

A LEAP FROM TRADITION TO MODERNITY; REFLECTED IN “DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS” OF MANJU KAPUR

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Abstract

Literature reflects and presents life in diverse ways, indicating the social status of the people. Feminism is one of the key topics of literature and it tackles a variety of issues concerning women in traditional society. Male chauvinism and inequality discriminated against them for centuries. The shift from Tradition to Modernity is a multidimensional and complex process that has shaped societies all over the world for ages. Manju Kapur's novels are heavily influenced by 'Tradition and Modernity'. 'Difficult Daughters' by Manju Kapur is a remarkable literary lens that examines the tremendous changes from tradition to modernity. Kapur's story expertly depicts the complexities of this cultural transformation, portraying the difficulties, sacrifices and successes that come with the transition from Tradition to Modernity. The story centers around Virmati, a young lady who defies societal norms and expectations in her pursuit of education, freedom and self-discovery. As the novel progresses, Virmati's life symbolizes the turbulent changes that occurred in Indian society throughout the mid-twentieth century. The present paper intends to explore how the characters make their leap from 'Tradition to Modernity.'

Keywords: Feminism, Modernity, Tradition, Women, Education and Society.

INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur is a notable Indian English novelist who comes first among the great Indian novelists and is famous for the feministic elements she includes in her novels. She talks about the different kinds of roles women play in society and how tradition enables male domination and hence the marginalization of women. Through her works, she has depicted the dilemma in the life of Indian women who were victimized in the joint families of a male-dominated society. Farzana S. Ali, rightly said through 'Novels of Manju Kapur –A Critical Study.'

“The struggling lives women live under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society are reflected in the writings of Manju Kapur.” (Ali. 2015, 65)

Kapur's fiction has become the voice of many women who are neglected in society. The fundamental concept of feminism is to empower them to enjoy equal status with men in society. As a movement, it supports women and stands for them to consider equal status and opportunity in society.

We find almost all characters of Manju Kapur fighting against all discriminative factors and ideas of a conventional society. The life of the woman of the Indian community faces visible discrimination from a male-dominated society. Kapur speaks strongly against such existing evils of society through her novels. She is well well-appreciated writer in Indian English Literature. Her most discussed novels bear strong and deep imprints of her professed feminist

ideal. 'Difficult Daughters' made Manju Kapur known across the country and the globe and later the novel received the prestigious Commonwealth Writer's Award in 1999. She has provided a realistic portrayal of the ladies of 1940, as well as the events and horrors that occurred in India, with a particular focus on urban middle-class women.

It explains Kapur's indubitable ability to explore the psyche of the present-day urban, educated middle-class woman who is trapped in the midway between tradition and modernity. (Nitonde, 2014, 17).

1. Discussion

The paper preoccupies itself with 'A Leap from Tradition to Modernity; Reflected in "Difficult Daughters" of Manju Kapur. In a society prone to superstitions irrationality and insane logic, women easily become the most vulnerable section, to be victimized, exploited, raped and even murdered. Manju Kapur understood that the women folk of the country were discriminated against in the male-dominated society. A journey from tradition to modernity was needed to bring changes to their life. Education was the only tool through which the change was possible. The article proceeds with the study of how the characters make their move from tradition to modernity.

2. The Political Background of Indian Society in the Light of Feminism

Like many other parts of the world in those times, Indian society of the 1940s was predictably immersed in the quagmire of the unrelenting, dehumanizing caste system, strange and enigmatic customs with the least pretensions to scientific rationality, surfeiting upon the sheer lack of education and literacy. In the political scenario, India was reaching its culmination of struggles against the British Raj and setting things right for independent existence; another fight after independence, but the life situation of women remained the same as it was before independence. The lack of literacy and information was obvious in their life. All the evils that prevailed in the society before 1947 remained the same and women continued to be rejected and ill-treated from everywhere. Women are constantly urged to be modern, independent human beings, like male characters in society, whereas, they were excluded from the mainstream of society and family due to insistent assertion of male hegemony.

3. Origin of Feminism and its Historical Background

Feminism emerged as a literary movement as a result of centuries of struggle for women's liberation. Certain assumptions serve as the foundation for this movement. The fundamental idea is to defend gender equality and to strongly oppose sexual discrimination and male oppression. Western civilization is primarily patriarchal, with women seldom being welcomed to the front lines of society and males in society viewing them as inferior beings. They were constrained to stay in the family and were denied prominent roles in social, political and economic fields. The women's flock yearned for freedom and equality and they gradually voiced their desire for equality through writings.

4. The Concept of Feminism

The concept of feminism differs from place to place and country to country but the purpose remains the same. Russian feminism is influenced by communist thoughts and ideas, whereas, in Austria, it is with the psychological and psychoanalytical ideology of Sigmund Freud, in America, it is a fight against capitalism and chronic male domination. Whereas, India, with its exclusive ideological as well as socio-cultural and political framework, feminism comes to suggest an equality that extends to all spheres of life and effective protection guaranteed to her from all sorts of exploitation.

