

Sites of Oppression seen as sites of emergent new roles through positive resistance by applying the essence of power theories of Michael Foucault-A case study of the protagonist Virmati in Manju Kapur's difficult Daughters

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Abstract— Woman as such are generally believed to be oppressed and therefore sympathized and seen in perpetual plight. Michael Foucault has concentrated on the resistance strategies adopted by the oppressed. Foucault has a totally novel and refreshing point of view for power relations. What his work tries to do is move thinking about power beyond this view of power as repression of the powerless by the powerful to an examination of the way that power operates within everyday relations between people and institutions. Michael Foucault looks at powerful and oppressed in a positive way and that is the new angle through which I would like to analyze the female characters depicted. In this paper, I have attempted to look at the protagonist Virmati from Difficult daughters by Manju Kapur and her struggles against the powerful patriarchal systems as positive sites of resistance and not just sites of oppression. We can conclude that something new evolves from this power struggle which is a step closer to emancipation.

Keywords— Sites of oppression, sites of repression, power struggles, Patriarchy.

INTRODUCTION

Rather than simply viewing power in a negative way, as constraining and repressing, Foucault argues that even the most constraining, oppressive measures are in fact productive, giving rise to new forms of behavior rather than simply closing down or censoring certain forms of behavior. (Foucault 1978)

Much of this work has provoked a critical debate among critical theorists and political theorists, as the exact mechanics of resistance to power relations is not necessarily clearly mapped., but his work has nevertheless, occasioned a very favorable response from a number of feminists and other critical theorists who have found in his work a novel way of thinking about the forms of power relations between men and women which do not fit neatly into the types of relations conventionally described within theorizations of power which tend to focus on the role of the State, ideology or patriarchy. (Thornborrow 2002).

Marxist theorizations such as that of Louis Althusser, of the state's role in oppressing people have been found to be largely unsatisfactory, since they focus only on a one-way traffic of power from the top downwards. (Althusser 1984). Foucault's bottom up model of power that

is his focus on the way power relations permeate all relations within a society, enables an account of the mundane and daily ways in which power is enacted and contested and allows an analysis which focuses on individuals as active subjects, as agents rather than as passive dupes. Michael Foucault has revolutionised the concept of power.

He states in Power/Knowledge, 'Power must be analyzed as something which circulates or as something which only functions in the form of a chair... Power is employed and exercised through a net like organization.... Individuals are the vehicles of power, not it's points of application. (Foucault 1990-98). Thus power is seen as a net. And second individuals should not be seen simply as the recipients of power but as the 'place' where power is enacted and the place where it is related. Foucault's analysis changes our perspective also on the role that individuals play in oppression – whether they are simply subjected to oppression or whether they actively play a role in the form of their relations with others and with institutions.

The microcosm of the relation between state and subject is the intrapersonal relations within a family and a social circle. In his essay 'The subject and power' what he

terms as anti-authority struggles which he characterizes in the following way opposition of the power of men over women, of parents over children, (Foucault 1982-211). Foucault labels these struggles as 'Local' or 'immediate' struggles since they are instances in which people are criticizing the immediate conditions of their lives and the way that certain people group or institutions are acting on their life. In Volume I of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault states that 'where there is power there is resistance' (Foucault 1978). In order for there to be a relation where power is exercised, there has to be someone who resists. Foucault goes so far as to argue that there is no resistance it is not, in effect, a power relation.

In this paper I have tried to view the protagonist Virmati by Manju Kapur in *Difficult Daughters* as not just site of oppression against patriarchy and society but as site of resistance where the character struggles to redefine her traditional roles with a tinge of modernity and a lot of bravery.

Argument in support-(Virmati's resistance story against patriarchal forces) Manju Kapur is a woman writer who has presented a woman protagonist who ventured to carve her own identity in an era where even thinking of a separate identity was a taboo. 'The novel is the story of a woman torn between family duty, the desire for education and illicit love. Virmati is a young girl who has been brought up in the traditional atmosphere but is interested in reading books and acquiring knowledge. She has been brought up on the discourse of the limiting values within which a woman has to live her life. Rousseau has said for every individual "Every individual is born free but is forever bound by chains." Women in India are bound by uncountable chains physical and mental. Physical chains are the powerful people around her who dominate her and do not allow her to lead her life the way she wants. As Michael Foucault said power operates in a family and creates hierarchies. A mother is the most powerful person in the life of a daughter. A daughter in India is conditioned with the discourse of marriage from the birth. The daughter remains in constant contact with the mother and with the usage of her powerful influence, the mother molds the personality of the daughter with the gadgets of love, care, fear and emotional blackmail. The daughter becomes the property of the mother. The family into which the daughter is born also decides the fate of her personality. The power which the family members enjoy on the small child is used to condition the child to the rules laid down by the social milieu. Every social milieu has a fixed set of conduct rules. For the girls, these rules are very strict. Therefore every member in the family has to work hard to mold the daughter in a specific way. In a sense, Virmati is lucky to have been

