

ARE DAUGHTERS DIFFICULT? TRACING VIRMATI'S
CONFUSION AND HELPLESSNESS IN MANJU KAPUR'S
DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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Abstract:

In a country such as India, thousands of girls spend their lives shrouded in countless insecurities as they wonder why they do not have the right to choose their own lives? Why they cannot decide for themselves whether they want to be housemakers or more. Why is marriage still the only reason of their birth? Manju Kapur belongs to the tradition of those Indian women writers who are keen to explore the perplexity in the mind of young girls caught in the opposing forces of tradition and modernity. Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* puts forward that part of feminine experience that is out of reach of male psyche and therefore is an authentic and sensitive portrayal of the conflicts, traumas, nuances, ambiguities and contradictions of the female psyche. The novel depicts the dreams and desires of a girl on the one hand and their denial, deprivation and disappointment on the other. It is a tale of how 'individual will' has to slurp the potion of a hydra-headed society. This paper is an attempt to explore the opposition (overt and covert) at home, the suspicion and scorn of the society and the moral predicament in the mind of Virmati (the protagonist of *Difficult Daughters*). Kapur skillfully hints at the male hegemony in the society, where Virmati continues her quest amidst psychological uncertainties and insecurities.

Keywords: Female psyche, feminine, feminism, female centered criticism, male hegemony, insecurities, psychological uncertainties, women writers

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Manju Kapur belongs to the tradition of those Indian women writers who are keen to explore the perplexity in the mind of young girls caught in the opposing forces of tradition and modernity. Perhaps the most compelling engagement for her protagonists is the construction of 'a new identity' plastered with freedom and self-assertion. Thus begins a process of negotiating and renegotiating, the struggle that never ceases. Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* puts forward that part of feminine experience that is out of reach of male psyche and therefore is an authentic and sensitive portrayal of the conflicts, traumas, nuances, ambiguities and contradictions of the female psyche. This text understands "a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible contexts." (Jaidev) *Difficult Daughters* recounts the story of a young woman named Virmati, her desires to study, her rejection of an arranged marriage, her involvement with her married neighbor, whose second wife she becomes and the subsequent vicissitudes in her life including her existential choices and their ambivalent outcomes.

Located mostly in the India of 1940's, the novel has been hailed as a saga of exploitation and expatriation during the freedom struggle. The theme is colonial in its context but appeals much to the post-colonial Indian mind for certain issues such as the psychological victimization of women in the social matrix of the colonial middle class. Therefore, with the freedom struggle at large, Kapur gives a 'kaleidoscopic pattern' of an individual in particular. Christopher Rollason puts it as:

The search for control over one's destiny, the key theme of *Difficult Daughters*, refers not only to the independence aspired to and obtained by a nation but also to the independence yearned after (and finally not obtained) by a woman and members of that same nation. (Rollason, *Women on the Margins* 01)

The main story of the novel revolves around Virmati, the eldest daughter of an Arya Samaj family, bubbling with the wish to move forward, with education as her weapon. She undertakes this journey with brilliant dreams in her eyes and determination in her heart. However, her journey ultimately drives her 'dreams to doom' and she pales into insignificance leaving behind a plethora of questions. The narrative fabric of *Difficult Daughters* is woven by Ida, Virmati's daughter, as she tries to explore herself. Even though both the mother and the daughter seem distanced by time and space yet the former remains, a vibrant presence in the latter's consciousness all through her life. Ida, an educated woman, divorced and childless, apparently leads a freer life than her mother in external terms, yet inside her she feels some of

the same anxieties as had plagued her mother: “no matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately.” (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* 03)

The novel depicts the dreams and desires of a girl on the one hand and their denial, deprivation and disappointment on the other. It is a tale of how ‘individual will’ has to slurp the potion of a hydra-headed society. Manju Kapur has recorded this through the experiences and memories of Virmati while keeping her surroundings, her circumstances and her cravings into consideration.

She becomes the representatives of those who try to break the taboos and yet fail to prove their spark because of their loyalties, which often crisscross in their cases. (Mishra, *Studies in Women Writer’s* 191)

Anyhow what is of prime significance in Virmati’s case is the way she single-handedly tries to resolve the conflict between individual satisfaction and traditional norms. She is the one who rebels, who rejects the established principles and moves out of the family establishments to face and learn from the numerous paradigmatic situations arising thereafter.

