

Transcending Taboo: An Enquiry into the Dynamics of Resistance in Manju Kapur's Novels *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*

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Abstract

Taboo is formally defined as “a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place or thing”. It is a prohibition of social actions based on the beliefs of the society. Such prohibitions are present in all societies. Taboos are often meant to protect the individuals or community, but when all the members are not given equal protection and when applied only to one individual or one subsection of the community it can serve to suppress the other person or the community. Thus, the dominant sections will be responsible for framing taboos and imposing taboos on the weaker sections of the society. There are different approaches to this concept of taboo namely social taboos, cultural taboos, religious taboos, gender taboos and sexual taboos. Manju Kapur, the celebrated novelist of Indian English Literature has foregrounded an imaginative impression of human life, human relations, social systems, political and religious institutions and the culture and customs of the time through her novels. She vigorously deals with the taboo issues like sexual assault, female sexuality, masturbation, sexual disability, divorce, abortion, adultery, extra marital relations and incestuous abuse. The focus of her novels is on the resistance of the characters within the territory of home, society and culture. The characters try to reveal the resistance to the existing taboos in the society. The paper intends to study the dynamics of resistance shown by the characters as seen in the novels *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur. The characters, Virmati, Ida,

Shakuntala, Astha and Pipeelika reveal resistance in relation to their home, society and culture and they transcend themselves from the taboos of the society.

Keywords: Taboo, Resistance, Transcend

Introduction

Human behaviour is governed not by rational thinking alone. Societies have framed values and standards of acceptable behaviour for their members and they are encouraged to follow those values. A culture which is acceptable to a specific society guides the behaviour and thoughts of the members by well-defined codes of conduct and related value systems. Such a list of behavioural guidelines is typically referred to as social norms. Any member who differs from, disobeys or violates this framework of norms will have to face multipronged taboos as a natural consequence. In this manner, norms and taboos have a major influence on our life. The way we eat, dress, behave and lead our sex lives are all governed by the norms or taboos of the societies we live in.

A taboo is formally defined as “a social or religious custom prohibiting or restricting a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place or thing.” It is a prohibition of certain social actions based on the beliefs of the society. Such prohibitions are present in all societies. Taboos are restrictions that could at an early stage be meant to protect the individuals or community, but when all the members are not given equal protection and when applied only to one individual or one subsection of the community it can only serve to suppress the other person or the community. The dominant sections, therefore, will be responsible for framing taboos and imposing them on the weaker and marginalised sections of society.

Taboos stem from almost every facet of life - they can be influenced by the matrices of culture, society, religion or even sex. Social taboos prohibit society from following certain social customs and practices, while a culture-based taboo would demand prohibition of various cultural laws which are forbidden in different cultures. A religious taboo would focus on restrictions derived from belief in spirit and could be inspired by the awe of supernatural. Such taboos differ according to differences that exist within societies, cultures and religions of a nation and, when viewed from a broader perspective can even cut across cultural, linguistic and national boundaries. Taboos and their dominance change over time and place. Some taboos may weaken or even disappear, while others may become stronger and dominant. An act may be a taboo in one culture but may not be in another. Social, cultural and religious taboos are thus practiced differently in different parts of the world. Some taboos are even created as a part of culture, which may even prevent individuals within that society from breaking the taboo. Breaking an existing taboo is often considered objectionable by certain societies, especially those which uphold a more stringent and traditional outlook towards life and human interactions.

Indian English Literature in general have contributed much to an understanding of social, cultural and religious construction of taboos. Many writers through their works, have recorded how the social, political and cultural systems of a pluralistic society like India have shaped social norms and taboos. "Taboos are sometimes referred to as doing the 'unthinkable'. Even thinking about violating a taboo is problematic. The sanctions associated pertain not just to the behaviour that contradicts the taboo but also merely thinking or considering such a behaviour" (Fershtman 3).

Manju Kapur, one of the celebrated novelists of contemporary Indian English Literature, has foregrounded an imaginative impression of human life, human relations, social systems,

political and religious institutions and the culture and customs of the time through her novels. Her fiction focuses on issues like sexual assault, female sexuality, masturbation, sexual disability, divorce, abortion, adultery, extra marital relations and incestuous abuse and her characters are on the path of resistance pre-marked within the territory of home, society and culture. The women in the novels of Manju Kapur are not traditional women who think that marriage is their destiny and they differ from conventional women, break all social taboos and emerge as new women. This evolving new image of women has shaken the foundations of the traditional concept of marriage and motherhood. Pre-marital sex, fornication, extra-marital relations and divorce are no longer considered as a taboo.

Critics have widely commented upon Manju Kapur's attitude towards the tyrannical and conservative ideologies of the Indian society and especially on how she represents individuals caged within the labyrinth of marriage, culture and tradition. The most important aspect evident in the writings of Manju Kapur is her inner passion to articulate the psyche of characters breaking taboos within the socio - cultural milieu and their attempts to circumvent them. Her characters mirror diverse human personalities, emotions and passions by revealing their real individual psyche. Most of her important characters are not ready to be shattered or paralyzed by the social forces but rather prefer to fight back against the social, cultural, sexual and gender taboos. Manju Kapur designs her characters as cult figures who resist and even trivialize social taboos and conventions. They often seem to nurture the desire of being independent and lead a life of their own as individuals. They are not silent rebels but are liberal, bold, outspoken, progressive, determined and action - oriented. The protagonists know they cannot depend on others to sort out problematic situations and proceed to tackle it on their own. What one discerns is a brilliant interweaving of the internal and external

conflicts of all the major characters which throw ample light upon the challenges and resistance shown by them as smart representations of her fictional world.

