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REBELLIOUS DAUGHTERS IN MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS: A REVIEW*

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The Lives of Others (Fiction)

Author: Manju Kapur

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Dr Shantilal Ghegade is the I/C Principal and HoD, English, Savitribai College of Arts, Pimpalgaon Pisa, Ahmednagar (MS). His educational credentials include an MA (ENG), an M.Phil on Arundhati Roy and Mulk Raj Anand and a PhD, on Manju Kapur, S. P. Pune University with 17 years of teaching experience. His areas of interest are Indian Women Writings in English. He has to his credit varied publications of articles on various current

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issues. He has also presented more than 16 papers in addition to creative writing at National and International conferences.

Difficult Daughters is Manju Kapur's first novel published in 1998 and became a quick success. The novel won the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book for Eurasian region in 1999. It also became one of the best sellers in India and abroad. The popularity of the book is evident in that it was translated into Spanish by Dora Sales Salvador in 2003. The novel presents the fictional account of an urban middle class Arya Samaj Punjabi family of Amritsar. It was a novel in its making for several years, the writer as a beginner had to rewrite and revise several times.

The novel probes into various social and historical factors that constituted women's identity in India in the last century. Kapur shows a keen insight in understanding and representing how women's identity was constructed in India in general and Punjab in particular. She takes care to make it clear that her story is a local one in terms of its geographical, historical and class and caste orientation. Although one might find a general picture of Indian womanhood in her novels, Kapur in her own modest way refuses to make any such generalization. In the saga of a family branching out into three generations, Kapur highlights the situation of Panjabi women. Although it appears to be the story of a family, particularly of the women members, the novelist takes care to relate the developments in the family to the developments taking place in the history of the nation.

Kapur presents several vital questions about the role of women in the making of a family, society and nation. Her characters amply demonstrate the role of women as the makers and yet their contribution to the making of the family, society and nation go unacknowledged. It is in this specific sense that Manju Kapur identifies the rebellious nature of women.

Indian literature in English has been sensitive to the question of marginals particularly women. Various Indian English novels projected the images of women and their exploitation under patriarchal society. Through their consistent actions to resist, they attempted to occupy a personal space in their own way. Recently, they are showing their chief role in social and economic development but a very of them are concerned in it. Even today bulks of them are living in marginal condition because of their submissive nature. Portrayal of the nature of womanhood is continuously defined all through literature in terms of male desire and male imagination.

Women are equal in number in the world population but still they are not treated as equally in society in spite of their progress and revolutions. India is not an exception to this reality. Our traditional system always attempted to keep them within the margin of the household life and shun their preference and interest in the worldly affair. It is made mandatory to women to handle the family responsibilities. It is a man-made rule to marginalize her to carry out minor role in society. The result is she could not spread her hands to touch her prospect beyond family life. In family she is always psychologically blackmailed in terms of seeking educational preference and employment prospect. She is always caught in her emotional life and woven in the complicated framework of human relationship. She becomes the victim of gender discrimination. Many writers attempted to glorify women's image by taking their

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issue for description of their experiences in literature. The life of a woman broadly depicts her intimate experiences.

Manju Kapur seems to have understood the mission of modern Indian intellectual in this sense. She is trying to bring into light the crucial roles played by women in the making of the family, society and nation. Women played both positive and negative roles. She tried to support and defends the fundamental value systems of the society, but she also questioned them when she found them oppressive. Women had her significant role in bringing radical social changes and yet her contributions are conveyingly forgotten by the patriarchal Indian society. If the role of women in India was limited to the domestic space in the early part of the last century, she came forward to play her significant role in the public spear in the later part of the century. The meta-narrative of the Indian independence movement rarely pay attention to the role of women in the making of the nation. If the Indian independence movement was by and large a middle class political movement, the women within the middle class did not get the benefits of the political freedom achieved in 1947. This is a clear indication that within the powerful Indian middle class, women remained a class of subalterns without any individual or political privileges. If she was granted any freedom at all that was exclusively within the domestic space which in many cases was controlled by male members. Thus, freedom remains still a popular myth for average Indian women. Manju Kapur tries to bring these subtle ideas in her first novel *Difficult Daughters*.

