



# TRAUMATIZED FAMILIES AND PERVASIVE INFLUENCE OF TRADITIONAL PATRIARCHAL STRUCTURES: AN ANALYSIS OF MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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## Abstract

Kapur's fictional realm is characterized by a notable prevalence of female characters who are shaped by the influences of contemporary education and progressive ideologies, as well as the accessibility of economic autonomy and career opportunities. They are confident in themselves and fearless enough to speak their minds openly about anything, including intimate topics like love, marriage, and family. Her imaginative and distinctive attempt to examine women's history from the past to the present and evaluate the state of the movement and its effects on society is reflected in the themes she explores in her novels. This study examines the portrayal of traumatised families and the pervasive effect of traditional patriarchal structures in Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters*. By analysing the narratives and character dynamics within these literary works, this research aims to shed light on the complex interplay between personal trauma and societal norms, particularly in the context of Indian society.

**Keywords:** Tradition, Marriage, Patriarchy, Trauma, Societal norms

## Introduction

Tradition is established upon a framework of values, social processes and belief systems that serve as its foundation and imbue it with purpose and importance. The term "ritual" is frequently employed by social anthropologists to characterize the social processes and behaviours that contribute to the formation and manifestation of social structure. Modern men and women still base their moral and ethical judgments on ancient Hindu texts called Shastras. In her work titled "*Women and Marriage*," Chandra Nisha writes:

“The Shastras emphasize fulfilling the obligations of "grahasthashram" and make the man-woman partnership in marriage an indissoluble bond which continues even in subsequent lives. But the realization within Hindu moral philosophy at the level of ‘dharma’ and ‘karma’ works, interestingly, more to subdue and reconcile woman rather than man to her unavoidable duty and inevitable fate.” (50)

The advent of British colonial control in India precipitated a series of significant transformations. Despite the inherently oppressive and exploitative nature of the British administration, it took measures to prohibit the perpetuation of certain inhumane practices such as sati-pratha, child-marriage, and the purdha-system. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the British government enacted a series of laws and bills with the aim of consolidating the status of women in India.

In the context of India, despite the passage of seventy six years since attaining independence, the status of women has exhibited limited progress. The individual continues to experience suffering and oppression, which restricts her ability to live a fully unrestricted life. Education has played a vital role in facilitating the evolution of individuals, enabling people to preserve their unique identities and assert their autonomy in the face of oppressive and suppressive forces. The landscape and structure of Indian fiction in the English language has experienced a significant transformation with the emergence of a new cohort of writers. In straying from the conventionalities of traditional Indian English literature, authors like Manju Kapur not only portray the societal oppression faced by women, but also imbue their heroines with the moral fortitude and bravery required to overcome their challenges.

In Kapur's first novel, "*Difficult Daughters*," the author explores a conventional theme by portraying the initial stages of the narrative through the lens of a standard joint family structure. This narrative focuses on the disintegration of the joint family structure belonging to Lala Diwan Chand, a prominent member of the Arya Samaj. The current household structure consists of a combined family unit of the patriarch's two sons, their respective spouses, and their offspring. Chander Prakash and Suraj Prakash are the two progeny of Lala Diwan. Chander Prakash's family comprises his spouse, Lajwanti, as well as his daughter, Shakuntala, and son, Somnath. The family of Suraj Prakash includes his spouse, Kasturi, along with their eleven offspring, namely Virmati, Gunwati, Indumathi, Vidyavati, Hemavati, Parvati, Gopinath, Kailashnath, Prakashnath, Krishanath, and Hiranath. Additionally, Lal Diwan Chand's sister resides in the same household. In the context of a joint family, the collective interests of the family are accorded precedence, often resulting in the

sacrifice of personal matters and individual aspirations. In her portrayal, Kapur effectively depicts the combined family of Lala Diwan Chand and their adherence to the ancient principles of the Arya Samaj.

The protagonist, Virmati, is a member of a highly conventional household residing in Amritsar. She was Kasturi and Suraj Prakash's oldest child. Virmati was characterized as temperamental, domineering, and quick-witted. At the age of ten, Virmati had become accustomed to her mother's numerous pregnancies and took it upon herself to ensure that her siblings did not leave any litter on her aunt Lajwanti's side of the home. The influence of Shakuntala, the daughter of Virmati's aunt Lajwanti, serves as a catalyst for Virmati's pursuit of independence, education, and empowerment.

