

Oppressive Forces of Feminine Psyche in Manjukapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

In literature, psyche stands for the 'human soul', 'mind' or the inner world of a person. An individual's psyche is influenced by both internal and external forces. In Greek mythology, Psyche represents a woman's search for authentic personal growth. Women encounter several social, economic, cultural and political issues which affect the psyche and its development and as a result women struggle to achieve psychic harmony. The inward turmoil and turbulence suggest what happens to them on the external world. Women and psyche have always been the subject matter in Indian Literature. The present endeavor focuses on the oppressive forces of feminine psyche in ManjuKapur's *Difficult Daughters*. ManjuKapur depicts the psyche of women living under patriarchy tends to be the psyche of oppression in her novel. Kapur, through the novel, has stressed the limitation of women's lives and their endless struggle with oppressive forces like the evils of patriarchy and social construct. She openly criticizes the redundant patriarchal values and exhibits an uninhibited expression to the feelings and desires of women. Kapur strives to bring a new social order and harmony which is compatible to the social, physical and psychic well-being of women in general.

Key-Words: Psyche, oppression, patriarchy, aspiration, isolation, identity

In literature, psyche denotes 'the human soul', 'mind' or the inner world of a person. Borrowed from the Greek word 'psyche' during the sixteenth century, psyche means the mind, soul, or invisible stimulating object which occupies the physical body. It is responsible for one's thought and feelings and it is the vital force in the behavior of a person. In other words, psyche

denotes to the psychological, mental and emotional elements that make us a human being. According to Carl Jung, it is the totality of the human mind, amalgamation of conscious and unconscious. An individual's psyche is influenced by both internal and external forces.

Psyche originally means the Greek goddess of soul. According to Greek mythology, Psyche represents a woman's search for authentic personal growth. In broad spectrum, the female psyche conforms to the social order defined by men. Women encounter several social, economic, cultural and political issues which are affecting the psyche and its development. As a result women struggle to achieve psychic harmony. Women and psyche have always been the subject matter in Indian Literature. Indian fiction always depicted the gender relations and gender differences prevalent in the society. The existing Indian writers are candidly pointing and assessing the conventional ideas and beliefs about women. Particularly the women writers are giving unrestrained articulation and expression to the feelings, aspirations and longings of women. They are focusing the inner world of women with a full range of female experience in order to explore the unexplored torn psyche. A woman's psyche is constructed on her experiences of life. Other features like her individual circumstances and society's anticipations related to age, class, etc. also restraints her. The inward turmoil and turbulence suggest what happens to them on the external world.

The women writers in their effort to elevate the consciousness of woman, probes into the female psyche and brings about the full range of the experiences of women. The psyche of women living under patriarchy tends to be the psyche of oppression. Due to the oppressive forces of the society and family they suffer from internal conflicts but they do not surrender to the will of the family and try to assert their individuality. Manju Kapur holds a unique place in the modern Indian novel in English. She is a versatile genius who has presented the intangible realities of life, the unknown facts concerning the innermost depths of woman psyche and an individual journey for meaning in life.

Kapur, in her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998), challenges the patriarchal anarchy, social organization and control mechanism. She, through the novel, has stressed the limitation of women's lives and their ceaseless struggle with oppressive forces. These oppressive forces are

nothing but the problems that a woman has to face in her life: male authority, the evils of patriarchal social set up, the double standards for the male and the female, male dogmatism, infidelity of the life partner, cultural constraints, etc. These forces disturb the harmony of the feminine psyche. According to Anita Myles the oppression of women is a psychological event. She says, “The oppression of women is not only a material reality, originating in economic conditions, but also a psychological phenomenon – how men and women perceive one another” (2-3). Kapur focuses on the inner most experiences of women and openly criticizes the redundant patriarchal values and exhibits an uninhibited expression to the feelings and desires of women.

