

## A Saga of Self' in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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### **Abstract:**

Recent trends in the writings of Indian women authors demonstrate their enormous leaps from the local to the global level. This article depicts not just the struggle and suffering of Indian women in the existing societal context but also those conditions that were manufactured to expand the feminist spectrum. For ages, the patriarchal world has marginalized women. Even in literature, art, and scripture, women have been depicted as humble, and anyone who deviates from these customary norms is considered sinful and immoral. Is this because men created the laws? The times have changed, and female protagonists are no longer suited to home scenes with subdued voices. The story of a nation's separation is recounted in Manju Kapur's debut novel, *'Difficult Daughters,'* which also preserves a symbiotic relationship and promotes the progression of women. The search is not limited to the one we desire and achieve; it also includes the woman's desire for independence.

**Key Words:** Indian writing in English, women writing, Indian feminism, self-disintegration, the saga of partition, identity crisis.

Feminism, like many other contemporary 'isms,' is characterized by an abundance of complex interpretations. Different schools of thought have, in some way, affected feminist beliefs. Various feminist theorists advocated for women's equality in accordance with their diverse psychosexual demands and natures. Others have rejected this reasoning based on hierarchical human interactions. It is significant to emphasize that feminist philosophy does not favor one feminist school of thought over another. In doing so, it reveals both its disapproval of patriarchal hierarchization and its willingness to acknowledge the numerous strategies feminists employ to oppose patriarchy (Abraham 1998: 13). Different feminist perspectives are denoted by names such as liberal, radical, French, American, and British feminism. Feminism is not restricted to a standard

female experience; instead, it results from numerous movements with political aims that challenge and modify women's assigned roles.

The novel *'Difficult Daughters'* by Manju Kapur is mainly set in 1940s India. The work discusses the concept of independence, which has not only been desired and achieved by a nation but also desired by a lady of the same nation. The novel's key themes are the search for identity and the desire to control one's destiny. The book presents several stages of women's growth in a sociohistorical context, manifesting an Indo-centric feminist viewpoint. Due to cultural customs and historical context, the concept of feminism does not accept a consistent system of thought in the Indian context. "They do not propagate their ideas of change through gender hostility, but rather through social rearrangements that cut across class and gender lines" because "the Indo-centric methodology cannot employ the western feminist premise of binary male-female gender hostility." (Lal 1995: 28).

*Difficult Daughters* portrays Indian feminism in terms of the significant feminist viewpoint on the presence of women in traditional Indian society. We discover that enticing Western ideas have a more substantial effect on attracting and alluring Indian women. The protagonist is Virmati, the eldest daughter of Kasturi and Suraj Prakash of the Lala Diwan family, who is seduced by Shakuntala's manner of life. Her mother has been sidelined, and Virmani protests against a society that restricts a woman's options to being a wife and nothing more. Virmani's mother, Kasturi, raised her according to the norms of patriarchal culture and taught her that marriage was the ultimate goal of a woman's life and that she must work tirelessly to please her husband's family. "During Kasturi's formal schooling, it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued at home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness through the impeccable nature of her daughter's qualifications. She was going to please her in-laws". (Kapur, 58)

The awareness of other avenues comes to Virmati when,

She watched her (Shakuntala) ride horses, smoke, play cards, and badminton, act without her mother's advice, and buy anything she wanted .... above all; she never seemed to question or doubt herself in anything (p.15).

Virmani remarked on her parental expectations, "They want nothing from me but an agreement to marry." (Kapur, 100)

This was not what she desired, so she began searching for alternative avenues for her existence. Fortunately, Virmati's father was more open-minded and had a larger perspective. Her sister was married off to the groom after she refused to accept the family-selected suitor. Virmani believes education is an escape from her family's criticisms and liberation from her mother's tyranny. The "*Difficult Daughters*," Virmati and Shakuntala, depict the developing awareness of the Indian lady of the 1940s. Virmani was not serious about obtaining an education and used it to escape the difficulties of her illegal connection with Professor Harish, who was already married. Shakuntala, on the other hand, cared about her professional independence for her benefit. When Virmati informed her mother that she wished to continue her study in Lahore, Kasturi reprimanded her daughter.

