

THE EDUCATION AS A CATALYST FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT; REFLECTED IN THE NOVELS OF MANJU KAPUR

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Abstract

Literature takes life as its theme and presents it in various ways representing the condition of the people of the society. Though human beings are created with equal rights and status; it is not assured to the women by the patriarchy. The women flocks of the community were snubbed by men and considered them as a being who should follow all the traditional rules and regulations of the society but men enjoyed all priorities in the society and the family. Indian society was deeply rooted in gender discrimination, customs and social evils. The multiple superstitious beliefs suppressed the women's flock and they were subjugated by both the educated and uneducated people. They faced inequality and rejection in social, political, economic and even in the family. Manju Kapur is a well-known writer who was convinced that only education can bring enlightenment, empowerment and cognitive development and lack of it creates a wide gap between sexes in the society. She wanted to promulgate the real struggles of women to enhance their lives and empower them in society through education and support. This paper explores the main ideas that how education becomes the catalyst of women's empowerment.

Keywords: Education, Feminism, Discrimination, Empowerment and Gender Equality

Introduction

Education plays a crucial role in the journey towards gender equality and women empowerment and it stands as the strong catalyst for women's upliftment. Education has the potential to shape the lives of women and it has emerged as the beacon of hope and change. Education is a strong tool to equip women with knowledge, skills and confidence. Above all, it helps the women to challenge the societal norms and regulation which doesn't support gender equality and empowerment. A society that lacks knowledge and insights under patriarchy will decline and may lead to stagnation. Feminism doesn't mean that it is against the male community but indeed the true side of the movement is reflected in getting equal status and equal opportunity. The customs and evils filled the family and society considered the birth of a girl as a burden and the birth of a boy a blessing. Thus, perusing the novels of Manju Kapur offers an insightful perspective on how education catalyst women's empowerment. Through her stories, Kapur likely portrays how education transforms lives, challenges societal norms, and advocates for equal opportunities for

women. Her work sheds light on the vital link between education, women's empowerment, and societal change.

The Primary Objectives of the Study

- To convince “*VidyadhanamSarvaDhanamPradhanam*, means knowledge is the most valuable thing.
- To give self-realization and empowerment.
- To retrieve from patriarchal control and eliminate old suppressing traditional rules and concepts
- To upgrade the values, dispelling ignorance and fostering intellectual awakening.
- To Promote gender equality and demotion of gender discrimination

1. The Indian Society in 1940

India is a multi-cultural country where many people observe their own independent traditional religious practices and customs. The country is also under the clutches of many unwanted social, political and religious practices which all have affected the women's community badly. The women were facing discrimination under the patriarchy and they were forced to be snubbed by the male-dominated society. According to VrindaNambiar, “in India, discrimination based on gender begins right at birth, or even before it.” The women of Indian society during the pre-independence and post-independence eras suffered a lot under the patriarchal rules and traditions. Higher education was considered a taboo for the women in the family and the society allowed the basic qualification to make them eligible for the marriage. Any woman who aspires to have a higher education is considered as someone who is against the prevailing tradition and family rules. It is evident from “*Difficult Daughters*” that when Virmati rejected the marriage proposal to pursue further education, her mother furiously cursed her, saying

“What crimes did I commit in my last life that I should be cursed with a daughter like you. (DD 59)¹

Women's flock was suffocated under the patriarchy and tradition. The empowerment and emancipation of women were not possible and it was beyond imagination. The uneducated and patriarchal Indian society gave more importance to annoying practices before and after freedom. Biological differences made gender inequality but education enhanced the opportunities and status. The worse condition of women in Indian society made Manju Kapur thoughtful and her interest in fighting against dehumanizing acts made her more influenced to contribute a lot to the society for the entire women community of India.

2. Why Women Education.

¹Kapur. *Difficult Daughters*. P.55.