5. Growth of Feminism in India

The growth of feminism in India has emerged from the influence of Western writings on feminist problems and it has a strong movement through eminent writers like Tarabai Shinde, Anita Desai, Jasodhara Bagchi, Suzanna, Arundhati Roy, Meena Kandasamy, Shashi Deshpande, Sarojini Naidu, Nayantara Sahgal, Mahasweta Devi, Githa Hariharan, Sushmita Banerjee, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Ismat Chughtai, Amrita Pritam, Krishna Sobti, Kamala Das, Kamala Markandaya and Manju Kapur.

6. A Leap from Tradition to Modernity

Tradition is a broad term that incorporates not just the temporal component of literature, but also the lives and ideas of the time. The Indian landmass is deeply entrenched in a nearly timeless culture and civilization, though it kept appropriating wayward and prodigal themes from afar in the torrential transit of time. Whereas, modernity is a gradual shift from past practice to new. Inada is well known for its rich culture and heritage. It is a land of spirituality and many religions teach dharma, equality and spirituality alike to their followers. The land is also famous for its "Unity in Diversity and Diversity in Unity." The 'Right to Equality' as per Articles 14 to 18 of the Indian constitution ensures equality for everyone and it is the fundamental rights of the citizens of the country. Even though everyone knows all the above-sacred knowledge, no one is ready to consider them accordingly.

The social setup of India is different from all other countries of the world. The society is both traditional and male-dominated before and after the independence. Social evils still prevail in society and everyone blindly follows them. Many times, women become the sufferers of those bad customs and traditions. Lack of education and conservative thought made them feel that the traditional customs and rules are for them only but in reality, they are not for rules but rules are for them. When someone thinks differently, everyone in the family and society may tell and curse that 'you will bring a bad name to the family.'

The novels of Manju Kapur bear unmistakable imprints of the irresistible dialectics between tradition and modernity. Her characters who are set in a conventional background make a giant leap, as the story proceeds from tradition to modernity. But the term modernity, in the novels of Manju Kapur, refers to a journey from discrimination and inequality to equality and equal rights. The old traditional concept that women should be restricted to home and kitchen has changed and she tries to come out of the home and kitchen now and it is a sign of modernity

“Her novels present a long, unending struggle of women to establish and make a position equal to men in the society herself. The distinction between the man and woman in the Indian context becomes the major theme of her fiction.” (Ali. 2015, 5).

The male-dominated family and society are much more rigid with a set of rules and regulations under the so-called tradition and any violation may be considered as a deviation from the customs of the society. Everyone knows that man and woman are created by God. As per the theological concept of Christianity, the Holy Bible says that “so God created man in his own image, male and female he created them.” But the male chauvinism and traditional society created division and discrimination in the community where they lived together.

According to Rohidas Nitonde.

“Kapur’s novels reveal the lives of women describing their struggle for basic rights, quest for identity and survival. With education, they become aware of their self-reliance which helps them to walk on new horizons. They have substantial freedom of expression and thoughts in every field they not only compete with men but also work efficiently like their male counterparts.” (Nitonde, 2014, 126).

Manju Kapur’s first novel, ‘Difficult Daughters’ carries a horrific saga of the woman’s plight in an Indian family. A clear conviction of modernity can be found through the novel ‘Difficult Daughters’ it takes you into a world where a young modern girl struggles against tradition and gender discrimination. ‘Difficult Daughters’ is a live instance of the confrontation between tradition and modernity.

“In the novel, there is a constant struggle between the traditional approach of Kasturi and modern views of Virmathi”. (Nitonde, 2014, 41)

The background of the novel ‘Difficult Daughters’ is set in 1940 and it explains the strange story of a young woman Virmati, who fights against tradition and gender discrimination in the same family. She grew up in a congested condition of tradition and desire to achieve higher education and modern life. The family insisted her to adjust the conventional rules, whereas she desired to continue her studies. The central female character is ensnared in the forbidding dialectics between the traditional ethical fortifications and the emerging realities that assail her with an inhuman tenacity.

“Kapur has achieved success in narrating live tales describing the lives of middle-class Indian women. Through all her novels she explores the difficulties of reconciling the devotion to family expected of middle-class Indian women with their aspirations and desire for a life outside.” (Nitonde, 2014, 27)

Kasthuri was the mother of Virmathi who had only a basic education and was destined to follow the traditions and superstitious beliefs that existed in the society and family. She considers marriage as the final goal in a woman’s life and education is only a requirement for the family life and marriage. For Kasturi, family is the world and her thought is limited to her experience and conservative imagination. Kasturi is like a frog in the well; limited to in and around the

family and tradition and she wishes the same fate for her daughter Virmati. The male-dominated society kept the women inside the four walls of the family and the dominant class considered women as being for the family roles and giving birth to children like Kasturi who had eleven children. The male community gave education as the basic requirement for marriage. Manju Kapur tells through Kasthuri that,

"Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family. I studied too, but my mother would have killed me if I had dared even to want to dress in anything other than was bought for me." (Kapur, 2010, 16- 17).

