MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS* :
AN EXPRESSION OF INDIAN FEMINISM

Feminism, like many other 'isms' in the contemporary times, is marked by complexity and plethora of interpretations. There are different schools of thought that have influenced feminist understanding in one way or the other. There are feminist thinkers who propose equality to women according to their different natures and needs based on psycho–sexual considerations. But this argument of different natures is rejected by others as constructed on the basis of essentialist binary logic that propagates hierarchical human relationships. Apart from this, the multiplicity of ideas based on specific cultural, historical and social practices informs the variety and plurality in feminist perspectives. Feminism does not function as an overarching, unitary system, rather it means different things in different national and regional locations. It is pertinent to note that, *''Feminist theory does not privilege any one school of feminist thought over the other. In this, it demonstrates both its dislike of patriarchal hierarchization and its openness in acknowledging, the various trajectories feminists take in order to combat patriarchy'' (Abraham 1998 : 13).* These ideas award greater significance to an awareness of being in a particular historical, cultural framework with a provisional and specific system of thought making sense of and providing legitimacy to different social practices. Different terms such as Liberal, Radical, French, American and British feminism etc. have been used to describe different feminist positions. Moreover, feminism is not limited to a shared female experience (that too varies from woman to woman) rather it comes out to be those movements and alignments of political interests that have sought to challenge and transform traditionally ascribed roles to women. In spite of the diversity informing the feminist thought there is a basic underlying unity that comes forth in the form of deep concern for the problems faced by women as women.

Feminism in its various forms has registered a marked presence in recent critical theory and literary practice throughout the world. Consequently, the contemporary Indian women writers in English have also exhibited a keen interest in depicting different aspects of women's experience. The visible sympathies of these writers and their specific stance vis-a-vis women bring forth their feminist tendencies. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) traces the different stages of women's development in a particular socio-historical context that marks the significance of Indocentric feminist perspective. In the Indian context, feminism is often considered to be a legacy of equality of sexes inherited from the constitutional rights of women, social reformational movements and spread of education. The typical nature of cultural traditions, historical background and the variety present in Indian life itself does not accept a uniform system of thought. The specific nature of the traditional cultural ethos and its long history in India does not conform to the western model of feminism. Therefore, in most of the novels by the contemporary Indian women writing in English we find that, *''They do not promulgate their ideas of change through gender hostility but through social rearrangements that cut across class and gender lines,''* for the, *''Indo-centric methodology cannot use the western feminist base of binary male female gender hostility'' (Lal 1995 : 28).*

Difficult Daughters, is a forceful expression of Indian feminism and presents it as the most suitable feminist position for the women's existence in traditional Indian society. In this novel we find Indian women attracted and allured towards the western thoughts presenting tantalizing possibilities. But their typical social and cultural background exercises a check on them and makes them explore certain means to have a viable space within the available social and cultural context. Virmati, the protagonist in this novel, feels tempted by the way of life adopted by her cousin Shakuntala. Her mother's marginalised existence and miserable plight make her protest

against the system that does not allow women to think of the possibilities of being something else than a wife only. The ultimate fate of a woman that Virmati has been taught and made to believe is marriage. The awareness of the other avenues comes to Virmati when,

> She watched her (Shakutala) ride horses, smoke, play cards and badminton, act without her mother's advice, buy anything she wanted .... above all, she never seemed to question or doubt herself in anything (p.15).

But Virmati does not accept this behaviour as a way of life. It simply provides the much needed impetus for Virmati to make efforts to seek new possibilities of her existence. Here these ideas inspire Virmati to refuse to accept, if not reject completely, the traditional Indian way of women's life examplified in her mother who is reduced to the level of a child–producing machine :

> For the eleventh time it had started, the heaviness in her belly. Morning and evening nausea, bile in her throat while eating, hair falling out in clumps, giddiness when she got up suddenly (p.7).

