

Women suffering from Identity Crisis: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters and Custody*

Usha Kaushik

Assistant Professor,
V M Patel College of Management Studies,
Ganpat University, Gujarat, India
Email: usha.kaushik@ganpatuniversity.ac.in

Krupa Raval

Research Scholar,
Faculty of Social Sciences & Humanities,
Ganpat University, Gujarat, India
Email: ksraval2010@gmail.com

Abstract

The word 'Identity' is generally believed to be a 'distinctive' characteristic belonging to any given individual or a group. A person spends his/her whole life searching for identity or creating it as per his/her desire which is of course, opposite to the age-old established identity and this contradiction results in identity crisis. In the Post Independent era, the concept of identity and identity crisis came to be one of the major areas of interest and highly adopted subject for the writers of Indian English Fiction.

*Manju Kapur one of the most famous modern Indian English women novelists has delineated women who suffer from identity crisis because their definition of 'self' or 'identity' is against the social and traditional norms. The research discusses how the author has attempted to draw out the social, emotional and psychological causes of identity crisis through her leading female characters in two of her novels named *Difficult Daughters and Custody*.*

Key Words

Identity, Identity Crisis, Self, Manju Kapur

Citation:

Kaushik Usha and Desai Ankita. Women suffering from Identity Crisis: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters and Custody*. *Ganpat University Journal of Applied Research In Social Sciences & Humanities*, 6 (1 & 2), (2017): 75-81.

'Identity' is not an unfamiliar word rather it's the most desirable thing to have by every human being in this world. One cannot live without identity because it is a psycho-sociological urge to survive. According to the Oxford dictionary, the semantic meaning of 'identity' is "the fact of being who or what a person or thing is". When a person refuses to accept the traditional identity given by society he /she faces identity crisis- a situation of discord between the person and the society or of the clash between the desired identity and the decided (by the society) identity. Erik Erikson, a German-born psychologist known for his theory on 'psychological development of human beings,' coined the term 'identity crisis' which is defined as 'a period of uncertainty and confusion in which a person's sense of identity becomes insecure, typically due to a change in his/her expected aims or role in society. With the advent of the twentieth century, the thematic concern of Indian English novelists has shifted from outer to the inner world; from a public to private sphere. As a result, the patterned themes of social issues, a struggle for freedom, communal problems, miserable conditions of untouchables and women, etc. came to be replaced with the modern themes of human existence, absurdity, the quest for self and identity crisis. The novelists moved towards the psycho-sociological assessment of their characters; expressing their thoughts, emotions and mental turmoil. It paved the way for the new generation of Indian English novels and that is the third mode of Indian English novel viz. "Psychological novels-showing an introspective concern with the individual", Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks thus,

The serious Indo-Anglian novelist no longer seems interested in simply documenting or hopefully improving the country, but in trying to depict the individual's groping towards self-realization. (Kapur,D.D 23)

To this third mode of a novel, women novelists of the age brought out a phenomenal success and constituted a significant sub-genre of women's writings. Prominent among these are Kamala Markandaya, NayantaraSahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Das, JhumpaLahiri, Gita Hariharan, Rama Mehta, Manju Kapur, and Arundhati Roy. Their works have proven to be an evidential record of a woman's position, situation, and condition in the society that has partially changed but not significantly. A woman suffers from a dual identity crisis- as a woman and as a human being and therefore the question of identity in women and of women has always remained an unsolved puzzle. Above, women novelists have imparted a psychological depth to their writings by projecting female psyche, inner aspirations, hopes, desires, and anxieties while talking about the female quest for identity. As Dr. Ashok Kumar says,

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. (Kumar. 48)

Manju Kapur, one of the leading women novelists of the age, is a versatile genius who in her novels presents various facets and colours of modern Indian life in socio-cultural context with special attention given to women. Kapur, born on 25th October 1948, was a professor of English literature at Miranda House College, Delhi University. Kapur is known for her in-depth observation, style of writing, an art of characterization and pre-meditated subjects. She is frank in her opinions and bold in her expressions. Though she has also experimented with short stories and poems, her fame mainly rests upon her five novels: *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant*, and *Custody*. In her novels, women are of core importance and are delineated from head to toe including their hopes, aspirations, frustration, feelings, and thoughts. Her female protagonists are mostly educated women from the middle class or upper-middle-class family, struggling for freedom and rights. They are trapped midway between tradition and modernity, between society and self. In her novels, women are shown to be the victims of the so-called male chauvinism but at the same time, her women do not sit back keeping mum rather they turn out rebellious or dare to speak out their minds. The present research studies two of Manju Kapur's novels and attempts to analyze the circumstances and incidents responsible for identity crisis in women protagonists.

