Manju Kapur’s Virmati in Difficult Daughters: A New Woman

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The New Woman was a feminist ideal that emerged in the late 19th century. A new woman pushed against the limits set by male-dominated society, especially as modelled in the plays of Norwegian Henrik Ibsen (1828 - 1906). "The New Woman sprang fully armed from Ibsen's brain," according to a joke by Max Beerbohm. The first example of the ‘new woman’ is Nora of Ibsen’s play, A Doll’s House. But even Nora is not a ‘new woman’ until the last part of the play. Before that she is a conventional house wife accepting the moral code for nineteenth century women. She also accepts her role which the man – made social system has set for her. She becomes a ‘new woman’ where she tells her husband, Helmer “Let us sit down and discuss” (Ibsen 85). This is the moment when she has suddenly developed a new insight in to the man-made social order and the position of a woman in it. She suddenly sees her role as a woman, a wife, a mother in a new perspective which is condensed in a single phrase ‘A Doll’s House’ and she leaves this ‘doll’s house’ to discover herself yet this insight only covers the domain of the social order which the ‘new woman’ of our study go beyond the consideration of the social order and their position in it.

A major contemporary issue faced by all the societies is the question of woman. In West and in India she is seen to launch herself in the quest for her identity. So it is the incumbent on sociologists, artists and critics to focus on feminist perceptions and major issues relating to woman- her awakening to the new realization of her individuality, she is breaking away with the traditional image, her relation with man and her aims and objectives in the contemporary society.

The woman today has her own quest for self-discovery and self fulfillment. The male, as representative of the patriarchal society has, at last, been jerked off the centre of woman’s gravitation. Woman is preparing now to be her own gravitational force, beyond the pull of patriarchy. The woman in contemporary society have become aware of the fact that the inferior position accorded to them is not pre-ordained. Women are trying to emancipate themselves from subordination. In this rapidly progressing world they are redefining their proper place. They have revolted against their exploitation, victimization and marginalization. They are questioning the sexual politics in which they are always victimized. They are busy reshaping themselves in a more humanistic mould, emphasizing thereby the need for a thorough re-examination in depth of marriage and man-woman relationship for a better understanding and sharing of mutual love and respect.

A woman is ‘new’ if her basic concerns are deeper than merely seeking equality with men, asserting her own personality and insisting upon her own rights as a woman. Seen from this angle, even a rebel or a revolutionary woman cannot be called a ‘new woman’ on this account alone. The women is ‘new’ when she analyses and reflect upon her position essentially as a woman in the scheme of things which includes the social, moral and spiritual fields.

The emergence of the ‘New Woman’ in Indian society and its concept in the Indian English novel has to be seen as a noticeable, if welcome, change. The significance of the woman awakening into a new world around her has not really made much difference in her realization of her place and position, in Indian society. But then, it is at least a new realization of her place and position, her individually and a sense of urgency about her rights as a human being. The early image of woman in Indian English Novel as a silent sufferer, an incarnation of patience and endurance, the main source of sustenance of Indian family life and culture, has gradually been eroded. The male, as representative of the patriarchal society has, at last, been jerked off the centre of woman’s gravitation. Woman is preparing now to be her own gravitational force, beyond the pull of patriarchy.

The Indian women novelists are an interesting group of professionals, housewives, and mothers, yet a force to reckon with. The primary task of Indian Women novelists has been, to attempt an
imaginative mediation between the traditional forces of Indian Patriarchal joint family system and the new demands of modernity. They further seek to reconstruct the socio-cultural values from a women’s view point.

Among the writers who have portrayed the “new woman” who is inclined to take the ‘road not taken’, and walking on their ‘on road’, Manju Kapur undoubtedly arrests attention. She is one Indian writer who prefers reality to magic realism and recreates an intimate world. Her first novel Difficult Daughters received huge international acclaim. This novel was published in 1998. It was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best first book (Eurasia) and was a number one best seller in India.

The purpose of this paper is to study Virmati, the female protagonist of Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters as a ‘New Woman’. We see the budding of new women in Manju Kapur’s heroines, who do not want to be rubber dolls for others to move as they will? Defying patriarchal notions that enforce women towards domesticity, they assert their individuality and aspire self-reliance through education. They nurture the desire of being independent and leading lives of their own. They want to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond a husband and children. They are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. All protagonists know they cannot depend on others to sort out the domestic situation and proceed to tackle it on their own. Do these heroines blossom into new women in the real sense? Though they dare to cross one patriarchal threshold, they are caught into another, where their free spirits are curbed and all they do is adjust, compromise and adapt. The conflict between the roots of imagination and sensibility is brought out well in the novels.

