

Shades of Feminism in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*

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Feminism has been derived from the Latin word 'femina' which means women. It was used with regard to the issue of equality and women rights Movement. Feminism means a rebellion wherein she struggles to achieve racial, social, economic and spiritual equality with man. Anyhow feminism has been used and interpreted in different shades. But the core idea that women should have same rights, power, opportunity that men have, has always been more or less the same. For achieving this equality women are stepping out of the rigid sex roles assigned to them traditionally. They have realized the evils originated from patriarchal system of society.

Though the high hopes of feminism have been washed away in the present social milieu, the relationship between Man and Woman becomes one of structured inter-dependence. But still the woman has to work for her liberation without resigning herself to her destiny. Gender equality remains a myth. Man has always escaped unscathed, even when the sin is committed together. The autogenous impression of man about women is that she is the 'second sex', but this submission by woman comes only as an emitted response because society has groomed her to act dependent. Simon de Beauvoir vividly expresses her states as, "A free and autonomous creature like all others, a woman finds herself living in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the 'other' and reduce her to the status of the 'second sex'" (Beauvoir : 391).

The finite dimension of the relationship between man and woman has been prescribed by man and not by woman. Her limits have been imposed on her by man who is ruled by the mastery-motive. It is the male ego that has given the woman on inferior status through the ages. Since ages women is in negotiations with her male counterpart as well as our androcentric society. No society or country can ever progress without active participations of women in its overall development. Unfortunately, men have always looked down upon women as the weaker sex, as their property and object of pleasure. Man has relegated her to a second-class citizen. But modern women prefer to exercise their choices and break away from their traumatic experiences. Some Indian women novelists like Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy and Manju Kapur have tried with sincerity and honesty to deal with the physical, psychological and emotional stress syndrome of women.

Among the new generation of Indian novelists, Manju Kapur is a feminists who lives in Delhi and teaches in a college in Delhi University. Starting her literary quest with *Difficult Daughters* in 1995, Manju Kapur, not only won commonwealth writers. Prize for the best first book but also gave some food for thought to the readers and writers concerned with feminism. Having earned a high acclaim for her maiden novel, Kapur is busy carving her niche in the field of Indian writing in English. She has already brought out her second novel. *A Married Women* (2002). It can be considered a sequel to her first novel. Whereas in *Difficult Daughters* the focus is on the relationship between the mothers and daughters with marriage as the ultimate goal, her second novel focuses attention on the relationships between the husband and the wife and the physical attraction between members of the same sex. It can be considered a feminist literary work, it

tackles the problems faced by an educated Indian women with authenticity and insight. It symbolizes a fight against taboos, social restrictions and manmade code of conduct in a traditional society. The woman of the forties depicted as a dependent woman symbolizes the modern woman as well. She is still struggling to establish her identity and gain self expression and self-assertion. In recent years *Difficult Daughter* and *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur are two novels which shows the situation and difficulties of female characters in the male dominated society. The present paper proposes to make a comparative study of both the novels from this viewpoint.

Manju Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughter* is set against historical back-ground of India's partition. It highlights the problem of marginalization suffered by Indian women whose major concern is maintaining their individuality and dignity. It is the story of Virmati seen through the eyes of her daughter Ida, the narrator and a divorcee, from whom her mother's past has always been kept a secret. Virmati, the heroine of the novel is the eldest daughter of an Arya Samaj family, which follows the old tradition of marrying off their daughters at a certain age after they have received the basic qualification of housekeeping. But Virmati's life takes different twists and turns because of her inclination to education in true sense of term. Virmati's urge for education had traces of her having an independent wish. She wanted to have her own space, her own identity. Her mother, Kasturi feared her nature when she wondered, "Why was her daughter so restless all the time? In a girl, that spelt disaster". Realizing the value of education, Virmati wants to go to Lahore for higher studies but her mother wanted her to be married. Unknowingly, the mother becomes the voice of patriarchy. Her mother fails to understand her despair about failing in her studies. On this Ida reflects, "Kasturi found the fuss Virmati was making about failing unreasonable. It hardly made a difference to which was getting married and looking after her own home".

