

Concept of Manju Kapur's New Woman: A Study of Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*

Dr. Sunit Bhandari

Associate Professor and Head, Dept. of English
KVA DAV College for Women, Karnal, Haryana

Abstract

This research paper examines the concept of 'New Woman' in Manju Kapur's esteemed novel *Difficult Daughters* by weaving it closely with the novel's storyline. Set against the backdrop of India's freedom movement, the novel traces Virmati's journey from a beautiful daughter to a defiant woman seeking identity and autonomy. The present study analyzes intricate roles of women within familial and social frameworks, emphasizing how education, personal agency and social defiance shape the path of the modern woman in the novel. This paper explores how Kapur maps a woman's inner revolution onto a larger canvas of societal expectations and national upheaval, making Virmati's life a reflection of the modern woman's struggles and contradictions.

Keywords: New woman, tradition, Gender, Identity, Feminism, Patriarchy.

The concept of the "New Woman" has historically been a major issue in feminist literary analysis. Emerging in the late 19th century, this word referred to a generation of women who began to challenge the conventional responsibilities ascribed to them in both household and public domains. These women pursued education, economic autonomy, and emotional satisfaction, frequently opposing stringent cultural norms. Within Indian literature, the "New Woman" began to gain prominence during the colonial and post-colonial eras, especially as India underwent an increasing national consciousness and socio-political turmoil. Feminists were already up in revolt against the patriarchal mores repressing women. They wanted that women should have opportunities to be recognized as individuals in

their own right overcoming the infirmities and inequalities forced on them. Women philosophers took a stand against established ethics and looked at women new angles of reality, free of dependence syndrome. It will be appropriate Chaman Nahal who opines:

I define Feminism as a mode of existence in which the woman is free of the dependence syndrome. There is dependency syndrome; whether it is the husband or the father or the community or whether it is a religious group, ethnic group. When women free themselves of the dependence syndrome and lead a normal life, my idea of feminism materializes. (Singh 17)

Hence voices were rising to liberate women from systematic dependence giving way to the idea of new woman. During the Indian independence

movement, women increasingly engaged in public affairs. As national movements focused on emancipation from colonial domination, a concurrent fight emerged within households, as women pursued personal autonomy and empowerment. Indian English literature during this period began to depict these conflicts and transformations in the lives of women caught between tradition and modernity.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998), skillfully depicts this tension through a combination of realism and empathy. The narrative, which is set in the 1930s and 1940s, vividly depicts Virmati, a woman who is divided between the expectations of her traditional Punjabi family and her aspiration for an autonomous life. Dr Shaleen Kumar Singh opines:

The novel ,written on the pre-independence background of Indian society that was facing long violent confrontation for freedom as well as the assault and onrush of Modernity in form of 'New Education' or out loud voices of women (who, since middle ages, have been the victims of repressions and oppressions).Virmati, the epitome of modernity, has tried to break the trammels of traditions that have been binding her and obstructing her to cross the boundaries of customs and *Samskaras* that have been prescribed by men and imposed by male dominated society(Ashok Kumar 11).

It is noteworthy that Kapur refrains from romanticizing or idealizing the obstacles that women encounter in her narrative. She accurately portrays the agony, bewilderment, and fortitude that are indicative of the journey of a "new woman" in a traditional society. This study examines how *Difficult Daughters* depicts the emergence of the new woman from various perspectives: education, personal autonomy,

romantic and marital decisions, family dynamics, and cultural influences. It contends that Virmati, despite her shortcomings and the societal repercussions of her decisions, symbolizes a transformation in the perception of female within Indian society. Consequently, the story evolves into a potent narrative of personal conflict and communal metamorphosis.

Virmati, the protagonist, embodies the rise of modern woman in pre-independent India. Virmati, raised in a devout Punjabi family is immersed in stringent customs and the demands of compliance and domesticity. Despite this, she is uniquely different- inquisitive, smart and enthusiastic about making her own way. Her desire to pursue education and make autonomous choices goes against the rule of her family, especially the rules assigned to her as a daughter and prospective wife. Her quest for education and her contentious relationship with the professor exemplify her assertion of autonomy. Opting to love a married man and persisting in her education, despite societal condemnation, demonstrates readiness to defy conventional traditions. Sarika Srivastava opines in this connection, "The women in the novels of Manju Kapur reveal that the voice of protest runs as an undercurrent. Her novels.... portray women who want their individual worth realised and attempt to break through the suffering that the traditional society offers them. *Difficult Daughters* deals with the idea of women's emancipation. Virmati, a young Punjabi girl belonging to an austere family fights to give legitimacy to her love through marriage, in spite of family opposition" (Ashok Kumar 70). Nonetheless, her decisions result in emotional isolation and familial discord, illustrating that the journey to empowerment is seldom straightforward. Kapur employs Virmati's internal conflict to underscore the intricacies of

challenging traditions. Kapur presents Virmati not as an ideal emblem of feminist triumph, but as a realistic depiction of a woman striving to reconcile her aspirations with societal limitations. Virmati's actions, notwithstanding their imperfections, signify a substantial transformation in woman's self-perception and societal roles. She represents the archetype of the new woman—an individual who is prepared to interrogate, contest, and reconfigure her societal role, regardless of whether the result is wholly emancipatory.

