



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 3.4
IJAR 2014; 1(1): 441-443
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 25-10-2014
Accepted: 24-12-2014

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Manju Kapur's difficult daughters: Emergence of new woman

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Abstract

In *Virmati* we find the incipient New Woman who is sensible, meditative, sophisticated and desires to carve a career for her. Doubtlessly, to some extent she even conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social restrictions. However, she lacks self-assurance, restraint, and judiciousness. *Virmati* is not ready to be the part of that social set-up where woman is considered subordinate to men because in childhood her father shields her, in youth, her husband and in old age her son; a woman never earns independence. She wanted to assert her individuality and identity and to live on her own terms.

Keywords: Rebel, strong determination and self-assertiveness

Introduction

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a family saga against the historical backdrop of partition. But, the focus of the novel is on the female protagonist *Virmati* as the novel starts with her cremation that proceeds with flashbacks where the story of her life is told by her daughter *Ida*. The novel turns out to be the story of a young girl, *Virmati* whose life is a journey in search for an identity

Dr. Dipika Sahai writes in "Self Assertiveness Leading to Defiance in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*":

"The theme of the novel is the unsuccessful attempt of the heroine *Virmati* to defy social conventions. She is a young girl, rebellious in nature and in search of her independence gets infatuated with a married person and accepts to become his second wife. She, thus, brings disgrace to her family and despair to herself [1]."

The female protagonist is a young girl born in Amritsar, Punjab. She is born and brought up into ascetic and high minded family from Punjab. She does not want to lead and carry on her mother's traditional ways of thinking and living. She goes to study in Lahore rejecting the confinement of her mother's world which revolved around home eases, wedding and child-bearing. *Virmati* is always reminded by her mother that the duty of every girl is to get married but being influenced and motivated by her cousin sister *Shakuntala*, *Virmati* becomes rebellious and tries to lead a life of liberated woman in her own way. *Kasturi*, *Virmati*'s mother has conservative and patriarchal ideas. However, *Virmati* is not ready to follow her mother's conservative and patriarchal ideas. Her name itself is suggestive of her braveness and stubbornness. No doubt, she tries to live inside an ethical code but destiny resolves otherwise.

She refuses to accept the groom chosen by her family and attempts suicide. However, she is saved by her grandfather's servants. Then she declares that she does not like the boy whom her parents want her to marry. Later on when her parents come to know about *Virmati*'s love affair with Professor *Harish*, her mother tries to persuade her but she pays no attention to her mother's words. As a result, she is confined in to the godown. In the course of time, she expresses her desire to pursue higher studies and follow the lines of her cousin *Shakuntala*. For her, education signifies an escape from the reproaches of her family and freedom from her mother's control. *Virmati*, the so-called difficult daughter of the family, represent the evolving consciousness of The New Woman of the forties.

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But Virmati is not serious about securing education and professional independence for her own sake. She seeks it as a respite to escape from the pressures of the illicit love relationship. Virmati rebels against her mother's expectations and left for Lahore. Though she says that she has left to study in Lahore, it was not true. The fact is that she wants to find respite from the professor. Virmati desperately seeks an escape from her meaningless life and thinks that pursuit of higher education might enable her to do so. She desires an independent life like that of Shakuntala. Though she tries to forget the professor and also to remain away from her home, she succumbs to his passionate demands. Consequently, she realizes that she has become pregnant and is left with no other alternative than to abort. She regrets the fact that she who has come to Lahore for expanding her mental horizons has done nothing. She knows that the professor would not provide any support to her in her hours of crisis.

No doubt, Virmati represents the strength of new woman in India as she proclaims her identity and longs for education. Unfortunately, she does not succeed in showing her mental strength in love. She is trapped in tornado of improper desire towards the Oxford returned English lecturer. He is already married and has a child. Resultantly, there is a struggle in the mind of the female protagonist. There is the unsettled contradiction about the female protagonist Virmati. On one hand, she is very strong and has strong will power and can resist all kinds of social and family pressures, but on the other hand, she is very weak, because she just cannot kick the professor out of her life. Infact the span of her life which she spends at Nahan is the most joyful and possibly the greatest fruitful span of her life. She was there the headmistress of a girls' school. She roughly attains the sovereignty over her life, which she has desired all along. She finally gets there her own space to live in.