The protagonist develops romantic feelings for her neighbour and college professor, Harish Chandra, despite his existing marital status. Unlike his wife, he considers Virmati to be special and worthy of being his partner because she is educated. Virmati's family endeavors to arrange her marriage with Inderjit, a Canal Engineer, prompting her to make a suicide attempt. She refrains from disclosing her relationship with Harish to her family and instead employs her pursuit of education as a justification for declining marriage proposals. Virmati's family experiences feelings of humiliation and disappointment towards her, resulting in her prolonged confinement. She was ultimately enrolled in Bahadur Sohan Lal Training College for Women, located in Lahore. During her sojourn in Lahore, she persists in engaging in a physical relationship with Harish, ultimately undergoing an abortion due to his reluctance to get into matrimony with her.

Virmati's marital union proves to be highly unfavourable and fraught with difficulties. Despite her legal status as the second wife, Harish treats her as more than just a domesticated spouse, valuing her as a companion. Harish's family members do not approve of her. The collective rage and resistance exhibited by Ganga and Harish's mother compel Virmati to retreat into a secluded area within the household. Harish reassures her that he will support her and advises her not to be concerned with other matters. As a wife, Virmati has to stand up for her rights when it comes to doing household chores like washing Harish's clothes but Ganga and Kishori Devi not allow her to do anything. In this case Virmati feels that the influence of knowledge and intelligence is insufficient to overcome the prevailing beliefs and values of a certain era.

Virmati's character exhibits nonconformity, and superficially, it seems like she achieved all her desired aspirations in life, like, acquiring an education and entering into a marital union with her beloved partner. Nevertheless, Manju Kapur illustrates the consequences that she experiences various forms of adversity, including feelings of estrangement, lack of respect, a diminished sense of self, and a dearth of parental affection and also Kapur illustrates the consequences that Virmati faced as a result of her defiance of societal norms and pursuit of her individual journey.

Harish's wife, Ganga, is another person who suffers at the whims of conservative norms. Her mother trains her in the art of housekeeping despite the fact that she has never attended school. Apathy and disdain for women's education are hallmarks of Indian tradition before independence. At the tender age of twelve, Ganga marries into her brother's family and attempts to establish herself as a respectable house wife, but she is

eventually unsuccessful and her husband ends up feeling lonely and isolated. Despite the Professor's best efforts to educate her, Ganga shares some of the blame for her predicament. She makes no effort to better herself so that she might provide her husband with the intellectual company to which he aspires. Professor Harish Chandra thinks his wife, Ganga, should know how to read and write, but she has trouble with the basics.

“Her husband would say, going over them once, twice. ‘Now you read them on your own. Copy them down in this notebook afterwards that will help you memorize them. We’ll do the next lesson tomorrow.’ The woman copied down the letters carefully, but when it came to her husband’s daily test, she found she had forgotten which sound went with which letter. Then they would do the whole thing over again, adding a few more letters, because the husband didn’t have all the time in the world, and he wanted his wife to become a companion quickly.” (40)

Ganga, in her role as a wife, has demonstrated exceptional proficiency in managing the family, which has garnered the Professor's utmost satisfaction. However, the primary source of his discontent is in the insurmountable disparity that exists between them in terms of cultural and intellectual perspectives. The detrimental impacts of early traditional marriages have profound repercussions on society as a whole. Kapur portrays Ganga as a quintessential embodiment of traditional wifhood. Ganga diligently fulfills her role as a traditional wife, attending to even the most mundane responsibilities. It is important to note that Ganga's commitment to her duties stems not from a desire to earn her husband's love or devotion, but rather from her understanding of her obligations as a traditional wife.

“From washing his clothes to polishing his shoes, to Tidying his desk, dusting his precious books, filling his Fountain pens with ink, putting his records back in their Jackets, mending his clothes, stitching his shirts and kurtas, hemming his dhotis, seeing that they were properly starched¾ Ganga did it all.” (216)

Ganga, adhering to traditional gender roles, exhibits a resigned demeanour as she unwillingly accepts her circumstances without expressing any objections towards her husband, upon the professor's introduction of Virmati as his second wife. In his commentary, Bhagbhat Nayak makes an observation.

