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Combating Alienation and Marginalization: A Study in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters

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Abstract

Modernization in human life signifies a life overburdened with materialism. In contrast to spiritual outlook of eastern hemisphere, materialism is the western lifestyle, which has become so dominant and captivating force in the past few decades that it has led human being to be only a part of "rat race" of "getting and spending". Emotions, feelings, mutual love and respect, moral values all seem to be eroded and man ceases to exist as a human being rather becoming more and more a robot without sentiment. Renaissance represented Man as the center of all studies but in the so called modern era Money has become the center of all human activity. But it is a bare ironical truth that despite all the advances, prosperity and progression in material terms man is leading a doubly alienated life. He faces social, psychological and familial alienation; and at the same time remains self estranged. He is caught into his self devised web and has become the sufferer and the victim of his own institutions. Difficult Daughters is Manju kapur's debut fiction where she portrayed three generations of Indian women on single canvas. This study investigates Difficult Daughters in the light of alienation and marginalization and protagonists attempt to overcome this isolation through entering into meaningful relationship.

Keywords: materialism; alienation; loneliness; identity crisis



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Introduction: Manju Kapur belongs to the legacy of post colonial women writers who is known for her sharp investigation of human psyche and an acute portrayal of the marginalized status of Indian women. Manju Kapur was born in Amritsar in 1948. She graduated from Miranda House College for Women and did her post graduation from Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova. Now she is working as Professor of English with her alma mater Miranda House for Women. Her debut fictional venture *Difficult Daughters* portrays three generations of Indian women on single integrated canvas. Here is an attempt to ponder over, trace out and investigate *Difficult Daughters* in the predominant undercurrents of alienation and marginalization and locate protagonists attempt to overcome their isolation through entering into meaningful relationship.

Difficult Daughters bagged the prestigious 1999 Commonwealth Writers Prize. The thematic fabric of the novel is woven seamlessly encompassing the three generations of Indian Woman and depicts the changing alienation suffered by women in different generations. Alienation suffered specifically by them may be defined as a sense of dislocation, a feeling of familial separation both physically and mentally. It is an estrangement from both values as well as from society. They become the victim of neurotic anxiety and phobia for the same. Consequently, her protagonists try to delve deep in order to find out and curb the roots of alienation but ironically their search increases the intensity of loneliness and frustration disastrously. Manju Kapur has very authentically portrayed her female protagonists as victimized subjects of alienation due to multiple reasons viz. self alienation, alienation from family society community environment circumstances etc.

Alienation: Multiple Shades and Aspects



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The theme of alienation was manifested in Indian writings in English during the year 1960's where it appeared as a main drift society was plunging in. According to Melvin Seeman the different manifestations of alienation in French and English fiction are "powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self estrangement" (qtd. in the Quest-2006:20). In *Difficult Daughters* Manju Kapur has presented three generation of daughters representing different sets of notions and beliefs.

- A) Alienation As suffered By First Generation Female Protagonists
- B) Alienation As Suffered By Second Generation Female Protagonists
- C) Alienation As Suffered By The Third Generation Female Protagonists

Manju Kapur portrayed nicely all three generations to make her characters live inside the realistic scenario. It would be jurisprudential enough to study the above three phases one by one and trace the themes of Marginalization and Alienations so as to meet out the objectives of the study.

A) Alienation As suffered By First Generation Female Protagonists: First generation consists of Kasturi, Lajwanti, Kishori Devi and Ganga. Kasturi mother of Virmati is an ideal inheritor of patriarchal values. Kasturi is brought up and nurtured according to the convention of patriarchal social construct and is immensely nourished with its values thus becoming an ideal inheritor of patriarchal values. She lives a doubly alienated life. She herself is an educated women but she gives priority to marriage as a social institution than any other thing. According to her family is prior to education and she values it most. She thinks that, "It is the duty of every girl to get married" (DD15). Kasturi is portrayed as an ever pregnant lady giving birth to eleven children. Her continuous pregnancy mars her health, she becomes very weak and fragile but she has to bear everything mutely. She can't