Man is considered as the head of the family in the patriarchal social setup. Irigary considers that patriarchy weakens the female bond particularly the mother-daughter relationship. “This relationship was destroyed to establish an order linked to private property and to the transmission of possessions within male genealogy. Such a system ensured that property and children belonged to the same genealogy” (30). In this realistic context, *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur’s first venture is weaved around Punjabi family consisting women of three generations: Kasturi, Vimati and Ida. The novel is set at the backdrop of the turbulent years of the World War II and the partition of Indian in 1947. Kasturi is depicted at the backdrop of the pre-independence period where India’s freedom is restricted and regulated by a foreign power. Likewise, Kasturi is portrayed in her own subjugated life where her freedom and individuality is repressed by the forces of patriarchy. Vimati’s character is pictured at the backdrop of the independence period where India is struggling and revolting against the colonizer. Vimati rebels and fights against that society which refuses to recognize her unconventionality. Ida represents the post independent period. She establishes her independent status as a divorced and unconventional woman but still she feels herself as unfulfilled and unsatisfied. The oppression faced by three women in the three stages is potent and poignant.

The main thread of the novel revolves around Vimati who battles for independence from conventions and taboos that engulfs her. The tale of Vimati is the tale of struggle of a woman against the patriarchal society. The tale is narrated through Ida, her daughter after the death of Vimati. Vimati, the eldest of eleven children looks after her siblings as their second mother.

Kapur writes, “trapped in the house, moaned about ruthlessly” (DD 11). She silently watches her weak, ailing mother harassed by constant child birth. Kasturi, Virmati’s mother is always ill or bedridden due to constant pregnancy and child birth. Kasturi used to spend the entire day either cooking in the kitchen or performing ritualistic ‘*havan*’ or ‘*sandhya*’. So she could not imagine a future for Virmati other than being a wife and mother like herself.

Kasturi, living in pre-independent India is unable to question against the institution of family that have been followed before her by the numerous female generations. Through the centuries, the Hindu woman in literature has been based on the mythic models from Ramayana and the Puranas. Patterned on these models, the woman is often passive, accepting the dynamic role of the men in her life. Therefore, she is doomed to a life of constant child bearing and mundane domesticity. She is deprived of even the desire for self-fulfillment. Her objectification is complete to such an extent that even her right to question her own status as child bearer is denied to her, “I will die if I have another child” (DD 8) said Kasturi desperately. Women have been kept in the capacity of silence. It is a forced passivity. The language that Kasturi speaks is a language based on male ideology.

Virmati’s relationship with her mother is most challenging and problematic. As she is the eldest of the eleven children, eventually she becomes the second mother to her ten siblings. She has to do the most oppressive daily chores and without any reason her mother often abuses her. Kapur states, “The language of feeling had never flowed between them, and this threat was meant to express all her thwarted yearnings. . . Why was her daughter so restless all the time? In a girl, that spelt disaster (DD 11-12). Viranti has to fight against the patriarchal oppression and the power of her mother who is equally oppressive. The conflict is based on gender differences and ineffable feeling.

When Virmati falls in love with the professor Harish Chandra who is already married, she confronts her mother with the proposal of not marrying Indrajit and wants her to continue her education. Virmati regards that marriage is an obstacle in her pursuit of education as it takes away the woman’s freedom and subordinates her to male domination. But Kasturi holds the view that education means rejection of tradition. After the unsuccessful attempt of suicide by Virmati,

Kasturi become the cruelest. Virmati, silently endured the harsh humiliation and cruel treatment of her mother who grabbed her head by the hair and banged it against the wall and locked her in the godown. “Virmati’s is a fight both against the engulfing power of the mother as well as the oppressive forces of patriarchy symbolized by mother figure” (Rishi 93) .

In spite of many hurdles and problems, Virmati finally succeeds in marrying the professor, yet she does not secure any space for herself in the family. Ganga, the professor’s first wife and his mother force Virmati to lead a suffocating life with in the four walls of the house. Virmati had an unsuccessful marriage life marked with misery and disapproval and plunged in melancholy, depression and desolation. After her marriage with the professor, Virmati struggled for existence. No one in the professor’s family, his wife Ganga, his mother Kishori Devi, his children Chhotti and Giridhar is willing to accept Virmati in their family fold. Thus Virmati always looked “alone in a place where her pariah status was announced with every averted look” (DD 198). Harish Chandra enjoys the company of both Ganga and Virmati. Ganga fulfills his every day needs and Virmati satisfies his academic need.