This is the focal point where the novel takes a dynamic turn. Her marriage is final with Inderjeet but it is postponed because of the death of his father. After that she has to go to Lahore for further studies and there, she falls in love with oxford returned Professor Harish Chandra who lives next door and is already married. This illegitimate affair leads to many a trouble. Virmati has to bear the brunt alone. She fails to demand her status from the professor whose baby she conceived before marriage. She is forced to abort the child to Harish as the professor is reluctant-rather afraid to marry her. Finally at the insistence of a friend, he is forced to marrying her. But Virmati's hardships do not end here, they simply change colors. Though she succeeds to marry the professor yet she does not secure any space for herself in family. Ganga, his first wife and his mother compel Virmati to lead a suffocating life in the tight walls of the house. Manju Kapur appositely projects her position in the family, "Though not overtly hostile, in the warring factions that existed in the house, she belongs to the opposition side".

One cannot deny the role of fate in Virmati's tragedy because all blood relations seem cold and barren. Nobody wants her, nobody likes her. The incongruities of time and fate also play truant with her and give her melancholy. Her melancholy cross all limits when she reaches her home to attend the funeral ceremony of her father. Her mother happens to see her standing there, she hurls all possible harsh words and blamed on her for her father's death and asks her to get out of the house when she says:

You've destroyed our family you badmash! you have blackened our face everywhere! For this I gave you birth? Because of you there is shame on me, shame on Bade Pitaji! But what do you care, brazen that you are!
(221)

Virmati's false hopes are finally shattered when she realizes, "were all ties between herself and her family broken? After all those years of care concern, sacrifice and responsibility?". The relations are strained and broken to the extent that she attends neither her father's nor her grandfather's funeral ceremony. She is touched to her own fate and is astonished to

think how Harish was accepted everywhere though he too, had been infidel of his first wife. The novelist perhaps has an implicit hint at the way society looks at women's faults. Virmati is pierced at heart to think how only one fault of hers has distanced her from everything. It is to be realized that despite all talks of equality and freedom, Indian society has not been able to forsake patriarchal influence. Seema Malik, too, sympathizes with Virmati when she says, "Though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is caught into another where her free spirit is curbed and all she does is 'adjust, compromise and adapt'" (Malik).

We, as readers, can easily envisage her struggle clearly when Virmati gives birth to a girl, she suggests 'Bharti' as a name, since she feels that God had blessed her with the child at the dawn of freedom of the country. But this is rejected by Harish and he names the child as 'Ida'. Over this Harish irritatingly remarks, "Let anybody think what they like for us it means a new slate and a blank beginning". With the advent of freedom for the country, it can be easily realized that the man who talks about freedom, does not provide freedom to his wife even for such a trivial matter like keeping the name of the newly born child at her choice. It is the hint at the male hegemony in Indian society. When India was fighting for freedom from the British Raj, Virmati was struggling to live life on her own terms. As India attained freedom at the cost of partition, at the cost of losing half its soul, Virmati is able to exercise her choices at the cost of family ties, dignity and self-respect. It is of great importance that Virmati's existence as an individual, a teacher and then as a wife is threatened. Nature also punishes her. Ultimately, she loses Harish, his family members and her carrier too. Her motherly status also evokes a valley of questions in Ida's mind and she does not want to be 'like her mother'. Badly confined in her self-centered desires in this physical world, she perhaps longs for a spiritual fulfillment after her death when she tells Ida:

When I die she said to me I want my body donated. My eyes, my heart, my Kidneys, any organ that can be of use. That way someone will value me after that I have gone.

As like her first novel Kapur's preoccupation with female revolt against deep-rooted family values and the institution of marriage is followed through in her second novel *A Married Women*. This novel by Manju Kapur takes a deep and satisfying look at the sense of displacement often felt by women in the traditional institution of marriage and family. Dharamashastras consider marriage as a sacrament. On this, Simon de Beauvoir also writes, "Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered by society" (Beauvoir). Whole the story of this novel revolves round Astha, a young women brought up in Delhi in a typical middle-class household. She was her parent's only child. She succumbs to her parents finding her husband in a traditional arranged manner. She is married with Hemant, the MBA, and foreign returned son of the bureaucrats. Within the bond of marriage she discovers a latent sexuality, which is driven by love and passion of her husband. She leads a seemingly blissful life, finding her feet in the teaching profession, painting as well as bearing two children.