Difficult Daughters is the story of a young woman, named Virmati born in Amritsar into an austere and high minded household. The story tells how she is torn between family duties, the desire for education and elicits love. This is a story of sorrow, love and compromise. The major portion deals with Virmati’s love affairs with professor and emerging her as a new woman. Story is full of Virmati’s assertion against her mother and other family members. This is a simple story, movingly told. Kapur sets the scene in pre partition Amritsar and Lahore, and she recreates that time and the locales beautifully. The whole novel shows Virmati emerging as a New Woman who opposes her all family and continues her study against the wishes of her family. Here the Professor Harish who loves Virmati could not marry her due to the social boundation. But at last Harish’s friend poet performs the essential marriage rituals. Thus Harish eventually marries Virmati, installs her in his home (alongside his furious first wife) and helps her towards further studies in Lahore, is a small consolation to her scandalised family or even to Virmati, who finds that the battle for her own independence has created irrevocable lines of partition and pain around her.

Difficult Daughters is a skilful, enticing first novel by an Indian writer who prefers reality to magic realism. This book offers a completely imagined, aromatic, complex world, a rare thing in the first novels. The story begins with Ida’s narration about her mother Virmati who has passed away. Ida recalls her mother’s sayings what she had said before her death that there should not be any shor shaar and her eyes, heart, kidneys and other useful organs should be donated. But here Ida observes all rituals contrary to her mother wishes. On this inauspicious day Ida’s relatives console her and make her realise that how they are only her parents and she should visit them occasionally. Ida decides to visit her birth place and she also has a great desire to know about her mother so she boards in a train and reaches without giving any information of her coming. Relatives welcome Ida and Ida tries fully to know each and every aspects of her mother’s life. Now relatives unfold about the life of Virmati and highlight even the minutest things about her. They narrate that being the eldest daughter she had to run the house and look after us. We depended on her although she was only our sister but she acted very bossy. We were scared of her. She was so keen to study bap re. First F.A. then B.A. on the top of that. Even after her marriage she went for an M.A. to Government College, Lahore, she studied more than any other girl in this family and Harish Bhai Shahib – your father – was very particular about education. ‘But why do you want all this? What is past is past, forget about it. Eat, have another para. But, have another parantha, you are so thin, my relatives gave me one view of my mother, I wanted another.’ (Difficult Daughters 3). All this was narrated by my relatives but I wanted another view of my mother said Ida. So relatives narrate the whole life aspects before Ida and the real story begins.

Virmati is the eldest daughter of eleven children of Kasturi and Suraj Prakash. One after another Kasturi gives birth to children and thus the whole burden of household work increases over Virmati, being the eldest daughter. By the time Virmati was ten, she was as attuned to signs of her mother’s pregnancies as Kasturi herself. At times Virmati yearns for affection but Kasturi gets irritated and pushes her away. By the time Virmati was sixteen and Kasturi becomes again pregnant. She was worried and unhealthy to give birth so she is sent to Dalhousie. Now Virmati was seventeen and studying for her F.A. exams. She has to go with her mother to look after her & other children. The conversation between Virmati and Kasturi shows Virmati’s assertion. ‘I’m tired of knitting and sewing’ flared Virmati. ‘Besides, I’m here to look after you’. ‘I can look after myself, why did you bring me if you don’t need me, Mati?’ said Virmati, with a thick lump in her throat. ‘What is all this nonsense? In Amritsar you were bad tempered because you were busy and tired, here you are bad-tempered because you are idle, retorted Kasturi. ‘May be I should go back to Amritsar Pitaji can take me the next time he comes’. (DD 12). The language of feeling had never flowed between them, and this throat was meant to express
all her thwarted yearnings. Lajwanti makes a plan to come to Dalhousie and succeeds in it. She also invites her daughter Shakuntala who has been studying in Lahore.

