

# Manju Kapur's Portrayal of Gender Discrimination in *Difficult Daughters*; An Overview

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## Abstract

*It is a known truth that Indian women are dislocated, alienated individuals who are crushed by tradition, household injustice, and institutionalised oppression. These women are also the captives of their period, society, and romantic fantasies. Women have thus been the primary victims of male rule throughout history. A lady is confronted with societal norms, rewards, and punishments from infancy in an effort to prevent the development of any traits common to the other half of humankind. Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters highlights the issue of gender inequality and the struggle of the disadvantaged Indian women within the oppressive framework of a closed society despite not being overtly feminist. the struggle to keep their dignity and ultimately regain their freedom. The story of Difficult Daughters, which is set during the time of partition, focuses on a woman whose struggle for freedom consumes her and mars her otherwise calm appearance with signs of agony and division.*

**Keywords:** Taboos, Patriarchal, Outmoded, Spiritual Odyssey, Feminist Discourse, Ostracism, Conventionridden, Progressive, Feminine Assertion, Chauvinism, Ancestral Home, Inner Turbulence, Infirmary, Melancholy, Hindering Presence, Contradictions, Disastrous Marriage.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is centred on the problem in the contemporary Indian system of values. The book raises awareness of the problem of gender discrimination and the pain experienced by Indian women who live under the repressive framework of a patriarchal society. The novel centres on the life of a woman whose struggle for freedom from deadwood of traditions and taboos engulfs her, leaving a contour of partition and pain on her apparently placid face. The novel is set in the backdrop of partition, when all values and conventions were being flouted. According to Agrawal, the main character Virmati is depicted as a new woman of colonial India who is investigating her options for education and financial freedom while challenging outdated views towards women. (qtd. in Prasad and Kumar Singh 239-240). The author of the book has used the backdrop of the Second World War, communalism, and division to highlight the potential of colonial women who collaborated with their male peers in social renewal and refused to conform to the strict social code that was forced on them. A contemporary woman who has lost her social and spiritual grounding and is eager to look for her origins, her search for identity is a spiritual journey.

Difficult Daughters by Manju Kapur was awarded the 1999 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book. The book received a lot of attention both domestically and internationally. The book can be interpreted effectively as a feminist and postcolonial debate. The tale of Vimati, who begins an unexpected connection with Professor Harish Chandra, a married man (with a wife and children), is told by Manju Kapur. The relationship reflects India's fight for independence, and after the nation was divided and India gained its independence, Vimati became the professor's second wife, which caused her to be shunned by her family. A portion of the narrative is based on the life of Vimati Kapur, the author's mother. Manju Kapur was so touched by the love story of her parents, which took place during the period of the division, that she attempted to retell it piece by piece before it faded from her memory. (Juneja 61). Innocent ambitions, rebellion against a society bound by custom, self-doubt, resolve, and acceptance are all depicted in the book.

In *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur portrays a middle-class Punjabi household with three generations of women in the pre-independence period. The narrator of the book is Ida, Vimati's third-generation daughter who never aspired to be like her mother. The main character of the book, Vimati, also defies tradition by falling in love with a guy who has already been married a number of times and marrying him. Women were not permitted to pursue advanced schooling in those days. In any case, Vimati rebelled against delaying her marriage and obtained parental approval to continue her education after school before refusing to wed the man she was betrothed to. Meanwhile, she developed feelings for Professor Harish. To validate her love, she worked to get married to him despite resistance from her family, eventually becoming "the black sheep of the family." (*Difficult Daughters* 104). Manju Kapur's portrayal of Kasturi, a mother of eleven children who gave birth to children like any "...dog or a cat in season" (22) at the expense of her own health, serves as a comparison. She contrasts this with Shakuntala and Swarnalata, who, against the wishes of their parents, cleared the way for their freedom and made their own decisions. The tensions that Vimati faces in a society that is both highly charged and ruled

by convention stay at the heart of the novel. Manju Kapur paraphrases Bijay Kumar Das as follows:

As a forward-thinking lady, Vimati would never give up her ambition to earn a better education. She is prepared to forgo her family and all social conventions that are controlled by men in order to pursue her education. Not only that, but she openly disobeyed the social norms of the society to which she belongs by getting married to a man who already had a wife and kids. It is indisputable that a woman has the freedom to adore and select her partner. (141)

That is the message Manju Kapur seems to be trying to get across through the character of Vimati who, in defiance of our religion's and society's observance of traditions like funerals, can be seen as a feminine statement of individual identity that defies the rules of a male-dominated society. Even her daughter voices her disapproval of the malechauvinism. She asserts feminine sensitivity by refusing to comply with her mother's desire to win her father over. The title of the book is well-deserved because both Vimati and her daughter LDa turned out to be troublesome children for their parents. (142).

In addition to bringing freedom from the British Empire and the agonising Holocaust of division, the year 1947 also marked a break with the past, its values, and customs. The structure of Manju Kapur's book *Difficult Daughters* is made from the threads of this time period. The story opens with a young girl named Ida going in search of her mother's ancestry; this journey will lead her to a time before 1947 and before India had experienced the pain of partition. But it's also a universe where the seeds of transformation have already been planted. This inquiry is crucial to Ida's desire for her own selfhood and identity because she recently got divorced. The first line of her introduction, "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother," reflects her internal conflict and the suffering of her journey. (*Difficult Daughters* 5). Ida sets out on a journey to comprehend her mother (Vimati), who used to be a "...silent, brisk, and bad-tempered" (2) mother, after her burial. She makes the decision that she "must travel to our birthplaces, hers and mine, overrun with aunts and uncles still residing in the ancestral

home.” (2). She searches for means of maintaining a relationship with her mother. Ida retraces her mother’s steps with the assistance of many cousins and brothers.

