

Identity Crises: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

ManjuKapur is a feminist writer who tangibly perceives the position of women in a patriarchal society and deals with the problems of women. Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is the story of a young woman Virmati who falls in love with a married man, hitherto a condemned passion in her narrow social circle. It is not only about the difficult daughters but also as much about the difficult mothers of the changing times. The novelist deals with the leading themes of the times where the description of love, sex and marriage is very bold and rather unconventional. The narrator, Ida, is a difficult daughter and she explores the life of her mother in the novel. Kapur uses three generations of daughters, who exhibit three sets of notions. The novel presents the archetype of two mother-daughter relationships where the daughters differ from their mothers and never want to be like them but in the end, they cannot but identify with their mothers. Ida is personified as a new women, expressing her resistance in many ways and thus trying to challenge the existing codes. ManjuKapur takes the readers through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations. It explores the complex terrain of Indian family and reveals many issues that are deep rooted within the family. Kapur is not argumentatively vocal in pleading the fate of the contemporary woman rather she sympathetically paints a woman's struggle to find an identity. Striking a balance between a natural co- existence on one hand and unfettered freedom and space on the other, Kapur's eloquent narration of women's issues is both Indian and universal.

KEYWORDS: Women's dilemma, Identity Crisis, Personification, Challenge.

ManjuKapur's feminist perceptions are seen in her novels. *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2009), and *Custody* (2011) throw light on the various shades of Indian social life and culture. Her novels have a typical Indian outlook, and she does not write to please the western readers. She selects the Indian background, characters and themes. She loves to present the Indian way of life which respects moral values. Traditions, conventions, cultural values play an important role in shaping human life. *Difficult Daughters* is set against the historical background of India's partition. It is the story of a young woman Virmati who falls in love with a married man, hitherto a condemned passion in her narrow social circle. She is torn between family duties, the desire for education and illicit love. It is a story of sorrow, love and compromise. ManjuKapur takes the readers through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations. It explores the complex terrain of Indian family and reveals many issues that are deep rooted within the family- the revolt against the age old traditions, quest for identity, the problems of marriage, women's dilemma and lastly the women's struggle for survival. The New Women in the novels of ManjuKapur seem to be the personification of "Women" who have been carrying the burden of inhibition since ages and want to be free now. ManjuKapur also deals with the roles of woman as a daughter, a wife and a mother. She is a trend setter and she brought the woman protagonist from the clutches of

suffering woman to daring and amazing woman. She has given woman a new image of boldness. ManjuKapur's heroines negotiate for their independence and a respectable place in society. The heroine is mentally advanced in the real sense of the word. The female protagonist is the new women who hail from the middle class but challenge the existing socio-cultural patriarchal system. In the social milieu, she is educated, modern, intelligent, bold and assertive. Even though they try to transcend the social hierarchy by demolishing it, they often undergo serious psychological traumas in the absence of an alternative, planned feminist ideology that may give them freedom, security and peace of mind.

ManjuKapur clearly shows the dilemma of women who carry the burden of being female as well as the added responsibility of being mothers to members of their own sex. In the traditional and social milieu of the novel where mothers and daughters exist, marriage is regarded an ultimate goal and destiny from which these women cannot escape. Her female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individuals caged within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking and makes them intolerant to family and society. They endure a conflict between the passions of the flesh and the yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day.

Difficult Daughters narrates the story of women, especially the dilemma of daughters caught in the traditional-versus-modern conflict. It is the story of a daughter's journey towards self-realization through her mother's attainment of self-identity. It is not only about the difficult daughters as the title suggests but also as much about the difficult mothers of the changing times. As the novel belongs to the post-modern period, the emphasis shifts from the East-West encounter to the more complicated theme of the conflict between tradition and modernity. The novelist deals with the leading themes of the times where the description of love, sex and marriage is very bold and rather unconventional. She has depicted that marriage as a social institution has lost its sanctity and relevance. Lack of faith in traditional customs resulting in declining moral values becomes one of the main themes discussed in the novel. Kapur is one of the new age women writers who have challenged the traditional family values in her writings, especially from a woman's perspective. SumanBala in an article writes about Kapur, "She is yet another woman writer from India on whom the image of the suffering, but stoic women, who are eventually breaking traditional boundaries, has had a significant impact . . . She's written about the female revolt against deep rooted social values. (12)

