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Emergence of Manju Kapur as Feminist in *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*

R. Sridevi, M.A., M.Phil.

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Manju Kapur and *Difficult Daughters*



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This paper justifies the protest of Virmati, the protagonist in the novel *Difficult Daughters*. According to Christopher Rollason, Manju Kapur is the highly regarded living practitioner of Indian values (Christopher, "Women on the Margins: Reflections on Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*"). Manju Kapur, like Shashi Deshpande, Arunthathi Roy, Gita Hariharan and Anita Nair, is one among the group of women writers in English live and write in India itself concerning the problems of the indigenous people here. Her novel, *Difficult Daughters* got the Commonwealth Writers Prize in the year 1998. It also acquired the international recognition, because this modern Indian fiction was translated into seven languages – Dutch, German, Greek, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish. This novel deals with the late colonization and partition of India and has assuredly earned a very considerable and critical success.

The Character Virmati

In her novels, Manju Kapur gives importance to the familial characters especially women. Women strive to study at college, take part in the national movements, and tend to break the clutches of society like the old values. Virmati, a young woman born in Amistar into a good, high-minded household, falls in love with a professor who is her neighbour. The professor is a married person who lives with his mother, spouse and two children. The professor finally marries Virmati and they settle down in his home which Virmati's parents have sublet to his family. His furious first wife leaves home in a difficult situation. The novel concludes with the emergence of Ida who is Virmati's daughter.

Context – Partition Days and Determination of Virmati

The story of the novel takes place during the partition of India and Pakistan. Education for women is denied at this period. However, Virmati conflicts with her parents and against their will, she joins her M.A. in Philosophy at an institution in Lahore. Secondly, she weds the Professor in secret and this makes her parents feel hugely embarrassed.

Throughout the novel, Virmati denies following the old social values in the name of custom. She fights against them all in a politically surcharged and convention-ridden society. Like Virmati, Ida also succeeds in breaking out of an unsuccessful marriage and staying single a phenomenon unheard of in her grandmother's time (Maini Cookie, 'Daughter's Labour of Love').

Significance of the Meaning of the Word 'Difficult'

In this novel, Manju Kapur uses the word 'difficult' for the daughter of each character. For Kasturi (Virmati's mother), Virmati is a difficult daughter and for Virmati, Ida is a difficult daughter. In fact, the very first monologue of this novel is – "I have decided not to be like my mother". Ida, the narrator of the story, says this in the introductory page of the novel. This is because the characters like Ida never wish to subdue themselves to the oppression of society in the name of tradition. It is true that they cannot do this instantly but by and by, they try to come

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out of the clutches of society which says 'a woman is by all means under the custody of her husband'. Though the female characters in 'Difficult Daughters' oppose the expectations of their parents, their thirst is for the freedom of women through the battle with the patriarchal society.

Why Use of Family Structure?

Why does Manju Kapur use the family structure in all her novels interpreting the problems of women? In an interview with Jai Arjun, Manju Kapur answers this question. She says: "Literature by women, always has the larger considerations, with years of studying texts, it becomes almost second nature to look [...] gender relationship and how they are played [...] in my writings happens to be the home. But then, all sort of things happening outside do affect what is happening inside the home" (Singh, Interview of Manju Kapur)

Quest for Identity

No doubt Kapur's protagonists are essentially women and their quest for identity but for her, men and women constitute a family (Agarwal, "Manju Kapur's *Home: A Chronicle of Urban Middle Class in India*"). But in the view of Chhikara ("Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* - A Saga of Feminist Autonomy and Separate Identity."), Manju Kapur yearns for autonomy and separate identity in her women characters. In *Difficult Daughters*, the novelist has portrayed women as the subjugated people caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and the passion for coming up in society. In the chain of events, Virmati becomes a rebel against the taboos of society, but at the same time, Kapur heightens this character through her tireless service to the innocent victims of violence who are numerous in number during India-Pakistan Partition. Virmati helps people as far as she could and encourages her neighbourhood for the same.

Feminist Way of Thinking and Family Conditions

Even though Kapur highlights the daughters' fight with the familial bondage, she never fails to showcase about how families would be broken because of a woman's feminist way of thinking (disagreements, parting or divorce). In this novel, Virmati does not give ears to her mother's advice and thus she loses all brothers and sisters in her family. She is not allowed to talk to them and her mother also hates her very much. As the Professor parts with her first wife, his children lose the love of their father. They are not able to be intimate with their father since their mother has parted with him and someone else has come in that place.

