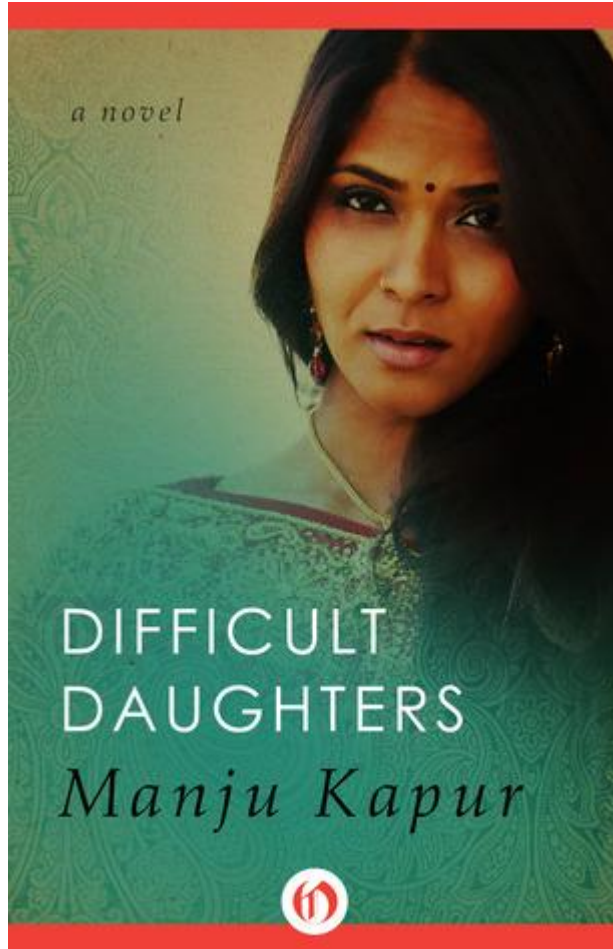


**Exploring Self-realization of Modern Women in Manju Kapur's
*Difficult Daughters***

Imtiyaz Ahmad Mir and Dr. V. K. Saravanan



Abstract

The post-modern Indian women writers portray life in its depth and complexity. They poignantly convey the predicament of people who are engaged in the struggle not only with their circumstances, with their limitations, and failure, but also with their own self. Such postmodern novelists show a deep insight into human nature. This paper tries to explore how Manju Kapur projects the view that when an Indian woman tries to transcend the limitations of her old custom she acquires self-fulfillment and inner freedom. In their social milieu women appear to be

educated, modern and intelligent, sophisticated, bold, and assertive. It is through their individual struggle with family and society that they plunge into dedicated efforts to carve an identity for themselves as stoic woman with faultless backgrounds. They represent the needs of adaption in the traditional system. The questions with which Kapur is chiefly concerned are of a fundamental nature: Women's destiny, the problem of women's suffering, the significant suffering in realizing selfhood or identity and the related question of her domesticity and her isolation within the family.

Keywords: Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, Society, Traditional, Suffering, Identity, Struggle, Limitations.

Difficult Daughters Setting

The novel *Difficult Daughters* is set during India's independence struggle and is partially based on the life of Kapur's own mother, Virmati. Set around the time of partition, it is the story of the woman torn between family duty, the desire for education, and illicit love. Virmati, a young, woman born in Amritsar in an austere and traditional household, falls in love with a neighbour, a Professor, who was already married. She enters into a scandalous relationship with the Professor.

Manju Kapur portrays women characters' quest for equality and identity as revealed in *Difficult Daughters*. The novel deals with the reaction of the girl child against the patriarchal upbringing and expectations. Kapur explores the discriminatory mode of upbringing of the girl child in her novel *Difficult Daughters*. It is during the process of the socialization that the female child is made aware of her role as a wife and mother in future, subsequently making her realize her secondary position to her male counterpart. The emphasis is laid on the nature of mother-daughter relationship painted by Kapur in her novel. The mother, who emerges as a strong agent of patriarchy, is portrayed as a suffocating and authoritarian figure. Like Simone de Beauvoir, a radical feminist, Kapur asserts that the mother becomes the upholder of the patriarchal values and ideals and tries her best to inculcate them in her daughter so that she can adapt herself very well in the domineering set-up, subsequently making the girl child aware of her "otherness".