Instead of thinking about some alternatives and the means to get rid of her present miserable existence Kasturi, Virmati's mother, seeks solace in prayer only, ''She turned to God, so beautiful with his gifts, and prayed ferociously for the miracle of a miscarriage'' (p.7). In spite of all this, she believes it is the duty of every girl to get married. On the other hand, Virmati now starts thinking differently and yearns to have a meaningful and independent selfhood. This leads her to prefer education to other traditionally ascribed roles that compelled women to remain inside the threshold.

The socio-historical background against which Kasturi's experiences and the early part of Virmati's life have been presented is the early 20th century India before Independence. The depiction of the decolonization of India along with the presentation of a gradual growth of an emancipated state of women's existence have been developed into fictional parallels. This juxtaposition of the two different phenomena— one historical and the other cultural—gains immense significance for, *''Decolonization as a metaphor acquires multiple dimensions in postcolonial and postmodernist writings. It is backed by the instinctive need to liberate the self from all traditional structures'' (James 1998 : 104).* In postcolonial terms a sense of unbelonging after the decolonization problematizes women's position in gender specific issue. Virmati's refusal to accept the established social code for women brings new challenges before her. Rejecting the traditionally ascribed norms for women's behaviour she struggles to seek new forms of life free from colonial rule of the patriarchy ordained values. Her defiance of the traditionally accepted social order, instead of bringing joy and freedom, causes a sense of unbelonging and isolation which ultimately finds sublimation in Virmati's marriage to Harish, a married man whom she loves. Virmati's experience in specific socio–historical situation can be considered a significant feminist position. The feminist aspect of Virmati's experience and her understanding of life can be ascertained from her deviation from role expectations and the compulsions that femininity has been conventionally identified with. As the cultural context created in the novel is traditional Indian social set up women's education emerges as a significant form of feminist position. Education, in the social context that finds expression in the novel, was considered a most powerful means of women's emancipation.

An important theme of the novel emerges in the form of Education versus Marriage. Education here is treated as a passport to freedom. Education makes Virmati aware of not only her subjugated existence but also instils confidence in her to go and lead a life of her own at Shantiniketan. Dependence on man, in this case on Harish, gets replaced by a faith in woman's

own ability. On the other hand Harish, a college teacher, is married to an uneducated woman Ganga whose lack of education is a constant source of regret and sorrow for Harish. It is education that brings Harish close to Virmati and facilitates a smooth relationship between them. Harish is attracted towards Virmati not because of her beauty or youth but due to the fact that she has the potential to study and become an ideal companion. The significance of education in man-woman relationship can be observed from Harish's words :

> We have nothing in common. I once wanted to share my interests with my wife, felt her pain at my estrangement from her.... Who is responsible for this state of affairs ? Society which deems that their sons should be educated, but not their daughters (p.95).

The significance of education regarding women's independence is realized even today. It is education that enables women to realize the nature of their subjugation, marginalization and suppression and helps find effective ways to check it and acquire a self-dependent, autonomous self. The following words bring out the significance of education for woman's freedom, *''Now the new education has awakened her real self. As a result of this she has started thinking of independent and self-reliant life. And in order to translate this thinking into reality, she has started fighting against her own timid self as well as man's protectoral shell'' (Barche 1995 : 130).*

The fictional arrangement, constructed in this novel, corresponds with the narrative design that informs the destabilization of cultural stereotypes. It makes the fictional discourse teleological, positional and ideological bound. In order to make the fictional discourse express a specific feminist position in the changing and developing Indian society the narrative is spread more in temporal dimension than in the spatial. It provides the novelist an opportunity to show the different forms of women's existence through time. Ultimately, the social context that Virmati inhabits highlights the requirement of the awareness that comes to women with education. These women are shown gradually learning that, *''To accept unquestioningly any fixed representations .... is to condone social systems of power which validate and authorize some images of women and not others'' (Hutcheon   1995 : 78).* In the process, the myth that marriages are in the hands of God stands challenged when we find Virmati marrying Harish, an already married man, due to social and pragmatic considerations. Similarly, the traditional Indian cultural ethos that idolizes women as mothers is contested in Kasturi's wish for a miscarriage and prayer for not to conceive again. In spite of these deviations in the thoughts and behaviour of these women from traditionally ascribed code, the feminist position that emerges finds relevance in the typical Indian context. The women like Kasturi, Virmati and Ida, represent different stages in the life and experience of women in the changing phases of Indian social history.

