

## **QUEST FOR SELF IN MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS***

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### **ABSTRACT**

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* deals with the yearning struggle of women to establish an identity. It is about a woman who is shredded by conflictual forces and torn apart by oppositional structures in life. The protagonist is caught between the dilemma of family duty and personal desires. Yet she gives preference to the latter and amidst extensive physical and emotional turmoil, exercises her choice which creates further emotional rift between herself and others. The paper explores how 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 and how the protagonist of the novel is in pursuit for autonomy and selfhood. Moreover, the paper discusses India's history of freedom and the protagonist's struggle for freedom and identity.

**Key Words:** Identity, Quest, Autonomy, Selfhood and Freedom

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### **INTRODUCTION**

In this novel Kapur deals with the lives of women, who attempt to create an identity for themselves during the period when India was politically unstable and undergoing a major historical catastrophe, the partition of 1947. The story is of three generations—Kasturi the mother of Virmati, Virmati who is the main protagonist, and Ida, the daughter of 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. 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 child of the ever pregnant Kasturi, Virmati has to look after ten younger siblings where her life is smeared under the pressure of family responsibilities. 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. Virmati doesn't like the idea of marriage and childbearing immediately after her high school study. She does not listen to her mother who persuades her to get married. 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 space, identity and freedom. However at seventeen she is engaged to Inderjeet, an irrigation engineer. Virmati falls in love with the romantic Harish Chandra who lives as a tenant in her aunt's home with his wife and children. He is a married Professor 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. It actually starts with the exchange of food materials.

Gradually, Virmati gets herself tangled in the web of Harish's love. His constant pleading of 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. 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. She never addresses him directly, and closes her letter with the alphabet —V. The professor uses the words —precious love, Viru, love, Viru sweet heart, Vir

darling, to address her and closes the letter with —H.

Virmati undergoes the agony and humiliation of failed love with a married man and after an unsuccessful suicide attempt, wants to change herself. 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. She doesn't yield to the age old traditions of Arya-Samaj family. 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 and says, God has put you on earth to punish me. (102) Kasturi accompanies Virmati to Lahore and puts her in a hostel. Virmati's refusal to marry Inderjeet, she is engaged to, reveals her rebellious nature.

Virmati is a young docile girl but Harish is matured, married and free to follow his whims as he is the lord in the patriarchal society. She falls in love with him and to give legitimacy to her love, she strives for marriage with him inspite of her family's opposition and, in the process, becomes "... the black sheep of the family". While love brings happiness for him, it robs Virmati of even the little peace of mind that she earlier has. While the woman faces ignominy and life stigmatised, the man pretends as if nothing has changed. 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.

By introducing Virmati to the canons of English Literature, the great western civilisations, and the nuances of cultured living, Harish succeeds in providing her a false feeling of woman's emancipation. She does not retaliate, nor does she feel resentment but follows his orders little realising his selfishness. 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 Virmati does not leave the safety of her home, he would not be free to prey on her. Lahore is to serve more as their rendezvous than a seat of learning. He continued his clandestine love affairs with her, going to Lahore very often. Virmati, who is first attracted to Harish, for his love of freedom and individuality, willingly loses her identity. To liberate herself from family pressures, she believes that education is the only means but falls prey to

Harish's snare. She realises how vulnerable her position is and pressurises him to marry her so that there will be some respectability to their relationship. She holds him responsible for all that has happened to her – breaking of her engagement, blackening of her family's name, being locked up inside her house and sent later to Lahore etc. 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 news of Ganga's pregnancy makes Virmati to think of starting her studies again. She does not want "... to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed".

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. However, at each point in her life, whenever she encounters freedom, Harish's presence in her life impedes her decisions she make. 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. She becomes critical of herself and wants to curb her longing for enhanced intimacy with him. She desires to realise her strength and regain her self respect through education and profound competence. In spite of her frequent requests, Harish is reluctant to marry her. He seems just another chauvinist steeped in patriarchal traditions. He is a hypocrite who, at his own convenience, has moulded his opinions about social traditions and sexually exploits Virmati. Luckily for Virmati, she is offered Principalship 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. Virmati is

unwelcomed by his family as expected. 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 the first wife, Ganga, her children, her mother-in-law and ostracized by her own family. Ganga, as the first wife, exercises her full right on everything. Her each and every movement is restricted by both Ganga and Kishori Devi, her mother-in-law. She finds herself as a pariah in the family and wondered drearily —... whether this isolation would continue till the end of her life. Ganga, the first 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. 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. After Harish's marriage with Virmati, Ganga protests at first, but her protest is weakened after few days. 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 serves him as a chattel, while Virmati, the second wife serves as a vassal for his sexual gratification and intellectual stimulation.

