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The Impact Of Societal Expectations On Women's Lives: An Analysis Of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

Manju Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters*, presents a poignant exploration of Virmati's existential struggles in early 20th-century India. This abstract examines the agony of Virmati's existence as she grapples with societal expectations, personal desires, and the quest for identity. Virmati's life is marked by contradictions, bound by traditional conventions yet yearning for independence and intellectual fulfillment. Her pursuit of higher education and involvement with a married man, Professor Harpal Singh, lead to self-discovery, societal ostracism, and personal turmoil. Through Virmati's narrative, Kapur masterfully captures the essence of existential angst, highlighting the limitations imposed by society, family, and circumstances. Virmati's story is a powerful exploration of the human condition, laying bare the complexities of desire, sacrifice, and the pursuit of happiness. This abstract explores the tensions between tradition and modernity, as Virmati navigates her desires and aspirations. The novel's portrayal of Virmati's agony testifies to Kapur's nuanced understanding of the human experience. Virmati's story sheds light on the difficulties faced by women in patriarchal societies, highlighting the ways societal expectations shape and suffocate individual identity. *Difficult Daughters* is a powerful exploration of the human condition, resonating with readers today. Virmati's story reminds us of the importance of self-awareness, personal agency, and pursuing one's desires, even in adversity.

By examining Virmati's existential agony, this abstract aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the novel's themes and struggles. Through a close reading, this study illuminates the ways *Difficult Daughters* offers a powerful exploration of the human experience, captivating readers with its nuanced portrayal of existence. Ultimately, Virmati's story serves as a poignant reminder of the complexities of human existence and the importance of individual identity.

Keywords: Existential agony, Identity, personal turmoil, self-discovery, societal ostracism, self-awareness, societal expectations and patriarchal society.

For centuries, women in patriarchal societies have faced social exclusion and sex-based discrimination. The struggles of women under these oppressive systems have been vividly portrayed in the works of numerous postcolonial Indian women writers. The late 20th century saw a significant surge in feminist literature, with writers exploring various aspects of Indian womanhood and advocating for women's rights. Notable authors like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, and Manju Kapur have made significant contributions to this genre. Manju Kapur, a prominent Indian English writer and former professor, has written four novels, including the award-winning "Difficult Daughters," which showcases her talent and commitment to exploring women's experiences.

Manju Kapur's novel "*Difficult Daughters*" is a thought-provoking exploration of complex mother-daughter relationships spanning three generations. Set against the backdrop of pre-independence India, the story navigates the cities of Amritsar and Lahore, weaving a narrative that follows Virmati's journey as both a daughter and a mother. This novel masterfully blends feminist, postmodern, and postcolonial themes, offering a nuanced portrayal of women's experiences in a rapidly changing world. Manju Kapur's novel "*Difficult Daughters*" explores multiple themes against the backdrop of India's struggle for independence. The story weaves together complex relationships, identity crises, and societal conflicts, particularly focusing on the life of Virmati, a young woman from a conservative family. Virmati's journey is marked by her desire for education, self-discovery, and love, which often clashes with the traditional expectations placed upon her. Her romance with Professor Harish Chandra, a married man, serves as a catalyst for her self-affirmation and intellectual growth. Through Virmati's story, Kapur skillfully intertwines the themes of family dynamics, societal norms, and the quest for individual identity.

Virmati's journey is a poignant exploration of a woman's quest for identity and self-discovery in a patriarchal society. Despite advancements in women's education and empowerment, Indian women continue to face societal expectations that perpetuate their subordination. The paradox of modernity and traditionalism creates a dilemma, where women are expected to be both independent and subservient. Manju Kapur's novels, including "*Difficult Daughters*," skillfully capture this predicament, highlighting the struggles of women like Virmati and Astha, who embark on a journey of self-discovery and existence. These heroines challenge societal norms, often at great personal cost, underscoring the complexities of women's experiences in India. Their stories serve as a testament to the enduring quest for autonomy, identity, and self-expression in a society that often seeks to define and constrain them.

