

Combating Objectification in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur, a professor at Delhi University delves into the life of women in the Indian culture. An exploration of *Difficult Daughters* exposes the objectification of women in the institution of marriage which confiscates her subjectivity. Kapur's heroine overrides the cultural codes of conduct and establishes an adulterous affair. She embarks on a quest for a fulfilling life and affirms her subjectivity.

Keywords: marriage, cultural codes, resistance, body.

Analysis of the novel:

Manju Kapur narrates the desire of a rebellious woman, Virmati who seeks to liberate her body and her self. Kapur begins the novel by highlighting the miserable condition of Indian women whose life revolves around domestic and marital responsibilities. Kapur asserts that the biological destiny of procreation renders women's life pathetic. Pierre Bourdieu's statement is pertinent in this context. He affirms that:

the necessities of biological reproduction determine the symbolic organization of the sexual division of labor, step by step, of the whole natural and social order, it is an arbitrary construction of the biological and in particular of the body, masculine and feminine, of its uses and of its functions, notably in biological reproduction, which gives an apparently natural foundation to the androcentric vision of the division of sexual labor and the sexual division of labor and, thereby, of the whole cosmos (Bourdieu, 1998: 40, Translation is mine).

Virmati's daughter, Ida, reconstructs the story of this novel retrospectively and embarks on a journey to learn about her mother's past. Kasturi, Virmati's mother, has eleven children of which Virmati is the eldest. Kasturi spends her whole life in maternity and motherhood.

Virmati is burdened with familial responsibilities owing to her mother's repeated pregnancies. Sylviane Agacinski affirms that "[...] women have been kept by civilization in subordinate situations because they were condemned to devote themselves essentially to the reproduction of the species" (Agacinski, 1998: 80, Translation is mine).

Virmati comes from an austere family that conditions girls according to rigid Hindu conventions. Kasturi nurtures her daughter with the traditional values of womanhood - virtue, chastity, docility and devotion. Kasturi instills in Virmati and her other daughters that the girl's territory is the home and the kitchen. She inculcates that the ultimate destiny of the girl's life is marriage for which she has to work relentlessly with the sole purpose of pleasing the husband and the in-laws. Kasturi believes that education can lead the girl astray from her domestic duty. She inscribes patriarchal codes of conduct in the minds of her daughters. She emphasizes that a girl's life is associated to family honour and humiliation.

Virmati is determined not to lead a conventional life like that of her mother and aspires for higher education. She does not want to confine herself to marriage and domesticity. She dreams of an intellectual life and yearns to embark on a new life of learning and teaching. Virmati expresses to her parents her ardent desire to continue her studies in the city. Her mother resists and affirms: "The honor and dignity of a woman is in the home" (Kapur, 1998: 18). Virmati resists and enrolls

in the college. By chance, she meets the family of a professor, Harish, who lives in the neighbourhood. She becomes the student of Harish and falls in love with the married man.

Virmati disrupts the traditional Indian values by falling in love with a married teacher. This is an adulterous love on the part of society. Virmati argues with her mother who wants to get her married to an engineer, Inderjit. The family makes wedding preparations but Virmati refuses defiantly the bridegroom chosen by her family. Overcome with frustration and grief, she leaves the house to drown herself in the canal. She leaves a message for Harish about her suicide. He is shocked and his wife carries the news to Virmati's family. Harish is worried that Virmati's restless action may reveal their secret love. Fortunately, she is saved by the villagers from the overflowing canal. Virmati returns home, her clothes and body soaked in water and shame because she has humiliated her family. Virmati's mother weeps mentioning the dishonour her daughter has brought to the family. Shattered by the rumours in the city, Virmati's mother locks her in the cellar.

Virmati's sister Indu is forced to marry Inderjit. Locked in the cellar, Virmati reflects on her status and identity. She finds herself like an object of consumption among the seeds and spices accumulated in her home. She complains about her misery: "I'm like the sacks of wheat and dal here without my own life" (Kapur, 1998: 93). Simone de Beauvoir affirms: "[...] you have to make yourself an object; she must therefore give up her autonomy. They treat her like a living doll and deny her freedom [...]" (Beauvoir, 1976: 29, Translation is mine). Virmati is reduced to an object, a living doll that must give up its autonomy.

Mustering her courage, Virmati informs her parents categorically her idea of pursuing higher studies in Lahore. The atmosphere at home becomes hostile. Virmati aggressively states that she is not interested in marriage. The mother accuses her daughter saying that the upbringing has given her the courage to subvert the decisions of the family. The mother accuses her daughter for nurturing and cherishing a dream that is unconventional

and not the domain of women. Kasturi pleads her daughter to perform the traditional tasks of womanhood like other girls. Beauvoir's declaration holds true in this context. She states:

While woman is asked to achieve her femininity to make herself object and prey, that is to say, to renounce her claims as a sovereign subject. It is this conflict which singularly characterizes the situation of the emancipated woman. She refuses to confine herself to her role as a female because she does not want to mutilate herself [...] To renounce her femininity is to renounce a part of her humanity (Beauvoir, 1976: 591, Translation is mine).

