



Research Paper - English

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Difficult Daughters by Manju Kapur is the story of a woman torn between different forces that affect her life. Her duty towards her family, her desire to be academically well equipped, her illicit love affair with a married man and her attempts to shape her own destiny stands at the core of the novel. Although the novel is set against the political backdrop, the historical events displayed are purely imaginative reconstructions.

A very absorbing tale of a woman torn between opposing forces Virmati, the protagonist of the novel exhibits sheer courage and determination while fighting her own battle of independence. Virmati, a young Punjabi girl from a very conservative family in Amritsar, falls in love with a married professor. This relationship is not only considered illicit but does not even receive social, legal or moral sanction. Although, Virmati prefers to take the road less traveled and is reprimanded for this from every quarter; she begins to value education and other's higher things in life. She realises that life's horizons are not only wider,

but there are things even beyond the horizons that still remains unconquered.

Although Virmati succeeds in breaking all man-made boundaries, there are certain priorities so deeply embedded within her that she struggles to shake through the shackles. She grows up from a naïve girl to a woman matured by suffering and through experience. During her life time, she travels through the realms of various experiences. In addition to higher education and a much talked about illicit love affair, Virmati realises that there are other things also to be done. She is in the quest for true love, quest for freedom, quest for the realization of the self--- the quest does not stop. Later on Virmati ponders: Was life really worth the quest? Did she really achieve what she aimed at? Virmati realises that life was really not worth all the struggle. Things are not always as they appear or seem. Throughout Virmati fights to get what she wants. She lives life on her own terms and conditions; but in the process loses a significant part of herself and realises the insignificance of things.

Virmati, the eldest in a family, is the protagonist of the novel. She is the second mother to her ten other siblings who look up to her for every little thing. She was impatient, but tolerant and a hard task master. Having been loaded with domestic responsibilities at a very early age, Virmati was totally deprived of her quota of love and care, and she even lost track of her childhood years. Looking back she has no fond memories of her past.

"At times Virmati yearned for affection for some sign that she was special" (6)

Much importance was not given to Virmati's education. She was taught that there were many other things in life than mere education. Marriage, setting up a new home, bearing and rearing children, striving for domestic bliss and marital contentment are the many things that a woman should strive for. When Virmati was 13 years old, talks about her marriage began to surface. Very often she felt like revolting and breaking the age old traditional barriers and doing something different. Virmati's marriage was fixed. No amount of persuasion could make her mother see reason. She irritable yells: "At your age I was already expecting you, not fighting with my mother".(19)

Finding no means of escape and all attempts at persuasion lost, Virmati begins to secretly weave a dream house filled with marital bliss.

Meanwhile Virmati continues with her education and is in college. Man, they say, is helpless in a face of destiny. So also the arrival of Prof. Harish Chandra at the Arya Sabha College turns Virmati's life topsy turvy. He was an Oxford return and taught English. He was back to his motherland 'bringing back as much England as he could'. In addition to this, he also carried relics of the European art and literature.

Harish Chandra along with his family had come to Lepel Griffin road and began staying as paying guest at the house of Lajwanti. (Virmati's paternal aunt) Harish Chandra never thought that he would ever fall in love with Punjab as he had left his heart in England.

The first time Virmati met Harish, he played some of the sweetest music for her, and was rewarded by the look on her face. On the other hand, Virmati was deeply enlightened by the Professor and considered him noble for his concern towards woman's education. These informal meets increased.

"He was offering a little bit of himself which both flattered and alarmed Virmati". (39)

Virmati, whose marriage was postponed due to the death of her fiancé's father began attending college regularly. In the Professor's class, Virmati sat in the front row with the other girls and he saw her "flower-like, against a backdrop of male students" (42)

This continued for sometime and soon "the Professor's desire to possess had extended to her heart and mind" (43)

They both were in love with each other, but the path to love never runs smooth. The social barricades and moral hurdles label their relationship as 'illicit'.

The first touch of Harish on her body made her decide that he would be her life partner, no matter what. Her entire life and soul belonged to Harish, "Even though in this case it meant humiliating her grandfather, who was publicly associated with female education, betraying her father who had allowed her to study further and spoiling the marriage chances of her siblings. (53)

There sprang a lot of tension, anger and contrasting views between Virmati and her

mother. For the mother, getting married and staying at home was higher than any kind of education. She reprimands Virmati and asks her to be at least a little grateful to her grandfather and father, who permitted her to study further. "They thought school and college would strengthen you, not change you" (54)

Virmati's mother was adamant and would not allow her to have her ways. Talks of marriage filled the air and everybody in the house could think of nothing else but Virmati's impending marriage. Virmati remained passive and silent, and every word fell on a deaf ear.

Things began to get out of control and Virmati contemplates suicide. She made a futile attempt at drowning. She was locked in the godown but still remained silent and stubborn. The next few months passed by in great pain and loneliness for both Virmati and Harish. They communicated through letters, exchanging every minute detail of things hapening.

Finally, it was decided, although reluctantly, that Virmati would go to Lahore for further studies. Her mother made one last attempt at making her see reason "If you cannot consider your duty to us, at least consider yourself. There is a time in the cycle of life for

everything. If you willfully ignore it like this, what will happen to you? A woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings" (102)

Virmati, as her name suggests was not only brave, but also stubborn. Although she tried to live within a moral code, fate decided otherwise. Despite her resolution and pain, she was still considered to be the black sheep of the family.

The two persons who greatly influenced Virmati were Shakuntala (her cousin) and Swarnalata (her room partner). Both these women were rebels who never gave into parental pressure. They decided to carve a name for themselves through their academic pursuits. They came about like a fresh breath in her life. They were the 'new women' who assured Virmati that there was much more to do in life than just adhering to the social / moral man-made codes.

