

**A ROOM OF HER OWN: NEGOTIATING SPACE, IDENTITY AND AUTONOMY  
IN MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS***

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***Abstract***

*This paper examines the multifaceted challenges of feminism and the intricate pursuit of self-identity as depicted in Manju Kapur's seminal novel, *Difficult Daughters*. In the broader landscape of literature, feminism has emerged as a crucial lens for critically examining the intersectional nature of gender dynamics and the pervasive patriarchal power structures embedded in society. Indian English literature, in particular, has witnessed a significant rise of feminist writers whose works have profoundly shaped literary discourse and enhanced our understanding of the intricate relationship between society and gender performativity. Manju Kapur stands out for her compelling portrayal of female protagonists, consistently reflecting clear feminist viewpoints throughout her oeuvre. Her characters, particularly Virmati, frequently endure profound physical and mental anguish as they navigate societal expectations and personal aspirations across pre- and post-independence India. This study analyses Kapur's nuanced perspective on women, men, and society, illuminating the specific struggles faced by women seeking autonomy within restrictive traditional frameworks. By focusing on *Difficult Daughters*, this paper highlights the intergenerational complexities of women's experiences and Kapur's enduring contribution to the discourse on women's liberation in Indian English literature.*

**Keywords:** Feminism, self-identity, gender dynamics, patriarchal power, Indian English literature, women's liberation.

In the vast realm of literature, feminism has emerged as a crucial lens through which to examine the intricate interplay of gender dynamics and patriarchal power relations within

society. Indian English literature, in particular, has witnessed a significant rise in feminist writers whose works have profoundly impacted literary reception and our understanding of the complex relationship between society and gender performativity. Modern English novelist Manju Kapur stands out for her compelling female protagonists, and her writings consistently reflect strong feminist viewpoints. Her characters frequently endure both physical and mental anguish throughout their narratives. This paper will delve into Manju Kapur's portrayal of females, males, and society, both pre- and post-independence, with a specific focus on investigating the challenges of feminism within her novel, *Difficult Daughters*.

The term "feminism" originates from the Latin word "femina," meaning "women." It advocates for gender equality across the general population, promoting women's rights and status in society. This term gained prominence at the beginning of the 20th century, propelled by a socio-political movement advocating for women's rights. The core purpose of feminism is to identify and address gender-based issues within political discourse, ultimately strengthening societal stability. The ideology posits that all individuals, irrespective of gender, should be afforded equal rights and treatment within society, specifically aiming for women's equality in political, economic, and social spheres.

Indian women authors have keenly felt the significance of this term. As Meena Shirwadkar asserts in her article "Image of Woman in the Indo-Anglian Novel," Indian society's transformations have led to a progression in novelistic depictions of female characters. They have moved from being mere symbols of suffering and feminine virtue to embodying more complex and genuine personas. Shirwadkar notes, "Tradition, transition, and modernity are the stages through which the woman in Indo-Anglian novel is passing" (Shirwadkar, n.d.). The archetype of the traditional woman, like Sita Savitri, was readily accessible and widely accepted. In a tradition-bound India, women were largely expected to exist for the benefit of "others," who governed and shaped the social framework. As Bakyalakshmi (2019) observes, the concept of self-sacrifice was readily adopted by women in both their daily lives and work. Fiction, however, provides a powerful medium for women to express their ideas and experiences from a female perspective. Contemporary English literature by women increasingly portrays women's endeavours to discover their true selves. The post-independence era has witnessed a dramatic shift in women's roles. Literature now demonstrates that women are no longer resigned to a passive or quiet position; instead, they are actively pushing for their rights and asserting their unique identities. Indian authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, and Shashi Deshpande reflect the struggle of modern Indian women to express their identities, imbuing their female characters with sufficient power to pursue their independent selves. This study aims to determine the position of women in society as depicted in *Difficult Daughters*. The term "women's liberation" encapsulates a

significant informality toward women, their lives, and cultures, coupled with a strong devotion to women's issues and enthusiasm. As Naseer (2022) highlights, the historical enslavement of women and their lifelong suffering have made this a primary societal concern. Janet Richards (2012) further emphasizes this point, arguing that "The essence of Feminism presents a compelling argument that there are significant reasons for the assertion that women suffer systematic social injustice due to their gender, which should be regarded as the foundation of women's rights."