It is the inner need in Virmati that compels her to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. The very title of the novel *Difficult Daughters* is also very suggestive. It subtly alludes to the patriarchal convention that a woman, who undertakes a quest for an individual identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well. Virmati, the female protagonist, succeeds in flouting all man-created limitations. However, there are definite primacies so intensely rooted within her that she struggles to come out through the fetters. In the course of the story, she develops from an inexperienced girl to a female who has learnt by grief and through knowledge the harsh reality of life. The novelist has mirrored India's conquest against the colonial rulers through female protagonist's life. No doubt, India achieved independence from British rule but India had to pay for it. It is achieved at the cost of division of India into two countries and racial hatred between two communities. In the same way, Virmati is also triumphant. She succeeds in breaking the long-standing fetters of male-controlled society. She succeeds in a country like India where conventions are of great importance. However, she also has to pay for it. She could do it just because of her patience to stand for mental anguish and endless fight.

The present novel traces the transition of a self-sacrificing woman towards assertive and ambitious woman trying hard to seek a medium for self-expression. The central character is based on ManjuKapur's own mother who was a difficult daughter. In an Indian family the daughter becomes difficult as soon as she tries to question inherent norms of society. Virmati is the eldest daughter of Kasturi and Suraj

Prakash. Kasturi had eleven children and Virmati being the eldest among them is haggard into household work. There are six girls and five boys - Virmati, Indumati, Gunavati, Hemavati, Vidyavati, Parvati. Kailashnath, Gopinath, Krishanath, Prakashnath and Hiranath. Virmati is the eldest of them.

She becomes the mother to all her sisters and brothers. P. Samuel and P. Hephzibah point out in their article, "Virmati passes her time by helping her ever-pregnant mother in the housework, taking care of the younger siblings and studying" and further they assert, "Being the eldest of the children, Virmati spends her time as nurse/mother, while her mother, Kasturi spends her life reproducing" [2].

She cares for them as well as she bosses over them. She has to protect herself from the comments of an aunt. Virmati's childhood is lost in being a young mother to her siblings. Whenever she protests, Kasturi snaps back,

"You are the eldest. If you don't see to things, who will [3]?"

Here Kapur gives a real description of kitchen scene at Virmati's house.

"Indu Pehnji and Vidya are in the kitchen, helping Mati, Gopi Praji is there too, trying to finish the pakoras by himself. Come, Pehnji, before they are all gone! I was waiting for you before I ate any! Paro tried to make her lagging sister walk faster by pulling her dupatta [4]." Virmati has five brothers but they are never shown to do work in kitchen. But the female characters like Virmati and her sisters are conceived in the manner in which they are made to learn cooking and other household activities from their childhood and they have nothing to do with the outer world.

Therefore, it is interesting to see how a young girl reacts to such pressures in her life, and how she manages them. She is always harassed and tired due to her weary domestic chores. Torn between her household work and responsibilities and her love for studies, she turns into a bad tempered girl. Because of the whole burden of the household work and duty to look after her siblings, she does not do well in her studies and fails. As an ideal feminine model of daughter, she receives her part without any queries. Though from inside she sensed muffled, she never raised up her voice. She thought if she does so then it would be unconventionality on her part. Her parents decide to marry her to an engineer. She accepts it as her fate, but due to death in Inderjeet's family, marriage gets postponed for a year.

During that year, Virmati happens to pass her FA Exam and eventually she says no to marry. Another development also takes place during this period. She falls in love with the professor, Harish. He is already a married man. He develops a close association with Virmati and there are regular meetings between them. When Virmati denies for marriage, professor insists her to remain firm.

