



Negotiating Feminine Identities in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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| Article History | Abstract |
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| Received: 06 June 2023 Revised: 05 Sept 2023 Accepted: 14 Oct 2023 | <p><i>This research delves into the exploration of women's identities within a society dominated by men as depicted in Manju Kapur's known novel, <i>Difficult Daughters</i>. Grounded in theory, the study examines how Kapur's female characters navigate the complexities of a male dominated world while grappling with layers of identity formation. By adopting a perspective, the analysis sheds light on the challenges faced by these protagonists as they strive to transcend expectations and traditional gender roles. The narrative lens of this novel serves as a reflection of societal norms that restrict women's aspirations and autonomy. Through examination of the text this research uncovers the dualities faced by the characters that are simultaneously constrained by ingrained gender norms and driven by their desire, for personal fulfilment. Their journey unfolds as a negotiation between conforming to expectations and pursuing their individuality. By analysing character dynamics, narrative arcs and social contexts this study showcases how the protagonists, in Kapur's novel grapple with issues related to marriage, education and self-determination. Drawing upon theory it reveals how these characters confront challenges push against normative boundaries and strive to carve out their own space within a patriarchal society. The analysis delves into the relationships of the characters whether it be with their families, society or, within themselves. It closely examines the challenges that these women encounter as they try to balance their dreams and desires with the expectations imposed upon them by society.</i></p> |
| CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0 | Keywords: Gender identity, patriarchal society, feminist analysis, identity negotiation and female empowerment. |

1. Introduction

The male-dominated Indian society is strongly protested in Manju Kapur's writings as a feminist author. The New Indian woman's voice is shown in Manju Kapur's works. In place of the stereotype of Indian women, a "New Women" in pursuit of self-identity and liberty in all spheres of life has emerged. It is extremely clear in her debut book, *Difficult Daughters*, that a traditional woman character is changed into "New Women" by erasing the stereotype of Indian women. In *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur offers a fresh perspective on Indian women. She criticises the enduring tradition that says marriage is necessary for women. She purposefully presents the personalities of two females with opposing perspectives. She presents her characters in both traditional and modern ways in her book *Difficult Daughters*.

This article aims to explore the complex ways in which women's identities are portrayed in Manju Kapur's novel. Due to its realistic depiction of female characters against the backdrop of a shifting socio-political milieu, Kapur's work offers a fertile ground for research.

Smith's (2010) critique places Kapur's books in the context of South Asian literature, with *Difficult Daughters* being singled out for its examination of gender and identity. According to Smith, Kapur's portrayal of women, especially that of the lead character Virmati, exposes the complex interaction between ingrained gender stereotypes and newly emerging contemporary ambitions. The novel's

portrayal of Virmati's struggle to further her studies and develop personally while living in a traditional culture is representative of the larger challenge that women faced in redefining their roles throughout India's war for independence.

The confrontation between tradition and modernity in Kapur's works is further mentioned in Singh (2015), with a special emphasis on the female protagonists. The research draws attention to the conflict and character agency that these characters experience as they try to balance society standards with their own aspirations for personal fulfilment. In *Difficult Daughters* Virmati's journey exemplifies this conflict as she tries to strike a balance between her responsibilities as a wife, daughter, and person while still pursuing ambitions outside of the box.

Gupta's analysis (2020) concentrates on how Kapur's novel challenges patriarchal narratives. The article discusses how Virmati's extramarital affair with Harish serves as a subversion of traditional norms, empowering her to explore her desires outside the boundaries set by her marriage. Gupta contends that this liberation is a significant aspect of negotiating her identity as a woman within a conservative society.

2. Negotiating Identities

Women are viewed as tyrannical individuals in the novel *Difficult Daughters*. Eleven kids are born to Kasturi. She becomes frail and sickly as a result. Her spouse doesn't care about or take her health into account. She is not allowed to have equal rights. She is thus forced into a position where she cannot refuse having several pregnancies. She is not given the opportunity to discuss her thoughts. By Harish, Virmati becomes pregnant. She is Harish's second wife. He forced her to get the abortion. In her quest for identity, she makes reference to aborting the kid. She fights to carve out a place for herself on her own while losing status and respect at every turn. When it becomes necessary to strongly contest the professor's sexual tyranny, her rebellious attitudes start to wane.

Like her mother, Virmati strictly enforces patriarchal rules on Ida. She falls short of being a sympathetic mother to Ida. Ida is made to suffer as a result of her independence. Ida, who is Virmati's daughter, battles for her identity, dignity, and confidence, all of which Virmati lacked. She despises traditional family values and a world controlled by men. Ida, Virmati's "Difficult Daughter", develops into a regular daughter. Domestic responsibilities and mother's constraints put stress on the life of Virmati.

