



## A Quest for Self Identity in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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### Abstract:

While the beginnings of modern feminism can be traced to mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the latter two decades of twentieth century witnessed the rise of 'new' woman or the independent women, as complex cultural signifiers. The 'new women' broke free from conventional constraints, and voiced women's rights, progressive marriage system and changed concept of sexuality. This distinction has become a complex manifestation which creates new levels of tensions in post-independence women writings. Many Indian English women writers portray the independent woman who is not in conflict with the male, but rejects choiceness, and accepts responsibility for herself. Self-Identity is no more an imagined or abstract concept but a conflict between physical existence and social rights.

**Keywords:** Quest, identity, feminism, traditionalism, exemplary, liberated

### Narration

Manju Kapur is a professor of English at Miranda House, Delhi. She projects a new vision of Indian women in her fiction. Her first novel, *Difficult Daughters* received the commonwealth Writers Prize for best first book (1998). This novel is the story of three generations of women-Kasturi, Virmai and Ida. The present research paper attempts to evaluate the journey of Virmati, the protagonist towards independent status. Kasturi is a traditional woman and she wants that her children must take interest in pooja-path and traditions. But her daughter Virmati breaks all the chains of traditionalism and looks like 'new woman'. The search for control over one's identity is the key theme of *Difficult Daughters*.

Virmati, the heroine of *Difficult Daughters*, is the eldest of the long chain of children born to an ever-pregnant mother. In a way her life is smeared under the pressure of family responsibilities. Her childhood is lost in being a young mother to her siblings, yet her desire to study further never diminishes. She belongs to a typical;

traditional family, which follows the old traditions of marrying off their daughters after receiving the basic qualification of housekeeping. Virmati has to face different twists and turns due to her desire of higher education. She makes up her mind that, "She too had to go to Lahore, even if she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over (DD.17). She has to struggle a lot after her failure in FA. Her family members especially her mother Kasturi presses her to get married but she wants to have her own space, her own identity, and wants to taste the wine of freedom like her cousin Shakuntala. Once Shakuntala visits to her aunt's house and inspires her a lot and after that Virmati's life style changes and she starts thinking that it is possible to be something other than a wife.

There was an endless argument between 'education verses marriage'. But nobody listens to her. Virmati wants to give practice to her English, while her mother considers it insignificant. To Kasturi, looking after the needs of family, husband and children are the most important



duties that anything else. Virmati, doesn't get success in convincing her mother and gets herself engaged with an irrigation engineer Inderjeet. She wants to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond a husband and children "May be here was the club to her unhappiness. It was useless looking for answers inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom, and the bright lights of Lahore colleges. (DD.15). She has to struggle a lot to continue to her education after her engagement with Inderjeet. She joins A.S. College, "the bastion of male learning" to do B.A., where she falls in love with an Amritsar teacher known as the Professor". He is a married man and lives in Virmati's house as tenant. For Virmati professor's love was more stimulant than Inderjeet. She was getting herself tangled in the web of professor's love. She compares between her fiancé and the professor, so he rejects to marry Inderjeet and suggests her mother 'Let Indumati marry. Give her the khes you are making. I don't want any bedding, pots and pans, nothing?'(DD.55). She is locked in the godown when her grandfather Lala Diwan Chand comes to know about her affair with the professor., She feels suffocated in her house when she comes to know about her affair with the professor. She feels suffocated in her house when she comes to know about Ganga's pregnancy (professor's first wife) she decides to start her studies once again. She writes to Harish; "I am going to Lahore to do my BT. I want to be a teacher like you and Shakuntala Pehenji (DD.99). Thus the journey of 'a new woman' starts, who does not want, 'to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed. (DD. 85). She determines to close the chapter of her life with Harish, the professor and burns his letters. She starts a meaningful life in Lahore

with her roommate Swarna Lata. Swarna Lata is an active participant in the political and social movements of the day. Under the shade of friend like Swarna Lata, Virmati attempts to analyze the communal tension involved during the Indian freedom struggle. But, the professor's thoughts keep circling around her mind. Harish comes to meet her in Lahore. They meet and enjoy their life. Virmati, gets pregnant. Then she goes to Amritsar and manages a gold bangle from her father but only to sell it for her abortion. Harish enjoys with her but he neither takes the responsibility of the child nor the abortion. After this depressing incident, she decides not to entertain the professor any more. She goes to Sirmour, a hill station in Nahan to become a principal in Pratibha Kanya Vidyalaya. At this point her mother was very perplexed but Diwan Sahib says to her, "She will be like my own daughter, and Nahan like her own home." "The Maharani is interested in fostering education for girls, and the principal of her school will have a lot of status. People will treat her like Sita."(DD.166).

