
REASSERTING PATRIARCHY TRANSCENDING TRADITIONS: A STUDY MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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Abstract :

*Manju Kapur is an indisputably leading and the most prominent contemporary Indian novelist in English. As a postcolonial writer, Manju Kapur tries to depict themes like marginalization, tensions and dilemmas, nostalgia, concern and quest for identity in her female characters in *Difficult Daughters*. Indian society assumes men as superior to women. They are considered as inferior and less intellectual and are made to follow male authorities and ideologies. The patriarchal ideologies consider women only as a housewife and men as a leader of social, political and economic authorities. The women experience domination, discrimination, oppression, control, insult and violence within family as well as in society. The study explores the ways in which Kapur's female protagonists challenge the oppressive systems of traditional gender roles, marriage, and societal norms. The present paper is an attempt to consider Manju Kapur's treatment of the women's resistance against patriarchal dominance in her Commonwealth Writer's Prize (1999) winning first novel, *Difficult Daughters*. By depicting both the internal and external struggles faced by women, Kapur contributes to the broader discourse on gender, power, and resistance in contemporary South Asian literature.*

Key words : Autonomy, Identity, Liberation of women, Patriarchy, Tradition.

Introduction :

Manju Kapur is an established diasporic writer of Indian origin who presents female protagonists in her fiction. As a postcolonial writer, Kapur tries to depict themes like marginalization, tensions and dilemmas, nostalgia, concern and quest for identity in her female characters in *Difficult Daughters*. It gives a graphic account of Indian society in her characters by depicting both the internal and external struggles faced by women. The exploration of patriarchal dominance reveals its implications on women's autonomy and societal roles, as well as the ongoing struggle against these entrenched norms. *Difficult Daughters* is a story of three generations of women: Ida, the narrator, who is a divorcee, Virmati, her mother, who marries an already married professor for love, and Kasturi, her grandmother, who comes to terms with a difficult daughter, Virmati. *Difficult Daughters* begins with the death of the heroine, Virmati. Ida explains that she did not want to be like her mother, who in turn, did not want to be like her mother.

Difficult Daughters is set at the time of partition in Amritsar and Lahore. Virmati, the protagonist of the novel, is born in an Arya-Samaj in Lala Diwan Chand family as the eldest of her ten brothers and sisters. Her grandfather is a noted landowner who strongly emphasizes on the education of women. The care and love which she expected from her mother and family, is never given to her. From her childhood she was bounded by the obligations of the home, she never has time for her own. She says:

I'm tired of knitting and sewing,' flared Virmati. 'Besides, I'm here to look after you,' 'I can look after myself'. (p. 12)

Virmati passes her time by helping her ever-pregnant mother in the housework taking care of the younger siblings and studying. Virmati's family considers her eligible for marriage as she is proficient in stitching, cooking and reading. The life of her mother and her education sow the seeds of her urge to break free from the patriarchal set-up that denies her freedom and choice. She is engaged to Inderjit but the marriage is postponed due to the demise of his father. Meanwhile, she joins college and falls in love with the Oxford-returned Professor, Harish Chandra, who lives next door. The professor has an illiterate docile wife, a daughter and lives with his mother and daughter. The professor finds an intellectual companion in Virmati and Virmati's need for self-affirmation is aggravated by the professor's love for her. Their love blooms and at the other end her wedding day with Inderjit approaches. Virmati gets torn between family duty, the desire to study and illicit love.

Unable to find a solution to her daily struggles and painful dilemma, Virmati attempts suicide but is rescued. Indumati, her younger sister, is married off to Inderjit and Virmati is shut up in a storehouse. Virmati and the professor exchange love letters through the youngest sister, Paro. Kasturi tries hard to make her daughter succumb to the wishes of the family, but in vain. Virmati decides to go to Lahore to study further. In her rebellion against her traditional Arya-Samaj family, her refusing to marry the person she is engaged to and her desire to study further, Virmati heroically asserts herself. Yet she is no hero and we see that as the story progresses. P.A. Ade, in his article, has rightly remarked about discrimination against women:

“The historical preference for male children and the relegation of women to domestic roles exemplify the systemic nature of patriarchy. In modern society, patriarchal structures continue to manifest through economic, political, and social discrimination against women, such as unequal educational opportunities and domestic violence” (Ade, 2021).

