



# St. Joseph's Journal of Humanities and Science

ISSN: 2347 - 5331

<http://sjctnc.edu.in/6107-2/>



## Contextualizing Gender Discrimination and Struggle of Indian Women in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

S. Kaliamoorthy

### ABSTRACT

This paper examines Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) to highlight the problem of gender inequality and Indian women's struggle in a restricted patriarchal culture. The crisis in modern society's value system serves as the foundation for this narrative. The main character of the novel, Virmati, is portrayed as a new lady in colonial India who challenges outdated views about gender. Her mother, a patriarchal figure, makes use of her special authority to educate her daughter in cultural norms so that she can assume her allotted roles as a daughter, a wife, and a mother without being questioned and understand the value of sacrifice and loyalty. This novel emphasises how crucial it is for women to exist and survive in India's middle-class society. Born into a circumstance that is distinctly Indian, Virmati finds herself torn between self-aggrandizement and self-realization, tradition and modernity, and self-assertion and conflict. As a result of the pressures and oppressions of patriarchal culture, when marriage is also primarily perceived as a compromise, it only serves to further female estrangement. Virmati is able to make choices, but it comes at the expense of self-respect, dignity, and family prejudice. Today, sexual exploitation and gender discrimination affect women disproportionately. Manju Kapur's female characters predominate across her whole literary universe, while the male characters are relegated to supporting roles.

**Keywords:** Gender, Marginalization, Women, Discrimination, Struggle, Oppression.

## INTRODUCTION

### Issue of Gender Discrimination and Struggle of Indian Women in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

Manju Kapur is one of most distinguished literary figures in the world of Indian English literature. She belongs to a group of English-language Indian women writers who lived and worked in India. She explores the idea that when an Indian woman possesses all the values, such as intelligence, position, and education, she attempts to marry of her own choosing and tries to ruin her life by choosing between two sides - one that she will rebel against and the other in which she will live. Her novels demonstrate a feministic struggle against prejudice. As Tahamina Durani, in *My Feudal Lord*, says, "Our closed society considered it obscene for a woman to reveal her intimate secrets, but would not silence be a greater crime" (375). This viewpoint is sufficient to nullify the issue of silence in terms of cultural construction.

Through her works, Manju Kapur illuminates important new ideas regarding the altered cultural contexts in which sex roles, shared duties, equal opportunities, and social restraints are viewed from a feminist perspective. In "Breaking the Tradition of Silence," Poonam Rani Gupta avers,

Manju Kapur presents the earnings of autonomy and separate identity in her women protagonists. All her women protagonists are caught in the conflict between the passion of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. (11)

Due to these discrepancies, feminism emerged as a social movement that aimed to correct this social imbalance by giving women the same

opportunities and rights as men so they could keep their legitimate positions in society.

In this postmodern story, Manju Kapur uses a traditional thread to depict the female protagonists' desire for independence and a distinct identity. Virmati and her intellectual thirsts are shown in *Difficult Daughters*. In time, Virmati acts and behaves like a challenging daughter for her mother and also for her daughter Ida, and she develops into a challenging daughter for Virmati. Ultimately, compulsion and exploitation fall disproportionately on both Virmati and Ida. The exploitation of Virmati is evident in the very first line, and the topic won't be altered again. Ida screams, "The one thing I had wished was not to be like my mother" (1). Partition has been the most active and popular genre for writers in the postcolonial era. In the background of a traditional story thread, Kapur presents the image of the rebellious but stoic ladies who ultimately break customary boundaries.

The idea of *Difficult Daughters* is the pursuit of self-determination. Virmati is looking for relationships with people that will enable her to exercise the kind of control over her life that an educated woman should have. She was born in 1940 in Amritsar, Punjab, as the oldest child. Suraj Prakash, her conservative mother Kasturi, and progressive Suraj Prakash are the parents of eleven children in total. They are Kailashnath, Gopinath, Krishnanath, Prakashnath, and Hiranath, who are boys, and Virmati, Indumati, Gunvati, Hemvati, Vidyavati, and Parvati, who are girls. Kasturi longs for a more emancipated existence than that which she is offered by those around her. Due to the misperception she picks up from both her own family and the family of the guy she marries, this ambition is doomed to failure. She has to consider the possibility that her girls might not experience what she does. Even though mom reprimanded them and particularly snapped at Virmati in her role as the oldest daughter.

