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Beyond the Conventional Ties: Exploring New Image of Womanhood in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract:

Manju Kapur's concern is to present the situations realistically in her fictional world where socio-political and cultural changes take place and in such background, she foregrounds the problems faced by upper-middle class woman. She simply records what she perceives in her surroundings and leaves the readers to chisel out the problem according to their own insight.

The present paper is an attempt to understand the dynamics of tradition, culture and patriarchy that how it works to restrict a woman to grow as an individual in her novel *Difficult Daughters*. And more importantly, as the title denotes, it focuses on modern woman's attempts to break these ties.

Keywords: feminism; new woman; patriarchy; tradition; society; womanhood

The term 'New Woman', according to Dipak Giri, "denotes to that class of women who set themselves free from the conventional image of womanhood to the modern new women. They are so called as they seek equal footing with man by their positional shifts and changes from a woman of rejection to a woman of reaction, from suppression to expression and from a woman of covert status to a woman of overt status" (241). We can take into account the definition of K. Meera Bai: "The word 'New Woman' has come to

signify the awakening of woman into a new realization of her place and position in family and society. Conscious of her individuality, the new woman has been trying to assert her rights as a human being and is determined to fight for equal treatment with man" (16). After understanding the concept of new woman, the further study shall be an attempt to deal with Manju Kapur's maiden venture, *Difficult Daughters* (1998) in the light of the this perspective. Unlike Shashi Deshpande, Kapur frankly acknowledges herself a feminist as her comment in the book, *Shaping the World* gives the idea that her working place "allowed interaction with female youth, along with a chance to instil [sic] feminist values in them" (Kapur 138). So, on reading her novels, the major problem that the reader finds - is the problem faced by Indian upper-middle class women. While analyzing Virmati's character in the light of new Woman's perspective in Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, we must keep in mind the period in which the novel is set. So to speak, around seventy years back, the scenario was certainly different from present day and judging from the present state, one may undervalue her efforts. This novel is set against the backdrop of Indian freedom movement and partition of India. Kapur articulates the idea of independence of the nation and foregrounds the idea of liberty of women. Virmati, the protagonist of Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* represents the complexities of a girl's life at the very basic level. These complications are the outcome of the dynamics of tradition, custom, and patriarchy. She faces its manifestation at every phase of her life. However, the novelist's intention behind christening her as Virmati is worth noticing - as her name denotes the intellect of a warrior.

At the initial stage of the narrative, we first find Virmati resisting against Kasturi, an epitome of tradition, a "custodian" (Jain 239) of tradition. She possesses a progressive mind, which is not covered by the cloud of ignorance. Although the more she tries to express herself, the more her mother compels her to be silent, saying "Why was her daughter so restless all the time? In a girl, that spelt disaster" (12). This comment of Virmati's mother Kasturi has the undertone that all the time, the question of Virmati's

marriage wobbles in her mind. So, since her childhood, she is brought up with a view to be homely and familial kind of girl. She belongs to a family where it is never forgotten that a girl's marriage is her destiny, where "A woman's shaan is in her home" (16). Her home is like a battlefield for her where ideological controversies are always in air. Jasbir Jain in her book *Writing Women Across Cultures* provides the reason for such controversy-between tradition and modernity. She opines that a traditionalist perceives modernity as a threat to cultural values and ignores "the vitality of human spirit" which has the ability to adopt and adept. She favours modernity as "valuable" from the viewpoint of an individual for whom it "works for an alteration". So the "Conflictual situations arise when this accommodation of changed aspirations does not take place, or the need for such an accommodation is not recognized" (239). Kasturi does not allow herself to listen to the need of her daughter but Virmati wants to live her life as an individual and not as "a rubber doll" (85). This consciousness arises in her after a sound conversation with her cousin, Shakuntala, another new woman whom we come across in the novel. Shakuntala leaves an indelible imprint on her mind and encourages her to lead a life of her own- "These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent... I wish you could see what all the women are doing in Lahore (17). She feels zealous and expresses her wish: "I want to be like you, Pehnji..." (17). At this point, we see Virmati's budding as a new woman: "It was useless looking for answers inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom, and the bright lights of Lahore colleges" (17). Shakuntala's influence on her is worth noticing. Virmati visualizes herself like her, an educated, independent woman, very clear in her approach towards life. It is she who alters her way of thinking.