Virmati enjoys a free life here like a bee and tastes the honey of her life here, her quest for identity was satisfying. She has to exercise her responsibilities entirely by herself. In the micro-state she has no family or close friends. She attains a near exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, like Virginia Woolf's famous 'room of one's own' and yet she falls. Harish comes to meet her in Nahan. They meet secretly in Virmati's room in the dark night. But this news flatters in the air, and Virmati loses her employees' confidence and leaves the job.

She still has another option Shantiniketan, where she decides to go. She could have remade her life and



maintained her identity and independence if she could have succeeded in this journey. Unfortunately, she has to change the train in Delhi and she contacts a friend of Harish and her dreams of a spiritual awaking, of a renewed autonomy fades. She marries Harish, she is unwelcomed by Harish's family members. She lives here like a queen because no household works are in her share. Both Virmati and Ganga accuse each other of snatching away each other's rights. Though Virmati succeeds to marry the professor yet she does not secure any space for herself in the family. Harish's mother and wife Ganga, compel Virmati to lead a suffocating life in the tight walls of the house. Ganga, Harish's first wife exercises her full right on everything. Once again Virmati gets pregnant. This news changes the attitude of her mother-in-law towards her but unfortunately the baby is miscarriage. Now, Harish thinks that further study will improve her lot. Virmati goes to Lahore to do M.A. in Philosophy. She takes admission but without enthusiasm. After completing her M.A., when she returns she comes to know that all the members of the family have gone to Kanpur because of communal tension. After some time Virmati gets pregnant again and blessed with a girl child who is the narrator named Ida.

'Virmati is educated with the potential of benign economically independent through her life. She is a rare accomplishment for the women of the times. The major problem of her life springs from her love for the professor. There is hardly any other area of conflict that Virmati goes through.'

'Virmati is a new woman of colonial India and stands as a metaphor to explore the possibilities for modern women in education and economic independence who experiences humiliation and

disillusionment in their colonial matrix'. Manjuj Kapur has raised the 'question of women' during a political and social movement in colonial India for which:

We may term a novel 'feminist' for its analysis of gender a socially constructed for its understanding that change is possible and that narrative can play a part in it.<sup>3</sup>

There are two other female characters who deserve to mention, Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin, and Swarna Lata, her roommate in Lahore. Both are representative of an emerging 'New Women' that recurs in Indian Literature; the emancipated woman militant. Shakuntala appears from the beginning as the example of the 'modern' or 'liberated' women. She studies, teaches, and takes part in the political-Gandhian movement. She shares her 'liberated' lifestyle with a group of friends, whose activities she explains to her cousin, "we travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings, follow each other's work' read papers, attend seminars." (DD.15) She also shares her feelings of being independent with Virmati, "These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent." (DD.14-15)

Swarna Lata is the only female who gets out of life what she wants, without compromising too much. In the Punjab Women's student Conference she shines as an orator; "Heavy applause broke out as Swarna finished speaking." (DD.145). She also continues to take an active part in political activities after her marriage. Virmati was too much impressed by these two characters and wanted to flutter her wings like them.

Virmati breaks the patriarchal norms to assert her individuality and hopes to achieve self-fulfillment. But she proves to



be a loser, fails to create a space or herself for which she had been striving all along. Perhaps it is this inability of Virmati to strike independence roots and grow that makes Ida (Virmati's daughter) remark, "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother." (DD.01) Who is responsible for Virmati's failure? Perhaps the male-dominated society where laws are made by men and a husband stands as a 'sheltering tree' under which a woman proves her strength through her suffering. Kapur has defended this through her Virmati with an idea that;

The emergence of feminist ideas and feminist politics depends on the understanding that, all societies which divide the sexes into differing cultural, economic or political spheres, women are less valued than men. Feminism also depends on the premise that women can consciously and collectively change their social place.<sup>4</sup>

To sum up we would quote Gur Pyari Jindal "it would be a mistake to devalue Virmati's struggle because she failed, for what mattered is that she tried to break that patriarchal mould and she had an inner urge for independent existence and in the forties it was her great achievement." Like the modern woman Virmati has courage to fight against male chauvinism for her right of education, right of choosing her mate in life and economic independence. Virmati symbolizes the changed mindset of Indian girls who want to decide their future and refuse to be treated like things. And her gathering voice symbolizes the freedom the females run after. Thus in Virmati,

we see the incipient 'New Women' who is conscious, introspective, educated and wants to carve out a life for herself. Virmati's desire for establishing self-identity is "A value charged, almost a charismatic term, with its secured achievement regarded as equivalent to personal salvation." And her quest for identity is a "spiritual odyssey of the modern man who has lost his social and spiritual moorings and who is anxious to seek his roots."

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