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ARE INDIAN DAUGHTERS DIFFICULT OR AUDACIOUS? : A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN
MANJU KAPUR'S NOVEL, 'DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS'

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ABSTRACT

The present paper aims to probe into the patriarchal attitude of the society in which it fixes certain taboo or derogatory identity to women. Manju Kapur shone into fame, receiving the Commonwealth prize with her debut novel, 'Difficult Daughters'. The title of the novel attracted the attention of many research scholars. Why did Manju Kapur give the title 'Difficult Daughters' to her first novel? and why not 'Audacious Daughters'? Daughters who are not submissive to the patriarchal norms are termed as 'difficult' daughters by the society. This attitude of patriarchal society is giving vent to social evils such as female foeticide and gender discrimination. A deep dive into the textual ocean of 'Difficult Daughters' makes the fact clear that the protagonist, Virmati is not a simple girl, putting age-old ideals into practice, rather she is 'difficult' because she is treading an age- old ideality of male dominated society. Instead of accepting and respecting a women's self expression, she is condemned. The paper investigates into how the socio-cultural force work in the complexity of search for identity of womanhood in the Indian Society. The patriarchal structure of Indian society is discussed in the light of feminism.

Key Words: patriarchal structure, feminism, socio-cultural force, identity etc.

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1. INTRODUCTION

An empirical view of the world gives us an opportunity to witness the contradictory image of women. In one part of the world (European nations) women are enjoying the pulf of modernism while in some other parts of the world women are stoned to death for asserting her individualism. (a woman was recently stoned to death for choosing her life-partner in Afghanistan. (Willgress)) In India itself, we have a diversified image of the women. On one hand, women, living in metropolitan cities are enjoying so

much craved individualism. On the other hand, women living in small villages, where the rays of modernism are on the way, are still struggling for their identity under the roof of patriarchy.

In today's scenario, women in India are in a great dilemma. The different avenues of the world are inviting them to come and explore the things. Women have proved their ability in almost every wing of human activities. However, the patriarchal structure of the Indian society is pulling them back. If a girl does something against the patriarchal norms, she will be

looked down with certain derogatory attitude. If she starts asserting her values in the society, the patriarchal society imposes certain taboos on her. The aim of the present paper is to put the patriarchal structure under scrutiny, how the patriarchal structure has put shackles around the female activities in the society, how she is being moulded and reshaped in accordance with male centric societal needs as reflected in Manju Kapur's novel, 'Difficult Daughters (1998)'

2. Discussion of the Study

2.1 Why 'Difficult' and Why 'Daughters': Manju Kapur is one of the widely read and most critically acclaimed novelists of Indian English literature. Why did Manju Kapur give the title 'Difficult Daughters' to her first novel? and why not 'Audacious Daughters'? It is, because the socio-milieu of the novel is dominated by patriarchal structure in which a girl-child is reared with great care, for the honor and pride of the family is rested on her and thus looked as difficult. The novel is set against the backdrop of partition of India and Pakistan. It is the portrayal of a young woman, Virmati torn between her family, her education and the lure of illicit love on the canvas of the patriarchal frame. Again the novelist has used the plurality of the noun 'Daughter' Manju Kapur has successfully presented three generation of daughters (Kasturi, her daughter Virmati and Virmatis' daughter, Ida) who are viewed as 'difficult' by the patriarchal society. Kasturi, mother of Virmati has shown the glimpses of 'difficult daughter' for she, in her childhood tries to deviate from patriarchal norms by praying before the image of Christ. Virmati the protagonist of the novel has violated the patriarchal norms with conflicts and paid heavy tax for the same. Again, Ida, daughter of Virmati is a modern woman who broke the patriarchal norms with great confidence. The process of overruling patriarchal norms which began with Kasturi, went through the transitional phase with Virmati and finally took the solid shape with Ida who is 'without husband, child or parents.'(DD: 4)

The paper will not focus on Kasturi as she had accepted the term, 'Difficult' as her identity and

accordingly adopted the patriarchal norms. Similarly it will also not focus on Ida who has strongly violated the norms. Rather the interest of the paper lies on the protagonist, Virmati who is in transitional phase of violating the norms and thus needs critical investigation of her deeds. The actions and activities of Virmati are not innocent or submissive rather are of bold nature. Her childhood experience has laid the foundation of her future deeds. The responsibility of keeping her siblings in discipline has fallen on the shoulders of Virmati. When Ida takes a reverse journey into the life of Virmati, she is told that 'she would lash out if we didn't listen. We used to run from her when she came. She was only our sister, but acted very bossy.'(DD: 5) However, Ida does not want the superficial/ external image of her mother. She says, 'my relatives gave me one view of my mother, I wanted another.'(DD: 5)

