

LIVING TOGETHER YET APART: ANALYSING MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS IN MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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Manju Kapur is one of the most celebrated women writers in Indian Writing in English. She teaches English Literature at Miranda House College, Delhi University. She is the recipient of the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Book (Eurasia Section). In *Difficult Daughters*, she speaks with great narrative eloquence, of the idea of independence aspired to and obtained by India, despite its cruel partition with Pakistan. Metaphorically, she highlights the plight of the Indian women in the post independence era. The novel/ist has earned a very substantial success, commercially and critically, both in India and abroad. Several critics and reviewers find *Difficult Daughters* highly lucid and readable. Maggie Gee in her article “ Rev. of *Difficult Daughters*” says: “This book offers a completely imagined, aromatic, complex world, a rare thing in first novels.” Pallavi Rastogi appreciates it as Kapur's “commendable effort to peel away, even if partially, the silencing layers of historical time.” Cookie Maini in her essay “*Daughter’s Labour of Love*” writes:

Difficult daughters is a story about a girl who finds herself in a position where she is caught between traditional values she is taught about and the values by which she wants to live her life. It is not exactly a struggle...but it is a story of mistakes and compromises

In fact, it is not the story of only one girl caught up in the tug-of-war between tradition and modernity; it reflects the problem through various generations of mothers and daughters.

Mother-daughter relationships are long-enduring affiliations that have the potential of influencing adult development in significant ways. It is a relationship which requires that language of feeling should flow between them. Gilbert and Webster observe: “each mother has to transmit the rules of femininity to her daughter to help her survive in the world she knows it.” Contrary to this, Elizabeth Brown-Guilory writes:

[the] mother-daughter dyad experiences a love/hate relationship often because the mother tries painstakingly to convey knowledge about how to survive in a racist, sexist, and classist world while the daughter rejects her mother's experiences as invalid in changing social times.

The mothers of the first generation consider their daughters as a burden on them due to the rigid set up which has made them look at girls as a liability. They cannot see their daughters go ahead of them or become equal to them. The daughters are treated as helping hands in domestic chores. The mothers of the second generation are victims of patriarchy and do not want to repeat history, therefore, they fight for the rights of their daughters. As Mohanty says "what binds women together is a sociological notion of the 'sameness' of their oppression." The mothers of the third generation are like sisters for their daughters. They share their feelings completely but mothers are always mothers. It is their social duty that they should keep a regular check on the activities of their children as they may detract from their paths and duties in the age of glamour and fashion. Nancy Chodorow argues that "the mother is the early care giver and primary source of identification for all children ... A daughter continues, to identify with the mother." Though the daughters of the third generation identify themselves with their mothers, they fail to understand the bonding and feelings of motherhood as they consider their mothers as barriers in their personal and professional lives. Lucy Fischer comments that because:

mothers and daughters identify with each other, and because their individual boundaries are not always clear, daughters struggle all their lives to separate (themselves) from their mothers.

Womanist writers also often discuss the idea of female bonding and show how daughters can achieve much by following the tradition of their mothers. However, the mother-daughter relationship varies in different cultural backgrounds and most of the time the younger generation looks upon the older as being antagonistic to its interest and therefore refuses to conform. In the present paper an effort has been made to trace out the multifaceted and multifarious relationships between mothers and daughters in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*.

Difficult Daughters is a hybrid form of autobiographical narrative containing an embedded narrative of the mother (Virmati) in which the daughter (Ida) attempts to talk about her mother and herself. In addition to this the relationship between Virmati and her mother

Kasturi, Kasturi and her mother, Shakuntala and her mother Lajwanti, Swam Lata and her mother is also underscored. The opening line of the novel gives a jolt to the reader: "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother." This cryptic statement is made by Virmati's only daughter, Ida, who is a childless divorcee. Ida could not develop her understanding with Virmati during her lifetime and after her mother's death this realization engulfs her with guilt. She says: "I am guilty I don't. The rawness I feel after my mother's death doesn't allow me to do anything that is not, in some way, connected with her" (48) and at another place, she says " ...I (am) associated with my mother, Without her, I am lost. I look for ways to connect "(4) Ida sets out on a journey into her mother's past by piecing together the fragments of memory in search of a woman she now wants to know and understand. She has grown up struggling to be the model daughter. Virmati provides her ample space but still carries forward the ideals of patriarchy in letter and spirit. When Ida tells her that she wishes to lead her life independently, she says: "You are disappointing your father" (279). Ida protests against her mother and the latter tightens her reins because she is concerned about Ida's well-being. Virmati shows her concern for her only daughter when she says: "What will happen to you after I am gone?" (279) Ida blames Virmati for repeating history and feels that she is "hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society" (279). Ida alienates herself from her mother, tries her best to establish her own identity, takes her own decisions and leads her life according to the principles that she herself has made. Finally, she identifies herself with her mother and marries Prabhakar with the consent of Virmati. However, her marital life is filled with problems. Prabhakar forces her to undergo an abortion and Ida conceals this from Virmati for two reasons. First, she does not want to give her any tension by sharing her marital problems and secondly, she does not want that her mother to interfere in her personal life. Ida understands the problems of Virmati in concrete terms. She says:

