

**Feminist Consciousness in Alice Walker's *Meridian* and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters***

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**Abstract**

*Alice Walker, a prominent African American female writer and the inventor of the term 'womanism' primarily focuses upon exploitation, marginalization and devaluation of the black women. The plight of the black women due to racial, class and gender discrimination becomes the central concern in all of her novels. She has successfully tried to showcase the hidden potential of women in general and black women in particular in her mostly acclaimed novel **Meridian** (1976) as well as **The Color Purple** (1983) Whereas Manju Kapur, one of the significant female voices in Indian writing in English, a winner of the 1999 commonwealth writers' prize for her first book **Difficult Daughters** (1998) exposes the victimization of women due to male tyranny. Both Alice Walker and Manju Kapur similarly depict awakening female consciousness. The present paper does a comparative study of Walker's *Meridian* and Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and show that how both of the writers are similar in their attempt to depict female consciousness.*

**Key Words:** Racism, Sexism, victimization, self-awareness, feminism, empowerment, etc.

As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country.

As a woman, my country is the whole world.

- Virginia Woolf ( 1938,109)

Both Alice Walker and Manju Kapoor advocate the idea of feminism. Hawkesworth remark about feminism: "feminism is a range of movements and ideologies that share a common goal: to define, establish, and achieve equal political, economic, cultural, personal, and social rights for women" (26-27). Walker and Kapur have exposed the ill effects of male patriarchy upon the life of women in their *Meridian* and *Difficult Daughters* respectively. Walker depicts humiliation, exploitation and marginalization of women in African American society on account of race and gender. Whereas Kapur too reveals the subordinate status of

women and their humiliation on the account of their gender in Indian society. Women are treated as marginal in the respective novels. As Dharmendra Sing asserts: “Marginality can be defined as a social process of being relegated to the fringes of society” (170). The females in the respective novels live on the fringes of society. However, they try hard to come out of the labyrinth of exploitation.

Meridian, the female protagonist of *Meridian* is truly feminist in nature who speaks for female consciousness. As Bell Hooks asserts: “A feminist advocates or supports the rights and equality of women.” Alice Walker has shown not only the suppression of the black women under the dominance of male patriarchy but also she has reflected the way out in the form of awakening female consciousness in women which shows her feminist concerns. Meridian, the female protagonist of her novel *Meridian* doesn't like the roles of daughter, wife and mother set by the society. As a girl child Meridian is neglected by her mother so she feels dissatisfied with the family ties. She is a school dropout and a girl who faces pregnancy at the stage of adolescence. It happened because her mother Mrs. Hill does not guide her properly. Mrs. Hill under the influence of male patriarchy does care Meridian which takes a bad toll on Meridian's life in the form of her unnecessary pregnancy. Meridian becomes aware about her subordinate status in family. Though she gets married with Eddie she is completely dissatisfied with their relationship. She wants freedom. So she is even ready to abandon her husband Eddie and child. Meridian is a woman portrayed by Walker as a true follower of goal. She not only abandons her child but also asks the doctor to tie her tubes so that she would never face the unwanted pregnancy. About her act of abortion, Ranveer writes: “she rejects the status of a biological mother.” (86) Thereafter, She seeks admission in Saxon college and pursues her goal. Meridian's objective is to establish her own identity in the male dominated society and she doesn't want to be a victim like her mother. The new path enables her to attain “the highest point of power, prosperity, splendor, health, vigour etc.” (14) Meridian's attempt of involving herself in the civil rights movement is also a part of her quest. She participates the civil rights movement in order to establish her own existence in the community. As Gillespie observes: “She joins the activities of the civil rights movement in Atlanta, an activity that allows her an outlet through which to express her true passions and desires.” (84) While participating in the Civil rights movement she gets familiar with Truman, a Civil rights activist and falls in love with him. Her love too shows her attempt of identity formation. Already she is in the emotions of loss as well as guilt since she has abandoned not only her husband, Eddie but also her child. Therefore she tries to seek solace in Truman's company but her attempt of identity formation fails on the account of racial violence in the community. Truman though likes Meridian starts dating a white girl Lynne. Here Truman is also seen as a victim of age old custom of racism who prefers a white girl to settle down. He marries Lynne in order to create his image better than other black men. So Meridian's attempt to find a soul mate in Truman fails and she becomes frustrated. It makes her feel guilty of being black as well as to search her own existence in the society at large. In