It is essential to have education for the women in the community for their empowerment and gender equality. Access to education allows women to gain knowledge, development of skills and equality. Women's education in Indian history has evolved significantly over time. Traditionally, women's education was limited and often confined to domestic skills and household duties. However, some ancient texts like the Vedas and the Upanishads did acknowledge the importance of educating women. Women had equal opportunity and status during the Vedic period. All the women had access to education during Vedic time and history shows that many educated women gradually eroded. It is known that many women candidates were enrolled for education in Nalanda, Vikramshila and Takshila. Whereas from 500 BC the status of women started to decline gradually. During the British colonial rule in India, efforts were made to promote Western education for both men and women. Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar encouraged women's education and social reforms. They fought against gender discrimination and the inhumane activities that are prevailing in society. The British understood that the improvement of Indian women is only through education and apart from that it is impossible. They insisted on spreading education to all the people of India through English medium. The emergence of British rule in India eliminated evil practices like sati, child marriage, female infanticide, etc...

3. Background of the Study

Feminism is a cultural, political and social movement that helps in obtaining women's rights and equality. The suffering of women needs to be eliminated their status has to be improved and should be given equal opportunities with men. The movement emerged as a reaction against the existing rules that degraded the women's flock. Women empowerment is the concern of all feminist writers and they gave more importance to uplifting women throughout their writings. Indian English literature is known for many brilliant writers who bring their creativity and creative ideas through their writings. Manju Kapur is a notable and creative writer and she portrays the condition of the women and the society. Pen is her weapon to fight against existing social issues such as male chauvinism, gender discrimination and inequality. Kapur is a strong prominent post-colonial writer and her novels are the manifestation of women's struggles and issues against patriarchy and superstitious beliefs that exist in the society. Manju Kapur is an acclaimed Indian author, who has beautifully depicted the role of education as a catalyst for women's empowerment in her novels. Kapur highlights how education empowers women to enable them to come out of social norms to challenge patriarchal tradition and inequality that exists in society. They present education as the tool to pursue the dream and maintain gender equality. She was convinced that only education could bring empowerment to them. She has set the characters as making their journey from illiteracy to literacy, tradition to modernity and empowerment. According to Dr. Farzana S. Ali. "Kapur's novels present a long, unending struggle for women to establish equality with men in society. The distinction between man and woman in the Indian context becomes the major theme of her fiction. "Kapur's novels manifest women's struggle for emancipation from economic, political and social bondage." (Ali. 5)

Indian writing has been recognized and internationally accepted due to its different way of presentation, creativity and the theme it deals with. It expresses the life of the people of the society. The motto of Indian writing was to circulate awareness on rights and equality and to express the condition of the life of the women in the society. The silent motto “Educate to Empower” was disseminated. Education arouses the confidence and knowledge in the women. As it is observed “The backdrop of her novel is mostly the pre-independence and post-independence India where there is a twofold struggle. Her characters represent each issue of women in society. When Virmati, opposed the marriage, Kasturi criticized the entire education system and schooling in her words

“they thought school and college would strengthen you, not change you.” (DD 59)²

4. Educate to Empower

The famous quote “Nothing Equals Knowledge” is worth considering now because it has tremendous meaning. The main agenda of women's empowerment through education is to remove the discrimination and exploitation that exist in society to enable them self-sufficient in everything. It is true that Sanskrit slogans “*VidyadhanamSarvaDhanamPradhanam*” Means knowledge is the most valuable thing. Knowledge makes everyone enlightened and makes them potential at multiple levels likewise the empowerment of women is possible only through education and it plays a key role in empowering women. It provides much impetus for women to fight against discrimination. Generally speaking, Women's education is a must for the progress of society and family. Education makes them understand the needs of the hour and enables them to be socially responsible. The women are living in a society where there is inequality and gender discrimination but education will help them to be more aware of their rights and roles in society and it will help them to break the cycle of discrimination and create a brighter future than the present. Women have the right to education as men in the society. Educating women along with men promotes the idea of equality and the development of society and family. Education makes women independent and confident. It is true in the words of Jawaharlal Nehru.

“If you educate a man you educate an individual, however, if you educate a woman you educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered”

Knowledge and education are the significant steps to the empowerment of women. Society and the dominant class rejected women's communities badly and considered them subordinate to males in all fields and life. They faced gender discrimination, discouragement from higher education and rejection from family and it is a question of why gender discrimination; since man and woman are created by God in his image and likeness.

The Bible says that

²Kapur. Difficult Daughters. P.59.

