



## A Feminist Reading of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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### Abstract:

Women are sometimes presented as goddesses; other times as subordinate beings but never as ordinary human beings. Feminism spreads awareness about injustice and oppression of women at the hands of patriarchy. In their writings, women describe and attack the suffocating conventions and norms that restrict women within the narrow world of morality. *Difficult daughter* chronicles the trials and tribulations of a young girl who charts her own course to define her identity and self. The novel questions the stifling system of patriarchy which denies women the right over their mind and body. Three different women represent three generations and their different attitudes towards life in the novel. Kasturi typifies a common Indian woman whose only job is to give birth to children and rear them. Shakuntala represents the liberated woman who charts her own course in life with the help of education that was forbidden area for girls. Virmati, the protagonist of the novel, starts imitating the lifestyle of her cousin Shakuntala, who is a college teacher. Virmati goes in for higher education and despite all obstacles from the society and family succeeds in her mission of becoming an educated woman. But her marriage with her professor takes the sheen off her aim to become an independent woman. She ends up by becoming a mere appendage of her husband. The present paper makes a detailed analysis of different approaches of women towards life.

Keywords: feminism, patriarchy, subordination, women's emancipation, traditional society, education, oppression

There has run a myth since the origin of the universe about the existence of women. It is said that the supreme creator, Lord Brahma, first created woman to give man a



company. Similarly it is said in Bible that Eve was created for the sake of Adam, but Adam has independent existence. The myth continues even now that woman does not exist individually. She is always seen in context of male. Thus emerges an ambiguous concept about women and it becomes the tradition and custom of society sanctioned by religion. If a woman tries to go against these established beliefs and conventions, she is declared as 'fallen woman' which is another misconception about women.

Women of letters try to break the myth of 'Pativratha'. In the earlier novels by male writers woman is presented as docile, timid, mute and silent sufferer. If she has all these virtues she is a 'true woman'. The dilemma of contemporary women entangled in the tangle of modernity and tradition is realistically portrayed by women novelists. Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* has become a kind of Bible for feminist writers. The main concept of the book is that woman's secondary position is not a natural occurrence; but it has been constructed by man.

Manju Kapur also penned her views and draws attention towards patriarchal society and need of universal freedom for women. She makes them realize that there are infinite horizons to spread their wings and dreams of liberty beyond the periphery of the household. *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. Her life story is pieced together by her daughter Ida who symbolizes the contemporary emancipated Indian woman who will lead her life according to her own terms and dictates.

*Difficult Daughters* has been studied by various critics. Sangeeta Mehta in "Women's Odyssey of Liberation in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* studies Virmati's search for liberation. S. Prasanna studies Virmati's emergence as a liberated woman in "Virmati A Tribulatory of Suffering: As Reflected through Ida's Eyes in Manju Kapur's *Difficult*

*Daughters*". She studies how Virmati is entangled in the web of passion and desire. How the society views her forbidden affair with the professor also finds mention in the article. Amar Singh in "Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* Depiction of Women's World" accuses Virmati of trying to "achieve false existence" which ultimately leads to her tragedy.

*Difficult Daughters* chronicles the trials and tribulations of a young girl who charts her own course to define her identity and self. Manju Kapur in her debut novel questions the stifling system of patriarchy which denies women the right over their mind and body. This Manju Kapur does by portraying three types of women representing three different attitudes to life---Kasturi (Virmati's mother), Lajwanti (Virmati's aunt) and Ganga (Professor's wife) who are nothing more than the shadows of their husbands. Ida, Shakuntala and Sawranlata are rebellious by nature who leads their lives according to their own terms and conditions. In between these two extremes stands Virmati who defies the dictates of the patriarchal society to define her own self through education but ultimately ends by becoming just the shadow of her husband. She is a queer mix of suffocating traditional norms and liberating ethos of modernity.

