

Difficult Mothers in Difficult Daughters by Manju Kapur

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Abstract: *The issue of poor mother-daughter relationship is rarely discussed openly in mainstream culture. When we utter or think of the word “Mother” the thoughts and feelings that rise in our hearts and minds are of love, affection, care, understanding, selfless devotion and all that is soft and sweet and noble in human nature. Much has been written on this holy relation and much has been exposed. If we have traditional literature eulogizing this relationship, we also have literature that exposes the ground reality. There are feminists who believe that this relationship is also based on selfish motives and is shaped by the circumstances that dominate. Difficult Daughters by Manju Kapur is a novel which shows mother -daughter relationship in a new light. The present paper is an attempt to show that how daughters lose their way when they get no motherly support and so become ‘difficult’.*

The society we live in is a patriarchal society, where often the child-father relationship is given more attention and revered. But there is an issue of poor mother-daughter relationship which is rarely discussed openly in mainstream culture as it appears to be more ‘dysfunctional’ because women are believed to be more nurturing, emphatic and social which prevents them from having any serious conflicts with their children. The fact is that broken mother-daughter relationships are more common than most are aware. It feels that this complex relationship can be taken similar to a roller coaster where some parts of the ride can be fun, thrilling and crazy while there may be some other stretches of that some ride also where one feels anxious, fearful and alienated. The studies suggest that nearly thirty percent of women have been estranged from their mothers at some point in their life. And this is especially true at the two extreme levels of the society: the very highly sophisticated class and the very poverty driven class.

When we utter or think of the word “Mother” the thoughts and feelings that rise in our hearts and minds are of love, affection, care, understanding, selfless devotion and all that is soft and sweet and noble in human nature. We cannot describe it or delimit it. Between a mother and a child, only trust and love can exist. And when it is a daughter, belonging to the same gender, they are supposed to be united in a bond of understanding besides love and trust. Much has been written on this holy relation and much has been exposed. If we have traditional literature eulogizing this relationship, we also have literature that exposes the ground reality. With women increasingly realizing their individuality and getting desperate to get recognition as persons and not as role models, there has been a visible change in the depiction of erstwhile romantic relationships. Mother-daughter relationship, which was highly romanticized, has come to be portrayed in more realistic light. Sophie Freud (1991) notices negativity and cruelty in such relationships. These feminists believe that this relationship is also based on selfish motives and is as much a give and take relationship as any. There are daughters who are not all that dependant, admiring lot and mothers who are not that doting, sacrificing one. The relationship is shaped by the circumstances that dominate. The bitterness, the resentment, the dislike and even the envy that were often felt but never expressed, came to be accepted as dominant traits of this relationship. These feminists believe that the glory of motherhood comes from taking a sentimental approach to the phenomenon which comes but naturally. But the kind of motherhood that has been celebrated through tradition is a myth created by the male of the species to chain their womenfolk and keep them focused on the household duties forgetting their identity.

In recent years *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur is a novel which shows mother -daughter relationship in a new light. It appeals that in this novel the author rather than focusing on the daughters being difficult she more focuses on how daughters lose their way when they get no motherly support and so become ‘difficult’. There is something sacred about mother-daughter relationships that leave women feeling empty and less whole when a motherly presence is absent from their life. The present paper tries to depict the mother-daughter relationship between the female protagonist Virmati and her mother Kasturi, and Ida the daughter of the protagonist and Virmati herself from a negative aspect that makes the respective mothers responsible for the failure of their daughters as individuals.

Difficult Daughters is primarily the story of a daughter’s journey towards self-realization vicariously through her mother’s attainment of selfhood. The story is presented through the conscience of Ida who goes on to explore the life and times of not only her mother Virmati but her maternal grandmother Kasturi as well.

Difficult Daughters is set at the time of partition in Amritsar and Lahore. It is the story of three generations of women in a traditional Punjabi family. Ida, the narrator, who is a divorcee. Virmati, her mother ,

who marries an already married professor for love, and Kasturi, her grandmother, who come to terms with a difficult daughter, Virmati. Being the eldest daughter of all the eleven children, Virmati spends her time as a nurse/ mother to her siblings, while her mother, Kasturi, spends her life reproducing. She keeps helping her ever-pregnant mother in the housework, taking care of other children and studying. Gradually it so happens that Kasturi starts taking Virmati for granted. She looks upon her daughter as the governess of her children. Virmati is expected to treat her studies as a secondary job, the primary one being her doing the household chores and caring for the children. While Virmati considers Shakuntala – her cousin who is pursuing her studies in Lahore – as her role model, Kasturi has other dreams for her daughter wherein studies do not find a place. Her mother takes education as a path to immorality. She is convinced that it led to moral degradation. But, luckily she has a liberal father, and so she goes to school and college. As far as Virmati is concerned, she sees education as an escape from the rigours of family life. On the other hand her mother wants her to marry a suitable boy of her elders' choice and settle down like a good, girl. But luck has chalked out a different course for the girl. At the same time, Virmati is fascinated by the young married professor, fresh from Oxford. She falls in love with him and marries him as a socially accepted second wife.