Manju Kapur's work *Difficult Daughters* vividly illustrates the profound effects of patriarchal society on women's lives, showcasing their struggles for identity and autonomy. Through the experiences of the character Virmati, Kapur critiques the societal norms that confine women to traditional roles, emphasizing their quest for personal fulfillment amidst oppressive structures.

Kapur portrays the suffering of women throughout her life. When Virmati marries Professor Harish Chandra, she is not welcomed by his own family members as well as her husband's family. Harish first wife Ganga and his mother Kishori Devi treat her in ruthless

manner. Virmati later realized:

“I should never have married you ... and it's too late now. I've never seen it so clearly. It's not fair” (p. 212).

Virmati's marriage with Harish firstly makes her proud and gives a feeling of security, but she fails to make any space for herself in her husband's family.

She wondered dreadingly whether this isolation would continue till the end of her life. (p. 215)

Now, she starts thinking that this isolation will continue till last breath of her life. When she becomes pregnant her mother-in-law takes care of her, at that time she was relieved of her misfortune. But unfortunately, she suffers a miscarriage and this incident further intensifies her pain, Then Harish sends Virmati to Lahore to study M.A. so that will bring her out of her depression, pain from that incident. Virmati starts realizing that even her voice, peace is gone after marriage. When Harish wants her by his side with him, she does not think of education or anything else. But when he thinks that she must pursue further studies and sent her Lahore, she does it without raising her voice or without any argument. Unknowingly or deliberately she has become a puppet in his hands.

Man has dominated woman to his self-control, used to satisfy his sexual pleasure but never has he preferred to uplift her to higher position in society. When Virmati gave birth to Ida, she suggested that her daughter to be named as Bharati, but her husband named the child Ida, a Persian name. Virmati seems to have a feeling of distress that she is not given the importance by her husband in any matter.

Simone De Beauvoir, in her *The Second Sex* rightly remarked about men-women relationship:

In actuality the relation of the two sexes is not quite like that of two electrical poles, for man represents both the positive and the neutral, as is indicated by the common use of man to designate human beings in general; whereas woman represents only the negative, defined by limiting criteria, without reciprocity. (Simone De Beauvoir, 1984)

For Manju Kapur liberation for women is most important. Virmati is the embodiment of liberation. After her disappointment in FA, her mother forces her to get married but she wants to have her own identity and wants to taste the sweetness of freedom like her cousin Shakuntala. Virmati takes great efforts to improve her English, while Kasturi feels it insignificant. Virmati fails to convince her mother and gets engaged with a canal engineer, Inderjeet by the family against her wish. She needs to struggle to continue her education after her engagement. She joins AS College. Here she meets an oxford return Professor, Harish Chandar. He is an instructor in English. She enjoys her personality. At college, he takes a glance at Virmati with warmth in his eyes. Kapur writes:

Virmati always sat in the front row with the four other girls who were in the professor's class, and that was the only place he saw her in college, flower-like, against a backdrop of male students. (p. 46).

Harish is a married man and lives in Virmati's home as tenant. For Virmati, professor's affection was more stimulant than Inderjeet. She is getting tangled in the web of professor's adoration. She contrasts Inderjeet and Harish. So she rejects Inderjeet and suggests her mother to give Indumati a chance to marry him. She is locked in the go-down when her grandfather comes to know the fact about her affair with professor. Virmati feels choked out when she finds out about Ganga's pregnancy. She writes to the professor:

"Now I know there is still some life in your feelings for your wife - as it is proper there should be - it would be very wrong of me to come between you, especially when there is going to be another baby. But for the pregnancy, I would never have known. What has happened has happened for the good. In which world was I living, to be so caught up in the illusion of your love? Just as you must do your duty to your family, and your wife, so too I must do my duty to mine. (p. 107)

She again decides to start her studies. She informs Harish that she is going to Lahore to do her BT. She wants to become a teacher like him and Shakuntala. Thus the journey of 'new woman' starts, who does not want to be a puppet in the hands of others. She decides to close her relationship with Harish and burns his letters. She begins a meaningful life in Lahore with her roommate Swarna Lata. She takes part in politics.