this respect Kashinath Ranveer rightly observes: "... Meridian, a woman who feels guilty of being a black woman, starts reclaiming the black woman's history and tries to associate herself with that positive and inspiring history of black women." (85) Meridian's attempt in the civil rights movement is seen as her successful attempt in identity formation. She emerges as a leader of the civil rights movement at the same time she is able to stand apart from the ideology of the revolutionary cadre which believes in violence. But she doesn't accept the violence and keeps silence when she is asked by the revolutionary group "Will she kill for the revolution. Here Walker has shown Meridian's role as a woman who doesn't accept the prescribed role of the revolution. Meridian doesn't want to kill for the revolution at all. Here she stands apart successfully. She is seen aggressive enough to handle the revolutionary group. As Kashinath Ranveer rightly observes: "In spite of Meridian's painful private experiences, she is born a new and succeeds in evolving a new self and in due course of time emerge as a leader of the black race. (87) Throughout the novel Meridian's journey is from darkness to light, from immaturity to matured self. When at the end of the novel Truman again wants Meridian's company and said: "I hate to think of you always alone." (242) Meridian's answer to his question is very subtle and important which shows her new form identity. She says: "But that is my value... Besides all the people who are as alone as I am will one day gather at the river? We will watch the evening sun go down. And in the darkness may be we will know the truth." (242) Here Meridian's attempt of establishing her own identity is seen successful. She considers herself as a responsible for the well being of the community. Her life is not limited like the previous one. She has successfully transformed her own life. As Bates Gerri asserts about Meridian: "Becoming politically awakened her involvement in the movement leads her to a higher calling, resulting in a decision to devote her life to freedom causes" (73). She gets pregnant and later has to get married. When Meridian comes to know about her mother's suffering as a woman she decides to get rid of her family. It is her feminist consciousness that compels her to leave her family behind and strive hard not only for herself but also for the whole community. Being a feminist, her struggle is visible in the novel. As the novelist writes: "And so she had left the North and comes back to South, moving from one small town to another, finding jobs-some better or worse than others- to support herself; remaining close to the people to see them to be with them, to understand them and herself, the people who now fed her and tolerated her and also, in a fashion, cared about her" (19). Meridian is portrayed by Walker as a woman who not only strives hard for her own survival but also for others' survival. In the novel She helps one black girl child namely Wild Child who is not accepted by Saxon standards. Meridian tries to help Wild Child. Her attempt is noteworthy as per the survival of black women is concerned. Here she tries to save black women from the dehumanization. As Pifer writes: "Meridian lives on her own, separated from her family and the cadre that has rejected her. Alone she performs spontaneous and symbolic acts of rebellion, such as carrying a drowned black child crops to the mayor's office to protest the town officials' neglect of drainage ditches in black

neighbourhood. She accomplishes more than the would-be revolutionaries..." (52) At the end of the book Meridian writes a poem:

*"There is water in the world for us  
brought by our friends  
though the rock of mother and God  
vanishes into sand  
and we, cast out alone  
to heal  
and re-create  
ourselves."*(236)

Bloom comments on this poem: "The mosaic of the episode that Walker fashions into Meridian are fused in the central character as the reader finally realizes that Meridian has become the rock of mother and God...Meridian is no longer cast out alone; she has healed and recreated herself." (23) Meridian's poem shows the awakened self of a woman who was victimized and suffered on the account of gender but later she stands as a responsible woman. She becomes a mother figure in the novel that takes care of the fellow women like Lenny in the novel. The novel *Meridian* shows the inner potential of black woman through the protagonist Meridian, who participates in the civil rights movement for the better cause and upliftment of the community.

Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* narrates a very passionate story of a young woman Virmati who falls in love with a married man, and her decision to live with him brings sorrow and sufferings to her. The novelist has given a very frank description of love, sex and marriage that looks completely unconventional. The objective is to bring the changing reality in the Indian society to the limelight. The story unfolds with the narrator, Ida, who is a difficult daughter and she explores the life of her mother, Virmati in the novel. Kapur uses three generations of daughters, who exhibit three sets of notions and different ideologies stand in different times. The novel showcases the conflict between tradition and modernity where the social institute like marriage has lost its sanctity and relevance. The relationship between Virmati and her husband fails on the ground of low moral values where woman is considered mere an object of wish fulfillment. Kapur is one of the new age women writers who have challenged the traditional family values in her writings, especially from a woman's perspective. Vimmy Sinha in an article writes about Kapur, "She is yet another woman writer from India on whom the image of the suffering, but stoic women, who are eventually breaking traditional boundaries, has had a significant impact . . . She's written about the female revolt against deep rooted social values. (qtd. in Sinha 12)

Virmati asserts her will to be educated. Her desire to get education is the first sign of her self awareness. Anyhow she manages to leave home to study in Lahore. There in Lahore she falls in love with an Oxford returned teacher known as 'the Professor', a married man who had been once her parent's tenant. After a number of vicissitudes, Virmati finally

chooses to marry him but unfortunately she finds herself trapped in a circle of sorrows and miseries. The professor refuses to leave his first wife, Ganga. Therefore at her family she is humiliated, exploited and marginalized by Ganga, her husband's wife. The sufferings and untold miseries of Virmati are told by her daughter, Ida who narrates the story of *Difficult Daughters*. Virmati couldn't enjoy her married life with the Professor because she couldn't withstand the rancor of Ganga: "When Ganga saw her, she would turn her face away or what was worse, would stare intensely at her, her eyes moist, her lip trembling, her big red bindi flashing accusingly" (Kapur 219) She had to follow Ganga's instructions at home. She was not allowed to walk freely in the premises of the home. The whole day she had to be confined to the dark, sullen dressing room with occasional visits to the main house to do her daily chores which shows her marginal existence.

