

**The New Emergent Women in  
Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and  
Anita Rau Badami's *The Hero's Walk***

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**Abstract**

Manju Kapur and Anita Rau Badami have been widely recognised as great and distinguished writers of English literary world. Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters* earned Commonwealth Writers' Award, the best first book, in Europe and South Asia in 1999. It earned her success in India as well as abroad. Badami received esteemed literary awards including the Regional Commonwealth Best Book Prize in the Canada/Caribbean Region, for her second book *The Hero's Walk*. The award-winning novels *Difficult Daughters* and *The Hero's Walk* are taken for study to examine the creative odyssey of Anita Rau Badami and Manju Kapur. Nirmala and Virmati, the protagonists of *The Hero's Walk* and *Difficult Daughters* are respectively studied in the article to appreciate how they have become victorious and succeeded in representing the new incarnation of women.

**Keywords:** Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, Anita Rau Badami, *The Hero's Walk*, new women, self-identity, middle-class Indian women, husband and wife relationship, tradition and modernity.

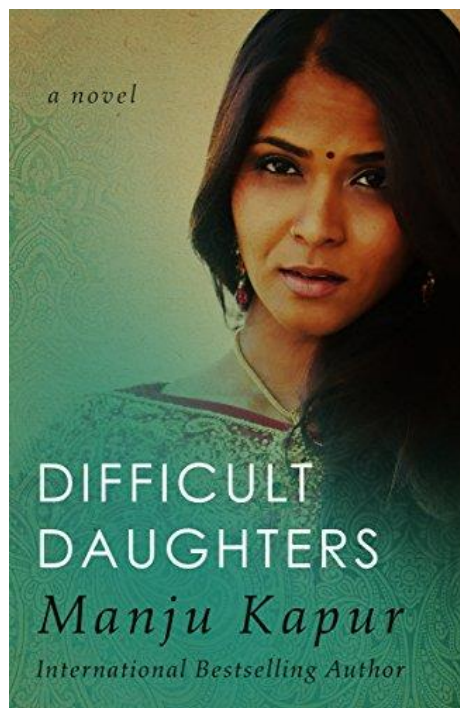
**Introduction**

An art form is a true reflection of social life. Novelists tend to reflect reality and various human relationships, human being in relation to universe, individual in relation to society and man in relation to woman. Traditional society is a male-dominated one where women's rights are subjugated. As a result, her self-identity has very little recognition and she is expected to be submissive. She is reminded by the family and society that she needs not to assert her identity as she is destined for man. With the advent of technology, media and western education, the position of women has been undergoing a constant change for betterment. From sociological point of view a major change has come in the relationship of husband and wife. In this regard, literature has played a sterling role in nurturing the readers' consciousness and preparing them for women's emancipation. Female writers proudly project women in their writings as a new incarnation of women. The novel harmonious presentation

of life in recent literature discovers a fresh identity and interpretations. Among all the great writers, Anita Rau Badami and Manju Kapur have attained a unique significance in today's English literary world.

Anita Rau Badami and Manju Kapur occupy a fittingly suitable place and emerged as a strong voice of modern Indian women by presenting the real image of India. Anita Rau Badami has occupied a stupendous position on literary vista. Her chief thematic concern is to present women's struggle in Indian social milieu. She was born in Rourkela, Orissa but spent her childhood in the north and east of India. After marriage, she moved to Canada with her husband. Badami wrote four novels *Tamarind Mam*, *The Hero's Walk*, *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* and *Tell It To The Trees*. Her art of writing carries a flavour of nativity and fragrance of motherland. Her roots in India make her successful in weaving tales of Indian women, exploring the rich and painful ceremonies which make a deep impact on the readers who are fascinated by the image of India in her works.