Kasturi is a child bearing machine. Every time she is expecting a child. She has given birth to eleven children which has made physical wreck:

Her teeth bled when she chewed her neem twigs, and she could feel some of them shaking. She has filled the house as her in-laws had wanted, but with another child there would be nothing left of her. (*Difficult Daughters* 7)

Her condition has become so pathetic that she even prays to God for miscarriage: "How trapped could nature make a woman? She turned to God, so bountiful with his gifts, and prayed ferociously for the miracle of a miscarriage."(*Difficult Daughters* 7) But she has neither the courage nor the inclination to ask her husband to end the ritual of her misery which is caused by her marriage. She was given rigorous training to be a perfect wife. For her, "a woman's shaan is in her home."(*Difficult Daughters* 16) But to Kasturi's utter horror and consternation, her daughter Virmati would have none of it as she was made up of different and sterner stuff.

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 belong to different worlds. S.Parsanna Sree describes his position: His wife Ganga attends him as a maidservant, fulfills his everyday needs, keeps his house tidy and clothes washed and Virmati satisfies his academic urge''(Difficult Daughters 176)

Ganga rues the fact of being uneducated. She concludes that it is the lack of education that has alienated her husband from her. The fact that there is hardly any dialogue worth the name in the whole of the novel between Ganga and her husband goes to prove her submissive and secondary status in the family and the society.

Virmati 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) She has entered A.S College for her B.A degree which was "the bastion of male learning. It had four hundred boys to six girls. Virmati was seventh" (Difficult Daughters 45).

Once in college she enters another area forbidden by society. She falls in love with her professor who teaches English literature in her college. But she is an anguished soul torn between her heart's desire and family honor. Virmati's arranged marriage with the canal engineer was a foregone conclusion and her family would not allow her to go 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, makes us fall so low we will have no name left" (Difficult Daughters 87). Her family surrenders before her strong will to study further and at last she is allowed to get admission in Lahore College. In one of letters written to her by the professor, he dwells at length on the importance of education that



education widens our horizons and equips us with the ability to question the ossified rituals and norms of the society: “one of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves”(Difficult Daughters 103).

Virmati’s strong will and affirmation of her individuality is explicitly made clear by Manju Kapur through her defiance of the dictates of the family to marry the boy of their choice. The very fact that she can go to the extent of sacrificing her life for the sake of love and education goes to prove her steely nerves. She challenges the role a woman is assigned by the family and the society. Virmati has been able to launch a brave fight against the patriarchal system with the powerful weapon of education.

When Virmati accompanied by her mother reaches the college hostel, she feels free as a bird: “Virmati looked around and saw autonomy and freedom” (Difficult Daughters 115). It is not only her love that thrives in Lahore, her mind also comes to know and realize new issues of social significance. Swarna, her roommate exhorts her to take part in social and freedom movement.

Virmati realizes that she is merely an object of sexual pleasure for her lover, Harish just wants to prolong “this series of furtive meetings in borrowed places.”(Difficult Daughters150) But she just would not allow Harish to manipulate her any further. She again asserts her decisive self. She concludes that the only way to disengage with Harish is to participate in the freedom movement. But fate willed otherwise. To be pregnant without marriage is the greatest sin a girl can commit in the Indian society. 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. She had successfully challenged her family for education. She comes out victorious after her abortion. She once more declares her independence:

‘She’s become so independent,’ she heard her mother complain to her aunt when they were sitting together preparing for the evening meal.

Virmati refused to acknowledge this. She went on picking the little nuggets of dirt from the rice, tossing it into the air without looking at the older women. Yes, she was independent. Her body had gone through knives and abortion, what could happen to her now that she could not bear? (*Difficult Daughters* 175).