Virmati is highly influenced by Shakuntala who is having royal manner and having her own views and wishes to run her own life. Shakuntala’s visit plants the seeds of aspiration in Virmati which is her first step towards being a New Woman. At Shakuntala’s departure Virmati clungs to her. The present speech shows the inner planning of Virmati. ‘May be I will also one day come to Lahore, Pehnji’, she wept. ‘I wish I too could do things. But I am not clever’ – ‘Arre,’ exclaimed her cousin patting her on the back, ‘times are changing and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?’ Why not, indeed, thought Virmati looking at her, almost breathless with admiration and love. (DD 18) Images of Shakuntala Pehnji floating through her head, Shakuntala Pehnji who having done her M.Sc. in Chemistry, has gone about tasting the wine of freedom. Virmati decides to become like her cousin.

Living in Dalhousie Virmati finishes her class VIII and has been sent for higher studies to Startford College in the Civil Lines. She takes admission in fine Art degree but due to her home duties she could not do well and fails. The following speech shows the assertion of Virmati ‘Mati’ she said to her mother that evening. ‘I’ve failed.’ I told you it was too much for you’, said her mother, busy feeding the young children. It’s not too much for me’, protested Virmati, ‘Not if I have time to study’. ‘Ever since we’ve come back, you have been making difficulties’, said Kasturi crossly. Kasturi scolds her saying that leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first. By this time Virmati seventeen, her mother worries about her marriage. The boy is a canal engineer and doing well. Meanwhile Kasturi continues sickly. The temporary respite in her ill health that the hill sojourn has brought about was soon over. Her father-in-law Lala Diwan Chand, could see that Kasturi had not benefited as much as he had hoped and his son is still anxious about his wife. There is a great dispute over the partition of property. Eventually it is decided to shift on Lepel Griffin Road. Lajwanti observes this as a golden opportunity to detach herself, once and for all, from her sister in law. She demands a separate living quarters. She succeeds but here she feels lonely and plans for having tenants. Harish Chandra is an ‘English Professor, hires Lajwanti’s home on Lepel Griffin Road. Soon Professor’s wife & Virmati’s family becomes friendly & their hospitably opens the doors of entrance. Now Virmati passes her F.A. & wants to study further. Although her parents thinks that she has gone for enough & her fiance’s parents thinks that she is already well qualified to be the wife of their son, the canal engineer. They do not want too much education in their daughter-in-law, even though times are changing. By this time Virmati is serious about her education, and due to the death of the father of canal engineer, marriage is postponed. So Virmati enters AS College but her mother is worried about her daughter’s education & seeks advice of Professor’s wife. She assures her that Virmati’s future is safe in AS College, Professor teacher and is highly impressed by the beauty of Virmati. By then, the Professor’s desire to possess her extended to his heart and mind. Now Ida asks to Kailashnath Mama about the college where her father used to teach and shows a keen desire to visit there. They do so.

Next chapter starts with the ------ decision of Virmati not to marry and wants to continue her education. Though living in a traditional family, Virmati still shows the courage to tell everybody about her decision which is bound to win the displeasure of everybody. She has done her B.A. This decision creates a storm in the family and she is beaten and scolded by Kasturi. But professor insists her on being firm and assures that one day they will be together. Professor arranges a regular meeting in his friend’s home. This process continues and finally she makes up her mind not to marry Inderjeet and becomes mentally disturbed. She could not find any solution and marriage time is gradually coming near. She decides to drown herself in Tarsikka so she leaves home at late afternoon and drowned herself in Tarsikka so she leaves home at late afternoon and drowned herself but is saved by Lala Diwanchand’s servant and returns at Lepel Griffin Road. Everybody enquires the reason and finally she declares that she does not like the boy and wants to study further. So marriage is settled with Indumati, the second daughter. Virmati is locked in the godown and marriage is performed with Indumati. Virmati and Professor continues their process through letters. But gradually Virmati thinks that all these activities are nothing except a fraud thing. So she writes him not to write further more after this. Now family plans to sent Virmati to Lahore for further studies. Kasturi has to go with her for getting her admit in RBSL College. Shakuntala who has been a source of inspiration for Virmati, visits her regularly. Professor’s course of meeting with Viru has yet not stopped and during this period she becomes pregnant. She becomes restless. She has already forbade Harish not to visit until her exam of BT not finishes. So there is no solution how to send the news of her pregnancy to Harish. Exams are approaching to her and she involves herself in such a matter. She remains mentally disturb. So with the help of Swarnalata, her roomate she gets abortion. Now she feels much better than before. While she sits for learning, the words of Professor echo in her mind and she could not concentrate her mind on study. So she could not do well in her exams. After completing B.T. she leaves Lahore and reaches home.

