

# Conflicts and Resolutions of Virmati and the Exploitation of Women in a Patriarchal Society in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*: A Critique

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## Abstract:

This paper examines the portrayal of conflicts and resolutions experienced by women within a patriarchal society as depicted in Manju Kapur's novel "Difficult Daughters." Kapur, a prominent Indian Punjabi novelist, presents a poignant narrative that delves into the struggles of characters like Virmati, whose yearning for love clashes with societal expectations. Burdened by the pressures of tradition, Virmati finds herself entangled in a relationship with Professor Harish Chandra, which ultimately leads her to become his second wife, despite feelings of humiliation and dishonor. Through Virmati's story, Kapur sheds light on the complexities of marriage and the vulnerability of women in abusive relationships. This analysis contributes to the broader conversation on gender dynamics and societal norms, emphasizing the need to challenge entrenched patriarchal structures and advocate for women's empowerment and autonomy.

**Keywords:** 1. Difficult Daughters, 2. Patriarchy, 3. Gender dynamics, 4. Abusive relationships, 5. Women's empowerment.

## Introduction

Manju Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters*, is semi-autobiographical and can be aptly termed a "feminine Bildungsroman." The story explores male chauvinism and the suffering of women, telling the poignant tale of Virmati. Coming from an "austere household," Virmati demonstrates unwavering bravery as she contests her parents' and family's dominance. Her thoughts are consumed by Harish, a married professor, and she longs for him to be her husband.

The plot centers on Virmati's quest to find her own identity. She is the eldest of her mother's eleven children and shows great patience while caring for them. Her mother is preoccupied with her marriage and having more children, which fuels Virmati's rebellious attitude. Virmati's free spirit is further highlighted in her relationship with her cousin, Shakuntala. Virmati listens, thrilled to be her mother's confidante, yet she is also drawn to Shakuntala, who embodies a life with responsibilities beyond just a husband and children: "Virmati listened, thrilled to be her mother's confidante, but drawn towards Shakuntala, to one whose responsibilities went beyond a husband and children" (17).

Virmati decides to imitate her cousin. Her mother, Kasturi, warns her not to follow her cousin, who she believes is a misguided example of a modern woman. Kasturi becomes wild and uncontrolled when Virmati expresses her desire to go to Lahore to pursue her studies. She grabs Virmati by the hair and bangs her hand against the wall, hoping to change her daughter's plans. "I want to be like you, Pehnji," Virmati feigns admission (15). She muses over the possibility of becoming "anything other than a wife" (17).

Virmati desires to pursue her education. She rebels against her family after being coerced into marrying a canal engineer. The passing of her great aunt delays the marriage for a year, which becomes a turning point for her. During this time, her desire to focus on her education takes priority, and the wedding is called off. However, a new complication arises when she finds herself drawn to Harish, a professor, despite his marital status. This unexpected development throws her carefully laid plans into question.

Virmati is young and submissive, while Professor Harish is an experienced, married man unrestricted by societal norms. He serves as a prime illustration of a patriarchal society. He is content with her affection, but it disrupts the little tranquillity she had. Harish weaves a web of deceit, manipulating her by whispering promises in one ear while subtly undermining her fiancé in the other. The mounting pressure becomes a relentless tide threatening to drown her. Her world, once secure, becomes a tangled mess of guilt and confusion.

Virmati continues to receive letters from the professor. However, she is confined to a godown and compelled to marry Indrajit. Her mother reprimands her and makes her feel ashamed. Despite this, Virmati is still unaware of Harish's true intentions. She finds solace in his love letters, which give her strength and independent aspirations.

Virmati sees Harish as her man, but his actions indicate that he intends to use her only as a tool to achieve his goals. He expects her to be available whenever he needs her, particularly for his sexual satisfaction. She continues to receive letters from him, with the help of one of her sisters, Paro, outlining all the tasks she must complete. Harish has no reservations about visiting her parents and making a marriage proposal, but he never seriously considers marrying her. For him, it is convenient if she remains unmarried. He encourages her to rebel against her family, and she continues to receive letters from him. "Do you know how an earthworm lives? It inhabits a very limited space; its whole life is spent within the darkness of the soil. It can neither feel nor see." (Difficult Daughters, Page 102)

Cultivating our intellect opens doors to new experiences and a richer understanding of the world. Lifelong learning is essential; it allows us to grow and thrive. Any part of us that is not used will atrophy, and the same is true of our minds. Remember, it was through our shared desire to learn that we were first drawn to each other.

Harish causes Virmati's spirit to atrophy. He never changes and eventually displays his true colors. She greatly embarrasses and suffocates him, yet she doesn't strike back or harbor grudges. She has a blind affection for him. When she learns that the professor's wife is pregnant, she becomes upset and realizes she is being mistreated. Harish enjoys the best of both worlds, leaving Virmati in a tragic situation with neither a husband nor a fiancé.

When Harish is with Virmati, he talks about his family and shows an odd lack of interest in her feelings. Does he not feel guilty about his love for Virmati when he is with Ganga? Virmati cannot hold herself accountable for his actions. She feels bad for Ganga and helpless about her own affection for the professor. Virmati is trapped between two opposing forces. She was initially drawn to the professor because of his affection. By loving him, she intertwined her identity with his, and she struggles to understand his actions. She is not ready to let go of her love. At the outset of their relationship, she was courageous, opposing her

parents and the patriarchal culture. However, she later finds herself reduced to the status of a concubine. The professor is unwilling to take responsibility, even if she becomes pregnant. He leaves her without marrying her. Feeling abandoned, Virmati becomes desperate and has an abortion. She vows never to see him again. Despite Harish's visit, she is not persuaded. He continues to take advantage of her, treating her as his property.

