International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Changing Ideas of Womanhood Across Generations in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract:
Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* tells the story of three generations of Punjabi women. Kasturi, Virmati and Ida live through the years of Independence and Partition. This paper studies how the idea of womanhood changes from one generation to the next, and how much of the old idea remains. It uses the view that gender is shaped by culture, Foucault's idea that power can produce resistance, and studies of the bond between mothers and daughters. Kasturi belongs to a reformed tradition. She is educated, but her education is meant to make her a good wife and mother. Virmati follows the example of Shakuntala and Swarnalata, who are educated and independent. She chooses higher studies and marries the man she loves, but she learns that for her "love and autonomy could never co-exist." Ida, the divorced and childless narrator, receives from her mother the lesson to "Adjust, compromise, adapt." She examines that lesson by writing her mother's story. The paper argues that Kapur shows the growth of the modern Indian woman as slow and uneven. Each daughter rebels against her mother, yet each repeats some part of her. For Ida, writing about the past becomes a way to gain freedom.

Keywords: Womanhood; Generational Conflict; Mother-Daughter Relationship; Patriarchy; New Woman

Introduction

Indian women writers in English have often asked what it means to be a woman in a society whose rules change more slowly than its people. Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande, among others, wrote about women who are torn between family duty and a growing sense of self. Manju Kapur added to this body of writing with *Difficult Daughters* (1998). The novel won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the best first book in the Eurasia region (Kaur, "Tradition" 26). Its narrator is Ida, who travels to Amritsar after her mother Virmati's death in order to learn about a woman she never understood. The first sentence of the novel states its main concern: "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother" (Kapur 1). The story begins with Kasturi's schooling in Sultanpur in 1904, continues through the years of Partition, and ends in Ida's present. Critics have studied the novel from several angles. Hooda and Saranya write about female identity, Kaur about tradition and modernity, Zia and her co-authors about patriarchal stereotypes, Bălănescu about mothers and daughters, and Chopra about Partition. All of these readings

recognise that the novel is built around generations. Each woman is shaped partly by what she accepts from her mother and partly by what she rejects.

This paper uses the three generations as its framework and asks three questions. What idea of womanhood does each generation hold? Which forces, such as education, the Arya Samaj, the freedom movement and the city of Lahore, change that idea? How much of the older idea survives in the new one? The discussion first looks at Kasturi. It then turns to Shakuntala and Swarnalata, the two "new women" of the novel, and goes on to Virmati and Ida. A final section links their story to the history of the nation.

Changing Ideas of Womanhood Across Generations:

In *Difficult Daughters* each woman learns what a woman should be from the women before her, and she questions part of what she learns. Atifa Binth e Zia, Maidah Basit Dar and Amina Shah use Nancy Chodorow's "concept of gender being a cultural product." They argue that Virmati "performs gender non-conformity within a gender biased society" (216). Olivia Bălănescu starts "from the assumption that the mother plays a crucial part in socialising children into traditional gender roles" (292). She also quotes Jung's remark that "every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother" (qtd. in Bălănescu 293). Suchita Marathe uses Foucault's idea that power works inside the family and that resistance to it can lead to something positive. She concludes that "something new evolves from this power struggle which is a step closer to emancipation" (1571). These critics suggest that each generation changes the model of womanhood it receives, but only in part.

Zia et al. call Kasturi "the most typical character in the novel" (218). Kapur shows, however, that Kasturi is herself a product of social reform. In Sultanpur in 1904 her uncle, a follower of Swami Dayanand, saves her from child marriage. He opens a school for girls so that she can become "one of the finest flowers of Hindu womanhood" (Kapur 54). Kapur describes the limits of this reform clearly: "Her father, uncle and teacher made sure that this step into modernity was prudent and innocuous. Her head remained modestly bent over her work. No questions, no assertion. She learned reading, writing, balancing household accounts and sewing" (Kapur 54). During her schooling "it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny" (Kapur 54). Her education is meant to make her a better wife and nothing more. Even so, Kasturi has a private life of the mind, because "Her clandestine activity was reading" (Kapur 55).

Marriage completes her training. On the train to Amritsar she accepts her sorrow, "for she knows she has been but a guest in her parents' house; this separation is ordained from birth" (Kapur 177). Her wedding night marks the start of "her long years of childbearing" (Kapur 179). Kapur does not present this life as ideal. When Kasturi is pregnant for the eleventh time, she prays for a miscarriage, and the narrator asks, "How trapped could nature make a woman?" (Kapur 6). Tradition values her body for bearing children, but for Kasturi it brings only exhaustion and a silent wish to rebel.

