very difficult to understand why in this country so much difference is made between men and women, whereas the Vedanta declares that the one and the same conscious self is present in all being. Liberty is the first condition of growth. (MILE, 76)

In fact, Gender politics i.e. the inequalities between men and women has been an age-old issue in the world, her novels reveal the new women who revolt against male dominating society where women remain confined within the four walls of their home and are denied the liberty to act and live according to their own wish. Her protagonist demand for equality society and oppose the orthodox social taboos. They struggle hard to break the shackles of patriarchy that leads to gender inequality and subordination of women.

Her women characters are mostly educated as she believes in the saying, "Educate a woman, you educate a family". Women's education plays an important role in their development as education leads them to free thinking and makes them aware of the social, homely, traditional and moral values. Manju Kapur presents that the spread of education makes the female aware of their individual rights as they realize their own ambitions.

'Difficult Daughters', her first novel presents the struggle of a woman for her identity as an individual. Virmati, the heroine of the novel, has her own aspirations and continues her study against the wishes of her family. She has the strong will power to challenge the patriarchal norms and opposes her whole family. As a new woman, she has an earnest desire to study and to do a job but her traditional family is of the opinion that it is the duty of a girl to get married and fulfil her household duties> On the other hand, Virmati is much inspired by her cousin Shakuntala, a new educated woman and wants to be educated like her. The novelist remarks:

Shakuntala's visit planted the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. It was possible to be something other than a wife. Images of Shakuntala Pehanji kept floating through her head, Shakuntala Pehanji who having done her M.Sc. in Chemistry, had gone about tasting wine of freedom. Wine, whereas all Virmati had ever drunk had been creamy milk in winter, designed to deaden the senses with its richness, and frothy cool lassi with its lacy bubbles in summer. No, she had to go to Lahore, even if she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over. (DD, 19)

Her mother Kasturi is traditional and thinks marriage as the ultimate aim of a girl's life as she tells Virmati:

'Leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first'.....

.....'Now it is you who are eating my head. What good are Shaku's degrees when she is not settled. Will they look after her when she is old? demanded Kasturi irritably. 'At your age I was already expecting you, not fighting with my mother'. (DD, 21-22)

Here Manju Kapur presents the conflict between tradition and morality. Kasturi represents tradition while Virmati stands for modernity. Kasturi disapproves the way of Shakuntala:

She is become a mem." Kasturi said disapprovingly. "Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family. I studied too, but my mother would have killed me if I had dared even to want to dress in anything other than was bought for me. (DD, 16-17)

The novelist presents Shakuntala as a new woman who is independent and leads her own life. She is of the view that time has changed and while the whole nation is fighting for freedom, it is sad that the women are still supposed to get married and doing nothing outside the household. She is assertive and joins rallies and attends political meetings. As the novelist present the background of India's partition, the independence struggle of 1940, the women like Shakuntala, Swarnalata, friend and the roommate of Virmati in Lahore are much influenced by the politics of the time. Virmati is much impressed by the views of Shakuntala and goes Lahore to

study as she has the aspiration to be self-reliant and independent.

Through the portrayal of Virmati, the novelist presents the new promising woman who refuses to marry the person she was engaged and rebels against her traditional family. She falls in love with Harish, a married professor and feels caught in the hopeless situation of passion for the professor and duty towards her family. Since childhood, she yearns for love and concern of her mother but her mother has no time as there are other children in the family. Due to lack of communication between her mother and herself, she becomes an easy prey to the professor and transgresses the laws of the home and gets involved in an illicit love affair with the professor. Though she knows that being the eldest sister she has the responsibility for her other younger sisters, she refuses to marry and destroys the good name of the family. P. Sudhashri remarks:

.....Virmati, the protagonist rebels against tradition. Yet she is filled with self-doubt. She pleads for studying further and postponement of her marriage. She attempts suicide, when faced with prospect of marrying the canal engineer. The family brands her 'to be restless, sick, selfish and locks her up'. (P. Sudhashri, 2005)

In Lahore, she resolves to study and decides not to marry and to live within a moral code. She feels guilty as she has disgraced her family by refusing marriage. She also decides to end her relation with Harish and burns all the letters he has ever sent her and decides to leave him to his pregnant wife. She rejects him, ignores his request and shows her strength of mind in overcoming her dejection. As an optimist, she wants to have a meaningful life. She looks for freedom and autonomy in hostel and meets Swarnalata, who is her roommate there. She has the idea to do something besides getting married and defies her mother's decision of getting married. She is politically active and attends various conferences and rallies. Swarnalata is a new woman who has individualist thinking as she is revealed when she says to Virmati :

Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war - the Satyagraha movement - because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, going to jail, wakeup from your stale dream. (DD, 151)

Again, the novelist's feministic approach is revealed when both Virmati and Swarnalata discuss the issues of marriage:

Most families look upon the marriage of a daughter as a sacred duty - or sacred burden. We are lucky we're living in times when women can do something else. Even in Europe women gain more respect during wartime. And here we have that war, and our Satyagraha as well. (DD, 152).

