



PORTRAYAL OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES OF WOMEN IN MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

Ms. Manjit Kaur

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Abstract

Manju Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) is an enthralling literary work that describes the complexities of women's lives in a male dominated society. This paper explores the diverse identities of female characters portrayed in the novel. It highlights Virmati, the protagonist's journey, who contravenes social norms, beliefs, and expectations to pursue her desires and ambitions, and challenges the traditional gender roles assigned to women. Virmati's struggles and conflicts against established norms are explored, throwing light on the intersections of gender discrimination. This paper also discusses other female characters in the novel, Virmati's mother Kasturi, her cousin Shakuntala, her friend Swarnlata and her own sister Indumati, who represent different generations and beliefs, and their differing struggles and identities are explored in the context of their social roles and expectations. The influence of patriarchal norms and social pressure on women's choices, relationships, and individuality is critically analyzed, revealing the complexities of women's lives in a traditional society. This research article contributes to the understanding of different identities of women and highlights the complex ways in which women deal with societal expectations, gender roles and discrimination, elucidating the challenges and struggles faced by women in a male-controlled society.

Keywords: Diverse Identities, Gender-Discrimination, Patriarchal, Social Norms, Relationships, Societal Expectations.

Associate Professor, Government College for Girls, Palwal, Kurukshetra, Haryana Research Scholar (Lovely Professional University), India.

Email: manjitkr7@gmail.com

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1. Introduction

Gender plays a prominent role in Indian English literature, as it shows the socio-cultural norms and values of the society. Woman has been the subject and object of world literature from beginning and Indian literature is no exception. However, Indian female authors have only recently started achieving recognition and acceptance on the literary stage. Indian English literature has seen a rise of female writers only in the last few decades. It is now widely accepted that females can bring a fresh and unique perspective to the literary world, and their voices need to be heard. Women writers have brought a new and innovative perspective to the conventional themes and motifs of Indian literature, and their writings questioned the patriarchal norms that have long suppressed women's freedom and desires. Gender identity and sexuality have also started to gain attention in Indian English literature, with authors discussing issues related to homosexuals, gays, lesbians and transgender that have been called "taboos" in Indian society. This has represented gender in a more subtle and different way in literature, and has helped in the complete collapse gender binarism that has been the established social norms in India for centuries. Thus, gender plays a vital role in shaping the themes, motifs, and perspectives in Indian English literature. Women writers have contributed significantly to the literary world, challenging patriarchal norms and bringing a fresh perspective to literature. With an increasing focus on gender identity and sexuality, Indian English literature is becoming more diverse and inclusive, embracing a wide range of perspectives and experiences. The famous writers in Indian writing in English like Kamala Das, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, and Manju Kapur have explored various themes and gender related issues of oppression, power, sexuality, and identity.

Virmati: A Maverick Character

Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) discusses the theme of gender in a male dominated society. The novel is set in Amritsar (Punjab) and the story of Virmati, a young woman who rebels against social norms and expectations. *Difficult Daughters* is Manju Kapur's debut novel that has won her the most famous Commonwealth Writers' Best First Book Award in 1999. This novel explores the quest for freedom and self-identity by describing the difference of opinions and reactions against social norms of daughters and mothers of three generations, their lives how they succumbed to the traditions willingly or unwillingly. On one hand *Difficult Daughters* describes the historical event of partition in 1947 and on another hand, it beautifully portrays the saga of a young girl named Virmati who is ripped up mercilessly between her family, her will

to get higher education and her temptation for illicit love. The novel portrays the story of three generation of women- Kasturi, Virmati and Ida. The mother-daughter relations in these three generations are not affable. Through these women, Kapur delineates the clash between their attitude towards social norms and traditions. The novel beautifully portrays the position of Indian middle-class women and their continuous struggle to shape their own identity. Virmati, the protagonist grows wonderfully through the vicissitudes of life with her ambitions, desires, expectations and hopes but in the end comes to terms with a life full of adjustment and compromises where there is not any touch of individuality and independence make us remember the famous Indian Poet Nissim Ezekiel's poem 'Enterprise'

"When, finally we reached the place,
We hardly know why we were there
The trip had darkened every face
Our deeds were neither great nor rare ..." (1)

