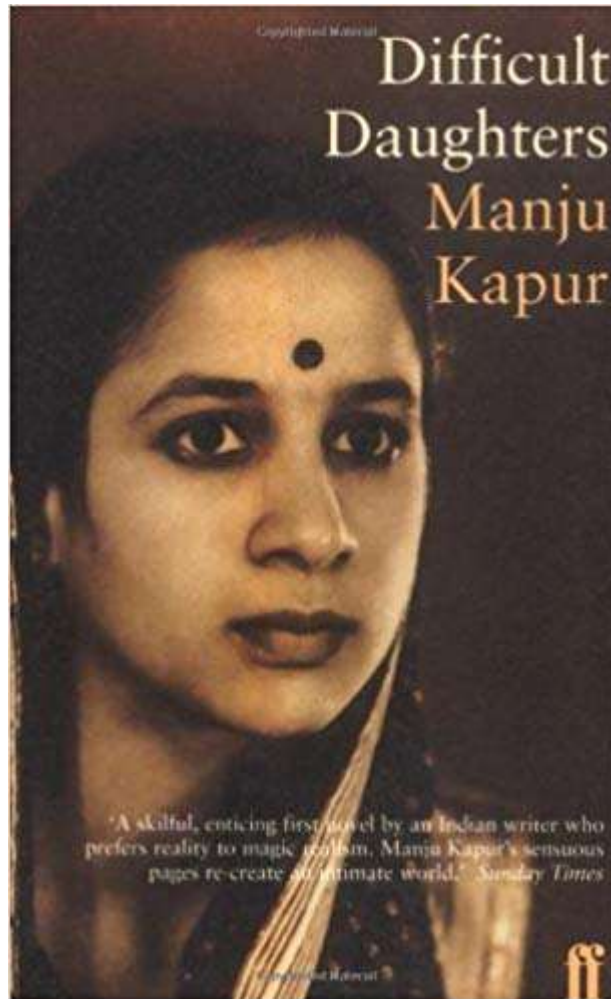


Emergence of New Woman in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Courtesy: <https://www.amazon.in/Difficult-Daughters-Novel-Manju-Kapur/dp/0571196349>

Abstract

Women by nature are very sensitive, sacrificing and great home makers. Their suffering has mellowed them down and given them an edge over their male counterparts. A major preoccupation in recent Indian women writing is a peep into a delineation of interpersonal relationships. Kapur is one of the women writers from India whose protagonists are women trying to maintain a balance all the time. Their suffering has made them strong and they are struggling to set themselves free from the shackles of tradition and various prejudices. Through her characters she highlights the contemporary social issues. Kapur remains very candid and truthful in presenting the women and the challenges they face in their personal, religious and socio- political levels. Almost all the female characters of Kapur are educated aspiring individuals cased within the confines of a conservative

society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become integrant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity and develop the awareness of the new woman, marriage, the social institution, trap and curb their spirit by binding them to the responsibility of a home.

Keywords: Relationships, marriage, tradition and modernity, emergence.

Adapting New Experience

This Paper titled “Emergence of New Woman” is about woman who adapts the new information or experiences and incorporates in to their existing ideas. This process is somewhat subjective because they tend to modify experience or information somewhat to fit in with their preexisting beliefs. In *Difficult Daughters* Kapur’s female characters are adapt some experiences and ideas. After their adaptation many changes have come into their life and they involved in the political activities etc.

Not as Dolls

In *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur shows that now days, women cannot be treated as dolls or as decorative ornaments. The growing concerns and awareness of women and their roles in the society allows them to explore their possibilities and the potential of being woman and their abilities to reshape themselves. There are many examples like Virmati where women stand shoulder to shoulder to man and have broken all the chains that obstruct their freedom and development. The major women characters in Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* is searching a place for themselves in the male dominated society. Society, morality, values are like bondage to them. So Virmati is leading forward in an ambiguous manner in the midst of relentless urbanization and the far reaching western influences.

Virmati and Feministic Issues

Manju Kapur registers her concern for Indian women in this novel. She dwells on various feministic issues in this novel. Virmati, the incipient new women who is conscious, educated, wants to carve a life for herself. Virmati defies societal expectation to assert her individually and hopes to achieve self-fulfillment. But what does she really get, she is a loser whose acts totally remains from her own family and she fails to create a space for herself, for which she had being stirring all alone. Perhaps it is this inability of Virmati to strike independent roots and grow that makes Ida remark “that one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother” (1).

The education and the life of Kasturi generate a new urge and emotion in Virmati to get herself free from the bondage of patriarchy that denies her freedom and choice. Virmati falls in love with a Professor, Harish Chandra, who is already married. When the time for her marriage with Inderjit comes, she attempts the suicide and declares that she does not like the boy and wants to study further. Finally, her parents locked Virmati in the godown and arranged for Indumati to marry Inderjit. She had an illegal relationship with Harish. However, she does realize the hopelessness of her illicit love when she learns about the pregnancy of the Professor’s wife. After that she goes to Lahore for further studies.

