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The Clash Between Modernity Versus Traditional Norms Reflects in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*: A Critical Study

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Abstract:

Difficult Daughters is one of the most popular novels of Manju Kapur. This novel describes the conflict between modernity and traditional values. Virmati is the heroine of the novel and she possesses her own aspirations. She keeps on her studies against the wishes of her parents. She has a strong willpower to face the challenges of various measures of patriarchy and opposes her parents. Virmati is inspired by Shakuntala's ideas. Shakuntala is modernist in her thoughts. Like Shakuntala, Virmati wants to get education and to do a job while her family is an obstacle on her way. Swarnlata, Shakuntla and Ida stand for modernity while Kasturi, Ganga and Lajwanti stand for traditional customs; and they follow the patriarchal norms. Kasturi thinks that a girl should get married and she should fulfill her household duties. However, Virmati rejects the idea of marriage. She has grown up seeing her mother's restricted world and miserable situation where woman is not allowed to be capable of being something than a wife. Ida is Veermati's daughter. Ida is strong and clearheaded. She breaks her marriage bond and she becomes free from patriarchal norms. She is not ready to compromise with her freedom. Ida does not want to adjust like her mother and she wants to live her separate identity.

Methodology and Approach: The paper aims to highlight the conflict between modern views and traditional norms. Manju Kapur depicts the picture of an Indian tradition family that stands against the modernization of woman. Shakuntala is Virmati's cousin. She is embodiment of modernity. Kasturi does not like her ideas. For Kasturi, marriage and family are more important than the studies. Kasturi is the symbol of tradition and patriarchy. In her novels Manju Kapur describes the Indian women who struggle for their lives under the oppressive mechanism of

narrow minded society. She depicts the domestic domination, physical abuse, want of personal freedom of the woman. The rituals and the traditions are the obstacles on way of the individual freedom.

Outcome- '*Difficult Daughters*' presents the story of a young woman named, Virmati, who fights against the orthodox; and she has strong will to get education and she rejects the marriage proposal arranged by the family. The central portion of the novel deals Virmati's love affair with her neighbour, Professor Harish Chandra. The rest part of her life treats fighting struggle for freedom. The episode of her love with Professor unsettles her and she moves to Lahore. She longs for her status and social recognition in the society. Professor fails to accept Virmati socially; but he continues to possess his sexual relations with her. Virmati has to take refuge in Shantiniketan. Professor understands the delicacy of occasion and he marries Virmati in haste. Virmati has to face many challenges before and after her marriage with Professor Harish Chandra.

Keywords: Traditional customs, modernization, individual freedom, marriage, family, conflict, independence, struggle, patriarchy, new women.

Introduction-

Manju Kapur is one the most famous contemporary Indian English women novelists whose primary concern is to draw the attention of the society towards various measures of patriarchy. She has the power to captivate the attention of the readers to the end of the novels. Like Jane Austan, she has written limited novels. Her novels are full of the stories of feminist struggles against oppression, exploitation and other social biases. She opposes the gender politics of society because due to this gender politics, a woman has to struggle to establish her position in the society. There was gender inequality between men and women in the past time. Her novels deal with the new women who oppose the male dominated society. These women are allowed to live within the four walls of their homes. They are not allowed to go out from the home for higher education. They are not allowed to do job. As a woman writer, Manju Kapur possesses the firm belief in the equality of gender. She advocates the rights for the women. Her protagonists demand for equality in the society. They revolt against the orthodox social taboos. Like Mary Wollstonecraft, she thinks that woman is the equal partner in the journey of Life.

The origin of the term or phrase ‘New Woman’ is not clear, however, it is regarded that it entered in English language in 1894. It was used in two essays in the North American Review by Sarah Grand and Mariae Rame. According to Sarah ‘the New Woman’ refers to a modern, independent woman, who craves the radical and social changes.’ Modernism is a general tendency to break with the traditional norms of living. The concept of modernism originated mainly from Europe and America. Traditional and ritual norms were hindrance on the individual freedom. Social institutions like marriage, family ties, norms of chastity and sanctity were regarded as the prison for personal freedom and development. Thus, we can say that modernism is a style of art, culture, and living that uses different methods and ideas from the past. The feminists use the concept of ‘New Woman’ to challenge the restrictions that society places on women. Beauvoir says that there is no pre-determined female nature or essence. It is believed in the Second Sex that women are bound to traditional roles such as wives and mothers. Beauvoir observes: *“For him (man), she (woman) is the sex-obsolete sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated concerning man and not he concerning her. She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the Subject, he is the absolute, and she is the other.”*(16)