All characters in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* are middle class educated urban Indian women but they cannot fully alter their marginal position in spite of their social class or education. They are continuously struggling to ascertain their own independent identities in the patriarchal system. From ages the institution of marriage has proved advantageous only for the male members of the society and led to regular termination of women's identity. Manju Kapur powerfully dealt the issues of women's marginalization and their suppression in their writings.

Manju Kapur presents the issues of women's marginalization in her novels. Kapur's women act in their own radical ways but very often they fail in their struggle to achieve their goals. Though they seem free and privileged in the beginning and they boldly undertake their challenging mission of challenging the mighty patriarchal system but at the end many of them realize their own limitations in destroying the patriarchal values. Her women realize their marginal position and start fighting against the male hegemony but never fully succeed in achieving what they want. The novelist seems to suggest that more than what is achieved the very struggle for achieving is more important. All women characters are well educated and belong to urban middle class. Except Ganga no other women character is illiterate in this novel. There is no character from rural background in the novel. It is not true that only the poor and lower classes are not subjugated, even the upper class, educated women also face this problem. In different ways middle class women were also subjugated and they suffered. Manju Kapur as a woman writer picked up many issues in her fiction. She presents the issues of marginalization in the form of suppression and exploitation of educated middle class woman in the so called posh areas of the society.





Kapur depicts the modern women who strongly claim their right in order to create their own identity in society. The novel parallels India's independence movement with the idea of women's liberty from traditional and patriarchal bondages. Manju Kapur believes in humanistic presentation of her women characters in her writings. In the first part of the novel she shows how various kinds of power rules women's lives in an unchanging family pattern. *Difficult Daughters* seems to confirm the view that women alone can authentically present the problems of women.

Difficult Daughters is set in the twentieth century India which witnessed several socio-political developments including the partition in 1947. Kapur points out that unlike what the official versions of history fail to include in their accounts, a large number of women participated in the national freedom movement. In this novel Swarna Lata appears as the representative of young radical woman who made tremendous personal sacrifice and join the Congress Party to fight for freedom. But such women and their personal sacrifices were not only forgotten in the post independent era but also turned against the values and ideas they represented.

The first generation women represented by Kasturi remained solely limited to the domestic space. Their concerns were not different from those of Indian women from time immemorial. They try to work in conformity with the notion of womanhood nurtured and cherished from the Vedic period. It was the prototype of womanhood frozen in time, never really challenged through centuries.

The novel highlights the fact that Kasturi is a product of and beneficiary of the reformist social movements that began in India in the late nineteenth century. She is a member of the Arya Samaj, the reformist movement started by Dayanand Saraswati in 1857. Arya Samaj was part of a movement which tries to reform the Hindu religion from within. As a counter movement to the colonialist attack on Hinduism, Arya Samaj intended to eradicate irrational and superstitious aspects of Hinduism to lend it a rational basis and to strengthen it from within to face the onslaught of Christianity patronized by the colonizers. The Arya Samaj endeavor to expose the spiritual unscientific aspects of the Vedic religion. Education, enlightenment and empowerment of Hindus remained the major concerns of Arya Samaj. Arya Samaj established several modern educational institutions across the country and it laid special emphasis on the education of women. It was the Arya Samaj that made the first serious and organized effort at educating Hindu women. Arya Samaj had considerable influence on the people of Panjab region leading to several leading upper middle class people becoming its followers.

The novel presents three generation of women and they can be classified under three separate categories. Kasturi belongs to the early 20th century educated and enlightened sections of Panjabi women. As a representative of the first generation of indigenously educated Indian woman, she possesses some progressive quality and yet she is fundamentally traditional in her outlook to life. Manju Kapur presents Kasturi as a distinctive traditional woman who follows the orders of others all through her life. She accepted her life as it is without grievance and never claims her right in the patriarchal family. Kapur is suggesting a





characteristic portrayal of women as at the margin in the early 20th century in the character of Kasturi.

