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A Multi-Perspective Study of the Novel 'Difficult Daughters' by Manju Kapur

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Abstract

Manju Kapur is a seminal name in the field of feminist studies and fiction also, her Difficult Daughters offers a compelling exploration of the search for self-identity within the oppressive structures of traditional Indian society. This paper analyzes the protagonist Virmati's struggle to carve an independent identity in a world where women are expected to conform to familial and societal norms. Set during the politically charged era of pre-Partition India, the novel reflects the broader socio-cultural transformations while focusing on the personal battle of an individual woman seeking agency. Virmati's aspirations for education, personal freedom, and emotional fulfillment come into direct conflict with the expectations imposed by her conservative Punjabi family, particularly her mother, Kasturi. Her illicit relationship with the already-married Professor Harish becomes a symbol of both rebellion and entrapment, revealing the complexities of seeking autonomy in a deeply patriarchal context. This study argues that while Virmati challenges traditional roles through her pursuit of selfhood, her journey ultimately results in alienation and emotional disillusionment rather than true liberation. Furthermore, the novel portrays the intergenerational tensions between mothers and daughters as a critical site of conflict, where traditional values are both resisted and reinforced. The novel thus offers an important commentary on the cost of female autonomy and the complex realities of negotiating individuality within collective cultural frameworks

Keywords: self-identity, societal norms, Female autonomy, individuality, patriarchal.

Introduction

Manju Kapur is widely acknowledged as one of the foremost contemporary women writers in Indian English literature, with her fiction reflecting the inner conflicts and external struggles of women attempting to redefine their identities within a patriarchal society. Her protagonists often strive to achieve a sense of balance between personal aspirations and societal norms, while simultaneously challenging the traditional expectations imposed upon them (Nair 104). A key attribute that empowers many of these women is their outward-facing and assertive nature, which enables them to resist and confront the challenges they face (Singh 87). Bhandari explains, Kapur's narratives are deeply rooted in the socio-cultural realities of Indian women, as she engages with pressing issues such as gender inequality, marital discord, and emotional isolation—recurrent themes in her literary oeuvre (Bhandari 56).

In novels like Difficult Daughters and A Married Woman, she examines diverse interpersonal dynamics, particularly those surrounding marriage, motherhood, and extramarital relationships, revealing the complexities of female subjectivity within confined domestic spaces (Sharma 212). Scholars have noted that Kapur's work vividly

illustrates the pervasive intellectual deprivation, economic dependence, domestic subordination, and physical exploitation experienced by women, emphasizing the constraints of traditional gender roles in a conservative society (Chandra 144).

Traditional Patriarchal Set Up

The prevailing societal attitude towards gender roles is powerfully encapsulated in Lord Tennyson's lines from The Princess (Part V):

"Man for the field and woman for the hearth,
Man for the sword and for the needle she,
Man with the head and woman with the heart,
Man to command and woman to obey."

These verses reflect the rigid, patriarchal ideology that relegated women to the private, domestic sphere while reserving public authority, intellect, and power for men. Such a worldview not only defined women's roles narrowly in terms of obedience, emotion, and domesticity but also legitimized male dominance in virtually every sphere of life. This cultural mindset, deeply ingrained in many societies—including colonial and postcolonial India—continues to inform the challenges faced by female characters in literature. This is the cause feminists are fighting against. This discrimination between male and female based on age old tradition has led the movement we know as feminism. Simone De Beauvior in her treatise 'The Second Sex' (1949) nurtured this idea. she connects 'the passivity that essentially characterizes the "feminine" woman is a trait that develops in her from her earliest years. But it is false to claim that therein lies a biological given; in fact, it is a destiny imposed on her by her teachers and by society' (Beauvior 87). She further describes how a girl is trained from very beginning so she fits the roles men want 'she is taught cooking, sewing, and housework as well as how to dress, how to take care of her personal appearance, charm, and modesty; she is dressed in uncomfortable and fancy clothes that she has to take care of, her hair is done in complicated styles, posture is imposed on her: stand up straight, don't walk like a duck; to be graceful, she has to repress spontaneous movements, she is told not to look like a tomboy, strenuous exercise is banned, she is forbidden to fight; in short, she is committed to becoming, like her elders, a servant and an idol. (Beauvior 98)' The core idea of feminism is that women should have equal rights, power and opportunities men have. For achieving that they are stepping out of the rigid sex roles assigned to them traditionally.

