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FEMINIST ASSERTION IN MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS* AND BAPSI
SIDHWA'S *AN AMERICAN BRAT*

RITU SHARMA¹, Dr. TANU GUPTA²

¹Assistant Professor, ²Professor

Department of Mathematics & Humanities, M.M.University, Mullana



RITU SHARMA

ABSTRACT

Discrimination against the 'fair sex' has been a much debated matter of discussion. Caught in a complex web prepared for her by the patriarchal world, she comes across a lot of hurdles in her way towards fulfillment of herself. However, she proves the worth of her nerves by crossing and breaking all the barriers of society and emerges as a person of strong will and self determination. In the present context, we would try to focus on the bright side of her personality. Her unending journey towards self realization has been highlighted through the various women characters living in entirely different societies following different religious norms but facing the same kind of oppression because of her feminine existence in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*.

Keywords; Patriarchy, Protest, Self -assertion, New Woman.

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The life cycle of a woman goes through various ups and downs while bearing the responsibilities of wifehood, motherhood and above all womanhood. Even in the most difficult circumstances, she remains like a strong rock unaffected by the uncountable hardships faced by her at every stage of her life and ultimately emerges as a fighter and survivor. Being aware of her own independent existence, she refuses to accept the established norms of restrictive patriarchal society which confines her in a traditional role of a traumatized victim and a passive sufferer. In fact, she wants to break her stereotype image of a sophisticated and elegant mistress of her husband's house and makes a way of her own by reflecting her own identity in today's world. Anees Jung's words are appropriate in this regard:

"Not long ago a woman who spoke about herself was considered a loose woman. To voice a pain to divulge a secret, was considered sacrilege a breach of family trust. Today, voices are raised without fear, and are heard outside the walls of homes that once kept a woman protected, also isolated. Some of the woman who speak here have stepped out. Others who have not, are beginning to be aware, eager to find expression. But let them speak for themselves.. Their looks have not changed, their manner has. Individually they have gained a name, collectively an identity. Their new power was not imposed upon them but already existed, enclosed within walls. Now that power has stirred out into the open. Their new strength stems from personalities defining their own terms, leading grace to living."(10)

As literature, a reliable mirror of any society reflects every minor and major change in social milieu, the struggle related to the emancipation of woman finds an important place in the writings of contemporary women novelists of India and its neighborhood. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat* presents the new images of women raising their voices against the injustice meted out to them since times immemorial. Crossing the threshold of their houses, women in new era long to become self-reliant and independent. Rejecting the notions of subordination, she demands equality and liberty not only in words but in deeds.

In Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, we find a gamut of female characters like Virmati, her mother Kasturi, her aunt Lajwanti and her daughter Ida. All of them show signs of rebellion against the taboos and restrictions imposed upon them by the orthodox society. They deny what they are asked to do. Except Kasturi all other characters break their silence and openly reveal their inner desires. Some of them successfully find their desired state while others make a hue and cry in a subdued voice. Virmati, the chief protagonist of the novel, has to perform a very complicated task in her teens, i.e., the role of a caretaker of her eleven siblings. Due to her mother, Kasturi's incessant pregnancies, puts a lot of pressure on the delicate shoulders of Virmati who has to do all the household chores along with her studies. When it seems very hard for her to do all these things, she breaks her silence and questions her mother. Being a young girl of her own will, she wants to excel in her academics. That is why she openly revolts against her mother as well as the entire social set up which confines a young girl within the four walls of her home. She says: "Let Indu Mati marry. Give her this khes you are making. I don't want any bedding, pots and pans, nothing!.. Mati, Please, I want to study... In Lahore... I want to go to Lahore.." (DD P.59).

Being a woman, one has to come across innumerable barriers in her pursuit for self-development. She is supposed to do whatever her family tells her to do. If she denies and demands for her desired status, she is labeled as 'disobedient' and 'unfaithful' by her own near and dear ones. In fact she is considered as a major blot on the forehead of her family. Even the society puts question mark on her integrity. But In spite of all these hurdles, her undying spirit gives her strength to move out of her cocoon prepared for her by the patriarchy and puts forward her own point of view. In the words of K Meera Bai, "It is a struggle against the hardships, neglect and dual moral standards to which women are subjected. The new woman's demand for her rightful place, recognition and respect due to her is prompted by an inner urge to make her existence a meaningful one." Like Virmati, Feroza in *An American Brat* represents the concept of "New Woman." Written in the backdrop of Parsi Culture, the novel unfolds the concealed layers of a woman's power and sense of assertion. Through the character of Feroza, Bapsi Sidhwa's hints at the tug-of-war between a girl's desire for individuality and her community that puts thorns in her way and tries to crush her freedom.

Deeply influenced by the American life style, Feroza wants to stay in America in order to fulfill her dreams regarding her education. Hailed from Pakistan she lives in America for a short span of time and make up her mind to get admission in a college as she loves the spectrum of openness and unrestricted freedom provided to the youth by the culture. In other words, she craves for what she misses in her country and culture. The novelist rightly gives voice to the unexpressed thoughts of Feroza when she says, "What could she expect to see of the country or imbibe of its progressive and stimulating culture, in a couple of months? How could she discover the opportunities and choice available to her in such a short time?" (P.119).