In *Difficult Daughters*, the identity of new woman is significantly influenced by her education. Education is not merely the acquisition of knowledge for Virmati. It is the pursuit of self-esteem and autonomy. She is exhausted with the restrictive constraints of domestic responsibilities "yet her desire to study never diminishes. She belongs to a typical traditional family, which follows the old traditions of marrying off their daughters after receiving the basic qualification of housekeeping. Virmati has to face different twists and turns due to her desire of higher education" (Srivastava 16). Despite family opposition, her decision to pursue additional education is a symbolic defiance of traditional feminine norms, asserting control over her narrative. Virmati has chosen to pursue self-education, "She too had to go to Lahore, even if she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was particularly over" (DD 17).

Kapur portrays education as both a challenge and an opportunity. Despite the fact that it allows Virmati to challenge conventional norms and develop independent thoughts, it also causes discord in her social and familial circles. The orthodox beliefs of her upbringing were in striking contrast to the intellectual liberty and modern influences that she experienced during her tenure in Lahore. Virmati begins

to thoroughly recognize her existence as an individual with thoughts, desires, and objectives during this period. Nevertheless, her pursuit of education comes at a price: the emotional distress of navigating a life that perpetually chafes against societal conventions and her growing alienation from her family.

The dynamic between Virmati and her mother, Kasturi, is a substantial source of tension. Kasturi is the embodiment of the archetype of the typical Indian woman, who is deferential, reticent, and acquiescent to patriarchal values. Compliance with her spouse and progeny are the defining characteristics of her existence, which is characterized by subservience. In contrast, Virmati's aspiration for a life beyond these limitations leads to an ongoing conflict between her and her mother. Her mother wants Virmati to shoulder household responsibilities and get engaged to an irrigation engineer Inderjeet, but Virmati's happiness lies in getting education and exposure of the outside world "Maybe here was the club to her happiness. It was useless looking for answers inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom, and the bright lights of Lahore colleges" (DD15). This leads to ideological conflict between generations. Kasturi's inability to understand Virmati's objectives frequently results in emotional repudiation and severe criticism. Kasturi regards Virmati's defiance of the conventional norms of early marriage and subservience as both disgraceful and perilous. Later Virmati feels attracted to Professor, a married man. In an interview to Deepa Diddi, Manju Kapur says, "...had Kasturi been open and affectionate towards Virmati, she might not have fallen in love with the Professor" (Sistani 160). Kasturi's opposition is predicated on a desire to preserve familial honor and fears of societal disgrace. This demonstrates that elder

generations of women frequently assumed the role of custodians of tradition, not out of malice, but as a consequence of internalized patriarchy and constrained life circumstances. Kapur exemplifies the broader feminist conflict that woman in India faced during the colonial period by examining the mother-daughter relationship. Her voyage becomes increasingly challenging as a result of Virmati's insurrection, which challenges both societal norms and familial obligations. This intergenerational conflict underscores the intricacy of change, demonstrating that the domestic sphere is often the site of the most resistance to changes in women's responsibilities. Kapur utilizes their relationship to emphasize that the process of becoming a new woman requires the confrontation of both external societal influences and deeply ingrained familial ideals.

The new woman of Manju Kapur is not solely a defiant being. She is presented as a strong individual who takes recourse to unconventional modes of asserting her identity. Virmati's decision to pursue a relationship with the Professor, who is married, is both personal and has huge societal implications. In a society where women are expected to maintain familial dignity through planned marriages and chastity, Virmati's behavior is seen as scandalous. Kapur depicts this link not to exaggerate it, but to highlight the challenges that women face in their desire for emotional and romantic independence from cultural norms. Virmati maintains her individuality in choosing her partner, but their relationship remains poor. Despite cultivating her intelligence, the Professor fails to provide the emotional and social equality she seeks. Following their marriage, Virmati feels isolated, living in a separate portion of the house and often reminded of her role as the second wife. This conversation demonstrates how actions of disobedience can

expose women to new forms of oppression. Kapur criticizes the assumption that breaking social conventions always ends in liberty. Santawana Haldar observes that, "In some approaches to life however, Virmati is a New Woman who has little faith in traditional moral codes. Sexual involvement before marriage was not a taboo for her. Nor was she troubled with any moral dilemma at the time of her abortion while studying for her B.T. degree." (186-187). As Virmati gains control over her romantic life, the consequences of her choices highlight the ubiquitous structures that continue to limit women's autonomy. The novel asserts that actual agency includes not just the act of making choices, but also the ability to exist with dignity and equality within those choices. Kapur enhances the character of the new woman by depicting the complex conflict between desire and social acceptance.