This paper explores Virmati's existential struggles as she navigates the constraints of her family life and her desire for education. Caught between her mundane domestic duties and her intellectual aspirations, Virmati becomes entangled in a tumultuous affair that brings both fulfillment and suffering. Her quest for self-identity and autonomy leads her down a complex path, marked by challenges such as attempted suicide, confinement, abortion, and family estrangement. Ultimately, she marries Professor Harish Chandra, but her life remains fragile. Virmati's desire for education and independence is inspired by her cousin Shakuntla, a successful and self-sufficient woman who embodies the freedom and respect Virmati yearns for.

The new education and observation of the life of Kasturi, generate a new desire in Virmati to get herself free from all the bondages of patriarchy that restrain her freedom. The novel highlights the ongoing debate between education and marriage, particularly for women. When Virmati is allowed to pursue further education, it marks a shift towards greater opportunities for women. However, as she asserts her independence, the conflict intensifies. Virmati's desire for autonomy and education leads her to question the traditional expectation of marriage, causing tension with her mother, Kasturi. Kasturi, who values traditional norms, sees Virmati's independence as selfish and ungrateful, unknowingly echoing patriarchal values.

Virmati's academic pursuits bring her into contact with Professor Harish Chandra, who teaches at her college. He becomes infatuated with her and proposes a relationship, disregarding her engagement to Inderjeet. Despite initial reservations, Virmati is drawn to the Professor, who convinces her of his emotional and intellectual connection with her. The Professor's marriage is portrayed as loveless and unfulfilling, and he sees Virmati

as a source of emotional and intellectual fulfillment. Virmati becomes entangled in the relationship, prioritizing her emotional connection with the Professor over her future security.

Virmati's mother, Kasturi, failed to recognize her daughter's need for a separate identity and independent existence, instead imposing her own expectations on Virmati. This led Virmati to rebel against her mother's values, rejecting the traditional roles of domesticity, marriage, and child-bearing. Virmati sought a new world of knowledge and self-assurance, one that her mother couldn't understand or relate to. This rebellion was a direct result of Kasturi's neglect and lack of acknowledgment of Virmati's individual needs and desires. Virmati's relationship with her mother, Kasturi, is strained and complex, echoing the dynamics described by Simone de Beauvoir in "The Second Sex." As the eldest daughter, Virmati is burdened with household chores and faces abuse from her mother, who sees her as a rival rather than a reflection of herself. This tense relationship lacks emotional connection, and Virmati's desire for independence and self-expression is thwarted.

When Virmati becomes engaged to Inderjeet, she is torn between her obligations and her growing feelings for Professor Harish Chandra. This inner conflict leads to a suicide attempt in Trishakunda, where she is fortunately rescued. However, her life takes a turn for the worse as her mother, Kasturi, responds with cruelty and confinement, rather than compassion. Virmati is isolated from her family, and the stigma of her attempted suicide leads to a decision to cancel her marriage plans. Despite this, Virmati and Professor Harish Chandra continue their romance through secret letters, facilitated by Virmati's youngest sister, Paro. When Virmati is sent to Lahore to pursue her studies, she finds freedom and her relationship with the Professor blossoms. As the nation becomes embroiled in the freedom movement, Virmati focuses on her own love story, prioritizing her personal desires and aspirations. Virmati's relationship with Professor Harish Chandra left her feeling inadequate and uncertain. Memories of their secret moments together often filled her with contemplation and longing. Swarna Lata, recognizing Virmati's predicament, tried to make her see the futility of investing in a relationship that seemed to have no future.