Manju Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters* published in 1998, won her the Commonwealth Writer's Prize for the best first book (Eurasia). The story is about a woman split among family duty, desire for education and illicit love. Set around the turbulent years of World War II and partition of India, the novel depicts the women of three generation- Kasturi, the mother, Virmati, the difficult daughter of second generation and Ida, Virmati's only daughter, a childless divorcee who is unable to develop an understanding with her mother during her lifetime. The story of the novel largely revolves around Virmati tracing her quest for identity, for space to study, for attention and love, for a freedom to live as per her likes.

Like Sigmund Freud, Erik Erikson has also stressed the importance of early childhood experiences in the formation and development of personality. According to Erikson, a mother is a significant person in her child's life whose love and responsiveness develop trust and security in a child. If the child is inadequately handled, the child becomes insecure and mistrustful which results in identity crisis. This is the case with Virmati too. She never receives any love or attention from her mother. Being the eldest daughter, she

is burdened with the family duties of looking after her ten younger siblings. Because of her mother's incessant breeding, Virmati never gets free time; she can't play or study. "Ever since Virmati could remember she had been looking after children. It wasn't only baby Parvati to whom she was indispensable; to her younger siblings she was second mother as well" (DD. 6) At times Virmati constantly yearns for her mother's love, for her attention and affection but-

When she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away. 'Have you seen to their food-milk-clothes-studies-?'...Protest Virmati finally. 'Why can't Indumati also take responsibility? Why does it always have to be me?'' You are the eldest. If you don't see to things, who will? (Kapur,DD.6-7)

Erikson firmly believes that adolescence is an important stage for the development of personality. It is during this stage that the adolescent will reexamine his identity and try to find out exactly who he or she is. During this period, one starts exploring possibilities and begins to form one's own identity based upon the outcome of their explorations. Failure to establish a sense of identity within can lead to identity crisis. Also, pressuring someone into identity can result in rebellion in the form of establishing a negative identity, and also in the feeling of unhappiness. Virmati, an adolescent is also passing through the process of identity formation. Meanwhile, Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin, her role model influences her a lot. She, who is doing her M.Sc. in Lahore, inspires Virmati for further study.

Now Virmati too wants to be self-dependent, defiant and assertive just like her cousin Shakuntala and therefore, she also tries to find out her identity and independence outside the home i.e. through her education at Lahore College. To study further, Virmati fights with her mother and her family. When she fails her exam, she is engaged to a canal engineer. But, She boldly refuses her family's decision of her arranged marriage. "The family brands her 'to be restless, sick and selfish' and locks her up." (Sudhashree. 165). Being deprived of love and care since her childhood, Virmati enjoys the attention given to her by Professor Harish. She finally chooses to marry Harish. After five years of ups and downs, Harish marries her and she becomes his second wife, an illegal wife. Virmati is not unaware of the consequences she has to face after her marrying a married man; both her family and society are not going to accept their marriage.

Virmati was sure that neither parents nor grandfather would ever forgive her. The process of rejection that had started with Tarsikka would be completed. Let them damn her as they might at least she had her new life...(Kapur 207)

However, she gets shocked as the Professor refuses to leave his first wife. She ends up being marginalized by her own family and despised by her husband's family. Now for Virmati circumstances have become even more difficult to live in; here as well, she has to struggle for the sake of her rights and recognition. Virmati faces rejection and hatred from both her family and her husband's family. Feelings of guilt and insult hover around her every time. Gradually, she feels lonely, depressed and dissatisfied. Her constant struggle for identity puts her in a state of mental unrest. She then starts her further education in Lahore to regain her lost self-esteem and selfhood but, she fails to revive herself; she still feels desolated and misplaced. The author writes as, "Virmati's life in Lahore was isolated. She was married with a husband, a co-wife and two stepchildren. She had one abortion and one miscarriage. These barriers divided her from her fellows..." (DD. 250) Throughout the novel, Virmati keeps searching for her own space and identity, first in her family and then in her husband's family. Her incessant attempts to find valuable recognition for herself in society are also suggestive of her identity crisis. Ultimately, she stands bewildered and dissatisfied; spends the rest of her life in restlessness and endless anxieties. Just because she elects a life of her choice which is against the social norms and traditions, Virmati has to suffer identity crisis till the end of her life.