Nadia Ahmad in, *On the Road to Baghdad, Or, Traveling Biculturalism: Theorizing a Biculturalism* observes about Virmati as “She is trying to achieve a level of modernity through education and social mobility, but she finds herself stumbling on traditional values that haunt her effort to grasp female agency. Her inner conflict is very much the issue of reconciling and tradition” (210).

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New Woman

The 'New Woman' in Virmati, who does not want "to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed, then I didn't want to live. I thought of what you taught us about Sydney Carton, and how noble and fine he seemed at the moment of his death. His last words echoed in my ears all that day so you all people should understand my actions!" (DD 92). Virmati asserts her individuality and desires self-reliance through education. She is not a silent rebel but is bold, outspoken, determined and action oriented. She knows she cannot depend upon the Professor to sort out the domestic situation and proceeds to tackle it on her own. Later, she is very decisively and coolly rejects the Professor, ignoring his request and keeps the reins in her hand. She displays a marvelous strength of mind in overcoming her dejection. She burns the Professor's letters in the determined and composed manner to show her resolution to close the chapter and look forward to a meaningful life in Lahore. Then she says to Professor that:

What has happened has happened for the good. In which world was I living, to be so caught up in the illusion of your love? Just as you must do your duty to your family, and your wife, so too I must do my duty to mine...I am going to Lahore to do my BT. I want to be a teacher like you and Shakuntala Pehanji. Perhaps my family will also benefit by what Ida, as yours has done. As for me, I never stopped learning from you, whether it was in the classroom or outside. (DD 107-08)

In the real sense Virmati does not blossom into a 'New Woman'. In spite of her initial revolt against the family and firm stand against the Professor, she had come to Lahore to get her horizons. Instead she gets involved in a useless love, doubtful marriage and unwed pregnancy.

Shakuntala and Swarnalata

In *Difficult Daughters*, there are two other female characters, Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin and Swarnalata, her roommate in Lahore. Both are representative of a emerging new women that recurs in Indian Literature. Shakuntala appears from the beginning as the example of the modern or liberated women. She studies, teaches and takes part in the Political- Gandhian movement. She shares her liberated lifestyle with a group of friends, whose activities she explains to her cousin. She also shares her feelings of being independent with Virmati:

These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else . . . But for my mother, marriage is the only choice in life. I so wish I could help her feel better about me. My friends are from different backgrounds, and all have families unhappy with their decision not to settle down, ... We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings, follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars. One of them is even going abroad for higher studies. (DD 17)

Committed to Meaningful Activities

Virmati wants to spread her wings like Swarnalata, her roommate, who is committed to meaningful activities regarding the freedom movement and women's emancipation. Virmati attempts to analyse the communal tension involved during the Indian freedom struggle. As Gurpyari Jandial aptly writes:

With Swarnalata, Virmati attends the Punjab women's students' conference. Here she seems and hears women who exude confidence and strength. She listens to them as

they explain the meaning of the flag, the importance of freedom for the development of human spirit, impact of war, human right, strikes, academic freedom, rural upliftment, language etc. (qtd. in. Prasanna 175)

Swarnalata as an Orator

Swarnalata is the only female character who gets out of life what she wants, without compromising too much. In one winter season in Lahore, conferences take place fast and furious in the city. Important people make speeches and their photographs printed in the newspapers. The atmosphere is charged by voices echo with self- awareness. On a very cold Saturday in January 1941 the Punjab Women's Student Conference is being held. Though it was a rainy day, Swarna moves out to the conference. Sita Rallia, Noor Ahmed, Mary Singh and Mohini Datta are arrived for the conference. Each one gives their own views regarding the freedom struggle. In Punjab Women's Student Conference, she shines as an orator. Swarnalata is the speech about the duty of the women that the unity of the country and does not meant the unity between Sikh and Christian. After her speech she has received a heavy applause:

Heavy applause broke out as Swarna finished speaking. As the final resolutions were being formulated, Virmati wondered about her friend. She had known she was well known but had not realized the extent of her reputation. Her heart felt dull and heavy within her. The whole afternoon had been interminable. She wondered whether she would ever get out, ever see the sky again. (DD 145)

Continuous Suffering of Virmati

Virmati has been continuously suffering because of the conflict between her inner desires and the reality. Virmati also participate the Punjab Women's Student Conference. Then she gets the interest to involve like the political activism and she herself recognizes that it does not attract her:

Am I free thought Virmati. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent being in love. Wasting it. Well, not wasting time, no, of course not, but then how come I never have a moment for anything else? Swarna does. (DD 142)

Virmati's married life turns out to be disastrous. Though she becomes the second wife legally, Harish treats her specially as a companion not just as a domesticated wife. The members in Harish's family do not accept her. Her education does not yield any satisfaction. The combined anger and resistance of Ganga and Harish's mother force Virmati to withdraw into her tight corner in the house. Harish telling her that she has him and should not bother about other things. She wants to wash Harish's dirty clothes which she is not allowed to do. Washing Harish's clothes becomes an important matter whereby Virmati has to assert her right as a wife. When Kishori Devi knew about her daughter- in- law's pregnancy she changed herself but unfortunately the baby is miscarriage. Virmati had a disastrous marriage marked with sadness and disapproval and engulfed in melancholy and despair. And it is much later that she realized how education and intellect cannot defeat the ethos of an age.

