

Autonomy and Moral Values in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

*The present paper attempts to explore how the self develops through relationships. Caring and mother-daughter relationship are certainly central to the development of the female self, but other powerful influences play a crucial role in their inter-subjective world when the "self" forms relationship with others. In *Difficult Daughters*, the novel to be examined here, the female characters encounter immense psycho-social problems because the relationship they bank on is fraught with dangers. How this relationship diminishes and destroys the female protagonists and how they try to hold on to other relationships will be the focus of this paper.*

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The present paper attempts to explore how the self develops through relationships. Caring and mother-daughter relationship are certainly central to the development of the female self, but other powerful influences play a crucial role in their inter-subjective world when the "self" forms relationship with others. One of the most significant of these relationships is the man-woman relationship that provides impetus towards self-recognition. A "fuller connection" with another person is important for a feeling of well-being and authenticity. In *Difficult Daughters*, the novel to be examined here, the female characters encounter immense psycho-social problems because the relationship they bank on is fraught with dangers. How this relationship diminishes and destroys the female protagonists and how they try to hold on to other relationships will be the focus of this paper.

Man woman relationship is a recurring and inexhaustible theme of literature. Fiction has religiously focused on this theme, bringing about a social awareness, unravelling the changes in the social sphere and the effect on it of several subterranean forces at operation. There are myriad relationships in a family between its members -- husband and wife, brother and sister, father and daughter etc. However, over and above every relationship man-woman dyad is the most central. Healthy relationships foster psychological development of people but unhealthy ones "diminish or destroy people, lead to trouble and lead to what is eventually called "pathology" (Miller 1986:2). A healthy relationship is one, which vouchsafes mutual growth. Jean Baker Miller in her paper 'What Do We Mean by Relationships' lists five 'good things'

present in a 'growth-fostering' relationship which forms the tools for the analysis of man-woman relationship. A brief resume of these principles are discussed here.

In a relationship where growth and empowerment take place the individuals experience:

- i. **Zest** -- Each person feels a greater sense of 'zest', vitality and energy. It is "the emotion, the feeling which comes when we feel a real sense of connection with another person(s). It is an increase – as opposed to a decrease – in a feeling of vitality, aliveness, energy" (Miller 1986:5). It is there when one makes emotional connections and absent when one does not.
- ii **Action** -- each person feels more able to act and does act and has "an impact on the other in a very important way" (Ibid:6). Interaction is valuable for psychological development because it plays a part in "augmenting or diminishing other people – and the relationship" (Ibid).
- iii **Knowledge** – each person gets a "more accurate picture of her/himself and the other person(s)" through understanding each other's struggle (Ibid:3).
- iv. **A Sense of Worth** – listening to one another and responding with respect and care, nurtures one another's sense of worth. One cannot develop a sense of worth unless the people around us, who are important to us, convey "attention to, and recognition of, our experience" (Ibid:6).
- v. **A greater sense of connection and desire for more connection** – The increased 'zest', empowerment, knowledge and worth lead to a growth of sense of connection and desire for more connections.

A true ethic of care in women-centred psychology and moral development demands reciprocity between the person cared for and the person who cares. Mutual understanding, trust compassion, support lead to authenticity in relationship and concretise it. Problems arise when they are one-sided. They diminish and destroy a relationship. Viewing these relationships in the societal context, which determines the different codes of behaviour for males and females, one finds that for men the development of the sense of self is based on 'individuation', 'autonomy' and 'separation' and for women it is in the 'relational context':

Women not only define themselves in a context of human relationships but also judge themselves in terms of their ability to care. Woman's place in man's cycle has been that of a nurturer, caretaker and helpmate, the weaver of those networks of relationships on which she in turn relies. But while women have thus taken care of men, men have in their psychological development, as in their economic arrangement, tended to assume or devalue that care (Gilligan 1982:17).

The absence of reciprocity of care thus generate feelings of worthlessness, lack of zest, isolation, depression and inertness further leading to neglect, lack of communication, alienation, conflict and identity crisis.