### **Manju Kapur's Feminist Lens in *Difficult Daughters***

Manju Kapur, the chosen author for this study, is a renowned novelist celebrated for the feminist issues she explores in her writings. *Difficult Daughters*, published in 1998, stands as her debut literary work and is a quintessential embodiment of feminist themes. Kapur's decision to resign from her position as an English professor at Miranda House, Delhi University, was driven by her passion for writing, leading her to gain notoriety in Indian English literature. Her feminist themes have garnered significant attention, as she offers a clear and concise portrayal of the realities faced by women in India. Her narratives feature a range of female characters, each fulfilling a pivotal role that exemplifies the mentality and condition of women during their respective time periods. Women in literature actively endeavour to reimagine traditional standards of culture and values to carve out a unique space for themselves, with their characters adopting critical and analytical attitudes that delve into the questioning of their identity.

Through her literary output, Manju Kapur demonstrates a profound understanding of societal hypocrisy. She vividly portrays a civilization steeped in tradition, characterized by its rich array of hues, a merger of cultures, traditions, and customs. Kapur spares no effort in rendering it authentic through its age-old views and the emerging new shapes and formations. Her critique is not only accurate but also grounded in reality, unconcerned with outcomes or positive feedback.

The central image conveyed in her work is that of a woman grappling with the struggle to find her own identity amidst competing pressures, especially from her family. Her work not only illuminates the dynamics of relationships between men and women but also sheds light on the intricacies of mother-daughter relationships, as well as relationships among women. Her narratives transcend mere depictions of women's difficulties or the representation of male dominance causing misery. The female protagonist must navigate a myriad of obstacles to discover her individual self. *Difficult Daughters* spans three generations living in the same house. As Sudha Shree (n.d.) notes, "Manju Kapur addresses the theme of struggles and **self-identity** in relation to socio-cultural identity in *Difficult Daughter*" (Shree 165). Despite the

novel's setting during the Partition, Kapur ultimately decided on the title *Difficult Daughters* at the publisher's suggestion, a title that resonates deeply with its feminist undertones.

### **The Intergenerational Struggle for Self-Identity: Virmati, Kasturi, and Ida**

The narrative of *Difficult Daughters* unfolds through the perspective of **Ida**, Virmati's daughter. Ida, despite her mother's passing, is keen to understand her mother's life, and Virmati's life choices significantly impact her daughter. Through this story, Virmati's profound desire for independence and freedom from responsibility is brought to life. She yearned for her own way of life, a personal space where she could perceive herself as more than merely a daughter or an older sister. Her aspirations, while simultaneously satisfying her intellectual curiosity from a different viewpoint, set her apart from the rest of her family. This pursuit of personal fulfilment often led her into miserable situations. Virmati's ambition to pursue higher education was a defining goal. She strongly disbelieved in the concept of arranged marriage, viewing it as a major impediment in her life. Everything that causes her to stray from her path is due to prevailing circumstances. The events that befall her are often seen as expressions of divine will, as she believes this to be her destiny. She yearned to transcend the traditional duties of a wife or daughter, seeking to escape her exhausted family for a more satisfying life. However, her complex connection with the Professor ultimately compels her to accept a fate she had desperately tried to avoid. The narrative extensively investigates the mother-daughter relationship, particularly Ida's desire to forge a distinct path from her mother. She explicitly states, "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she has departed" (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, Part 1, Chapter 1). This poignant declaration highlights the enduring impact of a mother's choices on her daughter's identity and aspirations.

