

## A Feministic Study of Manju Kapur's '*Difficult Daughters*'

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### Abstract:

Feminism is a criticism of the prevailing social conditions which have excluded woman from the dominant male culture, social, political and intellectual pursuits. Modernity is clearly evident in the emergence of the new woman anything the present paper attempts to analyse Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughter* as the voice raised against male chauvinism to claim the rights of economic Independence of woman and explores the utmost excitement and anguish of the protagonist Virmati in her quest for self-identity and protest against the blind dogmas of social-cultural as well as patriarchal cuteness. Virmati rejects the ideas of men about woman and denounces the patriarchal society's control over woman. Manju Kapur's feminism in '*Difficult Daughters*' is an attempt removing the small space, and insignificant positions woman were given by the males of society.

**Key Words:** Feminism, freedom, economic independence of woman, male-dominance, identity-crisis.

Indian women novelists have been portraying woman in various manifestations. Post-colonial Indian English Literature has got its own lion's share in world literature. The works of Indian women writers such as: Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, Manju Kapur and so on have left their indelible impression on the pages of literary history. They also have established their own identity by exploring female subjectivity in their literary offspring and striving to bring an identity for woman, by highlighting various untouched and unnoticed facets of life. Manju Kapur's '*Difficult Daughters*' (1998) is the best example of such feministic effort which is made to draw attention to the situations and predicaments of women. Manju Kapur has shown considerable talent in projecting her protagonist as individual who fights against the suppression and oppression of women by patriarchal society. She portrays a woman as rebelling against the traditional role, breaking the shackles of exploitation, awakening with search for identity, to assert their individuality.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult daughter* was short – listed for the Cross Word Book Award and also earned the prestigious Common Wealth Writer's Prize for the Best First Book category in the Eurasia Region in 1999. The novel is set at the time when India was to face the struggle for independence and the holocaust that followed in the wake of the partition that of the country in 1947. The central theme of '*Difficult Daughters*' is also struggle for freedom. On the one hand it is the freedom for one's country, the back drops of the novel on which it is set and on the other hand it is the freedom for one's self. It is a story of a woman, narrated by

another woman. Nira Gupta calls it “a novel about-female desire and entrapment, about compromise and compliance. (2003: 173)

ManjuKapur’s *Difficult Daughters* traces the different stages of woman’s development in a particular social –historical context that marks the significance of andocentric feminist perspective. In the Indian context, feminism is often considered to be a legacy of equality of sexes inherited from the constitutional rights of woman, social reformation movements and spread of education. The specific nature of the traditional cultural ethos and list long history in India does not conform to the western model of feminism. *Difficult Daughters* is a forceful expression in Indian feminism and presents it as the most suitable feminist positions for the women’s existence in traditional Indian society. In this novel Manju Kapur presents Indian women attracted and allured towards the western thoughts presenting tantalizing possibilities but their typical social and cultural background within the available social and cultural backgrounds exercises a check on them and makes them explore certain means to have a viable space within the available social and cultural context. Kasturi represents an oppressed Indian Woman by male dominance. She gives birth to eleven children, which makes her health weak and feeble. Her husband does not take care her health. She is thrown into a situation where she cannot reject giving multiple births. Virmati is the eldest daughter of Kasturi and Suraj Prakash, who is forced to become a foster mother to her ten younger siblings due to her mother’s constant pregnancies. As a girl, she is unable to find the love and attention or her mother which makes her feel weary and irritated all the time. She is emotionally devoid of any affection from her mother, which may be the reason for her finding the love outside the home.

Virmati belongs to progressive Arya Samaji family, who believes in educating the girl but unfortunately Virmati’s education is put aside due to her mother’s health and her siblings. Her demands of completing education is conveniently ignored by her mother Kasturi who feels her daughter has studied enough and she is supposed to devote her entire time to the family than to focus on her education. Her desire is marred by her mother who needs Virmati as a helping hand to look after her children. This environment sets up the upcoming life of Virmati who becomes a difficult daughter for her mother and struggles to find her own space and identity in her life.

Virmati is influenced by her glamorous modern and highly educated cousin Shankuntala. She is unmarried and lives independently in Lahore. Virmati begins to hope for a life like Shakuntala and that she needs higher education in order to come out of her miserable life as a foster mother of her siblings. She begins to believe marriage as a hindrance towards to path of education. On the other hand for Kasturi, her mother, marriage is the ultimate deliverance for a girl and she considers education as a means to pollute the mind of young girls. Kasturi neglects Virmati’s urge to study and fixed her marriage with a canal engineer Indrajeel but the wedding of Virmati is pushed ahead due to the death of Indrajeet’s father. Virmati enrolls in college and decides to complete her higher education. In college Virmati comes in contact with Harish Chandra an oxford returned professor teaching in her college and also the tenant in her aunt’s house. He is married and has a child. He teaches English Literature and finds meaning in each and every piece of Literature Virmati is deeply inclined to his ideologies and attracted towards him. At the same time HarishChandra is also

in love with her. He discovers the latent thirst of gaining knowledge and education in Virmati and as a result he gains complete control over her.