Living in a joint family and being the eldest of her macro-family with eleven brothers and sisters, Virmati confronted small and petty bickering every moment. She could not totally shrug off the sense of responsibility for her family deeply embedded in her psyche. However somewhere deep down in her heart she wanted to lead a freer life than what had been offered to her. Her mother’s apprehensions translate the agony, which she had in stock: “Why was her daughter so restless all the time? ” (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* 12) She is torn between duty towards the house for which she symbolizes honor and pride and a strong desire for education. Virmati realizes very early that life’s horizons are wider than those that have been shown to her. But the pressure of actually living and urging to have whatever is in dreams, neither permits fantasy nor is it conducive to prolonged meditation and self- analysis. Therefore Virmati suffers psychologically as countless uncertainties and insecurities keep on piling up as she faces the actualities of day-to-day life.

Problems in Virmati’s life are at rest until her family moves to a new place. Part of the house is rented out to the family of a professor, “an Oxford returned [Sic] English literature man, who sways in the sky talking high about beauty, symbols and hidden meanings in literature.” (Bhatnagar, *Tradition and Modernity* 01) He was married as a child to an illiterate woman and had two kids. Under his influence, Virmati learns the value of education and higher things in life.

She understands that knowledge would give her an independent status in life so that she can think freely and decide things for herself. Her acquaintance with the professor opens up new avenues for her.

Virmati is scheduled to marry Inderjeet, a canal engineer but because of some death in his family, their marriage is a little postponed. The delay in her marriage paves way for her tête-à-tête with the professor. The matter between them moves a step forward from the mere admiration of music to a desire for each other. They fall in love with each other. Her education helps her graduate emotionally and compare rationally about her life with her fiancé and the professor. She thinks about Inderjeet as “anybody who digs in canals all day must have a soul as dull and uninspiring as the mud he deals with. What pain will he suffer---.” (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* 57) She is termed ungrateful by her family members when she shows her unwillingness to marry the construction engineer. While she deliberately defers her arranged marriage, she constantly moves in her utopian world of love and romance. But there is no denying the fact that despite her sunny apprehensions about her love with the professor, she is conscious of the impossibilities in the two families to accept their unacceptable desires.

Virmati’s story is a tale of love, compromise and sorrow because she is torn between family duty, the desire to learn and illicit love. She is badly caught in the web of emotions and loses her hold on herself. Virmati waits throughout her life for getting the favours of her lover but he physically enjoys her and passes a long period in such activities.

Ironically, the professor speaks much but he means little. Probably he thinks of playing with her body without giving her the due space. (Mishra, *Studies in Women Writers* 197)

In the beginning, it is made evident that an immature Virmati does not ponder over her position. Even though she does not hesitate to offer all sorts of blandishments in bed, she finds it hard to live in peace as a secret wife of the professor. Her mental insolvency is the cause of her physical involvement. Her journey towards him grows intense and she feels incomplete without him. She longs to be with him but knows it clearly that his fetishes will be her future. When she analyses her situation she is filled with remorse and nausea. This wave of nausea gives her ‘thoughts that lie too deep for tears.’ With utmost shock and to her utter surprise she realizes that freedom for her has meant only evasion and exemption from responsibilities. She feels alienated and insecure from her own self: “She feels out of place, an outcast among all these women---.” (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* 144) Therefore, Virmati despite her vacillations fails because of her

vulnerability. She becomes a victim of her passion even though she realizes her lapses. The guilt in her conscience keeps on pricking her mind. “She has been a votary of love in violation of her moral ethics.” (Nayak, *Indian English Literature* 162) She understands it in the true sense that the professor’s love for her and his wife as well. She knows that he is realistically correct because he has been enjoying the best of both the worlds. Manju Kapur through the sufferings of Virmati highlights how, “male ego-centricism blinds men to the situation of women, who may be placed in agonizing circumstances on account of their relationship with men. (Bala and Chandra, *50 Years* 108)