“God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)³

Many novels, both classical and contemporary have portrayed the transformative power of education on women's lives and their path to empowerment. Manju Kapur meticulously presented her characters to fight against the dehumanizing acts in society through powerful and educated characters. The character of Manju Kapur represents each issue of the society. In general, they represent divorce, discrimination, sexual issues and dowry.

The novel *“Custody”* examines the complexities of family dynamics, divorce and battles with a focus on the emancipation of women through education. Education is the key to empowering women because it equips them with the skills necessary to reject engrained social norms and take control of their lives. Since Shagun starts as a young, naive lady married to Raman, an ambitious man from a conventional family, she serves as an illustration of this empowerment.

As the novel progresses Shagun becomes increasingly aware of her desires, goals, and individuality. She is aware that her lack of education was the cause of her unfulfilled dreams and aspirations. Her plan to marry Raman and drop out of education restricted her options and independence. Her decision to continue education made to conquer the impossible and her transition from a submissive housewife to an independent woman. On the other hand, Ishita and Shagun, two of the characters are portrayed as strong, independent women. She has a career, is educated, and can support herself. When it comes to her educational and professional decisions, Ishita breaks social norms and conventional gender roles. She is shown as a powerful, self-assured lady who defies gender stereotypes to the fullest. Manju Kapur draws attention to the transformational potential of education by highlighting the parallel stories of Shagun and Ishita. These two women demonstrate how education not only imparts useful skills and knowledge but also provides women the self-assurance to follow their passions and defy social standards. In the novels Ishita and the other woman are both shown as strong, self-reliant ladies. She has a rewarding career of her own and is intelligent and self-reliant. Ishita defies social standards and gender norms by choosing her career and educational routes. It presents her as a strong, confident woman who resists the constraints placed on her by conventional concepts of perfection. Manju Kapur emphasizes how education can transform a person's life in the parallel tales of Shagun and Ishita. These two women show how education not only equips women with the necessary knowledge and abilities but also gives them the self-assurance to defy oppressive social mores and follow their passions.

“Difficult Daughters” presents the Indian society before independence. The story is centered on a Punjabi family. Kasturi, Virmathi and Ida are the major characters of the story. Kasturi stands for the conservative society and she doesn't allow her daughter to go modern, she considers that

³Gen.1.27.

women's ultimate goal in life is family, marriage, maternity and education. Education was an alternate option for marriage. According to Arpitha Gosh

“A daughter is educated not to go out and take up a job, on the contrary, her education is a trap to hunt down a good husband and become a perfect wife and daughter-in-law representing ‘Indian women hood.’”

Kasturi was raised in a traditional home where her education was valued as a way to prepare her for marriage. Her parents emphasized cultural values and household skills to prepare her for marriage but not for a profession. This demonstrates the widely held notion that a woman's primary responsibilities are those of a wife and mother. Kasturi's education is shallow and constrained, emphasizing feminine values and abiding by social conventions.

When we analyze the novel and learn the background of Virmati's family, can come to know that her family also encourages education to all the members of her community. It is obvious that Kasturi was pressured into her early marriage and that she is now trying to impose her will on Virmati. However, Virmati's life is guided by her schooling. Not that Kasturi lacked education. Before getting married, she had also imagined a lovely existence enhanced by both physical and mental beauty. It is clear through the saying by Virmati

“my mother, my masi, all studied. It is the rivaz in our family; said Virmati proudly. Even now my father keeps getting my mother books and magazines to read.” (DD 39)⁴

Manju Kapur makes a point of elaborating on how difficult Virmati's quest for self-discovery through schooling was. The relationship between Virmati and her mother was plagued by differences in how they viewed education and marriage. She imitates her cousin Shakuntala, who disobeyed her parents and had a life of her own. Virmathi was encouraged by her cousin and she was ready to accompany her to Lahore for her higher studies. Her cousin Shakuntala motivated her by telling her that

“times are changing and women are moving out of the house, so why not you.” (DD18)

Kapur makes it very evident that Virmati used the mighty weapon of education to bravely challenge the patriarchal society. Her family finally gives in to her intense desire to continue her education, and she is finally let to enroll in college, in Lahore. Lahore is thriving for more reasons than just her love. Her mind also began to learn about and comprehend fresh social challenges. Her roommate Swarna encouraged her to get involved in the social and freedom movements and she was encouraged by her. Virmati's education had given her the perseverance and capacity to move forward in life on her own and later she could become the principal of a Nahan school in

⁴Kapur. Difficult Daughters. P.18.