Despite of being the half of the populace of the whole world, a woman has not been given that position, status, and honor and place which she deserves. In this situation, her wish to achieve freedom and independent identity is well justified. In patriarchal society, she serves and sacrifices her life as daughter, mother, wife, sister and even as grandmother to fulfill her family duties and responsibilities. Kapur describes the plight of middle-class Indian women and reveals that everything is not fit and fine in their lives. In one of her interviews, she herself states, "...personal lives of women are so difficult" and simultaneously asks a question to the Interviewer itself, "... Don't you think?" Manju Kapur majorly discusses socio-cultural issues that occur in the changing scenario of Indian society and discovers that how women find themselves incapable and powerless in removing the social evils. V.M. Manju and R. Lissy comment "Woman under patriarchal pressure and control are subjected to social group. They are discriminated and biased in the society. They live under problems and unfair treatment of closed society is reflected in Kapur writings." In our society she is expected to ape the path of mythological characters like Sita, Draupadi, Savitri, Gandhari and Rukmani sacrificing her own self for the happiness of others. Through the characters of Virmati, Kasturi, Shakuntala and Ida, kapur has portrayed the diverse female identities that are reacting to the established social norms in different ways. Virmati, the protagonist of the novel, is a maverick person, who rebels against conventional norms. The title *Difficult Daughters* is an indicator to the orthodox mindset of the society that a female who struggles to shape her own identity is called as "difficult" daughter by the people of society as well as family members.

Shakuntala, Swarnalata and Ida: Rejecting established social norms

Virmati, the heroine of the novel is a young, beautiful girl born in a reputed Punjabi family. She is the eldest child of Kasturi and Suraj Parkash, who takes care of her younger brothers and sisters as “second mother” (11). Her duty towards her family, her fervent wish to get higher education to create and shape her own identity, her illicit love affair with a married professor remains at the centre of the novel. The novel is about difficult mothers and difficult daughters, the mothers who don't understand the feelings, emotions, wishes, cravings and aspirations of their daughters and the daughters who fail to understand the cause behind their behavior. Virmati, a very hard-working girl, never receives love, care, affection and attention that she deserves, especially from her mother Kasturi. Virmati is badly trapped in her family responsibilities. But she is very much inspired by her cousin, Shankuntala, her ideal. The aspiration of getting higher education and freedom comes to her mind after meeting Shankuntala. She wants to be free from the burden of family responsibilities and craves to live a free life like her cousin. Virmati says when Shankuntala leaves for Lahore, “Maybe I will also one day come to Lahore, Pehenji, she wept, I wish I too could do things. But I am not clever.” (DD 18).

She wants to taste the ‘wine of freedom’ like her cousin. She decides to leave for Lahore as she knows that she cannot live a free life in Amritsar. Shakuntala appears as an independent and modern girl from the beginning. She studies, teaches and takes part in Gandhian movement. She does whatever she wants and she explain it to Virmati-“We travel, entertain ourselves in the evening, follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars” (DD15). Her activities re influence Virmati's life. “Virmati followed Shakuntala around. She watches her ride horses, smoke, play cards and badminton, act without her mother's advice, but anything she wanted, without thinking, it is a waste of money” (DD 18).

Shakuntala is a source of inspiration for her. She is very much impressed by her. Her wearing of gold bangle in one hand and a male wrist watch in other. Shakuntala's coming to Amritsar sows seed of desire for freedom in Virmati. Kapur throws light on young and immature mentality of Virmati in the following lines;

“Shakuntala visits planted the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. It was possible to be something other than a wife; images of Shakuntala Pehenji kept floating through head. She too had to go to Lahore, even if she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over.”

In Lahore, Virmati meets Swarnalata, her friend and roommate. She is the captain of her college and an active member of the group that is fighting for the

country's freedom. Virmati wishes to be like her close friend Swarnalata and her cousin Shakuntala. These lines describe the conflict of her mind after meeting Swarna:

Virmati stared at Swarna. What a girl! Her opinions seemed to come from inside herself. Her thoughts, ideas and feelings blended without any horrible sense of dislocation. She was committed articulate. Would the professor want her to be like Swarna? She didn't want to do anything that would alter the professor's undying love for her. May be she could be like Swarna from the inside secretly. (DD135)

Swarna wants Virmati to join freedom movement but Virmati remains in her dilemma. Though she is extremely influenced by Swarna, but again she gives priority to her illicit love affair with Harish, who merely uses her to quench his sexual hunger.

