

***DIFFICULT DAUGHTER AND A MARRIED WOMAN: A STUDY OF FEMINISTIC INTERNAL DESIRE IN
MANJU KAPUR'S NOVELS***

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When you marry, you can do anything your husband permits. (Manju Kapur: *Home*)

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. 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. Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact.

Manju Kapur, like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, Anita Nair or Shobha Dé, is one of the group of Indian women writers in English who live and write in India itself. Born in Amritsar in 1948, she graduated in English Literature from Miranda House University College for Women (attached to Delhi University), and went on to obtain an M.A. from Dalhousie College (Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada) -- thus having briefly been an expatriate -- and an M.Phil. from Delhi. She now teaches English Literature at her alma mater, Miranda House. She entered the literary sphere with *Difficult Daughters* (1998), a novel of the late colonial and Independence/Partition period that deservedly earned her a very considerable critical and commercial success, in India, elsewhere in the English-speaking world, and also in translation. This novel won her the 1999 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best First Published Book (Eurasia section), and has so far been translated into seven languages -- Dutch, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese, Spanish and, in an act of sub continental re-appropriation, Marathi. It recounts the story of a young woman called Virmati, her desire to study, her rejection of an arranged marriage, her entanglement with her married neighbor the "Professor", whose second wife she becomes, and her subsequent challenging and difficult life-choices and their ambivalent outcomes. *A Married Woman* (2002), Kapur's second novel, won comparable commercial success both in India and abroad - becoming a surprise library hit in Britain - and provoked strong reactions in the reading public, being if

anything even more controversial than its predecessor. It was shortlisted in India for the Society of Authors 2004 Encore Award for the Best Second Book. This time with a contemporary setting in an India poised on the verge of its globalization powered take-off, *A Married Woman* explores the twin explosive subjects of Hindu-Muslim confrontation and same-sex intimacy between women, against a backdrop of respectable middle-class Delhi life.

The theme of *Difficult Daughters*, refers to the Independence aspired to and obtained by a nation, but also to the independence yearned after by a woman and member of that same nation. Virmati, the heroine, seeks human relations that will allow her to be herself and to exercise the degree of control over her life which, as an educated woman, she knows she deserves. Born in Amritsar in the Punjab in 1940, the daughter of a father of progressive ideas and a traditionalist mother, she aspires to a freer life than that offered her by those around her. This aspiration is condemned to failure, thanks to the incomprehension she receives from both her own family and that of the man she marries - but also thanks to her own mistakes, for no-one obliged her to marry who became her husband, and she was free not to make the choice she did.

Virmati, like so many other sub continental women, is asked to accept a typical arranged marriage. She rebels against that destiny, to the lasting shame of her family, above all of her mother. Insisting on her right to be educated, she manages to leave home to study in Lahore. Nonetheless, she falls in love with an Amritsar teacher known as 'the Professor', a married man who first appears in her life as her parents' tenant. After a number of vicissitudes, including a period as a school principal in a small Himalayan state, she finally marries the man she loves (or thinks she loves), and returns to Amritsar to live with him. However, he refuses to leave his first wife, and the consequences for Virmati are harsh indeed: she ends up being marginalized by her own family and despised by her husband's. Virmati's tale is told, from a present-day perspective, by Ida, her only daughter, who seeks to reconstruct her late mother's life-story, against the background of the Independence movement of the 1940s and the subsequent trauma of Partition.

Virmati's married life with the Professor in Amritsar turns out to be a disaster. She wilts under the implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband's first wife, with whom she has to live. She loses all

sense of identity: the continuation of her education (she studies for a higher degree in philosophy, but without enthusiasm) feeds no more dreams of independence. In the end, her individual history disappears and becomes all but irrelevant, swallowed up in the greater and more resonant collective tragedy of Partition. Yet, despite all this, Virmati has in her life's path encountered other women, who like her aspired to a different life, and who succeeded better than she did.

