

Patriarchal Problems and the Concept of Independent Woman in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyse the portrayal of the "new woman" in Kapur's book, addressing the intricacy of life, diverse historical backgrounds, cultures, and value systems in a socio-cultural context. Kapur's writings reflect the hardships and unjust treatment faced by women in remote communities, experiencing discrimination and prejudice under the influence of patriarchal subjugation. Her works depict the emergence of a new era for women, characterized by liberation and empowerment, where they strive to define their own-self. Kapur in her works, also illustrate the plight of women and their subjugation, emphasizing their marginalization in terms of rights. The female heroines in Manju Kapur's works are typically well-educated with great fortitude but find themselves confined by traditional cultural constraints. Their education fosters independent thought, making their family and society unbearable. Consequently, they engage in a personal battles against family and society, dedicating themselves to the pursuit of a distinct identity as accomplished women.

KEYWORDS

New Women; Patriarchal Society; Traditional Vs. Modern.

The Portrayal of Indian Women's Life

In Indian writings in English, women authors have predominantly explored the male-dominated realm, often found women in secondary roles. While some authors choose female protagonists, their depiction is intended to be compared with that of real-life women. Only fictional portrayals depict an anguished wife, widow, and mother. According to Yadav:

Kapur's novels raise a powerful protest against the male-authorized

Indian society and give voice to the 'New Indian woman' who is in search of self, freedom in all spheres of life, and also replaces the old silent and subjugated image of Indian traditional women (902).

Traditional and cultural perspectives exerted a significant influence on this story. As Sckusky notes:

The prime concepts that the behavioural sciences use are those of culture, society, and personality.

It is impossible to study man's behavior without an understanding of all three of these concepts, but different disciplines emphasize different concepts (1).

Most female authors draw inspiration from their own experiences, and a significant majority of them ultimately align themselves with some form of feminism. Some authors portray their lifestyles through fiction and strongly identify with their female characters. Manju Kapur's work aptly depicts the lived experiences of women in the real world. She delves into personal experiences, challenges, physical environments, and the struggles they face in forging their self-identity.

Kapur's works add to our comprehension of the mind of an entrapped lady in a web of connections, some of which she has created herself and others which have been created for her. They exemplify a mystery of convention and modernity that many women in Indian society are confronted with; their inner conflict between the desire to care for their husbands and children, as well as their longing to discover more profound modes of fulfilment that are outside of conventional social norms. (Kumari and Niraj 104).

Crafting relatable books that resonate with contemporary women, Kapur portrays stories as reflections of her life. Exploring the dichotomy between traditional and modernist values, she focuses on women's quest for self-discovery and self-definition. In Manju Kapur's works, female characters embody these ideas, serving as the primary driving force behind her imaginative and creative endeavors. This transformation in the portrayal of women in Indian English literature is evident. No longer depicted as passive figures, these characters now emerge as active individuals challenging traditional norms while concurrently upholding family and societal ideals.

An Overview

The story revolves around Kasthuri, Virmati, and Ida. Ida, the central character, narrates her mother's history from her uncle's perspective. Manju Kapur skilfully portrays her female characters with a blend of traditional and contemporary perspectives. Virmati, the main character, exemplifies the former, while her cousin Sakunthala embodies the latter. According to Manju and Lissy:

Virmati has to contend against the power of her mother and the oppressive forces of patriarchy, symbolized by the mother figure. Kasturi, Virmati's mother, rejects her education, leading to Virmati's strong decision to pursue further studies, sparking controversy between mother and daughter (55).

Here, Kapur vividly contrasts the two female characters. Kasthuri, Virmati's mother, experiences declining health after bearing eleven children, yet her spouse shows little concern. Struggling to find satisfaction in her quest for equal rights, Kasthuri faces a predicament delivering numerous offspring and finds it challenging to discuss with her spouse. On the other hand, Virmati, becoming Harish's second spouse, conceives a child but staunchly refuses his coercion to terminate the pregnancy. This dynamic reveals parallels between the new Virmati and her mother, navigating through strong patriarchal norms.