The paper intends to study the dynamics of resistance shown by the characters as seen in the novels *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur. These novels offer a fascinating glimpse into the psyche of characters, their consciousness, interrelations and discuss their modes of resistance against the norms laid down by society. She portrays a wide range of issues related to the lives of human beings in the social, cultural, political and religious contexts of a predominantly patriarchal society: life in the family, sexual relationships with the male and female members, conflicts within the family, divorce, abortion, adultery, incest and extra marital relations. The novels reveal the resistance of the characters in relation to their home, society and culture and discuss how they transcend themselves by sometimes even trivializing taboos imposed on them by society. They are mentally strong and are ready to challenge the social norms, thereby trying to assert their identity.

Dynamics of Resistance in *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*

Difficult Daughters is a story of a woman divided between family duty, the desire for education and illicit love. Virmati, the central character falls in love with a neighbour, the Professor who is already married. The Professor eventually marries Virmati, installs her in his home along with his first wife and helps her to further continue her studies in Lahore. Virmati finally finds the battle for her own independence has created pain around her. *Difficult Daughters* portrays three generations of women who want to assert their right and establish their own identity in patriarchal society. In the course of their life they break down the age- old traditional norms of patriarchal hegemony. The novel describes the

independence of women from conventional and patriarchal bondages in the background of India's independence- partition.

The story is narrated by Ida, daughter of Virmati, who is never told about the past life of her mother. Her relatives give only one view of her mother, but she wants to know the real Virmati. The novel opens with the frank declaration of Ida, the narrator: "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she was gone, and I started at the fire that rose from her shrivelled body, dry-eyed, leaden, half dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept" (*Difficult Daughters*, 1). Ida undertakes a journey to know her mother's past. The name Ida implies a new state of consciousness, a fresh beginning. Ida wants to be different from her mother. Ida wants to live by her own terms. Ida protests at her mother. The agony and anger of Ida is captured by Manju Kapur in the epilogue of the novel:

I grew up struggling to be a model daughter. Pressure, pressure to perform day and night. My father liked me looking pretty, ...My mother tightened her reins on me as I grew older; she said it was for my own good. As a result, I am constantly looking for escape routes. Of course, I made a disastrous marriage.... I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society.

For long periods I was engulfed by melancholy, depression, and despair. I would lie in bed for hours, unable to sleep, pitying myself for all I didn't have, blaming my mother, myself. Now her shadow no longer threatens me. Without the hindrance of her presence, I can sink into her past and make it mine....

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 anymore. (*Difficult Daughters*, 279-280)

Virmati's daughter, Ida is strong and clear headed. She belongs to the post- independence and post- modern generation. She shows her resistance when she breaks up her marriage with her husband and her forced abortions are also a sign of termination of her marriage. Ida, thus, frees herself from male domination and power and the conventional social structures of society which limit women of her inner capabilities. She had the courage and strength that Virmati lacked. Thus, Ida's resistance and revolt are more constructive and successful. She leads a free and relaxed life than her mother. New generation defies the traditions, conventions and taboos of the old generation. Virmati defies her mother Kasturi and Ida defies Virmati. In the novel *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati is a difficult daughter of Kasturi while Ida is a difficult daughter of Virmati.

A Married Woman offers fascinating glimpses into the workings of a woman's mind as she struggles to come out from a patriarchal world. The female protagonist, Astha revolts against age old customs and traditions and the institution of marriage. Manju Kapur opens the novel with the description of Astha. "Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear. She was her parents' only child. Her education, her character, her health, her marriage, these were their burdens" (*A Married Woman*, 1). She is brought up in traditional and homely surroundings. Her mother often declares, "When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?" (*A Married Woman*, 1). Astha goes into many romantic relationships before marriage and finally she gets married. She had everything she could ask for- a dutiful husband, children and comfortable surroundings. But she ends up having a lesbian relationship with a much younger woman, Pipee, the widow of a political activist. Astha resistance finally throws off the fear instilled in her by her parents, her husband and society. In a culture where individualism

and protest have often remained alien ideas, and marital bliss and the woman's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. In depicting the inner subtlety of a woman's mind, Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female psyche.

Conclusion

Manju Kapur has freed the women protagonist from the shackles of suffering to daring and bold women from the shackled suffering women to daring and amazing women. She has given her protagonists a new image of boldness, her female characters revolt, resist and negotiate for their independence and finally find a respectable place in society. The characters are mentally advanced be it Virmati and Ida in *Difficult Daughters* or Astha and Pipeelika in *A Married Woman*. The female protagonists who hail from middle class resist and challenge the existing sociocultural patriarchal system. We see them as educated, modern, intelligent, bold and assertive. They even try to transcend the social and gender hierarchy by demolishing it. Even though they try to transcend the social hierarchy by demolishing or transcending it.

Virmati, Ida, Shakuntala, Swarnalata and Chhoti in *Difficult Daughters* show a movement from subjugation to liberation, from restraint to emancipation. Astha and Pipeelika in *A Married Woman* begin a lesbian relationship that breaks all conventional sexual norms of the society. The women in the novels of Manju Kapur are the personification of the 'new woman'. They are projected as convention-bashing new women, subverting the patriarchal conventions and transcending social taboos in society.

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