Opening Paths for Autonomy and Self-Identity

The title of Manju Kapur's novel Difficult Daughters is deliberately layered in connotative meaning(s), suggesting that the term "difficult" applies not only to the protagonist Virmati but also to the generational conflict experienced by other daughters in the narrative. Vandana Singh aptly points outs,

The novel intricately explores the strained relationships between three generations of women—Kasturi, Virmati, and Ida—each of whom grapples with her role as a daughter within the confines of a patriarchal social structure. None of these women share a harmonious bond with their mothers; instead, their daughterhood often becomes a source of anguish and alienation. This inherited tension illustrates how societal expectations and internalized patriarchal norms perpetuate emotional estrangement across generations. (Singh 91-92)

Virmati, the central figure in the narrative, embodies the burdens of both tradition and rebellion. As the eldest child in a conservative Punjabi family, she is prematurely thrust into maternal responsibilities, caring for her younger siblings at the cost of her own childhood. Despite these obligations, Virmati nurtures a strong desire for education and intellectual fulfillment, which puts her at odds with the cultural norms that prioritize domesticity and early marriage for women. Her family, particularly her mother Kasturi, views further education as a threat to conventional gender roles, reinforcing the notion that a girl's ultimate accomplishment lies in becoming a dutiful wife and homemaker (Singh 93). Virmati's struggle, therefore, is not just personal but emblematic of a broader resistance against deeply entrenched systems that dictate the limits of female ambition and autonomy.

Virmati's journey in Difficult Daughters is marked by a series of emotional and societal conflicts, most of which arise from her unwavering desire to pursue higher education—a pursuit that places her in direct opposition to the expectations

of her conservative family. When her mother insists that her education is complete, Virmati firmly resolves to continue her studies, "She too had to go to Lahore, even if she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over" (Kapur 17). Following her initial academic setback in the FA examination, Virmati is further pressured by her family, especially her mother Kasturi, to settle into a traditional domestic role through marriage. However, inspired by her cousin Shakuntala's independent lifestyle, Virmati yearns to carve out a space of her own—a life that values education, freedom, and selfhood over domestic conformity.

The tension between education and marriage becomes a recurring motif in the novel. Virmati's desire to improve her English and prepare herself intellectually is dismissed by her mother, who believes that a woman's duty is to care for her husband, children, and household. Despite familial resistance, Virmati becomes engaged to Inderjeet, an irrigation engineer, though her heart is not in the alliance. Her aspirations reach beyond the domestic sphere: "Maybe here? Was the clue to her happiness. It was useless looking for answers inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom, and the bright lights of Lahore colleges" (Kapur 15).

Virmati's enrollment at A.S. College, a predominantly male institution, symbolizes a radical departure from conventional gender roles. It is here that she becomes emotionally involved with her tenant, a married professor from Amritsar. Torn between societal expectations and personal desire, Virmati breaks off her engagement with Inderjeet, asserting her independence: "Let Indumati marry. Give her the khes you are making. I don't want any bedding, pots and pans, nothing" (Kapur 55). Her affair with the professor results in familial disgrace, and when her grandfather, Lala Diwan Chand, discovers the relationship, she is confined to a godown—a literal and metaphorical space of suffocation.

The sense of entrapment in Virmati's personality intensifies when she learns of Ganga's pregnancy, the professor's first wife. Feeling stifled and disillusioned, she reaffirms her commitment to education as a path to self-reclamation. In a letter to Harish, she writes, "I am going to Lahore to do my BT. I want to be a teacher like you and Shakuntala Pehenji" (Kapur 99). Her declaration marks the beginning of her transformation into a "new woman," one who rejects the role of a submissive, decorative object in a patriarchal setup: "She did not want to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed" (Kapur 85).

