



Conflict and Crisis of Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* of Manju Kapur

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ABSTRACT

In the realm of Indian Fiction in English, women novelists have exhibited their mettle amidst the grim situation in which society was patronised by patriarchy. Nineteen nineties witnessed the advent of many woman writers in India who proved to be remarkable in the portrayal of varied facets of pains and pangs of women – both traditional and modern. The group of Indian women novelists starting from Ruth Pawar Jabvala, Nayanatara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Manju Kapur are individuals who rebelled against the traditional role of women, and breaking the shackles of silent suffering of women. Manju Kapur is one among them who successfully and skilfully captured Indian ethos. She shows her deep insight into human nature and their day-to-day life. She, as a prolific and distinguished novelist, deals with women and their problems and love, sex and marriage in all her novels. She explores the clash between tradition and modernity, identity crisis of women, and their quest for independence, the east-west conflict.

All the women characters in *Difficult Daughters* clearly move around the spirit of marriage in the Indian context. The first set of characters like Lajwanti, Kasturi, Harish's mother, Kishori Devi, and Hirish's first wife Ganga are confine to the Indian tradition of weeping brides. The second set of female characters, little radical and different from the first set, consists of Virmati, and her cousin Shakuntala, and her roommate, Swarnalatha. Virmati defies her own family and tradition. Her act of marriage with an already married Professor results in humiliation and misery. Her cousin, Shakuntala is a lashing and dynamic woman activist, politically agile, and conducts conferences for women. The third set of female characters includes Chhotti and Ida. This third of female characters set are categorically considered to be the prime concern of Manju Kapur. The self willed Chhotti never marries, but self styled Ida enter the marital bond with a fellow of academic pursuit to settle a few contradiction of her personal life, which later ended with divorce, and childlessness.

This research articles, "Conflict and Crisis of Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* of Manju Kapur" focuses on the conflict and crisis of Virmati in the male dominated Indian society.

Key words: Tradition, Modernity, Identity Crisis, Patriarchal Dominance.

In the realm of Indian Fiction in English, women novelists have exhibited their mettle amidst the grim situation in which society was patronised by patriarchy. During the first decade of twentieth century, women were mute puppets under the male domination and were deprived their basic rights, individuality and self reliance. Woman was forced to act as an ideal wife, a mother and a home maker along with the copious roles to play in the family. Though she performs a series of roles, she is not considered to be equal to man.

Nineteen nineties witnessed the advent of many woman writers in India who proved to be remarkable in the portrayal of varied facets of pains and pangs of women – both traditional and modern. Their works have paid cudgels against the age-old patriarchal ethos operating through the social environment, the familial-social traditions and myths which created a space for a basic form to new themes. The Indian women novelists brought noticeable transformation to conform a specific genre to explore the unexplored array of maladies; to delineate the unequivocal reality of and pains of the women in Indian society. The group of Indian women novelists starting from Ruth Pawar Jabvala, Nayanatara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamala Markandaya, Manju Kapur are individuals who rebelled against the traditional role of women, and breaking the shackles of silent suffering of women.

Manju Kapur is one among them who successfully and skilfully captured Indian ethos. She shows her deep insight into human nature and their day-to-day life. She, as a prolific and distinguished novelist, deals with women and their problems and love, sex and marriage in all her novels. She explores the clash between tradition and modernity, identity crisis of women, and their quest for independence, the east-west conflict. She also explores, in her novels, many problems pertaining to the middle class women. She attempts in her novels to elevate the women equal to men in every aspect. Her works portray the need of equal rights to girls in making their free choices in their lives. In her novels Manju Kapur presents women who try to establish their own identity. The displacement that they suffer and the suffocation that they face in the traditional limits of marriage and family is clearly brought out by the novelist. In these lines Manju Kapur proclaims that “I am interested in the lives of women whether in the political arena or in the domestic spaces. One of the main pre-occupations in all my books is how women manage to negotiate both the inner and the outer spaces in their lives” (*A Married Woman*. p. 1.).

She was born in Amritsar in 1948. She studied in India and Canada and worked as a Professor of English in Miranda House University College. Her novels are *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2003), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008), and *Custody* (2011).

Her first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, published in 1998, won the 1999 Commonwealth Writer’s Prize, best first book of Europe and South Asia region. This first novel of her earned worldwide recognition, and substantial success, both commercially and critically. Kapur did five years of research to write her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*, at Nehru Memorial Museum and Library at Teen Murti House. She pondered over the subject of daughter’s reconstruction of her past, based on her mother’s story.

Commenting on the creation of the major character, Virmati, Kapur in an interview with Mona Goel confessed that “Actually, Virmati turned out to be based on my mother’s life” (*At Home with Manju Kapur: Interview*. p.1). In fact, it explores a daughter’s, Ida’s, journey back into her mother’s past to rebuild the memories of her mother as the daughter she had been. It is fictitious tale of three generations of women from a Punjabi family. Ida, the narrator, who faces an apathetic and doleful experience of marriage, becomes a divorcee. There is Virmati, who marries for love an already married Professor. And there is Kasturi, a mother of eleven children including Virmati, who comes to terms with a daughter, who insists on studying and spurns marriage. Jaya Chakravathy in “*A Study of Difficult Daughters and A Married Woman*” says, “*Difficult Daughters ... is essentially a story of three generations and is partly analytical, partly historical and partly travelogue*” (*A Study of Difficult Daughters and A Married Woman*. P 53).