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speaking anything about her miserable destiny to her husband because he hardly cares for her. Their marriage seems only to be restricted to physical bondage and lacks any emotional rapport. They both suffer from emotional alienation. Kasturi even remains alienated from her daughter Virmati because of her strong adherence to the patriarchal values. They both are the representative of two distinct generations thus having the difference in their attitude, approach and priorities in life. This generational gap makes them stand in sharp contrast to each other. Their mother daughter relationship suffers with a sort of emotional want. Although Kasturi values education but for her marriage is the ultimate destiny of every girl". My mother my masi all studied. It is the "rivaz" in our family. Kasturi said proudly but at the same time she holds the opinion that education and books are to be acquired as long as they are not used as a weapon of defiance against traditionalism by women. Virmati's negation of traditional values in her desire and pursuit for higher studies and her resistance against fixed or arranged marriage poses an open challenge to Kasturi and she takes it as personal confrontation against her daughter. She says "At your age I was already expecting you, not fighting with my mother". She tortures Virmati for her rebellion by locking her in her room for several days. By doing so unknowingly Kasturi becomes the voice of patriarchy. This harassment leads Virmati to make a failed suicide attempt. Even this extreme step of Virmati fails to move Kasturi emotionally; rather her maternal instincts remain suppressed under her staunch adherence to patriarchal system and values. Thus both Kasturi and Virmati live a lonely, alienated, unfulfilling and frustrated life in their separate worlds, craving intensely for love, mutual trust and understanding, emotional support and for being wanted.

Ganga, Harish first wife is an uneducated and submissive woman but she stands as a true embodiment of Indian patriarchal system. She sacrifices all her happiness and her identity as an individual for the sake of Harish and his family. She works like machine throughout the day for



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completing the household works but despite all her devotion she is doomed to suffer and lead a lonely and rejected life. Harish who is a professor and intellectual person does not find his wife Ganga, an uneducated woman at par with himself. He neglects her and finds himself attracted towards Virmati for her deep interest in learning and her quest for knowledge. Harish and Virmati's attraction finally culminates into marriage, thus bringing a great shock to Ganga. She finds her trust and devotion being betrayed by Harish and is filled with the feeling of extreme devastation.....“what have I done”, she wailed, “that God should punish me like this” “Tell me, what I did wrong”(DD211).

B) Alienation As Suffered By The Second Generation Female Protagonists:

Virmati, Shakuntala and Swarnlata are the female characters representing the second generation. Their characters are carved round about the time of independence. Virmati, the protagonist of the novel is not blessed with a gifted life. Right from her childhood she has to bear the responsibilities of her family and siblings. She has to do all the household works and take care and look after her ten siblings. She became almost a mother to them. Kasturi, Virmati's mother took her for granted. She never bothered about the psyche of this little girl and ever neglected her emotional needs, feelings and longing for love. Kasturi's voice of patriarchy becomes more stern when Virmati refuses her arrange marriage with Inderjit. She harasses her by locking her in” kotha room” where Virmati feels alienated from her family for first time. She shares her feeling of anger and abandonment with Harish through a letter. She writes, “Each time I hear the door shut, I burn with anger and humiliation. What have I done. I am just like the sacks of wheat and dal here, without my own life” (DD93). Even Harish who is blessed with a dignified profession and a devoted wife suffers with psychological alienation. Being an intellectual he finds his illiterate wife Ganga to be the most incompatible match for him and craves for an educated companion with whom he could find self expression. He tells Virmati, “what it takes away from the woman I live with. Apart from the planets in the house of marriage, of course, she is a good



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woman, runs the house to perfection, and looks after my family, as though they were her own. Despite all this, I am lonely, lonely, lonely” (DD103).

