

Tragic flight of the female protagonist in Manju Kapur's "Difficult daughters"

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Abstract

Tradition is deep-rooted in India and in the traditional system Indian society is organized around gender division giving more space to male for dominance. Right from the marriage, the bride's incorporation into the family begins. She is directed and educated into the way of life of her husband's family. But in spite of her all attempts to dedicate herself truthfully to the comfort of the family she is considered an outsider. A close study of Manju Kapur's novels makes us observe that through the story of her female protagonists in her all the three novels she also projects the view that when an Indian woman, in spite of her education, status and intelligence, tries to get married according to her own option, is likely to destroy her forecast in both the worlds the one that she revolts against and the other she embraces.

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Introduction

Manju Kapur has written four novels, *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), and *the Immigrant* (2008). The first novel *Difficult Daughters* traces the parallel growth of Virmati through various ups and downwards with her thoughts, wishes, desires and ambition but eventually ending with a lot of compromises and compliances retaining hardly any sense of individuality and freedom reminding us:

“When, finally, we reached the place
 We hardly knew why we were there”⁴.

Virmati is the eldest daughter born to Kasturi in a respectable 'Arya smaji' business family at Amritsar. Kasturi enjoys her lushness and every year she gives delivery to a child. Most of the times she remains either sick or pregnant. Hence right from her childhood Virmati's best energy is consumed in looking after the household and nurturing her mother's children. After her matriculation she is further trained into stitching, embroidery and other domestic chores which are believed to be the essential prerequisite of an Indian marriageable girl in a traditional family. According to her mother Virmati's education is practically over and now she should be married off.

Like many other Indian girls she also wants to have a choice to study what and where. Her cousin Shakuntala, who wears one gold bangle in only one hand and a male wrist watch on the other, talks freely of her social intercourse even with male, is a source of inspiration to her. She also wants to be independent so as to enable herself to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond husband and children. The novelist writes about her mentality at this stage:

“Shakuntala's visit fixed the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. It was possible to be something other than a wife, image of Shakuntala pehni kept floating through her head. She too

had to go to Lahore, even if she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over” (17).

She finished her F.A and with the support and encouragement of her father and grandfather succeeds in seeking admission to A.S College. Virmati also has to pay the price of her education. Here she becomes the target of the attraction of the professor who taught her English Literature. Most of the time in the class his eyes remains fixed at Viru. He is grateful for her intellect and potential to recognize the things in their right outlook. Their mutual attraction, reciprocative feelings develop into romantic love. The professor himself is a victim of child marriage.

It is the professor who for the first time acquaints her with romance in English literature and sows the seed of love in her fertile but virgin heart. This is the transition phase of her life. Her desire for education and her dream to be independent like her cousin pushes her closer to the professor. He begins to write her love letters which appeal deep to her emotions. The professor's letters have the desired effect and she shows her defiance to patriarchal authority and arranged marriage by tearing the letter of her fiancé she gets completely lost in the whirlpool of the misplaced passion for the professor. She refuses to marry Inderjit and even attempts to commit suicide by drowning in the canal. The professor is wise enough to feel the rhythm of Virmati's heart. Like an enchanter he misses no opportunity to trap her innocence in the net of his experience. Consequently she becomes the bringer of disgrace to the family, gets slaps from her mother and is finally confined to the go down. She realizes the hopelessness of her illicit passion for the professor. She feels cheated and jilted. Her double standard baffles her because he is expressing his love to her on the one hand and on the other making his wife pregnant. She is remained here of her parent's opinion of him:

“Aman who is already married and a traitor to his wife can never give happiness to any woman. He is a worldly person: caught in his own.

Desires Nothing solid (85)”

At this juncture, very brusquely and decisively she asks him to stop writing any more to her and acquaints him of her decision to go to Lahore to do her B.T. At one time she appears to be out spoken, bold, determined and action oriented. She burns all his letters and decides to have nothing more to do with him. She even refuses to see him when he comes to meet her at Lahore. But resolution wavers very soon. The blooming buds of individuality and self-respect are very soon infected by the canker of her emotional weakness. The loss of virginity pricks her conscience for a moment and she cries but very soon she overcomes the guilt and tries to rationalize it thinking. She thinks that in spite of everything there is only one person in the world who is her real well-wisher. All her initial assertive self-fades. The professor’s dominating personality can be seen merging her completely into his when a Lahore museum showing her paintings he guides her “just what to look for, what to admire, what to criticize” (119). But her greatest consolation is that “she thought of Harish who loved her. She must be satisfied with that” (133). But her pregnancy is a shattering blow to her. The irony of the situation is that he is not with her at the crucial moments of the termination of her pregnancy.

Another mode of life opens before Virmati when she joins as the principal of pritam kanya vidyalaya in a small princely-state in Himachal Pradesh. But the professor’s furtive night stays with her spoil her career and she is compelled to resign. He has always been evading the question of marriage. Compelled by the situation she decides to go to Shantiniketan and forget Harish for good. But fate wills otherwise. There is a way a divinity that shapes our ends. During her journey via Delhi, she prefers to go to the house of the Professor’s friend rather than wait for eleven hours at the railway station. The friend on knowing everything not only calls Harish there but compels him to marry her. She comes with the professor to his house at Amritsar as the second wife. She has to face the hostile gestures and gibes of all the family members there. She gets only a marginal space in the house and is not allowed to prepare food for her husband or even wash his clothes. Marital bliss is her only consolation. But fate doesn’t cease to shower its turbulence. The attention and affection that she now began to enjoy from her mother in law also comes to an abrupt end with her traumatic abortion.

Harish’s patronizing and domineering attitude to her has completely enmeshed Virmati. Now it is the professor who has decided to send her to Lahore to do M.A. in philosophy, a subject which according to Virmati is dull, abstract and meaningless.

“She wished Harish had thought another subject suitable for her. She also wished it was not such an uphill task, being worthy of him” (237).

“A women’s happiness lies in giving her husband happiness” (210). It is perhaps too much to expect a woman like her to combat against the hydra headed society. Seema Malik’s sympathy for Virmati is not out of place when she says: “Though she dares to cross our patriarchal threshold, she is caught into another where her free spirit is curbed and all she

does is adjust compromise and adapt.” (5) No doubt, her daughter Ida refuses to be like her mother but the question that hovers our mind is whether Ida-divorce, childless and not committed to anything in particular-arid chhoti not intending to marry at all, waiting for a Government accommodation to house her mother and Grandmother are living a meaningful, purposeful and fulfilled life.

Reference

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