Shakuntala, her cousin; and Swarna Lata, her roommate in Lahore. Both are representatives of a certain female type that recurs in Indian literature: the emancipated woman militant. As we have seen above, no-one should forget the many women who took part in the struggle for Independence and the Gandhian movement: a notable literary testimony to them is *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao's novel of 1938 in which he tells that story through the prism of a female narrative voice. In post-Independence literature, one may mention such characters as Daisy, the militant of *The Painter of Signs* by R.K. Narayan who prefers to remain single, or Malati Trivedi, the progressive activist of *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth, who first appears in that book as, curiously, also the roommate of the female protagonist, Lata; here too, the convergence of names between Seth's Lata and Kapur's Swarna Lata may be another detail pointing to a possible intertextuality. The name Shakuntala, too, has its intertextual connotations: the Indian reader will think immediately of the eponymous heroine of *The Recognition of Shakuntala*, the play by Kalidasa, the great classical Sanskrit dramatist - the young girl who, abandoned by her husband the king, finally obtains recognition of her rights and proper treatment.

In Virmati's extended family, her cousin Shakuntala appears from the beginning as the exemplar of the 'modern' or 'liberated' women. She studies, teaches, and takes part in the political- Gandhian movement: even after marriage, she keeps a firm grip on her autonomy and her freedom of action and thought. Shakuntala thus becomes a pole of attraction for Virmati: "Virmati listened, drawn towards Shakuntala, to one whose responsibilities went beyond a husband and children."¹ Nor is she an entirely atypical or isolated figure: she shares her 'liberated' lifestyle with a group of friends, whose activities she explains to her cousin: 'We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings, follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars. One of them is even going abroad for higher studies' (ibid)⁶. Later, in Swarna Lata, Virmati encounters a woman who leads a similar lifestyle; her friend, an ultra-committed activist, takes her to a meeting of the Punjab Women's Student Conference where she shines as the figure of the woman who goes abroad for further study recurs in 'A Married Woman'.

Swarna continues her political activity post-marriage, expressing herself on the matter to Virmati as follows: “We have plenty of married women working with us. I'm married, aren't I?”² One may draw a parallel between the careers of Shakuntala and Swarna, although here a qualification needs to be made: on the one and only occasion when the two meet, they do not get on - a small narrative irony which points up Kapur's ability to avoid both reductionism and sentimentalism. In the end, the path of political activism does not attract Virmati, as she herself recognizes:

I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, being politically active, while my time is spent being in love.³

She chooses - it cannot be said for her own good - the road that leads to the Professor: “a road not taken by Swarna, with whom she finally feels obliged to break off relations: 'And Swarna dropped out of her life’”⁴ Manju Kapur's second novel, *A Married Woman*, is set in the time leading up to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India in 1992. It deals with the crisis of a middle-class woman from Delhi caught in an unhappy marriage. Aastha has had her share of schoolgirl heartaches, but once over them, she looks forward to married life with a nice, romantic dream boy. She happily agrees to an arranged marriage with an America-returned MBA, Hemant, who seems the complete antithesis of a traditional Indian man. When Aastha is pregnant, the couple inform her mother, who hopes the child will be a son. “But Ma, I want a daughter ... In America there is no difference between boys and girls. How can this country get anywhere if we go on treating our women this way?”⁵ says Hemant, to Aastha's (and her mother's) amazement.

Aastha does have a daughter and the family prospers until her husband inexplicably transforms into a cliché of the male chauvinist pig, in one throwaway sentence: “Somewhere along the way Hemant's attitude to Aastha changed. She told herself it was only slightly, but it oppressed her.” Hemant now wants the second child to be a son. constantly pregnant. Hardly a serious job, you just go, talk to some children about poems and stories, organize a few clubs and come back. “Poems are about emotions”, defended Aastha Maybe Now he would ask her why she felt sad and they could really talk”.⁶ If you do feel it is so

important, all the more reason not to mind if Mummy does some puja. Who knows, it may yield good results.

Now sexually involved with another, she realized how many facets of the relationship between her husband and herself reflected power rather than love”⁷ When Hemant transforms into a bad guy, Aastha starts to feel unappreciated, condescended to, and bored. Aastha, like Gloria Steinem once said, doesn't breed well in captivity. But Aastha's angst is tiresome and problematic to the plot. Aastha was never the rebellious sort and all she wanted to do was marry a romantic, rich guy. Her father is more of a feminist than she is. “your mother hates me because I am Muslim. Your friends love me because I am Muslim, I don't know which is worse”⁸ Even more troublesome is Aastha's sudden makeover into a political animal, by virtue of her meeting a political activist, Aijaz Akhtar Khan, who alerts her to the growing religious fundamentalism in India. Aijaz and his street-theater troupe are burned alive by a fundamentalist mob and the incident makes Aastha more committed to the cause. Her transformation into a flag-waving, protest-marcher fighting sectarianism is farcical. Virmati, the heroine of *Difficult Daughters*, is a consistent character. Aastha isn't.