Meanwhile, Harish was getting restless without Virmati. All his letters went unreplied. His friend Syed Hussain opted to help him in every possible way. Harish tried to meet her thrice but was rewarded only the fourth time. Virmati spent the time arguing with him and blaming him for his indecisiveness. But true to his style, the Professor tried to calm her by

saying: "There is a void in my heart and in my home that you alone can fill" (112).

Their first physical encounter was rather a tense and uneasy one. Although guilty at first, Virmati realised that it was foolish denying something on the basis of an out dated morality. The first Diwali that they spent together was a step towards public statement, matrimony and the fruition of love.

December 1940 saw the Congress in the Satyagraha movement and arrests made on a daily basis. There were talks about Partition. Money, goods, arms and men were being sent out of India for war purpose. Virmati and the professor discussed everything from war to unity, to books. They met frequently and spent a lot of time together.

The air was filled with political affairs like the Anti-Pakistan Conference, the Urdu Conference, the All-India Sikh League. Virmati came across women like Mohini Datta, Sita Rallia, Mary Singh, Mrs Leela Mehta, all engrossed in the National Movement. They all appeared so remote from her. She begins to contemplate: " _ _ _ _ I am not like these women. They are using their minds organizing participating in conference, politically active, while my time is being spent in love. Wasting, it _ _ _ _ " (131).

Virmati realized that as a woman it was not mere duty but also a privilege to work for the unity of the country; to get rid of all the artificial barriers and gain power over the insecure and fearful minds.

The meetings of Virmati and the Professor became rare. Whenever she came up with the topic of marriage, he had his own 'genuine' reasons and excuses. She holds him responsible for all that she goes through in life, right from a broken engagement to being titled as the black sheep of the family. Even in Lahore, she lives a shameful life with the tag of a 'secret wife'. Virmati opens her heart to Swarnalata who advises her :

"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, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream". (139)

She explained that they were lucky to live in an age where women could work wonders. They had the war and the Satyagraha to contribute to.

At first Virmati thought of working for the National Movement. Later, she made up her mind to first complete her education as that would be her sure passport to independence

and self-respect.

However, to her dismay she realised that she was with child. How could this happen? She trusted the Professor no end who assured her that nothing would go wrong. Now all his assurance echoed back with a touch of irony. How well he had taught her to recognise irony in Shakespeare's books!

'Tragic irony, comic irony, how he had loved to expand on them. Which species was this? It lacked the epic proportions of tragedy, and the love-courtship marriage theme of comedy. In either case, she was the Fool, that much at least was certain" (142)

Virmati tried to get in touch with the Professor to plan out her future, but all her attempts proved to be futile. The only option left for her was an abortion. She was miserable. She longed for Harish's presence. Was she right in terminating their child? Would Harish approve of it? She was quite confident that the child would seal their relationship into marriage. But could she wait so long? Very soon signs would be visible and it would be too late to avoid the shame. She felt a deep emptiness within her, which she interpreted as an intense urge for him.

"Her body was marked by him, she could never look else where, never entertain another choice" (163)

Virmati found herself a job as a teacher in the Pratibha Kanya Vidhalaya. It was here that she discovered her hidden talents and potentials. Frequently she was driven by an urge to be with the professor. They kept writing to each other and their secret liaison continued. However, the path of true love never did smoothly run. When the Management of the school got air of this secret affair, she was expelled from school. She did not know how many more beginnings she would have to make. Although hopeless, she began to feel stronger with every mile that she travelled. She knew that she had a long life ahead and would definitely forge an identity for herself.

This novel is narrated in the flash-back technique. The entire events are seen through the eyes of Ida, Virmati's daughter. She nursed a grudge against her mother and ferociously states : "The only thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother" (1). Ida was a childless divorcee who failed to understand her mother all her life. Realisation dawned only after her mother's death engulfing her into an abyss of guilt and shame. Picking up the fragments of memory, she looks back and begins to look at her mother's life in a newer light.

Manju Kapoor joins the group of women writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundathi Roy and many others who portray the image of suffering but stoic women who eventually break free from the traditional shackles and live life on their own terms and conditions. Women under the patriarchal pressures and control are subject to much burnt and social ostracism. They are discriminated and biased in lieu of their sex. These women live and struggle under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society. However, at the hands of Manju Kapur, these women do not remain as mere puppets. Defying patriarchal notions they enforce themselves not only towards domesticity but also assert their individuality and aspire self reliance through education. They nurture the desire to be independent.

Manju Kapur has an actual understanding of social hypocrisies and perception of human foibles in a tradition soaked society.

In an interview she states:

"In my work I aim to show rather than tell". When she starts writing she has a theme in mind, not the story. The story takes shape gradually. Her work is transparent and seamless.

The present book is an aroma to be breathed, taste to be savoured and emotion to be felt. The book works on two levels. On one level it is India's fight for freedom against the British Raj and on the other it deals with Virmati's conflict to live life on her own terms and conditions. As readers we begin to sympathise with Virmati even through her forbidden love affair; India's victory is mirrored through Virmati's life. No doubt India attained freedom but at the cost of partition and communal hatred. Virmati was victorious in breaking the age old shackles of a country which is tradition bound but at the cost of much mental, torture and the tag of being the 'other'.

Both the victories are hollow. Today as a country or as individuals we may have our freedom, but our souls are still locked up in the confines of some definite construct. There is an element of fear which looms large over our lives. Every moment and the future stands to be unpredictable.

An excellent presentation by Manju Kapur, who leaves no stone unturned in presenting human desires, and the urge to lead a self-designed life very often creates an irrevocable line of pain which even time cannot mar.