

Mother – Daughter Relationships in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

Manju Kapur speaks, with great narrative eloquence, of the idea of independence. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters*, published in 1998. She was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for *Difficult Daughters* and has earned her very substantial success, both commercially and critically, both in her native India and throughout the world. Her novel *Difficult Daughters* is a story of a daughter’s journey back into her mother’s painful past. The dream of independence and decolonization were portrayed clearly. The incidents like orgies of rape and murder, staged in the name of freedom. In the beginning, Ida, the narrator and daughter of protagonist, trying to reclaim her mother’s secret life, turns out to be main story. Virmati was a child of a conservative Hindu family, comes of age in the turbulent and optimistic 1040s. It was considered to be the time of transformation to the educated Indians. Exposed to taste the new wine of freedom, Virmati encounters freedom-fighters of all religions and persuasions, falls in love, and marries an already married professor. Sequestered with mother-in-law, co-wife and stepchildren, Virmati uses advanced education as an escape route. It is true here, “Education led to independence and loose conduct”. Her progress parallels the new-found freedoms of educated Indian women, but double standards prevail, increasing awareness of the ties that bind. This paper brings out the mother – daughter relationships in the novel.

KEYWORDS: Mother – Daughter Relationships, post-colonialism in Manju Kapur’ *Difficult Daughters*

Mother-Daughter Relationship is a natural as well as problematic area of understanding vis-à-vis the human relationships so far as the formulation and construction of gendered identities in a society is concerned. Adrienne Rich remarks very candidly: “*To accept and strengthen both the mother and the daughter in ourselves is no easy matter, because patriarchal attitudes have encouraged us to split, to polarize these images and to project all unwanted guilt, anger, shame, power, freedom, on to ‘other woman.’*”¹ This observation seems valid for almost all cultures and climes as mother-daughter relationship is one of the most natural and closes bonds.

In contemporary Indian writings, especially by women writers, the mother has been granted visibility by presenting her as human being with all the fallible human characteristics, instead of placing her on the high pedestal of super humans. The stress on the ‘mother’ in a woman-the bounteous giver, ‘the Angel of the house’, intensely sympathetic’, ‘immensely charming’, ‘utterly sacrifices herself daily’² –conspiratorially

takes away a crucial part of her personality which like any other creature, seeks joy and sustenance through her fulfillment. This breaking of the myth of motherhood not only relieves her of the eternal aura of a divinity but also of the formidable burden that such images carry along.

The new generation of Indian women novelist namely, Gita Hariharan, Namita Gokhale, Anita Nair and Manju Kapur have invited much critical attention. Each one of the four has composed at least one novel focusing attention on the plight of contemporary women especially in their endeavour for emancipation and liberation from the matrilineal social system. However, it is difficult to assess their position as feminist writing either Western or Indian. Nevertheless, scrutinizing their novelist's adventure provides an interesting study.

Manju Kapur speaks, with great narrative eloquence, of the idea of independence. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters*, published in 1998. She was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for *Difficult Daughters* and has earned her very substantial success, both commercially and critically, both in her native India and throughout the world. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a story of three generations of women: Ida, the narrator, an educated woman, who is a divorcee and childless. Virmati, her mother, born in Amritsar in the Punjab in 1940, the daughter of a father of progressive ideas and a traditionalist mother, who marries an already married professor for love, and Kasturi, her grandmother, who come to terms with a difficult daughter, Virmati. This is the story of a real, middle class home with fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters that one had seen and lived with. Merging them together was the background of the Partition, which 50 years later seems to be the watershed event of modern India.

In this novel Virmati is attracted towards an English professor who falls passionately in love with her because his illiterate wife could never prove a soul mate. After his repeated overtures Virmati gives in, as she is also a soul thirsting for love. This illegitimate affair leads to many sufferings. Virmati has to bear the brunt alone. She is forced to abort the child of Harish as the professor is reluctant-rather afraid – to marry her. Finally at the insistence of a friend, the professor is forced into marrying her. But Virmati's hardships do not end here, they simply change colours. Most of her sufferings are caused by maternal apathy. Virmati does not have a sympathetic shoulder to weep on and this aggravates her agony. She suffers at the hands of the parochial society, her family and above all her paramour.