The attraction towards a new adventurous world makes her daring and modern. Eagerly waiting to begin a new phase of their life, both Feroza in *An American Brat* and Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* are ready to face the wrath of the traditional patriarchal system. Both of them question the destiny offered to a woman by her own family. The main difference in their struggle for fulfilment and expression comes before us in the form of their mothers. Virmati's mother Kasturi is a typical representative of the patriarchy as she believes in a woman's modesty and passivity. For her, marriage is the be all and end all of a woman's life. On the other hand, education does not have any importance in her life because she has to spend her whole in the four walls of her home where her husband is her lord and to obey him at any cost is her foremost duty. But Feroza's mother Zareen's point of view is not of similar kind. Though, she plays the role of a passive member in her family and seldom violates the established norms required for a woman to follow as a wife, daughter or

daughter-in-law. She also gives instructions to her daughter, Feroza to adopt feminine traits such as servility, tolerance and self- sacrifice. But she comes forward in her support as far as the matter of her education is concerned. Giving no ear to the objections raised by her husband and mother, Zareen articulates her voice: "What do you mean no good will come of it! Of course it will be good. A good education is a good thing!.. Mumma, times have changed. A lot of people are sending their daughters for education to America." (P.120). As Simone de Beauvoir rightly says, "She (mother) grimly forbids the child to resemble her, she wants her experience to be of some use, it is one way of having a second chance. The prostitute sends her daughters to a convent; the ignorant woman has her educated." (P. 534).

Besides it, a young girl whether she belongs to a typical middle class Punjabi family or from a minority class like Parsi community, she is not allowed to choose a life partner of her own choice. Falling in love with someone before marriage is considered as something shameful for a girl as well as for her whole family. In *An American Brat*, Bapsi Sidhwa has highlighted this narrow mindedness on the part of the entire social system which acknowledges woman an epitome of obedience and self control. When Feroza reveals her love for an American gay, David to her parents, her mother opposes her immediately. She says, "Love? Loves come after marriage. And only if you marry the right man. Don't think, you can be happy by making us all unhappy." [P.279]. Being a young girl of free will, Feroza hardly pays any attention to the words uttered by her mother regarding her relationship with David. She declares openly whatever she has in her mind, "We' re having a civil marriage in any case, a judge will marry us, That way I can keep my religion if it matters so much to you. Of course you know David and I are Unitarians." [P.278].

The above mentioned conversation between Feroza and her mother depicts her struggle and quest for freedom in taking the most crucial decision of her life. Eyebrows are raised when it has been revealed that she is in love and the boy is a non- Parsee. Brushing aside all the ifs and buts of her family and society, Feroza says angrily, "I am only getting married if the family wants to feel disgraced, let them." [P.279].

On the contrary, Manju Kapur shows the subdued rebellion of Indian woman through the character of Virmati. She falls in love with her married professor, Harish as she likes his looks and expressions for conveying his thoughts through poetry. Whenever she remains with him, she finds herself in a new world full of imagination, love and enjoyment. Fully aware of her engaged status, she cannot resist herself going near to that man. In her heart of hearts, she compares her lover with her fiancé chosen by her family. A canal engineer by profession, that boy has a practical approach towards everything in life. Devoid of deep emotions, he only conveys to Virmati his straight forwardness. There is an internal conflict in Virmati's mind and soul and she is not in a position to take a hard decision related to her marriage. At last, she thinks of ending her own life finding the only solution of her problem. But when she is rescued by her grandfather, she gives voice to her unexpressed sentiments. She tells them frankly, "And not marry... I don't want to marry." (P.87). She also reveals the root cause of her denial when she says, "The boy, I do not like the boy." (P.87).

Though Virmati's heartbroken and bold acts are due to her blind love for the professor, yet she does not spare him whenever feels doubtful about his intentions. She lashes out in an outspoken manner, "I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family's name, am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people will say if they find out, not being able to leave in peace, study in peace. And why? Because I am an idiot."(P.149).

She clearly asks the professor about her position in his life and makes a strong demand for a socially approved legal status in the form of marriage, "Why don't we get married? You say your family makes no difference. But still you want to continue in this way. Be honest with me. I can bear anything but this continuous irresolution. Swarna is right men do take advantage of women!"(P.149).

Despite her parents' consistent objection and disliking for her secret love affair with the professor, Virmati gets married and assumes the place of his second wife in his family, house and his life.

The life of her cousin Shakuntala's and her friend Swaran Lata depicts the woman's desire for independence. Both of them fight for achieving recognition for themselves and ultimately win it for them. Though their way is not easy, but they opt for a liberated life by defining the conventional norms.

Leading an independent life in Lahore, Shakuntala's encourages Virmati for breaking the traditional ties which marginalizes her position, "Times are changing, and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?"[P.18].

Similarly, Swaran Lata shares her own tale of struggle for independence with Virmati. Her defiance is reflected through the words she uttered to her parents, "I was very clear that I wanted to do something besides getting married I told my parents that if they would support me for two more years I would be grateful otherwise I would be forced to offer satyagraha along with other congress workers against the British." (P.118).

Through the characters of Virmati, Shakuntala's and Swaran Lata, Manju Kapur has shown the process of woman's liberation in its true colours. Slowly and steadily, all of them move in different directions for the attainment of their own selves. But the character of Ida completely resembles the image of "New Woman" who steps into a new role in order to lead a life of her own without caring a niche for her family, her society and her reputation. She breaks her marital bond and decides to remain single because her relationship with her husband is far from conducive to self- recognition. Being aware of her mother's anxiety for her future life, she assures her in another world after her death through her self determination, "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with mu head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and Leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore." (P.280).

Through the above mentioned discussion regarding the female characters of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*, we come to the conclusion that victimization of woman is a common phenomenon. It is an undeniable fact that her own family is the root cause her miserable plight. Being aware of of her suppression at the hands of her own loved ones, she revolts overtly or covertly and refuses to give up her intense carnal desires at any cost. Whether the matter is her academic pursuit or her marriage she never hesitates in breaking her silence and transcend her given identity. In the words of Jyoti Singh, "Rebellion rises within the form of conflict and often gives rise to feelings of worthlessness, low self-esteem, non- involvement, decompression and passivity, but the female heroes learn to counter it and get over the feelings of worthlessness." (P.160).

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