

# Exploring Women's Struggle for Identity and Freedom in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

**Abstract:** *Difficult Daughters*, published in 1991 and recipient of the Commonwealth Writers Prize, sheds light on the perpetual struggle of women against societal norms that perpetuate male dominance. The novel delves into the quest for self-respect and identity among women who, despite being well-educated, find themselves constrained by societal expectations. It portrays how education, while empowering, can also make societal and familial pressures unbearable, prompting a search for identity. The protagonist's journey reflects a growing awareness of her societal role and a determination to shape her own destiny. Furthermore, the novel provides insights into the struggles of the middle class for identity and freedom, offering potential solutions to these challenges. At its core, the novel addresses key issues such as women's education and empowerment.

**Keyword:** Individuality; Learning; Autonomy; Patriarchal Control

## I. Introduction

Women have long been relegated to inferior roles compared to men, denied the equality and autonomy enjoyed by their male counterparts. Their lives, both before and after marriage, are often dictated by their parents and husbands, leaving little room for personal aspirations. Trapped within the confines of societal expectations, women find their dreams stifled and their realities harsh. Manju Kapur's protagonists reflect this struggle, torn between familial obligations and the desire for independence. Through education, they challenge traditional norms and strive for autonomy, seeking to forge their own identities. In the novel, the narrator, Ida, recounts the story of her mother, Virmati, who endured oppression within her own family and after marriage. Denied freedom by her mother and husband alike, Virmati's education sparks a consciousness of her own identity, prompting her to break free from societal constraints. Sanjay Kumar observes that Virmati embodies the plight of women in the patriarchal society of the 1950s, subjected to injustice and indignity.

Virmati undergoes a significant evolution from innocence to worldly experience throughout her life. Observing her cousin Shakuntala, who revels in the freedom to pursue her own desires, Virmati becomes inspired to carve out her own identity. This transformation is evident in her shift from traditional attire to Western clothing. Shakuntala remarks on Virmati's change, highlighting the disconnect between societal expectations and the desire for personal autonomy. She expresses frustration at the continued societal pressure on women to prioritize marriage over personal fulfillment, even amidst the fight for national freedom.

Manju Kapur's novel "Difficult Daughters" depicts the dual struggle for independence faced by Virmati and the nation. Despite the transformative impact of the freedom movement on the country, societal norms entrenched in tradition continue to undervalue women's abilities and potential. Kapur highlights the persistent disparity between the changing landscape of the nation and the stagnant plight of women. While Virmati contends with societal constraints and hardships, her cousin Shakuntala enjoys unfettered freedom and self-expression. Inspired by Shakuntala's liberty, Virmati aspires for a similar autonomy, longing to break free from societal expectations and redefine her identity beyond the role of a wife. Both educated, they engage in discussions about educational issues, yet Virmati's traditional-minded mother, Kasturi, prioritizes marriage over education, seeking to hasten Virmati's union. Veera Alexander observes that within the narrative, education is portrayed as either a threat or a dead end for women, relegating accomplished female characters to submissive roles of wifehood and dependency instead of empowering them to pursue independent livelihoods.

Kasturi fails to offer support to her daughter Virmati and lacks understanding of her feelings, emotions, and thoughts. Virmati finds herself constrained by the traditional norms of society. Through her novel "Difficult Daughters," Manju Kapur provides insight into the challenges faced by women in society as they navigate roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. Women are denied the opportunity to explore their own identities, with their freedom suppressed by male dominance, leaving them with limited space for self-expression.

Vikram Chandra describes "Difficult Daughters" as a vividly imagined and gracefully written narrative that delves into the struggles between parents and their children, immersing readers in their poignant moments and youthful desires for love, independence, and fulfillment. It emerges as a compelling tale that explores the complexities of family dynamics, partition, and love. Virmati finds solace and purpose in her life as she forms a close bond with her roommate Swarna Lata in Lahore. Swarna Lata actively engages in social and political activism, advocating for women's rights and challenging the notion that marriage is the ultimate solution to women's issues. Inspired by Swarna Lata's courage and conviction, Virmati begins to participate in conferences aimed at empowering women. However, she grapples with feelings of inadequacy as she reflects on her own passive role compared to the active engagement of other women, pondering whether she is truly free to pursue her own aspirations. *Difficult Daughters* P-142.