The dignity and destiny of a woman is seen in marriage, as Beauvoir observes, "Marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (Beauvoir 1997:444). In the Indian

culture, marriage is a sacred institution where the wife is the half of man, *Ardhangini*, but ironically submits completely to the husband for he is *Patiparmeshwar*, an earthly substitute for God around whom her whole being revolves. Though Indian women have attained emancipation from the binding stereotype roles to some extent they still lead contradictory lives. What Manu, the Hindu lawgiver decreed still runs in the blood of Indians. According to him a woman must be kept in subordination. He compares a “woman to a river and a husband to an ocean” where after reaching the latter, the former completely loses its identity (Indra 1955:32). A woman is expected to submerge her whole being in doing her duty to her husband irrespective of what he is. This often leads to tension in the lives of women. Some continue in the battering relationship and some rebel. Through the experiences of *Virmati*, *Kasturi*, *Ganga*, *Ida*, I shall analyse how disillusionment springing from the absence of healthy communication and reciprocal care results in estrangement of individuals and create bad marriages, which leads to depression in woman. This chapter would study the two viewpoints towards relationship – male and female – and discuss the extent to which relationships are vital for woman’s quest for the self.

Women see themselves in relation to others. Therefore, they “stay with, build on and develop in a context of attachment and affiliation with others ... eventually for many women, the threat of disruption of an affiliation is perceived not just as a loss of relationship but as something closer to a total loss of self” (Gilligan 1982:69). Women, in order to continue and save the relationships from disruption suffer compromise and adapt even in battering relationship without raising their voice. They undergo suffering of physical and psychological violence masochistically. It is the ideal of womanhood not to voice their grievances. They suffer at the hands of brutal victimizers mutely, for, the Indian tradition, idealizing the myths of *Sita*, *Savitri* expects and emphasizes passivity in women. They efface their very being to serve their masters. Miller puts it more explicitly:

The woman is not encouraged to take her own needs seriously. To explore them, to try to act on them as a separate individual. She is enjoined from engaging all of her own resources and thereby prevented from developing some valid and reliable sense of her own worth. Instead the woman is encouraged to concentrate on the needs and development of man (Miller 1976:18).

In *Difficult Daughters* the Professor’s second marriage is occasioned because of the temperamental incompatibility with his illiterate wife, *Ganga*. His dissatisfaction and failure to educate her, make her read the books he liked, to become his companion invoked in him an urge to win the companionship of an educated, thinking woman, *Virmati*. *Ganga* plays her role of a devoted and dutiful wife, mother and daughter-in-law to the hilt. She mutely embrace her lot without voicing her discontent She organizes her life centring around serving others especially her husband, effacing herself for a man “who didn’t seem to care about her household skills” (37). Unable to conform to her husband’s standards she feels unhappy and discontented. In order to compound the situation she converts herself into her husband’s serf obliterating herself, thinking that that this would win her his devotion too. “... Some women come to believe that others will love them (and become permanently devoted to them) because they are serving these others so much and so well. The tragedy here is that people do not usually love others for this reason. They may become dependent on their services but that is different from real love and interest” (Miller 1976:64-65). She fasts twice every week for her husband’s long and prosperous

life, rarely goes out and never wears anything blue for he doesn't like blue. She presses his legs and never harbours a thought that did not directly pertain to his well-being.

The form in which women's ties to their husbands is structured is illumined by Ganga's devotion; "from washing his clothes to polishing his shoes", "tidying", "dusting" his books, filling his pens, "mending, stitching", "hemming" his clothes, "Ganga did it all" and "his sleek and well kept air was due to her ... he sent orders to the kitchen that their favourite *samosas - kachoris - pakoras - mathris* should be made ..." (200). After all this, the Professor thought she did "nothing much ... just little small things here and there" (199). It would not be a hazard to state that the Professor is utterly selfish who shuts his eyes to Ganga's intrinsic goodness; he is apathetic and seeks fulfilment outside marriage, ruthlessly hurting her. Her selfless devotion instead of being rewarded is punished by his rejection and for her love for him Ganga mutely suffers the anguish of emotional abandonment succumbing to her mother-in-law's advice that "our destiny is predetermined ... We can only control ourselves" (194). Her husband's statement that he cannot live his life tied to a woman with whom, "I have nothing in common, who cannot read" profoundly hurts Ganga (93). He, in an air of a dominant patriarchal male makes it clear that if Ganga has a problem with his second marriage he would move to another house. This threat silences and reduces Ganga to a mute sufferer. She curses her fate for being thus side-tracked by her husband who never speaks directly to her, and refers to her as 'she'. She smoulders with jealousy and bitterness for being disowned. Unable to rebel, her reprisal comes in the form of not letting Virmati enter the kitchen or wash her husband's clothes. Ignoring Ganga he assures Virmati that Ganga can never enjoy the place she does in his heart; "you are my other self. Let her wash my clothes, if she likes. It has nothing to do with me. I don't want a washerwoman. I want a companion"(201). Ganga suffers the apathetic attitude of her husband who cannot be forgiven for wronging his first wife and denying her, her marital rights.

