



Research Paper

## “The Illiterate Earthworm in Darkness!” An Analysis of the Character of Ganga and the Importance of Education with reference to Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters

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**ABSTRACT:** Manju Kapur’s outstanding novel *Difficult Daughters* illustrates the importance of women’s education and their struggle for identity. Character of Ganga is shown as the illiterate earthworm in darkness. Professor Harish could not find a companion in uneducated Ganga whom he had married as a child. He falls in love with one of his students, Virmati, who was eager to learn and married her as a second wife. Ganga who was actually professor Harish’s wife did all the household chores but suffered rejection and humiliation as she was illiterate and not intellectually competent enough for Harish who was in need of a companion rather than a maid. Literacy rate of India shows that men are much advanced as compared to women. Ganga is not responsible for her uneducated state of life. The social attitude and traditional practice in rural India consider women only as child bearers and domestic workers. Their education is considered of least importance. We can compare woman to the river Ganga which is the river of life for India and yet polluted by us too. Similarly, the girl child is the life-giver of the human race and yet treated as a commodity. Ganga, Harish’s uneducated wife, is compared to an earthworm living in darkness. The darkness represents the evil practice in India of discouraging education for females and giving importance to males alone. This paper aims to explore and analyze the character of Ganga in Manju Kapur’s well recognized novel *Difficult Daughters* to determine the importance of education in a woman’s life in the time of globalization

**Key words:** Education, Women Empowerment, Illiteracy, Manju Kapur, Ganga.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur’s name is emerging as a strong signature in the realm of Indian women writings in English and particularly in the context of Indian Feminism. Her works present dynamic themes unfolding the hidden aspect of women’s life and demands a social justice with individual freedom which have created an insurgence and sensation amid literary circles. In fact, Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* is a real middle-class story written in the background of partition. The novel covers three generations of ‘difficult daughters’ who lived in both pre and post-Independence Era. Kasturi (mother of eleven daughters and the eldest is Virmati, the heroine, most difficult daughter) represent the pre-independent period who considered marriage and domestic work as the primary duty of women. Kasturi never wanted her daughter go for higher studies and is anxious about her marriage. She is the representative of first wave of feminism who has internalized the reigning patriarchal system. Virmati, her ‘most difficult daughter’, breaks all the norms and taboos set by her mother and the society and goes for higher education. She falls in love with her professor, Harish, who was already married to Ganga. Harish got attracted to Virmati because his illiterate wife could never prove to be a soul mate. After five long years of secret love, Virmati comes to Harish’s home (where his first wife Ganga and mother lives) as a socially accepted second wife. Rejected and humiliated Ganga is now condemned to become a mere ‘domestic servant’ and compelled to cook for Virmati! Ida, the daughter of Harish and Virmati is considered as a new beginning. The novel gives a lot of importance to women’s education and their struggle for identity and independent existence.

A good companionship is essential for human beings. A companion who can understand your strength and weakness at the same time is a blessing. Harish gets married to a girl in his childhood as child marriage was

so prevalent in his time. As he grew up he received an education and went on to become an outstanding college professor, but his wife remained uneducated. Though she was a caring and a faithful wife, Harish was not happy with her as she failed to be a companion in the true sense of the word. Harish says, "They do not recognize that I need the companionship of an educated, thinking woman nor that I feel lonely and desolate among all these people who care for me." (Kapur-94) Simone de Beauvoir remark in *The Second Sex* is make sense here, "Two separate beings, in different circumstances, face to face in freedom and seeking justification of their existence through one another, will always live an adventure full of risk and promise." (Beauvoir-248) Harish so desperately tells his educated lover, Virmati,

"Then Viru, consider, what is it that the woman I live with? Apart from the planets in the house of marriage, of course! She is a good woman, runs the house to perfection, looks after my family as though they were her own. Despite all this, I am lonely, lonely, lonely. We have nothing in common. I once wanted to share my interests with my wife, felt her pain at my estrangement from her. But she will not change." (Kapur-103)

He realized that the uneducated wife cannot reach up to his level of thinking. It is pointed out that women's opinions are not taken seriously nor are they treated as equal to man or given respect especially when they are uneducated and unemployed. In the novel we also see that the educated and open minded Virmati could become a true companion of Harish, "Virmati was the only adult female of the professor's family to enter the water, fully dressed in salwar kameez, of course. Any hesitation she might have had about other men seeing her wet was ridiculed by the professor, who was never tired of pointing out that he expected his wife to be a companion to him." (Kapur-229) Virmati could go beyond the traditional limitations set by the society to become a 'companion' as she became bold and liberal because of her education.

Literacy rate of women is much lower as compared to men. They are not given sufficient opportunities for higher studies with an orientation toward taking a profession. Marriage is the primary aim of their life! In the novel we see people realizing the importance of compatibility:

"It is unusual to have a daughter so highly qualified," he complimented carefully. 'BA, with a BT from Lahore. Very few of our girls are allowed to go in for higher studies. You should see the poor teachers of our schools. Some fifth pass, some eighth, at the most matric pass. What can we do? You are an example for others to follow.' 'Bhai Sahib, you know how times are changing. With the boys becoming educated, and often opting for professional careers, there is the need for girls to keep up with them. Otherwise, where is the compatibility?' said Suraj Prakash." (Kapur-179)

Harish finds his educated lover makes his life complete. He says: "Only now, with your letters which I read and reread constantly, do I feel a whole man again." (Kapur-95) We also find this incompatibility making Harish's life miserable, "When I look back, I feel I have achieved so little of what I wanted! My debts are unredeemed, and my family's ineptitude in matters of learning and self-improvement is a glaring as ever. When I see how eagerly my students learn, how they hang upon my every word, sadness comes upon me. Those who are my nearest ones are those whom I can help the least. She was the first with whom I tried, and the first with whom I failed." (Kapur-98) A wife needs to be intellectually compatible to her husband.