"Strikes, academic freedom, the war, the peace, rural upliftment, mass consciousness.. Independence day movement, rally, speeches..She felt out of place, an outcaste amongst all these women. She thought of Harish who loved her. She must be satisfied with that...Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war-the Satyagraha movement...taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream" (132-139)

Virmati's emotional dependence on the Professor had become all-consuming, with his disapproval dictating her actions and marriage remaining an elusive prospect. At times, she even envied Swarna Lata's independence and self-assurance, wishing she could be more like her: "may be I could be like Swarna from inside secretly." (124)

Virmati's struggles persisted in Lahore, where her relationship with Professor Harish Chandra led to pregnancy. Knowing the societal stigma surrounding unwed motherhood, Virmati felt compelled to undergo an abortion. This experience added to her physical and emotional pain. Notably, Professor Harish Chandra failed to provide support during this challenging time, leaving Virmati to face the consequences alone. Swarna's assistance played a crucial role in Virmati's decision to undergo the abortion. In hindsight, Virmati realized that accepting the Professor's proposal would have required him to leave his wife, Ganga, which could have altered the course of their relationship.

After completing her B.T. from RSBL College in Lahore, Virmati returned to Amritsar and soon received an exciting offer to become the Principal of a school in Nahan, a town in the Himalayan state of Sirmour. This new role brought her a sense of discipline and respect, as well as a period of autonomy and independence. However, her reputation was compromised when the Professor's frequent visits to Nahan became public, leading to her being asked to resign. Virmati then considered going to Shantiniketan, but a chance encounter with an acquaintance of the Professor's in Delhi changed her plans, and she ended up staying with the Professor and eventually marrying him.

After much persuasion, Professor Harish Chandra agreed to marry Virmati, and the ceremony took place in a humble setting. However, despite marrying the man she loved, Virmati faced social exclusion and was treated as an outcast. As the second wife, she had to navigate the challenges of social ostracism outside the home and competition with Ganga, the first wife, within the household. Virmati's attempts to carve out a niche for herself were met with resistance, and she was relegated to a store-room, isolated from the rest of the family. She had to endure the hostile gaze of Ganga and the disapproving eyes of the community. Despite her high education, Virmati's aspirations to play a traditional role as a housewife were thwarted, and she was forced to lead a suffocating life.

Virmati's marriage to Professor Harish Chandra brought her both intellectual validation and personal suffering. Despite her academic achievements, she was not recognized for her intellectual contributions within the marriage. Instead, the Professor claimed credit for her ideas. Their union also led to social ostracism, family estrangements, and personal hardships, including a miscarriage and humiliation. Virmati's relationship with her mother, Kasturi, deteriorated further, with Kasturi disowning her daughter due to societal shame. Virmati's health and composure suffered as she faced marginalization from both her own family and her husband's. The Professor eventually sent her to Lahore to pursue her M.A. in Philosophy. During a brief period of respite, when her mother-in-law and Ganga were away, Virmati and the Professor had a chance to live together, and she gave birth to a baby. However, their relationship lacked companionship, and the Professor's decisions often left Virmati feeling belittled and unheard. The novel highlights the patriarchal norms that govern women's lives, with the Professor embodying the oppressive forces that Virmati faces. Despite her struggles, Virmati's story serves as a testament to the complexities of women's experiences in a patriarchal society.

Virmati's life was turned upside down by her relationship with Professor Harish Chandra. Despite her success and independence at Nahan, where she proved herself as a capable and emancipated woman, the Professor's influence rendered her vulnerable. It seems that the Professor exploited Virmati's intellectual and emotional needs, enjoying the benefits of both his relationships – Ganga's domestic servitude and Virmati's intellectual stimulation. The Professor's pursuit of Virmati, even after sending her away to Lahore, reveals a pattern of gratifying his own desires while disregarding Virmati's emotional well-being. His reluctance to marry Virmati, despite her repeated requests, highlights the power imbalance in their relationship. Virmati's family had indeed failed to prepare her for the complexities of relationships with men, leaving her vulnerable to exploitation.

The question remains whether the Professor's love for Virmati was genuine or just a manifestation of his own desires. If he truly loved her, why didn't he leave his wife? If he couldn't leave his wife, why did he entangle Virmati in his love? Virmati's life was torn between tradition and modernity, love and duty, ultimately leading to disappointment and heartbreak. The relationship between Virmati and the Professor can be seen as passionate yet misleading and mismatched, with the Professor's actions revealing a "married rake" who seduced Virmati through intellectual and cultural means.