The patriarchal system once again tries to thwart her independence without knowing that a new Virmati had emerged after going under the knife of the male doctor and suffering the ignominy of unwed pregnancy. Once again her parents bring up the hackneyed subject of her marriage. But the girl “was past listening to anyone. The topic of marriage had come up again, only to be met with violent hysteria on Virmati’s part. After the Tarsikka episode, the family was too wary to force anything against her will” (*Difficult Daughters* 181). 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)

Virmati 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). She was doing excellently well as the principal and enjoying her life as a free woman when the professor stung her once again. She starts wondering what her love affair with the professor had given her –shame, dishonor, abortion and dismissal. 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 Daughter* 198). She decides to go Shanti Niketan for further studies. Harish’s friend sends him a telegram. Upon his arrival, Professor’s friend impresses upon Harish the urgency of his marriage with Virmati. The next day the poet friend arranges a pandit and the



wedding ceremony is performed. Virmati now realizes that “the burden of last five years had lifted” (*Difficult Daughters* 202).

Undoubtedly, Virmati decision to marry the Professor is a bold assertion of her self and declaration of her love. It was defiance of the social taboos. But at the same time, it is also true that with her marriage ends her quest of independence and affirmation of self. In Professor’s house she is not the same fiery Virmati who had challenged the obstacles. She accepts her secondary status of Professor’s co wife who is accepted neither by the society nor by her family. Now, Virmati lives by the mantra of “adjust, compromise, adapt” (*Difficult Daughters* 256).

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 give a hoot to the family and the society when they even try to throttle their vision. They do not subscribe to the most famous dictum of Pati Parmeshwar enunciated by the Indian society. 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. For her, marriage was inconsequential. It was of little significance. She is an M.Sc. in Chemistry and teaches in Lahore. It is not that she is not pestered by her family or friends to marry but she tells Virmati: “But women are still supposed to marry and do nothing else.” (*Difficult Daughters* 17). She emerges as an intelligent, independent and rebellious character in the novel. Virmati wants to live her life the way Shakuntala was living. She challenges the dominant view of patriarchal Indian system which restricts a woman’s movements and aspirations. She is told everyday that a girl should not go beyond the threshold of the house. Her life is sought to be hemmed on all sides by the negative imperatives of the family and society. But Shakuntala will not be a slave to the dictates of the society and family. She advises Virmati to lead a life of her own choice





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 stays put and rejects all the photos of her would be grooms. When Virmati asked her why her parents had not tried to stop her from doing so, she emphatically tells: “I was very clear that I wanted to do something besides getting married. I told my parents that if they would support me for two more years I would be grateful. Otherwise I would be forced to offer Satyagraha along with other Congress workers against the British. And go on offering it until taken to prison. Free food and lodging at the hands of the imperialists’ ” (*Difficult Daughters* 118). Swarna starts taking part in freedom movement and soon becomes a die-hard nationalist. She finds that the real meaning of her life lies in the larger issues of social significance. Virmati decides to follow Swarna. “This is the life I should be involved in. Not useless love and a doubtful marriage” (*Difficult Daughters* 134). She goes to attend Punjab’s Women’s Student Conference in Lahore along with Swarna where Leela Mehta, “the guiding spirit of the women’s conference,” thundered to the applause of the gathering (*Difficult Daughters* 147). But Virmati was being smitten by the feeling of guilt. She felt like “an impostor sitting in the hall” because all her world centered around the Professor (*Difficult Daughters* 144). She starts comparing herself with Swarna whose actions and thoughts always involved careful choosing. She wonders how much choosing went into her affair with the Professor. At last she decides that it would be “far better to be like Swarna, involved in other people and waiting for no man” (*Difficult Daughters* 150). When she confides in Swarna her ardent wish to marry Harish and the latter’s lackadaisical response Swarna advises her. “Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war – the Satyagraha movement – because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, and going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream” (*Difficult Daughters* 151). It is Swarna who comes to Virmati’s rescue during the most difficult phase of her life. It is she who boldly arranges a doctor for Virmati’s abortion. Even in her letters to Virmati, she talks of her passionate interest in India’s Freedom Movement. 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 conditions:

