



## PORTRAYAL OF 'THE NEW WOMAN': A FEMINIST READING OF MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

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### ABSTRACT

*Women writers in India are moving forward with their strong and sure strides. The present analysis will focus on the demystification of the network of relationships held by the patriarchal discourse and the forms of resistances employed by women. The present study proposes to explore 'The New Woman' presented in the select novels of Manju Kapur. All domains of her growth-social, political and psychological shall remain the focus of investigation. The New image of Woman under study is ambitious, revolting, rational, powerful, and mixture of tradition and modernity. This evolving image of woman has created a crisis in family and society and has shaken the foundations of age-old institutions. This paper attempts to study the ways of subversion by Indian women who are culturally dislocated, portrayed by select women novelist.*

**Key words:** patriarchal discourse, resistances, double exploitation, revolting.

Manju Kapur describes through her protagonist (Astha):

***"A woman should be aware, self-control, strong will, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense"***

Astha wants to a break her dependence on others and proceed on the path of full human status that poses a threat to Hemant and his male superiority. She finds herself trapped between the pressure of modern developing society and shackles of ancient biases. She canonizes and comments on her feminine sensibility, by raising the social issues related to women.

The pre-determined role of ideal woman has been given a second look in the novels of Manju Kapur. While Manju Kapur's first novel is a family saga against the historical backdrop of partition, her second novel *A Married Woman* (2002) is a work of investigative reporting on the most controversial and political issue of the demolition of Babri Masjid. The novel is a kind of narrative on a woman's incompatible marriage and resultant frustration and the

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contemporary political turmoil in its historical context. Her third novel '*Home*' explores the complex terrain of the domestic world and reveals many issues such as the revolt against the age-old traditions, quest for identity, the problems of marriage; and lastly the women's struggle for her survival.

### **Manju Kapoor's *Difficult Daughters*:**

Manju Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individuals caged within the confines of a conservative society. This New Woman tries to find meaning to her existence through her individual struggle. Manju Kapoor's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) is a skilful, enticing first novel by an Indian writer who prefers reality to magic realism. Manju Kapur recreates an intimate world where tradition binds the ties of family and women's lives are confined to cooking, washing, weaving, chopping and blending. Manju Kapur presents the yearning for autonomy and separate identity by her women protagonists in this post-modern novel in a traditional thread. *Difficult Daughters* is a novel set in pre partition scenario of India. The novel recounts the story of Virmati, a young woman born in Amritsar into an austere Punjabi family, who did not wish to live her mother's life and went to study in Lahore rejecting the confinement of her mother's world which revolved around domesticity, marriage and child bearing. Virmati's history is reconstructed in retrospect by her daughter Ida who undertakes a journey to know the past of her mother which was always hidden from her. Although her mother constantly reminded her that, it is the duty of every girl to get married, Virmati's dreams were influenced by her cousin sister Shakuntala who was a rebel and a liberated woman in her own regard. Virmati's mother Kasturi was brought up upon the conventional principles of patriarchal society where marriage was the ultimate destiny of a girl's life and marriage implied that a girl had to work tirelessly to please her in-laws.

She refused to accept the groom chosen by her family and attempted suicide. Her sister was married off to the groom instead of her. Virmati expressed her desire to pursue higher studies and follow the lines of her cousin Shakuntala. For Virmati, education signified an escape from the reproaches of her family and freedom from her mother's control. Virmati and Shakuntala, the so-called difficult daughters of the family, represent the evolving consciousness of 'The New woman' of the forties. But unlike Shakuntala, Virmati was not serious about securing education and professional independence for her own sake. She sought it as a respite to escape from the pressures of the illicit love relationship. Virmati rebelled against her mother's expectations and left for Lahore. Although she said to the world that she left to study in Lahore, yet in reality it was an attempt to find a respite from the professor. Virmati desperately sought an escape from her meaningless life and thought that pursuit of higher education might enable her to do so. She coveted an independent life like that of Shakuntala. Despite her desperation to forget the professor and being away from her home she succumbed to his passionate demands. Consequently she realized that she had become pregnant and was left with no other alternative but to go in for an abortion. She regretted the fact that she who