Virmati had just one child, Ida. Harish told her that three was a large enough family, his resources were already strained beyond his means. Giridhar and Chhotti came to live with them when their schooling demanded it. Harish carried on with his love of learning and made education an issue with each of his children. They didn't care for the whole process as much as he did, and each found a way to rebel (Kapur 257).

Ida, a member of the third generation and Virmati's daughter, actively

strives to assert her identity, maintain dignity, and cultivate self-confidence. Challenging established conventions and the patriarchal structure, she disrupts societal norms. Nye states, "Patriarchy is the universal constant in all political and economic systems, and sexism dates from the beginning of history" (95). Therefore, Ida exemplifies the characteristic traits of a 'difficult daughter', akin to Virmati. Virmati's life is entirely burdened with managing home chores, as depicted: "Virmati mooned about restlessly, hanging about her mother, playing with the baby, fidgeting with some knitting as she looked out of the window" (Kapur 10). In Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati assumes a major and influential position, diligently attending to the needs and well-being of her family, playing the role of a surrogate mother for her siblings. Disturbed by Sakunthala's lifestyle, and hobbies, Virmati makes a resolute decision to become an independent woman. Sakunthala's visit to Virmati's home instills the germ of independence in her, prompting a desire to emulate Sakunthala's lifestyle. Virmati gain various insights, learning how to exude beauty while defying limitations from Sakunthala. According to Chander,

Shakuntala is another woman belonging to the second generation. She is more liberated than her mother. It is she who has sown the seeds of aspiration in Virmati's mind. She has done M.Sc. in Chemistry and is working as a lecturer in a college in Lahore. She is the one who has tasted the wine of freedom and has a strange kind of confidence in her (208).

Virmati struggles with the conflict between traditional values and modernization. Harrison notes, "Undoubtedly, many factors played a role, but it seemed to me that culture had to be a large part of the explanation" (16).

Sakunthala motivates Virmati to cultivate self-reliance and assert her autonomy. Together, these two women endeavour to challenge and dismantle antiquated customs and traditions imposed upon them. Virmati undergoes a loss of her identity and social standing but perseveres diligently to carve out a place for her own self. However, her strong confidence and defiant demeanour empower her to resist the professor's sexual persecution. According to Kathiresan and Priya:

Shakuntala, a cousin of Virmati, leads an independent life in Lahore. Her way of dressing, lifestyle, and activities disturb Virmati, prompting a strong decision to lead an independent life. Shakuntala's visit plants the seed of independence in Virmati, inspiring her to live like Shakuntala (19).

Marital Discord in Kasturi's Life Journey:

In the novel, she is portrayed as a mother whose primary responsibility is to bear as many children as possible. After Kasturi's marriage, she becomes subject to the cycle of perpetual childbirth.

Kasturi entered the dark and slippery bathroom to check whether there was any promising reddish-looking mucus between her thighs. Nothing, always nothing, and tears gathered and flowed in the only privacy she knew. Her life seemed such a burden, her body so difficult to carry. Her sister-in-law's words echoed in her ears, 'Breeding like cats and dogs,' 'Harvest time again (Kapur 7).

Consistently seeking divine intervention to terminate her pregnancy, she strives to avoid getting pregnant again in her lifetime. Throughout this period, she is not relieved of her responsibilities towards her other children. Due to her demanding schedule, she constantly feels exhausted.

Kasturi cannot recall a time when she was not tired, when her feet and legs did not ache. Consequently, Kasturi's life is completely chaotic, leading to a rift in her marriage. Virmati exemplifies a challenging young girl in this story, disregarding her parents' advice and seeking an alternative path for herself. During Kasturi's era, women were mostly confined to parenting and domestic labor tasks. According to Johnson, "A society is patriarchal to the degree that it is male-dominated, male-identified, and male-centered. It also involves as one of its key aspects the oppression of women" (5).

Virmati breaks away from the traditional constraints imposed on Indian women when she articulates her ambition to pursue further studies in Lahore, earning appreciation from her cousin. Subsequently, a married professor relocates to Amritsar, and resides with his aunt and her husband. The professor married to his wife when he was young. He later developed romantic feelings for Virmati when he saw her in college for the first time. Despite being aware of his existing marriage, Virmati finds it challenging to reject him. Inderjit, a Canal Engineer, proposes to Virmati, but she declines, stating, "As far as Inderjit is concerned, I don't feel I have done him any wrong. He has got Indu, who will make him an infinitely better wife" (Kapur 84).