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"When I was your age, girls only left their house when they married.." (Kapur, 111).

Kasturi believed Virmati was delivered to her as a form of retribution. Virmani was characterized as unusual and unsuitable for a woman's success. Thus she was urged to settle down with a family like other girls her age. Though Virmati had not wholly rejected this issue, she refused to embrace the conventional Indian way of life for women, as shown by her mother, who is relegated to the status of a child-producing machine.

For the eleventh time, it had started, the heaviness in her belly. Morning and evening nausea, bile in her throat while eating, hair falling out in clumps, and giddiness when she got up suddenly (p.7).

Kasturi found comfort only in prayer, "She turned to God, so beautiful with his gifts, and prayed ferociously for the miracle of a miscarriage" (p.7).

Despite all this, Virmati's mother still believes that every girl must get married. We can see the sociohistorical background against which Kasturi's experiences portray the woman's life in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century India before Independence. The two different phenomena – the historical and the cultural – are juxtaposed significantly, bringing forth the depiction of the decolonization of India along with the portrayal of the gradual growth of an emotional state of women's existence, "Decolonization as a metaphor acquires multiple dimensions in postcolonial and postmodernist writings. It is backed by the instinctive need to liberate the self from all traditional structures" (James 1998: 104).

Now, Virmati begins to think differently and craves meaningful and autonomous selfhood. She defied her mother's expectations by leaving for Lahore. But this trip to Lahore was an attempt to forget the Professor, who never acknowledged their relationship. Shakuntala's description of her life in Lahore indicated that she viewed it as liberating. Shakuntala was the only member of her family who had access to a life beyond the ordinary domestic atmosphere, thus she desired to explore the world beyond it.

"We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings, follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars."

Shakuntala's words enthralled and inspired Virmati, who exclaimed, "I want to be like you, Behnji.....".

The novel opens with the narrator, Virmati's daughter, Ida's frank declaration of her curiosity about her mother. She is a childless divorcee who undertakes a journey to know her mother's history, "the one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother." (Kapur 1). The name Ida implies a new state of consciousness, a fresh beginning. (Prasad 163)

We encounter Ida's realization that she is different from her mother, as well as the issue of defiance and the generation difference. It is typical for each succeeding generation to challenge the authority of the preceding one and battle against its influence. Virmani is also observed opposing Kasturi's ideology, which Ida has not adopted. Even though Virmati embodies the 'New Woman' spirit in India by declaring her uniqueness and craving for knowledge, she fails to demonstrate her mental power in love. She developed feelings for the Oxford-returned Professor, who was already married. Her mother had ongoing pregnancies, and Virmani was burdened with domestic responsibilities and had a profound desire for love and affection from a young age. Professor Harish filled her love void in life, and she inevitably fell in love with him. Harish could not love his illiterate wife and continued his secret affair with Virmani. Despite his education and comprehension, Harish lacked the confidence and ability to assist Virmani. Virmani was also well aware of the futility of the clandestine romance, but she rebuked him with harsh words when she learned of his wife's pregnancy and his simultaneous declaration of love for her. "You can do what you like so long as you say you love."

Even though Virmati went to Lahore to forget Professor Harish, she failed in her aim. She yielded to the Professor's pitiful pleadings and passion during her solitary stay in Lahore. She surrendered without resistance to the temptations of the flesh. She fell pregnant and was left with no alternative but to get an abortion. She knew the Professor would offer her no assistance in her time of need. She first intended to take the move that would save her family's reputation. She quickly realized that she had traveled to Lahore to exacerbate her mental anguish and that she had become hopelessly entangled in a love affair that had brought her nothing but misery. She desired to live a "useful" life like her roommate Swarnalatha, a freedom campaigner, but she could not overcome her innate need for love and emotional reliance. (Malik 135)

Virmani was torn between the desires of her heart and her strong desire to participate in her period's political and intellectual movements. Swarnalatha declared:

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"Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war, the Satyagraha movement because of all these things, women are coming out of their houses—talking jobs fighting...going to jail". ( Kapur 124)

She blamed herself for being selfish, engaged in her world of love and pains when the heat of freedom struggle had swept the entire nation but finally could not get out of her emotional yearning for the Professor.