Virmati decides herself to be involved with Swarna Lata, but professor's thoughts continue hovering around her mind. Harish comes to meet her and furthermore to seek after her. He succeeds in convincing his adoration for Virmati. For the first time they enjoy physical joy. She conceives soon and has to abort the child by selling the gold bangles given to her by her grandfather. After this occurrence she again decides to cut her relationship with him. She goes to Siramaur, a hill station in Nahan to be a principal of Pratibha Kanya Vidyalaya. She teaches family household and English Literature to class IX and X. Virmati enjoys much in Nahan. It is most likely her best period. There she enjoys a free life freely. Her search for identity ends here. She needs to manage everything by herself. Here she has no friends and family. Though she achieves the status of female autonomy. Veena Singh states that:

In Virmati there struck the head and the heart, physical and moral, Virmati gives way to her heart and body" (Singh 168).

But destiny has written something else for her as Harish comes here to meet her frequently. She meets him secretly at nights. The trustee of the school finds out her to be guilty. She has to abandon her job as she has lost employees' confidence. She decides to go to Shantiniketan, but on her way she meets a friend of Harish. He calls Harish at her home. She marries Harish and becomes the second wife to him. Virmati feels frustrated in the professor's home as a second wife. She is not ready to project herself in the home. She is not permitted to wash his clothes. She has not given permission to enter into kitchen. Everything is done by professor's first wife Ganga. Virmati is self-assured yet in her in-laws home, she never finds freedom there. As she is alienated from her family members and mother, she feels caught in with Ganga as a co-wife in the home. She feels that she probably done some sin in her past. She gets the marital status but she does not able to achieve peace of mind, the thing she wanted most. However, she could not accomplish genuine feelings of serenity, the thing she required most. Elleke Boehmer rightly remarks:

After her marriage, Virmati is symbolically cast out of her mother's house and forced to find her own way. Her punishing exile ends only when the massacres of partition make her family's continuing rejection untenable. It is a sign of Virmati's marginality (Boehmer 57).

Virmati's life is a steady battle passing from one front to another. She carries on her life with loneliness and dullness which makes her feel miserable about herself. Ganga's children do not care for her. Her mother-in-law also disregards her. Whenever she conceives, her mother-in-law takes care of her. She somehow feels nice. She gets miscarriage. It was not her fault but rather fate has written something else for her. She again starts her education. In the meantime riots happen and she is not able to see her family members and her mother. On the demise of her grandfather she is not able to go to his funeral service because of her past. She again conceives and gives birth to a baby girl. Virmati wants to name her child as 'Bharati' but Harish rejects and named her as Ida, a Persian name. As tables' turn, Virmati finds Ida as a difficult daughter. We can quote Anita Myles to sum up Virmati's journey, called life:

Virmati's inner strength and will power sustain her providing that there is more to life than depending on marriage, parents and other conventional value systems. At least Virmati conjures up the courage to defy traditions for the sake of her own happiness. (Myles, 128)

Kasturi is a traditional woman in the novel, who obeys to others throughout her life. In patriarchal family of Lala Diwan Chand, she endures everything silently. She does the greater part of things without rebelling her own self. She works day and night in the house. She becomes drained every night because of over-burden of household duties. Manju Kapur says:

Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not tired, when her feet and legs did not ache. (p. 7)

Kasturi is a mother of eleven kids. She moves her burden of child rearing to her eldest child Virmati. She belongs to Arya Samaj family in which child marriages are considered as an evil. In her childhood Kasturi used to go to the Mission school. However, the day when she found praying before the photo of Christ, it was the last day of her in that school. After some time a college for Hindu girls was built and the door for her education opened:

Kasturi became the first girl in her family to postpone the arrival of the wedding guests by tentative assault on learning. Her father, uncle and teacher made sure that this step into modernity was prudent and innocuous... She learnt writing, reading, sewing and household works while she was in Hindu girl's school. (p. 62).