Virmati struggles with the demands of family life; raising her siblings cost her childhood, yet she never gives up on her education. She comes from a typical traditional family which believes in marrying off their daughters once they have traditionally attained the fundamental qualification of housekeeping. Due to her quest for a higher education, she must deal with numerous challenges and changes. After leaving the highlands, she might become a second mother to her siblings. She failed FA, which is when the struggle started. Kasturi, her mother, pushes her to be married. Virmati is constantly viewed as a sentimentally deficient individual. When she falls in love with Harish Chandra, an English professor who is already married and renting space from her aunt on Lepel Griffin Road with his family—a mother, wife, and children—chaos breaks out in the narrative. She is inspired by her cousin Shakuntala and the Oxford-returned Professor in her early years. Because Shakuntala is educated and involved in the political Gandhian movement, Virmati is impressed by her M.Sc. in Chemistry, her opinions on living, and the effects of her lifestyle.

By pursuing her further education, Virmati is willing to forego her family and all the ideals of the male-dominated society. She wants to demonstrate that she is not interested in being a puppet with other people holding the thread. She starts the rebellion because she has worked so hard to discover who she is. Since her parents constantly want their kids to follow their instructions, Virmati ends up being the challenging daughter for them. She also becomes the challenging child for her challenging mother since Kasturi believes that women live lives that are characterised by masculine dominance. Here it is made plain that if a woman does not go by the standards that are established by males, she becomes the reverse of a woman.

The tension persists from one generation to the next, presumably because mothers want their daughters to be safe, despite Virmati's wish to uphold her patriarchal traditions. To better understand the benefits of further education, Virmati relocates to Lahore for more study. She also draws inspiration from Shakuntala. She doesn't just go to Lahore for additional education; she also might be able to relieve herself of domestic responsibilities and, of course, of the Professor's macho attention. She has come to believe that one must look outside for freedom and education. That is how even the professor's wife feels. In this instance, Manju Kapur has drawn attention to moral hypocrisy because the professor is treated with silence but Virmati is imprisoned in a godown. Because the Professor is away attending the "mundan" of his legitimate son, she must have her pregnancy terminated. Due to these debates, Virmati decides to shape her identity in a life of service, dedication, and devotion and is totally committed to carving out her own place. Fortunately, different plans are decided. The Professor is stuck and can no longer put off getting married to her due to a strange quirk of fate. Her own family has abandoned Virmati. She has been pushed to the point where she no longer cares if she has a house and kids. She makes efforts to find her identity, but she still falls prey to conditioned conventionality. She tries to defend herself after experiencing her first sexual attraction to the Professor by arguing that it would be silly to refuse what is rightfully his on the basis of an antiquated moral code. Instead, she is happy that she married the Professor since it gave her life a respectable structure. She is certain that neither her grandfather nor her parents will ever pardon her for what she did. Even so, she is content with her favourable reputation. Women are viewed as having a respectable marital position in Indian society. It is well-crafted by Manju Kapur in *Difficult Daughters*,

The thought of her husband, asleep in the berth below, made her eyes go soft with tenderness. 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. (207)

It is possible to view Virmati's experience in a certain socio-historical context as a crucial feminist attitude. The feminist aspect of Virmati's experience and her perspective on life can be inferred from her departure from gender roles and the compulsions that have traditionally been linked with femininity. Women's education appears as a crucial sort of feminist status because the novel's cultural background is the conventional Indian social system. In the societal setting that is expressed in the novel, education is seen as one of the most effective ways to emancipate women.

The need for self-actualization, autonomy, self-realization, independence, and individuality is highlighted in *Difficult Daughters*. Manju Kapur discusses the idea of independence as something a nation longs for and achieves, as well as the independence a woman yearns for. She surely draws attention from writers who have portrayed the "new woman," who is driven to pursue the "road less travelled" and to forge her own "path." She frequently declares her interest in women's lives, whether they are found in the political or domestic spheres. The central theme of all of her novels is how women traverse both inner and outer spaces in their lives, including the sacrifices they must make to keep the house fires going and the types of fulfilment they find outside the home at the expense of their personal lives. They assert their independence and work to become self-sufficient through education, rejecting patriarchal ideals that force women into domesticity. They encourage the capacity to be independent and live

their own lives. They want to devote to something other than a husband and children. They are courageous, loud, resolute, and action-oriented - they are not silent revolutionaries. The two main characters decide to handle the household crisis on their own after realising they cannot rely on anybody else to do it. Despite gaining knowledge and independence, the female heroines of Manju Kapur's novels do not develop into new women in the traditional sense. Even if they dared to cross one patriarchal threshold, they were caught in another, where their rebellious spirits were restrained.

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