### **The Earthworm in darkness of Illiteracy and Tradition**

Education can free women from exploitation and low status of life. The uneducated Ganga is termed as an earthworm living in darkness.

Harish laments, "Do you know how an earthworm lives? It inhabits an extremely limited space; its whole life is spent within the darkness of the soil. It can neither feel nor see." He goes on to say, "Uneducated people are like that. We are being murderers towards ourselves if we do not develop our intellect. Any part of us that is not used will atrophy and die – the same is true of our minds." Harish points out the fact that he developed a special likeness towards Virmati because of her desire to learn; he says, "Remember, it was through your desire to learn that we are first drawn to each other." (Kapur-103)

Ganga was spurned by him only because of her lack of education. Harish rightly points out, "Who is responsible for this state of affairs? Society, which deems that their sons should be educated, and not their daughters. Society that decides that children – babies really – should be married at the ages of two and three as we were." (Kapur-103) He sees Ganga and himself as victims of evil social practices and attitudes. He says, "As a result, both of us needlessly suffer for no fault of ours. I cannot be an adherent to stultifying tradition after this, but Viru, you must make up your own mind about these matters. You are intelligent and capable." (Kapur-103) Harish does not blame Ganga for her ignorance but the prevailing social structure that hindered her path to knowledge and enlightenment.

One day Harish came home with a new educated wife. Poor Ganga could not comprehend it, "The tears, Ganga was determined not to show anybody and started pouring down her face. She buried her face between her raised knees, and wept as though her heart would break." (Kapur-211) Her life became so insignificant and desperate. "What I have done," she wailed, "that God should punish me like this?" (Kapur-211) She is a victim of blind beliefs and traditions.

“From washing his clothes to polishing his shoes, to tidying his desk, dusting his precious books, filling his fountain pens with ink, putting his record back in their jackets, mending his clothes, stitching his shirts and kurtas, hemming his dhotis, seeing that they were properly starched – Ganga did it all. His sleek and well-kept air was due to her. When his friends came, he sent orders to the kitchen that their favourite samosas – kachories – pakoras – mathris should be made. Along with te khas, almomd or rosewater sherbet of the season. All the effort of pounding, grinding, mixing, chopping, cutting, shaping, frying was hers.” (Kapur-216)

But she still failed to be a companion to the educated professor! She was doomed to be a domestic servant. It is observed that in India a full time housewife who does not have a job devotes 56% of her time to unpaid work. [Chaterji-9] Ganga might have devoted even more than this. It is also noted that “the kitchen environment is the most crucial in victimizing women... Most of the kitchens... are harmful, unsafe and unhygienic.” [Chaterji-13] Illiterate Ganga was neglected by her educated husband and even the hard work she did was not appreciated.

### **Education and the Changes**

Indian society traditionally, considers marriage as the only ‘profession’ for women. Swernalata’s (college friend and hostel roommate) words expresses the wave of change, “... ‘Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war – the satyagraha movement – because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, and going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream.’ ...” (Kapur-151) Virmati sets upon a course of education that doesn’t radically change her way of thinking, but gives her the gumption to demand to make her own mistakes. [Samuel-2]

### **Ida- the New Beginning**

“I was born. ‘Bharati,’ suggested Virmati as a name. ‘No,’ said Harish. ‘No? But why? I thought with the birth of our country...’ ‘I don’t wish our daughter to be trained with the birth of our country.’” (Kapur-276) Harish is totally dissatisfied by the sad realities around him, “What birth is this? With so much hatred? We haven’t been born. We have moved back in to the dark ages. Fighting, killing over religion. Religion of all things. Even the educated. This is madness, not freedom. And I never ever wish to be reminded of it.” (Kapur-276) He does not want his daughter be part of the evil attitudes and traditions. Therefore, he rejects the name Bharati, which reminds him about the nation. Harish names his child ‘Ida’. “But what does it mean?” asked Virmati doubtfully. ‘People might think it is a Persian name.’... ‘Let anybody think what they like. For us it means a new slate and a blank beginning.’” (Kapur-276-277) Henceforth, may all baby girls, born in India, be born in the ‘safe-hands of Mother India’ and experience this newness and freedom from gender bias and evil practices.

## **II. CONCLUSION**

Ganga ever tried to be an ideal wife. She is an example of traditional women of her era. Like most of the women of her times, she was illiterate. Marital responsibilities along with taking care of children and domestic work were the most important duties she was supposed to do. She did it to the best of her ability. But still she failed to become a soul mate to her educated husband. Intellectual incompetency prevented her from becoming a true companion to Professor Harish. Ganga is a victim of patriarchal structure of the society which gives less importance to women education. Ganga blames everything on Karma. She is stoic about it and accepts it as her fate. If she were to receive good education like Viramati, Shakuntala (cousin of Viramati) or Swernalatha (college friend and roommate of Viramati) she also would have had a better life and a compatible companionship with Harish. Mary Wollstonecraft rightly declares in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* that, “My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone.” (Wollstonecraft-8) Education along with social support will lead Indian women to progress and self-realization. If a woman has education and power to think critically, she can stand and fight against for her own identity for her society and for the entire world as well. The time has come to shift power in the hands of women.

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