Virmati decides that she will never meet Harish. Virmati is offered the principalship of a college, but Kasturi does not like to sent her. The Diwan Sahib wants an answer before leaving Amritsar and question of Virmati’s future has to be discussed with all the elders of the family. It is decided that Virmati will return to Nahan with him. Kailash will also go along, look things over and settle her in. Virmati settles there and soon Professor also
visits her at night. This is the first time they have spent the whole night together but this visit is discovered by Diwan Sahib, and he calls Virmati ‘Beti’ he started ‘you know I am like a father to you. Your parents sent you
here on my recommendation. I am responsible for you to the Maharani as well as to them’. Now Virmati decides to
leave and goes to Shantineketan. At Delhi, Virmati has to wait seventeen hours before the connecting train to
Calcutta. She knew Harish’s friend Poet lived in the Civil Lines, and she decides to wait there. He is already
aware of their intimate relationship. So he does not let her go and calls Harish immediate. Harish receives his
friend’s urgent telegram. He comes and poet performs all the rituals of marriage. Professor with Virmati returns
home. During her conjugal life Virmati feels that it would have been better if she had not been married with
Harish. Harish believes that everything will become normal with the passes of time. After sometime Virmati
gives birth to a girl named Ida. The novel ends with the birth of Ida. This girl Ida grows and asks to her relatives
more & more about her mother. Her relatives especially her Kailash Mama narrates the whole aspects of
Virmati to Ida. The whole story shows a traditional girl growing into a New Woman.
Kapur’s fiction stresses on the women need for self fulfilment autonomy, self-realisation, independence,
individuality and self-actualisation. “I am interested”, says Kapur, “In the lives of women, whether in the
political arena or in domestic spaces. One of the main pre occupations in all my books is how women manage to
negotiates both inner and outer spaces in their lives-what sacrifices do they have to make in order to keep the
home fires burning and at what cost to their personal lives do they find some kind of fulfilment outside the
home” (Manju). It is against this background the fictional world of Kapur needs to be studied. She does not want
her protagonists to be solitary weepers but to take decisions and face the consequences. Her ‘new woman’ is
silent no more and refuses to be a victim but in the process of refusal she still has to face indignities and
complaint.
But the question is – does Virmati blossom inta a ‘New Woman’ in the real sense? No, inspire her revolt against
the family and firm stand against the Professor, she succumbs to his implorations and passions in Lahore. She
had come to Lahore to broaden her horizons but instead she gets involved in a useless love, doubtful marriage
and unwed pregnancy. She wants to spread her wings like Swarnlata, her roommate who is committed the
’meaningful activities’ regarding the freedom movement and woman emancipation. But Virmati is used by the
Professor. Even when he eventually marries her very reluctantly, she is given a pariah status.
Kapur unmasks the reacting mind of Virmati who is upset by the betrayal of her lover; her agonized mind is
revealed in her utterances of the following lines. “Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of
shame, wondering what people will say if they find me out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace
and…. Why?” She refers to Swarnalata’s statement about this selfishness and dominance of men over women.
Swarnalata states “Men take advantage of women”. (DD 149) Virmati holds the conventional view of the purity
and chastity of woman’s body. “She was his for life, whether her ever married or not”. She could never look
elsewhere, never entertain another choicé”. (DD 177)
Thus, Virmati dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is caught into another, where her free spirit is curbed
and all she does is adjust, compromise and adapt. She is a loser whose acts totally alienate her from her family
and she fails to create a space for herself for which she had been striving all alone. Perhaps it is this inability of
Virmati to strike independent roots and grow and forces Ida to remark, ‘the one thing I had wanted was not to be
like my mother.’ (DD 1)
The concluding lines of the novel reiterate Ida’s rejection of Virmati not as a mother but as a woman. ‘This book
weaves a connection between any mother and me’ each word a brick in a mansion I made with head and my
heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me. Do not haunt me anymore.(DD 280) Ida who grew up struggling to
be a model daughter, does not have the heart to reject Virmati, the mother but her head, the rational, rejects her
as a woman, after having an insight into Virmati’s past.

References
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