Women like Ganga embrace the traditional image of ideal woman and totally efface their selfhood in favour of their spouses. They are akin to the kind of women Ruth Prawar Jhabvala illustrates: "Beat them, starve them, mal treat them how you like, they will sit and look with animal eyes and never raise a hand to defend themselves ..." (Iyengar 1985:41-42). They do not show any reaction or rebellion but remain silent and subdued. At times, the woman's "dependence syndrome" (Nahal 1991:17) and needs for "mothering, love, affection, shelter, protection, security, food and warmth" make them continue with their masochism (Stiver 1991:146).. For many women walking out of their suffering relationship is not easy for it is "often perceived by others, and consequently by herself, as aggressive and hurtful. She may then hold on to or stay in the position of relative weakness in order for this most significant relationship to survive" (Stiver 1991:148). They meekly internalise the 'feminine mystique' following the stereotype role-models: *Sita*, *Savitri* and *Sati*. Their identity rooted in tradition does not empower them to react like Nora in Ibsen's *Doll's House*.

The second set of female characters under study articulate their suffering and are aware of their victimization. They complain, express conflict overtly or covertly but do not walk out of their marriages, for matrimony, for most of them is a form of subsistence though it is no longer inviolable. Kasturi, Virmati, show streaks of rebellion by expressing their simmering discontent with their marital life but the main dictum dominating their lives is "compromise." "The Indian

culture, places a greater value of compromise on the capacity to live with contradictions and to balance conflicting alternatives especially for women” (Chitnis 1988:93).

Virmati's mother, Kasturi's husband is a simple man who looks after all her needs except one. His intense carnal desire drives her to incessant childbearing proving hazardous to her health. Seventeen years of relentless child bearing made her life wretched. Even the doctors declared that no medicine could help Kasturi through another pregnancy. Instead of rebelling against her husband, her rebellion comes in form of her trial to abort her eleventh baby, which can be termed as negation of her self. She holds her body responsible for her suffering. “Rebellion filled her. Why should she look after her body? Hadn't it made her life wretched enough?” (9). Kasturi articulates her conflict but does not blame her husband. She feels herself ‘a prisoner of sex’.

Virmati, is a woman of her will. She is portrayed as a “woman who breaks rules and defies traditions to get something she always aspired for -- independence. In the end all Virmati wants is to be the Professor's legally wedded wife and a happy home” (Gurdev 2000:5). She becomes a victim of her choice, torn between duty to her family and her illicit love for the Professor. On a close reading a discernible reader can easily postulate the egotistical and cunning attitude of the Professor, which the gullible Virmati fails to notice. On one hand, he wrongs Ganga gravely and on the other is cruel to Virmati, constantly procrastinating their marriage. He fails to do justice to both, especially vulnerable Ganga who in the end is abandoned by him. Mesmerizing Virmati by his romantic notions of a glorious world of freedom and love which he weaves through his high flown erotic diction, he continues to captivate her heart. He declares:

“You are imprinted on my mind, my heart, my soul, so firmly ...” (52)

“... I cannot, cannot live without you. Not in this world, or in the next” (82).

“Day and night I move with your invisible presence next to me, my love for your quickening my heartbeat with life and vitality ...” (96-97).

“Can I merely be interested in someone whom I have banded round my heart with hoops of steel? (100).

Like an ardent lovelorn person he threatens her with suicide were she to marry her “clottish” fiancé. Virmati, blinkered by her love for him, fails to see through the self-centred and disloyal attitude of the Professor when he tells her that she is everything to him and even his children are “nothing next to you” (112).

Unfortunately, this clandestine relationship does not give Virmati any respite. On the one hand, the Professor's empty promises to marry her “soon” land her in uncertainty; on the other, the scandal of an illicit relation with a married man give her social stigma. The Professor, in the entire affair appears an embodiment of licentiousness and corruption. He is callous to his wife and frivolous with Virmati. It goes to Virmati's credit that she insists on regularising their relationship by giving it a socially accepted name “marriage.” She succeeds in marrying him but in her success lies her failure because the fiery and zestful Virmati is reduced to being the Professor's wife and loses her spark forever. The Professor disillusioned Virmati who had expected to find in him an intellectual companion, not the lustful male.

