

## **Journey from Suppression to Rebellion**

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**Abstract:** *For ages woman is pictured as an epitome of endurance and fortitude and put her in a frame of goddess, a giver. But have we ever considered her as a co-human being who too has some expectations from life and can shout when in pain. We imagine her always as a dutiful wife, a lovable daughter or a caring mother. If she is out of that frame we call her difficult or uncharacteristic. She should not have space called her own. Her life is more a life for society than individual. Though family and society impose their age old rules or make her center of oppression and subjugation she without second word has to fulfill her duties unless she will be called rebel. Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters portrays the life of such a woman Virmati who since childhood due to lack of love and burdened with responsibilities which are more for her age struggle for an escape in the form of education and expect some happiness. There too her emotions get seduced and bring down her as a woman who has manipulated age old rules and made others life difficult. But which is the truth; society's imposed rules for its comfort or her response to that.*

**Key Words:** *daughters, generation, patriarchy, oppression, mothers, understanding, society.*

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### **I. INTRODUCTION**

In the second half of the twentieth century, there are many women novelists who have enriched the Indian English literature. Among them a notable writer is Manju Kapur. She has presented the problems of the Indian women in a joint family in a male-dominated society and gave a new vision of Indian women in her fiction. Manju Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters* is published in 1998 and it has been winning several accolades since then. It was short listed for the Crossword Book award and also won the prestigious Common Wealth Writers 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 in 1947. The central theme of this novel is struggle for freedom. On the one hand it is the freedom for one's country the back drop of the novel on which it is set and on the other it is the freedom for one's self. India's history of freedom and the protagonist's struggle for freedom and identity run parallel to each other. *Difficult Daughters* brings forth the issue of gender discrimination and struggle of the Indian women under the oppressive mechanism of the closed society. The novel focuses on the struggle of an educated young woman of middle-class against the norms of a family that cherishes old values of arranged marriage. It is the story of a woman who is crisscrossed by contradictory and conflicting concepts ripped by two disjunctive doctrines that systemize the human life. Veermati the protagonist is caught between the dilemma of obedience to traditional family duty to keep up the family prestige and subjugation or surrender to self sensuous desires. She is portrayed as a woman totally in control of her body and mind. But in her physical and emotional rifts she gives preference to the latter and which creates further emotional rift between her and others. It is thus the search of the protagonist for autonomy and selfhood. It is her daughter Ida's quest that traces out her mother's past that brings out the intrinsic struggle of a girl to attain selfhood. Ida under an emotional trance after her mother's death opens up an entire genealogy of narrative and filial relationships of her mother in trying to know her past. However her search does not provide her to find the facts that she wants as she claims my relatives gave me one view of my mother, I wanted another.(DD-5) Ida not being content with the views of the relatives about her mother makes further efforts to reconstruct her mother's story. The paper depicts the mother daughter relationship tracing it through three successive generations. We see each succeeding generation of daughters take a step further to conflicts between them.

*Difficult Daughters* is a story of three generations of women: Ida, the narrator, who is a divorcee. Virmati, her mother and the protagonist who marries an already married professor for love, and Kasturi, her grandmother, who come to terms with a difficult daughter, Virmati. Virmati belongs to a conservative Punjabi family who lives in Lahore before Independence and settles in Amritsar after Independence. From the very beginning she has been brought up in a traditional patriarchal Indian society which confined woman to the four walls of the house. Again it is cultured family which gives priority to education. The head of the family, Virmati's grandfather, is progressive enough in his outlook to think that basic education is necessary for girls. However, he too agrees with the societal norms that higher education should be banned for girls. Being the

eldest Virmati has been grown to be a responsible girl looking after her younger siblings as a surrogate mother since her mother's successive pregnancies and consequent sickness. Virmati has to look after ten younger siblings the girls: Virmati, Indumati, Gunvati, Hemavati, Vidyavati and Parvati. The boys: Kailashnath, Gopinath, Krishnanath, Parkashnath and Hiranath. "Ever since Virmati could remember she had been looking after children. It wasn't only baby Parvati to whom she was indispensable; to her younger siblings she was second mother as well" (DD-6). The one cause for Virmati's frustration was her mother's continuous breeding. Virmati was never remained free. Her life is smeared under the pressure of family responsibilities. At times Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special she was dejected and secluded. "