Virmati's traditional family opposed her affair. Virmati locked up in her house when her affair with Chandra becomes public. Chandra doesn't care about the ramifications of their illicit affair on her young mind and professes his love in the most poetic, passionate and impressive manner. Virmati refuses to marry Indrajeet but when she comes to know Chandra's self-centered behavior, she tries to commit suicide she knows that Harish would never be able to give a viable solution to her miserable life and could only write about the lofty ideals of love than to take out a substantial solution to problem.

*"The koel is singing of its mate, a pair of squirrels is running up and down the Jamun tree in the corner of the hedge. We too will one day together. It's the faith I live by"* (Kapur 52).

After a lot of chaos in life, Virmati manages to convince her family for further education and is enrolled in Lahore. Lahore is very pompous and modern city. It promises to bestow her independence from the chains of convictions and traditions. She experience different life and comes in contact with woman like Swarnlata who are emancipated and unapologetic about their free and modern life. Swarnlata, her roommate in Lahore is a fiercely independent and is actively involved in the freedom struggle against British Raj. Virmati also attends her meetings and listens her fiery speech on women and their role in the freedom struggle. Virmati tries to involve Vacations and festivals; she prefers to study in Lahore. Christopher Rollanson writes:

*"She wilts under the implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband's first wife, with whom she has to live. She loses all sense of identity: the continuation of her education feeds no more dreams of independence. In the end her individual history disappears and becomes all but relevant, swallowed up in the greater and more resonant collective tragedy of partition".* (5)

In the wake of communal riots of during the partition of India and Pakistan Virmati leaves Lahore forever and comes back to Amritsar. After coming back she immerses herself fully into a social work. Her peace of mind is slowly restored when she is able to reunite with her own family. Harish's family moves back to united provinces in order to escape the riots. Kasturi's marginalized existence and miserable plight makes Virmati protest against the system that does not allow women to think the possibilities of being something else than wife only but her experience teacher her and makes her to believe that the ultimate fate of woman is marriage. Accepting the truth Virmati again lives with Harish and gives birth to a baby girl Ida and settles with her husband and daughter eventually.

Virmati became the headmistress of girl's school and attained the autonomy over life and discovered her own space to live. However, it is Virmati's difficult daughter Ida who in her determination to live life despite all odds represents the real face of a modern woman. As Virmati and her cousin Shakuntala were the difficult daughters of her family, Ida becomes Virmati's difficult daughters. She could not accept her mother's decision to abort the fetus and terminate the life growing within her. She doesn't think like Virmati about marriage. She had broken her relationship with her husband Prabhakar for he had forced her to go for an

abortion. Ida's conscious decision to be different from her mother, introduced the generation gap. Virmati challenged her mother Kasturi's principles; Ida could not accept her mother Virmati's principles. Virmati 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 was already married. On the other hand Virmati's daughter Ida is strong and clearheaded. She breaks up her marriage as she is denied maternity by her husband Prabhakar. Ida by severing the marriage bond frees herself from male domination and conventional social structures, Virmati lacks this strength.

Thus the fight for autonomy and separate identity remains an unfinished combat. Virmati in her quest for identity, rebels against her family and social convictions and impelled by the inner need to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. The title of the novel is "*Difficult Daughters*" Subtly alludes to the Indian Patriarchal convention that a woman, who undertakes a quest for individual identity is branded as difficult daughter by not only the family but the society also. Virmati stands for those women who struggles for freedom and own identity. She struggles to shake through the shackles of convictions as India struggles for freedom from British colonialism. India attained freedom from British rule but at the cost of partition and communal hatred in the same manner Virmati succeeds in breaking the traditional rules of a patriarchal, male dominant Indian society but at the cost of mental, torture and constantly struggling but failing to erase the tag of being the 'other woman'. Manju Kapur presents the psychic distress of Indian women through the rebellious character of Virmati. She brings out glimpses of women of the forties in India, trying to assert to establish their own identity.

Virmati seeks self-identity but loses self-respect and dignity. Harish dominates Viramti forever with his intellectual superiority. The greatest tragedy of Virmati is her failure as a mother. The opening lines and the last lines of the novel are evident of her failure.

*"The one thing I had wanted not to be like my mother"*. (Kapur 1)

*"This book weaver a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore."* (Kapur 259)

Ida, Virmati's daughter opposes her mother's expectations and becomes another difficult daughter for her mother, who wants to escape from the clutches of her mother's pressure. After a long struggle also Virmati doesn't achieve the real freedom. '*Difficult Daughters*' enable us to get an idea of the feminist struggle against biases.

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