ManjuKapur, was so moved by the love story of her parents set in that era that she restored it bit by bit, before letting it sink into her memory. She pieced together the story through sepia photographs, talks with relatives, her own fragmented memory, and rounded up with a journey to the locales of her mother's place to write *Difficult Daughters*. It is her quest for her own identity through reliving her mother's past. The narrator, Ida, is a difficult daughter and she explores the life of her mother in the novel. As she admits in the end,

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. (280)

Through her journey into the past of her mother, she finds, she is like her mother. Although she hates her mother and the novel begins by saying, “The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother” (1). Yet, in the end she finds herself building a mansion for her mother. It is the identity crisis that results in a conflict in relationship between them. A daughter's search for her identity begins when she finds similarities with her mother. And when she starts asserting herself, the conflict starts building up. Ida grows up “struggling to be the model daughter” (279) and under this pressure to perform better she is “constantly looking for escape routes” (279) and becomes a rebel and finally she is “nothing, husbandless, childless” (279). She blames her mother for the “melancholy depression and despair” (279) in her life. As the mother is the culture bearer and passes on the legacy of the patriarchal system to her daughter who may either accept it implicitly or may question it but “no matter how diverse their views, the daughter is unable to reject her completely”. (Uma 71)

Kapur uses three generations of daughters, who exhibit three sets of notions. These three generations of women show the generational progression and all these revolve around the idea of marriage in the Indian context.

The first generation consists of Kasturi, Lajwanti, Harish's mother, Kishori Devi and his first wife, Ganga. Their marriages belong to the pre-independence era. They give priority to family rather than education and think that “it is the duty of every girl to get married” (15). Even Ganga's view on marriage is that “some things come before studies” (41). They all glorify the institution of marriage and see marriage as the ultimate aim of a girl's life. Ganga's appearance doesn't change with her husband's second marriage. He “continued to be Ganga's public statement of selfhood. Her bindi and her bangles, her toe-rings and her mangal sutra, all managed to suggest that he was still her God” (278).

The second generation has Virmati, Shakuntala and SwarnaLata. They represent the social scenario round about the Independence time. They are the rebels who fight and rebel against the age-old traditions. Shakuntala's thinking goes “beyond a husband and children” and she never marries and tells that all her “friends are from different backgrounds, and all have families unhappy with their decision not to settle down” (17). It is not only the case with Shakuntala but with the whole generation, which is going through transformation. The European ideals motivate them to be independent in their thinking. Virmati also follows her cousin, Shakuntala and studies further and refuses to marry but later marries the Professor. Thereby, she defies “her own family for many years” (256) and opts for a marriage that is “condemned socially, resulting in nothing but humiliation and misery to everybody” (194). Her room mate, SwarnaLata also defies her mother's decision as she admits that she was very clear that she “wanted to do something besides getting married” (118). She is politically active and shows a fair amount of maturity as reflected from her opinion regarding marriage: 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. Wake up from your stale dream. (151) Through Virmati, Kapur points to a kind of feminist emancipation that lies in not limiting women to their traditional roles but in expanding and awakening them to several other possibilities and to their own consciousness: 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 (152). No doubt SwarnLata belongs to the modern times. Although Virmati

is highly impressed by her individualistic thinking, she cannot conceive of “a life for herself without marriage, which was strange and not quite right” (152). Virmati reflects her state of mind. She wants to be modern in thinking but she also values her traditions and believes in marriage. She even refuses to marry the Professor as it is against the tradition and tells him in a letter that “in my family, marriages are not made like this” (107). But her romantic desires overtake tradition and finally she forces him to marry her but it makes her feel “dispossessed” (212). She is born between two sets of values. She wants to be more than just a wife, mother or daughter. This second generation depicts the transition phase from tradition to modernity.

The third generation includes Virmati's daughter, Ida, and the Professor's daughter, Chotti. Chotti joins the IAS and never marries as she has seen the disastrous marriage of her parents. Ida also makes a disastrous marriage as it is short-lived and results in a divorce. They want their space within the patriarchal framework, their ‘room’ within the male domination. But one thing is clear that irrespective of the generation, none of the daughters want to be like their mothers. Earlier Virmati and SwarnaLata do not like their mothers. Later Ida does not want to be like her mother. In an effort to become independent in their thinking they move away from the realities and ideals of Indian social customs and traditions. They seem to be fascinated by English liberalism and free love.