When she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away. Have you seen to their food – milk – clothes – studies?' . . . 'I am just going', protest Virmati finally. 'Why can't Indumati also take responsibility? Why does it always have to be me?' 'You know they don't listen to her', snapped Kasturi. 'You are the eldest. If you don't see to things, Who will?' (DD-6-7)

She has to play the role of a second mother for her brothers and sisters, do the most oppressive of the daily chores in the house and is often abused by her mother, without any apparent reason. She never gets affection, love, care and attention from her mother which she expects, naturally, as a child. Mothers are such strong influences in the lives of their daughters that they have the power to make or mar their daughter's personality. In a patriarchal world, however mothers instead of protecting the interests of their daughters become instrumental in torturing them. There is nothing more painful for a girl than the pressure to grow up even before she enjoyed her child hood. Making things more typical, at seventeen Virmati is engaged to Inderjeet, an irrigation engineer. But Virmati does not like the idea of marriage and childbearing immediately after her high school study. Virmati never likes to be like Kasturi, her mother who is only a home maker. But according to Kasturi, —Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family. (DD-14) Kasturi always persuades Virmati to get marry but she does not listen to her mother. Her role model is Shakuntala, daughter of Lajwanti and glamorous cousin of Virmati. Shakuntala is M.Sc. in Chemistry working at Lahore. She is an intelligent independent modern and a sophisticated girl who does not believe in the concept of marriage and reacts strongly to this traditional idea. But for Virmati's family, marriage is for the parental pleasure and family prestige. In a patriarchal family, it becomes painful for an elder daughter like Virmati to enjoy her childhood under the pressure of responsibilities. Virmati is constantly torn between the two worlds- one wanting to get married and settled and the other craving for an independent and socially responsible life. Also, she does not believe in arranged marriage: —Early marriage, and no education and no love? Her soul revolted and her sufferings increased. (DD-50) Virmati never shares her feelings with Kasturi. As a child she keeps craving for a little understanding from her mother but with the passing of time she learns to accept the situation as it is. Inspired by her cousin, Shakuntala, she thinks that it is possible for a girl to be something other than a wife. She longs to have her own identity and freedom and when finds her space she struggles to negotiate her wishes. She struggles with the oppositional aspects of domination and resistance as well as freedom and bondage. But Kasturi argues,

Shakuntala Pehnji did not have five sisters waiting to get married either. And do you think it makes her mother happy to have her daughter unmarried? She may say what she likes about jobs and modern women, but I know how hard she still tries to find a husband for Shaku, and how bad she feels. You want to do the same to me, to your father and grandfather? (DD-54)

Shakuntala's behaviour is viewed with contempt and disdain especially within her own family because she smokes, disobeys her mother, and acts as she pleases. Her behavior is considered as manly. She also does not comply with the standards of her society. She neither depends on her father nor is married. She is self-sufficient and shows no interest in marriage. Shakuntala's father who is Veermati's uncle too lives in his newly constructed house at Lepel Griffin road. They tenant their house to an England returned professor in English by named Harish. He is returned from Oxford two years ago and had landed in Amritsar at the request of one of his friend's father who was on board of trustees of Arya Sabha College, Amritsar. He is enticed by a salary of two hundred and thirty rupees, twenty rupees more than what he gets at a college in Waltair. Virmati and all other female members of her family develop intimacy with the professor's family. Very soon the families became friends and the professor's wife Ganga become Veermati's bosom friend and Veermati frequently visits the professor's wife. They go shopping together and enjoy each other's company. When his wife introduces Veermati to him the professor senses that, "this girl has potential he found himself thinking". (DD-39) He is impressed and get attracted to her. She too sensed that the professor paying attention to her. Veermati thinks about him "it was very noble of the professor to try and teach his wife. It showed that he really cared for woman's education just like her grandfather (DD-39). But the professor's wife was not able to learn. Ganga, the wife of Harish, is married to him at the age of three years. Her mother never bothered to send her to school instead has trained her in good housekeeping. Ganga enters her in-laws house at the age of twelve, and tries to prove herself as a good housewife, but has never made any attempt to be an intellectual companion to her