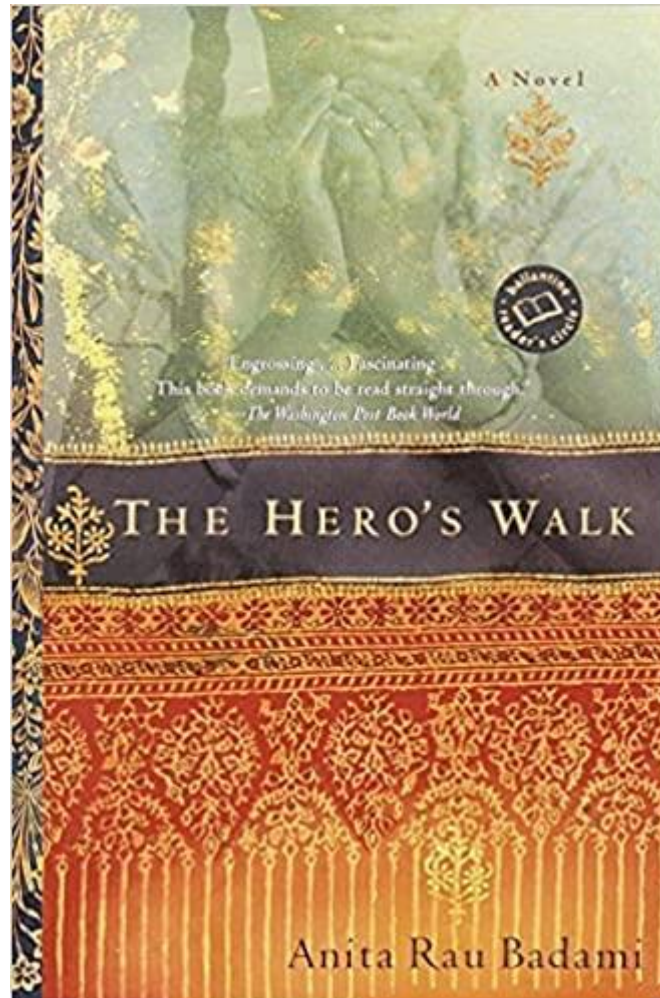
Manju Kapur is one of the most impressive post-independent Indian women writers. She is known for her sincerity and ability in voicing the concerns of the urban educated middle-class women. She is popularly known as *Jane Austen of India*. This epithet well sums up her keen observation and depiction of life. Her novels bring novelty for readers and allow them to visualize the world that is a combination of fact and fiction. Her works reflect the gamut of Indian cultural issues. She is concerned with the woman's quest for self; an exploration into the female psyche and an understanding of the mysteries of life along with the protagonist's role in it. Her success lies in her representation of real-life experiences.



[https://www.amazon.com/Difficult-Daughters-Novel-Manju-Kapur-ebook/dp/B00JW4EZ9W/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?crid=3F8P3MUNVZ5CH&dchild=1&keywords=difficult+daughters+by+manju+kapur&qid=1631934947&s=books&sprefix=Difficult+Daughters%2Cstripbooks%2C334&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Difficult-Daughters-Novel-Manju-Kapur-ebook/dp/B00JW4EZ9W/ref=sr_1_1?crid=3F8P3MUNVZ5CH&dchild=1&keywords=difficult+daughters+by+manju+kapur&qid=1631934947&s=books&sprefix=Difficult+Daughters%2Cstripbooks%2C334&sr=1-1)

Manju Kapur's debut novel is *Difficult Daughters*, the most readable Indian novel. It highlights the image of middle-class woman who is sandwiched between tradition and modernity. The novel is about gender discrimination and inequality prevalent in Indian society. It also deals with motherhood, husband - wife relationship, mother - daughter relationship, problems of Indian joint families and mental and physical trauma of women. The protagonist Virmati raises her voice against the role models of the age old patriarchal set up. It is a fine example of the pain rampant in the lives of women, their suffering at domestic and social levels and the imposed endurance in marriage. It voices the scathing aspect of Indian social institutions like marriage or family, orthodox expectations from Hindu daughters, suffocating experiences of women and symptomatic anguish of the emerging 'new woman' who struggles to overcome her domestic plight with dignity and strength.

*Difficult Daughters* is the unique tale of a daughter's journey down the memory lanes collecting events from her mother's past. The narrator, Ida, visits her ancestor's house where her mother spent her childhood. To trace her dead mother's past she meets the family, friends, and acquaintances of her mother. The novel starts with an ambiguous note by the narrator Ida, "*The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother.*" The story is based on factual events of India's Independence, showcasing a Punjabi family covering the life span of three generations. Ida, daughter of Virmati, is a divorcee who experiences a disastrous arranged marriage. The protagonist Virmati is the eldest child of Kasturi. Kasturi is the mother of eleven children. Virmati is hopelessly caught in an illicit love relation with a professor, Harish who is already married and father of a child too. Virmati refuses to marry a decent boy chosen by her family and goes to Lahore for further studies. She works as the principal of a college and returns to Lahore as professor's second wife.