After few month of their marriage, Astha's life becomes dull and dry. Hemant ruins her dreams as well as all happiness of her life. She demands him to give some time to their relationship, but he replies that he has no time for such games. He cannot satisfy her. The feeling of marginalization and neglect has telling effects upon her. Astha's married life suffers pangs not only because of herself indulgence but also because of her callous treatment given to her by her own people. Right from her childhood she protested against the niche of traditional trappings of social customs and values. Like Virmati's mother Astha's mother also believes in traditional values and shastras. But she never imbibed in her the values of her. In the beginning of the novel, we can see how her mother gives her opinion about marriage. She declared;

When you are married, our responsibility will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth.

At this Astha reacts strongly, “I don’t believe in all that stuff and I think, as an educated person neither should you” (1). Thus we can say it is the long chain of contradiction of women starts from their mother. Mothers, being women were themselves conditioned by their mothers first and the society at large next. Mothers take it as their duty to condition their girl child into the norms of the patriarchal society. After the death of her father, Astha becomes very concerned for her mother. She wants her mother to stay with her family. When she constantly requests her mother for it her mother says, “It doesn’t look nice”(85). At this Astha replied with a grieving heart to her mother:

I wish you wouldn’t be so stick-in-the mud, Ma. Why didn’t you have a son to look after you when you were old, if you cannot take anything from a daughter? Why did you stop with me?(85)

The life of Astha as depicted by Manju Kapur reveals her torrential quest for equality, for considering her an equal being and a worthy member of society One day, Astha becomes very emotional for the books of her father that express her devastated and outburst anger when she learnt that the books had been donated to a library. She quarreled with Hement and shouted at her mother, “Why did you do that, they were mine as well, I loved them”(87). Her mother takes this decision only because Hemant doesn’t want them. She feels shattered as she was not consulted before taking any major or minor decisions. One more instance is when Astha’s mother sells her plot and gives the balance to Hemant to manage. We find again that this type of behavior considering women weak. Her statement testifies it when she says, “Really Ma, don’t you think women can be responsible for their own investments? (97). This urge to be treated as an equal being is fully imbibed in each of her remarks. It appears as if Manju Kapur through the medium of Astha demands the niche which is equal to men in a society. In regard of equality, Astha sadly finds fault in her father also who thought his wife, i.e. her mother, inferior in managing money matters. She finds fault in her mother-in-law also who brought up her son, “for bringing Hemant to never regard women as beings to be consulted in their own lives” (98). Hemant promoted Astha for teaching but treated her as an Indian wife, who is the second being after a husband. He wants a daughter when Astha was pregnant first time but later on this same man discriminates between a boy and girl.

Not only this but his Indian male-ego is outpoured when Astha considers her job important. He talk of teaching in derogatory terms, “Hardly a serious job, you just go, talk to some children about poems and stories, organize a few clubs and come back” (68). Thus, Astha is hurt again and again by the male dominated treatment. Astha’s family affairs are also not so good and nothing is right with her. As a married woman she becomes enduring wife and sacrificing mother. Her temperamental incompatibility with her corporate thinking husband compels to play the role of mother and father for her children. This denies herself fulfillment and leads to the collapse of the institution of marriage. Astha understands a married women’s place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death in her Indian status. She realizes for herself that, “A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth” (231) are the essential prerequisites of a married woman. She contemplates marriage a terrible decision as it puts of rage, pain and indecision. Being torn between her duty and responsibility, faith and fact, public ethos and personal ethics, Astha thinks, “tired women cannot make a good wives” (154), and struggles for an emotional freedom from the scourge of nation. She likes to have a break from dependence on other and proceeds on the path of full human status that poses a threat to Hemant and his male superiority. Although she finds herself trapped between the pressures of the modern developing society and shackles of ancient biases she sets out on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationships with peepilika, a Muslim’s wife. While the lesbian attempts drag peepilika to the world of forget fullness, Astha takes a sweet revenge on her husband.

Almost all the female characters of Manju Kapur in both the novels are educated, aspiring individuals cased within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society intolerant of them. They struggles between tradition and modernity and develop the awareness of the new women, who has a voice of their own. Marriage, the social institution, traps and curbs their spirit by binding them to the responsibility of a home. In her novels, she has exhibited the new facets of the married woman. As a novelist she tries to show through *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* that suffering and sacrifice are the badges of women's tribe. Through all female characters in her novels she proves it. Kasturi and Lajwanti are child rearing and housekeeping machines. Astha describes women's situation in the family as unpaid servant and slave. But, Sakuntla, Swarnalata, Leela, Chotti, and Ida have gotnew voices in the wake of freedom.

