



**THE POSTMODERN FEMININE CONSCIOUSNESS  
IN MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Indian women caught between two cultures, doubly alienated, lead a marginal existence that take them nowhere. The conflict between their loyalty to a dominant tradition and their compelling need to break through the conventional barrier has left Indian women in a double framework of mind where feelings of doubt and isolation, and feelings of conviction and assertion, alternate with each other. Here they face unprecedented rootlessness and alienation which leads to a severe identity crisis. Modern women who are basically existentialists, move in accordance with their own personal rhythm and enter realms that lie beyond social sanction. Their journey to self-hood follows the lines of their natural evolution as a person. These women represent a new consciousness. They refuse to live in the traditional role of a meek housewife. Their intellectual passion itself seems unorthodox and threatens male supremacy. To them self-fulfillment is an attainable dream. These women preserve their integrity and fulfil their need to exist as individuals in a society that still operates on a system of patriarchal conventions. In transmitting their own philosophy for living, women and their followers have redefined and modified their old role definition.*

The image of women in Indian novels has undergone a change in the last three decades. Throughout this period, women writers have moved away from traditional enduring, self-sacrificing women toward conflicted female characters searching for identity. The interests of women writers have changed with Indian society and its relationship with the West. This trend in writings by Indian women clearly appears if one compares the images of suffering women in Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and Meera Mahadevan's *Shulamith* to recent subversions and expansions of the traditional image in works by Chitra Fernando, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Manju Kapur and Anita Nair. In contrast to the main women characters in Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* and Mahadevan's *Shulamith*, female characters in the 1980s, 90s and onwards assert themselves and defy marriage and family strictures. The recent books explore an educated woman's search for identity and meaning — in autobiographical form, as in Kamala Das' *My Story* or in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, or combining autobiographical and ethnographic form, as in most recent Indian women's novels in English.

Traditionally, marriage for women has entailed a most submissive feminine role. Although a woman ideally had power as a mother, as a wife she submitted to her husband and his family. Only recently have Indian women in the dominant patriarchal tradition started to question aspects of this role, or decided against marriage altogether. In *Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel*, Meena Shirwadkar claims that, following the changes in Indian society,



novels have started to progress from depicting women characters solely as epitomes of suffering, womanly virtue to portraying more complex, real characters: “Tradition, transition and modernity are the stages through which the woman in Indo-Anglian novel is passing. The image of traditional woman, the Sita Savitri type, was at once, easy and popular . . . . In India, with its strong bent for tradition, woman was expected mainly to live for others than for herself because “others” controlled and moulded the social structure. Even woman in life and literature herself voluntarily surrendered to the ideal of self-sacrifice. . . . Modern woman, in life, has been trying to throw off the burden of inhibitions she has carried for ages. Yet, a woman on way [sic] to liberation, trying to be free from inhibitions, is rarely seen in Indo-Anglian literature.” [*Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel*. New Delhi : Sterling. 1979. 153-154.]

Manju Kapur is born in 1948 in the city of Amritsar. It is a city all too familiar with sectarian conflict. She graduated from the Miranda House University College for women. Then she went on to take an MA at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and an M.Phil. at Delhi University. Her first novel, the acclaimed *Difficult Daughters*, won the Commonwealth Prize for First Novels (Eurasia Section). It was a number one bestseller in India. Manju Kapur lives in New Delhi, where she is a teacher of English literature at her *alma mater* Miranda House College. Manju Kapur has lived through turbulent times in India.

In *Difficult Daughters*, a woman tries to find a place for herself in a world where her life is dictated by familial duty. She becomes embroiled in a forbidden affair while the seismic upheavals of the Partition surround her. In *A Married Woman*, there is the struggle to gain control of the disputed Ayodhya temple site. It is a struggle which still persists today, years after the 1992 destruction of the Babri mosque. This struggle parallels Astha’s emotional turmoil. Her third novel *Home* is a multi-generational family saga. It is rather more domestic. There are the sectarian conflicts that dog the sub-continent. These conflicts provide the backdrop to Kapur’s other novels.