husband. The professor's desires of sharing his views on literature and others could not be fulfilled. He was longing for a companion with whom he could share and discuss his literary knowledge and Veermati was found to suitable. Veermati refuses to marry the canal engineer whom her family selected for her as she sensually yielded to the professor who always tried to induce her. Gradually, Virmati gets herself tangled in the web of Harish's love. His constant pleading for intense love makes the matter so worse for her that she even decides to end her life by drowning herself in the canal but is fortunately rescued by the servants. When she attempts suicide and is rescued, the family members doubt: —Was this all her education had taught her? (DD-79) They lock her in the godown during day time. She is angry and doesn't know why she is locked in the godown like a sack of wheat or dal. Indumati, her younger sister, is married off to Inderjit when Virmati is locked up. With the help of Paro, her little sister, Virmati and the professor exchange love letters. Virmati undergoes the agony and humiliation of failed love with a married man. While love brings happiness for him, it robs Virmati of even the little peace of mind that she earlier had. Viramti, who is first attracted to Harish, for his love of freedom and individuality, willingly loses her identity. She looks up to him as her ideal, but Harish selfishly thinks about his own needs, his own cravings. He keeps sending a list of all that she has to do through letters but never bothers to face Virmati's parents and propose marriage. On the one hand he leaves her alone to face humiliation and on the other, he keeps instigating her to revolt against her family. After an unsuccessful suicide attempt, she wants to change herself. In Veermati one finds the incipient "New woman" who wants to carve out a life herself. To liberate herself from family pressures, she believes that education is the only means but again falls prey to Harish's snare. It is not her education or the development of her personality that the man is interested in, it is rather his need for her and also the fact that for as long as Viramti does not leave the safety of her home, he would not be free to prey on her. She convinces her parents to let her join in a training college in Lahore for her B.Ed. degree. She rebels and insists on her right to higher education. When permission is granted by her father, Virmati decides to go to Lahore to complete the B.T. course, despite strong protest by her mother, Kasturi, who is totally dissatisfied with her daughter. Harish continues his clandestine love affairs with her, going to Lahore very often. Lahore is to serve more as their rendezvous than a seat of learning. Her furtive meetings with Harish in the safe haven of one of his friend's residence inside the campus lands her in yet another difficult situation of being pregnant with his child. On the pretext of her preparation for her B.T. Examination, she rushes to her place only to talk to Harish. But by that time he has left Amritsar for his village for the Mundan ceremony of his son. Not knowing what to do, Virmati returns to her hostel, confides to Swarnalatha, her roommate, who comes to her rescue in getting her pregnancy terminated. Her family knows nothing about the goings-on. The act of abortion with the help of a friend and the shame and humiliation of an illegitimate baby becomes too much for Virmati to bear. She completes her B.A in Lahore. Virmati, no doubt, is revolutionary in spirit and fights for her rights at every stage of her life. She is also capable of managing her situations in moments of crisis. But every time she rebels and aspires to live a freer life, she is condemned because of Harish whom she loves. At each point in her life, whenever she encounters freedom, Harish's presence in her life impedes her decisions she make. She realizes how vulnerable her position is and pressurizes him to marry her so that there will be some respectability to their relationship. In spite of her frequent requests, Harish is reluctant to marry her. He is a hypocrite who, at his own convenience, moulds his opinions about social traditions and sexually exploits Virmati.

What can I do? I am hemmed in and tortured on all sides. I know I have been unfair to her- I know. And yet what can I do?' Harish turned an agitated face to the poet. Everybody will condemn me, her. My children will never accept it, nor my mother. You know the constraints. Surely I need not explain myself to you! (DD-185)

