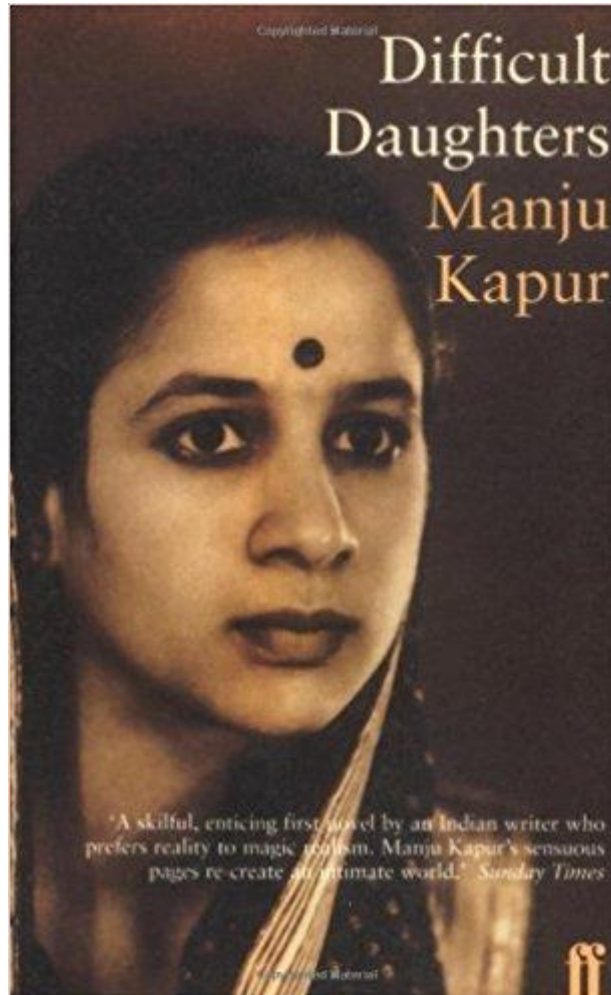


**Feminine Discourse and Female Difference:
A Reading of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters***

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

Abstract

It is a significant fact that Kapur made her debut as a novelist with the publication of the novel *Difficult Daughters*, which became an instant success. The reason for the success is not far to seek. It is nothing, but the proper employment of the narrative devices such as story, plot and so on and so forth. Above all, the Showalterian “female difference” is explicit in her writings. Kapur proves to be a seasoned writer in employing cleverly the narrative devices such as

withholding information and imparting the same on the right occasion, at the appropriate place. She excels in deciding as to when a piece of information ought to be withheld and when it ought to be imparted. The one without the other would mar the artistic grandeur of the novel. Barry's view that withholding the information is more significant than imparting, at crucial stages of the progress of the novel, is quite true. The pit-a-pat of the heart of the reader is decided in the drawing room of the novelist, no matter, he or she wails or cries out in impatience, she withholds what needs to be withheld. This paper studies these strategies of the writer in this novel.

However, any kind of excess in either of the strategies, or in both will result in a kind of ennui. A stickler for economy of words, Kapur aims at rationing both the strategies, thus achieving the finale of the novel. The employment of ennui also adds to the rhythmic movement of the novel. But for the employment of which, the work of art would have fallen short of its literary standards. This paper studies these strategies of the writer in this novel.

Keywords: Manju Kapur, Narrative novel, oppression of women, depression, *Difficult Daughters*

Ida, the Narrator

Ida, the narrator of the novel *Difficult Daughters* delves deep into the past of her mother when she stumbles upon the “scallop edged faded” photograph of her mother. It is more or less a discovery of her mother who had passed away. As far as the narrator's life is concerned, what is withheld is more than half of what is disclosed. The piece of information that she is a middle-aged woman and is proceeding to Amritsar, the birth-place of her mother, is mentioned, to let the reader know more about her mother.

