

SELF AFFIRMATION IN THE NOVELS OF MANJU KAPUR AND JEAN SASSON

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ABSTRACT

Jean Sasson is a voice of women of the Middle East and her work 'Daughters of Arabia', portrays the exact suffering that the women of Middle East generally face. On the other hand Manju Kapoor is an Indian novelist, who's novel 'Difficult Daughters' depicts the women sensitivity struggling against the set norms of society. The present paper is an analysis of the concept of self affirmation in women in the rigid male dominating society, through the novels of these two writers, Manju Kapoor and Jean Sasson. It presents the contemporary picture of women's mindset who wants to get free of the domestic walls of their houses and make a new identity of themselves. There is a transformation in the portrayal of the women characters in the contemporary literary works. Women are no longer presented as a sorry figure, instead they are portrayed as strong fighting characters, searching for their existence. Both of these novels present the journey of the women characters fighting for the rights of women in the male dominating society that confined them to the four walls of their houses. In the process their relationship with their daughters and mothers suffers. The circumstances always went against the strong women characters but they chose not to surrender in front of these partial traditional rules of society and fought till the end to make an individual identity.

Key words- Affirmation, Transformation, Traditional, Individual identity.

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The issue of women rights and women independence has always been a widely discussed topic. With the raging wave of feminism the role of the women has broadened. A lot of writers write regarding or dealing with role of the women in society these days. One of them is Manju Kapur. Manju Kapur has significantly contributed to the progression of Indian fiction, who intuitively observes the position of women in patriarchal society and deals with the problems of women. Another one writer, who can be called a feminist writer, is Jean Sasson. Jean Sasson is an American writer whose works mainly deals with the life of the women of Middle East. Her work *Daughters of Arabia* is a second part of the book *Princess*.

Jean Sasson has written twelve books and all her books portray the plight of women, and their effort to get an identity for themselves. Sasson's novel *Daughter of Arabia* presents the life of a princess and the troubles and tribulations, she faces being a women. In this novel one sees the life of a princess in Saudi Arabia with her own eyes. The novel is a first person narrative and the voice of the narrative is princess's herself that makes this novel more believing and even more compelling. Whereas *Difficult Daughters* is a novel written by Manju Kapur, a simple story, movingly told. This is a story of sorrow coping love and compromises, made by female members of society.

Manju Kapoor, an author who is known for her works dealing with the innate sensibility to human relationships threads the story of *Difficult Daughter* through the relationships between mothers and daughters. The story spans the life of three generations. First it demonstrates the relationship between the lead character Virmati and her daughter Ida, then it encompasses the relationship between Virmati and her mother Kasturi, along with several other relationships such as love affair and other family relations. But the main significance of the story is that how a girl who belongs to a rigid

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patriarchal society tries to free herself from the social barriers. The rules and regulations of an orthodox family sting her everyday and then she decides to revolt against it.

Similarly, the novel *Daughters of Arabia* presents the story of a girl who although is princess but still has to face the unfair social rules and regulations that seems to be made only to demean women. Jean Sassoon is an American author who is known to give voice to the plight of Middle Eastern women through her works. She has written twelve books so far, each one of them dealing with the troubles and tragedies faced by the women of Middle East. *Daughters Of Arabia* is the second book of the *Princess* series, the bestseller books. Same as Manju Kapur, Jean Sassoon also exposes the reality of this so called modern world where women are still treated as lower than men and have no right what so ever, not even her own body in some cases.

For centuries women are presented as weaker than men and thus always been deprived of their rights. Even art and sculpture treat women as weak or docile. One who questions this system of society is considered to be immoral. But there is a transformation in the portrayal of women in the contemporary literature. Proving this right, Manju Kapur has tried to give a new viewpoint to the life of women through her novel *Difficult Daughters*. The main character of this novel, Virmati embarks upon a journey in which she fights for her basic rights. In her journey she meets endless sorrow and so many disappointments but she does not get dispirited and does not stop. Similarly the lead character of the novel *Daughters of Arabia*, the Princess Sultana faces so many problems while fighting for the basic rights of women but does not put a halt to her efforts to make the life of women a little easy on the land of Saudi Arabia. Both the novels use journey as a motif, as difficult daughter presents journey of Virmati to find a place of her own in this male dominant society and *Daughters Of Arabia* presents the journey of Princess Sultana to make the lives of women of Saudi Arabia a little better and easy.