Through Virmati's continuation of her studies at Lahore on Professor's insistence, she finds an opportunity to free from the shackles of marriage where she found nothing but sorrow. Virmati awakens to the mistake she has committed on the very first day of her marriage. But it is too late: "I should never have married you, she said slowly, 'and its too late now. I have never seen it so clearly. It is not fair'" (212). She couldn't free herself from the pain and the sense of guilt throughout her life. It is this sense of guilt that doesn't allow her to open up her feelings to her daughter, Ida. It is only Ida, who takes an expedition to Amritsar and Lahore (now in Pakistan) to find answers to the perplexed life of her mother. She wants to give voice to her mother's voiceless past. Her activity is one of her feminist acts where she stands to expose humiliation and exploitation of her mother in particular and women in general. She wants to reveal the ugly reality of her mother's life and appeals for equality. Virmati though faced a series of disappointments did make an attempt to empower herself in the novel

Anwesha Roy Chaudhury and Dr Joydeep Banerjee observe: "Manju Kapur has artfully drawn the character of Virmati as the incipient New Woman – one who is conscious, introspective, educated wants to carve out a life for herself, conveying her personal vision of womanhood only to be left alienated." (28)

While showcasing Virmati's plight, Kapur presents parallel narratives of Swarnlata, Virmati's roommate at Lahore and Shakuntala, her cousin who is a lecturer. Both of them are also 'difficult daughters' but they manage their living without disturbing the social structures. During the difficult times of independence struggle, Swarnlata aspires to rise above her personal concerns and connected herself to the larger issues of the nation having inspired by Mahatma Gandhi. Swarnlata is similar to Walker's Meridian in this respect who does not think about herself but live for well-being of the society. Walker's Meridian and Kapur's Virmati are also similar in their attempt to take a tool of education to empower themselves. Meridian joins Saxon college whereas Virmati joins college in Lahore who believes: "One of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves (102) Kapur paints her character as a self-directed woman of the new generation who does

not hesitate to leave her family back. She is a woman who takes a decision of marriage on her own responsibility which shows her consciousness. She alienates herself from her own home to live a life of freedom through education & transgresses the threshold. Her downfall occurs with her illicit relationship with an already married Prof. Harish who professes his love for her and seduces her through sending her Petrarchan sonnets & by referring to Machiavelli & the Greek tragedy. After all he gains complete hold over her mind. Virmati's decision to marry with Harish brings sorrows and sufferings to her.

Virmati, a woman who faced a complete failure in marriage; a denial from her own maternal home at last stands for her own survival. She keeps Harish's request at bay and overcomes her dejection and emerges out as an independent female at least for some days. She takes the role of a headmistress of a girls's school at Nahan, the capital of Sirmaur, the small Himalayan state run by an enlightened maharaja. She attains an ideal level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, gets a room of her own. She believes she needs a man, and she again makes the wrong choice. She returns to a relationship that had already brought her nothing but suffering. The repeated secret visits of the fatal Professor lose Virmati her employers' confidence and she is asked to quit her school, house and employment. From Nahan her journey to Shantiniketan, to get greater freedom again fails on the ground of hypocritical marital values in male dominated Indian society. Her story narrates the evil tendencies in Indian society where woman is treated as an object. She does not have her own space. She has to leave a life of dependent sometime on parents; sometime on husband and there is no any way for complete freedom. Walker's *Meridian*, Wile Child and the white girl Lynne are humiliated and exploited on the account of race and gender. It is only *Meridian* who awakens and stands for her own identity. Her noble help to Wile Child and Lynne puts her in the category of feminist who thinks for the principles of equality and brotherhood. She surpasses the narrow confines of marriage, motherhood, community and race. Undoubtedly Kapur's *Virmati* does not attain that feminist consciousness which Walker's *Meridian* attains. But Virmati's attempt is also remarkable. Though she is trapped into the marital conflict she tries to arise from the life situation at any cost. She joins as a headmistress of girls' school in Nahan. Here, she stands for her own rights as a female. She paves a new platform for other women to follow who live a marginal existence under the heavy burden of societal laws and customs.

Thus, both Alice Walker and Manju Kapoor bring the issue marginalization of women to the limelight in their respective novels. They skillfully illustrate the changing images of a woman in the society. Walker's *Meridian* and Kapur's *Virmati* are the women who are labeled as 'sufferers' all the time. They become self aware and know their hidden potentials. They emerge as women of new generation that stand for feminist consciousness. Walker's *Meridian* and Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* are the authentic documents which pave the way for feminist consciousness. Their work is very relevant today in the 21 st century where still women are humiliated, exploited and marginalized on the account of gender. This is the need



of the time now to change the psychology of men as well as society towards women to bring change.

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