Mother-daughter relationship

It is true that she is the mother that Kapur writes of but certainly she forms the core of the personality that Kapur so lovingly presents. *Difficult Daughters* begins with a daughter going back to Amritsar carrying her mother's ashes to meet her maternal family. The narrative then alternates between the past and the present with the mother and daughter speaking to each other through places and events. Traced within this paradigm are both the history of the mother's extraordinary life and the turbulence of the years preceding the independence of our country. Amritsar in those times was a vastly different

place from what it is today because it isn't today. Towns such as Amritsar had what was called a 'genry', which counted eminent educator, teachers, lawyers and landed families among their class. To such a family belongs Virmati. Her grandfather is a prominent landowner and ardent Arya Samaj, Committed to the education of women. Because, it is he who helps Virmati to stand upon her point. His sons run a successful jewellery establishment and have a large brood of children. Virmati is the eldest of 11 children and divides her time between helping her anemic mother cope with the housework and studying. It doesn't mean that she did it with wholeheartedly. Virmati's interest in studies is incomprehensible to her family which considers her accomplished enough to handle life, equipped as she is to deal with stitching, cooking and reading and writing. The narrative, then, alternates between the past and the present, revealing bit by bit, Virmati's life from the information Ida collects from her mother's friends, brothers, sisters and acquaintances. She concludes by saying, "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.

Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* has to be a mother, to all her ten siblings. The mother Kasturi is involved in the sole job of procreation leaving the young ones for Virmati to tend upon. The absence or lack of mother's sympathetic shoulders at home forces these daughters to look for sympathy outside which in turn leads to deception. At times Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that was special. However, when she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away. "Have you seen to their food-milk-clothes-studies?" The poor girl does her best to appease her mother and at the same time pursue her studies. The world may not love a lover, but it certainly adores a mother, simultaneously a daughter may adore her mother. The world is full of love, affection, selfless devotion and all that is soft and sweet and noble in human nature. Between a mother and a child, trust and love exist. This should be especially true of a mother – daughter relationship. "What will happen to you after I am gone?" is her favorite lament about Ida. Because, she is nothing, husbandless and childless. She feels herself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society. Daughters are not all that dependant, admiring lot and mother are not all that dotting, sacrificing one. Their relationship is shaped by the circumstances that were dominating. Because it is that the long chain of conditioning of women starts from their mothers. Mothers, being women, were themselves conditioned by their mothers first and the society at large into the norms of the patriarchal society.

The novel *Difficult Daughters* gives us a critique of mother-daughter relationship, tracing it through three successive generations. Through the sensitive portrayal of three generations of women and their problems, Manju Kapur has given us an unforgettable picture of the evolution of the Indian woman's psyche overtime, starting from the pre-independence period through the independence era up to the time of the post – independence. We see feminist leanings at the outset in the portrayal of Shakuntala and Virmati who make their own choices in life. The later developments seem to spell out that women who go against tradition are sure to be singled out and oppressed by society, rejected even by their own mothers. Their relationship with their mother becomes the first casualty. And the sears they bear are handed down to the next generation. Due to the difference in times, the generation gap becomes too wide to be bridged. Even the

common experience of child bearing did not bring them together, unlike in usual mother – daughter relationships. The stressful times of Partition and its aftermath, much elaborated in the novel, may have caused a rift in relations. Only with Virmati's death is the ghost laid to rest, and Ida becomes free to lead her own life, no longer threatened by the shadow of her mother. The novel is a pointer to how a mother's influence could be unsettling to the daughter under different circumstances. How filial love and affection could be replaced by hate and bitterness, how a mother, traditionally and epitome of sacrifice and goodness, could become a symbol of selfishness and resentment to her children.

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