Infact, Swarnalata is a mature thinker and Virmati feels surprised as she always does when Swarnalata talking about the many things she is involved in. Swarnalata has richness of mind and is able to judge everything easily as she possesses the intellectual power and presence of mind. Virmati remarks:

What a girl! Her opinions seem to come from inside herself, her thoughts, ideas and feelings blended without any horrible sense of dislocation. She was committed, articulate..... May be, could be like Swarna from the inside secretly. (DD, 135)

As a friend, Swarnalata inspires her to take part in Indian freedom struggle as she herself is an active participant in Indian freedom struggle and politics. Virmati also attends the women's conference meeting and begins two questions herself- Is she free? Is she like these women who are intellectuals and making so many efforts for the development of the human spirit. The novelist remarks :

Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent being in love. Wasting it. Well, not wasting time, no, of course not, but then how come. I never have a moment for anything else? (DD, 142).

Virmati is much influenced to hear the speeches made by various women nationalists who are fully devoted to the cause of the freedom and unity of the country. She wonders about Swarnalata who has a great reputation among these nationalists. As a realist, the novelist presents the fact that women participated forcefully in the social movements leading independence.

In her note to her Spanish translation of the novel, Dora Sales Salvador appositely stresses :

'Kapur enfatiza la labor que en aquellos momentos ejercieron

muchas mujeres que, al tiempo que reclamaban la igualdad de oportunidades, el acceso paritario a la educación y las posibilidades de una vida más allá de las convenciones, fueron una fuerza visible en la resistencia no violenta ante los británicos' (Kapur emphasises the efforts made at that time by numerous women who while, demanding equal opportunities, equal access to education and life-opportunities going beyond convention, were a visible force in the non-violent resistance to the British) (DSS, 356)

Though Virmati is much impressed by thoughts of Swarnalata and other women nationalists and her words give her comfort but she does not want to live without marriage as she thinks-

But the meant thinking of a life for herself without marriage, which was strange and not quite right. It meant she would be alone, and she wasn't sure she was capable of it. (DD, 152)

Virmati realizes that she is not politically active and she remains indifferent towards the way of political activities. She wants to marry the professor as she could not deny her exigent and ardent lover, her newborn selfhood weakens and she falls prey to the passion of the married professor. She constantly meets him secretly and asks for their marriage. Actually her quest is for fulfillment and she wants to fulfillment in her life, the love, space and self-expression. But the professor, a married man and cannot abandon his wife and children and so the condition is serious as Virmati has waited for five years and also undergoes a trauma of aborting her child with him. She is ready to become the second wife of Harish as he cannot leave his first wife. Finally she marries Harish but it is not the joy but the relief as now she thinks marriage as the ultimate aim of her life.

'The poet's parents did the Kanya-dan, the seven pheras were taken, the couple pronounced man and wife. A Virmati rubbed her eyes, watering from the smoke, she knew, rather than felt, that the burden of the past five years had lifted'. (DD, 202)

Finally, she comes to Amritsar with Harish but it is hard for her to live with his family. Her sufferings increase as she realizes the sorrow of Ganga, the first wife of the professor and feels guilty of getting married to Harish who has done

injustice to his first wife. She is cursed by the family and she suffers by being a second wife to him. His family does not accept her and Virmati has to bear insults in his home. Even she is not allowed to prepare her own meal and she realizes that though she is married. She is dispossessed:

Why can't I make my own meals? ' she occasionally, hopelessly asked. She had once tried going into the kitchen. 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. If Virmati has the bed, Ganga was going to have the house.... (DE, 230)

But as a woman Virmati is not ready to lose courage and her only weapon is her husband who loves her as he always wants an educated companion like Virmati. She displays her power over him, needling him about Ganga so that he may not think of going towards her. Though she wonders what is happening to her yet she loves everything about Harish, including his relatives.

Her own mother and family curse her as she has disgraced the family and now she has no contact with anybody from her own family except Paro, her younger sister. Finally, she gets success and gets the desired space with the professor all alone at his home as the whole family shifts to Kanpur due partition riots. Now they have freedom as there is none to disturb them. At last she gets freedom as she has never had so much space around her and may be this is really what she has fought for all along, space to be. She conceived and gives birth to her daughter Ida. Finally she achieves her cherished desire. But what she gets, she is regarded as a loser as she had to pay heavy price for all this. She struggles hard but fails to assert her individuality in reality as though she breaks the shackles of past traditions and wants to assert her individual freedom, her relationship with the professor checks her way as she is locked into newer shackles. In fact, she could not create a space for herself for which she has been struggling as Rollason comments:

In the micro-state to which her destiny leads her, she has no family or close friends. She attains a near-exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, Virginia Woolf's famous 'room of one's own: and yet she fall'. (R.C. 2004).

On the other hand, Ida, Virmati's daughter, is strong enough to break up her marriage as her husband denies her maternity and thus sows the seeds of break up. He wanted her to have an abortion and so Ida frees herself from the bond of marriage

as her husband does not want a baby from her. Ida shows more independent nature as she is not prepared to have relation with her husband and breaks up her marriage while Virmati is not able to go beyond marriage and accepts to be the professor's second wife. To her marriage is the ultimate goal of her life, a possibility which will perhaps give her sense of security and certainty.

Thus it become clear that Manju Kapur is well familiar with the various problems, a woman is subjected to in the patriarchal society. She supports the idea that a woman is assigned a subordinate and relative position in our society. Through her works Kapur presents the factors which deny the freedom of the female to assert their individuality and her female characters such as Ida, Shakuntala, Swarnalata and Virmati are bold enough to resist and overcome the social and traditional barriers. Her novels are a remarkable contribution to the Indian English Fiction as they reveal women struggle for freedom from social, political and social bondages.

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