Meeting the Demands of the Patriarchal Society

In an attempt to make the daughter enable to meet the demands of the patriarchal society, the mother curbs her rights, and inflicts physical and psychological tortures on her, ultimately reducing her into a submissive and sacrificial being. She is made to learn to live for others and her emotions are tightly reined in, subsequently depriving her to bloom upto the mark. As the woman in the patriarchal society is expected to be a perfect homemaker, the training for housekeeping is prioritized to education, consequently trampling on her aspirations for establishing self-identity, and autonomy. Virmati's mother in *Difficult Daughters* do not value her daughters' academic merits but try her best to inculcate in her the household skills, consequently making her realise of her secondary position in the society. Like Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodorow, the psychoanalytic feminists, Kapur highlights how the value of connectedness is inculcated into the girl child by putting on her the burden of mothering the younger siblings. Through the reproduction of mothering she is made to think of others, and consequently she always sees herself in relation with others that leads to the annihilation of her individuality. Simultaneously the novelist vehemently criticizes the big family system which becomes a curse for the eldest daughter who

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bears the burden of the household to some extent as highlighted in the case of Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*.

Religious Dogma and Patriarchal Society

Along with the destructive social norms, the author vehemently criticizes the religious dogmas which reduces woman to the secondary position. Kapur's protagonist, Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, is brought up strictly according to the patriarchal norms and religious dogmas prevailing in the patriarchal society.

Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* focuses on the Arya Samaj Family of Lala Diwan Chand. She also employs a narrative technique that deliberately traces out a generational progression with respect to the genealogical table of the family, especially referring to the women folk of the second and the third generations. The central character, Virmati belongs to the second generation. The dominant narrative voice in the novel is that of Ida. She delivers the same solely basing upon her own past experiences, reminiscences, and the plenty of information that she gathers from Kailash Nath and Gopi Nath, her maternal uncles and her Parvati Masi and all the close associates, friends and colleagues of her parents, well after the death of the couple. Besides, a thorough and comprehensive study of the novel obviously exhibits the treatment of three separate composite sets of Indian women. All the three sets categorically centre around the very idea and spirit of marriage in the Indian context.

Marriage in the Indian Context

The first one consists of Lajwanti, Kasturi, Harish's mother, Kishori Devi and Harish's first wife, Ganga. Their marriages decidedly date back to the pre-Independence era. They seem to be behaving uniformly. To them, it is the moral aspect that counts. Naturally they glorify the institution marriage as the "be-all and end-all" for themselves. Ganga is seen as another victim of the traditional society. During her childhood, she was married to Harisol when he was three years old. 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 in-laws' house and tried to prove herself as a good housewife but she could never become an intellectual companion to her husband. As he felt lonely and desolate among his family members, he drew towards Virmati through her desire to learn and fell in love with her.

Ganga is also at fault for her plight because in spite of Professor's attempts to teach her, she never tried to improve herself, to become a literate woman and share intellectual companionship with her husband for which he aspired. 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-feelings for Virmati are quite natural because no wife would like interference in her married life. She wished for Virmati's death when she heard that she had gone to drown herself. After Virmati's pregnancy she wished for the birth of a baby girl. At the resolution concerning Virmati's further learning Ganga resented her studying the most. She thought that if that much attention had been given to her, she would not be in the position she was that time. She smiled at the short while Virmati has lasted in the house and thought "She herself would never clear the field for anyone" (*Difficult Daughters*, 187).

Second and Third Generations

The remaining two sets, comprising the second and the third generations of the womenfolk of the family, vividly visualize the social scenario round about the Independence of India and onwards. Virmati her cousin Shakuntala and her hostel room-mate, SwarnaLata Constitutes the second set. Virmati, like so many other sub-continental women, is asked to accept a typical arranged marriage. She rebels against that destiny, to the lasting shame of her family, above all of her mother. Insisting on her right to be educated, she manages to leave home to study in Lahore. Nonetheless, she falls in love with an Amritsar Professor, Harish Chandra, a married man who first appears in her life as her parents' tenant. After a number of vicissitudes, including a period as a school principal in a small Himalayan state, she finally marries the man she loves and returns to Amritsar to live with him. However, he refuses to leave his first wife, and the consequence for Virmati are harsh indeed; she ends up being marginalized by her own family and despised by her husband.