"Mother, I have never told you this, because you thought Prabhakar was so wonderful, and I was glad that in the choice of my husband I had pleased you. Why should I burden you with my heartaches when you had enough of your own? You believed too strongly in the convention that a mother has no place in a daughter's home to stay with me, so you never really got to see the dynamics of our relationship close at hand (156-57).

Ida and Virmati share similar kind of traumas and pains because like Prabhakar, Professor Harish had also forced Virmati to abort her child. The consciousness of the reader shuttles between the present and the past along with Ida who visits Different Place and meets her mother's relatives and acquaintances to know more about Virmati whom she never bonded with when she was alive. At the end of the novel Ida rejects Virmati, not as a mother but as a woman. "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each 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 any more"(280). Throughout her life she establishes a complex relationship with Virmati and after her death she thinks of giving her a memorial by describing her story so that someone may value her after she has gone. Kapur shows that under ideal circumstances the girl partially detaches herself from the mother. A girl needs to be able to shape her own identity but, at the same time, continues to need her mother throughout her life as a model and counsellor.

As the narrative unfolds we realize that Virmati, the eldest daughter of an austere and high minded Punjabi family of Amritsar, is burdened with family duties because of her mother's incessant pregnancies. She is indispensable to her mother Kasturi and a 'second mother' for her younger siblings. She grows up with the conditioning that the duty of every girl is to get married and a woman's 'shaan' is in her home and not in doing a job. Partha Chatterjee has rightly remarked: "...whatever knowledge she (woman) may acquire, she cannot claim any reputation unless she is proficient in household. Virmati realizes that it is useless to look for answers inside the home as the "language of feeling had never flown" (27) between her and her mother Kasturi. Jaideep Rishi remarks that Manju kapur has "unfolds the story of Virmati, a daughter and a mother, and with her the tale of generational dialects that underscores every daughter's relationship with her mother."

Virmati's story unfolds the relationship with her mother Kasturi. Kasturi is the mother of first generation a product of strict patriarchal regime and cannot tolerate her daughter to be her equal. Simone de Beauvoir, expresses: "She (mother) cannot bear to have her double become other." She curbs Virmati's yearnings to attain higher education at every moment and feels that God has put Virmati on the earth to punish her. Virmati fails to establish an ideal relationship with her mother and shows her protest by observing silence. She feels: "...saying anything to her mother so difficult? May be it was the best to keep silent"(12). However, seeds of aspiration are planted in Virmati when she meets her alter-ego, Shaku Pehnji

(Shakuntala) at Dalhousie. She decides to taste the 'wine of freedom' and resolves: "I want to be like you, Pehnji... (17).

Virmati gets admission in A. S. College despite her mother's protests. Here she develops her relationship with Professor Harish Chandra, her neighbour who notices her particularly, "flower like, against a back drop of male students"(67). With the passage of time, both realize that they are made for each other, Virmati refuses to marry Inderjeet, a canal engineer to whom she is betrothed. She tries to commit suicide but is saved by the servants of her grandfather Lala Diwan Chand. Kasturi's reaction to this is typically inspired by the male - oriented environment. She is intolerant of her daughter's foolishness: "She grabbed her by the hair and banged her head against the wall. May 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?" (59) Kasturi fails to comprehend how girls have changed so much in a generation. She realizes: "Really, I give my daughters too much freedom. And this is the result!" (79) She threatens Virmati psychologically: "Remember you are going to be married next month, if I have to swallow poison to make you do it!" (60) She uses abusive words for her "You badmash, you randi! you've blackened our face everywhere! For this I give you birth? Because of you there is shame on our family, shame on me shame on bade Pitaji! (221) Jaideep Rishi rightly remarks:

Kasturi unknowingly becomes the voice of patriarchy. She holds those values as ideal which patriarchy has taught her to be so. And when her daughter rebels against such values she takes it to be a rebellion against her own self ... in her daughter's despair, she finds herself humiliated, instead of showing compassion, she behaves most inhumanly, feeling betrayed by one who most resembled her, was closest to her.