Mothers are such strong influences in the lives of their daughters that they have the power to make or mar their daughter's personality. In a patriarchal world, however mothers instead of protecting the interests of their daughters become instrumental in torturing them. There is nothing more painful for a girl than the pressure to grow up even before she enjoyed

her childhood. The patriarchal set-up plots against women right since their birth. The conditioning begins at home and women are supposed to walk from mother's womb into mother's shoes.

An innocent life that is full of possibilities is maimed by the forces that connive to condition a girl child to prove conducive to the patriarchal set-up. The most pathetic fact arises out of the knowledge that it is the mother who proves instrumental in this type of connivance. Same is true for Virmati also. Most of her sufferings are caused by maternal apathy. Virmati does not have a sympathetic shoulder to weep on and this aggravates her agony. She suffers at the hands of the parochial society, her family and above all her paramour. She could never share her feelings with Kasturi. As a child she keeps craving for a little understanding from her mother but with the passing of time she learns to accept the situation as it is.

Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* has to be a mother to all her ten siblings. The mother Kasturi is involved in the sole job of procreation leaving the young ones for Virmati to tend upon. This proves the end of all her dreams, her aspirations and even her individuality. Before the girl could learn to assert herself, she is burdened with responsibility of taking care of a baby brother. There are women who force their daughters into servitude but they are never moved with a bit of sympathy for the poor soul. The daughters have to share the responsibility that belong to their mothers. Similarly, the poor girl Virmati does her best to appease her mother and at the same time pursue her studies. The presence of Shakuntala her cousin inspires her with the thirst for knowledge but the maternal pressure on her psyche is too much to bear. Even her dreams of emancipation are not free of all apprehensions;

She could hear her mother telling her not to waste her time; there were more important things to do. Like looking after the children, thought Virmati bitterly, and then, as she thought of Paro's clinging arms around her neck, she began to cry. (pg 18).

When Ida's uncle explains her about Virmati, he says that she was only their sister, but she acted very bossy. She was so keen to study. She studied more than any other girl in the family. At the age of ten, she had the maturity to look after her eleven brothers and sisters. When she complained about her work to her mother, she made her dumb by saying, "You are the eldest. If you don't see things, who will?"

Apart from this Virmati does not exist for Kasturi. Years later when Ida rebuilds Virmati's story from the information provided by her relatives she could still sense that; 'The language of feeling had never flowed between them'.

Thus, it is the long chain of conditioning of women that starts from their mothers. Mothers, being women, are themselves conditioned by their mothers first and the society at large next. Mothers take it as their duty to condition their girl child into the norms of the patriarchal society. The sooner the process is begun, the better it is for the daughter.

The Victorian approach of 'men for sword and women for hearth' has seeped so deep into our psyche that it seems hard to rub it off. The real business of life is a nightmare which threatens to murder the peace of the daughter's mind. The tale of Virmati is the tale of struggle of a woman against the parochial society. In this struggle women must be aided by women. The feminists talk about the concept of sisterhood. There have been many instances where this concept has been successfully materialized but mothers seldom rise up to this concept. This is one relationship wherein understanding and support are most expected but this is sadly one relationship where these ideas are lacking.

There may be seen absolute dearth of understanding and emotional bonding between mothers and daughters. This lack of understanding is also due to the fact that mothers take their own revenge on the society by avenging against their daughters. Since they had not been allowed freedom, their daughters must also be

denied. Since they were not free to dream, their daughters must also learn to accept the breaking of their dreams. Since the mothers were not permitted to pursue education, their daughters must also suppress their yearnings. An unmarried daughter's existence is futile, meaningless; she can bring significance to her life only by proving useful at home. Virmati keeps thirsting for love and understanding but her mother Kasturi fails to understand her cravings. Ida tells the readers:

At times Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special. However, when she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away. 'Have you seen to their food-milk-clothes-studies?'