Manju Kapur's another famous novel *Custody* published in 2011 is also a tale of marriage crippled by a socially unacceptable romance upon which the concept of identity crisis or quest for self has been designed. The novel is about two women- Ishita and Shagun with two different attitudes. Taking the issue of the conflict between husband and wife, Manju Kapur talks about the identity crisis, women face during their marital life. Kapur explores the influences of modern life as the story revolves around Raman and Shagun who are couple along with charismatic Ashok Khanna, Raman's boss and Ishita, a childless divorcee. Shagun is not portrayed as a submissive wife in the manner of R.K. Narayan's Savitri in *The Dark Room*. She is an ultra-modern woman who does not endure discontentment in marriage or cheat behind her husband's back instead she leaves her perfect picture family behind, divorces her husband Raman Kaushik, marries her love Ashok Khanna and moves to New York. While Ishita is portrayed as a traditional Indian woman though Kapur does not draw her in the manner of women of a pre-independent era; she is educated and mature enough to take her decisions.

Through the character of Shagun, Kapur tries to depict the problems faced by urban middle class married women and thereby examines the roots of the identity crisis. Shagun, the only child of Mrs. Sabharwal is a free minded liberated woman who loves to follow her heart. She would do anything to fulfill her desire for materialistic pleasure. Shagun, an unfaithful wife is shown as "sick and tired of being alone" (*Custody* .9) although the marriage of Raman and Shagun "had been arranged along standard lines, she the beauty, he the one with the brilliant prospects" (*Custody* .14), yet she has every reason to justify her unfaithfulness. Shagun who appears to be the happiest woman on the earth after her marriage, is actually "unhappier than she realized" (*Custody* .26). Her marriage remains the foremost objective for her mother as she strongly opposed the career of a model that Shagun desired to adopt. "Do what you like after marriage" (*Custody* .11), Shagun's mother suggested her, but after marriage roles change with her increased responsibilities as a wife and a mother. So, it's the mother who instills the seeds of identity crisis in her daughter by pressurizing her to change her identity or role which drives Shagun towards the stage of 'identity- role confusion'. This makes Shagun to never identify herself with the traditional role as a housewife. Her meeting with her husband's boss, Ashok Khanna, gives her a way to fulfill her inner aspirations. Shagun's choices are her own and she is determined to tread the chosen path least bothered of the social dogmas that will not accept her illegitimate relation. Tondon says that,

Any woman who has broken away from the tethering of normal domestic life becomes liberal in her attitude to sexual freedom. She realizes there cannot be different standards for man and for a woman, sexual freedom is more often approved by emancipated women belonging to the progressive younger group, by woman unhappy in marriage, sexually frustrated, widowed, or separated. (Tondon .165).

Shagun's is also a case of 'identity-isolation', sixth of Erikson's eight stages of identity crises. She is an apt character for the aspect of identity-isolation. Shagun's longing for her husband's love and attention, her desire for freedom to supplement this aspect. Kapur shows how Shagun who has lost her individual identity in her 'stupid early marriage' seeks for the lost selfhood in her extramarital relation with Ashok. This affair gives her a delightful experience and teaches her to be self-reliant, confident, powerful, independent and resourceful as she pursues sexuality, equality, and self-independence.

The second protagonist of the novel, Ishita is an opposite of Shagun. Her life exposes the shallowness of marital life where a woman is stigmatized because of her infertility and the fact that she can't carry forward the family name. She suffers from severe mental torture with no one to take her side. A gynecologist investigates her and 'severe blockage of her fallopian tubes' is announced and she is confirmed 'an infertile woman'. She "thought it easier to commit suicide than to live" (*Custody* 63). Her childless marriage is plagued with tension, social stigma, emotional exploitation, and psychological pressure. As a result, Ishita experiences a lack of identity and feels that she is not fulfilling her role as a woman. There is both a loss of health and self-esteem as infertility denies Ishita recognition: "Hadh't they valued her for herself? Being childless, relegate her to the status of a 'nobody' as she has failed to prove her femininity through childbearing." (*Custody* 68). She experiences a sense of alienation and gets haunted by the feelings of self-hatred and inadequacy. All these leave her to identity crisis. Divorce fills her life with angst, misery, depression, dejection, gloominess, and sense of failure. But, she resumes her life from where she has left off five years ago. She embarks on a new journey with Raman. Ishita overpowers her inability and showers her motherly love on Roohi, a motherless and abandoned girl. Ishita struggles to establish her identity in her new home. In the end, she gets back her status as a wife and a mother for which has long awaited and suffered a lot. In her case also, Erikson's theory of identity crisis is well applicable. Ishita's character illustrates the stage of 'identity-isolation'.

To sum up, the friction caused in the life of Virmati, Shagun and Ishita is the resultant effect of clashes among paradoxical factors of the tyranny of patriarchal hierarchy, social roles, individual talent, and personal ambitions and all stimulate none but identity crisis in their minds.

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