Both Harish and Virmati are victimized by loneliness and are alienated and inwardly both of them have the intense longing for ‘being loved’ and ‘being wanted’. They suffer with the same existential conditions of loneliness, the absence of relationships, the feeling of dissociation from others as well as meaninglessness in their lives. It is not love but the lack of love which brings them close to each other. They strive to fill up their emptiness and void by marrying each other. But their marriage does not prove to be a Utopia for her as she dreamt of earlier. Marrying an already married man and a father of two children, instead of providing her a recluse shatters her dreams of a better and secured life. Virmati becomes doubly alienated. She is alienated from her family members as well as she is not welcomed and accepted in Harish’s family. She feels dispossessed and isolated and regrets her decision, “I should never have married you” she said slowly, “and it is too late now I never have seen it so clearly. It is not fair” (DD212). It is not the end of male oppression which is an integral part of patriarchal built of society but it also becomes evident when Harish forces Virmati to abort her child and she has to surrender before his will. Thus Virmati’s life becomes a symbol of endless battle where sometimes she feels miserable about herself. As the novel progresses we find Virmati emerging out as “a new and progressive woman”. Her endless trials help her to evolve and learn the true essence of life. She rebuilds her inner strength and boosts up her confidence to out a new identity for herself. She breaks away from all the shackles of age old traditions and moves to Lahore for pursuing her higher studies and thus redefining her life once again.

C) Alienation As Suffered By The Third Generation Female Protagonists: Ida, daughter of Virmati identifies herself with the third generation of women belonging to the post-colonized India. She is an embodiment of a new woman who is quite conscious about her rights,



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equal status and individual identity in a male oppressed society. Although she loved her mother Virmati but rebels against the way she spent her life. “The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother” (DD Kapur¹). It has been very aptly said “The best way for us to cultivate fearlessness in our daughters and other women is by example. If they see their mothers and other women in their lives going forward despite fear they will know it is possible” Gloria Steinem (writer and activist). Ida is an ideal portrayal of a modern woman who is quite progressive and liberal in her thoughts and deeds but deep beneath her modernism she leads a cursed life. Her denial and rejection of marriage as a social institution makes her an issueless divorcee. After the death of her mother Virmati she becomes parentless also. She suffers with a shock and apparently finds no reason to live more. She craves for her own identity and tries to carve it out by tracing her mother Virmati’s past. Therefore her journey which began with alienation ends up with complete identification. Lastly she acknowledges that “adjust compromise and adopt” are the key elements which makes a man’s life worth living.

Difficult Daughters as Indian Social Panorama of Combating Alienation and Marginalization:

Thus, after scrutinizing thoroughly and going through the in depth study of the lives of the female protagonists representing their own respective generations it may justifiably concluded that all of them are alienated in their lives in their own destined way. Even the advancement of time and space cannot provide any relief or riddance from alienation.

First generation.....Kasturi, Lajwanti and Ganga the leading females of first generation suffer with familial alienation because of their strict imbibitions of patriarchal values and try to redefine themselves within this limited sphere

Second generation...Virmati, the leading lady of second generation, although educated but suffers with intense loneliness while remaining within her family, but lastly she breaks herself away from all the age old traditions to explore the new horizons in life.



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Third generation....Ida, a true embodiment of a progressive woman very aptly portrays the loneliness emerging out of a conflict between tradition and modernity but she learns to combat this alienation by developing an attitude of compromise and adjustment.

Rather, to contradict above them all it would be fitfully advisable that, "Every women has the right to become herself and to do whatever she needs to do" (Ani Di Franco. Activist). Miss. Martina Navratilova advises women to not to adhere or to abide by any limits in her words, "I think the key is for women not to set any limits". Thus for her liberation, rehabilitation and emancipation she has to challenge her own comfort zone instead facing inflictions of the gendered society.

So far as the encouraging aspect of the protagonists of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* are concerned their indomitable spirit which keeps them struggling against all the sufferings in their lives and thus trying to create an individual identity for themselves.

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