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TRANSITIONAL IDENTITY IN MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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Abstract

*Hybridity demands intrusion of new elements into the old fortified deeply rooted strong tradition. In *Difficult Daughters*, through her protagonists, especially *Virmati*, Manju Kapur explores the changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards self-assured, assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands and in providing a medium for self-expression. The novel displays woman's search for her 'self' which has become a sociological issue that incorporates myriad contemporary feminist questions and concerns regarding women's role in society and the domestic space. The protagonist questions her treatment as slave for man and protests against the age-old practice of being a property, tool and plaything of man. The characters of Kapur redefine gender relations striving towards a more meaningful cooperative social life. Education and profession makes Kapur's characters authoritative and asserts and reshapes their life. Education can save women from the suppressions and oppressions of the world. The struggle of *Virmati* can be compared to the struggle of India. Both crave for freedom and independence in the middle of family and socio-political problems.*

Keywords: *Hybridity, self-identity, cultural identity, tradition, modernity, education, maternal alienation, nationalism.*

Transitional identity frees an individual from his own traditional identity. He/she may acquire transitional identity when they break their regional or national cultures. Hybridity is the offspring of two extremely opposite cultures, produced through human manipulation for specific achievement for the betterment of human life. It refers to anything derived from heterogeneous sources, or composed of elements of different and incongruous kinds. Kapur highlights upon the identity crisis and individual's tragic predicament consequent upon the clash of cultures. Her protagonists have their conflict between two selves-the inherited and the acquired one. She has made a positive contribution towards understanding the psyche of the modern Indian woman and the trauma she undergoes in expressing her self-identity and cultural identity in the changing society. She feels torn between the twin forces of ancient traditional values of India and the enlightened scientific attitudes of the West towards life.

Kapur's novels are an eye opener to some of the complex problems in marriages, especially in this day and age when marriage is a highly complicated issue and there is a global crisis of broken marriages. She also points out the evils of marriage that an Indian woman has to face in India. She recommends that the marriage should be between two rational consenting adults. Kasturi's conventional family has provided an opportunity to break the boundaries in marriage, particularly 'brideseeing'.

The success of the marriage generally lies in accepting the principles and philosophies of equality by the stakeholders. This is pointed out by Mitra that "The partnership in marriage, the writer seems to suggest, should be one of interdependence but if there is any undue

shift of power of one partner, there should be a total breaking away from the relationship" (Mitra 79). Kapur seems to reveal the fact that the professor is not in a position to grant rights for the women, both the wife and co-wife. *Virmati* protests the idea of marriage saying "In my family there is only marriage for girls" (DD 151). She strives to lead the life of a modern Indian woman and struggles to achieve her ambition and desires expecting her own freedom. To achieve these, she protests against the pressures of patriarchy, marginality and helplessness.

Education plays a dominant role in the lives of women. When educated women, due to socio-economic crisis came out of the house, the world around her, made her aware of her potentialities other than cooking and house-keeping. This new awareness awakened women to realize her new place and position in the family and society and made them conscious of her own individuality. Because *Kasturi* was educated, she gave *Virmati* freedom and indirectly promoted the seedlings of feminism in *Virmati*.

The alienation that *Virmati* suffers makes her protest for independence crossing the traditional boundaries and identify herself as the professor's second wife whereas *Kasturi* who is not able to understand *Virmati*'s emotions and sentiments expresses her rage and frustration that education has abused her and deprived of her reason "In her time, going to school had been a privilege, not to be abused by going against one's parents. How had girls changed so much in just a generation?" (DD 60). Women's education does not allow them to become modernist but to reinforce the value of patriarchal society. *Kasturi*'s thoughts express the anguish of average mothers of every

generation, "when they see their daughters rebelling against the imposition of values of their earlier generation upon them"(Devi 225). Kapur's women characters are educated, aspiring individuals who are caged within the confines of a conservative society.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her article "Can the Subaltern Speak" points out that Third-World Women are shuttled between tradition and modernity and in the process of swinging lose their identity as they are "caught between tradition and modernization"(qtd in Sharma 1). Kapur without breaking the traditional system brings in elements of modernity. In the Indian context 'representational feminism' is the need of the hour to liberate women from their enclosed space so that they can redefine their secular identity and realise their claims and rights. In Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, she questions "One wonders if women still exist, if they will always exist, whether or not it is desirable that they should, what place they occupy in this world, what their place should be, 'what has become of women?' was asked recently in an ephemeral magazine" (Beauvoir 13).