Virmati, is a difficult daughter for her mother, Kasturi. Virmati has five sisters but only Virmati creates problems and becomes difficult to handle. It is her education and her modern outlook that is problematic. In the beginning Virmati is depicted as the governess of her brother and sisters. She is aware of “how indispensable she was to her mother and the whole family” (7). But she is attracted towards the modern thinking of Shakuntala and wants to study more. She too wants “to go to Lahore, even if she had to fight with her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over” (19). But Kasturi thinks on an entirely different line. She tells to Virmati, “Leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad-tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first” (21). So, the difference in their thinking and priorities causes a conflict in their relationships. Mothers think it is their duty to condition their daughters according to the norms of the patriarchal society. Kasturi thinks that only primary education is required. She feels proud that:

She came from a good family where girls were taught housekeeping
from the time they could walk. All of a sudden Kasturi felt grateful
to her mother for those long hours she had spent in the kitchen, cutting ,
peeling, chopping, slicing, pounding, wrapping, mixing, kneading,
baking, roasting, stirring and frying. It paid to know these things. (205)

Kasturi wants her daughter Virmati to be like her. But Virmati never feels a oneness with her mother. The sense of belonging that is the essence of any good relationship is missing here. Since childhood Virmati keeps longing for love and understanding but the mother doesn't have time for her. The feeling of being wanted is absent here. “The language of feeling had never flowed between them” (12). Kasturi never shows any emotional love for Virmati. When she leaves Virmati in the hostel for BT, she is

“moved by the tears in her daughter's eyes, unbent enough to give her an affectionate farewell” (116). Similar is the mother of SwarnaLata, Virmati's friend. Swarna is in hostel for further studies only because of her father as her mother was annoyed with her and “wanted me to marry” (117). They question their existence and want their own place in society. It is the outcome of the education of independence and freedom. It is the lack in communication between Kasturi and Virmati that leads to her affair with Harish. She finds an escape route in Harish's love as she is devoid of love and attention since childhood. Had her mother supported her in her academic pursuits, she may not have become the victim of Harish's love. But Virmati is so unfortunate that she is never able to share her pleasures, pains and sorrows with her mother. All her sorrows first as mistress and then as a second wife remains buried in her heart. There is a barrier between them, which Virmati also never tries to cross. When Virmati marries the Professor, she loses her family as she is “beaten by her mother, and declared dead” (223). This barrier between them melts away with the Partition. “Virmati's mother sent for her. The times demanded from Kasturi that she carry resentment no further” (274). In the end, she gets reconciled with her mother who gives her solace and peace of mind.

The mother and daughter relationship leads to the dilemma in the daughter's life. Belonging to the same gender, they are supposed to be united in a bond of understanding besides love and trust. But sadly, in reality, bitterness, resentment, dislike and envy are the dominant feelings in their relationship. Mothers want their daughters to be like them but daughters want to learn from their own experiences. This crisis of self-identity strains their relationship. Thus the very course of a daughter's life changes due to the mother as “most families look upon the marriage of a daughter as a sacred duty... sacred burden” (152). Mothers are least bothered about consulting their daughter and this further makes them rebels. It is often difficult for a daughter to negate her mother's influence. The novel presents the paradigm of two mother-daughter relationships where the daughters differ from their mothers and never want to be like them but in the end, they cannot but identify with their mothers.

Simone De Beauvoir rightly says: There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband- or in some cases a 'protector'-is for her (woman) the most important of undertakings...She will free herself from the parental home, from her other's hold, she will open her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of a new master. (352)

ManjuKapur is one of the most appreciated contemporary Indian English woman novelists. She insists that the world she portrays analytically in her novels stems from the intellectual experience of her academic life. Her basic approach is to liberate women from the oppressive measures of patriarchy. The protagonists in her novel therefore, endure physical, emotional and psychological sufferings, but finally are able to attain their long cherished freedom to a great extent. Ida is personified as a New Woman, expressing her resistance in many ways and thus trying to challenge the existing codes. ManjuKapur's novels enable the readers to get an idea of the feminist struggle against biases. Striking a balance between a natural co- existence on one hand and unfettered freedom and space on the other, her eloquent narration of women's issues is nevertheless, both Indian and universal. Kapur has chosen a period of political, economic and social changes and so it has become necessary for a woman also to redefine her new role and determine its parameters for her and society.

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