

**Quest for Self- Identity: A Study of ManjuKapur's *Difficult Daughters***

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**Abstract:**

Many contemporary Indian women novelists have been crowned with literary glory by winning international recognition and awards namely Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Jumpha Lahiri, kiran Desai. The primary task of these women writers is to bridge between the traditional forces of Indian patriarchal joint family system and new demands of modern society. They further seek to discover societal and cultural norms from a woman's viewpoint. A woman in the post- independence era was aware of the discrimination she had to face in a male- dominated society. Consequent to access to higher education, now women have started questioning the traditional norms of society.

**Keywords:** Tradition, modernity, self-identity, marginalized, gender discrimination.

**Introduction**

In contemporary era, she is keen for the full expression of her emotional and moral self, a person in her own right enjoying the same status as man has always enjoyed. So, she indulges herself in search of her real self- image. The image of the 'New Woman' and her pursuit for identity, her inclination to realize personality and to achieve self-definition through life, progress and experience is portrayed convincingly by the Indian women writers of the nineties.

Manju Kapur through her novels explores the difficulties of reconciling the expectations of family and her own aspirations. The clash between conventional and modern is prevalent in her entire fictional world. All her protagonists are considered as 'second sex' and also are marginalized because of demand of the joint family system of which they are part and parcel. They fight to make themselves able to take decisions of their own lives.. Due to this, they face difficulties and are unable to cope up with the obstacles and live life comfortably. In their battle for self-identity versus family prestige, her women, sometimes in this course of action ignore the family. B R Agrawal writes that "The novelist seems to be

questioning the traditional systems of child marriage, gender discrimination, women's education and other outmoded value systems which lie at the root of modern malaise. Hence, there is a need to modify and not to change them" (Agarwal 246).

Manju Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) received the commonwealth Award for the Eurasian region. The setting of the book is during India's independence struggle and to some extent, the book is based on the life of Manju Kapur's mother. Her novel is just like the mirror that reflect the scenario of the society and people of that time. The novel reveals the truth that Indian women are trying to break the chains of male hegemony and they are working hard to find their own identities. The story is based on three generations of women-

Kasturi, Virmati and Ida and unveils their sense of disillusionment. Some of them kneel down to the demands of a patriarchal society while some succeed in questioning them and creating a sort of freedom for themselves, though they have been labelled as difficult daughters. The novel is primarily the story of Virmati torn between family duty, the desire for education and illicit love. Her struggle to create a space for herself brings a lot of pain to her and others. It was difficult in those days for girls to aspire for higher studies. Finally, Virmati does succeed in getting higher education but is entrapped by her love for Professor for whom she is an object of desire. The paper is an attempt to explore how Virmati's journey of realization and freedom scrambles into incoherence and increases her misery of life and shuts all the doors of happiness. All her romantic illusions of equality which ultimately force her to lead the role of a second wife in a man- made society.

The novel deals with the story of three generation of daughters. These female characters Kasturi, Virmati and Ida - each one a difficult one for its generation. In their relationships, all the daughters either encounter difficulties from others or create difficulties to others. Each daughter tries to write her own story in her own way and points to the larger issues of women's oppression that even education and financial independence are not able to make them achievers in life. Kasturi, the mother represents the era before independence and is shown as a victim of male dominated society. She is being shown as an embodiment of motherhood who bears pain and suffering. Through the story of these three female characters, Manju Kapoor has revealed the life cycle of a woman who is dedicated from the beginning of her life. Virmati's life represents the life of a girl child who has to do all household chores. Kasturi's condition reveals that after marriage, a woman has to go through pain and suffering to bring a child in this world and sacrifices her complete life. Ida contrary to her mother manages herself to become an independent woman. When the novel starts, we find Ida peeping into her mother's past life, resisting her and revolting against the ways and follies. Her deep anger is expressed when she says that she would not be like her mother.

The novel reveals Virmati's search for independence and self-identity, her wish to find space for herself. Her desire to shed the surrogate motherhood, imposed on her. Being the eldest daughter, she is always busy performing duties because of her mother's regular pregnancies. The one cause for Virmati's frustration is her mother's continuous breeding.

Kasturi's ideology is confined to male dominated society, and she thinks that marriage as the duty of every girl rather than studies. For Kasturi, Education means developing the mind for the benefit of the family and nothing more than that. According to her, she emphasises the stereotypical opinion that only a man is free to do a job, to go outside and to do his desired task whereas a girl has to perform her duty according to society's norms. She has no hold on her life. For Kasturi, Virmati's practical education was complete, but Virmati wants to study further even if she has to fight with her mother. Virmati is under household burden. She has to take care of everyone's demand in the home. Eventually, Virmati fails her FA. She shows a great fuss. Kasturi tells her that it is over now. At the age of 17, she is engaged to a canal engineer, Inderjeet. Virmati is angry and frustrated at her failure. Kasturi says that you should leave your studies as it is changing you into bad tempered person. She tells Virmati that she is forgetting her priorities. Thus, during her search to find an individual space, Virmati has to face many difficulties.