"She felt out of place, an outcast amongst all these women. She thought of Harish, who loved her. She must be satisfied with that. These larger spaces were not for her. She felt an impostor sitting in the hall. Again, scenes from her private life came unbidden before her eyes". (Kapur 144)

Virmani knew she was doomed from the start but did not have the courage to deny it. Both families disapproved of their romance, but the Professor eventually married her. Virmani's marriage was a complete failure because she had to vie with Ganga for her husband's affection. She was forced to adjust to her husband's family and ultimately died an unremarkable death.

Ida states after the story, "This book builds a connection between my mother and me, each word-brick in a mansion I constructed with my mind and heart." Now, Mama, live in it and leave me alone. Do not continue to haunt me." (G. Kumar 108). She desired to bury the ghosts of her mother's past and move forward with her life.

In the feminist part of Virmati's experience and way of life, femininity has been perceived to adhere to specific criteria. We discover that simultaneously produced cultural background and woman's education are emerging as critical forms of feminist viewpoint. Education is consequently positioned as the most effective way of woman's empowerment. In postcolonial terms, a woman's perspective on gender issues is challenging due to her lack of possessiveness. Because she refuses to embrace the already established social code for women, Virmati encounters new obstacles. It introduces fresh ideas regarding the struggle against rejecting old ascribed norms to seek new freedom from the colonial authority of patriarchal society and its ideals. Her loneliness ultimately led her to find fulfillment in Virmati's marriage to Harish, a man she loved but was already married to. In Education versus Marriage, we also observe the emergence of a substantial motif. Education is initially viewed as a passport to liberty. It made Virmati aware of her submissive lifestyle and gave her the confidence to move to Shantiniketan and live a life of her choosing. Instead of relying

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on Harish, she has faith in her abilities. Harish is married to Ganga, an ignorant woman whose lack of knowledge is a continual source of his sorrow and unhappiness.

This education brings Harish and Virmati closer together and fosters a harmonious relationship. Harish is attracted to Virmati not because she is attractive or young but because she can study and become an ideal companion. Observing Harish's statements, we may comprehend the importance of education in man-woman relationships.

"We have nothing in common. I once wanted to share my interests with my wife but felt her pain at my estrangement from her... Who is responsible for this state of affairs? A society that deems their sons to be educated but not their daughters? (p.95).

Education enables women to realize the nature of their subjugation, marginalization and suppression and is regarded as women's independence. It helps a woman find effective ways to become self-dependent and autonomous.

"Now, the new education has awakened her real self. As a result, she has started thinking of independent and self-reliant life. And to translate this thinking into reality, she has started fighting against her timid self and man's protectoral shell" (Barche 1995: 130).

These women are shown gradually learning that "To accept unquestioningly any fixed representations .... is to condone social systems of power which validate and authorize some images of women and not others" ( Jaidev 1995).

The work contains topics connected to myths. Due to social and theological circumstances, Virmati's marriage to Harish, a man who is already married, challenges God's authority over marriage. Kasturi is seen appealing to God not to become pregnant again. Women such as Kasturi, Virmani, and Ida exemplify women's varying stages of life and experiences in the ever-evolving chapters of Indian social history. However, the subjection and marginalisation of women in the current social order do not appear to be the result of a supremacist mindset on the part of men. This is a crucial insight. It seems to have arisen from the subtle but potent influence of a patriarchal society that assigns distinct responsibilities to men and women. Therefore, the feminist state shown

in *Difficult Daughters* does not promote male hostility. The main issue here is not the aggressive attitude of men but rather a woman's lack of knowledge of her unmet needs and identity. Education empowers her to find a viable place in the existing social framework.

"A gendered, existentialist fight against invisibility and inability, challenging authority, stereotypes, icons, and sexist values" (James 1952 ).

From an Indian feminist perspective, the kind of ambivalence in a woman can be discerned from her household role. A woman's individuality and presence remain hidden and denied in the name of greater family interests, which marginalise and silence her. However, the woman's family and relationships give her support, a sense of belonging, and unity. In this regard, Malashri Lal's statements are noteworthy: "Indian women, despite accepting the intellectual message of individual, gender-based critique from the West, seek to maintain an active connection with family and community ideals in India" (Lal 1995:28).