As tradition makes a woman an adorable creature as also the beast of burden, Virmati too has no escape. In her struggle to break from the pattern of sexuality and sensuality and to discover herself as a human being she completely loses sight of her authentic self. Initially she was happy because it seemed to her that there was an opportunity in the form of the professor knocking at the door however later she finds it to be illusory and a sand trap. She is stuck half way:

In her effort to retain her sources of instinctual gratification and her struggle to seek newer socially acceptable ways of satisfying her need for prestige and esteem, she is inevitably penalized. (Krishnaswamy, *Woman in Indian Fiction* 63)

With Virmati, the incongruities of time and fate also play truant and give her melancholy. The professor always talked of his undying love for her but never talked of marriage even though “he gets her in all sorts of troubles including getting her pregnant.” (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* 50) He compliments her for being an intelligent and learned companion but turns deaf ears to her complaints. Harish, the professor carries within him the vision of modernity which the West has imbued on him but his “modernity however, constantly grapples with the traditional patterns of relation across community, a caste and gender that continue to be a part of his lived experiences.” (Chauhaan, *Desert in Bloom* 143)

It has been suggested by critics that as long as caste, region and religion remain inescapable part of the identity of an individual, he cannot be wholly free from the specific community howsoever keen he is to transcend the bond. The professor does not leave his bindings to adopt Virmati. However Virmati does partially transcend the teachings of her family regarding what is desirable and undesirable. She is educated, with the potential of being economically independent throughout her life -- a rare accomplishment for women of her times.

The major crisis for her however, springs from her love for the professor. Nevertheless, the attitude of the professor to her and their relationship is related to specific social and cultural processes. These laws of social and cultural institutions stand in sharp opposition to Virmati's relative autonomy without which her "private space" (Chatterjee, *Fragments of Nation* 26) cannot be delineated. Thus because of the professor's incapability to shed off his ties and do as he promised in the beginning of their affair,

...the community remains active within Virmati, at the subterranean level and keeps intruding in the dynamics of her interpersonal and group relationships. Therefore, this duality manifests itself in infinite ways to make her a victim of her circumstances and melancholy. (Mishra, *A Thematic Study* 203)

It is of great importance that Virmati's existence as an individual is completely shattered and tattered with wanderings that lead her nowhere. After leaving her family, she goes to a place called Nahan, where she becomes the principal of a school. This period appears as one utopian moment in Virmati's life. However, the repeated visits of the 'fatal' professor make Virmati lose her employer's confidence and she is obliged to quit her school, house and employment. Despite all this, she has another option open to her and that is going to Shantiniketan for higher education. It had been the destination where she glimpses an opening but she finally eludes it. It would be apt to say

Had Virmati completed the journey she never finished, she could have remade her life there. She could have met new people, maintained her independence and at the very least found new opportunities. (Rollason, *Women on the Margins* 04)

By the time she plans to go Shantiniketan, unfortunately, she falls prey of another trap of time. She contacts an acquaintance in Delhi, who is also a friend of the professor. On seeing Virmati's sorry state, this friend arranges for her marriage with the professor. Therefore, the glimpse of "a spiritual awakening and of a renounced autonomy fades into distance." (Rollason, *Women on Margins* 04)

Karen Horney, a distinguished psychologist, believed that "feminine psychology is based on lack of confidence and an overemphasis of the love relationship...." (Hall and Lindzey, *Theories of Personality* 176) Applying Horney's conclusion to Virmati, we detect that she overvalues love and is extremely afraid of being deserted or left alone. She becomes a parasite in relation to her own self. Her insecurity and anxiousness makes her develop various strategies by

which she begins cope with her feeling of isolation and helplessness. She becomes overtly submissive in order to get her share of love. That is why there is hardly any other area of conflict that Virmati goes through after she gets married. She is never able to move beyond the halo of the professor and her jealous obsession with his first wife.