Courtesy: [https://www.amazon.com/Heros-Walk-Ballantine-Readers-Circle/dp/0345450922/ref=sr\\_1\\_1?dchild=1&keywords=The+Hero%E2%80%99s+Walk&qid=1631934658&s=books&sr=1-1](https://www.amazon.com/Heros-Walk-Ballantine-Readers-Circle/dp/0345450922/ref=sr_1_1?dchild=1&keywords=The+Hero%E2%80%99s+Walk&qid=1631934658&s=books&sr=1-1)

The novel *The Hero's Walk* is the simple story of a common woman's heroism who simply seeks to navigate life from birth to death. The novel deals with a typical twentieth century middle class family, a loyal follower of Hinduism. The family struggles to retain its identity in the folds of modern arena. The older generation follows their tradition, but younger generation tries to make their new path.

Badami creates a fictional town Toturpuram in Tamil Nadu. The plot is fabricated around the lifestyle of a common woman Nirmala and her husband, Sripathi Rao. Sripathi Rao, a middle-aged man works as an advertising copy writer. Their daughter Maya pursues her education in Vancouver. She breaks her engagement with Prakash and marries a Canadian. Sripathi's son Arun, matured but unsettled, wastes his time in politics. Sripathi Rao's sister Putti is a forty-four-year-old spinster whose marriage prospects are delayed by her selfish mother, Ammayya. Nandana, daughter of Maya, comes to India after the sudden death of her parents in Vancouver.

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**Language in India** [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) ISSN 1930-2940 21:9 September 2021

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## The New Emergent Women

At the end of 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term 'New Woman' was used to describe women who were pushing against the social limits which was strictly imposed on them. The new woman refused to be stifled under oppressive restrictions and confronted tradition and society to come up with her own identity.

India achieved its freedom, but women have to achieve their genuine freedom yet. With a desire to educate and change the attitudes of men and women, Manju elaborates the suffering of her female characters and draws our attention towards suitable remedies also. In Indian tradition, women are not expected to raise their voice for their rights, against injustice, beliefs, rituals, and superstitions. They need to obey the deep-rooted patriarchal system. Women are taught to be disciplined, calm, meek, timid, submissive, and docile. Their rights as women and humans are denied mercilessly. Manju has an immense understanding of marginalization of women. She explores the psyche of urban women with their devastating problems and challenges. Virmati fights against the stereo typed roles assigned to her both by society and family. She refuses to marry with whom she was engaged and fights with her inner self, expresses pain, agony, and helplessness to secure her love.

Manju highlights how a girl in the patriarchal Indian society is not allowed to take her marriage decision. It can deteriorate the status of the family and destroy their happiness. Always Virmati's vital needs like to be loved, to be heard and pampered remain unfulfilled in her childhood due to her mother's incessant pregnancy. Gender discrimination begins at home which instils deep abhorrence in Virmati which remains a part of her psyche and turns her into a rebel. But she was always afraid that she would be unwanted, redundant and an appendage one could do without. She feels like the fisherman's daughter who was asked by the King Shantanu to marry him. Virmati has given herself up fully and unconditionally to Harish to love him and to be loved before marriage. The fisherman's daughter had bargained, but Virmati could not, as her family was against the marriage. Her orthodox family does not want her to get married to a married man.

The conflict between Virmati and her mother Kasturi represents the clash between the old and the younger generations. Her mother is an obstruction in her path to gain self-realization. The feminine self as envisaged by Kapur seems a fusion of opposite notions like acceptance and rejection; flexibility and rigidity; fantasy and reality; rebellion and reconciliation. All this is blended in Virmati, a typical middle-class woman. Virmati's conflict is every woman's conflict between the desired and the imposed; the willed and the unwilled. Her education makes her rebellious and militant. It also makes her reluctant to accept the unreasonable and the irrational. As a new emergent woman of the modern industrial age, she declines to remain within the four walls of her house and attempts for higher studies.

Highly educated Virmati aspires to fly high in the sky but imprisoned within the confines of a conservative society. Initially due to the ignorance of existential crisis, she surrenders herself. She faces unexpected turns of life but analyses, realizes and interprets the situation, changes her attitude and takes a firm decision. She successfully achieves her 'self' and makes significant decisions in life. Kapur prepares her to encounter adverse phases of life, shapes and moulds her towards prudence individually and socially. The protagonist attains the purpose of life. To lead a fulfilling life, she empowers and enriches herself with confidence. Kapur's message is clearly exemplified through her protagonist's transition from ignorance to intelligence.