In Lahore, Virmati forms a close bond with Harish, which leads to a sexual relationship and ultimately results in her pregnancy, leaving her consumed by guilt. She travels to Amritsar for an abortion, holding the professor responsible for her predicament and ending their engagement due to this mistake. Virmati, like many women of the 1940s, challenges societal norms by stepping out of the confines of her home, displaying courage when she becomes the headmistress of a girls' school in Nahan, despite Harish's opposition. Her dedication earns her respect and appreciation. This marks the first time she lives according to her own desires, with a space to express herself. However, her marriage to the professor proves to be stressful and stifling, lacking mutual understanding or companionship. Despite her education, Virmati is expected to fulfill her husband's expectations, enduring his lengthy lectures to silence her. Kapur portrays Virmati's struggle for autonomy, as she breaks free from one oppressive relationship only to find herself trapped in another. While the marriage offers a temporary reprieve from loneliness, it ultimately confines her to another form of imprisonment, offering only fleeting moments of closeness behind closed doors.

## **II. Review of Literature**

Exploring women's struggles for identity and autonomy in Indian society is an important theme in contemporary feminist literature. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a pivotal work that addresses these themes, depicting the conflict between traditional societal expectations and the pursuit of personal freedom. Kapur's novel portrays education as a double-edged sword for women. While it is a tool of empowerment, it also becomes a source of conflict within traditional family and societal structures. Vera Alexander (2006)<sup>1</sup> discusses how education in Indian novels often presents a dichotomy in which educated women are seen either as threats to societal norms or as individuals who must adapt to traditional roles despite their educational achievements. This perspective resonates with Virmati's experiences in *Difficult Daughters*, who finds her training both liberating and stressful, as it heightens her awareness of her subjugation and fuels her desire for independence. The novel's depiction of patriarchal control resonates with various critical responses to feminist literature. Sanjay Kumar (2006)<sup>4</sup> states that characters like Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* embody women's struggle against the deeply rooted patriarchal values of the 1950s. These values are perpetuated by family members and societal expectations that prioritize marriage and subservience over personal aspirations and freedom. This patriarchal oppression is a recurring theme in Indian feminist fiction, as it illustrates the systemic barriers that women face. Marriage is another central theme in *Difficult Daughters*, where it is depicted as an institution that often confines women rather than offering companionship or fulfillment. Simmi Gurwara (2009)<sup>3</sup> interrogates marital relationships in Indian literature, highlighting how marriage is frequently portrayed as a site of struggle for women. In Virmati's case, her marriage to the professor, Harish, is marked by emotional and intellectual suppression, reflecting the broader societal expectation for women to subordinate their desires to their husband's authority.

The quest for identity and self-expression is a significant aspect of Virmati's journey. Vikram Chandra (1998)<sup>2</sup> describes *Difficult Daughters* as a narrative that delves deeply into the conflicts between parents and children, particularly focusing on women's desires for love, independence, and self-fulfillment. Virmati's relationship with her cousin Shakuntala and her involvement in educational and political activities symbolize her struggle to carve out an independent identity amidst societal constraints. Critical responses to Kapur's work often emphasize the feminist aspects of her storytelling. Bhagabat Nayak (2007)<sup>6</sup> and Malti Mathur (2006)<sup>5</sup> both analyze Kapur's portrayal of women's assertion and resistance against patriarchal norms. They argue that *Difficult Daughters* not only highlights the personal struggles of its protagonist but also serves as a critique of the broader societal context that limits women's potential and freedom.

According to Kumar (2008)<sup>7</sup>, Manju Kapur's exposure of a woman's yearning for love and lesbianism is an old-fashioned and irreconcilable irritant. With a desire to transform Indian sensibility, she recounts the anguish experienced by female protagonists, from which they suffer and die for their support of Trump. She is horrified by the rise in fundamentalism and the claims made by religious fanatics seeking to elevate and raise their country