Virmati is sent to Lahore for higher education and Kasturi willy-nilly accompanies her. Virmati tries "to live within a moral code, but her mother would never understand that" (113). Later, when Kasturi sees the hostel premises of RBSL School and College, she becomes soft and poignant. She says: "My poor girl, for this she wouldn't marry. For living in a solitary, poky little room in a strange city, for Eating hostel food, for the loneliness of single life" (115), However, it comes as a surprise to the readers that Virmati's desire to be in Lahore is not for academics but for her passionate desire to be with Professor without anyone's

interference. Harish marries Virmati at the request of his friend Syed Hussain. But she does not get the status of a legally wedded wife. Thus, though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold against the wishes of her family, she is caught up in another agency of patriarchy—a marriage in which her free spirit is curbed and all she does is to ‘adjust, compromise and adapt’. Murray Roston says: "The crisis of alienation affects all sectors of society, irrespective of class, gender, race, politics or religion." Her parents are shocked at her marriage and her father dies of heart attack. Kasturi blames Virmati when she comes for the cremation of her father: "Because of you, he died. Otherwise is this age to go?" (239), Virmati remains a subaltern and is now not only alienated from her own family but ironically a deprived creature who is denied the very 'space' for which she undertook to strive and rebelled against her near and dear ones. Kasturi compares her daughter with herself and yet does not value her perspectives. Vikram Chandra in his article "Rev. of *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur" writes: "*Difficult daughters* is... our struggles with our parents, it flings us into their own momentous times their youthful yearnings for love and independence and life..."

The pages of *Difficult Daughters* speak not only of Virmati and Ida, but of other ‘difficult daughters’, Shakuntala and Swarna Lata who succeed better than the former did in their parallel struggles for independence in their lives. Shakuntala is a highly educated girl. Marriage is not her aim and even she does not get any suitable match. With the passage of time she attains control over her senses. She adopts education as her career and excels in academics throughout her life. Her mother Lajwanti remains in depression as no proposal comes for her only daughter. Outwardly, she does not show her emotions and always praises her daughter's achievements which she has never really understood or cared for, but inwardly, weeps for her. When Kasturi tells her that “it is duty of every girl to get married”, she answers aggressively: “She lives for other, not herself, but what to do, everybody in our family is like that. And with all this reading-writing, girls are getting married late. It is the will of God” (15). She stands all times with her daughter as the latter does not bring any disgrace and shame for the family. Shakuntala and Lajwanti's relationship can be contrasted with that of Virmati and Kasturi. Shakuntala has chosen to reject and sidetrack the patriarchal environment in search of her independence. Her mother Lajwanti accepts the decision of her daughter and if Kasturi had supported her daughter perhaps Virmati's rebellion would not have been so disgraceful in the eyes of society.

Swarna Lata, Virmati's room-mate is a social activist. She is a daughter of third generation and establishes her own distinctiveness. Her mother is against her education as she feels that marriage is the only destiny in a woman's life. Swarna Lata is however, determined to achieve the heights and leaves her parents in Amritsar and takes admission in a prestigious institution at Lahore. She participates in various seminars, conferences and contributes to the freedom movement with Congress co-workers. It is she who gives support and confidence to Virmati in her hard times.

Last but not the least Kasturi and her mother's relationship is also described briefly. Kasturi also appears an unconventional girl to her mother because she is drawn towards another religion. Kasturi is married at the age of twelve as she starts worshiping Christ at the age of seven. Kasturi's mother had "torn the picture, screamed and shouted, and threatened to marry her off before she brought further disgrace to the family" (61) and calls her a witch. In the eyes of her mother she has committed sacrilege by worshipping the prophet of another religion. Like all the stereotypical mothers, she worries about Kasturi's marriage and education is the secondary thing for her. She is a typical traditional mother who even does not drink a drop of water from her daughter's house. She brings her own servant and groceries along with her at the birth of Virmati. It is under her influence Kasturi develops herself and carries the patriarchal order forward which is why she cannot probably understand why Virmati her daughter wants to break traditions. *Difficult Daughters* illustrates Rich's assertion: "the story of mother and daughter has indeed been written, although it is not often found on the surface but in the submerged depths of literary texts."

The conclusion that emerges out of the novel is that for one reason or other mothers and daughters are not compatible and it is only in retrospect that the daughters develop an understanding for their mothers' attitude. The Freudian 'Electra complex' may be one of the reasons why daughters find their mothers inimical to their desires and fathers congenial to them. They support their efforts of development and education. However, for the mothers marriage is still the ideal culmination of their daughters' lives. They focus on the family values above all and consider education a secondary task. Indirectly women are themselves closing the gates for the development of younger generations of their own sex. Mother-daughter relationships are complex, but can be filled with compassion and love. Mothers and daughters often seem farther away from each other than they really are. Usually when a girl goes through adolescence, the relationship between her and her mother begins to change in

many different ways, while growing at the same time. Manju Kapur's accounts of the mother-daughter bond are the most personal and at the same time the most universal. She has taken pains to emphasize the complexity and identification in the mother-daughter relationship.

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