Luckily Virmati, is offered Principal ship of a girls' school, Pratibha Kanya Vidyalaya, at Nahan where nobody knows about her past. But Harish follows her even to Nahan and much against her wishes, goes to bed with her and becomes responsible for the termination of her services in the school. At Nahan Virmati makes a wrong choice that is to return to a relationship that brought her only suffering. Whenever Virmati speaks about their marriage, Harish has his own genuine reasons and excuses. In Delhi, on her way to Shantiniketan, she contacts an acquaintance who is also a friend of Harish. It is this friend who persuades him to marry Virmati. Ultimately their marriage takes place in the house of Harish's friend. As expected, Virmati is unwelcomed by Harish's family. Virmati succeeds in marrying Harish, but she fails to secure any space for herself in his family. As a second wife, she is resented by her mother-in-law and ostracized by her own family. The first wife, Ganga, her children, too resents her. Virmati is forced to realize: —I should never have married you ... and it's too late now. I've never seen it so clearly. It's not fair. (DD-195) Ganga, being illiterate and having been married in childhood, is faithful to her husband as a typical Hindu wife. She believes that Indian wives suffer but are able to adjust themselves tremendously. She feels isolated with the entry of Virmati. She knows that she has to fight her own struggle. She is the mother of his children, and is anxious to protect their present and future. To her, marriage is a religious and social institution where love has no importance at all. She serves him as an obedient servant, while Virmati, the second wife serves as a vassal for his sexual gratification and intellectual stimulation.

Harish thinks that Ganga, his illiterate wife, could never prove a soul mate. He wails out the social disparity in thoughts: "They do not recognize that I need the companionship of an educated, thinking woman nor that I feel lonely and desolate among all these people who care for me". (DD-86) Harish finds an educated and thinking wife in Virmati. However, like a traditional wife, Virmati wants to take care of all the chores and responsibilities of a wife. She doesn't feel complete without doing them. On the contrary, Harish treats his second wife a companion, a company for his thoughts and academics. He tells the same to Virmati. "You are my other self. Let her wash my clothes, if she feels like it. It has nothing to do with me. I don't want a washerwoman. I want a companion. (DD-201) Virmati becomes pregnant, and her mother-in-law now takes care of her and shows concern for her. But unfortunately she suffers a miscarriage and Harish sends Virmati to Lahore to do her M.A which, he thinks, will bring her out of her depression. There she lives with her husband, but later it becomes difficult for him to come to Lahore frequently since he is promoted as the Principal of AS College. Virmati returns after her M.A. course and comes to know that her husband's family has been shifted to Kanpur because of communal tension. Ganga and the family go to their home town and Virmati gets united to Harish. Legally she becomes the second wife of Harish and once they shift to Delhi, she acquires the much awaited status of wife and mother of a daughter. Still she never feels that belongingness which a newly married couple should do. She feels depressed and alienated. She attempts to find out her identity and her freedom. "I feel so utterly left out, so utterly cold. Will there be any change in my life, I wonder?" (DD-235)

Swarnalata, the roommate of Virmati, generous at heart and always eager to help others, Swarna is equally committed to political goals and tries very hard to orient Virmati too in this direction by inviting her to various political events and actions. However Virmati's desire both for independence and for unconditional love from her husband cannot go together. The constant clash of the two, mirrored in the history of country's freedom movement, shows that the path of attaining Independence of heart, mind and action for a modern woman is not an easy one. Virmati's fertility is metaphorically connected with the ongoing political events and, after an abortion and a miscarriage she is finally able to give birth to Ida, her only child, after Independence. She and Harish argue over her suggestion that their daughter be called Bharati, but finally Harish comes up with a Persian name- Ida, neither Hindu nor Muslim-because he does not wish their daughter to be tainted with the birth of their country. At times Virmati tries to assert her autonomy and identity she is censured and ordered by her husband to be part of the contemporary society, its culture and rituals. In her quest of identity, she loses it at every stage and struggles to make space for herself on her own. Her rebellious attitude takes back stages whenever it has to be strong to refute Harish's sexual oppression. Sadly she becomes submissive and succumbs to the whims and fancies of Harish. Love, in Virmati's case, does what even strong patriarchal traditions could not do. The girl who has refused to be cowed down in the name of family honor, to marry a man of their choice, now does not move her fingers without the prior permission of Harish. At one stage she finds herself willing to join Swarnalata in the independence struggle but checks herself. She is not sure —Would Harish like it? (DD-233) During their courtship and even after the marriage, it is always 'Harish didn't want her to do this or Harish wanted her to do that'. All that she cares for in the world is to be "worthy of him" (DD-237). Gradually though unwillingly or unknowingly Virmati loses her individuality. Harish knows how to bring her round to his views. He is very confident: —She might protest but ultimately she had to do as he said. (DD-244) Virmati, being educated, makes a departure from the established path of Indian social custom and tradition. Yet, paradoxically she follows the same established norms of the Indian tradition and finds fulfillment and contentment in her own way. It appears that she is neither successfully emancipated nor confined truly to the traditional role expected of her. Thus it can be said that she fails to carve a strong and independent identity of herself.