Kasturi, Virmati's mother, provides a stark example of women's lives in a traditional Indian household. At the tender age of ten, she recognized that marriage was an inevitable part of her destiny. While she never placed significant importance on her education, her mother instilled in her that her purpose was to fulfill the expectations of her future spouse's family. This clearly demonstrates that the sole objective for women during that era was to get married. The narrative powerfully illustrates Kasturi's plight as a mother, responsible for ensuring her in-laws' satisfaction and bearing as many children as they desired. This account effectively depicts the predicament of Indian women, highlighting how their primary task was to marry and have a large number of children, reducing them to little more than "reproductive machines." Despite having no option but to marry into a traditional family and have eleven children, Kasturi was unable to challenge this circumstance, as it was completely against her will. The numerous children included Virmati, Indumati, Gunvanti, Hemavati,

Vidyavati, Parvati, Kailashnath, Gopinath, Krishanath, Prakashnath, and Hiranath (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, Part 1, Chapter 1). Her mother-in-law's insistence on continued childbirth, claiming it a "heavenly blessing," further underscores the societal pressure: "Do not speak such nonsense, daughter; God has favored you" (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, Part 1, Chapter 2). Kasturi's attempts to avoid repeated pregnancies are futile. Even though it was imperative that she give birth to ensure her family's happiness, she found herself in a state of extreme weakness, agitation, and worsening health. The narrative also reveals how women, despite their own traumatic experiences, could fail to appreciate and support other women during pregnancy. Her sister-in-law's derogatory comments, "Breeding like cats and dogs, Harvest time again" (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, Part 1, Chapter 2), exemplify the lack of empathy and the societal burden placed on women. Furthermore, the novel depicts how, even after a traumatic birth, a woman is compelled to fulfill her responsibilities regardless of the circumstances. "When Kasturi was finally permitted to rise from bed, she was still experiencing significant haemorrhaging," yet she was required to clean the stains on her bedsheet on her own (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, Part 1, Chapter 2). This instance underscores the relentless demands placed on women, even in their most vulnerable states.

Virmati's life mirrors her mother's in reflecting the prevailing concepts of womanhood and marriage. As the eldest sister, she was burdened with the care of her younger siblings, compelling her to sacrifice her youth, devotion, and personal space. She continuously yearned for a momentary escape, a chance to be alone. Like Kasturi's mother, Virmati's parents desired her swift marriage. Despite her mother's frequent discussions about marriage, she failed to appreciate Virmati's feelings, desires, and goals. Virmati possessed a strong sense of self-respect and held the ambition of not becoming solely a married woman like her mother. Virmati attempts to gain her mother's attention and verbalizes her affection; however, her mother often responds by inquiring about her household responsibilities. "At times, Virmati yearned for affection, for some indication that she was unique. However, when she positioned her head next to the youngest newborn, who was being fed in the mother's embrace, Kasturi would grow irritated and push her away. Virmati's desire for affection was never satisfied. Have you watched their academic endeavors, as well as their nutrition, milk, and clothes purchases?" (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, Part 1, Chapter 2). Despite her significant efforts, she remains unappreciated and ignored. Her mother constantly hoped she would remain actively involved in her siblings' well-being. She served not just as an older sister but also as a maternal figure, constantly supervising them, and her mother's constant murmuring exacerbated her displeasure. Despite her mother's pleas, she steadfastly refuses to discontinue her education. Despite encountering significant opposition, her tenacity ultimately leads to her being granted permission and accepted to college. However, her

family's choice of a suitable suitor makes it necessary for her to enter into a marriage contract.

### **Virmati's Rebellion and the Pursuit of Autonomy**

Despite her staunch opposition to the concept of arranged marriage, Virmati's family had already meticulously planned the specifics. Consequently, she was granted permission to pursue further education, seemingly with little regard for her impending married status. Her mother frequently expressed disapproval of additional schooling, noting that at Virmati's age, she had only left her house upon getting married, not for a degree that was "unquestionably unnecessary." Her mother consistently impressed upon her that women are expected to be submissive and to live with their families, unlike those who leave their homes. This memory of her mother only exacerbates Virmati's annoyance and strengthens her resolve to leave her home and embark on her journey toward happiness. Like her cousin **Shakuntala**, Virmati desires to be independent, assertive, and aggressive. Shakuntala plants the seeds of freedom within Virmati. Virmati perceives her cousin as a contemporary woman who challenges gender stereotypes that confine a daughter to early marriage, leading to domesticity and family duties. By referencing the post-colonially emancipated "New Woman," who rejects the constraints of a tradition-bound culture, Shakuntala encourages Virmati to fight for freedom and gender equality (Joshi, 2023).