She laments: "You know every girl has to go to her own home. It is your duty and our duty" (Kapur, 1998: 87). Beauvoir adds: "For young girls, marriage is the only way to be integrated into the community and, if they are 'left behind', they are social waste. That's why mothers have always tried so hard to settle them" (Beauvoir, 1976: 89, Translation is mine). Kasturi curses her daughter saying: "What crimes did I commit in my past life that I am damned with a girl like you in this life" (Kapur, 1998: 59). In this regard, Agacinski observes that "one will almost always encounter, in the history of the theorization of sexual difference, the family as the structure within which the subordination of women is established" (Agacinski, 1998: 65, Translation is mine). Kasturi declares that the woman without a home and without a family is like a ship without an anchor. She is afraid that Virmati's existence will become useless and shameful. Virmati's mother firmly believes that marriage will give a respectful status to her daughter. Beauvoir comments: "Marriage allows women to achieve their full social dignity and to realize themselves sexually as lovers and mothers. It is under this figure that those around her see her future and that she sees it herself" (Beauvoir, 1976: 89, Translation is mine).

Meanwhile, Virmati is shocked when she learns that the professor's wife is pregnant again. She interrogates the dual role of the professor and decides to leave for Lahore.

Virmati enrolls in college in Lahore, the bastion of human learning. She burns the professor's love letters to forget the past and enjoy an academic life in Lahore. Virmati fails to forget the teacher and becomes more engaged and attached to him. She succumbs little by little to the passionate pleas of the professor and turns pregnant. She daringly aborts the child to save her family from shame. She regrets that she has not broadened her intellectual horizons but has an adulterous and affair.

Virmati returns to Amritsar after finishing her studies. The subject of marriage explodes again at home. She becomes stubborn, violent and rejects marriage. The Pratibha Kanya Vidyalaya school in Nahan looks for a teacher with good training. Virmati's qualifications attract the institution that offers her the placement. Virmati accepts her appointment without hesitation and leaves home much to the disaster of her mother and family. In Nahan, Harish pays visit to Virmati surreptitiously and sleeps with her. Owing to her misconduct, Virmati is dismissed from school. She gathers all her courage and takes the train towards the life in front of her where she can always forge her identity. She convinces herself to meet Harish's friend who argues with him. He persuades Harish to marry Virmati who screams with all her might. After much thought, Harish marries Virmati.

Virmati dreads her family and breaks down into tears. Harish's mother accuses them and Ganga, his wife curses and harasses Virmati. Despite the revulsion of the families, the professor and Virmati enjoy the married life. Virmati occupies the bedroom with the teacher throwing out Ganga. The kitchen is allotted to Ganga and the bedroom is reserved for Virmati. Beauvoir says that "woman is dedicated to the maintenance of the species and the maintenance of the home" (Beauvoir, 1976:221, Translation is mine). She also says that "[...] marriage is her only livelihood and the only social justification for her existence [...] she must give children to the community. Even civilizations demand that she be under the protection of a husband; it also has the function of satisfying the sexual needs of a male and taking care of his home" (Beauvoir, 1976 :224, Translation is mine).

Gathering her strength, Virmati returns home to meet her mother. Kasturi curses her and throws her out of the house : "You have destroyed our family, you impudent, you insolent! You have blackened our faces everywhere" (Kapur, 1998:221). Virmati's ties with her parents is shattered after all the years of care, sacrifice and responsibility. Virmati is rejected by her entire family and the community on all occasions. She accepts her rejected status and rejoices in the love of her husband. When Virmati learns about the demise of her father, she pays visit with Harish to offer their condolences. Harish is received well by the members of the family. In this context, Kapur exclaims: "He was accepted, and she?" (Kapur, 1998:239). Virmati is thunderstruck by the behaviour of the community. Agacinski says that "society cultivates the difference between the sexes as one cultivates plants and flowers" (Kapur, 1998:55, Translation is mine). Virmati discards the shame and humiliation and leads a fulfilled life with Harish. Unfortunately, she suffers a miscarriage. To overcome this grief, Harish sends her to Lahore to continue her studies. After finishing her studies, Virmati returns home and gives birth to a child Ida.

The most important elements of the novel in question are marginality and resistance in patriarchal culture. Virmati is trapped by cultural, religious and social codes. She transgresses the codes established by patriarchy and engages in a struggle against patriarchy. The strategy of resistance is exercised through her body. This novel enlightens on the rejection of domestic confinement, the subversion of patriarchy and the recovery of the female body. Hélène Cixous, a French feminist who pins her theory on psychoanalysis remarks:

Against women they have committed the greatest crime: they have led them, insidiously, violently, to hate women, to be their own enemies, to mobilize their immense power against themselves, to be the executors of their virile work (Cixous,2010:41, Translation is mine).