2.2 The Concept of Patriarchy: The term 'patriarchy' has been used to describe the power of the father as head of household. It refers to the systematic organization of male supremacy and female subordination. The patriarchal structure is defined as a system of male authority which oppresses women through its social, political and economic institutions. The concept of patriarchy is ingrained in Simone de Beauvoir's seminal book, 'The Second Sex', who famously says, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." According to her, women have been always forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men. Another one of the most influential figures among the patriarchal theorists is Kate Millet. In her 'Sexual Politics', she writes:

"Our society, like all other historical civilizations, is patriarchy. The fact is evident at once if one recalls that the military, technology, universities, science, political office, and finance- in short, every avenue of power...including the coercive force of the police, is entirely in male hands...what lingers of supernatural authority, The Diety, "His" ministry, together with the ethics and values, the philosophy and art of our culture- it's very

civilization- as T.S. Eliot once observed, is of male manufacture" (25)

According to Andrienne Rich, "traditional woman is conceptualized as a duped and powerless victim. Her degraded position has few, if any, redeeming features. The power of the fathers, acting either directly or indirectly through agents (lower- class males and women) permeates everything. Men define the role women are to play as they define the language and patterns of thought. Women were incorporated into a family structure controlled by men and created to meet their own needs. The role of motherhood is especially disvalued, with mothers acting primarily as male agents in the socializing of the men's children. Women have certainly perpetuated these male institutions, but only because they have submitted to male domination of their will." (Mirkin 47) "Women have internalized the values of patriarchs. Thus they become willing, cooperative and passive victims."(44)

2.3 Virmati : Difficult or Audacious: Manju Kapur's novels deal with an enduring struggle of female protagonists to break the chains of patriarchy and are in quest of identity against the dogmas of social and cultural thinking. "Difficult Daughters" is set in 1940s Indian society in which patriarchal structure was more dominant. Manju kapur's protagonist, Virmati is portrayed not only as a revolutionary woman who revolts against her family but also as one who stands for her education and freedom. She raises her voice against male prejudices to claim her rights of economic independence. Kapur makes her strong enough to undermine patriarchal taboos and break social and cultural constraints. Thus, from the patriarchal point of view she is 'difficult daughter' because she does not follow the norms set by the patriarchy, rather she defies its established norms and shows tremendous courage in following her determination and aspiration for freedom and individuality and therefore in the eyes of feminist she is an 'audacious daughter'.

2.4 Family as a Patriarchal Agent: As argued earlier patriarchy has internalized its values into the family system. In a spirited journey of Virmati towards her emancipation, her family members have played a role

of patriarchal agent, especially her mother, Kasturi. Since her childhood, Virmati has tough moments with her mother. "The language of feeling had never flowed between them and this throat was meant to express all her thwarted yearnings." (DD: 12) Kasturi is the ideal creature of patriarchal influences, according to whom a girl should marry at proper time, she should be educated enough to manage household works, she should be obedient to visible God (husband) and invisible God. She expects the same things to be ingrained in Virmati. However, Virmati is not destined to tread the steps of her mother. She rebels against her mother. At the tender age of seventeenth, she has to go with her mother to look after her and other children. When Kasturi asks her to sew a sweater, she revolts against her mother.

"I'm tired of knitting and sewing,
Besides, I am here to look after you
I can look after myself,
Why did you bring me if you don't need me,
Mati?" (DD:12)

In patriarchal paradigm, a mother is authorized to raise her daughter on the set norms of patriarchy. Kasturi is the voice of all the patriarchal norms for Virmati who wondered, "Why was her daughter so restless all the time? In a girl, that spelt disaster." (DD: 15) Virmati wants to go to Lahore for higher education but her mother wanted her to be married because, "it is the duty of every girl to get."(DD: 15) Unknowingly the mother becomes the representing agent of patriarchy. Her assertion of individualism and self reliance had shaken the patriarchal norms of family and therefore, it boycotted Virmati from her family. A girls' assertion of her rights are looked down with contempt. The following words of Kasturi bear the testimony of this.

"You've destroyed our family you badmash!...
you have blackened our face everywhere! For
this I gave you birth? Because of you there is
shame on me, shame on Bade Pitaji!But what
do you care, brazen that you are!" (DD: 221)

Thus, the patriarchal norms have raised the walls between Virmati and her family. The relations are strained enough that she she is not allowed to attend

the funeral ceremonies of her father and grandfather. In patriarchal system of believes, men are entitled to have more freedom than women. Harish, the professor is also the guilty of same offence as Virmati. But Harish is not discriminated in the society. A women is never free of patriarchal burden for she is constantly caught in one after another patriarchal entraps and this is equally true with Virmati. Therefore, Seema Malik writes about Virmati, "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: 135) Thus the actions and activities of women are placed in the patriarchal structure, and often its result is subordination of women.