Virmati develops romantic feelings for a married professor, a connection her family vehemently opposes. She attempts to take her own life, but is ultimately ashamed of her rash actions to commit suicide. Despite being confined to a room, she continues to write to the professor, expressing her anguish: "Each time I hear the doors shut, I burn with anger and humiliation" (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, Part 2, Chapter 14). Although she eventually moved to Lahore, she continued to be influenced by the Professor. The Professor, though married, was unhappy with his wife, who lacked a formal education, leading him to feel a lack of intellectual compatibility. Despite Virmati and the Professor's mutual fondness, the Professor consistently fails to acknowledge her in social situations, contributing to Virmati's sadness.

Driven by the embarrassment she endured due to her love affair with the professor, Virmati decides to move to Shanti Niketan to create distance between herself and the professor, who had initially declined to marry her. Upon learning this, the professor, recognizing the urgency of the situation and desiring to win her devotion, makes preparations for marriage. Now married, Virmati is finally able to wear the crimson bangles customarily worn by married women. However, this marriage only worsens her current predicament. She is now compelled to live with Ganga, the Professor's first wife, and their children. Regarding her tasks as a

wife, which were previously handled by his first wife, Virmati develops a possessive attachment to them. Her mother-in-law is also displeased, believing Virmati has destroyed Ganga's life. Virmati occasionally experiences similar feelings herself. The expectation that she live in her small dressing room and maintain a safe distance from other household members, despite being married, intensifies her feelings of loneliness. The establishment of her status within that home becomes paramount to her. She feels she has completely lost her own family and that they would not welcome her back. She now understands that she lacks a true home. As Sudha Shree (n.d.) articulates, "In her marital residence, the mother-in-law perceives her as a woman who has deviated, the stepsons refer to her as 'a gandi (bad) mummy,' and the step-wife prohibits her from entering the kitchen or performing household duties for family members." Furthermore, her own mother physically assaults and mistreats her when she attempts to return home to see her sibling (Shree 166). Both her original family and her husband fail to accept her on a personal level. Due to the turbulence in her life, she struggles to maintain her dignity.

### **The Power of Female Solidarity and the Quest for Emancipation**

Through the character of Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur powerfully demonstrates the significant impact of external forces on an individual's life. Her roommate at the hostel, Swarna Lata, profoundly influences her. Virmati holds great admiration for Swarna Lata, who imparts the knowledge that marriage is not essential for a rich and satisfying life. She enlightens Virmati on the importance of the changing times, stating that women are increasingly leaving their homes to pursue emancipation not only for their nation but also for themselves. Swarna Lata strongly encourages Virmati to participate in the Satyagraha movement to advocate for various rights. Virmati's ultimate goal is to free herself from this "pointless existence" once and for all. She pursues more education and consistently demonstrates her intellectual worth.

Within the context of the story, women are often portrayed as objective material, seemingly only having the right to live their lives according to the expectations of others. The narrative not only focuses on the circumstances of a specific state but also encompasses the entire country. Kasturi's situation vividly illustrates the predicament women face in traditional homes, where the majority of their lives are dedicated to matrimony and fulfilling the expectations of others. However, Virmati's desire for autonomy strengthens her uniqueness, distinguishing her from her mother. While Virmati's character initially appears similar to her mother's, burdened with a plethora of duties inherent to being a woman, her choices ultimately diverge. Ida's role serves as a crucial example of the enduring mother-daughter relationship, as she witnesses the pervasive violence perpetrated against women in society

through her mother's story. The persona of Virmati represents Indian women who aspire to improve their lives by relying on the opinions and support of their female relatives and, at times, defying societal expectations. This book serves as a powerful illustration of women's position both before and after the liberation movement. The entirety of the work represents the complex ups and downs that women are forced to navigate in their lives. Despite challenging circumstances, they adapt and endure to ensure the well-being and satisfaction of their family. Shakuntala and Swarnlata emerge as inspiring individuals who prioritize their own self-satisfaction above the concerns of others, embodying a strong sense of empowerment. The constraints women face due to sociocultural conventions, attitudes, and responsibilities often prohibit them from exploring alternative options. *Difficult Daughters* provides a compelling illustration of women's societal position and their varied responses to it.

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