Ganga

Ganga, Harish's first wife is seen as the victim of the traditional society. During her childhood, she was never sent to school by her mother, but she had trained her in good housekeeping. When Ganga was twelve years old, she entered her husband's house and tried to prove herself as a

good house wife, but she could never become an intellectual companion to her husband. Ganga is also at fault for her difficult situation. She is an illiterate woman, after her marriage Harish tries to teach her but she never tried to improve herself. Due to Ganga's illiteracy, he brought home her rival Virmati. Distress enveloped her, but she continued with domestic routine and her role as a wife, a mother and a daughter in law. Her ill- feeling for Virmati is quite natural because no wife would like interference in her married life. She wished for Virmati's death. After Virmati's pregnancy she wished for the birth of a baby girl. Kapur records Ganga's outlook in the following words:

Ganga's leaving home, in the pressures and tensions of the moment, was meant to be a temporary affair. However, she, could never return. She wept, begged, and stormed indirectly through her mother- in- law, but circumstances did not favour her . . . Her husband continued to be Ganga's public statement of selfhood. Her bindi and her bangles, her toe rings and her mangalsutra, all managed to suggest that he was still her god. (DD 278)

Kasturi

Kasturi is Virmati's mother and she has to realize that she is a girl since she was in her school. She is repeatedly reminded that she is born to work and please her in- laws. Since her school days, ". . . it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued at home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by impeccable nature of her daughter's qualifications. She was going to please her in- laws" (DD 58). She has been described in the novel as a mother whose duty is to give birth to children as many as she can. When Kasturi gets married, she becomes the victim of this unrestricted birth. She is married in a traditional family. She has to give birth to six daughters and five sons against her wishes, "There had been eleven of them. The girls: Virmati, Indumati, Gunvati, Hemavati, Vidyavati and Parvati. The boys: Kailashnath, Prakashnath, and Hiranath" (DD 4). The story of Virmati's mother is overwhelming. When she is going to give birth to eleventh child; her pregnancy symptoms were like an anemic and restless woman, she all the time prays to God to abort this child and aspires not to get pregnant ever in her life:

For the eleventh time it had started, the heaviness in her belly, morning and evening nausea, bile in her throat while eating, hair falling out in clumps, giddiness when she got up suddenly. Her life seemed such a burden, her body so difficult to carry. Her sister- in- law's words echoed in her ears, 'Breeding like cats and dogs,' 'Harvest time again'. (DD 7)

Swarnalata was Virmati's roommate in Lahore who went to do her M.A and continue her activities in Lahore. She wanted to do something besides getting married. She told her parents if they did not co-operate her she would involve in Satyagraha and got to prison. Later she become a teacher in her old college and got married. Due to the help of her parents and husband she could carve a path for herself in life. After her marriage also, her husband accepted all her conditions allowing "to continue her other activities, remain treasurer of the Women's Conference, go on working for the Party. Everything to do with the house they would share as much as possible. She owed it to her parents to marry. They had let her have her way in everything else" (DD 188).

Virmati's Daughter

Ida, who grew up struggling to be the model daughter, does not have the heart to reject Virmati. But Ida's rejection of Virmati is not as a mother but as a woman. Virmati's difficult daughter Ida is the real face of a modern woman. She had broken her relationship with her husband

Prabhakar for he had forced her to go for an abortion. She has the strength which Virmati lacks. Ida by severing the marriage bonds free herself from conventional social structures which bind women.

Ida is the daughter of Virmati and the Professor. The relation between Virmati and Ida is not cordial. Ida never enjoys happy moments with her own mother. Ida gets educated, married and also get divorced but she is not neglected by her mother. She dislikes her mother and feels irritated whenever she sees her mother. There is lack of love as well as understanding between them. “Ida becomes the typical daughter of a ‘difficult daughter’ Virmati. She should not develop an understanding with her mother in her lifetime and after Virmati’s death this realization engulf her with guilt” (web).

To Conclude

In *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur shows the emergence of new women through her heroines, who do not want to be rubber doll for others to move as they will. In spite of getting education and freedom the women protagonist of Kapur’s novel does not blossom into new woman in the real sense. Though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, they are caught into another. In this novel Kapur discusses about the forms of changes and human relationship. In her interview with Nivedita Mukherjee, Kapur says, “it is an attempt to inject an element of artistic and emotional coherence. Actually, a relationship with a woman does not threaten a marriage as much as relationship with a man”.

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