brought up in an otherwise conservative but in some ways modern family, as they were ready to provide at least basic education to their daughter. Virmati received basic education without any struggle. If the powerful influence of her mother were not counterbalanced with the other impressions on her mind, Virmati would have been happy to marry the canal engineer chosen by her family. The first competition of a tug of war of power over Virmati was between Virmati's cousin Shakuntala and her mother. Shakuntala is the first 'New Women' created by Manju Kapur. Shakuntala is highly educated; has a lecturer's job in Lahore and wants to enjoy the freedom provided by education and her career. She has taken the decision of not marrying and has the courage to brave the society for her strong headed decision. The influence of the family and the mother is not powerful on her. She has carved her own identity and does not need the identity provided by the husband to live in society. Virmati is fascinated by her independent ways and dreams of living a similar life. Thus seeds of an aspiration to carve her own identity are planted during her conversation with Shakuntala.

Thus the discourse conditioned by her mother of tradition is challenged by the discourse of the life led by Shakuntala in Lahore. Shakuntala knows that she has created an impression on the young mind of Virmati but also warns Virmati that the family will not be happy to accept two daughters who have defied societal norms. Virmati is like the clay which can be molded to our liking. Her mother had been happy to rule over her and take decisions for her. She became influenced by Shakuntala but being too conditioned by the influence of patriarchy was unable to go against the system at that time. Therefore she accepted the marriage decided by her elders. In the tug of war for power over Virmati, Kasturi could win the race over Shakuntala. In the case of Shakuntala, the competitor was known and therefore Kasturi was alert to efface the modern influence of Shakuntala with her own strategies. But the ensuing influence on Virmati was much powerful and unknown and therefore Kasturi was caught unawares and came to know at a time when a lot of damage had been done. The foreign returned Professor with his sophisticated manners was too powerful an influence to resist. He began by paying attention to her education which no one had done till then. He showed an interest in educating woman and wanted companionship in marriage. Virmati had never been a radical thinker. She yearned for both the love of a man and a freer life than the women of the previous generation. As she came in contact with the Professor, she felt that he was a man different from his patriarchal counterparts. This unknown influence on Virmati was no match for Kasturi. In this case, Kasturi was trying to control Virmati while the

Professor was trying to win her over with love. The Professor had won the battle as Virmati fell easy prey to his mesmerizing words. The Professor showed her dreams of loving togetherness, equality and companionship. Virmati lost interest in her arranged marriage and the first action of asserting her identity apart from the wishes of her family was shown. Virmati with the courage provided by the love of the Professor refused to marry the boy chosen by her family. Thus, it is ironical that it was the support and love from a man, a part of the same dreaded patriarchy which gave her courage to assert her own decision before her family. Thus Virmati initiated her struggle with the family not for education or career but for her love and the right to choose her own marriage partner. In the beginning, she tried to camouflage her love for the Professor with the love for education. But when the family finally fixed the date of her marriage she decided to end her life. In this stage of her life, accomplishing the permanent love of the Professor and social respect to their relationship through marriage became the goal of her life. Her zeal for education was shadowed by the earnest love for the Professor. The Professor was after all a product of the patriarchy. He was happy to get the love and companionship of the educated Virmati and at the same time enjoy a comfortable and cozy household maintained by his dutiful and traditional wife Ganga. Thus, Virmati was an individual influenced by modernity but still unable to break the shackles of tradition. She could not imagine a life without the support of the professor even though she realized later that the professor was enjoying the best of both the worlds. By that time she had lost too much of her personal world to go back. Now she was left at the mercy of the professor. When Virmati lived in Lahore to complete her BT, her friend Swarnlata tried to draw her towards the freedom struggle. She did visit some meetings for her friend's sake but could not build up the same excitement for doing something for the country as her female peers in the gathering. Throughout the meeting what she could think of were the moments of togetherness with the professor. Virmati always searched for an identity through the professor. As a novice in the public domain she desired, expected and depended on the Professor's for every decision. Whenever Virmati endeavored to create her own identity, Professor ruthlessly sabotaged her plans. Virmati was in the process of earning a separate identity of a successful principal in the school at Nahan; when the Professor's totally uncalled for visit at Nahan and an overnight stay maligned her reputation and she was asked to vacate her post. Virmati had nowhere to go and she tried to find resort in Shantiniketan. As she made a stop at Delhi, in the house of the Professor's friend; he intervened and forced the professor to marry Virmati. At this point, Virmati

felt that her search for identity is finally over and she will enjoy the status of the Professor's wife. But soon Virmati realized that the status of a legitimate wife would only go to Ganga, the Professor's first wife and she would have to occupy a small corner of the house.