Virmati, the Protagonist

The novel is born with the death of her mother. But the readers are not provided with an opportunity to know more about her father Harish Chandra at the time of Virmati's death. As far as the story of *Difficult Daughters* is concerned, Ida belongs to the present as she happens to be the narrator of the lives of her grandmother, Kasturi, mother Virmati and hers. But as far as the readers are concerned, Virmati, though dead at the time of the narration, is omnipresent to the end of the novel. Since the presence of Virmati is so captivating that she creeps into the hearts of the readers, pushing aside all other characters into oblivion, thus becoming a thing of the present. Hence a thing of the past becomes a thing of the present.

Virmati as the protagonist of the novel is never dead, but ever alive in the heart and hearts of the readers. This is nothing but a revelation of the successful construction of the plot. Kapur's knack of constructing the plot is really worthy of mention. She makes a mark, because of the successful handling of such story-telling narratological devices.

Forefathers

As a story, *Difficult Daughters*, begins with the lives of the forefathers of Kasturi and moves forward tracing the lives of Virmati and her Professor – turned – already – married husband, Harish Chandra and Ganga his first wife and Ida their daughter. The story, set in the pre-partition times, begins at Amritsar, but Delhi is the city from where the plot begins. Ida's account of her mother's past is a flash back, a very successful narratological device often employed in the field

of Cinema. Her account of her mother's life enables the readers to access the past and also enable them to get an over-view of the novel.

Action Is More Significant than the Character Herself

A divorcee without parents and children, Ida is also a victim of oppression. Though she is the narrator of the novel, she never makes a prominent appearance. Nor does she hinder the flow of the novel. Her name is mentioned only once or twice, she keeps a low profile. Kapur makes it crystal clear that since oppression is an outcome of an action, it is more significant than the character herself. She analyses how Ida's rootlessness causes despair in her psyche and how she overcomes her self-pity.

Kapur is precise and economical in briefing her readers of the bitter past of Ida which is marked by depression and oppression:

Amritsar was a place I associated with my mother. Without her,
I am lost. I look for ways to connect.
I know my relatives feel sorry for me. I am without husband, child
or parents. I can see the ancient wheels of my divorce still grinding
and clanking in their heads. (DD 4)

She concentrates on the plight of women and makes her writing more effective with a feminine difference. Women are no longer the marginalized lot. On the contrary, they occupy the centre and they decide upon the course of the novel.

Oppression as the Focus

Oppression is the lynchpin around which the plot of the novel revolves. Hence oppression itself becomes an effective narratological device. The most desirable quality of this novel is coherence and that is achieved through a very careful handling of oppression in the lives of mother, daughter and granddaughter for not less than a period of three generations. Kasturi, Virmati and Ida are the three women who undergo the agony of oppression and the anguish of depression. As a result, they lose themselves in self-pity. While Kasturi ends up as a victim of self-pity, Virmati comes out of this syndrome of self-pity to some extent. But Ida wages a war against this syndrome:

I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering
Like a pencil notation on the margins of society.
For long periods I was engulfed by melancholy, depression and
despair. I would be in bed for hours, unable to sleep, pitying
myself for all I didn't have, blaming my mother, myself. Now
her shadow no longer threatens me. (Kapur DD 279)

Kapur capitalizes on oppression, as a "Concept and Cultural Practice", through the successful employment of both analeptic and proleptic narratological devices. The deliberate reference to the past and the present in tandem, exactly serves the purpose in achieving the readiness of the readers to accept the momentum of the novel with Coleridgean "Willing suspension of disbelief". (Albert 304)

The credibility of the plot is maintained, which, in turn, paves the way for the effective rendering of the “discourse”. Barry finds the term “discourse” more meaningful, than the term “plot” – the reason being the all-inclusive aspects of the former. Kapur is extremely careful in providing the readers with (a self-contained package of the “discourse”), point of view, stylistics and every available strategy which, ultimately, offers the much-awaited finale of this fine work of art. (215)

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