The pages of *Difficult Daughters* speak not only of Virmati, but a large number of other 'difficult daughters,' who succeed better than she does in their struggles for independence in their lives. At the centre of the narrative, there is a young woman who fights but falls by the wayside. The particularity of Virmati's destiny, at every stage of her life is that she has to exercise her responsibilities entirely by herself. It is right to say that:

In the micro-state to which her destiny leads her she has no family or close friend to call her own. She believes she needs a man and makes a wrong choice returning and re-returning to a relationship that had brought her nothing but suffering. (Rollason, *Women on the Margins* 04)

In the conflict between Virmati's mind and body, the body always wins and the mind suffers. Her search for an independent identity ultimately deprives her of all identities. After a number of vicissitudes, she marries the man she loves (or she thinks she loves) and comes to stay in his home at Amritsar. The professor's installation of Virmati in his house is a little consolation to her because she had suffered irrevocable lines of partition and pain around her. After her marriage with the professor, she wishes to find some peace and solace. However it would not be wrong to say that they have a disastrous marriage marked with sadness, disapproval and engulfed in melancholy, depression and despair. It is at this juncture that she realizes how education and intellect cannot defeat the ethos of an age. Her megalomania drives her to become a stranger in a world where she had yearned to be. Some critics have sympathized with Virmati by suggesting that,

Though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is caught in another where her free spirit is curbed and all she does is 'adjust, compromise and adapt.' (Malik, *Glimpses of the Incipient* 135)

However, the psychological annihilation of Virmati, at the hands of her own family and her husband's family, should not be thought as a fatality. What happens to her is no doubt the most representative destiny of women, quantitatively and statistically but *Difficult Daughters* also suggests that other paths also exist even though choices are by no means simple or either-or. To quote the perceptive comment of Dora Sales in this context-

In this novel, one needs to stress that the disjunction between the weight of gender- determined tradition, on the one hand, and the yearning for independence and self-affirmation on the other, does not appear as a simple dichotomy of life choices. In no sense are things black and white. There is a whole range of complex emotional shades of grey between the two alternatives. (Dora Sales, *Memory, Imagination and Desires* 08)

Manju Kapur brings out very specifically that in a country like India, thousands of girls sit within the walls of their houses and their lives are shrouded in countless insecurities as they wonder why they do not have the right to choose their own lives, decide for themselves whether they want to be housemakers or more. Why is marriage still the only reason of their birth? *Difficult Daughters* is purely based on the ideology that freedom is just a state of mind. But what is really pathetic is that we may have our land to ourselves but our minds are still locked up in the confines of colonial culture when we talk of subjects dealing with girls and women. These issues sound stale but the fact of the matter is that their urgency is to be realized so that they are dealt appropriately.

Virmati's state depicts the struggle of numerous women who wish to come out of the state of stagnation. The rebellion that rises in the heart of these women against their surroundings is many a times smothered by the male in the family or by the pressures of circumstances. The reason for a woman's submissive role in the society, as Dr. Radhakrishnan points out is that, "centuries of tradition have made Indian women the most patient women in the world, whose pride is suffering. (Kapur, *Marriage and Working* 10) The opposition (overt and covert) at home, the suspicion and scorn of the society and the moral predicament in their own divided mind cause tensions for women in their effort to stand on their own legs. But with the changing times there has been a drastic change in the position of women as well.

There is certainly no denying the fact that the new generation women crave for more space. However this can be defended on the grounds of maladjustment in the fast changing flexible world of today. Kapur has tried to assert more voice to her female characters so that they do not hesitate to speak and do as they desire. In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati had just one concern and that is to be married to the person of her choice. The claim for rights and status becomes vociferous in Virmati who expects from her partner not only his physical participation but also his social and emotional support. But to her utmost displeasure the professor does not pay any heed to her desires and needs after they both get married.

She finds herself struck between Scylla and Charybdis by leaving her family and loving the professor. (Nayak, *Indian English Literature* 160)

When Virmati thinks over her situation, says in helplessness-

...as for me, I know, I have failed in my duty and I will be punished one day. No one can escape from their Karma. May be what is happening to me is part of it, and there is no use protesting. (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* 84-85)

Kapur skillfully hints at the male hegemony in the society, where Virmati continues her quest amidst psychological uncertainties and insecurities. Near the climax, her suggestion to name her own daughter 'Bharti' is not lent an ear by the patriarchal threshold dominated by the professor in her case. Despite such pathetic situation around, turns inward and takes different routes of release and escape. She does look back and console herself with fond memories but does not lose sight of her present. She may find melancholy waiting for her even in the end but she doesn't run away from it, rather she accepts it. Her state matches with what Virginia Woolf says –

Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged. Life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelop surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. (Woolf, *The Common Reader* 189)

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