Manju Kapur wrote the novel *Difficult Daughters* during India's independence struggle based on the life of Kapur's own mother, Virmati, whose photograph was printed on the cover of the book. Virmati falls in love, the scandalous relationship, which parallels India's battle for freedom, with her married neighbour, the Professor. Finally Virmati becomes the Professor's second wife. The novel is set mostly in Amritsar and Lahore during the partition and swivels around Virmati who is caught in an illicit relationship with the married Professor. The illicit relationship leads to conjugal bond after she becomes a pregnant and the inevitable situation forced her to live with the first wife and children of the Professor. This is a poignant tale of a lady, who is forced to sacrifice her freedom for her love. Jaya Chakravathy in "A Study of *Difficult Daughters* and A Married Woman" says, "*Difficult Daughters* discusses the life of Virmati and her relationship with her mother Kasturi, her sisters and her daughters Ida and Harish's wife Ganga" (*A Study of Difficult Daughters and A Married Woman*. P. 53).

All the women characters in *Difficult Daughters* clearly move around the spirit of marriage in the Indian context. The first set of characters like Lajwanti, Kasturi, Harish's mother, Kishori Devi, and Harish's first wife Ganga are confined to the Indian tradition of weeping brides. The second set of female characters, little radical and different from the first set, consists of Virmati, and her cousin Shakuntala, and her roommate, Swarnalatha. Virmati defies her own family and tradition. Her act of marriage with an already married Professor results in humiliation and misery. Her cousin, Shakuntala is a lashing and dynamic woman activist, politically agile, and conducts conferences for women. The third set of female characters includes Chhotti and Ida. This third of female characters set are categorically considered to be the prime concern of Manju Kapur. The self-willed Chhotti never marries, but self-styled Ida enters the marital bond with a fellow of academic pursuit to settle a few contradictions of her personal life, which later ended with divorce, and childlessness.

Difficult Daughters, in other words, is a story of a doleful life of a sensitive girl, Virmati who is forced to suffer and enter into the dire conflict in her life under the male-dominated society. Virmati has ten sisters and brothers living together. As she is the elder, the responsibility of the family lies on her. During the array of pregnancies of her mother, she looks after the household affairs in her tender age. She is almost second mother to her brothers and sisters.

Virmati, with different perspectives and ambitions in life, doesn't have compromising in nature. Her mind gets disturbed for small things, and this kind of nature puts her in a conflicting situation in Amritsar. In fact, living in Amritsar paves the new way to Virmati to enter the freedom which she desires to get for a long time. It is a journey from innocence to experience. For her, education means freedom and new outlook and attitude. In Amritsar, her attitude to life is completely changed, and she wants to get further education, but her family has declined her desire. Her mother finds fault with Virmati's ambition and behaviour. Manju Kapur, in *Difficult Daughters*, writes: "Leave your studies, if it is going to make you so bad-tempered with your family" (Kapur Manju. *Difficult Daughters*. P. 21). For her mother, education is not important, but awareness of the traditional and conventional role of the Indian woman after marriage. As a difficult daughter, Virmati stands firm in her decision to go to Lahore for education. In Lahore she finds company of Shakuntala. Virmati visits the Oxford University returned Professor, Harish, and falls in love with him. The love affair provides sexual and emotional fulfilment to both Virmati and Professor. Later, this illicit relation has begotten confusion and conflict to Virmati. "She would sometimes wish that but what could she wish? Early marriage and no education? No Professor and no love?" (*Difficult Daughters*. p. 54).

On the one hand, she has to abide by the traditional society where girls are not independent to choose their husbands, and on the other hand she is courageous to break the traditional moors to marry a married man. Professor behaves like a true symbol of Indian male, and all the time he tries to treat her as a sexual toy to quench his thirst of lust. He says: "Virus I love you more than you love me, that much is obvious" (*Difficult Daughters*. p. 189). Commenting on this relationship, Gajendra Kumar responds that "the Professor neither visualizes the sociological fact nor emotional intensity of Virmati" (*Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters: A Saga of Conflict and Crisis*. P. 101). However, Virmati's abortion provokes her with little maturity to resist the sexual urge of the Professor. Kapur writes: "Virmati realized and thought how stupid she was not to have realized earlier that to

have a man” (*Difficult Daughters*. p. 194) As such, she is under the constant conflict from her spousal and parental families.