Manju Kapur writes :

During Kasturi's formal schooling it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued at home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by impeccable nature of her daughter's qualifications. She was going to please her in-laws. (p. 62)

She additionally learnt ceremonies of Arya Samaj in school. She follows the rituals day by day. Kasturi is living in a patriarchal environment where a woman's ultimate destiny is to

get married and she needs to work tirelessly to make her in-laws happy. When Virmati doesn't comply with her and conflicts with her wishes, she says,

"God has put you on earth to punish me". (p. 111)

She calls Virmati "randi" when she married Harish. Kasturi trusts that Virmati has put a dark spot on her family's reputation by becoming the second wife. She breaks all relationships with Virmati. Kasturi is the epitome of old values and customs.

There is another character Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin and Lajwanti's little daughter. She lives in Lahore. She is doing M.Sc. in Chemistry. She is a girl with free will and liberal mind. Nobody dares try to discuss her unmarried status. She is portrayed as a force. In front of Virmati and Kasturi, Lajwanti appreciates about her daughter's qualities:

How can anyone see her when she has no time? Such a talented teacher, so popular, and also an inspiring example for young ones..... She lives for others, not herself, but what to do, everybody in our family is like that. And with all this reading-writing, girls are getting married late. It is the will of God. (p. 15)

But inwardly she is too stressed over the unmarried status of her daughter and about her modern outlook towards everything. The very word "shadi" makes her desperate and miserable. Kasturi worries over Shakuntala as she sees her occasionally. Lajwanti sniffed in the background disapprovingly.

'When will this girl settle down?' she asked rhetorically. 'All the time in the lab, doing experiments, helping the girls, studying or going to conferences. I tell her she should be a man. (p. 16)

Kasturi and Lajwanti belongs to the same generation and belongs to the same family. Yet there is contrast between the two ladies. Kasturi, though educated, represents a more traditional, patriarchal mother who prioritizes her daughter's marriage and highly upset by Virmati's choices. Lajwanti, though also a product of the patriarchal system, is portrayed as having different approach to life and perhaps a slightly more independent spirit, even if her choices also reflects her societal norms. Lajwanti has a potentially different temperament and approach to life within the same restrictive society.

Shakuntala, her cousin, is an ideal for Virmati. She is doing M.Sc. in Chemistry. The initially seed of getting freedom and education comes to Virmati's mind after meeting her at her home. During their walk Shakuntala shares her activities such as - participation in seminar; experiments in laboratory read each other's work etc. Her intelligence and vibrancy motivates Virmati towards her. She tells Virmati while walking that these people do not understand them. She also convinces Virmati to live her life as she wishes. She advises Virmati about her friends who are miserable with their families and searching for fulfilment by working with her group. She continues:

We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings, follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars. One of them is even going abroad for higher studies. (p. 17)

She believes if woman wish to continue higher studies, she should not marry. According

to her, marriage takes away the liberation from women. For her, freedom for one's self is more essential than everything. She realizes that Kasturi considers her as an awful impact for Virmati. But Virmati denies that. Virmati clings to her when she leaves for Lahore and says:

'Maybe I will also one day come to Lahore, Pehnji,' she wept. 'I wish I too could do things. But I am not clever -' (p. 18)

In any case, Shakuntala reassures Virmati and reveals to her :

Times are changing, and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?
(p. 18)