Manju Kapur has portrayed the educated characters in her novels. She herself believes in the proverb, ‘Educate a man, you educate a man; but educate a woman, you educate a family.’ She has expressed her valuable thoughts on education, liberty, fundamental rights and feminism concerns. The novel *‘Difficult Daughters’* depicts the need of education for every one without discrimination. There is a conflict between Virmati and her mother. In the novel *‘A Married Woman’* Manju Kapur says that every N. G. O. must work for education of the children. In *‘The Immigrant’* she says that the opportunities should be given to the women to further education. Education plays an important role in the development of women because it leads them for free thinking. The novelist regards that only education makes aware the women for their rights. Virmati has the inner conflict of tradition and modernism. She desires to be independent. She thinks education as a tool to achieve her identity. She is influenced by her cousin, who is independent, affiant and assertive. Virmati wants to study more and to do job. Her mother does not like her idea for job. She thinks ‘marriage’ as the duty of every girl rather than studies. She says: *‘Hai re, beti! What is the need to do a job? A woman’s shaan is in her home. Now you have studied and worked enough, Shaadi. After you get married, Viru can follow.’*(*Difficult*

Daughters-16) Shakuntala symbolizes modernism. She does not want to marry. She shares her views with Virmati and says:

'These people don't really understand Viru....women are still supposed to marry and nothing else.' (*Difficult Daughters*-17) She encourages Virmati to be independent and the equal rights for women. She symbolizes the 'new woman'. Shakuntala is an educated woman. Kapur remarks:

'Shakuntala's visit planted the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. It was possible to be something other than a wife. Images of Shakuntala Pehanji kept floating through her head, Shakuntala Pehanji who have done her M. Sc. in Chemistry, had gone about tasting wine of freedom. Wine, whereas all Virmati had ever drunk had been creamy milk in winter, designed to deaden the senses with its richness and frothy cool lassi with its lacy bubbles in summer. No, she had to go to Lahore; even she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over.' (*Difficult Daughters*-19)

Kasturi symbolizes the traditional views. She thinks marriage is the ultimate aim of a girl's life and tells her daughter:

'Leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first'.....'Now it is you who are eating my head. What good are Shaku's degrees when she is not settled? Will they look after her when she is old?' (*Difficult Daughters*-20-21)

Manju Kapur presents the conflict between modernity and tradition. Kasturi presents the tradition while Virmati stands for modernity. Kasturi does not like the manners of Shakuntala and she says:

'She is become a mem.' Kasturi said disapprovingly. *'Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family. I have studied too, but my mother would have killed me if I had dared even to want to dress in anything other than was brought for me.'* (*Difficult Daughters*-16-17)

Manju Kapur depicts the true picture of Indian traditional family that opposes the modernization of woman. There is a conflict between the tradition outlook of Kasturi and the modern outlook of Virmati. Like Shawanlata, Virmati hopes to pass her life in a modern way.

She does not like to be a bird is put in the cage; fluttering its wings to break the cage. Virmati engages to canal engineer, Inderjit. She shows great courage to continue her studies. As a girl of strong will, she keeps on struggling for her studies; and she takes admission in A S College. She comes in the contact of Professor Harish Chandra. Harish Chandra is a married person to whom she starts loving. She shares her feelings with Professor. As there is the lack for communication between Virmati and Kasturi; and the result is that she becomes an easy prey to the Professor. She gets involved in illicit love affair with him. She fails to realize that her love affair with a married person can be the reason of sorrow in coming of the time. She takes a strong step and she refuses to get married to Inderjit. She challenges the family customs. She thinks of her happiness only and she goes against the wishes of her family. She finds herself trapped in a net between her love and her duties towards the family. She knows that she could not perform her duty as a responsible sister. She rejects the idea of marriage; and she destroys the good name of her family. Sudhashri remarks:

...Virmati, the protagonist rebels against tradition. Yet she is filled with self-doubt. She pleads for studying further and postponement of her marriage. She attempts suicide, when faced with prospect of marrying the canal engineer. The family brands her to be restless, sick, and selfish and locks her up. (Sudhashri-2005)

Shakuntala is a modern woman who wants to be independent. She passes her life in her own manner. She thinks that time has changed and the whole nation is struggling for freedom. However, she feels sadness that the women are not allowed to do anything outside the household. She is assertive in her outlook and joins rallies and attends political meetings. Virmati is impressed by the ideas of Shakuntala and she goes to Lahore to further studies. She wants to be a teacher like Shakuntala. In Lahore, she resolves to study. She will live within a moral code. She feels guilt why she refuses to marry. She decides to break her relations with Professor. She burns all the love letters that he has sent to her. She decides to leave him to his pregnant wife. She rejects him and she tries to overcome her dejection. She looks freedom and autonomy and she meets Swarnalata, who is her roommate. She thinks to do something besides of marrying. She is politically active and takes part in various conferences and meetings. Like Shakuntala, Swarnalata is a new woman who possesses an individualistic thinking and she says to Virmati:

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, going to jail, wakeup from your stale dream.....most families look upon the marriage of a daughter as a sacred duty—sacred burden. We are lucky we are living in times when women can do something else. Even in Europe the women gain more respect during wartime. Here we have that war and our Satyagraha as well.’(Difficult daughters-151-152)

Swarnalata is a straight forward, advanced and mature thinker. She follows her own opinions independently without fear. She is the mouthpiece of Manju Kapur. Through her, the novelist expresses her own ideas regarding the equality of women in the male-dominated society. Women have played an active role in the Satyagraha movement and other social and political movements related to the women's rights and freedom struggles. Virmati observed that the women were crossing the threshold of the homes and they had become the part of social and political activities. She also attended many conferences and rallies with Swarnalata. She realized that these women were fully devoted to women liberty and freedom of the country. There is an inner conflict in her mind and asks herself—Is she an intellectual like these women who are free and strong? They are taking part in the freedom struggle. The novelist says:

‘Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent in being love. Wasting it. Well, not wasting time, no, of course not, but then how come. I have never a moment for anything else?’ (Difficult daughters-142)

Virmati is an educated woman. She sets up her individual identity in the society. She starts a job of a Headmistress of a Girl's School at Nahan. This job is respectable for her. She has become an independent woman and lives her life like a bird without any problem. It is the happiest time of her life; and she finds a suitable place. She passes her life in teaching the girls happily. She has a positive vision of life. She has adjusted herself in the new atmosphere and she has power to control her life. She is a rebel and opposes the social practices and ends the barriers confining women within the four walls of the homes. She satisfied with her free life but as a woman feels the need of a man in her life; in the same way she wants to fulfill her with love and again she wants to have the physical relationship with Professor. But she has to lose her job when the school authorities come to know about her illicit relationship with the Professor. After

losing her job, she goes to Shantiniketan. She decides to marry the Professor and she becomes his second wife. But she is still a restless as she feels herself alienated in the family. His family does not welcome her and she has to bear insults in his home. Virmati has married to get love, happiness, peace; but it seems that her Life is beyond of happiness. Virmati does get the marital status but she has to face the opposition in the family. But she wants the love of her husband only; and Professor wants an educated wife while His first wife, Ganga, is uneducated wife. Virmati knows the fact very well that as being the second wife of the Professor, she is not accepted in the society and her family is against her marriage with Professor. Her family does not accept this marriage and she has destroyed the name of her family; she is happy with her husband who is her choice and she accepts her marriage as her husband is everything for her, after having married with a married person, she wants to show the society that women can defy the patriarchal dogmatism. She thinks that marriage is the ultimate aim of her life:

'The poet's parents did the Kanya-dan, the seven pheras were taken, the couple pronounced man and wife. As Virmati rubbed her eyes, watering from the smoke, she knew, rather than felt that the burden of the past five years had lifted.' (Difficult Daughters-202)

Her own mother curses her as she has disgraced the family. She has no contact with anybody from her own family except Paro, her younger sister. Finally, she gets success and gets the desired space with the Professor all alone at his home as the whole family shifts to Kanpur. Virmati has freedom. There is none to disturb her. She gets freedom as she has never had so much space around her. She gives birth to a daughter, Ida. At last, she achieves her cherished desire; but what she get, she is regarded as a loser because she has to pay a heavy price for all this. She has to struggle hard but in vain.