And then came Swarna's note saying she was married. He had accepted all her conditions. She was going to be allowed to continue her other activities, remain treasurer of the Women's Conference, and go on working for the Party. Everything to do with the house they would share as much as possible. She owed it to her parents to marry. They had let her have her way in everything else. (*Difficult Daughters* 189)

Her concept of marriage is totally at variance with the dominant view. In Indian patriarchal system, marriage means the total annihilation of woman's personality. Wife is considered merely as the shadow of her husband but it will not be so for Swarna. For her, marriage means mutual respect and love where the partners have the choice to achieve their goals and pursue their goals according to their preferences. So Swarna meant marriage to be an institution of flowering of one's personality, not the other way round.

Just as Virmati was a difficult daughter for her mother, so is Ida for Virmati. Harish suggests that his daughter should be named Ida which meant "a new state and a blank beginning" (*Difficult Daughters* 277). But Ida would not allow anybody to write anything on her new slate. She would prove to be a defiant daughter. She rebels against the parental control and authority with vehement defiance. Virmati wants Ida to attain perfection in every field—be in looks, studies or co-curricular activities. Amar Singh rightly observes that Virmati's attempt to force a self identification leaves her hard hearted and desolate. He says:

She is the difficult daughter of Virmati who wants to live a life on her own terms. An issueless divorce, she succeeds in breaking out the unsuccessful marriage and staying single a phenomenon unheard of in her grandmother's time. She is not in good terms with her mother and after her death she delves into her mother's past in order to understand their relationship. She grows up struggling to be a model daughter. She is not a good scholar like her mother and father. As a result of Virmati's restraint upon her

she starts looking for routes to escape. She refuses to show any signs of intellectual brightness as she is engaged in the pursuit of other better things in her life (76).

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 must 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. She wants to lead life of her own choice unhindered by any kind of outside authority.

Actually, Manju Kapur is giving voice to her views and thoughts about women emancipation through Ida. She is a strong votary of women’s freedom and choice in life. In an interview, Manju Kapur says: I guess because I am a woman I teach in a woman’s college, and I live in a joint family. I have an agenda about women’s issues, their freedom, and their constraints and how they are constricted by their personal, their spaces, and their findings of themselves. I look at that in book after book (web).” Virmati remains a victim of patriarchy in the form of Harish’s second wife. She bears all the insults passively in Harish’s house. She hardly raises her voice against her husband’s desire to use her merely an object of his sexual pleasure. She undergoes abortion but she hardly takes any step to register her protest against her lover. Ida, on the other hand is courageous, defiant and rebellious. Virmati falters but Ida remains steadfast in her journey of self discovery and affirmative.

Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* is a novel which tells about the various phases of struggle of women’s liberation in the Indian society. It tells of Indian women’s trials, tribulations, and sufferings faced by them in this journey of assertion and affirmation. From Kasturi to Virmati to Ida, the journey of discovery of an independent self is long and arduous. Manju Kapur’s characters do not revel in silent sufferings; they are rebels who demand their space which rightfully belongs to them. In this attempt to define themselves, they defy the conventional role assigned to women by the patriarchal society.



However, to say that Virmati's struggle was a failure will be a great misreading of the novel. The Indian society of the 40s was totally a different society than the contemporary Indian society. For a woman even to dream freedom during those times was considered a sin. The very fact that Virmati dreamt and struggled to affirm her identity through education during 40s goes to prove the achievements of her struggle. Though the family and society imposed all the kinds of restrictions on Virmati but she would just not waver. Manju Kapur develops in her characters a strong urge to define them. Virmati's struggle signifies her triumph over patriarchal authority. She liberates herself from the deathly grip of an oppressive society and achieves her independent status not only financially but psychologically also. Manju Kapur's characterization of strong women thirsting for independent status and their constant efforts to achieve freedom and independence of self are unique in themselves.

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