In *Hero's Walk*, Nirmala wants to meet her daughter Maya who is alienated by Sripathi Rao. But she cannot welcome Maya into her house without her husband's permission. The unprecedented death of Maya and arrival of her daughter Nandana bring a radical change in Nirmala's outlook towards life. She understands the real meaning of life. She reassures Nandana that the people of the Big House love her ardently. She even convinces Sripathi to sell the house to get relief from the debts, counsels her son Arun to take the responsibilities of the family by finding a decent job, performs the marriage between Putti and Gopala by erasing caste boundaries and helps Nandana to lead a normal life in India. Nirmala becomes a conqueror because of her optimism and patience. Her heroic walk in the family's tale provides a bright future for her next generation Nandana, Arun and Putti. *The Hero's Walk* ends with an optimistic note of success assuring peace and comfort in everyone's life. Her evolution in the novel proves that a woman's silence should not be taken for granted and consider to be her weakness. Thus, her success is the success of a middle-class family that is fretted and bounded by the dictates of patriarchy and false prestige. Finally, Nirmala surges out as a 'New Woman' who resolves all the problems of her family. They all attain maturity and start thinking on constructive grounds aiming for a successful future.

Nirmala's journey is a journey from self-alienation to self-identification, from negation to assertion, from diffidence to confidence. She learns to trust her feminine self and tells her husband that they have to prepare themselves for the comfort of the remaining family members. This is the expression of the assertion of her individuality, her willingness to confront reality and not to run away from problems. She becomes aware that a wall of silence shall be of no help to her. By gaining the identity as a woman, a new Nirmala is identified. She epitomizes this struggle for the liberation of her next generation.

Generally, mothers are considered the reservoir of all positive values and symbol of love and care. The image of a mother has a very strong and secure hold on Indian psyche. But in these two novels, mother is a quite contrary to such values. Love, respect, and unquestioned obedience are replaced by filial rebellion against mothers. In both the novels mothers try to exercise their will, exhibit gender discrimination, and try to control their daughters' lives. In *Difficult Daughters* Kasturi wants Virmati to take care of her siblings and

discourages her to opt for higher studies. In *The Hero's Walk* Ammayya is such a selfish mother who keeps postponing her daughter Putti's marriage so that Putti can serve her in her old age. This discrimination proves how the individuality of girls is restricted by the selfish motives. Liberties which are normally granted to boys are denied to girls. In both the novels, it is shown how gender preference turns submissive girls into rebellious. According to Usha Bande and Atma Ram, "The 'New Woman' is one who shorn of her 'feminine mystique' is aware of herself as an individual, she is free from her traditional, social and moral constrictions and is able to live with a heightened sense of dignity and individuality." Virmati and Putti stand against their mothers, Virmati marries a married professor Harish and Putti marries Gopala who belongs to a lower class.

Though the protagonists Virmati and Nirmala are part of the intellectual society, are trapped in internal as well as external conflicts. They face dilemma to choose between family's duty or self, suppression or independence and tradition or transition. Traditional culture and customs try to subdue their identity and individuality, but intellectual thoughts and philosophy force them to free themselves from the cages of tradition.

### Conclusion

Kapur and Badami artistically show their protagonists under the shade of inferior status consequently facing mental trauma. Women face refusal of love, education, profession, social activities, and selection of life partner. Both the protagonists cannot take decision related to familial, financial, and emotional aspects. The authors present slice of life of the protagonists through different techniques. All the women are not the new women from beginning pages of the novels but their exposure to the problems serves as a catalyst in turning them prudent. The authors do not demand any sympathy and empathy on the part of society, but they educate their characters to realize their responsibility towards their own life and that of the society. In *Difficult Daughters* Kapur signifies, "Society would be better off if its females were effective and capable." (Kapur, 163)

Manju and Anita Rau Badami are talented authors who present life in all its hues and twists. They neither glorify nor distort the image of women. They give it a very realistic touch by making their protagonists mere puppets in the beginning and later gain maturity and search for self-identity. The protagonists quench their thirst of identity by moving forward with determination.

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