Virmati's Role

Virmati, being the eldest in the family of eleven children is made to play a second mother to her siblings. She is reminded of the incomplete sewing and knitting or the food, milk, clothes and studies of her brothers and sisters by her mother. Education was important as educated boys asked for educated girls; it therefore was important only from the matrimonial point of view. Naturally in this set-up and with this social requirement, the role of education neither aimed at the growth of individually nor did it promise independence to women. Virmati's mother had been dutifully spinning cotton in order to make a quilt for her to be given as dowry for her impending marriage. She was visibly exasperated at Virmati's refusal to consider the marriage. When Virmati mentioned Lahore for her further studies, Kasturi became violent with rage and frustration. She grabbed her daughter by her hair and banged her head against the wall, expressly to knock some sense into her. She declared that she would readily consume poison if that would make her daughter marry the man her parents had chosen for her. Kasturi's feelings are revealed which show the anguish of an average mother:

What had come over the girl? She had always been so good and sensible. How could she not see that her happiness lay in marrying a decent boy, who had waited patiently all these years, to whom, the family had given their word? ... In her time, going to school had been a privilege, not to be abused by going against one's parents. How had girls changed so much in just a generation? (60)

This is a question that haunts every generation of mothers when they see their daughters rebelling against the imposition of values of their earlier generation upon them.

Education vs. Marriage

The "education verses marriage" argument is reiterated many times in the novel. Virmati's engagement and subsequent postponement of marriage gives her the opportunity to study further and thus begins the illicit relationship between her and the married Professor. Through most of her life, Virmati is torn between family loyalty, her love for the Professor, which is a social aberration and her desire to be educated and independent. Soon after marriage, Virmati finds that everybody

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becomes hostile to her in the new environment. It is amazing to see that Virmati who was first attracted to the Professor for his love of freedom and individuality, willingly loses her identity into that of the Professor. Not because she does not understand the wrongs done by the Professor, but she is not prepared to face the situation. She, who had evinced much spirit in defying her parents and the parochial society, gets mired in the principles of patriarchy that suit the Professor. The harbinger of emancipation reduces Virmati to the position of a concubine.

Quest for identify or Struggle for Existence?

After her marriage, Virmati's quest for identity is replaced by the struggle for existence. The woman who was supposed to be an intellectual, keeps craving for an opportunity to wash her husband's clothes. Her notions of self-assertiveness become confined to that of domesticity. Washing Harish's clothes becomes an important matter whereby Virmati has to assert her right as a wife. Love, naturally acquires another synonym for her that of servitude. She has accepted everything as her lot and completely surrenders to it. Indian women take care of everybody in the family except themselves. Bhagbhat Nayak remarks, "The novel evokes some concern over the problems of women in a male-dominated society where laws for women are made by men in its social matrix and a husband stands as a 'sheltering tree' under which a woman proves her strength through her suffering" (Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, A feminist Reading, 19)

Shakuntaia and Swarnalata belonged to the type of advanced women in society; Shakuntaia after doing her M.Sc, in Chemistry had experienced the joys of independent life. Her decision of not getting married during those days' shows her strong character. When Kasturi said to Shakuntala "What the need to do a job? A woman's shaan is in her home" (*Difficult Daughters*, 16). She became the mouthpiece of traditional society of contemporary India. At this Shakuntala responded by criticizing the social custom of marrying the daughters: "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" (17).

Shakuntala sowed the seeds for further studies in Virmati and invited her to Lahore saying "... times are chinging, and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?" (18). It was due to her inspiration only that Virmati could aspire to soar very high in the sky defying her traditional family and got herself highly educated, with the potential of being economically independent through her life — a rare accomplishment for the women of the times. Shakuntala was well over the marriageable age, but had chosen not to marry. This was causing a headache for her mother Lajwanti, because she wanted her to be married and settled though she tried to hide the fact. Shakuntala was a fearless woman who opened the doors of Virmati's mind to worlds other than mere marriage.