Ida is also unable to be cheerful, because she comes to know about the tearful story of her mother which breaks her heart. So she also abhors married life and eventually divorces her husband.

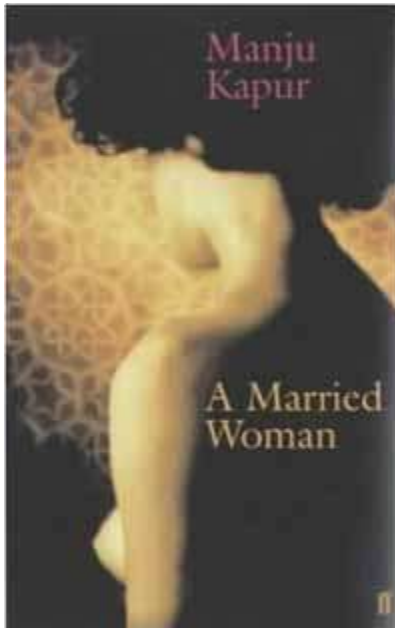
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A Married Woman



Similarly in her other novels like *Custody* and *Home*, Kapur depicts the miserable life of the progeny of 'parted parents' very well. The novel *A Married Woman* which presents this ideology of Kapur was published in 2002.

When *Difficult Daughters* is the story of an audacious young woman falling in love with a man, who is already married, *A Married Woman* on the other hand talks about the different phases in the life of a woman, pre and post marriage. Kapur emerges as a contemporary feminist writer in this novel too. *A Married Woman* has been translated into Spanish and remains controversial in certain Indian critical circles.

Astha

Astha is the only daughter of a painter. Astha's life since beginning has been controlled by her mother, who has always imposed her stringent decisions on her daughter. Like a typical mother, she spends all her time for shaping Astha as an ideal wife, daughter-in-law and a good mother. Astha is married to Hemant finally.

This is the story and it deals with the entire journey (life) of Astha, the protagonist of *A Married Woman*. Though Astha has everything a woman can trust from her marriage- a responsible husband, caring in-laws, and two kids, Astha still feels incomplete as an individual. People at home belittle her likes and opinions continually. Her requirements as a person are in general

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packed down by her daily chores towards her family. Nobody in her family cares for her and eventually she finds herself being deserted and unnoticed.

Her life becomes entirely different, when Aijaz comes to the school where she teaches. Aijaz, a street play artist, asks her to build up the screenplay for a drama. The theme of this drama is 'Babri Masjid Chaos'. As far as Astha is concerned, she talks to an outsider for the first time in life. But Aijaz appreciates her talents and hence she feels drawn to him. Aijaz is murdered brutally all of a sudden while performing a drama involving the burning issue of Babri Masjid-Ram Janmbhoomi. After some time, Astha has to meet Peeplika, a social activist, with whom she becomes very close, and thus begins a relationship that breaks all the conventions.

A Popular Novel

This work is completely popular only because of the realistic depiction of Astha's problems and emotions. She searches everywhere for peace, but she acquires nothing. There is none in the world to cheer her up and share her problems. Her husband never understands any of her emotions and problems and gives least importance to them. Moreover, the way Astha's mother always blindly supports Hemant's decisions and the way Astha is not given even a separate room for her painting irritates not only Astha, but also the reading public. This novel stands as the best example for male chauvinism, oppression of women and the emergence of 'new women' in society. In spite of all the coercion against her, Astha is very happy and stands as a new woman. She has the power to carry on the charade of a happy married life just for the sake of her children and her family.

Marriage and Women in India

Until marriage, a woman in India is controlled by her parents and after that her husband, mother-in-law and everybody dominate her. The protagonists Virmati and Astha are not only the examples for the distinct portrayal of the lives of two women from different identity, but also for the depiction of the life of each and every woman in India. Women under the patriarchal pressure and control burn out and are subjected to social ostracism. They are subject to bias and prejudice. The patriarchal society for ages has degraded the word 'women'.

Virmati and Astha want to achieve something which goes beyond a husband and children. They are not silent rebels but are bold, outspoken, well-determined and action-oriented. That is what Manju Kapur had aimed at and has done it very successfully in her novels *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*.

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