had come to Lahore for expanding her mental horizons had done nothing. She knew that the professor would not render any support to her in her hours of crisis. The happiest and perhaps the most successful phase of her life was the episode at Nahan, when she became the headmistress of a girl's school. She almost attained the autonomy over her life, which she had craved all along and eventually discovered her own space to live. However, it is actually Virmati's difficult daughter Ida who in her determination to live life despite all odds represents the real face of a modern woman. Ida could not accept her mother's decision to abort the fetus and terminate the life growing within her. She had broken her relationship with her husband Prabhakar for he had forced her to go for an abortion. Through Ida's conscious decision to be different from her mother we are introduced to the question of defiance and generation gap. Virmati challenged Kasturi's principles; Ida could not accept Virmati's. Although Virmati's case may be seen as representative up to a point yet she could not live up to it completely. It is true that she represents the spirit of "New Woman" in India with her assertion of individuality, and yearning for education but she fails to show her strength of mind in love. She was caught in whirlpool of misplaced passion towards the Oxford returned Professor who already had a wife. However in Virmati, there is a struggle between the head and the heart, the physical and moral. Virmati's daughter Ida is strong and clearheaded. She breaks up her marriage as she is denied maternity by her husband. The forced abortion is also the termination of her marriage. Ida by severing the marriage bond frees herself from male domination and from conventional social structures. She has that strength which Virmati lacks. Swarna Lata, Virmati's friend, is also a clearheaded, strong woman. She too experiences tension with her parents over the issue of marriage but unlike Virmati she channelizes her energy into a new direction.

The fight for autonomy and separate identity remains an unfinished combat. Throughout this novel Ida's declaration echoes that she doesn't want to be like her mother and wants to assert her autonomy. As she says: "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word-brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore". Perhaps it is this inability of Virmati to strike independent roots and grow which leads Ida remark like this. Ida, an educated woman, divorced and childless, apparently leads a freer life than her mother's in external terms; yet inside her she feels, some of the same anxieties as had plagued her mother: 'No matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately'. Trampling patriarchal norms, Virmati defies societal expectation to assert her individuality and hopes to achieve self fulfilment.

In the novel, '*Difficult Daughters*', Virmati, in her quest for identity, rebels against her family tradition. She is impelled by the inner need to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. The very title of the novel *Difficult Daughters* subtly alludes to the patriarchal convention that a woman, who undertakes a quest for an individual identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well. Although Virmati



succeeds in breaking all man-made boundaries, there are certain priorities so deeply embedded within her that she struggles to shake through the shackles. In the course of the novel she grows up from a naïve girl to a woman matured by suffering and through experience."(John, p 1)India's victory against the imperial rulers is mirrored through Virmati's life. No doubt India attained freedom from colonial rule but at the cost of partition and communal hatred. Virmati was victorious in breaking the age old shackles of a patriarchal society in a tradition bound country but at the cost of much mental, torture and constantly struggling but failing to to erase the tag of being the 'other' woman

### Conclusion

Kapur presents the psychic distress of women through the rebellious character of Virmati. The novel not only refers to the difficult daughter Virmati but also alludes to the several other difficult daughters leaving the confines of their household and engaged themselves in the national struggle for independence. The women characters in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* are divided into three generations, with their values, mindsets and relationships. Virmati's history is reconstructed in retrospect by her daughter Ida. Virmati is depicted as a New Woman of colonial India and her urge to acquire education and freedom resemble the nation's quest for identity and selfhood but she fails to completely live up to her wishes. Although she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she gets caught into another, where her free spirit is curbed and controlled. In Shakuntala, Swarnalatha and Ida we see the images Modern Woman, conscious, introspective, educated, emancipated, driven by the zeal to assert their autonomy and separate identity and find a place for themselves in society. Manju Kapur's novel brings out glimpses of women of the forties in India trying to assert to establish their own identity.

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