The second generation of women is represented by Kasturi's daughter Virmati. Virmati born into a rich business family of Lala Diwan Chand, who heads the family, is a severe and strict person and closely follows tradition even in the modern age. She gets good education and care at home. She has an extremely protective father, a rich, enlightened and benevolent grandfather. All her relatives living together in the joint family are educated and hence her early childhood is characterized by peaceful living together in a joint family. However, her future in the family is predetermined in that as soon as she reaches puberty the parents are concerned about marrying her to a boy who is in a compatible socio-economic level. For as the eldest daughter in the family, the responsibility of looking after all the younger brothers and sisters falls on Virmati. It is the convention that the elder in the family should take care of the younger. Naturally, she has to take the responsibilities of her brothers and sisters. As the second mother of her ten other siblings, Virmati becomes busy in taking care of her younger siblings. She is an open-minded girl who believes in hard work. But she is very anxious to get away from difficult situation and so she becomes difficult daughter in the family. She is too young to take such responsibility and dreams of escaping the stultifying air of the joint family system. She longs for love and cares for her family but is deserted by her own mother. Her childhood is without comfort and joy which she yearns for but as she is bound by the household duties, she never finds time for herself.

It is more than coincidental that the narrator of *Difficult Daughters* is Ida, the daughter of Virmati, is the third generation that achieves the power and skill to narrate their own stories. It is not that women never told stories in the past—in fact they did tell too many stories but such stories were treated as the 'old wives tales' signifying nothing but Ida's narrative about the two generations of women before she achieves the dignity of a modern novel. The voice of the modern woman is finally 'heard'. Ida had a problematic relation with her mother as much as her mother had with Kasturi. Thus, the novel presents three difficult daughters, belonging to three subsequent generations each unique in its own way. Each of the three had to encounter the male dominated society and its values prevailing in their respective times, struggle with the forces of domination and their historical determinants in her own tragic way. The novel leaves the suggestion that woman's struggle for identity and freedom will continue and the novel brings to surface the tragic moods characterizing such struggle.

It is around this time when she is caught in this kind of a personal crisis that for good or bad the political scene begins to change in India, when she still at Lahore, the nation inches close to the much awaited independence. The national independence also foreshadows a kind of personal independence for Virmati and others. But this leap into a new era also comes with its share of pain. The partition of India had its great painful movements felt in Panjab. The novel goes into the details of the partition and the bloody events that followed it.

In the novel Virmati represents a new emerging woman who tries to go beyond the cultural conventions and customs to give a new dimension to education and prefers to marry an already married man. She does not chain herself to traditional ways by accepting the marriage proposal with the consent of her family, on the other hand she gives preference to her desire. She does not vacillate to engage herself in bodily relationship with a man before her

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marriage. An educated modern woman, she wants to enjoy free and vital life rather than only being a traditional woman. Her struggle becomes more significant against the background of gender marginalization.

Thus, Manju Kapur's protagonist seems to be aggressive to male dominated society to prove that they are not dependent on their men for their sexual want, emotional contentment and psychological support. In this struggle women have to endure a lot of pain that illustrates the nature of andocentric society and their marginal position. They show their courage, psychological guts, defiant nature, initiating rapture and think about their own pleasure by building required surroundings but at last they all are unsuccessful to create an independent world, to come out of this marginalized position.

Manju Kapur depicts aspirations of women characters in the novel that demand socio-cultural change for the empowerment of women. The novel highlights the need of social reformation and the challenges and predicaments of women. In the modern age women do not easily succumb to the pressure tactics of the male dominated world. The characters presented in the novel have their own troubles as new duties, availability of equal chance, social limitations and a sense of liberty. All female protagonists seem self-reliant, bold and daring. They know well how to fulfill their desires and live life freely with self-assurance but while doing this they face trials and tribulations.

Kapur attempts to show the fortitude of women in their struggle to bring change in gender relation but most of the women characters have to submit to the male domination in Indian context. They do not prove violent attackers on patriarchal system. Astha understands her own self and then becomes mutinous for generating her own space through independent activity. Manju Kapur's novel present the issues related to the Indian women and their difficulties like independent identity, taking decision, free to love, caste system, sterility as a curse, divorce, extra marital affair in want of love and financial independence.

This review is primarily concerned with the issues that marginalize Indian women and their struggle to establish their identity through education; empowerment, financial autonomy, abolition of child marriage. These issues refer to women's rights, status and power. These debating issues are radically seen in India differently in different contexts.

Manju Kapur seems to represent women in diverse social environment, particularly in the context of different human relationships. Her woman protagonists are bold enough to show confrontation with male-dominated society which provides a little space to them. The education of woman seems to be most significant trait of her novel. Her central protagonist wants to be educated in order to strengthen themselves in society. They appear rebellious against the customary notions and they would like to stand on their own feet for everything.



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