Lives of women have always been difficult whether it be India or Saudi Arabia. Virmati belongs to a small town Amritsar in India and Princess Sultana belongs to a developed city Riyadh in Saudi Arabia, but both the characters have astounding similarities. Both the characters are at first plagued by the limit of rights of women in society. Virmati right from her childhood was burdened under the responsibilities of her siblings. Her mother was all the time tired and weak due to giving birth to eleven children one after another. So the responsibility of all her brothers and sisters like their food, their clothes their school lessons were on the feeble shoulders of young Virmati. When she yearned for a little affection from her mother, her mother used to get irritated and push her away, saying

“Have you seen to their food – milk – clothes – studies? . . .” So Virmati started to long for a place of her own. When she got to stay for some time with her cousin Shakuntala, she discovers a way to get out of these social norms that limit the life of a women to an early marriage then child rearing and household only. “Shkuntala sowed the seeds of freedom in Virmati” she encouraged her for independence and for equal rights of women. “these people don’t really understand veeru....women are still supposed to marry and nothing else” . At one point Kasturi says about Shakuntala

“All the time in lab, doing experiments, helping the girls, studying or going to conferences, tell her she should have been a man” (Kapur 16)

Here the mentality of orthodox male dominant society is evident.

For Kasturi (Virmati’s mother), Virmati’s studies were over but Virmati wanted to study even if she had to fight against her family for that. She wanted a free life. But as she was burdened under her responsibilities of siblings she could not cop up with her studies and failed her F A exam. So at the age of 17, Virmati was engaged to a canal engineer, Inderjeet. Virmati was outraged and frustrated at her failure, on this Kasturi says: “Leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first”.

Thus, during her search to find an individual space, Virmati has to face many obstacles. Princess Sultana on the other hand faces different kind of obstacles. From her childhood time she witnessed a great deal of difference between the treatment of people towards the female siblings of her and the male sibling that is Ali, her only brother. He was treated with so much love and care by her father and other people of family and servants that at one point of time in her innocence she took him for God and started worshipping him. As she grew older the restriction on her increased making her even more frustrated with the social system. Social rules of Saudi Arabia are different to that of Indian rules yet they are similar in restricting the female of the family to great extent. The girls of Saudi Arabia have to start to wear Burkha once they reach puberty whenever they step outside the home. That piece of clothes covers the whole body of women from tip to toe. Restrictions are made even regarding the use of cosmetics and make up of women.

When a ban on cosmetics had been announced in a girls school... I remember well what I had said to my sisters at the time. I waved the clipping angrily under their noses, ranging, ‘see for yourself! The men of this country want to regulate the wearing of our shoes, the ribbons in our hair, the colour of our lips!’

My sisters, while their anger did not equal mine, had sullenly complained that our men were obsessed with controlling every aspect of our lives, even that part of our daily living which was supposedly private.(Sasson 79).

Jean Sasson has exposed about so many restrictions being applied on women of Saudi Arabia. Such as women are not allowed to drive, they are not allowed to go in a flight without a male family member. And if a woman is blamed of having an affair, she is punished brutally whereas males are allowed to marry as many women as they want. All these are the problems of society that Princess Sultana wanted to put an end to.

Being a princess Sultana had so many privileges yet being a woman she had limited power in her hand. She wanted to work for the betterment of female of her country and wanted to stop so many brutal practices inflicted on women but a very few time she got successful.

One of the main characteristics of the contemporary literature is that it does not present women characters as weak, submissive or as a mere decorative piece instead it presents the women as strong influential and confident having a power to bring a change.

You may write me down in history
With your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise. (Angelou Maya)

These lines from the poem *Still I Rise* by Maya Angelou fits exactly to the character of Virmati and Princess Sultana. Here also the lead characters of both the novels is that every time they face failure they rise once again with a promise to themselves that next time they will try harder. If we try to explore the mentality of Virmati we come to know that she was hurt emotionally. Her desire for self realization was pressed down by her own family. Her mother never gave her the affection that she longed for and her childhood was spent fulfilling the household responsibilities. So when she got a little affection and care from a married professor she could not stop herself from getting caught in his trap and messed up her life thoroughly. She knew that she was going a wrong path, that she should not have a illicit relationship with a married man, and she never wanted to be a cause of mental agony that the professor's simple wife went through. But she did eventually become a reason for that.