Virmati, the daughter of Kasturi, the heroine of the novel is fed up with the society which restricts the growth of women and puts control over them. Virmati felt that women were not part of family and society as she faced rejection. Professor Harish represents the educated male community and it is sad to see that even the educated people also have the same thoughts on women. Professor Harish considers Virmati as an object for personal pleasure and it is the clear picture of the male-dominated society and the best instance of how men consider women.

Virmati's ardent desire for education and imagination of modern life makes her fight for her fundamental rights in society. Virmati's cousin Shakuntala with the vestiges of European consciousness was livid in Lahore and enjoyed the freedom there. She was a fearless woman who could lead other women to think and act against tradition and gender differences. Her unmistakable impact casts its unmistakable spell on Virmati, whose hopes soar high in the imagined heights of the sky. Surging ahead with her academic backing, she must now establish her terrain and economic independence. Shakuntala's visit had sowed the seed of aspiration in Virmati and she said 'times are changing and women are moving out of the house, why not you'?

Swarnalatha was Virmati's roommate in Lahore and Lahore becomes the playground of Swarnalatha's hoped-after state of idealistic fulfillment even as she reaches the city to complete her M.A. Her audacity must now inform her parents that their failure to understand her idea of marriage would find inevitable aftermath in the form of Satyagraha, perfected by the Gandhian ideology, even courting arrest and imprisonment. It ultimately brings the things chartered by her as she courts a husband who must now accede to her legitimate demands without raising an eyebrow even as begins to work as a teacher in the college.

Shakuntala and Swarnalatha break the restrictions of society and tradition. They challenged the age-old tradition and made their way to modernity. These two characters are the symbol of modernity and inspiration for Virmati to go ahead for a dignified existence of self-esteem.

Shakuntala and Swarna Lata are the representatives of the emerging 'New Women' and Kapur has focused on Shakuntala as an example of the 'Modern' or the 'Liberated' woman from the beginning of the novel.

“Shakuntala and Swarnlatha represent the modern women who fight for their place in society and live lives on their terms. They are learned intellectuals, with minds of their own and enough to make their own decision. They are the mouthpiece of the contemporary modern women who fight for their rights. They seem to personify the ‘new women’ who try to throw off the inhibitions that women have been carrying for ages... They are not silent rebels but are cold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented.” (Ali. 2015, 77-78)

However, Virmati, a symbol of civil strife, is highly literate and eager to learn and rebels against traditional representation. Kasturi complies with social norms and a patriarchal society. Virmati does not care about the conventional notions and eliminates her mother’s view and makes a different thought about her life, education and marriage; against the wishes of her mother for whom a woman is not a real woman if she is not married.

CONCLUSION

The novels of Manju Kapur are the typical expression of Indian society and the condition of women during the pre-independence of India. The illiterate masses of the Indian population have been forever apprehensive of the woman’s eagerness to stake claim to a world of her own away from the monstrosities of the male’s oppressive socio-psychological bearings. The novel mirrors society's obsession with its conservative ideas of women, superstitions, male children and the family's sacred duty of marriage. The uneducated Indian community opposes the steps to modernity and doesn't allow any women to move out from the track of tradition.

The novel mirrors society's obsession with its conservative ideas of women, superstitions, male children and the family's sacred duty of marriage. No concern for the women flocks of the society and they are the victims of tradition and male dominance. Why women suffer, it is because men are not ready to consider them instead they treat them as objects for personal satisfaction and someone to follow the complete regulations of society. In this conflict of tradition versus modernity, her characters break away from the norms and conditions of society.

In the irreversible transition of history, women must now identify and claim for themselves those spaces that had till this time been part of an augmented reality or at best a weary dream. The conjectured edifices and corresponding insignia of power and dominance, those associative trappings of male prowess no longer can be revisited as they have merged into the sands of time and history. Every bondage inevitably leads to a historical juncture, it has to be reduced to dust under the gathering weight of the edifice which had been the sole sustenance of a male dominance that had never been.

A woman's identity can be established only through women's empowerment. Kapur’s novels that uphold a typical Indian outlook irradiate the darkness of conventionalism and illuminate the readers’ minds with an insight into modernism. Women’s liberation has come from within; it accompanies her determined and audacious act of abjuring those comfort zones and suffixes of the divine theme promised by male hegemonies, with a typical Ibsensian predicament. Novelist’s theme of female freedom has to be stripped of its lexical trappings, as it is an

awakening of consciousness in an ensemble of the forbidding powers of education, rationalism and responsibility sans of course those debilitating orchestrations of tradition and culture which had hitherto sought to undermine vast potentials, capabilities and sagacities she bore within.

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