
Exploring Marriage as a Social Construction or Cultural Obligation in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters

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Abstract: Love and contentment are the most essential aspects of married life. The absence of these attributes may adversely effects human behaviour towards family and society. Therefore, the issue of love and marriage has always greatly attracted and influenced the women writers in India. The present paper examines and explores the above in the much-celebrated writing of Manju Kapur's 'Difficult Daughters.' It focuses on how the institution of marriage though normalizes Virmati but does not empower her.

Keyword: Love, marriage, female identity, feminist tradition, patriarchal system, commitment

Introduction: Manju Kapur attracted considerable critical attention from scholars both in India and abroad. 'Difficult Daughters', the very first book of Manju Kapur has won the prestigious Commonwealth Eurasia Region Award for the best debut novel of 1999, which has brought her international recognition and acclaim. But Manju was not an inborn writer as she herself reflects that she had been writing poems and plays only for the past two or three years before she embarked on the task of writing Difficult Daughters. But she is also regretful for her late beginning.

Talking about the writing style of Manju Kapur one can deduct, by going through her books, thather style is simple and lucid. She takes up the commonplace plots and gives them a creative figure through her experience and study. In this context, Kapur says, "As a teacher of English literature, I read plenty of fiction and otherwise too reading is my hobby. But I have not copied any particular style; I have evolved my own style, to suit my subject matter and temperament. The language I happened to chance upon, through hot and trial is extremely simple. I tried writing in the post- modernist trend which is complex and stylish, but I couldn't." [1]

Like various other women novelists of the century, Manju Kapur has a strong feminine sensibility and this feministic tradition is strongly apparent in all her novels. It may not be wrong to say that a woman is the nucleus from which all her novels originate and revolve around this centre. After having a close study of all her three novels one can easily make out that women and their life in the society is the major theme of her novels. For instance, her first novel 'Difficult Daughters' is the story of woman, Virmati, who is tattered between the duties towards family, the craving for education and love.

The present paper focuses on how in Difficult Daughters, Manu Kapur reflects the complexities of female desire and social conformity through Virmati's determination to legitimize her illicit relationship with the professor, ultimately highlighting the oppressive weight of respectability and the disillusionment that follows the fulfillment of socially sanctioned roles. In Difficult Daughters, Manu Kapur portrays marriage not as a private or romantic ideal, but as a social construct and cultural obligation that strengthen patriarchal values and dictates the paths of female identity and agency.

The novel 'Difficult Daughters' [2] is placed around the period of Indian independence struggle. Its partial origination is the life and sufferings of Kapur's own mother, Virmati. Its theme is about the story of a woman who suffers a lot because of her longing for education and love without sacrificing the family duty. Therefore, she always feels torn between her responsibilities and desires. Virmati, who belongs to an austere family, falls in love with a married professor. She formed a relationship which is always considered is graceful in the society. This happens during the societal disturbance due to the ongoing India's freedom struggle and circumstantially she becomes second wife of professor. But as the time progresses feels that the reality is something different.

Marriage and love need not be mutually exclusive but for Kamala Das it proved to be so [3]. This also proved to be true in Virmati's case, the heroin cum protagonist of 'Difficult Daughters'. For Virmati love does not meant only to be a wife but rather to be a lady of self and to be a wife who is not considered as a property or possession but considered as lady working shoulder to shoulder with better half. As Russell said "Some people love to marry, others marry to love." [4] And Virmati also thought that her love will grow into a more mature bond and will reach its spiritual destination of marriage and after marriage once again their love will grow and bring her self-satisfaction and happiness but it only proved to be an illusion. The central story of the novel is purposely placed alongside the independence struggle of the country in order to relate the national struggle for freedom and self identity to Virmati's struggle for her own identity and personality. While reading the novel, the readers travel to that time on Indian scene when nation was involved in a freedom struggle against the British hegemony. In the freedom struggle, women also participated very actively and through frequent interactions with men folks they became

aware of their personality and role in the modern society. Many young took the roles of ideal for others.

The entire life of Virmati can be seen through three phases of love and aspiration for different things. In the first phase during her adolescence she had strong desire for education and was fascinated to be like Shakuntala, her elder cousin sister. She wanted to be an individual in spite of looking after her younger brother and sisters. Shakuntala's very appearance brings into Virmati a longing of its kind while she visits Dalhousi. Virmati wondered at the glamorous change Lahore had brought in Shakuntala. To Virmati's astonishment, perhaps Shakuntala's features were not so good but now she looked smart and pretty. She appeared to be vibrant and intelligent, as if she has become self confident and self reliant. Her dressing style has been changed. Earlier she used to wear the Saris in Parsi-style. She used to wear stylish shoes and jewelry. "She's become a mem", Kasturi said disapprovingly. "Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family. I studied too, but my mother would have killed me if I had dared even to want to dress in anything other than was brought for me." [2, Pg-16, 17]