2.5 Virmati's crave for Education: Virmati is not a traditional woman who prefers to be locked into the four walls of house. Rather she is a modern woman who recognizes the value of education. After meeting Shakuntala, whom she dreams as a role model, her protest grows stronger and it starts with her wish to continue her education. She firmly believes that education is the only means to liberate her. However, as Kate Millet observes in 'Sexual Politics',

"Traditionally, patriarchy permitted occasional minimal literacy to women while higher education was closed to them. While modern patriarchies have, fairly recently, opened all educational levels to women, the kind and quality of education is not the same for each sex. This difference is of course apparent in early socialization but it persists and enters into higher education as well."
(42)

Virmati falls victim of gender discrimination when her desire for higher education is thwarted by her parents. Her fiancée's parents also didn't want too much education in her. However the death of her fiancée's father postponed her marriage with Indrajeet. Instead of sitting back at home, she is given the permission to attend AS college. After her marriage, Virmati is allowed to pursue her M.A from Government College, Lahore (even the subject of M.A. is chosen by Harish) in a circumstances in which it was better to keep her

away from home to solve the domestic problems. Hence, the education of women is in men's hand. Thus instead of many hurdles and hardships Virmati pursues her education which enlighten her mind and broaden her vision.

2.6 Virmati: Her Economic Independence: Virmati knows that dependence on others will not give her an opportunity to express her identity. She wants to be free from 'dependence syndrome' as Chaman Nahal wishes. (17) She believes in economic independence of women. Her affair with Harish has made her life full of uncertainty. She longs for meaning in life. Finally she realizes that her economic dependency cannot give her identity. She decides to join as the Headmistress of a Girls' school in the hill station of Sirmur. Her days as the Headmistress are the most conspicuous days of her life because for the first time she feels her existence. However, in patriarchal society men, "by force, direct pressure, or through ritual, tradition, law and language, customs, etiquette, education, and the division of labor define the part that women shall(or shall not) play." (Rich 41) Harish does not allow her to play the role of economic independent as a school headmistress. He secretly visits and entraps her into the sexual oppression. It tarnishes her reputation and the Diwan sahib asks her to resign because, "It is important to set a good example." In this way, her only opportunity of liberation and identity is destroyed.

2.7 Virmati's Love for Harish: Her marriage with Indrajeet is postponed because of his father's death. This resulted into her going to Lahore for further studies and there she meets and falls in love with Harish Chandra, an Oxford-returned Professor who lives next door to her and is already married. For her, Harish is incarnation of freedom. She is deeply attracted towards his intellectualism and all the speeches on love and independence of women. Virmati is caught in conflicts between dull and dry letters of Indrajeet and love-drenched letters of Harish. Slowly but steadily Harish invades not only her mind but also her body. She falls prey to sexual oppression of Harish who uses her as a sexual being.

“Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees. She appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex... absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her, she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to essential.”(Beauvoir:534)

The continual of illicit relationship with Harish leads to many troubles. She fails to demand her status from the Professor whose baby she conceived before marriage. She is forced to abort the child. She feels void when she aborts the child, she laments, “That a child of their union, the result of all those speeches on freedom and the right to individuality, the sanctity of human love, and the tyranny of social and religious restraints should meet its end like this.” (DD:171) Ever since the arrival of Harish in her life, she has lost not only the cozy nest of her family but also her pure mind and body. She becomes furious when Harish refuses to marry her. She audaciously retaliates 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 people will say if they find me out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace... and why?”(DD:149)

Twist and turns in her life make her realize and affirm Swarnalata’s statement that “Men do take advantage of women.”(DD:149). Though the actions and deeds of Virmati had earned her the name ‘difficult’, her suffering, her humiliation and above all her incessant determination made her an audacious daughter. Thus we see the emergence of Virmati as an audacious woman who does not want, “to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed.”(DD:92) She overrules patriarchal norms and notions that subordinate women in the society and announces her individuality and determines for self reliance through education.

3. Conclusion

Thus the life journey of Virmati from an innocent milk drinking girl to the revolutionary woman is full of ups and downs. Her revolt against her family which acts as a patriarchal agent, her determination to pursue her education in midst of many hurdles and hardships, her aspiration to be economically independent and finally, her gallantly falling in love with the married man, Harish are the acts and incidents which can be interpreted in different ways. The milieu in which the novel is set, the space in which the characters are created is characterized with the dominance of patriarchy. Interpreted with this reality, Virmati is certainly the ‘difficult daughter’ as she has created whirlpool in the lives of those who are the silent sufferers of patriarchy. However, many eminent feminists have proved the invalidity of patriarchy. Today women have equal rights in the execution of their abilities to achieve their perfection. In this direction of thought it can be said that the determination Virmati has showed for perfection, the efforts she has taken to achieve it and the suffering she has gone through, in the process of achieving it are undoubtedly audacious.

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