However, she keeps this information from her mother. Virmati's encounter with Harish Chandra, an English professor, becomes a pivotal moment in her life. Paying close attention to his words, she defies her family to pursue her affection for him. Virmati, deeply infatuated with the professor, refuses to marry Inderjit, and even attempts to end her life by drowning. Eventually, she relocates to Lahore. However, the professor proves to be a manipulative individual. He was dissatisfied with his previous spouse due to her lack of education and their differing thoughts.

Changes in Virmati's life

Now highly educated, Virmati secures a job as the headmistress of a progressive girls' school run by an enlightened maharaja. This marks the best time in Virmati's life. Despite being reluctant, she runs away to Shanti Niketan to escape from the pain caused by her master. However, faced with a hurried proposal from the professor, recognizing its significance, Virmati agrees to marry him. Subsequently, she adopts the tradition of wearing red bangles after marriage, seeking a sense of belonging and integration into society alongside other married women.

Accordingly, he took her out and chose a deep red and gold tissue sari with tiny woven silver flowers in the traditional Banarsi style. He draped it around her head in the shop, and his heart took a turn at how beautiful she looked. The bride, for her part, managed to smile at him. The only thing she said she wanted were the red ivory bangles that the women of her family wore when they married (Kapur 186).

Nevertheless, this marriage only exacerbates her distress, leaving her feeling abandoned, discontented, and fearful. "Although married, she was seized." She would proceed resolutely and silently, following the predetermined path that had been laid out for her. Virmati regrets marrying Harish and believes her life would have been better if she hadn't. The family from both the sides despise this union. Her stepmother even prevents her from entering the kitchen or performing household tasks for the family. When she tries to visit her siblings, her mother physically abuses and mistreats her. She is seen as a lady without a certain location; she is recognized neither at her husband's residence nor at her parent's. She is not allowed to leave the house, even though her father has died, while her son-in-law is

happily received. No one forgives her, and she suffers a lot because of her decisions. She knows that putting her own desires ahead of other people's doesn't get her off the hook with either of her families.

Women as Birth Giver

The central theme of this work revolves around Kasturi's role as a means of reproduction and Virmati's status as someone deprived of possessions. Additionally, Ida's part in the story reinforces the ties between mothers and daughters, even though she openly expresses reluctance to follow her mother's path. *Difficult Daughters* portrays the inner struggle of a woman as she strives to transcend her cultural background and establish her own sense of identity. In the end, both Virmati and Ida demonstrate strength, securing and achieving independence. They pave the way for peaceful coexistence in public, considering both family ties and the desire to be self-governing.

Conclusion

India possesses a wealth of ancient legends and tales, offering both joy and contemplation on the victorious way of life. Beyond providing thrills, sensations, and emotions, these anecdotes impart teachings on values and reasoning, rich in significance. The work explores the

mother-daughter connection across three successive generations, spanning from the pre-independence era to the post-independence period, highlighting the evolution of women's experiences. Feminist inclinations are evident from the start in the portrayal of Shakuntala and Virmati, exercising autonomy in making life choices. Subsequent events indicate that women defying societal norms may be targeted, mistreated, and even rejected by their own mothers, with their relationship becoming the primary casualty. The diseases they carry are transmitted to future generations. Due to the disparity in time, the age gap seems insurmountably huge, and the typical occurrence of childbirth does not bring them together. The distressing events of partition, extensively depicted in the book, could have led to a fracture in connections. With Virmati's demise, the phantom is finally released, and Ida is now free to live her own life without influence from her mother's shadow. The story explores how a mother's influence may be unsettling for a daughter under different circumstances, portraying the transformation from dutiful love and warmth to hatred and harshness. The shift of a mother, often seen as a symbol of sacrifice and kindness, into a figure of self-centeredness and animosity towards her children is a perplexing phenomenon.

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