Family plays an important role in the novel. For the sake of family's name, Virmati is forced to sacrifice her study and freedom. She is taught to be an ideal daughter. She goes against her family's will of arrange marriage with an engineer, Inderjit and falls in love with a Professor, Harish who is already married, who first appears in her life as her parent's tenant. The Professor is married as a child to an illiterate woman, whom he had tried to educate and had miserably failed. Up to the middle of the book, Professor's wife could not find any space. She is the woman whose life's mission is to cook for and feed her family and keep the house neat & clean. So the Professor becomes close to his student Virmati who is passionately interested in studies. Virmati's thought of her fiancé has been replaced by the thought of Professor. She is caught in psychological dilemma as on the one side there is family, customs, norms, and traditional values; and on the other is her illicit love for Professor, her desire to educate herself. Days passed and Virmati's confusion grew. Virmati has finished her BA and her marriage date was fixed. Professor insists her to tell Inderjit, her fiance about their relation. By gathering all her courage, Virmati opposes her marriage with Inderjit. Now Virmati wants to follow her cousin Shakuntala who is independent, resistant and assertive. Shakuntala consoles Virmati that these people do not understand a woman and according to them women are still supposed to marry and nothing else. Virmati comes to know about her inner desire to find a self- identity. Shakuntala's decision not to get married shows her strength during the conservative India of the forties. She works in a college and stays alone in Lahore. She sows the seeds of freedom in Virmati. She represents modernity as not following the conventional norms which limits daughter to an early marriage and then home and family. She encourages her for independence and equality, thus epitomizing the post-colonial emancipated 'New Woman'. She encourages Virmati for further studies and asks her to come to Lahore. She believes that times is changing, and women are becoming independent to take decisions of her own life. Like Shakuntala, Virmati herself urges to go to Lahore for further studies. Kasturi is shocked to see this transformation in Virmati.

Swarnalata, Virmati's roommate in Lahore has her convictions and faith in herself as against Virmati who lacks confidence. She is an activist and a feminist in the true sense. She

gets a job as a teacher in her old college and gets married on her terms and conditions. Her parents had let her have her way in everything. She continues to be an activist even after her marriage. She encourages Virmati to join them in their demonstration against Draft Hindu Code Bill.

Kapur skillfully portrays the psychological state of the characters. In her struggle to make decisions, Virmati ultimately contemplates suicide as a possible resolution to her miseries. Virmati constantly oscillates between her pursuit of education and her impending marriage. When forced into an unwanted marriage with the canal engineer, she protests and expresses her feelings to Professor Harish, emphasizing that she is not a puppet to be moved at will. Virmati lacks resilience; although she resists her family and society, she finds it difficult to resist Harish's love. After a series of transformations, including a period as a school principal in a small Himalayan State, she finally marries the man she loves and returns to Amritsar to live with him. However, he denies leaving his first wife and she has to live like an outsider in the family, neglected by her in laws. The Professor does not care about her problems. On her arrival in Amritsar, she writes and tells her own family that she is married but nobody comes to see her. All blood relations seem cold and barren. Virmati's false hopes are finally collapsed. She realises that all ties between herself and her family have come to an end. Despite all care and concern, all sacrifice and responsibility that she carried out being the daughter of the family, they have flung her away. She remains alone and unattended. That is the reason when Harish takes pride in discussing the political scenario at national and international level: she is worried about her own freedom.

Virmati gets admission for masters degree in Philosophy. She has no interest in this subject, though Harish considers Philosophy a noble subject. Her struggle is evident as we look into another incident, when a girl is born to her. She wanted to name her Bharti because she has been blessed with her at the dawn of independence of the country. But Harish did not approve of this name and named the child as 'Ida'. She is to do compromises and has no control on his life. She is second wife of Harish, therefore her identity is lost. Further, she is not very enthusiastic about her education which she considers as way to freedom. Virmati feels humiliated and decides to keep mum. It appears that Manju Kapur as a novelist does not try to project her righteous behaviour but highlights her grief after she becomes the co-wife. Participation of women in Gandhi's Swaraj agitations is portrayed differently by Kapur. The novel tells the story of Virmati and other difficult daughters who did well in their parallel struggle for independence in their lives. Virmati's daughter Ida has same insecurities inside her, though she is portrayed as living a free life than her mother in external terms. Though at the centre of narrative is a woman who fights but does not succeed. Kapur's novel portray the fate of Indian women. However, Guru Pyari Jandial rightly points out that Virmati's struggle should not be devalued because of her failure as what she did in forties is remarkable achievement.

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