Kasturi, as already mentioned as living form of tradition, is in her way. She always haunts her with the idea of marriage: "And once she finishes [her education], it will be time to get her married" (23). The novelist seems to provide the answer to the question- "... she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her

education was practically over" (19). With so much topsy-turvy and without the fear of the consequences, she encounters the clash between education and marriage, and Virmati wins to get more education: "First FA, then BA, then BT on top of that. Even after her marriage, she went for an MA to Government College, Lahore... She studied more than any other girl in the family (5). It is evident that she wins over the challenge of getting higher education but the journey of a new woman does not end here rather, it is the beginning. The next point to be taken into consideration is her breaking up the notion of ideal womanhood. Ideal womanhood is purely a patriarchal notion, which has always worked to restrict a woman in a way that throughout her life, a woman devotes herself to the man whom she is married. Feminism acutely criticizes this notion and urges woman to assert her sexuality. Manju Kapur too, implements this ideology in the novel. It is seen when Virmati falls in love with Professor Harish who already has wife and children, and breaks up the engagement with the prospect of her parents' choice. This action by Virmati shatters the belief that a girl, once betrothed cannot think of another man. Virmati not only thinks but acts in this direction. She boldly denies marrying Inderjeet- "I want to study" (86), "I don't want to marry", "I don't like the boy" (87).

Though being in love with Professor, she does not yield before him as much as possible. She leaves him several times. For instance, when Professor beats about the bush on the question of marriage and she comes to know that his wife is again pregnant, she does not hesitate to break the relation with him, saying that "Just as you must do your duty to your family, and your wife, so too I must do my duty to mine" (107). But Professor is too much in love with her that he begins the clandestine meeting with her. Very soon, a phase comes in her life when Virmati breaks the most strict patriarchal-moral code of chastity and purity, that is, the unwed pregnancy. Pregnancy of an unmarried woman is always seen contemptuously and such women are never entertained in our society. The fear of being scorned at the hands of authority compels women to take recourse to the stealthy abortion or in

some cases, honor-killing comes to their credit. The donor of the germ is supposed to legalize the conception by marrying the woman but he shows his back leaving her in the mid-way. It is at this stage, she realizes the dynamics of male hegemony but instead of making any hue and cry, she tackles the whole situation completely by herself. She moves to Amritsar to share the news to her lover so that the abortion could be avoided. But the thought of dependence on Harish to handle the situation vanishes on failing to have any contact with him. She decides to abort this "unwanted burden" (170) as early as possible. Although, she undergoes physical and mental strain but she does not lose her confidence. At this stage also, she emerges as confident and fearless woman, as the novelist throws light on her, "Whatever it was, she thought, she would be able to tackle her problems on her own. She had lived away from home for almost a year, she had seen women growing in power and strength... She would solve her problems on her own. She was worthy of independence" (163). Virmati crosses conventional boundaries one after another irrespective of the consequences. Kapur has shown that education empowers to the level that Virmati becomes a financially independent woman after becoming the principal of a girls' school in a small state of Sirmaur where "She attains a near exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, like Virginia Woolf's famous 'a room of one's own'..." (Srivastava 18). Besides these factors, the most important point that comes in continuation is the question of identity. It is true that education is a tool that widens the horizon of a woman and enables her to think about herself; financial freedom too plays a vital role in the empowerment of women but these factors cannot be held all in all. Because a homemaker who is not educated or financially independent can be said to be a new woman if she lives her life with dignity and esteem within the marital ties and her worth is recognized. Virmati comes a long way in her journey by breaking several traditional shackles, by getting higher education and by proving her as economically independent woman.

To wind up, Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is all about the struggle of the protagonist against the male dominated society during 1940s. Though, Virmati fails to create a space for herself but she throws her weight to achieve it. Her failure cannot stop the reader to categorize her as a new woman. We can give more loads to her struggle if we compare her to the women of today who are certainly in better social milieu but they silently accept the role that is assigned to them. So, the courage that she gathers to fight and to rebel is worth noticing and her struggle cannot be overlooked and devalued.

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