After the visit of Shakuntala, Virmati was so inspired that she started thinking to be something other than merely a wife. The growing love for education and identity started pushing her to argue with her mother who was although educated but a typical Indian woman of the view that the purpose of education is only to have good match. For her mother marriage is more important than education. Virmati's urge for education and identity was so high that she fell in love with a foreign return married professor. She was strongly attracted from his personality and behavior. She herself says,

"At what stage did thoughts of the professor replace the permitted thoughts of her fiancé in Virmati's mind?" [2, Pg-54]

Virmati felt that the professor values the need of women education and also respect their likings.

"Virmati thought it very noble of the professor to try and teach his wife. It showed he really cared for women's education, just like her grandfather." [2, Pg-39]

Virmati was illusioned with the fact that he will transform her aspirations and feelings into reality. Hence, her love travels to its second phase and she now feels that the Professor's existence is not only of her English teacher but much more than that.

"That he looked at her, she knew. That he paid attention to her, she was aware." [2, Pg-54]

This was the phase in Virmati's life which one can relate to as, the phase of secret love between Virmati and professor. She was in a state of dilemma where her family was forcing her to go for arranged marriage with the person identified by them and she was sensing the professor's love. She was impressed from the words and personality of the Professor and revolted against her family and decided not to marry the man of their choice.

Eventually, Virmati was so much disappointed by her situation that she tries to end her life but fortunately was saved. Virmati to the Professor, “I cannot do it, I simply can’t. We will have to forget about the whole thing. At home they will not listen to any more arguments.”

The period of secret love between Virmati and professor extended to a long duration. Many ups and downs came in their love-life. Virmati believed that her love for professor is everlasting. She assumed that professor wants to marry her. But as the time went on, Professor’s behaviour towards her changed. He started making excuses whenever she requested for marriage. But in the mean time they formed the physical relation and she got pregnant before marriage. Under this situation she went through heavy mental suffering. This was the time of her BT exams and she was alone in Lahore. She was helpless from her family as well as the person responsible for her present situation. Finally, in the third phase professor marries Virmati’s on her compulsion. But soon after the marriage all her expectations and dreams about married life shattered.

The central part of the novel deals with love-affair of Virmati and the concept of marriage. The view point of the three major characters i.e. Virmati, the English professor Harish and Ganga can be used to analyze love. First is Virmati for whom love brought the sense of being emancipated and self-reliant. She fell in love with English professor because she felt him as an ideal person who cares for women independence and education. But Virmati never imagined and expected the difficulties which came before her along with love. As at that time love was considered as a kind of social crime and it was accepted only after being married and to love only the person arranged by the family. Virmati’s issue was even more problematic because her love was for an already married man. But she was straightforward wanted true love in return. In his company Virmati forgot all her compulsions and disturbances. That was the reason that she could not forget him in spite of deciding that she will get out of this relationship at some movements.

“Virmati sat the way she was. The professor lowered his hands, and began to caress the round caps of her knees. Feeling the weight of the professor’s head, and the proximity of his moving hands, the muscles in Virmati’s legs grew tense and she shifted uneasily. The professor tightened his grip. His hands inched higher. ‘Don’t,’ she whispered. ‘Please.’ ‘Why? Aren’t you mine? And I yours? Body and soul, heart and mind? I worship you, Viru, I want to express it, that’s all.’ The professor got up and pressed his lips to her through, her ears, her chain, her lips, murmuring endearments while his breath came faster. He seemed to be in a trance. Dazed, Virmati didn’t think it would be fair to bring up the fact of his existing wife and children. But this was not right either.

Then marry me,” she said, trying to push him away. “Marry me and make it clear to everybody. I will, I will, darling, I will. Just give me time.” [2, Pg-125]

“This was the first Diwali they had spent together, and she saw it as a step towards public statement, matrimony and the fruition of love.” [2, Pg-126]

At the end they got married and a feeling of bright future imbibed into her. After marriage all her expectations of a bright future with a man of her choice went into vain. He professor turned his back towards problems Virmati was facing while at home. Although Virmati was very strong in a way that she was able to resist the family and society but was very weak to resist the professor due to her unconditional love for him and his personality influence on her. Love was the Virmati's weakness because since her childhood she missed the love from family and relatives. Besides the influence of his personality, that was the other reason that she got easily influenced from professor as he promised her bright future and care. But after marrying professor she was not happy and was again struggling for her identity and emancipation in his house. Mental her sufferings and discontentment leads to miscarriage also. The author narrates

Virmati became better, but not less dull. One abortion and one miscarriage. She was young, she told herself, years stretched out before her. Years of penetration, years of her inside churning with pregnant beginnings. God was speaking. He was punishing her for the first time. May be she could never have children. She had robbed her own womb three years earlier, just as she had robbed another woman of her husband. Ganga's face, swollen with hate and fear, had followed her everywhere, the venom concentrated in the gaze of her evil eye.