Swarnalata

Swarnalata was Virmati's room-mate in Lahore who went to do her M.A, there postponing her marriage as she had to 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 go to prison. Later she became a teacher in her old college and got married. Her husband accepted all her conditions allowing "... to continue her other activities, remain treasurer of the

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Women's Conference, go on working for the Party. Everything to do with the house they would share as much as possible" (188). Due to the help of her parents and husband she could carve a path for herself in life.

Chhotti and Ida

The third set includes Chhotti and Ida. Due to her parents' unseemly indifference, Chhotti never marries. The self-willed Ida marries a fellow of academic pursuit to settle certain contradictions of her personal life. But she hardly ever seems to be happy with him. It resulted in divorce in the least possible time. She confesses: "Of course I made a disastrous marriage. I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society" (279).

Marriage as a Central Issue

Marriage is a very central issue in every Indian, family. In Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati is brought up to be a wife and a mother, on the consciously inculcated idea of Indian feminine role. Her resolution not to marry the man of her parents' choice but to marry the Professor or no else is taken because of her upbringing in an austere family, where high ideals like morality, virginity and chastity are considered necessary virtues of an unmarried girl. The formal marriage, a social and public statement, is must for her. It is this which will establish her identity even if it is as the Professor's second wife. Marriage thus for her means deliverance from the fear of being socially condemned, a possibility which will perhaps bring her back into the fold and relieve her from the sense of insecurity and uncertainty. The earlier generation of her mother saw no reason to rebel. There was complete acceptance in life. Kasturi is an example of the typical feminine attitude - to procreate in order to bring about life and pleasure. To run her home, first a joint family and later her own, is happiness for her. Like Kasturi, for Ganga, marriage is a religious and a social institution, where love is not the basis of marriage. She too has a superb domestic sensibility.

Virmati's daughter Ida is strong and clearheaded. She breaks up her marriage as she is denied maternity by her husband. The forced abortion is also the termination of her marriage. Ida by severing the marriage bond frees herself from male domination and power and also from conventional social structures which bind women. She has that strength which Virmati lacks. Swarnalata is also a clearheaded strong woman. She too experiences tension with her parents over the issue of marriage but unlike Virmati she channelizes her energy into a new direction. Her marriage rests on the condition that it would not hamper her work.

Women in the Novel

Whatever may be their social status and howsoever promising they look to be, most of these women are quite committed to exact the underlying spirit of the very first line of the novel, "The one thing I wanted was not to be like my mother"(1). Here lie the true difficulties of these daughters. So they are not at all ready "to follow blindly beliefs that may not be valid" (112). However; their entire driving passions project each of them all the more far removed from the realities and ideals of modern, India. No doubt, these ladies are educated but their education certainly aided them in making a detour from the established path of Indian social custom and tradition. Yet, except a few like Shakuntala, Swarnalata and Ida, other women in the novel follow

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the established norms of the Indian tradition and finds fulfillment and contentment in their way of life.

Thus, Manju Kapur realistically depicts women of three generations. In *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur explores the feminine psyche through marriage which is a core issue in Indian society. The wedlock proves to be a lock to the freedom of most of the women in Indian society which the women accept wholeheartedly as a result of their brought-up in a patriarchal society. Moreover, the Indian women lead rather a committed life thinking that marriage is the be-all and the end-all of their life.

On the whole, we can say that in order to determine a new meaning in life, Virmati is led to either a false existence or else to death and destruction. Both way, it is painful and she is penalised. This sense of the essential absurdity of life, of willful waste of human potential, comes through our reading of the novel. We realize that equality and liberation are operative words which cannot be reconciled with the existing reality even if wealth, beauty, education and opportunity are used as means of tipping the balance in favour of the woman. Beauteous, intelligent, economically independent women, however rare and diligent they be, find it equally difficult to reach their full potential as human beings as their less fortunate sisters. The suppressed and subjugated world of Indian women comes to full light in the character of her protagonist, Virmati. She dexterously delineates all kinds of visible and invisible pressure that kept Indian women suffocated for long.

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