



## Role of Education in Women's Emancipation: A Study of Manju Kapur's

### *Difficult Daughters*

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#### Abstract:

The present paper studies the role and importance of education in a woman's life. It widens her horizons and equips her with the capability of defining herself. Education gives her strength to question the wrong and ossified belief system of the society. It leads her to emancipation and assertion of beliefs and views. In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati struggled against the patriarchal system with the help of education. Traditionally, higher education was a forbidden area for women. Women were given the minimal elementary training which prepared her for her ultimate journey of life i.e. marriage. When Virmati completes her B.A. the family finds a suitable match for her because education is but a step to marriage. Neither her parents nor her in-laws would want Virmati to go in for education. She rebels against these patriarchal taboos and goes to a college for her B.A. degree. There were only seven girls in the college suggesting thereby the near total exclusion of girls from colleges and universities. When she is denied permission to go in for B.A. degree she takes the extreme step of taking her life. She is saved by her family servants. But it surely underlines how strong Virmati's urge for education is. She was a restless soul for whom education was like oxygen. Then she goes again to Lahore for her M.A. Virmati's efforts to achieve self-assertion through education is no small achievement. The very fact that Manju Kapur gives enough space to the professor's views on education goes to prove its important place in her scheme of things. Manju Kapur strongly believes that education is the key to women's emancipation and affirmation. In all her novels education forms the central theme as she believes that it is education only that can lead Indian women on the journey of a life full of dignity, honor and power.

Keywords: education, emancipation, self-assertion, affirmation, dignity, honor

Indian writing in English has attained world recognition with international acknowledgement. Indian literature is growing continually. Fiction has become the most powerful form of expression. R.S. Pathak describes the progress, "Its development can be traced



from imitative to realistic, to psychological and experiment stage.” (50). Indian women novelists are also shining stars in the galaxy of Indian English Literature.

Women liberation movement led to the upliftment of women’s status in society. The movement had its origin in India during British rule. The Britishers emphasized improvement of women’s condition in society through education. They opened missionary schools and girls colleges all over India to remove illiteracy which was also a major cause of women’s exploitation. Education gave them knowledge of their rights and aroused confidence in them so that they could demand equal rights with men in every sphere of life. Various social reforms also played significant role in removing such social evils as Sati, child marriage, wretched life of widows, and illiteracy. With the hope of betterment in their position, women came forward with men in Indian freedom movement.

Lionel Trilling rightly defines that the purpose of novel is “a perpetual quest for reality” (205). A writer has the power to change the society, a society based on misinterpreted tradition and religion. In their novels, they describe and attack the suffocating conventions and norms that restrict women and girls within the narrow world of morality. Marriage and maternity are not the chief goals in the life of a woman. A woman’s body is essentially her own. Education and job opportunity can bring a change in their status and position in society and family. They demand freedom not only in outer world but in family also. They carry the burden of fulfilling family responsibilities and dreams of better opportunities for their career. More often, they sacrifice their dreams for responsibility.

*Difficult Daughters* explores the dynamics associated with the emergence of New Woman in Indian society. It tells the story of three generations of a Punjabi family in pre-independence India. Virmati’s mother, Kasturi, is a conservative woman who does not want her daughter to go in for higher education. She thinks that marriage is the ultimate goal of a woman’s life. But Virmati is a rebellious girl who challenges the norms of the ossified patriarchal system. For her education and not marriage should be the ultimate goal of a girl’s life. Virmati successfully demolishes all the hurdles put in her way by the traditional family and society. In Virmati, we have an educated, independent and self-reliant woman. Her life story is pieced



together by her daughter Ida who symbolizes the contemporary Indian woman who will lead her life according to her own terms and dictates. Thus Kasturi, Virmati and Ida signify different phases of emergence of New Woman in Indian Society. Amara Rama Devi's "Women beyond Traditions: Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*" describes how Virmati breaks the rocky resistance of the patriarchal system in her journey of self-definition. She successfully challenges the family and the society at large to chart out her own independent self.

Kasturi was forced to marry at an early age and so she wants to impose her will on Virmati. But for Virmati it is education that guides her life. It is not that Kasturi was uneducated. Before marriage, she also had dreamt of a beautiful life touched by beauty of mind and body. She had been sent to a mission school but her mother caught her "praying to a picture of Christ." (*Difficult Daughters* 61). Her mother tore "the picture, screamed and shouted" and "threatened to marry her off" (*Difficult Daughters* 61). Marriage in the traditional homes was considered panacea for of all the ills. But luckily for her, her uncle intervened and she was sent to a school "meant to part education following the conventions of Samaj" (Pathak 168). She was told that "once she had gained proper education she would be on her way to becoming one of the finest flowers of Hindu womanhood" (*Difficult Daughters* 62). And the idea of a perfect Hindu womanhood envisages total adherence and obedience to the patriarchal system. It had been ingrained in her mind that the ultimate end of education is to find a suitable bridegroom.