Manju Kapur may sound as an advocate of women's rights but she doesn't allow her characters to disregard the values of Indian middle-class families. The elders respect the tradition, order and ritual. Virmati's parent wants their daughter married according to Hindu rights. Astha gets married according to traditional rituals. Astha is dissatisfied and distressed but she wouldn't go for divorce. Hemant's sister, Sangeeta's married life is full of hassles and is like an unpaid servant in her family. But there is no denying the fact that the new generation female crave for more space. Kapur has tried to assert more voice to her female characters in both the novels. In her first novel, Virmati had only one concern and that was to be married to a person who played with her body. Virmati's claim for her right and status becomes vociferous in Astha, the protagonist of the second novel who expects from her paramour not only his physical participation but also his emotional support. The authoress advocates for the equal participation of women in every field of life.

Manju Kapur has raised sexuality as a weapon and as a problem for the women in the traditional Indian society. The depiction of sex, rather illicit relationship, in the present day world has attracted ample attention in Indian novels. In the first novel, Virmati makes pre-marital sex as a weapon for her marriage with the professor. Her becoming the second wife of the professor is not at all an insult for her. In the second novel, Kapur tries to justifies Astha's lesbian love with pip as nothing was seriously threatened between two women. She raises the question of feminism in both the novels by portraying Astha and Virmati in all their moods and colors. A devoted wife to her husband, a docil daughter-in-law and a carefull mother. They want independence of thought and action too. The heroines of Kapur's in both the novels resembles in their independence of spirit like Deshpande's jaya, Indu and Saru. But like them, they don't seek a refuge in their parental home rather they fight their battles themselves Kapur, like Shashi Deshpande may not hesitate to touch the aspect of sexuality. Yet we do neither find Virmati nor Astha indulging freely in their sexual sport like Deshpande's heroines. Virmati's association with Harish and Astha's with Rohan and Banti, her boy friends and ultimately with pipeelika are innocuous and if all they sound unsound, both Virmati and Astha try to justify it. Kapur allows bold depiction of sex in her novels but she restricts it to a greater extent.

Kapur's another important issue is marriage. Not only Virmati and Astha but Sakuntla in *Difficult Daughters* and Pipeelika in *A Married Woman* too bring self-definition and assimilation into the Indian ethos. Virmati's total surrender to the professor and Astha's slight and subtle deviation can, to a great extent make their claim of marriage more valid Marriage in both the cases, are not Mirages but the meeting of two bodies bubbling with desires and two souls smouldering with sparks spasmodically. Virmati's struggle for marriage and Astha's reconciliation with her married life are very much a part of Kapur's claim of being a feminist. We find Manju Kapur in total agreement with what the veteran feminist, Simon de Beauvoir, too holds:



We open factories, the offices the facilities to women but we continue to hold that Marriage is for her a most honorable career freeing her from the need of any other participation in the collective life. (Beauvoir 167)

Thus, *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* shows Kapur maturing as a feminist in Indian writing in English. As, we know that her second novel is the sequel of the first. So many events and incidents are similar in both the novels. The most important thing is that the situation of the heroines in both the novels is same. Born out of typically Indian situation, they are caught between tradition and modernity, self- aggrandizement and self-realization, and self-assertion and confrontation. It only results in self-alienation and they become a symbol of female imagination responding to pressures and oppressions of patriarchal culture where marriage is seen only as a compromise.

Though these novels can be considered a Feminist literary work, it tackles the problems faced by an educated Indian women with authenticity and insight. It symbolizes a fight against taboos, social restrictions and manmade code of conduct in a traditional society. They frees themselves from old shackles, they becomes a prisoner of new ones. Manju Kapur is one of the women writers from India whose Protagonists are woman trying to maintain a balance all the time. Their suffering has made them strong and they are struggling to set themselves free from the shackles of tradition and various prejudices. Her preoccupation with the female revolt against deep rooted family values and the institution of marriage is the focal point of interest in both the novels.

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