Kasturi's views on womanhood grow out of this experience. When her niece Shakuntala comes from Lahore, Kasturi asks, "What is the need to do a job? A woman's shaan is in her home." She also gives learning a narrow purpose: "Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family" (Kapur 13). When Virmati fails her FA examination and asks for more time to study, Kasturi replies, "At your age I was already expecting you, not fighting with my mother" (Kapur 18). She judges her daughter by the standard that was used to judge her. Paramjit Kaur notes that Kasturi believes a girl must be trained in

household work for a suitable match and needs only enough schooling to read and write ("Analysis" 24). Neelam Hooda describes this as a society "where marriage is viewed as a definitive objective and fate from which these women can't escape" (104). Kaur also observes that Kasturi "complies to social norms and patriarchal society" and "compels her daughter Virmati to concede the family tradition" ("Tradition" 26). Zia et al. add that Kasturi will "unleash violence on her daughter only to keep her family's so-called respect" (219). The novel shows this violence directly. Kasturi bangs Virmati's head against a wall (Kapur 51), and after the marriage she beats her with a chappal (Kapur 193).

Kapur places two other women beside her who have already stepped outside the home. Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin, has a degree in chemistry and teaches in Lahore. When she visits Dalhousie, Virmati sees that "She looked vibrant and intelligent, as though she had a life of her own" (Kapur 13). She also connects the freedom of women with the freedom of the country: "Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else" (Kapur 13). Her parting words, "times are changing, and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?" (Kapur 15), change Virmati's hopes. The narrator says, "Shakuntala's visit planted the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. It was possible to be something other than a wife" (Kapur 16). Marathe calls Shakuntala "the first 'New Women' created by Manju Kapur." She describes a "tug of war" between the cousin and the mother for Virmati, in which "Kasturi could win the race over Shakuntala" (1572).

Swarnalata, Virmati's room-mate in Lahore, is a more political new woman. Virmati notices that Swarna makes her own choices in everything, including her decision to stay in Lahore "though her parents wanted her to come home and get married" (Kapur 131). Her advice to Virmati is direct: "Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war – the satyagraha movement – because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream" (Kapur 131). Virmati answers, "In my family there is only marriage for girls" (Kapur 131), and the reply shows how far apart the two women are. Swarnalata later marries, but she continues her public work (Kapur 164, 219). Kaur places Shakuntala and Swarnalata, together with Virmati and Ida, among "the paradigm of new women" who "break the limitations of traditional values and family customs" ("Tradition" 26). V. M. Saranya adds a qualification. She writes that "while the protagonist feels inspired by them, she never quite embodies feminist values" (1028). Virmati admires both women, but she never becomes fully like them.

Virmati stands between the old model and the new one. Her childhood follows her mother's ideal. As the eldest of eleven children she is a "second mother" to her brothers and sisters (Kapur 5), and Kasturi tells her, "You are the eldest. If you don't see to things, who will?" (Kapur 5). Shakuntala shows her a different path: "It was useless looking for answers inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom, and the bright lights of Lahore colleges" (Kapur 14).

Her rebellion takes courage. She asks her mother, "What is wrong with not wanting to marry?" (Kapur 50). Kasturi replies that the elders "thought school and college would strengthen you, not change you" (Kapur 51). Without meaning to, she names the cause of the change between generations. Education was meant to decorate a woman, but it has begun to change what women want. After she tries to drown herself in the canal at Tarsikka, Virmati refuses to marry the canal engineer chosen for her. Kapur writes, "Her silence though was not one of acquiescence, but refusal. She would not marry" (Kapur 75). In her small

hostel room in Lahore, Virmati sees "autonomy and freedom," while her mother sees only "the loneliness of single life." The narrator sums up the difference: "Marriage was acceptable to her family, but not independence" (Kapur 100).

Her rebellion, however, is divided. The education that should free her is mixed up with her love for Harish, the married Professor who is her neighbour and her teacher. She tells herself that "Her studies were her passport to independence, not just her passport to sleeping with the Professor." At the same time, the idea of "a life for herself without marriage" seems to her "strange and not quite right" (Kapur 132). After her abortion in Lahore she thinks, "Yes, she was independent. Her body had gone through knives and abortion, what could happen to her now that she could not bear?" (Kapur 152). Soon afterwards she feels that "She was his for life, whether he ever married her or not" (Kapur 154). Virmati later becomes headmistress of a school in Nahan, where she senses "her singleness and her power," but the post ends when the Professor's visits threaten a scandal (Kapur 159). Ida writes that her mother came to Nahan "excited about independence, still not knowing that for her love and autonomy could never co-exist" (Kapur 159).

Virmati's marriage to Harish is the high point of her rebellion, and it is also her defeat. On her first day in his house she tells him, "I should never have married you ... and it's too late now" (Kapur 185). Her mother declares, "It would have been better if you had drowned in the canal than live to disgrace us like this!" (Kapur 192). In Harish's home the first wife, Ganga, keeps control of the kitchen and the house. Bălănescu notes that Virmati and Harish "are only allowed a dressing-room," and that this division of space "reflects Virmati's split consciousness" (304). Ganga stands for the oldest idea of womanhood in the novel. Ida writes that "Her husband continued to be Ganga's public statement of selfhood" (Kapur 243). When Virmati is sent back to Lahore to study for an MA, Ganga wonders, "What woman would want to exchange a home for a classroom?" (Kapur 216). The two wives hold opposite ideas of a woman's life, yet both depend on the same man.