The woman must be a good fighter to get out of passivity. She asserts that:

a woman without a body, a mute, a blind, cannot be a good fighter. She is reduced to being the servant of the militant, his shadow. We must kill the false woman who prevents the living from breathing (Cixous,2010:46, Translation is mine).

Cixous says : “ [...], you are for you, your body is yours, take it (Cixous, 2010:39, Translation is mine). The recovery of the female body is Cixous’ most important claim. Cixous appeals to women for the liberation of female sexuality in order to inscribe femininity. She observes that women free themselves from patriarchy through the rediscovery of the female body and this requires a radical and revolutionary transformation. Cixous says :

[...] and imagine a real liberation of sexuality, that is to say a transformation of the relationship of each to his body (to the other body), an approximation of the immense sensual organic material universe that we are, that cannot be done, of course, without equally radical political transformations(Cixous, 2010:110, Translation is mine).

As Cixous pleads to work against repressive forces that cause political oppression, the subversive actions of Virmati echo Cixous’ revolutionary ideas. She rejects marital confinement, subverts patriarchal values, recovers her body and seeks her adulterous affair. She disrupts the traditional values of chastity and virtue, transgresses her home, her family and Hindu culture to have sex with the teacher she loves with all her heart.

Cixous says: “And every story, every myth tells him: ‘there is no place for your desire in our affairs of state’ [...] Beyond that is the fall: enslavement of the one and the other, domestication, internment in the family, in the social role” (Cixous, 2010 :79, Translation is mine). For Cixous, the woman must show the man the abundance and power of the female body and affirm her status as a subject. The woman must regain her pleasure and her immense bodily territories which have been confiscated by man. For Cixous, the woman must seek her lost body, recognize it, learn to love it and make it live and enjoy personal

pleasure. Erogeny and jouissance can deconstruct patriarchal society and affirm female identity.

Virmati’s passion for Harish is intense. In Lahore, every day, she visits Harish and he kisses her sweetly. Kapur says: “All of Virmati’s feelings revolve around his touch” (Kapur, 1998: 67) The professor touches Virmati’s face with caressing gestures. He kisses her eyes, her nose and her mouth. Luce Irigaray comments: “The woman enjoys the touch more than the look [...]” (Irigaray, 1977: 25, Translation is mine). Irigaray places importance on the erogenous potential of touch. Touch triggers the strongest and most pleasant sensations. The teacher kneels to adore, venerate and idolize Virmati and their love. Virmati feels that it is ridiculous to deny sexual pleasure by clinging to traditions and moral values. The teacher spends the eve of Diwali with Virmati. He adorns Virmati’s body with an exquisite silk saree and Virmati’s body dazzles. Virmati realizes that this is a step towards realizing love, towards marriage and towards declaring publicly their relationship. Kapur portrays Virmati as a girl who vacillates between the amorous demands of her body and the desire to be part of intellectual movements with their friends. Although she is overwhelmed with guilt, she forgets it when she engages in erotic moments with Harish. She is tired of clandestine meetings and physical love underground in discreet places. She yearns to throw herself on the professor’s chest, to feel his love and sympathy, and to babble her emotions throughout her life.

The happiest moment in Virmati’s life was when she became a teacher at the prestigious Nahan school. She invites the teacher to the school with excitement. She shivers, but dares to spend the whole night with him. The sexual need of his body gives her the courage to face any degradation or humiliation in the world. Irigaray comments that “woman has sexes almost everywhere. She enjoys everywhere” (Irigaray, 1977: 26, Translation is mine) The feeling of guilt, the fear of his family, the terror of being exposed to society vanishes. Kapur describes Virmati’s feeling:

No fear of security, or of the house, no fear that someone may listen to them. For a brief moment Virmati lives that night, as if there is no tomorrow. In bed, they look at each other smiling, love begins to flow firmly and securely between them. He kisses the strands of damp hair on his face, he gently wipes away the sweat with the palm of his hand. As she sleeps in the circle of his arms, he kisses and caresses her (Kapur, 1998: 190).

Virmati lives the night for the pleasure of her body and the happiness of her heart. She thinks she belongs to the professor and her body is his. She can feel the power of her sexual desire and the violence of her passion for the professor. Kapur describes: "The fulfillment of their life is in their union" (Kapur, 1998:154). As Harish's second wife, Virmati finds happiness in talking with him, reading with him, eating with him and sleeping with him. Virmati is happy with her space, the bedroom. The bedroom provides her with the much desired corporeal pleasure. Virmati challenges the constructs of patriarchy to become a self-directed woman who can carve her own life and satisfy the desire of her body.

Conclusion:

Virmati is a stoic woman who rejects the barriers of society to assert her identity. She asserts that she has the right to let her body vibrate as she pleased because the body is her possession. Virmati is victorious in breaking the chains of patriarchal society and affirming her subjectivity.

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