Through the character of Harish, the novelist presents the plight of an educated husband. He marries to an illiterate woman, 'Ganga'; who cannot understand his intellectual motives. He admires his wife as she is a good woman. She runs the house to the perfection. She looks after his family as her own. But he tells Virmati that he feels loneliness. He wants to share his interests and thoughts with his wife, Ganga who fails to change herself and she feels pain at his estrangement. This is the reason that he is away from his wife. Through the character of Harish, the novelist criticized the age-old tradition of society and she asks:

'Who is responsible for this state of affairs? Society, which deems that their sons should be educated but not their daughters. Society that decides that children- babies really should be married at the age two and three as we were, As a result, both of us needlessly suffer no fault of ours. I cannot be an adherent to stultifying tradition after this, but Viru, you must make your own mind about these matters. You are intelligent and capable.' (*Difficult Daughters*-103)

Ida is a rebel who revolts against the social conventions. She does not want to be a puppet in the hands of her husband, Prabhakar. He was approved by her parents for marriage. The result is that she got married to him to please her parents and she says: *"Because you thought that Prabhakar was so wonderful and I was glad that in the choice of my husband I have pleased you."* She is strong enough to break up her marriage. Her husband told her for an abortion but Ida is not agreeing for abortion. Ida herself frees from the bond of marriage. Her husband does not want a baby from her. Ida shows more independent nature. She is not prepared to have relation with her husband and she breaks up her marriage. Virmita is not able to go beyond marriage and she has to be the professor's second wife. To Virmita, marriage is the ultimate goal of her life which will perhaps give her sense of security and certainty.

As a new woman, Ida rebels against the deep rooted family norms of male dominated society. She is the product of Post-independence era. She sets up herself as a new independent woman. She transcends the social restrictions and fights for her identity. Kapur presents the difficult relationship between mother and daughter. The first line of the novel depicts the complicated relationship of Ida and her mother, Virmita. Ida says:

'When I grew up I was very careful to tailor my needs to what I knew I could get. That is my female inheritance. That is what she tried to give me. Adjust, compromise, adapt. Assertion, though difficult to establish, is easy to remember.' (*Difficult Daughters*-236)

The novelist discusses on education for women in her novels. She says how education helps women to take job and establish their individuality in society. At present time, the women are getting higher education and professional experience. They have achieved a place in the society on their own. The middle class women have no longer full time profession. They are trying to emulate the upper echelons of society. They have accepted the challenges in life. Virmita has a great passion for higher education and excels other girls in the family. She has an ambition to be a teacher in her life.

Manju Kapur deals with the relationship of mother and daughter in her novels. In the novel “*Difficult Daughters*’ she presents that mothers like Kasturi and Sona who have a conventional ways, in contrast the daughters like Virmati, Shakuntala and Ida have modern norms. They want to pass their lives in the modern manners. The modern women possess their own desires and ambitions. They want to fulfill on their desires. They have the courage to oppose the age-old patriarchal system and they fight for individual liberty and power. In the novel *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur reveals the picture of new women through the female characters like Ida, Shakuntala, Swarna lata and Virmati. Ida wants to explore her mother’s past. The novel begins the following line:

‘*The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother.*’ (*Difficult Daughters*-1)

Manju kapur is a committed writer who has firm faith in women empowerment. As a female writer she has successfully presented the concept of New Women and their struggle to freedom in patriarchal society. They are not afraid to stand alone in the society; they have undergone many transformations. Virmati, Shakuntala Ida and Swranlata are ‘The New Women’. They are assertive, self-reliant progressive women who display the remarkable will power. Her female characters such as Ida, Shakuntala, Swarna Lata and Virmita are bold enough to resist and overcome the social and traditional barriers. They are high-spirited women who fight to be free from the stale social restrictions. They are aware of gender discrimination and women liberty. They raise their voice against social injustice and gender inequality.

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