Here Manju Kapur delineates new woman' in Virmati, who needs to state her right to get married and study. In this way Manju Kapur depicts the character of a modern woman who is dismissed in her family for her bold behaviour. Shakuntala thinks beyond being as wife at home. Her way of life is exceptionally marvellous. Virmati sees the change that Lahore had acquired in her way of life. She is intelligent and delightful. Now we see the character, Swarna Lata, who is a roommate of Virmati in Lahore. The meaning of her name is golden creeper. She is dynamic in politics. She is an advanced woman with her own opinions and views. She thinks by oneself. She wishes to accomplish something more than simply marrying. She wouldn't like to wait for her man and involves herself in others. She is great at heart. She has a lot to offer to Virmati when she meets her at the first time. Swarna Lata is also a revolt like Virmati. She abandons her home for herself. She wants something more from life. She tells Virmati concerning leaving her home:

I was very clear that I wanted to do something besides getting married..... And go on offering it until taken to prison. Free food and lodging at the hands of the imperialists. (p.118)

When Shakuntala comes to meet Virmati in Lahore hostel, she also meets Swarna Lata. Shakuntala discovers Swarna plain. She derecognizes her identity. But, Virmati tells about Swarna Lata:

Anybody would be impressed by Swarna's eyes behind her glasses, eyes, eyes that refused to smile just because they were looked at. And what about the intelligence in her round face, and the friendliness that was frank and open? (p. 119)

She is not only a roommate for Virmati. When Virmati finds herself in problem it is Swarna Lata who advices her and furthermore helps her. When Virmati is completely in deep dilemma about her relationship with Harish, she advises her:

Most families look upon the marriage of a daughter as a sacred duty - or sacred burden. We are lucky we're living in times when women can do something else. Even in Europe women gain more respect during wartime. And here we have that war, and our satyagraha as well. (p. 152)

When Virmati returns from Nahan, she knows that she is conceived. Swarna Lata helps her in her abortion. She is for Virmati 'a friend in need is a friend indeed.' Swarna Lata is the only female who escapes life what she needs. Shakuntala and Swarna Lata are liberal women

who stand against in a patriarchal society. Both are good models for Virmati. Virmati wants to follow Swarna Lata and Shakuntala. Christopher Rollason remarks:

At all events, it may be said that Virmati's frustrated life is, as it were, framed- as if in a triptych- by those two other, much more successful lives: those of Shakuntala and Swarna Lata, both emblematic of the educated, politicized and emancipated women. In other words, the psychological annihilation of Virmati, at the hands of her own family and her husband's, should not be read as a fatality. What happens to Virmati is, no doubt, the most representative destiny of the Indian woman, quantitatively or statistically, but Kapur's novel shows that other paths also exist, while further stressing that choice are by no means simple or either-or. (Rollason, 7)

Ganga is another woman character in *Difficult Daughters*. She is a traditional woman. She is an uneducated woman, who is married to a professor. As she is uneducated, Harish tries to teach her. In this respect Manju Kapur writes:

The woman thought back to the many times her husband had tried to teach her. In the beginning he was patient, it was an impossible situation that his wife should be illiterate..... But the woman found it difficult to learn letters. (p. 40)

She does every household work in her home. At home she does everything from washing clothes to tidying of the desk, polishing shoes, dusting of the books, mending clothes, filling fountain pen, stitching of shirts she did it all. When Harish's poet friends come, she makes kachoris, samosas, mathris and pakoras for them. Harish's marriage with Virmati puts her great shock. She is disappointed by his act. She thinks, if there is her fault in her husband's marriage, but couldn't find out anything. Ganga is a uneducated and submissive woman. She is one of the victims of the patriarchal society. After Harish's marriage with Virmati, Kishori Devi meets Ganga and says it is destiny, which is in God's hand. We need to just accept and nothing is in our hand. On hearing all these Ganga breaks:

The tears Ganga was determined not to show anybody, started pouring down her face. She buried her face between her raised knees, and wept as though her heart would break. 'What have I done,' she wailed, 'that God should punish me like this....' tell me, what I did wrong? (p. 211)

Ida is Virmati's educated, clear-minded, and independent daughter who is childless divorcee. She seems distanced from her mother Virmati in time and space and yet Virmati remains a vibrating presence all through Ida's life. Although not physically present, Virmati hovers close to Ida's surface of consciousness and is often a cause of inner turbulence. The void in Ida's life at her mother's funeral becomes more pronounced and unbearable:

I stared again at my mother's ashes and wondered what memorial I could give her. She, who had not wanted to be mourned in anyway. (p. 1)

She tries to understand her mother's story creating a generational defiance against societal norms. She expresses her desire:

The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. (p. 1)

Apparently Virmati's presence has failed to provide Ida with a sense of fulfillment and security during her life and thus, Ida made every effort to stay clear of the image that she had of her mother.