This novel captures the complex relationship between mothers and daughters over a period of three generations. Kasturi wanted to groom Virmati to be one like her since Kasturi is never given a chance by her mother and perhaps, that is why, she is not ready to allow any choice to her daughter, Virmati. She was least concerned about educating her daughter further. Kasturi believes in the patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience because, "During Kasturi's formal schooling, it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny .... Her mother tried to ensure. ... She was going to please her in-laws. (DD-57)

On the other hand Veermati being born and brought up in an orthodox, Arya samaj family should not have loved a married man. It is nothing but betraying own family especially when she has been engaged to some other person chosen by her family. She denying the traditions and ethics quench for physical satisfaction at the cost of her family reputation and at the risk of her life. Her longing for her mother's affection and love and her crave for acceptance by someone in the family with whom she can share her views and emotions lead her to Harish who shows more concern and interest in her with his alluring looks and words. Though she knows it is an illicit, immoral and unethical relationship she surrenders herself completely losing her wisdom. This is all because lack of love and communication gap between Virmati and her mother who always reminded her of her responsibilities and burdened her with duties but forgot of her rights as daughter. Being daughter to her mother she has all rights to have love and affection from her. Virmati fed up with the traditions and norms of the society decides to break up the shackles of the society. She displays courage to fight for her right to education,

for her right to choose her man in life and economic independence. She makes several attempts at asserting her individuality. Every time she rebels to liberate herself and aspires for a freer life, she fails to create a space for herself and proves to be a loser. The male dominated society, the incredulousness of her family and finally her husband himself could be responsible for her failure. But if she had an understanding mother, she would not be a victim to all these disasters and would not be the wife of a much married man like Harish.

Virmati has no respect for family traditions but paradoxically she forces Ida to be bound by them. She tries to keep her under her control. Ida comes to know why Virmati, who herself has flouted the norms of idealized femininity all her life turns out to be a stern and strict mother, because in patriarchy, a mother has to become strict for the safety of her daughter. Thus, it is the long chain of conditioning of women that starts from their mothers. Mothers, being women, are themselves conditioned by their mothers first and the society at large next. Mothers take it as their duty to condition their girl child into the norms of the patriarchal society. Ida, belonging to the same sex, identifies herself with Virmati but a stage comes when in her attempt to assert her identity, she breaks away from Virmati and feels alienated. However, after being an experienced self, Ida looks back at the past of Virmati and realizes what it is to be a mother in a patriarchal society. In this way, again an identification and understanding takes place between the daughter and the mother Ida is shown as a radical modern woman of contemporary India. She does things to please herself, thereby questioning the patriarchal structure. Ida, an educated woman, divorced and childless, apparently leads a freer life than her mother. Yet she is also not free from pain and anxiety that plagued her mother: "No matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately ... (DD-3) The self-willed Ida marries Prabhakar, a fellow of her academic pursuit but she hardly ever seems to be happy with him. It results in divorce very soon. She confesses: "Of course I made a disastrous marriage ... I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society". (DD-258) Ida refuses to submit to the dictating ship of the male dominant society and believes in the personal freedom. She is not willing to follow the traditions and customs of the society.

The novel gives us a critique of mother-daughter relationship, tracing it through three successive generations. Through the sensitive portrayal of three generations of women and their problems, Manju Kapur has given us an unforgettable picture of the evolution of the Indian woman's psyche overtime, starting from the pre-independence period through the independence era up to the time of the post – independence. The novel is pointer to how a mother's influence could be unsettling to the daughter under different circumstances. How filial love and affection could be replaced by hate and bitterness, how a mother, traditionally and epitome of sacrifice and goodness, could become a symbol of selfishness and resentment to her children. Again we see feminist leanings as the outset in the portrayal of Shakuntala and Virmati who make their own choices in life. The later developments seem to spell out that women who go against tradition are sure to be singled out and oppressed by society, rejected even by their own mothers and the sears they bear are handed down to the next generation. Due to the difference in times, the generation gap too becomes wide to be bridged. As we go through the novel in the end we could come to a conclusion that 'daughters are difficult only when life becomes difficult for them'.

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