Marriage versus Education

After meeting Shakuntala she comes to realize that there is life even beyond husband and children. “She does not have limitations towards the tradition of getting marriage and family relationship” (Muthamil M.S, V. Kamala). In Indian middle-class society, marriage is considered a very pious and significant institution. Marriage is regarded as a milestone in girl's life. Here, marriage is not just a union of two persons but also a union of two families. A marriage is believed as a lifelong commitment and a necessary factor in the social and cultural fabric of the Indian middle-class society. Education versus marriage has always been a burning issue among traditional Indian families. When Virmati expresses her wish get higher after completing her schooling, even her mother Kasturi does not support her. Kasturi also swings between her desires and her family responsibilities. When she wants to learn English, her mother thinks it useless and insignificant. In Kasturi's opinion, catering to the needs of family, children, husband and in-laws, is the primary duty of a girl in Indian society. That's why, after matriculation, she is given the training of household works like stitching, cooking and embroidery etc. Kasturi says “A woman's shaan is her home” (DD 16). She believes that marriage is the final destination of girl's journey of life, but Virmati goes against her beliefs, she denies marrying Inderjit and makes her entire family suffer because of her. Virmati is locked up in the god own and the family decides for the marriage of Indumati to Inderjit to save the honour and reputation of the family in the society. Kasturi is an educated woman but totally depends on her husband and is the real image of weeping bride. Simon de Beauvoir says, “Man can think of himself without woman, she cannot think of herself without a man”. Kasturi wants her daughters to be educated so that they can live through all circumstances in the society, but she does not want them to rebel against the traditional values. She

curses the modern system of education when her daughter rejects the proposal of her arranged marriage to Inderjeet. She rebukes Virmati "Leave your studies, if it is going to make you so bad-tempered with your family, you are forgetting what comes first" (DD21). Kasturi gives more importance to family and expects her daughter to follow the traditional and social norms appropriate for Indian girl after marriage. Not only Kasturi, but her husband Suraj Parkash also believes that girls should be given only the basic education only to make them able to take care of their family and children. Virmati, the protagonist is shown as a second mother to her siblings. Her mother, Kasturi, is shown as a staunch follower of patriarchy. This pair of mother and daughter always remains engaged in continuous inimical arguments. Virmati's illicit affair with Professor Harish has sown the seeds of liberty in her mind. She bears all the anguish and opposition of family members but rejects the idea of arranged marriage and prefers to start her journey for self-assertion. She develops a love-affair with Harish and bravely resists her familial pressure. She decides to stay in a marriage relationship in which she has to remain as a second wife. Her aspirations for self-reliance and the impact of Swarna lata enable her to emerge out as a new woman. She completes her education and settles herself in a respectable job of Principal. Her controversial and unaccepted relationship with Harish keeps her in continuous struggle with patriarchy. She has to face the opposition of her parents and her mother-in-law and Harish's first wife Ganga. Her daughter Ida significantly opens the inner locks of Virmati's journey. Nadia Ahmad observes Virmati's conflict and remarks, "She is trying to achieve a level of modernity through education and social mobility, but finds herself stumbling on traditional values that haunt her efforts to grasp female agency. Her inner conflict is very much the issue of reconciling tradition and modernity".

No doubt, the condition and position of women has changed after independence, but Indian society is still male controlled. Sivakumar, I. and Manimekalai, K. (2021) observe patriarchy in Indian society:

Patriarchal values regulating sexuality, reproduction, and social productions are expressed through specific cultural metaphors. Overt rules prohibiting women from certain important specific activities and denying certain rights did exist...women are trained not to challenge discrimination, subordination, exploitation, and subjugation at various levels in the system. These norms restrict women from having aspirations beyond marriage. (Sivakumar 427-435)

Kasturi , Ganga and Indumati: Conforming to Patriarchy

In Indian society, women are still expected to follow the traditional roles assigned to them. They feel trapped in their roles as wives and mothers as they are expected only to take care of the household and children. Manju Kapur gives the real picture of the condition of women in Indian society by portraying the character of Kasturi who feels sick and weak due to her unwanted pregnancies every year which causes permanent illness to her. "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). Though she suffers a lot, but still she is the symbol of patriarchy in the novel. Not only, she silently accepts the gender role assigned to Indian women, but also expects the same from her daughter Virmati. Ganga, the first wife of Harish, can't even do anything when Harish brings Virmati as his second wife. For the sake of family's honour, Indumati, Virmati's younger sister marries Inderjeet without any resistance, when Veermati refuses to marry him. Ganga and Indumati are silent sufferers in the novel who quietly conform to the established social norms.

2. Conclusion

Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters* explores the complex relationships and inner struggles of her female characters in post-independence India. Amidst larger societal changes, Kapur's characters navigate traditional gender roles, familial expectations, and the push and pull of modernity and tradition. The novel offers a rich tapestry of diverse female identities and their experiences and perspectives. On one side, there are Kasturi and Ganga true picture of Indian women conforming to the patriarchal values and on other side there are Shakuntala, Swarnlata, Virmati and Ida rebelling against conventional norms, searching for independence and identity. Kapur highlights the complexities and challenges of womanhood and family dynamics in a rapidly changing society, while also celebrating the resilience and strength of her female characters. Ultimately, *Difficult Daughters* is meticulous portrayal Indian women trying to find their voice and place in the world.

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