

Reclaiming Self: Women's Struggles for Identity and Liberation in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Article Received: 13/08/2025

Article Accepted: 15/09/2025

Published Online: 15/09/2025

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2025.7.09.210

Abstract:

This study explores the portrayal of women as individuals who oppose patriarchal domination and suppression. *Difficult Daughters* highlights women's social positioning and their persistent struggle to define their identities meaningfully. Manju Kapur writes with a clear purpose, establishing herself as a thoughtful social critic. Her novels tend to focus on issues faced by middle and upper-middle-class women, crafted with specific aims in mind. Kapur's works reflect her interest in broader themes concerning women's evolving identities within a modern, educated middle-class context. Most of her female protagonists are educated women who, despite their strength and independence, remain confined within societal and cultural boundaries. Their education fosters independent thinking, leading them to challenge familial and societal norms in their quest to forge identities that affirm their competence and integrity. The heroines are depicted as women caught between their personal desires and their aspirations to integrate into contemporary political and intellectual circles.

Keywords: New Woman, Marriage, Education, Male Domination, Identity Struggle

Introduction:

Despite ongoing social and political revolutions, women continue to comprise over half of the global population and still face inequality. Despite possessing equal moral and intellectual capacities, women are not recognized as equals. This context necessitates an exploration of female identity. In a male-dominated society, women typically assume roles such as wives, mothers, sisters, and homemakers. They are expected to submit, serve, sacrifice, and endure injustices silently. Patriarchal norms marginalize their individual selves, often leading women to adopt a life of self-effacement.

Women are frequently modeled after mythic figures like Sita, Savitri, and Gandhari—epic heroines whose lives differ vastly from the hardships faced by women today, who

often lack a sense of self. Women are socialized to live for others, and in the Indian context, they are expected to submit to their husbands and maintain a harmonious home. Manju Kapur is well-known for her feminist perspectives. Her characters often represent contemporary women who have endured long-standing repression and now seek to break free from silence and tradition.

In her novels, Kapur portrays mothers and daughters within the traditional social fabric where marriage is regarded as the ultimate goal—an institution from which women often find it difficult to escape. Her female characters symbolize women yearning for liberation from outdated social norms and conventions but rarely get the opportunity to do so. Most of her women are educated, which enables them to think independently, yet this very independence often leads to societal rejection. They struggle between tradition and modernity, striving to establish identities as competent women of integrity.

Ida, Virmati's daughter, narrates her story, revealing her mother's life and death at the outset. Virmati's desire to die and her perspective on life are central to the narrative. Ida, who is divorced, seeks to understand her mother's past, portraying her as a resilient woman fighting societal restrictions. Virmati was raised in a typical Indian household, where her family responsibilities overshadowed her personal identity. Kapur vividly depicts the realities faced by Indian women at home through Virmati's experiences. She is portrayed as a puppet under male control—her mother taught her that a woman's ultimate destiny was marriage. As the eldest daughter, Virmati was responsible for caring for her siblings and helping her mother with household chores, often feeling exhausted and harassed.

Kapur intentionally highlights the theme of independence within the narrative. She links Virmati's personal struggles with India's independence movement, illustrating that despite national liberation efforts, women's status remained unchanged. Virmati longs to live freely, like the mythic Shakuntala, seeking a life beyond familial bonds. Her friendship with Shakuntala provides her with a glimpse of the freedom she desires outside her traditional home.

"Is this freedom? I came here to be free, yet I am not like the other women.

They use their minds, organize, participate in conferences, and are politically active—while I waste my time on love," Virmati reflects. (DD142)

Virmati's internal conflict between schooling and marriage is a constant subject. Her family dismisses her desire for education, emphasizing her duty to marry and bear children. She defies expectations by attending college and developing a romantic relationship with Professor Harish Chandra, with whom she falls in love. Despite her education and progressive upbringing, her family's expectations restrict her choices. Her refusal to accept an arranged marriage with Inderjit leads to social ostracism and emotional distress. She attempts suicide after her rejection, illustrating her profound despair. Ultimately, her family arranges her younger sister Indu's marriage to Inderjit, compounding her sense of loss.

Kapur explores how women's perceived inadequacies are rooted in societal reliance on traditional gender roles. Women lack autonomy because men hold power over their lives. Virmati's internal struggle is marked by her love and her desire for independence, which she sacrifices due to societal pressures. Her quest for freedom is intertwined with her participation in women's empowerment movements, although her aspirations often remain elusive.

Virmati's attendance at women's conferences and her admiration for leaders like Leela Mehta embody her desire for liberation. She observes women actively engaged in the independence movement, feeling a yearning to be part of that movement herself.

"Am I truly free?" Virmati wonders. "I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They think, organize, participate—while I spend my time in love and waste it." (DD 142)

Her marriage to Harish does not bring her fulfillment. She faces confinement within her household, where her intelligence and independence are ignored. Her attempts to influence her future are met with rejection and neglect. Her education and exposure to Western ideas clash with her traditional surroundings, making her pursuit of identity challenging. Her defiance of her husband's control culminates in her standing up against his sexual oppression—her act of rebellion signifies her reclaiming her agency. Kapur's work actively promotes women's rights and status in Indian society.

What makes Kapur's stories compelling is her contrasting depiction of women's struggles to find their own identities amid societal constraints. N.P. Sharma notes that Virmati must contend with both patriarchal dominance represented by her mother and the oppressive influence of maternal figures. While her rebellion may replace one form of enslavement with another, ultimately, she finds a degree of liberation—free from her husband's dominance and able to restore her relationship with her child and family.

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