Ganga , the first wife of Harish, is a woman according to her mother-in-law, Kishori Devi “ female inheritance . . . Adjust, compromise, adapt” (DD 256). Harish’s mother teachers her to draw solaces from tradition and says, “Duty is our guide and our strength. How can we control the things outside us?” (DD 211). She is a perfect woman and she knows her duties well; “that was her right, to be able to cook for her family, to be left in peace to fuss over the eating habits, to cater to their likes and dislikes” (DD 73). She did not allow Virmati to do any work for the professor and she did everything to assert her right as a socially approved wife. The professor has got a male-dominance in the house. He is the authoritative person of the house and no body openly questioned his statement. But by bringing Virmati as a second wife, he betrays Ganga’s trust, her submissive docility and traditional modesty. Through Ganga Kapur highlights the issue of woman’s predicament in the male- dominated society. It brings immense mental torture to Ganga who is punished for no fault of hers. The brutal patriarchal force gives massive agony to the psyche of women like Ganga.

Kapur seems to point out that the present social system fulfills the needs and interests of men regardless of women's basic needs and happiness as the system itself is man-made. Ganga is dependent and bound by tradition, so she is completely helpless to establish her authority as a married woman. Even for Virmati, the marriage with the professor brings only frustration, humiliation and dejection. The passive and suppressed position of Virmati has been shown in the episode in which Virmati suggests the name Bharathi, for their newly-born daughter. The name is dismissed as inappropriate by the professor.

“‘Bharathi,’ suggested Virmati as name.

‘No,’ said Harish.

‘No? But why? I thought with the birth of our country. . .

Harish's voice rose hysterically, and the girl was named Ida” (DD 276). Virmati is fully aware of the fact that life in the patriarchal setup is really difficult. She feels that she is out of place, an outcaste among all women. Janet Remillard rightly says that, “A woman who sacrifices ‘self’ for the sake of love is led on a desperate journey to the brink of suicide, abortion, loss of childhood and no sense of belonging” (40).

As a second wife to Harish, Virmati has lost all sense of identity. She meditates whether this isolation would continue till the end of her life. She is blamed when her father dies. When her grandfather Lala Diwan Chand dies too, she feels a hardening round her heart. Both of them died without forgiving her. After this her condition becomes wretched: “It was almost as though she had gone mad. Forgotten who she was, who she was married to, and all her obligations” (DD 240). Virmati's daughter Ida leads a free life, but her inner anxiety is similar to that of her mother. Ida says, “I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of a society” (DD 279). Kapur highlights the mental agony of women in the power politics of patriarchy and culture.

Kapur deftly describes the power structure of patriarchal society by showing the oppression of women from 1904 to the present day. Kasturi, Virmati, Ida and Ganga are oppressed by the social structure and each one turns out to be an instrument of oppression for

others. The women are subjugated not only by the social construct but also their own mother does the same. The women are powerless in this social set up but are powerful when it comes to oppressing a woman. All the religious and philosophical opinions firmly establish the fact that a woman has been considered as a secondary character. She was never considered as an independent human being. Suffering and subjugation still force her to lead a confined life.

ManjuKapur is aware of all the shades of the suffering of Indian middle-class women. By focusing on the aspirations and tribulations of women in *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur provides a deep insight into the psychic mind of the women in general. She brings to foreground all the forces existing in the society that hinders the inner harmony of women. They are physically and mentally shackled by principles of male supremacy and social constraints. She challenges the gender stereotypes through her fictional world and makes an attempt to redefine the conventional image of women. In all her novels, the women tried their best to come out of their confining. Her fictional world is filled with the cries of these baffled women who find themselves oscillating between aspiration and deprivation. Kapur tries to destroy the subsisting myths related to women and strive to bring a new social order and harmony which is compatible to the social, physical and psychic well-being of women.

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