That brief first time she had been in perfect health, but, preoccupied with shame, she had violated her body. The time for a child lay in the future. Now she felt she was left with nothing. Her job could not sustain her, and flaunting Harish seemed a pathetic gesture, signifying her emotional poverty.”[2, Pg-246-247]

In the novel it is apparent that finally Virmati had to force the professor for marriage. And it is also the reality that the professor was also divided into two parts after marrying Virmati, his first wife and Virmati itself i.e. the duties for ex-family and love. Under the influence of his ex family he could not give full rights to Virmati. Therefore she always remained complaining. At a moment it disturbed his family life and in frustration he decided to send Virmati to Lahore to continue her further studies. The behavior of professor undoubtedly shows the patriarchal control on Virmati. Always he was able to convince Virmati as per his choice and wish. It clearly indicates the exploitation of Virmati by the patriarchal system.

Another women character in the novel, Ganga was an illiterate lady fully devoted to his family but has deep sense of love with her husband. As a typical Indian housewife never went against the wishes of her husband. Her devotion to her husband was so strong that she even not argued or objected to professor when he brought second wife. She shows

either annoyance only to her mother-in-law and cried before him but otherwise carried on with her family duties with same devotion and commitment. Ganga depicts the true picture of “Patti-Permeshwar” where the words of husband are always prime in every context.

“Marriage is depicted as a secular and sacred institute” in the novel. The traditional Indian value is signified from marriage. Somehow the society has transformed the marriage in the form of orthodoxy and superstition where people are bound to marry the girls at an appropriate age and through the socially acceptable ways. The traditional Indian way of marrying the girl is at an early stage and finding the man of family’s choice. The girl’s choice remains secondary. Even the education took secondary stage before marriage. The interaction of Virmati with professor’s first indicates early marriage.

I agreed and in fact I would have been married by now, but then my grandmother, great-aunt really, died. I think she never liked it here after we moved, you know. My grandfather was most upset. Know we have to wait a year and in the meantime I will go on studying. I want to go to Lahore like Shakuntla Pehn ji, but I don’t know...

Some things come before studies,’ smiled the woman. It is the right time. That is what they all say,’ grumbled Virmati, for form’s sake. It is true. You will see later,’ said the woman.” [2, Pg-41]

Marriage was esteemed high and so much important that the moment Virmati gave a slight hint of studying further a not marrying the boy of her family’s choice, her mother lost her patience and got annoyed. She abused her for this. Kasturi could bear her daughter’s foolishness no further. She grabbed her by the hair and bagged her head against the wall. “Maybe this will knock some sense into you!” she cried. ‘What crimes did I commit in my last life that I should be cursed with a daughter like you in this one?’ [2, Pg-59,]

Finally, Virmati was locked in the godown in order to regain her senses and was detained from any of family works. Marriage was also considered important as it was a kind of legal stamp over the man and woman relationship. Even Virmati feels that her satisfaction lies in getting married to the professor and for this reason she has one and only arrangement for the professor to marry her. She no more wanted to linger on with the hide and seek of love. She felt that marriage was the only answer to their relationship and bring a halt to the questioning eyes of people. She argues with the professor.

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 out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace...and why? Because I am an idiot. No, no, Viru- Now you want to prolong the situation. Why don’t we get married? You say your family makes no difference. But still you want to continue in this way. Be honest with me. I can bear anything but this continuous relationship. Swarna is right. Men do take

advantage of woman!" [2, Pg-149]

Hence It can be concluded that the novel is a story about family and love plotted around partition. The novel is a story of Virmati as spotted from the views of Ida, her daughter whom is unaware about the past of her mother. As in the end of the novel Manju Kapur quotes:

"This book leaves a connection between my mother and me, a 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."

Therefore, the novel is created by Manju Kapur to bring forth the story of her own mother. The novel is the story of woman, not only as a daughter but also a lover, married lady and a mother and the difficulties faced by her. In a way the novel successfully depicts the difficulties of daughters as well as mothers in the context of mothers not sensing the daughters and daughters who has high aspirations.

Conclusions:

The novel clearly brings out the impact of marriage over Indian society, the risk brought by love before marriage and other than the life partner after marriage. And even today when we talk of 21st century the impact some way or the other remains the same. Perhaps it will remain same no matter how much liberated we may be. Definitely, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* clearly critiques the institution of marriage as a culturally constructed and socially enforced obligation that limits female agency, reflecting the oppressive gender norms of Indian society during the Pre-Independence era.

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