The concept of morality differs in case of men and women. It is clearly evident through the assessment of the Professor's and Virmati's relationship. Claiming that he did not live with his wife, Ganga in "any meaningful way" the Professor wins Virmati's consent to marry him (112). Coming to self-defence he attributes his desire to remarry to tradition, establishing it as morally correct. He says "co-wives are part of our social tradition. If you refuse me you will be changing nothing" (112). On the other hand, Virmati, who stands as rock against her family members' pressure and defies them, cannot take her own decision regarding the Professor. She goes on enduring his emotional violence with the traditional belief that "she was his for life, whether he ever married her or not. Her body was marked by him, she could never look elsewhere, never entertain another choice" (163). She is aware of her being wronged. Her repressed anger and anxiety give way to depression and feelings of vulnerability. Psychologists put it that "during the immediate crisis period victims tend to withdraw from interpersonal involvement and social activities" (Sales 1984:117) and "experience mood swings guilt, loss of self esteem, anxiety and depression." (Ragga and Kilpalnik 1990:121). Virmati is transformed into a person "more alone than ever" (157) for she had given herself to "prove she trusted him" (142) and this trust having been belied made her feel cheated. Blinkered by blind love she succumbs to his carnal desire. At the same time she is overwhelmed with a "sense of guilt, her fear of her family, her terror of being exposed" (126). Continuous procrastination of marriage and subsequent pregnancy corrodes Virmati's trust in the Professor.

A conflict sets in and seeing her marriage unnecessarily delayed exasperates her. The signs of protest become conspicuous when in a fit of frenzy she exclaims:

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 a position of being your secret wife, full of shame wondering what people will say if they find out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace ... because I am an idiot ... you prolong the situation ... Be honest with me ... Men do take advantage of women ... (137-38).

Virmati does not want to involve in "useless love", a "doubtful marriage" but having undergone 'interiorized subjugation' she did not want to alter the Professor's "undying love for her" (124). Compelled by the overwhelming conflict and rebellion simmering within her, she leaves for Shantiniketan in search of peace.

Ganga and Virmati, both become victims of the Professor's immorality. They both long for his care and affection. Ganga suffers his negation but this does not diminish her allegiance to him. On the other hand, the Professor does not feel guilty for his acts. Virmati does feel the pangs of guilt and feels like a 'murderess' for robbing "another woman of her husband" (227). She considers her miscarriage as God's nemesis befallen on her. Pent up feelings stifle her, making her dull, reduced to "a block of wood, whose only response to the world was the passive oozing of tears" (228). The Professor sends her away to Lahore for further studies to maintain harmony in his home. Virmati avoids coming home. Pressurized by her husband she comes but, is "secretly relieved" when the vacation is over (237).

Kasturi, Virmati, show visible signs of reaction. They react strongly against their oppressive marriages but are also unable to walk out or to strike a change in their lives.

“Reaction is not revolution” therefore one must not confuse “retaliation or rebellion with revolution” (Greer 1971:353). They voice their ‘angst’ now and then but lack the power to break free from the situation. Their struggle to maintain the relationships binding on them, make them hold on to them and endure the suffering. Kasturi blames herself for her predicament and Virmati too is guilt ridden for wronging Ganga. Rather than blame the Professor she holds herself responsible for another woman’s debacle. Kasturi, Virmati, resist and react against the suffocation of the male-dominance but it is tepid and feeble in nature. Kasturi’s anger roused by her helplessness is turned in-ward holding her ‘sex’ responsible for her predicament. Her anger does not redeem the situation and Virmati reacts strongly in the end against the professor’s wrong but is happy when her motive of marrying him is completed. Marriage does not gain her much except perhaps respectability of being a wedded wife.

Failure to find joy and happiness in their marriage reduce these women to loneliness and existential angst. Virmati discovers that the Professor, despite his literary taste and intellectual thirst is nothing more than a lascivious male. Disharmony prevails in the lives of these women because their relationship does not offer them authenticity. They suffer because they are defined by their gender. Failure to validate their claim to social membership through relationships creates tension between responsibility to others and responsibility to self.

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