through a Crusade, and she incites panic by portraying evil as a historical necessity. Varma.et.al.(2007)<sup>8</sup> In contrast to Hemant, who just fulfilled his wife's social requirements, Astha saw marriage as a commitment to participation in all activities and discussing all matters with her spouse. According to Gajendra Kumar (2001)<sup>9</sup>, the lecturer does not understand the social fact or the severity of Vimati's emotions. Ida's 'I' also functions as Kapur's alter-ego. Bruschi (2010)<sup>10</sup> realizes Vimati has been like her, a difficult daughter. Prema and Shanthi (2016)<sup>11</sup> discuss the challenges faced by the protagonists of the novels for their non-identity. In Bhat.et.al. (2016)<sup>13</sup> women fight for their operation and separation in society in difficult daughters. she explores how women are fighting for their own respect and identity. Her novels are related to issues of middle and upper class women. The protagonists are well educated but bonded by the norms of society due to which their family becomes intolerable for them and efforts for source of Identity without any fault. Ajay Kumar (2017)<sup>12</sup> examines the various stages of women's lives, including those before and after marriage. In Sasikala.A.(2018)<sup>14</sup>, Manju Kapur is mainly concerned about the independence of women. She won a prize for the novel "Difficult Daughters" in 1999 novel "Married Woman" is about love and lesbianism, women are portrayed as educated, job oriented. Here protagonists are bonded within the conservative norms of society. Women are always back staged as they never have four fronts. Sri Gayathri. A. R. (2019)<sup>18</sup> also explores the loss of identity in Manju Kapur's "Difficult Daughters". It details the issues of ladies in Amritsar's upper-class Punjabi family In her story, the author gives a fresh perspective on Indian women. The author tells the tale of Vimati, a young Amritsar woman. She is a middle-class educated female who speaks out about her anti-male culture and seeks to find her identity in day-to-day life. She struggles to balance her responsibilities to her family, her ambition for school, and her clandestine love in the novel. The head and the heart, the physical and the moral, are in conflict withVimati, but Vimati cedes to her heart and body. Ida, Vimati's daughter and a part of the generation born after independence, is tenacious and sensible. As a result, her husband refused to give her a child, she dissolves their marriage. She possesses the power that Vimati does not. Manju Kapur expresses the feminine life cycle through these three female characters.

Ujhala Devi (2020)<sup>15</sup>, focused on exploring the psyche of Vimati in "Difficult Daughters" between the feelings of Desire and duty towards family. There is an internal and external conflict which keeps Vimati away from the world and people. Kanchan. D. (2020)<sup>16</sup> discussed Tradition and Modernity in Manju Kapur's "Difficult Daughters" by different characters. Her novels represent the life of women who constantly strive for their fundamental rights to education, search for identity, and survival. Manju Kapur demonstrates the tension between tradition and modernity.

### **III. Material And Methods**

**Statement of the Problem:** This study examines the challenges confronted by women in Indian society as presented in Manju Kapur's novel Difficult Daughters. The novel highlights the systemic oppression and identity crisis women experience as they struggle to gain self-respect and autonomy amid societal pressures. The protagonist's journey represents the larger struggles women face in a patriarchal society that limits their aspirations and dictates their roles before and after.

**Significance of the Study:** This study is significant as it highlights the ongoing struggle for women's rights and autonomy within a patriarchal framework. Exploring the issues of difficult daughters, the study highlights the central role of women's education and empowerment, revealing the limitations imposed by social norms. The results provide important insights into the historical and cultural context of women's issues in India, contributing to the wider debate on gender equality and social justice

**Methodology:** The research uses a literary analytical approach that focuses on a close reading of Difficult Daughters to examine its portrayal of women's struggles for identity and freedom. The analysis examines character development, narrative structure, and thematic elements to understand how the novel reflects and critiques societal norms. Secondary sources, including critical essays and scholarly articles, support the interpretation and provide a thorough understanding of the text.

### **IV.Results**

The analysis shows that the protagonist Vimati's development from oppression to self-awareness and autonomy reflects the wider struggle of women in Indian society. Despite her education, Vimati faces many obstacles in becoming independent. The novel contrasts women in traditional roles and challenges society's expectations. It also represents the limited support women receive from their families and the constant pressure to prioritize marriage over personal fulfillment.

### **V. Discussion**

The dialogue emphasizes the twin struggles of both the protagonist and the nation for independence. Although India's freedom movement brings significant changes, the social norms that oppress women remain largely unchanged. The novel highlights the paradox of education as both an empowering force and a source of conflict for women. Vimati's journey from innocence to self-awareness shows the potential for change, but also

the constant challenges posed by patriarchal structures. The study recommends re-evaluation of social values and support for empowerment and empowerment of women

## VI. Conclusion

It is evident that both before and after marriage, Virmati faces significant challenges in asserting her identity in society, despite her education. Her story highlights the ongoing struggle of women in Indian society, where they are afforded limited space for self-expression. Virmati's rebellion ultimately leads her from one form of oppression to another. However, towards the end, she manages to break free from the restrictive rules and regulations imposed by her husband, gaining a sense of liberation.

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