Virmati's mother fails to understand her despair about failing in her studies. Ida reflects;

Kasturi found the fuss Virmati was making about failing unreasonable. It hardly made a difference to the real business of her life, which was getting married and looking after her own home (19).

Maternal alienation can be sensed all through the thoughts and deeds of daughters. The apathy that starts from the mother gives birth to this sense of alienation. As a result, the daughters never feel oneness with their mothers. The relationship has always an aura of estrangement. Daughters suffer in silence but are not able to share their private sorrows with their mothers. Firstly, because the mother is not inclined to share and secondly but more importantly because most of these sorrows are inflicted by the mother herself. The sense of belonging that is the essence of a good relationship is found sadly missing from this relationship which is most vital in the life of a woman. The absence or lack of mother's sympathetic shoulders at home forces these daughters to look for sympathy outside which in turn leads to deception. And they become vulnerable to outside influences.

If Virmati drifts away to Harish it is primarily due to the contrast that she finds between her mother and Harish. Harish shows patience and sympathy. Also he makes quite clear at the outset itself that he needs her badly. Virmati feels loved, wanted-- the feeling that her mother could never generate. Virmati goes about her household duties quite mechanically. She manages her mother's home skillfully; but seems quite uninvolved and aloof. There is a sense of alienation especially maternal alienation. She does not seem to belong to her mother. As a young child, she craves for her mother's love but when it seems impossible, her yearning for it dies down. Virmati finds refuge in the arms of Harish who promises Utopia. Thus, maternal alienation leads to strong changes in the lives of daughters.

For Virmati, the love of Harish comes-as the only escape from the otherwise dull convention ridden patriarchal world. In fact, it is not love but the lack of love that turns her life upside down.

Identity crisis is an issue facing all alert and aware women in a patriarchal society where identity is considered a preposterous concept for women. A daughter's quest for identity begins with her identification with her mother. Daughters search for self-realization through their mothers. Ida in *Difficult Daughters* begins a journey into the history of her mother with a purpose to discover herself. Ironical it is then that the conflict in this relationship begins when daughters start their quest. For as long as daughters are unaware of their feminine status and are not conscious of their individuality, the relationship runs quite smoothly. But as soon as the child becomes aware of her femininity and starts asserting her individuality, the strain starts building up. Ida in her quest for identity begins the search of the person who was her mother. She begins with a resolution that she would not be like her mother but as the story unravels she finds herself identifying with her mother. What started as alienation ends up in complete identification. But not all daughters are as fortunate as Ida. Virmati herself could never belong to her mother Kasturi. Her pleasures, her pains, her pathetic life as a mistress and then a second wife all remained her private sorrows. She could never share them with her mother. Kasturi never understands her, never attempts to understand her. Virmati becomes used to the tartness in Kasturi's voice. There seems a barrier between them which Virmati fails to pull down. Ida tells the readers;

From time to time Virmati glanced furtively at her mother, and the wall she encountered forbade her from making the attentive gestures that might have made the journey bearable for both (102).

Besides all other allegations, Kasturi grudges Virmati the fact that 'She's become so independent' (161).

Virmati also jumps into a blind, bleak future with Harish because her mother could never understand her dreams. So many promising lives go down the drain due to maternal apathy. Virmati would not be a victim to a much married man like Harish if she had had a understanding mother.

Thus, the novel presents the paradigm of two mother daughter relationships. What could be a simple self-exploration through the exploration of formative influences becomes quite amazing in view of Ida's reluctance to be like her mother. As the realization gradually dawns, one finds Ida getting drawn towards Virmati. So much so that the novel ends with Ida almost identifying with Virmati. Thus, one mother-daughter relationship marches from identification to alienation and years later Ida-the daughter of Virmati-relives her relation with her mother, marching from alienation to identification.

Conclusion:- Mother-daughter relationship is unique and determines the future development of a woman. It is a relationship which requires separation and fusion at the same time for the proper development of the daughter's personality. It is this relationship that helps the daughter overcome the ambivalences and to gain confidence to go out into the world, to face the world as an individual. The very course of a daughter's life

changes due to the mother's attitude. Daughters are difficult only when life becomes difficult for them. Though like all relationships, this one is also bilateral and is based on interdependence; the dependence of the daughter is greater than that of the mother. Authoritative and autocratic attitude of the mother may mar the very personality of daughter and it may make a pseudo-rebel out of an otherwise disciplined and motivated daughter as in the case of Virmati.

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