

# Quest for Feminine Identity in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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### Abstract

*Manju Kapur is a renowned novelist, in Indian writing in English. Her character that is caught in the complex web of tradition that appears in two forms in *Difficult Daughters*. firstly, it manifests itself in the form of patriarchal form of society and secondly, in the form of male chauvinism. The novelist is very capably presented her characters during the period of change that characterizes them with special distinctive characters. A writer, worth the name must capture this time spirit because the time spirit expresses the general mood and temperament of that particular generation, quite distinguishing from the one that proceeds and the one that follows. Her novels touche many issues like revolt against deep-rooted family tradition, the search for selfhood, women's rights, marriage and the battle for independence at both fronts personal and national. This paper focuses quest for identity in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters**

**Keywords:** transition, self-fulfillment, patriarchal society, suffocated, zeitgeist.

Manju Kapur is in confederation with the contemporary Indian women writers who write only to emphasize the troubles the modern women who it seems that come out to be liberated from the boundaries of the society but nowhere she is liberated from the underneath burdens which usually happen to the grounds of their utilizations. Her story typically drifts over dissatisfactions, refusals, revenges and their break of conservative anticipations. Her uniqueness has very little or no gratitude at all. She discovers comfort only in obliterate herself.

Her novels show a lengthy, endless struggle of women to establish and make a position the same to man in the society herself. According to Mayur Chhikara, "The novelist has portrayed her protagonist as a woman caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. The women of India have indeed achieved their success in half a century of Independence, but if there is to be a true female independence, much remains to be done" (189). The dissimilarity among the men and women in the Indian background becomes the most important subject of her novel. Although her foremost characters

are well conscious of their own potentials and they do not easily surrender to the situations. But somewhere their feminine self takes them near to the age old traditional values where marriage is preferred to live-in-relationship.

The quest for identity is one of the mainly outstanding and notable aspects of Manju Kapur's novel. She comments on her female characterization: "the mother-daughter nexus is only one of the many manifestations of the Indian women's role. She is a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law, in fact there are many aspects of a woman's life" (23). She is very doing well in depicts dissimilar facets of womanhood in all her multitasking talents and special sensitivity to handle the ordinary life. Her greatest cleverness lies in portraying factual to existence characters in which she exceeds approximately all her modern women writers.

The milieu of her novel is typically the pre-Independence and post-Independence India where there is a dual struggle: the exterior life is full of violence with dark scar and the inner chaos by no means allowing the mind to rest at peace. The inner and the outer turmoil are very intensely portrayed in almost all her works where her female protagonists direct to liberate themselves both psychologically as well as physically without any kind of hesitation or burden from within the family or the society. A very conspicuous aspect of almost all her female leads is that they grasp education at the uppermost pedestal with no air of dominance or conflict. Their virtue is very obviously seen in their dealing with the society; be it their love affair or their taking a divorce for marrying the man of their option which has no comparison as far as their individuality is concerned. They are not only successful in putting a struggle to emphasize their rightful place in the society by leading a life of their choice but were also successful in breaking the high handed patriarch norms only to retain their self-respect and self-gratification by all means.

Manju Kapur's first Novel *Difficult Daughters* received huge international acclaim. This novel was published in 1998. It was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best first book and was number one best seller in India. *Difficult Daughters* is about emergence of new woman and woman's quest for identity. It is based partly on the life of Kapur's Mother Virmati.

*Difficult Daughters* tells the story of Virmati, a young and rebellious girl and who wants to create their own identity in the male dominated society. She falls in love with a married professor and eventually becomes his second wife. The historical context of the book is framed by the massive, turbulent and emotive history of modern India, particularly the dreadful events of the subcontinent's partition in 1947 that destroyed and disrupted so many lives.

Kasturi and Suraj Prakash have eleven children. Virmati is the eldest daughter. One after another she gives birth to children and thus the whole burden of the household work increases over Virmati. So her busy routine she does not do well in her studies and fails. She falls in love with a professor and intimate relationship with Virmati and decides an appropriate place for regular meeting. But their parents decide to marry her to an engineer, Inderjeet. But her marriage is postponed for two years. During this period Virmati passes her FA Exam and denies for marriage. In this situation the family members of Virmati comes to know about her love with the professor. They won't allow marrying the professor, because the professor is already married. So they decide to allow Virmati for her higher studies. So she joined in RBSL College. Shakuntala, who has been a regular source of inspiration for Virmati, visits her regularly. 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 unclaimed ovation.