The film *'Difficult Daughters'* is an honest plea for recognizing women's existence and a redefinition of gender roles in shifting sociocultural contexts. The narrator initially describes Kasturi's sad and pitiful situation. Kasturi's part is to procreate and care for her brood; her only available area is always within the threshold. She believes, "Why is it necessary to work?" A woman's 'Shaan' is in her home" (p.13.). According to her, 'Shaadi' or marriage is the ultimate objective of a woman's life. Kasturi perceives Shakuntala's single lifestyle as strange. She comments,

"I tell her she should have been a man" (p.14).

Even though Indian society in the middle of the 20th century did not permit women to consider life without a male, the fictitious character Virmati demonstrates the impact of reformation movements such as Arya Samaj and Indian Independence through her role. The conclusion of *Ida* presents the notion that a woman can strive to remake herself in the face of familial and social hostility. She may lack the courage to stand alone and be perceived as always needing back support. In this scenario, it is possible that her efforts will result in a lacklustre marriage and eventual accommodation to the actual reality of life.

In *'Difficult Daughters,'* Manju Kapur describes the nature of female desire and sheds insight on the disintegration of traditional social gender standards. She emphasizes the protagonist's battle for self-identity and autonomy. The tale primarily takes place in pre-partition

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Punjab. Through Virmati, Manju Kapur highlights the story of a young woman who defies the colonization of her 'Self' by resisting patriarchy. The young generation, inspired by the independence movement, also demands individual freedom. Nationalist movements and feminist education ideals created the way for independent thought. Virmani's sincere interest in education is the initial step in her resistance. Kasturi's rejection of this type of schooling fuels her desire and determination to obtain it, and she battles to the bitter end. Her cousin Shakuntala inspires her and plants "the seeds of aspiration in Viramati" (17), and as a result, she develops a covert desire to drink the "wine of freedom" like Shakuntala.

With her steadfastness, Virmani's daughter, Ida, represents a modern woman's natural face. She did not give importance to her mother's decision to abort the fetus and terminate the life growing within her. She had broken her relationship with her husband Prabhakar as he had forced her to abort the fetus. "I knew, Mother, what it was like to have an abortion. Prabhakar had insisted I have one. In denying that incipient little thing in my belly, he sowed the seeds of our break up". (Kapur, p156)

Ida had never shared this secret with her mother. She confessed,

Mother, I never told you this because you thought Prabhakar was excellent, and I was glad I had pleased you with my husband's choice. Why should I burden you with my heartaches when you've had enough of your own? (Kapur 156-157)

Ida knew well that her mother liked Prabhakar, but as Virmati never came to stay with her daughter, she was not aware of the fundamental dynamics of their relationship. Ida says,

He was what you respected, a successful academic, a writer of books, a connoisseur of culture, and a disseminator of knowledge. Like my father...My father was on a pedestal so high that to breathe that rarified atmosphere was an honor. (Kapur, p156-157)

Ida firmly resolved to abandon the past and embrace the future. She did not wish to make the same concessions as her mother. Shakuntala, Swarnalatha, and Ida are modern women who are introspective, educated, and independent. Manju Kapur reveals glimpses of Indian women in the 1940s who were eager to assert their independence and develop a

separate identity. Virmani's participation demonstrates India's victory against the imperial rulers. India achieved independence from colonial domination at the expense of fragmentation and communal enmity. Virmani is likewise depicted as emerging victorious after breaking the traditional shackles of patriarchal society, but only after enduring a great deal of mental torment and hardship. One can argue that "Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*' is a feminist discourse not because she is a woman writing about women's difficulties, but because she attempts to grasp the situation of a woman both as a woman and as a human being, under pressure from both apparent and unseen settings." (Jaidev p68).

Consequently, *Difficult Daughters*' is simultaneously Indian and universal. "The work perfectly depicts how families reflect all of society, including social mores, cultural trends, gender relations, and socioeconomic dynamics," adds Manju. Her remarks elevate our spirits. "I think it doesn't matter how you define me as long as I am relevant and as long as I am read."

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