Due to Kasturi's several pregnancies, she is nearly impatient and denies Virmati the rightful joy of being loved. Kasturi has never shown Virmati any compassion, despite the fact that she is overworked with household duties in addition to caring for her brothers: "At times Virmati, yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special. However, when she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push away. 'Have you seen to their food ...milk.....clothes....studies'" (*Difficult Daughters* 6).

It is clear from the passages above that male domination is observed in social institutions including the family and the business. Women like Kasturi were perceived as experiencing economic and socio-cultural disadvantages in a society dominated by males. Patriarchy patronised the society. People like Virmati were denied their fundamental rights and ambitions to establish their uniqueness and independence. To the reader, it seems as if the motherly instinct in Kasturi has been totally paralyzed, "The language of feeling has never flowed and this threat was meant to express all her thwarted yearnings" (*Difficult Daughters*12). When Virmati has all admiration for Shakuntala, her first cousin, one can see the earliest seeds of a departure from conventional thought. She has fallen victim to Shakuntala's charismatic charm almost unknowingly. Here, it is acceptable to paraphrase Virmati in the author's own words:

Virmati looking at her glamorous cousin marvelled at the change Lahore has wrought in her. What did it matter that Shakuntala's features were not good? She looked better than merely pretty. She looked vibrant, and intelligent, as though she had a life of her own. Her manner was expensive, she did not look shyly around for approval when she spoke or acted. (*Difficult Daughters*16)

Harish and Ganga's clashing personalities make their union utterly discordant. Being a progressive man, Harish aspires to find a compatible intellectual partner. In contrast to Virmati, a smart lady who Harish desires and who eventually marries, Ganga is a careless student who suffers from ignorance.

As soon as Harish married Virmati, he began to ignore Ganga, his first wife. Harish was drawn to Virmati's enthusiasm for education. Harish cautions Virmati that she won't be content if she marries him as his second wife at the same time. Harish serves as a metaphor for a patriarchal culture. His domineering manner subjugates Virmati. He forces her to have their child aborted. In Virmati, women's oppressive and unequal roles are evident when she endures a life without affection from her mother and a life under control of her spouse. To Virmati's siblings, she becomes a surrogate mother. She performs all of the obligations and tasks that a male successor would. So, Virmati's vulnerable childhood is conditioned by the stress of managing the family and caring for younger sisters and siblings. She splits her time between her academics and helping her anaemic mother with housework. She desires to be an independent woman in her life and longs to live a happy existence. Readers perceive Virmati as a powerful woman who battles to define her identity. Her ability to live an independent life is questioned by powerful men as she comes to terms with becoming a "New Woman". Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin, lives on her own in "Lahore". Her manner of clothing, way of life, and Shakuntala's activities worry Virmati, who then makes the firm decision to live alone. The arrival of Shakuntala sows the seed of independence in Virmati. She aspires to lead the life of Shakuntala. Shakuntala teaches her many lessons about life, including how to be gorgeous despite limitations. Virmati finds herself torn between a traditional and contemporary life-style. The impact of Shakuntala's words on Virmati is clear from the latter's words, "I want to be like you, Pehnji, if there are two of us, then they will not mind so much." (*Difficult Daughters* 17). And she emphasizes her modern views by asserting: "It was useless looking for answer inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom and the bright lights of Lahore colleges" (*Difficult Daughters* 17). The fascinating words of Shakuntala have brought a visible change in Virmati when she tells her, "Maybe I will also one day come to Lahore, I wish I could do things. But I am not clever" (*Difficult Daughters* 1).

Inspiring Virmati to be independent and seek equal rights for women, Shakuntala personifies the post-colonially liberated "New Woman." The social norms of the established society are broken by the new lady. Women have been given more authority since the founding of the society because of social security, political understanding, and economic tradition. Shakuntala has the ability to take charge of her own life. Shakuntala is portrayed by ManjuKapur as a logical figure who teaches Virmati her feminist values and way of life. While Ida is the one who really becomes one of these new women, Virmati is classified as a new woman who aspires to be one. Kasturi, the mother of Virmati, abides by the established customs and accepts patriarchal domination without being forced to do so. She would follow the customs of the family. As a result, Kasturi and Virmati had a protracted discussion about marriage and education.

The long-standing family traditions and rituals are broken by Virmati and Shakuntala. Virmati's inner need to be adored as a unique person rather than as a good daughter drives her. They aspire to be contemporary women. Love, adoration, unselfish devotion, and everything else admirable and kind about human nature are abundant in the world. Virmati always wanted for a token of love that she could keep forever. However, Kasturi would become annoyed and push her away when she put her head near to the youngest child who was being fed in her mother's arms. She craves love and attention and longs for her mother to truly love and comprehend her. Everyone wants to feel loved by their parents. When such feelings, desires, and excitement are not expressed, they develop a complex that causes them to look for someone else. Harish provides Virmati with all the answers, and she develops feelings for a married guy.