I try and ask about my mother, the way she was before I knew her. (p. 2)

Nevertheless, the unconscious affiliation with the absent mother propels her to excavate the other unknown view of her mother and she sets out on her journey. She embodies a modern attitude towards tradition and relationships, wanting to live a free life and confidently facing challenges. Ida represents the new generation's rejection of its predecessor's ideology, specifically Virmati's, highlighting the fight against the "anxiety of influence". Ida fights for her own identity, dignity, and self-confidence, rejecting family norms and the patriarchal setup. Despite defying the family and the traditions, Virmati insists her daughter to adjust and compromise. She tries hard to keep her daughter in her control, but to no avail. Virmati wants her daughter to be settled peace-fully in marriage but Ida's marriage is unsuccessful and she is left without husband and child, "engulfed in melancholy, depression and despair." (p. 279)

While her mother Virmati struggled within patriarchal confines, Ida actively seeks to be different, though she eventually develops some of her mother's anxieties. She experiences the societal consequences of being a divorcee and ultimately decides to end her own marriage due to her husband's limitations, not accepting social conventions.

At the end of the novel Ida says "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore." (p.280). She wanted to forget her mother's past behind her and move on in life.

In Ida's case, she reminisces that she "could not remember a time, it had been right between us" (p. 2) which naturally left her rebelling and struggling along with an in-built infirmity just as a cripple without crutches. Ida may not have been consciously aware of this deficiency for the simple reason that the image she carried of Virmati was of a woman who was "silent, brisk and bad-tempered." (p. 2)

Ida, determined to unveil her mother's past, experiences the "excitement of discovery" (p. 280) which finally culminates in establishing a strong bond between the narrator and the mother with "each word a brick in a mansion" (p. 280). Having accomplished this task, she seeks to be liberated and pleads earnestly to her dead mother. "Do not haunt me anymore" (p. 280), the anxiety, thereby, bringing an end to the traumatic transition period. The "escape routes" (p. 279) she had been looking for all her life came in the form of the book. The melancholy and despair is caused by knowledge "I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society" (p. 279) appear to be dispelled having sunk into her mother's past without Virmati's hindering presence. Ida, groping for the 'self' lost in an attempt to be a model daughter under pressure from her parents, tried "bridge the contradictions in her life by marrying a man who was also an academic" (p. 279) to end up in a "disastrous marriage". (p.279)

Conclusion :

A detailed study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* reveals that women in her novels

belongs to modern society having an education. The complexity of life of women with different histories, cultures and social values is discussed in the novel. It focuses on the women's questions that should be tackled in relation to the socio-cultural situation in a patriarchal society. The characters in the novel want their self-identity and freedom of assertion to be restored in male dominated patriarchal society. Women under the patriarchal system were subjected to much more pressures and isolation in the society. *Difficult Daughters* is the story of women who have made a rebellion against the patriarchal norms for their desire to study and raised their voice against arranged marriages. They want to break family restrictions which are the outcomes of traditional norms of the society. Furthermore, Kapur's novel illustrates the intricate relationship between individual desires and collective societal norms, showing the path to empowerment. However, the women in her novel may not always achieve complete liberation, their efforts and acts of resistance. In conclusion, Manju Kapur's portrayal of women's resistance underscores a critical examination of patriarchal power, while offering a hopeful perspective on the potential for change. Her novels serve as a reminder of the power of women's voices and their capacity to reshape their destinies, even in the face of overwhelming societal constraints.

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