Aastha enjoys the fate of the poorest. She is suffocated with the growing needs of her family and “always adjusting to everybody's needs”.⁹ Aastha understands a married woman's place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death in her Indian status. She feels for herself that “A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth”¹⁰ are the necessary prerequisites of a married woman. She contemplates marriage a terrible decision as it puts her in a lot to enjoy bouts of rage, pain and indecision. Judging the male impression of woman she thinks that a married woman is an object of “mind fucking”¹¹. She does not think “marriage is just sex”¹² rather it provides interest, togetherness and respect. Being torn between her duty and responsibility, faith and fact, history and contemporaneity, public ethos and personal ethics she thinks “a tired woman cannot make good wives”¹³, and struggles for an emotional freedom from the scourge of the nation. She develops psychosomatic symptoms of stress and depression balancing between existing and living.

Astha's husband notices the changes in his wife he tries to bridge the gap. Even when she is physically present he feels he is missing her. He is totally committed to her but Astha is unwilling to leave her home life. She wants both Pipee and her home. Astha is neither bold nor so strong enough to live with Pipee forever. Thus Pipee leaves for the U.S.A. and the relationship breaks up. Astha devotes her time to prepare paintings. Her paintings are strong and effective statements.

Astha curiosities the established norms to search for her identity. She had led a life of sacrifice and adjustment but it had failed. She had longed to have her husband who would appreciate her peaceful family but now she is a matured woman. As she continues with her paintings, she feels more confident she had ever been before. "She thought of her name. Faith, Faith in herself, it was all she had". Hemant is a totally real and believable character who is the typical, insensitive, business oriented man who also loves his family deeply. Astha's conflict between the oppressive patriarchal culture and her imagination and sensibility is brought out in the novel.

A large section of women in both the working and non-working groups are married - 82 percent of working women and 87 per cent of non-working women. Around 47 per cent of all respondents stated that they had quit work after marriage and childbirth. Contrary to perception, marital status does not impose a direct bar on women's access to a working life. Rather, marital status and its associated reproductive roles mediate this access and the nature of work-life arrangements. Only 31 per cent of the working respondents had worked prior to marriage. This means that for a good 69 per cent of working women, the decision to work follows, and does not precede, marriage. Around 60 per cent of the working respondents had worked prior to childbirth, implying that as much as 40 per cent of working women decide to work only after getting married and having a child.

Kapur starts writing, she has a theme in mind but not a story: "The story takes shape gradually." Revealing something of the tortuous, tentative way in which a book may arrive at its final form, she says, "In this case, I didn't want Nina to get pregnant, and then I had to have a reason for that. Baby is out. Why is baby out? Infertility wasn't enough of a reason and I didn't want anything as extreme as impotence – there was more dramatic potential in a lingering dissatisfaction, which led me to Ananda's

sexual problem.” This in turn meant adding to his back-story, and numerous revisions were required before the final structure of the book emerged.

It will be interesting to note the man woman relationship in the three novels of Manju Kapur. The emergence of new women in the realm of social, economic, cultural and racial aspects will also be probed in the novels of Manju Kapur. The concept of new women in Indian society varies from the one in the west and therefore Manju Kapur has tried to evolve her own stream of emerging of new women grounded in reality. She has her own concerns priorities as well as her own ways of dealing with the predicament of her women protagonists. Her novels make a significant contribution in this direction.

References:

1. Kapur, Manju, *Difficult Daughters*, London: Faber and Faber, 1998, p.17.
2. *Ibid.*, p.252.
3. *Ibid.*, p.142.
4. *Ibid.*, p.252.
5. Kapur, Manju, *A Married Women*, London: Faber and Faber, 2002,
6. *Ibid.*, p.57.
7. *Ibid.*, p.81.
8. *Ibid.*, p.233.
9. *Ibid.*, p.125.
10. *Ibid.*, p.227.
11. *Ibid.*, p.231.
12. *Ibid.*, p.218.
13. *Ibid.*, p.275.
14. *Ibid.*, p.154.