Ganga is another example of stifling of woman's voice and individuality by the patriarchal system. She was married to Harish when she was just three years old. She never learnt what education meant. She was never treated as a companion by her husband because they belonged to different worlds. Whereas Harish talked of Shakespeare, Goethe and Keats, she talked of pakoras and vegetables. She tries to be good at everything but she never gets any credit for it. S. Parsanna Sree describes his position: "His wife Ganga attends him as a maidservant, fulfills his everyday needs, keep his house tidy and clothes washed and Virmati satisfies his academic urge" (176). Harish does everything he can to raise the intellectual level of his wife but she would have none of it. It is because of these differences of temperament and thinking that Harish falls for an educated girl, Virmati. He tells Virmati: "You are my other self. Let her wash my clothes if she feels like it. It has nothing to do with me." (*Difficult Daughters* 217).



Even as a child, Virmati wanted to devote her time to studies. She was so keen to study that she stole time for her books. Ida's aunt tells her of Virmati's achievements in the field of education:

First FA, then BA, then BT on top of that. Even after her marriage, she went for an MA to Government College, Lahore, you know—very good college, not like now a days. The Oxford of the East they called it. (*Difficult Daughters* 5)

Manju Kapur is at pains to elaborate that Virmati's journey of discovery of self through education was not smooth. Differences in their approach towards education and marriage constantly haunted the relationship between Virmati and her mother. She follows her cousin Shakuntala who had defied her parents by living her own life. She tells Virmati, "Times are changing and women are moving out of house, so why not you?" (*Difficult Daughters* 18). All hell breaks loose in her family when she conveys her decision to go to Lahore for education thereby practically negating all possibilities of her marriage with the canal engineer. She would not be allowed to go to Lahore for her education. Left with no option, she throws herself in the canal to commit suicide but she is saved by the servants of the family. When she is brought home after her failed suicide attempt, Kasturi asks her the reason of doing so. Virmati says sheepishly, "I want to study" (*Difficult Daughters* 86). Kasturi bemoans, "This girl will throw mud on our whole family, make us fall so low we will have no name left." (*Difficult Daughters* 87) Upon her refusal to marry, she is thrown into the godown as a measure of harsh punishment.

Virmati has been able to launch a brave fight against the patriarchal system with the powerful weapon of education. Her family surrenders before her strong will to study further and at last she is allowed to get admission in RBSL School and College, Lahore for her B.T. degree. It is not only her love that thrives in Lahore. Her mind also came to know and realize new issues of social significance. Swarna, her roommate, exhorts her to take part in social and freedom movement but her love affair just would not let her do it.

She becomes a pawn in Harish's hands. He does not want to go to the extreme of marrying Virmati because it would hurt his family. Virmati realizes that she is merely an object of sexual pleasure for Harish and he just wants to prolong "this series of furtive meetings in borrowed places". (*Difficult Daughters* 150) But Virmati just would not allow Harish to



manipulate her any further. The only way to extricate herself from this situation was to terminate her affair with Harish and find meaning of life in issues of larger social significance. But her decision has to wait till her examinations are over. Her studies were her passport to independence, not just her passport to sleeping with the Professor. She does not want to be dictated by her family or her lover. She rebelled against her family when it opposed her education plans. Now, she rebels against her lover because he just wants to use her as a sex object.

But fate willed otherwise. She finds one fine morning that she has become pregnant. She feels totally devastated both physically and mentally. Her plight became all the more miserable because her lover was nowhere around to lend her a helping hand. She finally decides to solve the problem on by herself. She comes back to Lahore and with the help of Swarna and Miss Dutta, she undergoes abortion with the medical help of a male doctor. To dally with a married man, to enjoy the forbidden fruit of physical love to become pregnant before marriage and then to expose her private parts to a male doctor for abortion make Virmati stronger and more defiant.

Her education had equipped her with the strength and capability to go ahead in life without anybody help. She needed no crutches now: “Her BT had left her restless and dissatisfied, hungry to work, and anxious to broaden her horizons. She had had a taste of freedom in Lahore; it was hard to come back to the old life when she was not the old person any more” (*Difficult Daughters* 181)

She becomes the Principal of a school in Nahan which was patronized by the Queen of Sirmaur. Here she finds independence and contentment because now she wanted to “serve the cause of the nation’s literacy” (*Difficult Daughters* 181). Extricate herself from the suffocating love affair with the Professor, she immerses herself in the social cause of larger significance. As a Principal, she had to perform various activities and shoulder responsibilities ranging from teaching to meeting the parents of the students. But the idyllic experience did not last long. She was doing excellently well as the Principal and enjoying her life as a free woman when the Professor stung her once again. Virmati again brings up the topic of her marriage for discussion. There is gossip in the school about the furtive visits of the Professor to Virmati’s cottage.



She starts wondering what her love affair with the Professor had given to her. Shame, dishonor, abortion and dismissal—all these were Professor's precious gifts to her. But she would not allow herself to be defeated by the adversities of life: "There was a life of dedication and service ahead of her, and in that she would forge her identity" (*Difficult Daughters* 198). She decides go to Shanti Niketan for further studies. Before going to Calcutta, she meets Harish's friend in Delhi who impresses upon Harish the urgency of his marriage with Virmati but Harish would come out with his stale excuses. The next day the poet friend arranges a pandit and the wedding ceremony is performed. Virmati now realizes that "the burden of the last five years had lifted" (*Difficult Daughters* 202).