Lala Diwan Chand is the traditional combined family featured in the novel’s opening, and its members have a strong belief in God, their religion, as well as traditional values and systems. In order to “preserve the norms of peace that had existed in the early days of their joint family household,” Diwan Chand takes the uttermost precautions. (Malhotra 30). The three groups of female characters in the book each have their own set of values, perspectives, and interpersonal interactions. Lala Diwan Chand is the traditional combined family featured in the novel’s opening, and its members have a strong belief in God, their religion, as well as traditional values and systems. In order to “preserve the norms of peace that had existed in the early days of their joint family household,” Diwan Chand takes the uttermost precautions. (Malhotra 30). The three groups of female characters in the book each have their own set of values, perspectives, and interpersonal interactions.

The narrator, Ida, appears to be separated from her mother, Virmati, in both time and place, but Virmati continues to be a vibrant presence throughout Ida’s existence. “Virmati hovers near the surface of Ida’s consciousness, though she is not physically present, and is frequently a source of inner turbulence.” (Alka Singh 132). At her mother’s funeral, the emptiness in Ida’s existence becomes more obvious and intolerable. Ida made every effort to avoid the picture she had of her mother because it appears that having Virmati around has failed to give her a feeling of fulfilment and stability throughout her life. She embarks on her trip, however, driven by an unconscious affiliation with her missing mother to discover her mother from a different perspective. She embarked on an unrelenting journey that began as a mental search because of her unrest. The idea of a “good” and “bad” mother is widespread throughout the globe and takes on additional importance in the Indian setting. The connection to a comparable being strengthens a female kid. In Ida’s case, she recalls that “she could not remember a time, it had been right between us” (2), which left her naturally pondering

and battling with an inherent infirmity similar to a cripple without supports. Ida might not have been cognizant of this shortcoming for the simple reason that her perception of Virmati was that of a “silent, brisk, bad-tempered” lady. (2). Virmati is seen battling with her wants for education and illicit love in the face of hardship that threatens to ruin her inner self in Manju Kapur’s difficult daughters, which makes for an engrossing reading and challenges the reader to break through the silence of suffering Virmati.

Ida is driven to “unveil her mother’s past, experiences the excitement of discovery,” which ultimately results in the two of them forging a close connection with “each word a brick in a mansion” (258). (259). After completing this job, she cries out to her deceased mother, “Do not haunt me anymore,” in an effort to gain freedom. (259). The revelation appears to quell the anxiety-inducing circumstance, ending the traumatic transition time. The book provided the “escape routes” (258) she had been seeking for her entire existence. the sadness and hopelessness brought on by realising “I was nothing, husbandless, childless.” I sensed myself hovering like a pencil note on the edges of society” (258) seem to have vanished after she delves into her mother’s history without the interference of Virmati. Ida attempted to “bridge the inconsistencies in her life by marrying a man who was also a scholar” (258) to end up in a catastrophic marriage. Ida was searching for the “self lost in an effort to be a model daughter under pressure from her parents. Ida travels to Amristar, a location connected to her mother, where she feels very disoriented without her, in an effort to discover the truth about her mother.

Of Kasturi’s eleven children, Virmati was the oldest and was responsible for managing the household and caring for her smaller siblings and sisters. Although she was only their sibling, the other kids were terrified of her because of the way she behaved. When Virmati was ten years old, she was just as aware of her mother’s pregnancy symptoms as Kasturi. (6). As the author notes, “Virmati moaned about ruthlessly, trapped in the house.” (11). She passively observes her ill, frail mother who is being tormented by delivery. She made every effort to shield herself from her aunt Lajwanti’s remarks,

who resided next door. Soshe took excellent care of her smaller siblings. The query Kasturi asks her daughter, age 10, "Have you seen to their food-milk-clothes-studies?" strikes the reader. (6). She occasionally longed for her mother's love and for a sign that she was unique, but she never received either, so she sought solace in her schoolwork. She frequently appears stressed and worn out as a result of her demanding job. She became a quick-tempered girl as a result of being torn between her domestic duties and her passion of learning, according to Juneja.(62). She went to Dalhousie with her mother to help care for her mother who had just given birth. But when she learned that her mother (Kasturi) did not require her, she also started to feel antsy. After their arguments, Kasturi used to ponder, "Why was her daughter so restless all the time? " without comprehending Virmati's mental condition. That meant catastrophe for a girl." (Difficult Daughters 11). The seeds of Virmati's ambition were sown by Shakuntala's journey to Dalhousie. She was inspired by Shakuntala Pehnji after encountering a spirited, rebellious relative sister and wished to emulate her. She began to reflect, "It was pointless searching for solutions inside the house. One needed to glance outside. To independence, education, and the shining lights of Lahore's institutions. (15). She was aware that being something other than a wife was conceivable. The girl made the decision, "No, she too had to go to Lahore, even if she had to fight her mother who was so certain that her education was all but over." (17). The reader begins to believe that she will be effective in creating a niche for herself because of Juneja's observation that "her

determination shows her assertive nature." (63).

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