Now 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. 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. Lack of love and humiliation

from the family makes Virmati steadfast to uphold her right to self-assertion through education at Lahore and through economic independence by becoming a teacher in a school at Nahan. However in her pursuit of identity, she loses it at every stage and struggles to make space for herself on her own. Even as a child, Virmati never likes to be like Kasturi, her mother who is only a home maker. Kasturi, on the other hand, wants to groom Virmati to be one like her. 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 is 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. In the same way, Virmati is well aware that Kasturi sees to that, —She was to be supervised like a jailbird on parole. Marriage was acceptable to her family, but not independence.(106) Kasturi is so traditional and conservative in her outlook that she does not approve the dress of Shakuntala, daughter of Lajwanti and glamorous cousin of Virmati. 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 behaviour 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. She becomes a role model for Virmati and gradually Virmati tends to think of a life without marriage, husband and children. 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. In this novel the mother- daughter relationship marches from identification to alienation. Like Virmati, Maya of Anita Rao Badami’s *The Hero’s Walk*, defies tradition and marries for love. Maya wins a scholarship to study at a Canadian University and before she leaves, she is engaged to a young Brahmin. But Maya breaks her engagement to marry Alan Baker with whom she has fallen in love in Canada. She is banished and humiliated from her parental home like Virmati. But she lives a happy life with her Canadian husband till her death in a car accident. Both the protagonists rebel against their parents and the society and are successful in their struggle against the oppressive mechanism of a closed society.

When Swarnalata shares her ideas about the congress and Muslim League coalition and how she thought that they must together fight a common enemy, the British, Virmati thinks, —This is the life I should be involved in. Not useless love and a doubtful marriage. Virmati's mind is caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. Virmati, along with Swarnalata, attends the Punjab women students' conference. Here she sees and hears women who exude confidence and strength. Swarnalata tries to make Virmati realize how she is wasting her life on a love which cannot be trusted. Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war – the Satyagraha movement - because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from their stale dream. Virmati's fertility is metaphorically connected with the on going 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 but she is censured and ordered by her husband to be part of the contemporary society, its culture and rituals. Virmati seems to have a gnawing feeling that she is not given the importance she deserves. She tells Ida that she is not to be mourned in any way when she dies. She further tells Ida, “When I die ... I want my body donated. My eyes, my heart, my kidneys, any organ that can be of use. That way someone will value me

after I have gone”. 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. This novel captures the complex relationship between mothers and daughters over a period of three generations.

Initially, Ida, belonging to the same sex, identifies herself with Virmati. Then 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.

A better realization of her relationship with her mother descends on Saru when she tries to accept the elements she hitherto neglects and detests because they, in one way or the other, belong to her mother. Like Ida, Saru too hates her mother and does not want to be like her. When Saru, like Ida, puts her feet into her mother's shoes, then she realizes what it is to be a mother in the patriarchal society. Virmati is fed up with the traditions and norms of the society. She 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. It is a matter of concern that her marriage with Harish turns out to be disastrous. 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.

The self-willed Ida marries Prabhakar, a fellow of academic pursuit to settle certain contradictions of her personal life. 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". Ida refuses to submit to the dictates of the male dominant society and believes in the personal freedom. She is not willing to follow the traditions and customs of the society. She hates her voice to be suppressed and believes in the personal freedom. She always tries to reach that goal which her mother aimed in her life. Virmati, in 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 fulfilment 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. There are other women, like Shakuntala, Swarnalata and her own daughter, Ida, who demand equal opportunities and go beyond



convention and they ... succeed better than she did in their parallel struggles for independence in their lives. The time Virmati spends as a headmistress of a girls' school in Nahan is the most happiest and satisfying period in her life. She is a competent teacher and her performance gets her a deserved respect. There she has no family to look after and no responsibilities to fulfil. She has a house of her own and lives independently. Thus in Virmati, an incipient new woman is seen who is aware, introspective, and educated. A desire to strike independent roots and grow is also seen. To some extent she becomes successful in defying social conventions. Yet she lacks confidence, self-control and farsightedness which stop her in reaching her goal. More than these her need to be emotionally and intellectually dependent on Harish wrecks her.

## **CONCLUSION**

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 honour, to marry a man of their choice, now does not move her fingers without the prior permission of Harish. 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. That Virmati could also want to do certain things and abstain from doing certain things becomes a matter of no importance to her. All that she cares for in the world is to be worthy of him. The dreams of emancipation that Virmati has dreamt and fought for still elude her. At the end of her journey she finds that she is still dumb and mute and she is still expected to follow and never to lead. All her efforts in that direction become awry, simply an exercise in futility.

On the very first day of her marriage does she realise: She would walk tight lipped, mute on the path her destiny had carved out for her. Even her education becomes a matter of Harish's convenience. When he wants her by his side she does not think of education but when Harish thinks that she must pursue studies further, she does it without raising her voice. Unknowingly she has become a puppet in his hands. On the contrary, Charumati reveals great admiration and respect for Virmati when she draws our attention to the fact that more than the

outcome, it is the attempt that is to be given value for. Virmati's fight against her mother symbolises the oppressive forces of patriarchy. Defying patriarchal norms that enforce a woman towards domesticity, Virmati asserts her individuality and desires to achieve self-reliance through education. Thus she can be called a rebel who is bold, determined and action oriented. However, when she falls in love with Harish, she has actually exchanged one kind of slavery for another. But towards the end she becomes free, free even from the oppressive love of her husband. However, Virmati, finally, realizes that a woman should be aware, self-controlled, strong willed, self reliant and rational. She should have faith in her innate strength. And once she succeeds in doing that, she gets her husband all by herself, her child and the reconciliation with her family. Though providence plays a part in it, symbolically it makes her true emancipation. Indian women have realised their potential and achieved a lot in half a century of independence. But if there is to be a true female independence also, much remains to be done.

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