Virmati gets a home of her own only when history changes her circumstances. In 1947 Ganga leaves Amritsar and never returns. Virmati then feels, "Maybe this was really what she had fought for all along, space to be" (Kapur 239). The space she gains is inside the home, and she gains it because another woman has been pushed out. Ida imagines her mother saying, "I'm my own mistress. I will relate to you with dignity or not at all" (Kapur 222). She admits, however, that "though she had escaped the marital home, an essential part of it, the marital bed she carried inside her head" (Kapur 223). Bălănescu writes that Virmati "remained enslaved to the patriarchal myth of matrimonial union and romantic fulfilment, which promises women an illusory wholeness" (306). Virmati moves the idea of womanhood forward because she insists on making her own choices. She still believes, however, that a woman's life is completed by a man.

Ida belongs to the third generation, and she is the voice of the novel. She grows up in Delhi after Independence, well educated but closely controlled. Her father wants her to be pretty, accomplished and intelligent, and Ida writes, "My mother tightened her reins on me as I grew older, she said it was for my own good" (Kapur 244). The daughter who once fought Kasturi has started to behave like Kasturi. Bălănescu puts it this way: "Without realising it, Virmati has taken Kasturi's place, demanding her daughter obey and please her family" (305). When Virmati complains that Ida is disappointing her father,

Ida answers, “There are other things in life.” When her mother asks what they are, she replies, “Like living” (Kapur 243). Kapur adds that “by the time she grew up she was not sure what self she had to please” (Kapur 244).

Ida breaks the old pattern more fully than her mother did. Her husband, Prabhakar, “had insisted” that she have an abortion (Kapur 135), and the marriage ends in divorce. She never told Virmati about it, because “in the choice of my husband I had pleased you” (Kapur 136). After the divorce she feels “husbandless, childless,” and she describes herself as “hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society” (Kapur 244). By the standards of Kasturi’s generation she has failed, and her relatives in Amritsar pity her as a woman “without husband, child or parents” (Kapur 3). Yet she is the first woman in the family who refuses to remain in an unhappy marriage. She also names what her mother passed on to her: “That is my female inheritance. That is what she tried to give me. Adjust, compromise, adapt” (Kapur 223). By putting the lesson into words, she shows that she no longer accepts it without question.

In the end Ida finds her freedom through writing. When she rebuilds her mother’s life in words, she first understands her mother and then separates herself from her: “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” (Kapur 244). Kuntal Beniwal and Ritu Sharma explain such conflict by saying that “mothers are more conventional as compared to their daughters and daughters choose to live differently in the modern world, seeking for independence, love and accomplishment” (216). Kasturi read in secret, and Virmati studied in order to escape her family, but Ida writes in order to understand. Her opening wish “not to be like my mother” becomes, by the end of the novel, a wish to know her mother and then to be free of her.

Kapur places the changing idea of womanhood beside the birth of the nation. Radhika Chopra compares the novel with *Train to Pakistan* and argues that “the search for control over one’s destiny, surely the key theme of *Difficult Daughters*, refers to the Independence aspired to and obtained by a nation ... but also to the independence yearned after (and finally not obtained) by a woman” (171). The divisions within Virmati’s family also look forward to the division of the country. Lala Diwan Chand’s settlement with his elder son is meant to end a family quarrel, but it turns out to be “the beginning of a long chain of partitions” (Kapur 23). Chopra also quotes Urvashi Butalia, who calls Partition “a history of deep violation—physical and mental for women” (qtd. in Chopra 173). When Ida is born, Harish refuses the name Bharati because, in his words, “We have moved back into the dark ages” (Kapur 241). He chooses the name Ida because for him it means “a new slate, and a blank beginning” (Kapur 242). The comparison suggests that the modern Indian woman, like the nation, won a freedom that was divided and incomplete.

Conclusion

Difficult Daughters presents the history of Indian womanhood in the first half of the twentieth century through the women of one family. Kasturi represents a reformed tradition in which education supports the life of the home and does not change it. Shakuntala and Swarnalata are the new women of the freedom movement, independent and active in public life. Virmati stands between these models. She claims the right to study and to choose her husband, and in doing so she breaks her family’s rules. She still believes, however, that a woman’s identity depends on a man, and she passes on to her daughter the lesson of

adjustment that she once resisted. Ida, who is divorced and childless, seems a failure by the older standards. She is also the only one who examines the habit of compromise she has inherited, and writing her mother's story gives her some release from it.

The change across the three generations is slow and uneven. Each daughter is "difficult" for her mother because she wants more from life, and each daughter partly becomes the mother she resisted. Education drives most of this change. Kasturi receives five years of schooling that prepares her for the home, Virmati earns degrees in Lahore, and Ida grows up in an academic world. In every case marriage, family honour and the wishes of men limit what education can do. Kapur presents these limits honestly, but she does not present them as final. Her novel suggests that the idea of womanhood changes through small acts of refusal and through the example of other women. It also changes when a daughter tries to understand her mother. The woman who once wanted only "not to be like my mother" makes her mother's story her own, and in doing so she claims the freedom to define herself.

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