Virmati's pursuit of love and autonomy is marked by struggles and misfortunes. Her desire for independence and escape from arranged marriage ultimately leads to her downfall. Like Manisha in Anita Desai's "The Voices in the City," Virmati's story raises questions about the societal expectations placed on women. Both characters challenge the status quo, but their paths differ – Virmati attempts suicide and survives, while Manisha takes her own life. Virmati's journey is a fight against the oppressive forces of patriarchy, symbolized by her mother's authority and her husband's controlling love. Although she may have traded one form of slavery for another, Virmati ultimately finds freedom and becomes a more self-assured individual. Her experience with the Professor teaches her valuable lessons, and she eventually breaks free from his oppressive love. Virmati's story serves as a testament to the struggles women face in a patriarchal society, where their needs and happiness are often sacrificed for the benefit of men.

The novel highlights the societal pressures that shape women's lives, particularly in the context of Indian society. Virmati's character represents the complexities of women's experiences, where the pursuit of autonomy and self-identity is often fraught with challenges. Through Virmati's story, the novel sheds light on the need for women's empowerment and the importance of recognizing their agency and individuality.

Virmati's life is marked by a quest for identity and autonomy, but her journey is fraught with challenges. Unlike Swarna Lata and Shakuntala, who find fulfillment and independence through their pursuits, Virmati's experiences are shaped by her relationships and societal expectations. Her desire for love and validation leads her to Professor Harish Chandra, who offers her a sense of importance and affection she lacked in her family.

However, Virmati's relationship with the Professor also highlights the patriarchal norms that govern women's lives. Despite his passion for Virmati, the Professor doesn't compromise his own life or status, leaving Virmati to bear the consequences of their relationship. The societal double standards are evident, as the Professor's actions are not scrutinized in the same way as Virmati's.

Virmati's pursuit of education serves as an escape from her family's disapproval and her mother's lack of affection. While education provides her with a sense of purpose, she doesn't view it as a means to achieve individual freedom, unlike Shakuntala, who uses her education to shape her life and resist societal pressures. Virmati's story underscores the complexities of women's experiences in a patriarchal society, where their choices and opportunities are often limited by societal expectations and power dynamics.

The title "Difficult Daughters" aptly captures Virmati's struggles as she challenges societal norms and conventions in pursuit of her identity. Her story is a complex mix of emotions, marked by longing, hate, hope, and aspiration. Virmati's love affair with a married professor sparks a revolt against deep-rooted family traditions, self-doubt, and ultimately, acceptance.

"I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family's name, am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people will say if they find out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace...and why? Because I am an idiot. (137)

The novel highlights the plight of modern women, particularly in patriarchal societies, where their quest for identity and self-expression is often met with resistance. Manju Kapur's heroines, including Virmati, embody the emergence of a new woman who seeks to satisfy her mental, physical, psychological, and sexual needs. These characters challenge traditional norms and expectations, striving to redefine themselves and break free from societal constraints.

Virmati's journey is marked by sacrifice and suffering, ultimately leading to her social isolation. Her quest for identity costs her dearly, leaving her without family support and recognition from the man she loved. Despite the agonies, Virmati's story serves as a testament to the resilience and determination of women who dare to challenge the status quo and forge a new path.

Virmati's story in *Difficult Daughters* is a poignant and powerful exploration of the agony of existence. Through her struggles, Manju Kapur sheds light on the complexities of women's lives in a patriarchal society, highlighting the tensions between tradition and modernity, desire and duty, and identity and societal expectations. Virmati's journey serves as a testament to the human spirit's capacity for resilience, self-awareness, and the pursuit of one's own desires, even in the face of adversity. Ultimately, *Difficult Daughters* offers a nuanced and thought-provoking portrayal of the human condition, one that continues to resonate with readers today, making Virmati's story a timeless and universal tale of existential struggle and self-discovery.

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