She is not happy and faces grim situations after marriage with Harish. Ganga, the first wife of Professor, could do anything in spite of accepting the fate and sobbing and crying in loneliness in the male dominated Indian society. Kishori Devi, Professor’s mother, doesn’t find fault with her son, and only consoles Ganga with sympathetic words. She says to Ganga: “In this life we can do nothing, but one duty” (*Difficult Daughters*. p. 211). Virmati’s second stage of suffering begins after the marriage. Virmati hesitates to be comfortable to move freely with Ganga and Kishori Devi as she feels shameful to marry a married man. Her life with Professor in Amritsar is proved to be sombre and disastrous under the implacable and hostile treatment of Ganga, the first wife of Professor. She loses her identity and unable to continue her studies in such a dire conflict. Rollason opines, “What happens to Virmati is no doubt the most representative destiny of the Indian woman (even if educated), qualitatively or statistically [...]” (*Women on the Margins: Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters*. p.7). The clash between tradition and modern in Indian society has been categorical in this novel. Virmati is the symbol of modernity, and breaks the orthodox chains of tradition and boundaries of customs that have been fabulously prescribed with false intention by men. This clash of tradition and modernity is obvious in three generation of women – Kasturi, Virmati, and Ida. The relationships of Kasturi, Virmati, and Ida are much affected with ailment of generation gap.

Virmati’s financial dreams also have been broken by the practical mindedness of Harish. She is unable to find her own freedom with Harish in Lahore and unable to get herself proper education. Her mind is in conflict with the tumultuous thoughts of emancipation. In such isolation in Ganga’s family, she falls in psychological jerk which causes loss of interest in life and psychosomatic and xenophobic illness. She loses her self esteem when every activity performed by his first wife Ganga. Virmati saks, “And, And what? As your wife, and I to do nothing for you? Just be in your bed?” (*Difficult Daughters*. p. 217) She fails to prove herself as a wife in a sense with which the Indian society would accept. Meneeta Kahlon observes that “the novel explores the problems of women in a male dominated society” (*Family Structure in Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters and Home* p. 3). In the course of time, she gets involved and adjusted and compromised, but she is alienated from her own family and unable to create a room for herself.

The saga of Virmati told in third person is framed by a first person narration in the present tense. Readers don’t listen to the voice of Virmati, but Ida ruminates over the past of her mother, Virmati. Ida’s role as a researcher and dominant narrative voice of the past of her mother is an important. Her account of her mother is hinged on her own experiences, information gathered from Kailsanath, and Gopinath, friends and colleagues of her parents, her maternal uncles, and so on, after the demise of her parents.

Ida’s ‘I’ also functions as Kapur’s alter-ego. Bruschi details: “She realizes Virmati has been like her, a difficult daughter” (*A second Generations Look at the Partition of India*. p. 252). Ida has been portrayed as a radical modern woman. Virmati is Kasturi’s difficult daughter, Ida is the difficult daughter born to a difficult daughter. She is an issueless divorcee, and stays single which is a rare phenomenon unheard of in her grandmother Kasturi’s times. She goes to Amritsar after her mother’s death to delve deep into her mother’s past in the process of understanding their relationship. There she discovered how her mother defied her own traditional-bound family in which marriage is acceptable but not independence. Virmati never informed Ida to assert her identity and inheritance from her mother she got “Adjust, compromise, adapt” (*Difficult Daughters*. p. 236).

They represent either tradition or modernity. Katuru remains traditional. Virmati and Ida fail to be completely traditional. They prove to be limbo between tradition and modernity inviting conflict in their lives. Shakuntala and Swarna latha remain unaffected by their modern outlook and they are not caught up in the cob web of love. After completion of M.Sc., Shakuntala experiences happiness in leading an independent life. Such decision of not involving in marriage reveals her stringent characters. Shakuntala motivates Virmati and invites

her to Lahore to pursue further studies. The inspiration instilled in her by Shakuntla provoked her to reach the academic zeniths defying the traditional family and its customs. But Virmati is in contrast to Swarna latha. Virmati, as woman, lacks the courage and strength like Swarna latha. Virmati aspires to be economically independent throughout her life, but vain. Swarna latha, Virmati's roommate in her post graduation, postpones her marriage as she hankers for continuing her activities in Lahore. She wants to achieve something besides getting marriage. In course of time, she becomes a teacher with the support of her husband and parents, and paved a path for herself. In the novel, *Difficult Daughters*, Swarna latha is a female character who gets and achieves what she wants without any compromise. She also has gone through the tension with parents relating to her marriage, but channelizes her prudence and energy to have a new sense of identity for her unlike Virmati. Ganga, the first wife of Professor, is a scapegoat and victim in the patriarchal society. Ganga has been portrayed as marginalized woman in a male dominated society due to her illiteracy. She was married to Harish in her childhood when she was three years old. She was not sent to school, but was well trained in housekeeping. She proves to be a good wife after entering in laws' house at the age of twelve years, but never proved to be an intellectual companion to Harish.

Kasturi, Virmati, Ida, Shakuntala, Swarna latha, and Ganga are the difficult daughter in Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. Virmati has been portrayed as a difficult daughter, a scapegoat under the ruthless patriarchal dominance, who is caught up and sandwiched between tradition and modernity.

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