Sirmaur. She was compelling Virmathi to get an education because Kasturi discouraged Virmathi and Kasturi's ultimate dream was family and marriage and certain conservative practices and superstitious beliefs. Kasturi does not want her daughter to get educated anymore and she is not willing to entertain the knowledge for her. She wanted her daughter to get adjusted to the traditional rules and family. For her study means

“study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family. I studied too, but my mother would have killed me if I had dared even to want to dress in anything other than bought for me.”

We observe the mentality of Professor Harish, towards education through his words when he speaks about Ganga, his wife who was not educated at all. She was never considered as a companion or an accepted life partner, since she lacked education, he considered her as the servant of the house. It so happened because Ganaga had no education and lack of education made them in a different world. It is quite clear throughout the novel. When Harish talked about Shakespeare, Keats, talked about pakora and vegetables....

“I did everything to raise the intellectual level of her but she would have none of it..... You are my other self. Let her wash cloth if she feels; it has nothing to do with me. (DD 17)

The novel “*Difficult Daughters*”, is set in pre-partition India and revolves around Virmati's struggles and aspirations as she seeks higher education and independence. Education catalyzes Virmati's transformation and empowers her to challenge societal norms and traditional expectations imposed on women during that time. Through her pursuit of education, Virmati gains a sense of self-worth, intellectual growth and the courage to make her own choices. However, later it is clear that her education did not help her make a strong decision with Professor Harish when he approached her for his pleasure and that has brought her down and shame. Virmati's desire to seek higher education was rejected by her family members because it was against the traditional beliefs of her family and the community. As it is said in “*The Difficult Daughters.*”

“leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad-tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first.” (DD 21)

Virmati's education becomes a source of both liberation and conflict within her family and relationships and Virmati's journey reflects the struggles faced by many women who sought education and independence in a deeply patriarchal society. Overall, “*Difficult Daughters*” portrays the transformative power of education for women, highlighting its impact on their lives and the complex dynamics it creates within families and society. Virmati opposes traditional norms by giving importance to education because in many traditional societies, women were expected to focus solely on household duties and not pursue formal education. However, Virmati challenges

this norm by emphasizing the value of education for her and possibly other women, empowering them with knowledge and opportunities beyond their expected roles.

“mati, please, I want to studyVirmati flattered.
In Lahore I want to go to Lahore.” (DD59)

The strong willpower and the decision made her oppose the patriarchy and go ahead with her desire to have an education in her life. The modern women Shakuntala and Swarnalatha were a great inspiration for her.

Results of the study

- The study gives awareness that no woman should be degraded of rights and social status but needs to be respected.
- Women empowerment is needed since it aims at advocating women's rights and removing gender inequality.
- To know that the education will help to think critically and question patriarchy and gender discrimination.
- Free from physical and emotional separation.
- To ensure “Nothing Equals Knowledge”

Conclusion

Indeed, feminism does not attempt to promote female superiority over males, but rather equality and the deconstruction of patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequity. Feminism has made important contributions to the advancement of women's rights and continues to be a powerful force in influencing social and political landscapes across the world. The women's group can only be empowered through education. Society will continue to follow patriarchal laws and regulations and equality will not be recognized unless and until women are educated. Education is a true catalyst for women's empowerment, because knowledge provides insight, determination, and strength. The phrase 'Knowledge is Power.' is correct in every sense. The civilization will maintain its patriarchal dominance and numerous superstitious beliefs that lead to horrible behavior. Women's empowerment must occur in a variety of methods, which is achievable when the women's community is educated.

Women's empowerment is an extensive endeavor that aims to make them equal to the community's dominant class. In general, irrational prejudice must be eradicated to empower the women's community. Education teaches them to think critically and to question societal conventions that undermine women's dignity. It gives people the ability to confront unfair practices and create a more equitable environment for themselves. She investigates the transforming impact of education in altering women's lives and challenging societal conventions. Education allows the system to be free of conventional roles and family rules. When everyone is educated, knowledge improves and

when knowledge improves gender concerns are no longer a cause for concern and knowledge and education make everyone equal and knowledge will be the power and SarvaDhanamPradhanam.

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