Virmati tries to create a space for herself but Harish never encourages her in achieving her social goals like becoming a professor. Instead, he creates obstacles on her path. Meera asserts it is a negation of her own existence "It can be called a conscious sacrifice of her identity as anything except Harish's 'Second' wife. She pays no attention to the outside world nor even to her own life or health"(Meera 103). Virmati's graph rises for sometime and falls down losing all her former strength. Ida who probe her mother's life comes to the conclusion that the strong-willed woman after sometime loses the strength and becomes weak and docile. Choubey also agrees "Virmati's journey from strength to weakness"(Choubey 24) with the rebellious spirit gives her a sense of security and affection. Virmati is inspired by Swarnalata and Shakuntala who try to go beyond family duties. She is torn between self-identity and socio-cultural identity.

Though inculcated by her situation, it is wrong on Virmati's part to collapse a family's happiness especially that of Ganga's and also changing her economic, social and historical conditioning. However, in *Difficult Daughters* Kapur has portrayed Virmati as one of the Indian women "displaced, alienated figures, ground in the mill of convention, domestic injustice and institutionalised tyranny, the victims of their time, of their society, of their own romantic illusions"(Juneja 60). Virmati is doubly marginalised because she has to face the hatredness of the other relatives of Ganga and Harish. She is confronted

with the complex and convoluted emotions of guilt due to her affairs with her new-found lover, the married professor and the overvaulting ambition to be modern. Kapur has attempted to understand how social restrictions influence lives of women and how it has affected their relationship to art and literature.

The efforts to change the position of common woman are becoming part of the basic structure of culture. Virmati who leads the life as the illicit lover and second wife of Harish has to protest against the man-made rules to assert her rights as his lover and wife unmindful of the social stigma. She also searches for her identity in the society through education and economic independence. Later, we find her daughter Ida too giving her own voice of protest in her married life and finally "engulfed in melancholy, depression and despair"(qtd in Srivastava 75).

Kapur experiments with the life of three generations of women by presenting the life of Kasturi, Virmati and Ida and allows these women graded freedom. Kasturi enjoys limited freedom which is latter expanded and given to Virmati who in turn allows maximum freedom to Ida. The progressive ideas of Kapur are rooted through the character of Ida. Kapur highlights the parities and disparities lurking in-between. Kasturi and Virmati. Kasturi, though a traditional woman, changes a little bit during modern times and therefore accepts her daughter without carrying any resentment further. Kasturi's generation of women believes that the child is a product of providence for their love and loyalty to the institution called marriage. In the case of Virmati, there is no love but lust. So, she is forced to pay heed to her lover's advice to abort the child conceived outside wedlock. The third generation, represented by Ida though modern in her outlook towards life experiences pain when her husband forces her to abort child. She laments that she was unable to achieve motherhood which offers pleasure and happiness and a sense of fulfillment in life.

Virmati's sharing of her pleasures and pains with the professor, her pathetic life as his second wife are her private sorrows and the denial of maternal love becomes one of the main reasons for it, thereby making her suffer from guilty consciousness. Kapur creates Kasturi as a foil to Virmati. Kasturi is for the kind of freedom that is controlled and confined to certain essential things in life. She is not expecting a new woman from that freedom whereas she claims that she has given freedom to all her daughters but she also feels that this freedom has been exercised by them without responsibility.

Nationalism denotes a process of self-realisation, both for women and the nation as autonomous entities which requires ties of mutual recognition and inclusiveness. Though Kasturi is rooted to the tradition and confined her to the welfare of the family, she plays her social role well when there is a critical situation related to partition crisis due to Hindu-Muslim conflict. Because of the failed marriage, Virmati has not only lost her freedom and independence but also her self-esteem. Virmati's desire to name her daughter as Bharati, which is associated with the birth of India is symbolic of her desire for social role. It is denied by Harish who names her Ida. It is symbolically limiting Virmati's role to her family "For us it means new slate and a blank beginning"(DD 277).

Virmati symbolically represents India. She stands as an emblem in "the process of emerging nationalism by self-individuation or the process of separating one's self from the trappings of 'the other' self which is subjugated by colonial and cultural politics"(Celly 66). The depiction of history in its multi dimensions is not the only concern of Kapur but she compares the pre-partition days in India with the universal human experience. Like the colonial India, struggling to come out of the foreign invasion, Virmati also struggles hard to come out of the shackles of tradition.

Kapur craves for a greater sense of balance, self - confessedly she feels trapped in the woman's world. Self - introspection and self - discovery help her women characters of to realise their veiled inner strength. The Indian women are fully protected by laws; more than in any other country, they are better placed than women in the west. Now women have to wake up and look around and start doing things for themselves. Preaching the feminist philosophy will not solve their problems. The change must come from within. The emerging new woman and her image in literature, especially fiction of Kapur is a product of the inevitable transformation taking place in our society.

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