An interesting aspect of the feminist views that emerges from the novel is that women's subjugation and invisibility in the present social system does not seem to be the result of oppressive and supremacist attitude of man. It rather seems to be the outcome of the subtle but powerful presence of patriarchal system that enjoins specific roles to men and women. Therefore, the feminist position that comes forth in *Difficult Daughters* does not propagate or advocate hostility against men. Women in this scenario do not show a keenness to level the male female or man woman difference. The real cause of woman's problems here is not the antagonistic attitude of man rather it comes out to be the lack of awareness in woman and in the people in general about woman's true needs and her right to attain a separate self. The patriarchy established norms have been injected so deep in the minds of the people that they fail to imagine or see women in a role different from the roles already fixed by the system. It makes Virmati's quest for a different

selfhood, independent of patriarchy defined female existence, so difficult that she experiences isolation, loneliness, frustration and depression that lead her to attempt committing suicide. But education brings a new consciousness in her. It helps her struggle and find a viable space in the given social system. Therefore, she does not accept the demolition of social institutions like family and marriage. Her only concern seems to raise, *''A gendered, existentialist fight against invisibility and inability, challenging authority, stereotypes, icons, and sexist values'' (James 1995 : 106).*

As the woman's protest and resentment is directed against the system that imposes certain values which marginalize and silence her, she does not seem to envisage a radical change and demolition of male-female difference in the name of woman's liberation. Instead of using the western radical feminist base of male female hostility the Indocentric methodology seems to accept harmonious co-existence. In this context, Malashri Lal's words expressing Indian feminist stance are quite significant, *''Indian women despite their acceptance of the intellectual message of individual, gender based critique from the west, wish to remain in active link with family and community concepts in India'' (Lal 1995 : 28).* The ambivalent nature of Indian feminist perspective can be observed from the role of the family. Family and kinship system facilitate the perpetuation of patriarchal silencing of women by men. Women's identity and existence remain invisible and suppressed in the name of broader family interests. But, at the same time, it is family and relationships that provide support and a sense of belonging to women.

The typical Indian feminist stance, that emerges from *Difficult Daughters,* turns out to be an earnest appeal for the sympathetic recognition of women's existence and a redefinition of gender roles according to the changing socio-cultural contexts. These ideas find a forceful expression through the life and experience of different women characters. In the beginning of the novel the narrator presents Kasturi's miserable and pitiable plight. She seems to be quite helpless before the social conditions. The accepted purpose of her existence and of all the women at this stage of social development in India is to be a female only. Her function is to produce children and look after the family. The only space available to her is inside the threshold. Due to the persistence of certain ideas constantly forced on women she believes, ''What is the need to do a job ? A woman's *shaan* is in her home,'' (p.13.). And *'shaddi'* she considers to be the ultimate goal of a woman's life. Shakuntala's living a life of singlehood is something unnatural and abnormal for Kasturi. Her attending the conference and working in the laboratory makes Kasturi comment, ''I tell her she should have been a man'' (p.14). Gradually, under the impact of reformation movements like Arya Samaj and the Indian Independence movement people reject the traditional views and start thinking of other possibilities for women. This development has been illustrated through the fictional character of Virmati. In spite of the progress that informed Indian society in the middle of the 20th century it was not possible for a woman to think of living without man. Virmati defies traditional set of social rules in getting married to an already married person. But she does not think of rejecting marriage as such, nor does she accept participation in political movement that offers an opportunity for becoming,

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