She feels- "I should not, cannot, will not marry you. It will not be fair. And now she had married him, but the old words were still springing to her lips, so many futile noises in the air." (Kapur 212)

She had an illicit relationship with the professor, who just used her and nothing else.

Virmati always sat in the front row with the four other girls who were in the Professor's class and that was the only place he saw her in college, flower-like, against a backdrop of male students . . . The Professor drank in the symbolism of her posture greedily. It moved him so deeply that he remembered it in all its detail . . . the Professor's desire to possess had extended to her heart and mind. (Kapur 46-47)

Professor wanted to accept Virmati not as wife but as an intellectual companion. Whenever she needed his support he was not there. When Virmati got pregnant, the professor was nowhere to be seen. So Virmati had to abort the child because of the fear of social stigma, although it was very painful to her mentally, physically and emotionally.

That was all she wanted to do. Forget, forget, forget. She felt a deep emptiness inside her, which she construed as yearning for the professor. Oh how she longed to meet him, to throw herself on his chest, babble out her story, feel his love and sympathy, his regret that he wasn't there pouring over her in a great tidal wave that would cleanse her of all guilt and sorrow. (Kapur 173)

The character of Virmati presents the psyche of ordinary middle class girls, who want to have freedom and love and knowledge. But as is the case with most of the middle class girls, Virmati could not have that at her home. So she tries to find that outside her home. She was caught in a psychological conflict. At one side there were social rules traditions and norms and on the other side were her desire for love, desire for education, and desire for self affirmation. In her dilemma she chose her love for Harish, the professor that brings even more troubles in her life. Even after her marriage to Harish she could not get peace of mind or even basic rights of a wife. But she stood and chose to fight for her rights, and got successful in the end.

The male dominated structure of society and her desire for self realization made Virmati chose Harish as her husband although he was not right for her. This was her reaction against the orthodox society that believes in the subjugation of women. Same as that princess Sultana's daughters reacted against the male dominated society. Princess Sultana had two daughters Maha and Amani and a son Abdulla. Because of the social orthodox rules of Saudi Arabia her elder daughter started to practically hate males of

society. She goes through a psychological trauma and starts to practice Black magic. Also she gets indulge in a homosexual relationship with one of her friend Aisha. It's only after a long psychiatrist treatment of Maha that she gets out of her distress and starts to live a normal life.

Second daughter of Sultana also have a bad effect of the social rigidness against the women on her psyche. But her reaction to the social conservative rules was totally different from that of Maha. She becomes a religious extremist. She starts to wear a thick Burkha even when she is at home. She starts to preach people to follow the age old orthodox rules of society that does not give women any kind of right. She even gets violent sometimes on the matters of women's duty towards her family, towards her religion and towards her society. Thus the social environment of Saudi Arabia affects deeply the psyche of both the girls, making it very difficult for Princess Sultana to deal with it. It's only the extreme love and tender care of Amani's parents that keeps her safe and sane.

Thus the unfair social rules that tries to cage women within four domestic walls, have a bad effect on Virmati and even a horrible effect on Amani and Maha. Because of Virmati's resistance against the social rules she could not leave Harish, the professor, although many a times he proved to be a wrong choice for her. And Maha was so drastically affected by this social orthodoxy that she had to go through psychiatric treatment

Thus one sees that the *Difficult Daughters* is a novel presenting the story of a Virmati's search for independence at the time when a girl's future was decided by anyone but herself. Virmati faces problems, troubles, social stigmas but never cease to go on a path of self affirmation. Similarly *Daughters of Arabia* presents the journey of Princess Sultana, who is fighting for the rights of women in society, at a place where women are considered to be mere things for use. During her journey she had to face a lot of difficulties. She had to stand against her father her brother and sometimes against her husband. But she never quits her efforts for the betterment of the women of Saudi Arabia. Virginia Woolf says in her essay, *A Room of My Own*, "Lock up your libraries if u like; but there is no gate, no lock, no bolt that you can set upon the freedom of my mind". These novels are abound in different era, different place and different cultures. But still both these novels have astounding similarities, as both the novels presents the predicament of women in male dominated society and women's strong efforts to get out of these unfair rules and regulations, and their determination to have a place of their own.

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