Virmati's search for individuality is constantly hampered by societal limits that define acceptable behavior for women of her time. Despite her desire for a life defined by her own choices—including education, love, and career—society responds with hostility and exclusion. Every action she makes, whether it is to further her education, engage in a romantic connection with a married man, or advocate for an unusual lifestyle, is scrutinized. Kapur convincingly demonstrates that women's liberties are limited not only by legislative frameworks or cultural standards, but also by deeply embedded social attitudes and communal expectations. Virmati's experiences demonstrate how social boundaries are enforced both externally and inside. The public judgment she faces is accompanied by internal guilt and turmoil. She frequently finds herself split between her need to assert her originality and her need to conform. Despite her status as the Professor's wife, she continues to struggle with feelings of respect

and belonging. The lack of acceptance from both her family and her husband's family demonstrates the long-term consequences of nonconformity. Her loneliness exemplifies the cost that women frequently pay for challenging patriarchal norms. Kapur uses Virmati's persona to emphasize a fundamental truth: women's liberation cannot be understood without the societal structures that aim to confine it. Genuine independence necessitates a shift in cultural ideals, not just personal daring. *Difficult Daughters* depicts the societal restraints that Virmati faces, encouraging readers to consider the ubiquitous standards that continue to influence women's life, despite the appearance of individual decision-making. The story pushes us to consider the vast cultural upheaval required for women's freedom to be meaningful and long-lasting.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* offers a striking portrait of the modern woman through the character of Virmati, whose desire for identity and freedom exemplifies broader feminist themes in Colonial India. Christopher Rollason makes a pertinent observation in this regard:

The search for control over one's destiny, surely the key theme of *Difficult Daughters*, refers to the independence aspired to and obtained by a nation (despite its cruel division by a fateful partition), but also to the independence yearned after (and finally not obtained) by a woman and member of that same nation (or of one of its rival communities. (Ashok Kumar 1)

Despite the suffering and societal consequences that accompany Virmati's trip, her determination to establish her autonomy represents a significant break from previous generations' passive obedience. She challenges customary expectations by asserting her right to education, affection, and originality, despite

the possibility of isolation as a result of such decisions. Kapur articulates a sophisticated view of womanhood that accepts imperfection and adversity, emphasizing that the pursuit of gender equality is complex, unique, and ongoing. Virmati's legacy is defined not by her victories, but by her audacity to challenge and oppose - a legacy that continues to inspire introspection and discourse in the present debate on women's rights.

Works Cited

1. Diddi, Deepa. "An Interview with Manju Kapur". *Feminism and Fiction, India and Beyond*. Eds. Shahram R. Sistani and Santwana Haldar. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2011. p 159-165.
2. Haldar, Santwana. "Feminism and the Society Set up: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*." *Feminism and Fiction, India and Beyond*. Eds. Shahram R. Sistani and Santwana Haldar. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 2011. p 172-192.
3. Kapur, Manju. *Difficult Daughters*. New Delhi: Penguin Books Ltd., 1998. (Referred to as DD in all the quotes from this edition)
4. Nahal, Chaman. "Feminism in English Fiction: Forms and Variations". *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*. Ed. Sushila Singh. New Delhi: Prestige Books, 1991. p 14 to 21.
5. Rollason, Christopher. "Women on the Margins: Reflections on Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*". *Novels of Manju Kapur: A Feministic Study*. Ed. Ashok Kumar. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2010. p 1-9.
6. Singh, Shaleen Kumar. "Tradition versus Modernity in *Difficult Daughters*". *Novels of Manju Kapur: A Feministic Study*. Ed. Ashok Kumar. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2010. p 10 – 14.

7. Srivastava, Sarika. "The Voice of Protest in the Novels of Manju Kapur". *Novels of Manju Kapur: A Feministic Study*. Ed. Ashok Kumar. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2010. p 70-84.
8. Srivastava, Shilpi Rishi. "A Quest for Identity in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*". *Novels of Manju Kapur: A Feministic Study*. Ed. Ashok Kumar. New Delhi: Sarup Book Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2010. p 15 – 21.