All three novels explore the difficulties of reconciling the devotion to family expected of middle-class Indian women with their aspirations and desire for a life outside. As she has said: “I am interested in the lives of women, whether in the political arena or in domestic spaces. One of the main preoccupations in all my books is how women manage to negotiate both the inner and outer spaces in their lives – what sacrifices do they have to make in order to keep the home fires burning – and at what cost to their personal lives do they find some kind of fulfilment outside the home.”

Kapur’s writing is far from inaccessible for non-Indian readers. These readers are not familiar with terms such as *yatra* (a journey or pilgrimage) or *kar sevaks* (religious volunteers). She writes with an Indian audience in mind. Things an Indian audience takes for granted will then have to be explained. She wishes to be as clear, lucid and unobtrusive as possible. Indeed this uncluttered clarity and lucidity characterises her writing.

*Difficult Daughters* is written by Manju Kapur in 1998. The novel is set on the time period during the last years, which were leading to the socio-political catastrophe, the Partition of 1947. Women were involved in Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement during this period. The *Satyagraha* movement was Mahatma Gandhi’s non-violent civil disobedience campaign.



Women were gradually becoming active during the Swadeshi movement a decade earlier. Women were highly involved in the fight for their independent nation this time. Very few women novelists have written about the Partition of 1947. It is mentioned in Nina Sibal's *Yatra*, Shauna Singh Baldwin's *What the Body Remembers* (1999) and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998).

Life in the Punjab in the decades before Partition is the subject of *Difficult Daughters*. The novel has a sophisticated plot, with the third generation daughter, Ida, going on a journey to understand her mother Virmati and her grandmother. The protagonist of the novel is Virmati. She rejects an arranged marriage because she is in love with her professor, a married man. The circumscribed life of women, Virmati's successful efforts to obtain a Master's degree, and the prejudice she had to face even after legally marrying the professor are recreated in a very credible manner in this novel.

As Bumiller remarks, "Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in his *The Discovery of India* recounts that 'our women came to the front and took charge of the struggle. Women had always been there, of course, but now there was an avalanche of them, which took not only the British government but their own men folk by surprise. Here were these women, women of the upper or middle classes, leading sheltered lives in their own homes-peasant women, working-class women, rich women-pouring out in their tens of thousands in defiance of government order. . . it was not only that display of courage and daring, but what was even more surprising was the organizational power they showed.'" [Bumiller. 19] After the *Swadeshi* movement, women then became a major part of Gandhi's *Satyagraha* movement. Women such as Swarnalata and Shakuntala in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* are part of this movement. Their participation reveals the emancipation of women during the time period between 1930 and 1947.

While there are female characters in the novel like Swarnalata participating in the movement, the novel is centered on Virmati. Harish falls for her because she is an educated woman, unlike his wife, Ganga, whom he has to marry according to the tradition of arranged childhood marriage. Virmati struggles to create an identity for herself. She is unable to make a mark of herself within her society. Her desire and passion towards Harish impedes her intellectual goals. The goals, which could have led her to emancipation like the women, she idolized. This novel is set within the historical context exemplifying the struggles which women faced during in the early 20th century.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* maps the lives of women, who attempt to create an identity for themselves during the time period when India was politically unstable and undergoing a major historical catastrophe, the Partition of 1947. There are many important notions Kapur investigates in the novel such as education, marriage, and polygamy. It is centered on the life of Virmati, the female protagonist, who struggles to form an independent identity for herself, but fails after falling in love with a married man. The notion of education is an important element discussed in the novel, and allows distinction between the two sets of women. Kapur presents the readers with two different categories of women. The traditional women, who adhere to the standards of the society they thrive in, and exercise their agency in a limited fashion. They are juxtaposed the modern women, who not only are aggressive and follow their desires, but also control and impose their agency within the society. Ganga and



Kasturi represent the former category, while Swarnalata and Shakuntala are emblematic of the latter category. One such traditional text, although not as influential as other historical texts but vital nonetheless, is *Manusmriti*. It has directly or indirectly defined the role of women in the Indian society.

The novel *Difficult Daughters* showcases the gradual progress of the status of Indian women, which is achieved in *Ladies Coupé*. The *Difficult Daughters*, which observes the decade right after the early 1900s, when the Swadeshi movement was taking place. No longer are women bound to child marriages, or are being burned into the pyre. Although their situation is much better than it was in the 19th century, women continue to be in the 20th and 21st century in India are in a paradoxical situation.

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