Through a compassionate representation of three generations of women and their issues, ManjuKapur's work illuminates the life of women, their fight for fundamental rights, desire for identity, and struggle for existence. Because Shakuntala and Virmati are portrayed as independent thinkers in *Difficult Daughters*, feminist tendencies might come out as crude at first. Only after Virmati's passing, the spirit is finally put to rest, allowing Ida to live her own life without feeling threatened by her mother's ghost. Virmati's family decides to send her to Nahan as the headmistress of a girl's school. She welcomes the opportunity, though dispassionately, as it helps her widen her vision and serve the nation's literacy,

“Her B.T. had left 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 anymore.” (*Difficult Daughters* 181). When Virmatih has all admiration for Shakuntala, her first cousin, one can see the earliest seeds of a departure from conventional thought. She has fallen victim to Shakuntala's charismatic charm almost unknowingly. Here, it is acceptable to paraphrase Virmati in the author's own words, “You think it's easy for me! It isn't people wondering all the time. Why I am not married. What should I say? That my lover is a coward? That he is waiting for permission from his family to bring home a second wife?” (*Difficult Daughters*193).

In this novel, a female heroine fights with challenges of domesticity and academic success in a way that echoes the political conflicts around her. Neither the route of political conflict nor the path of scholarly life are comfortable for Virmati. Harish's continuous obstructions are frustrating for her. Nevertheless, it is notable because Manju Kapur specifically selects two female characters, Shakuntala and Swarnalata, who are engaged in nonviolent resistance against British Government and who would have a significant impact on each person's personal growth. Her in-laws are critical of Virmati, and Ganga, her husband's first wife, harbours a bitter hatred towards her. Her added load comes from Virmati's potential function as a wife, which prevents her from pursuing her education without interruption. Virmati's decision is worthy of a modern woman's mindset with her courage to face future on her own. Thus, if a traditionally minded woman were to be in that situation, she would attempt to commit suicide. In this context, one may quote Seema Malik who rightly observes:

Thus, we see the budding of a new woman in Virmati defying patriarchal notions that enforce a woman towards domesticity; she asserts her individuality and aspires for self-reliance through education. She is not a silent rebel but is bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. She displays a marvellous strength of mind in overcoming her dejection.” (Seema 132-137)

The long-awaited marriage has finally occurred, and Virmati considers it to be a personal victory. With this, she starts a new chapter in her life. She has come to realise that getting married to the professor is the ultimate goal of her life after a protracted time of suspenseful, nervous, and painful anguish. All of her close relatives, parents, and grandfather are put to the background of her mind because she is intoxicated with a sense of personal pride. Given how much religious significance she accords to her relationship with the professor, it is obvious that Virmati is more traditional than modern:

Virmati was sure that neither her parents nor grandfather would ever forgive. The process of rejection that had started with Tarsikka would be completed. Let them damn her as they might; at least she had this new life- she promised herself a blissful marriage; after all they had gone through so much to be together. Her husband would be everything to her. This was the way it should be, and she was pleased to finally detect a recognizable pattern in her life. (*Difficult Daughters*207)

With her eventual death and extinguishment on the funeral pyre, Virmati's narrative of identity exploration and life goals came to an end. As Binod Mishra observes, “However educated or innovative as Indian woman is, her Indian background and psyche cannot feel satisfied unless society approves of her endeavors and her relationship. Virmati's tragedy is tragedy of ambition, obsession and unclaimed ovation.” (Mishra 151).

4. Conclusion

Difficult Daughters serves as a rich canvas upon which Manju Kapur intricately paints the struggles and triumphs of women negotiating their identities in a transforming Indian society. Through the characters of Virmati, Shakuntala, and Kusturi and Ida; Kapur skillfully explores the tension between tradition and modernity, agency and constraint, and personal desires and societal expectations. By examining the characters' choices, interactions, and transformations, this paper has illuminated the multi-layered dimensions of women's identities in a post-colonial context. Kapur's work underscores the complex interplay of factors that shape women's lives and decisions, offering a poignant reflection on the evolving roles of women in India.

Virmati stands in for the newfound aspirations of Indian women for autonomy, freedom, and self-identity. As a result, the reader of *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati can be seen as the emerging "New Woman," who is aware, self-aware, educated, and eager to build a life for herself. Dennis H. Wrong

summarised Virmati's quest for self-identification as, “A value charged, almost a charismatic term, with its secured achievement regarded as equivalent to personal salvation” (Wrong 20).

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