"Darling Vir..... You must be firm. I know how difficult it is for you, but

you must be firm....." [5]

But Virmati is unable to understand as to how things will be all right. She is in a hopeless situation. She becomes mentally disturbed and goes to Tarashika to drown herself and to commit suicide. But she is saved by her grandfather's servant and hence returns to her house. When asked by family members, Virmati declares that she does not like the boy and wants to study further.

Once Virmati accompanies her mother to Dalhousie to take care of her failing health and there she meets her cousin Shakuntala. She is impressed by Shakuntala's spirited,

independent and defiant nature. It plants the seed of inspiration in her. She wishes to be like her cousin. While taking an evening walk Shakuntala tells Virmati that there is abundant gratification in leading one's own life. It is also very pleasurable to be independent. However, in reality the people in the house don't understand this truth. In this way, Shakuntala plants seeds of aspiration in Virmati. She instigates Virmati to lead her own life in her own way and to be independent. Virmati also secretly nurtures the desire of being autonomous and leading a life of her own. She desired her life to go beyond monotonous business of looking after better half and procreating. She knew if she wanted to be free she needs to look outside the family. She thinks:

"One has to look outside. To education. Freedom and the bright lights of Lahore colleges [6]."

Her mother looks at education as evil force that is why she doesn't want Virmati to study further. In reality, Kasturi was the embodiment of traditional women in male-controlled construct. One day, when Virmati shows her desire to study, her mother, Kasturi in reproaching tone says that:

"Leave your studies if it is going to make you bad tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first [7]."

Due to her contemporary viewpoint, she falls prey to brutality. Kasturi is the carrier of tradition and is under psychological slavery in the patriarchal structure. She is angry with Virmati and in anger she holds Virmati by the locks and booms her head against the partition. She also abuses and curses her.

"What crimes did she entrust in my last life that she must be cursed with a daughter like you in this one [8]?"

It is very obvious from this that in Indian male-controlled society GENDER Discrimination is done. Male child is shown soft corner in every respect, may it be education or establishing own identity or autonomy. If some female dares, any one of this, she is threatened with violence. She is not free to establish her own identity. In this battle against the endorsed role she not only clears her F. A. exam but also enters A.S College which was the bastion of male learning. She asserts herself not only through education but also through her choice of life partner. It is during her years in A.S College that she develops feelings for Harish, professor in her college and a tenant at her place. Harish, being already married and father of children becomes the most unsuitable choice on the part of Virmati. In a way the relationship between Virmati and Harish is an illegitimate relationship. It leads her to commit suicide because it becomes difficult for Virmati to define her position in her family as well as in professor's. She is locked up by her parents. Meanwhile Indumati her younger sister marries Inderjeet to save the name of family.

When Virmati learns that the professor's wife Ganga is pregnant, she realizes the hopelessness of her illicit love. She cuts the professor in a very determined manner. Infected, Virmati feels suffocated when she learns about Ganga's pregnancy. She writes to the professor:

"Now I know there is still some life in your feelings for your wife - as it is proper there should be - it would be very wrong of me to come between you, especially when there is going to be another baby. But for the pregnancy, I would never have known. What has happened has happened for the good. In which world I was living, to be so caught up in the illusion of your love? Just as you must do your duty to your family, and your wife, so too I must do my duty to mine [9]."

She feels cheated because professor is not loyal to her. On

one hand, he professes his love for her and on the other hand he makes his wife pregnant. She feels he is not dependable person. Therefore, she very decisively cuts him off by saying that:

"You think you can do what you like so long as you go on saying you love [10]."

Virmati is bold enough and therefore doesn't hesitate to solve her problem boldly and in her way. She does not hesitate to defy the age-old traditions of submissiveness of a woman. It is during her imprisonment she gets lot of leisurely time to ponder and think. There, she tries to find her, self. Her thoughts are as follows:

"My fate is cast, and I am free now. I feel far more peaceful in the godown than I did in the days before I went to river [11]."

These are the words which define her state of mind. They also suggest her will to move freely and to establish her own identity. She defies patriarchal notions that insist on women towards domesticity and she asserts her individuality. She attempts to seek self-reliance through education. She is not a silent rebel, but bold, outspoken, determined, and action oriented.

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