In Professor's house she is not the same fiery Virmati who had challenged the obstacles. She is treated as a pariah in the house as she is not allowed free excess either in the kitchen or in the other rooms of the house. She accepts her secondary status of Professor's co-wife who is accepted neither by the society nor by her family. When her mother comes to know about this marriage, she raises hell and hurls abuses on her, even calling her a prostitute: "You've blackened our face everywhere! For this I gave you birth? Because of you there is shame on our family, shame on me, shame on Bade Pitaji! But what do you care, brazen that you are!" (*Difficult Daughters* 221). All the members of Harish's family—his mother, his wife, his children—are totally hostile to her. Now she had become a mere extension of her husband's personality.

A careful reading of the novel would naturally compel a reader to ask the question—was it only for marriage with Harish that Virmati had defied all the symbols of the patriarchal authority? What did she get in life? Was her journey fruitful and meaningful? It will be worthwhile to quote Binod Mishra in this regard:

I think the authoress is very much inclined to say that however educated or innovative an Indian Woman is, her Indian background and psyche cannot feel satisfied, unless society approves of her endeavors and her relationship. Virmati's tragedy is the tragedy of ambition, obsession and unacclaimed ovation. (qtd. In Shree 151)



Virmati's rebellion symbolizes the emergence of modern Indian women towards the end of the novel she again goes to Lahore for her M.A. degree. It is no small achievement that in a society which discourages girls even from going to school, Virmati got B.A., B.T., and M.A. degrees. Even in her death she challenges the Indian customs and ritual of death. She donates the organs of her body, a gesture which was a direct challenge to the dominant Hindu view of death. Virmati's strength and success lie in the assertion of her individuality and self reliance through education. She embarks on a journey which other girls might not even have imagined or thought of in those days. She represents the emergence of new Indian woman who is educated, assertive and independent. She trampled patriarchal taboos regarding girls' education and marriage and asserted her individuality.

The real affirmation in *Difficult Daughters* comes through three young educated and independent girls namely Shakuntala, Swarna and Ida. They announce the arrival of New Indian Woman who is assertive, independent, educated and self reliant. They may prefer to remain single or marry a man of their choice and preference and when he tries to boss over her, they do not even think twice before divorcing him to lead their life. What people will say about them is none of their concern. Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin was never guilty or shy of her single status. She is M.Sc. in Chemistry and teaches in Lahore. Swarna is another girl who successfully challenges the social dictum that "women are like the pencil notations on the margins of the society" (*Difficult Daughters* 279). She declines go in for marriage because she wanted "to do an M.A." in Lahore (*Difficult Daughters* 117). Swarna starts taking part in freedom movement and soon becomes a die-hard nationalist. It is not that Swarna would never marry because of her passionate involvement in social causes. For her, marriage meant exercise of one's choice and when she finds the right choice, she marries but on her own terms and condition.

Just as Virmati was a difficult daughter for her mother, so is Ida for Virmati. Ida proves to be a radical woman of contemporary India. She rebels against the parental control and authority with vehement defiant. She married Parbhakar who was "a successful academic, a writer of books, a connoisseur of culture and a disseminator of knowledge. (*Difficult Daughters* 157). But when he insists that she go in for abortion, she develops loathing and hatred for him: "In denying that incipient of little thing in my belly, he sowed the seeds of our breakup (*Difficult*



*Daughters* 156). She decides to divorce Parbhakar because he was throttling her 'self' by limiting her choice.

It is not that Manju Kapur is against the institution of marriage. For her, marriage should provide enough space for the flowering and fruition of wife's identity and personality. Virmati defies marriage because it was used as a ruse by her family to end her journey of discovery of self. . Virmati is a live example of what education can do to a woman. Traditionally, higher education was a forbidden area of women. There were only seven girls in the college suggesting thereby the near total exclusion of girls from colleges and universities. The very fact that Manju Kapur gives enough space to the professor's views on education goes to prove its important place in her scheme of things. It will be rather useful to reproduce a part of letter in which he dwells on the subject of education:

You say your family is questioning your years of studying. One of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves. Even if we arrive at the same conclusions that have been presented to us, our faith in those beliefs is stronger for having been personally thought out. If, as sometimes happens, our education leads us to question some of the value systems by which we live, that is not to say that we are destroying tradition. The tradition that refuses to entertain doubt, or remains' impervious to new thoughts and ideas, becomes a prison rather than a sustaining life force. Even the smallest one of us has a social function, but that function is not to follow blindly beliefs that may not be valid.

Do you know how an earthworm lives? It inhabits an extremely limited space; its whole life is spent within the darkness of the soil. It can neither feel nor see. Uneducated people are like that. We are being murderers towards ourselves if we do not develop our intellect. (*Difficult Daughters* 102-103)

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