Only the professor talked with her and the other members of the family behaved as if she did not exist. She also lost the identity of being the daughter of her own family. Her mother did not accept her. Virmati found the futility in searching for her happiness with the Professor after she had married him. She lost her old identity as a respectable and accepted member of the family and concomitantly society and the way to create her own identity in the house of the Professor's seemed difficult. She felt rootless; the professor was her only anchor to the world now. Virmati had believed that the Professor would be ready to do anything to give her happiness but in reality the Professor was too tied down by the burden of responsibility towards his wife, mother sister and children, that having created a storm in their lives by marrying Virmati; the Professor felt morally inclined to bow down before the wishes of his mother to wash away his guilt; no matter the extent to which Virmati felt neglected. Virmati started working to give some meaning to her existence. The professor had married Virmati for companionship. So he wanted that she should continue her education and enable herself to participate in worthy discussions with him. But once married, Virmati's traditional ideas of being a dutiful wife surfaced and she felt sorrowful that she could not fulfill the responsibilities of a normal wife. Ganga did not allow her to enter the kitchen; talk with the children; nor look after the day to day running of the household. When the Professor was absent from home, Virmati had to just sit in her assigned claustrophobic area and wait for the professor. Her only identity during this period was a companion for the Professor. Later as Virmati suffered from miscarriage she was sent to Lahore to do a post-graduation in Philosophy. As a true patriarch the professor decided to send Virmati to Lahore; he himself decided the subject also. Virmati was housed as paying guest for economic reasons. Virmati had to go to Amritsar as and when called by the Professor. Ironically, the professor continued his relations with his first wife. Virmati was not free to mingle with anybody without the permission of the Professor; if she did, she was severely reprimanded. At this point, Virmati tried to assert herself when she declined to join the Professor in Amritsar.

Virmati did not want to meet the other members of the family so she wanted that the Professor should come to Lahore to meet her. But the Professor quoted economic reasons and ordered Virmati to visit Amritsar. So we see that the Professor wanted a companion for himself but he was

not ready to empathize with Virmati's situation. Much later, when Ganga had to leave Amritsar during Partition riots, did Virmati get her rightful place in the household. She then enjoyed the status of wife and conceived to become a mother of a daughter. Virmati finally achieved the coveted position of the wife of the Professor. When Kasturi came to know that Virmati is pregnant she also forgot her follies and brought her back in the family fold. Virmati got back her identity of a daughter. Virmati had defied her family to attain happiness on her own terms. She dared to bring herself out from the age-old ideas of happiness where marriage was decided by elders and only women with children with a proper male heir were considered happy. But Virmati did not conform to any of these traditional values. She chose her own marriage partner from another community who was already married. She became a mother of a daughter and did not add to the male lineage as the Professor decided that he had enough mouths to feed. Her impetus to assert was limited to this. Ironically after marriage she stuck to the old values so permanently conditioned in her and chose to meekly submit before the wish of the Professor. As a matter of fact after her marriage with the Professor she did not take any decision independently. She even tried to bring up her daughter in the traditional way.

Conclusion-Thus we see that finally the traditional discourse remained a powerful influence in Virmati's life and she was dictated by its rules. It was love for the Professor which gave Virmati courage to fight the confines of family and tradition and when that driving force subsided she did not search for improvised alternatives for traditional roles but on the contrary yearned to conform to the stereotyped roles assigned by patriarchy.

Thus Virmati belonged to the first generation of resisters who resisted patriarchy for education and love and having achieved their goal in their short flight towards freedom, immediately reverted back to the mythical warmth of the traditional world. Their search for identity only gathered strength for a short time as a flash of lightning lights up the sky for a very short time.

Virmati had to fight the dominating forces of maternal domination, traditional hegemony and had to break conventional set-ups. Virmati no doubt grew from a totally submissive character to a one who found courage to retaliate the forces of patriarchy and maternal domination to realize her dreams. Virmati finally married and had a daughter but to achieve this she chose the untrodden path of going against the wishes of family and society.

As Foucault states Virmati was not subdued by the forces of patriarchy but Virmati pioneered in her family to take education, enter a job, choose husband of her own choice.

So she was able to resist and negotiate her role into a new emergent role. Thus Foucault's theorizations gives us a new perspective to look at the struggles of our female characters. By Foucauldian method, we cannot term them as sites of oppression alone but of resistance also. Foucault admits that many a times the resistance might be of a covert character. instead of an open encounter. Virmati's daughter Ida, again a step ahead than Virmati decided to research on her mother's life and write a book on it. So as Foucault puts it that if the resistance was a production of literary pieces or folk songs or movies or invitation into social work then these were positive outcomes. Thus, his analysis of power has set in motion an entirely new way of examining power relations in society, focusing more on resistance. than on oppression.

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