"The novel evokes some concern over the problems of women in a male-dominated society where laws for women are made by men in its social matrix and a husband stands as a ‘sheltering tree’ under which a woman proves her strength through her suffering." (103)

Ganga, as an adherent to traditional gender roles, aspires to assume complete control over the culinary sphere as the primary authority inside the household. Upon Virmati's attempted entry into the kitchen, Ganga engages in a prolonged period of weeping and lamentation, devoting the entire day to the arduous task of

cleaning and purifying the various utensils and cookware. By adopting this approach, she affirms her entitlements as a conventional spouse, ensuring that her role as a wife does not become diminished.

Kishori Devi, Professor Harish Chander's mother, is another traditional woman presented in the novel. She experiences significant distress upon hearing her son's covert relationships with Virmati. Devi has a profound sense of astonishment with the unexpected arrival of her son, accompanied by his recently wedded second spouse. Kapur adeptly depicts the character of Kishori Devi in a highly vulnerable and precarious situation. In his analysis of Manju Kapur's novel "*Difficult Daughters*," Bhagabat Nayak highlights the portrayal of Kishori Devi as a commendable female character. Nayak observes that Kishori Devi embodies the qualities of an exemplary woman, fulfilling her roles as a devoted wife and nurturing mother. Furthermore, she demonstrates her commitment to finding a resolution within the given circumstances while adhering to the customs and values of her own cultural heritage (Nayak 162).

Kasturi, a prominent character in the novel represents the first generation of women and serves as a symbol of tradition. Kapur strategically selects particular incidents that exemplify the concept of tradition. She has a strong adherence to tradition. In the narrative, Kasturi, as the mother of Virmati, fulfils the position of a mother figure that emerges as a significant influence within the patriarchal framework. She exemplifies the conventional attributes that are commonly associated with traditional femininity. She hails from a financially prosperous middle-class family with traditional values, adhering to the principles of Arya Samaj.

She is trained, even from her girlhood, that marriage is her destiny. As such, Kasturi was trained in the culinary arts, which were an essential qualification for a young girl to be married. Marriage changes the status of a daughter into the status of a daughter-in-law, and from then on, her in-laws become hers. And her chief duty as a daughter-in-law is to please her in-laws. Traditionally, she is well-equipped to be a daughter-in-law whose chief duty is to be good at cooking. Kasturi, herself, goes through many struggles in her life due to traditional marriage norms. Like Lajwanti, who has had two abortions due to unwanted pregnancies, she wished for a miscarriage with her eleventh pregnancy due to the physical toll of carrying so many children. Dai tries to cause a miscarriage using her medicine, but it doesn't work.

“Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not tired, when her feet and legs did not ache. Her back curved in towards the base of her spine, and carrying her children was a strain.”

In her portrayal of Kasturi's character, Manju Kapur effectively illustrates the detrimental condition of a woman's reproductive health, wherein Kasturi's persistent illness results in her emotional detachment from her own children. Due to her situation, she assumes the role of the ultimate embodiment of mother apathy. In her observation, Ruby Milhoutra notes:

“Kasturi’s repeated pregnancies made her sickly, resulting in her total dependence on Virmati to manage the household. As a natural consequence, her unique position in the home is lost, which she has to yield to her daughter quite unwillingly. Virmati thus becomes a ‘substitute’ and not the double that every wants her daughter to be. As a consequence, the relationship assumes hostile dimensions.” (165)

Ganga, Kishori Devi, and Kasturi are all typical examples of women who, despite their own difficulties, maintain their devotion to traditional values. Although these women come from an array of backgrounds and perspectives, they all adhere to conventional parenting norms.

## Conclusion

Manju Kapur is known for the feminist elements she incorporates in her novels. She talks about the different kinds of roles women play in society and how tradition enables male dominance and the marginalization of women. In her work *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur adeptly portrays the characters of conventional women, who embody gender stereotypes and serve as a significant manifestation of patriarchal influence. These individuals not only bear the weight of established customs and practices, but also endeavour to impart their knowledge and wisdom to the succeeding generation, so assuming the role of custodians and promoters of tradition.

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