Virmati ultimately resolves to end her entanglement with Harish by burning his letters, symbolically attempting to close that painful chapter of her life. Seeking a fresh start, she moves to Lahore and begins a more purposeful existence alongside her politically active roommate, Swarna Lata. However, Harish re-enters her life and their relationship resumes briefly. When Virmati becomes pregnant, she returns to Amritsar and persuades her father to give her a gold bangle, which she then sells to finance an abortion. Harish, despite enjoying her companionship, refuses to take responsibility—either for the child or the consequences of its termination. This experience leaves Virmati deeply disillusioned, prompting her to sever ties with Harish and prioritize her independence.

In search of autonomy and purpose, Virmati accepts a post as principal at a girls' school in Sirmaur, a remote hill station in the princely state of Nahan. This marks a pivotal period in her life, where, for the first time, she experiences a level of freedom and self-sufficiency that had previously been denied to her. Without familial obligations or social constraints, she enjoys a sense of identity akin to liberation—"like a bee tasting the honey of life." However, this hard-earned freedom is short-lived. When Harish visits her in Sirmaur and they meet secretly at night, the discovery of their liaison leads to a loss of trust among the staff, forcing her resignation.

Still determined to forge a new path, Virmati sets her sights on Shantiniketan, envisioning it as a place of intellectual and spiritual renewal. However, while transiting through Delhi, she contacts a friend of Harish—an emotionally charged decision that marks a critical turning point. Overcome by emotion, she allows her resolve to waver, abandoning her aspiration for independence. Instead, she succumbs once again to Harish, ultimately marrying him.

Marriage does not bring fulfillment. Virmati is met with hostility from Harish's family, especially from his first wife, Ganga, and his mother. Although she is treated like a guest or a queen—freed from household chores—this exclusion becomes a new form of confinement. Ganga, who continues to occupy the central space in the household, asserts authority over daily life, while Virmati is relegated to the margins, living within emotional and social isolation. Her pregnancy offers a brief glimpse of acceptance from her mother-in-law, but this hope is shattered when she suffers a miscarriage, deepening her sense of loss and despair.

Example of A 'New Woman'

In Difficult Daughters, Manju Kapur introduces two significant female characters—Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin, and Swarnalata, her roommate in Lahore—who embody the emerging archetype of the "New Woman" in Indian English literature. Both characters serve as foils to Virmati and as representations of alternative paths that challenge traditional gender norms. The "New Woman," a recurring figure in post-independence Indian fiction, is characterized by self-awareness, intellectual agency, and socio-political engagement.

Shakuntala is portrayed from the outset as a model of liberation and self-determination. She is educated, self-reliant, and actively engaged in the Gandhian political movement. She articulates her modern lifestyle with pride: "We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings, follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars" (Kapur, Difficult Daughters 15). More importantly, she shares with Virmati the emotional fulfillment she derives from her independence, stating, "These people don't really understand, Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent" (14–15). Her autonomy and political consciousness serve as a catalyst for Virmati's own awakening.

Swarnalata, similarly, emerges as a compelling example of female empowerment. Unlike many women around her, she manages to achieve personal and intellectual goals without compromising her principles. At the Punjab Women's Student Conference, she captivates the audience with her powerful speech, earning resounding applause (Kapur 145). Even after marriage, Swarnalata continues her political activism, signaling that personal commitment to freedom and social justice can coexist with domestic roles. These two characters significantly influence Virmati, who aspires to emulate their strength and purpose.

Through such portrayals, Kapur constructs a narrative tension between tradition and modernity. Her protagonists—primarily educated, middle-class women—are positioned within a transitional moment in Indian society. While they engage actively in intellectual, political, and cultural spheres, they do not entirely dismiss the moral framework of the Indian middle class. In A Married Woman, for instance, Astha's life exemplifies this struggle. Though she marries according to traditional customs, her emotional and spiritual dissatisfaction leads her to challenge marital norms and seek personal fulfillment beyond her domestic role. However, she never chooses divorce, revealing the complexity of negotiating individual desires within the boundaries of cultural expectation.

Kapur's fiction thus reflects the evolving identity of Indian women. She shifts away from the conventional image of the docile and enduring woman toward assertive, reflective, and ambitious female figures. The narrated women demand recognition and agency in both private and public spheres, offering a literary medium for self-expression and social critique.

Abbreviations- DD (Difficult Daughters)

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