Shakuntala is a prototype of the "New woman". She is a lady of independent thoughts, she says to Viru, "how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are fighting for the freedom of nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing

else' (17). She is a woman who rides horses, smokes, plays cards and badminton, acts without her mother's advice, buys anything she wants and above all, "she never seemed to question or doubt herself" (15). Shakuntala says, "My friends are from different backgrounds, and all have families unhappy with their decision not to settle down. 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' (17).

There was a lot of influence of Shakuntala on Virmati her visits plants the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. Shakuntala shows her that a woman can be something other than a wife. Under the influence of Shakuntala on Virmati struggle to get her own identity, who is conscious about her rights. Throughout the novel we find the picture of a girl who aims high in life and seeks to empower herself through education.

Virmati wants to stretch her wings like Swamlata, her roommate who is dedicated to "meaning activities concerning the freedom movement and women's liberation. But her emotional dependence on the professor who constantly evades the question of marriage, stops her from doing anything that he disapproves - 'May be I could be like Swarna from the inside secretly'" (124). Undergoing a gradual process of self-effacement, her energies are directed towards pleasing him while she herself remained parched. Though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is caught into another where her free spirit is curbed. Virmati fails to break dependence syndrome. She is a loser whose acts totally alienate her from her own family and she fails to create a space for herself for which she had been striving all along. Shakuntala and Swamlata have not been portrayed elaborately in the novel but compared to Virmati they stand out as stronger and with clearer vision. Shakuntala, her first cousin too had fought the family pressures and had succeeded in carving out a life for herself. Though her life was decorative on the western model, she appears more firm and emotionally stronger to recognize the hegemonic structures.

Virmati from the very beginning of the novel stands against patriarchy and affirming her individuality. She fights her family, protests imposition on her will carves her way to higher education, but she remains as much in the clutches of the hegemonic order as any other woman, only with the difference that While women in general accept the patriarchal structure mutely Virmati shows the courage to question it. Not only does she resist her paternal family, she questions the professor, withdraws her from him goes to Sirmour state to work in Pratibha Kumari Vidyalyaya. After her removal from prestigious job because of the professor's clandestine visits, she decides to leave for Shantiniketan so that she cannot restore her self-identity, and recover her independence. The two persons who greatly influenced Virmati are Shakuntala and Swarnalata. Both these women are rebels who never give into parental pressure. They decides to carve a name for themselves through their academic pursuits.

Through the novel, the author articulates the nature of female longing by subverting the rigid social gender norms and exploring her protagonist's struggle for self determination. Her female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individual caged within the conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and 'society becomes intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunge into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds. The novelist has portrayed her protagonist as a woman caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day.

Manju Kapur present in her novel the changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self sacrificing women towards self assured assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands and in this way providing a medium for self expression.

One sees the emergence of new women in Manju Kapur's heroines, who do not want to be rubber dolls for others to move as they will. Defying patriarchal notions that enforce women towards domesticity, they assert their individuality and desire self-reliance through education. They nurture the aspiration of being independent and leading lives of their own. They want to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond their husband and children. They are not silent rebels, but are bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. All protagonists know they cannot depend on others to sort out the domestic situation and proceed to tackle it on their own. In spite of getting education and freedom the women protagonists of Manju Kapur's novels do not blossom into new women in the real sense. Though they dare to cross one patriarchal threshold, they are caught into another, where their free spirits are curbed and all they do is 'Adjust, Compromise and Adapt'. B.R. Agrawal writes that "The novelist seems to be questioning the traditional systems of child marriage, gender discrimination, women's education and other outmoded value systems which lie at the root of modern malaise. Hence, there is a need to modify and not to change them. (246) Through Virmati, the central character in *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur has revealed women have always been less important individuals.

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