Kapur also makes it clear that politics, wherever they may take place, can sever even the strongest human relationships. Swarna Latha, Virmati's roommate, is in love with Ashrafi, who was studying English Honours along with her at Lahore College for Women. Both stood for senior studentship in student elections. The college, with more Hindus, Christians, and Sikhs than Muslims, saw most votes go to Swarna Latha, leading to her election victory. Kapur writes: "Obviously, she still hasn't forgiven me. I hear she's joined the youth wing of the Muslim League. Ashrafi! The most apolitical person that was! How does one stop thinking of someone one used to love, Viru? How does one stop remembering? Swarna shook herself, adding, 'It's something I have to get used to, I suppose. It happens all the time.'" (Difficult Daughters, page 135)

Virmati is unable to participate in Swarnalata's fight for independence because she is overcome by love. For Harish, however, it is merely a pastime, an activity to be enjoyed when convenient. But for Virmati, love overwhelms her senses, transforming her from a curious, aspirational, and dreamy young woman into a drab, aimless one. She becomes content with the limitations that love places on her. Her inner critic is relentless, constantly pointing out her flaws. She questions her own liberation. Although she came seeking freedom, she feels disconnected from the other women, whose sharp minds actively shape the world at conferences and political events. In contrast, her focus on love seems frivolous, a nagging worry.

At the Punjab Women's Student Conference, she feels out of place. Her love for Harish makes her egotistical and obsessed. Surrounded by empowered women, she feels inadequate. Harish's love is a refuge, but a nagging voice whispers that she needs more for true fulfillment and attainment.

In an article entitled "Deconstructing Mother-Daughter Relationship: A Study of Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters" published in the journal *The Criterion*, Judith Kegan Gardiner observes that "the word 'identity' is paradoxical in itself, meaning both sameness and distinctiveness, and its contradictions proliferate when it is applied to women" (347). After she marries Harish, Virmati's search for identity is replaced with a battle for survival. She becomes a pariah, constantly pining for a chance to wash her husband's clothes. Her ideas of assertiveness shift from outside the home to inside. She thinks it is necessary to wash Harish's clothes to uphold her rights as a wife. However, she is aware that "she would travel mutely, tight-lipped, on the route her destiny had mapped out for her" (196). Everything changes to suit Harish, even her education. When he wants her by his side, her thoughts shift away from education.

In Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati succumbs to the Professor's passion, subverting the legal system, conjugal ties, and customary marriage laws. She finds herself caught up in an extramarital relationship with the married professor, who physically and mentally abuses her.

Harish disobeys the sacred act of matrimony. He is ecstatic to see Virmati while she works as a teacher at Pratibha Kanya Vidyalaya in Sirmour, a hill state. He violates her space, forcing his way into her cottage. The intimacy that follows is a brutal exertion of power, not a shared act of love. Consequences are never a concern for him; he simply wants to use a woman as a slave. This is evident during their sexual encounters, which Kapur details extensively, illustrating how a domineering man can sexually enslave a woman and exert hegemony over her.

Forceful and unwilling sexual acts illustrate how a woman can be sexually enslaved and conquered without her consent, akin to vicious rape. A rebellious heroine, Virmati marries the man she loves again as his second wife, causing her family to turn against her. Despite facing harassment for pursuing unconventional careers and shouldering most of the unpaid domestic burden, many women still strive to break into the workforce. Virmati is asked to consent to a prearranged union, but she disobeys their preferences and embarks on the journey of a disobedient woman.

In the towns of Amritsar and Lahore, the novel *Difficult Daughters* uses the backdrop of India's partition to tell the story of complex women navigating personal struggles. It's a woman's story, after all. A married professor proposes to Virmati, and the novel explores the experiences of three generations of women, highlighting their marital disillusionment. Women are treated like consumer goods in marriage, turning into objects that men can use for sex against their will. The three female generations—Virmati, Kasturi, and Ida—represent three phases of Indian womanhood in marriage.

Instead of treating women as equals, the sexual exploitation of women is the norm. Mother Kasturi symbolizes pre-independence, suffering under oppressive patriarchal control. She is portrayed as the ideal mother, enduring anguish and misery both as a mother and a wife. Kasturi is always exhausted, with constant pain in her feet and legs: "She couldn't recall a moment when she wasn't" (Page 7). During the Indian Independence War, Virmati desires a married man and is forced to rebel against her family, aspiring to avoid humiliation. Her daughter, Ida, is divorced and tells the story her mother shared. Through these three female protagonists, Kapur illustrates the cycle of a woman's life. As a child, Virmati performs household chores. After marriage, she is expected to have children, similar to Kasturi, whose illness is revealed after having 11 children.

In an article entitled "Deconstructing Mother-Daughter Relationship: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*," published in the journal *The Criterion*, K.R. Sujatha and S. Gokilavani observe: "The nature of motherhood is dependent on the cultures and societies that have moulded them. Indian motherhood is inculcated in the woman from the day of her birth. She is raised to look forward to nothing else and she rates her worth by her efficiency to fulfil this role" (147).

Kasturi's life became devoted to her family once she became a mother. How entrapped could a woman be by nature? Virmati might symbolize India's quest for independence on a larger scale. She expresses her rebellious inclination toward ingrained customs and desires to distinguish herself. However, she feels trapped when she marries Professor Harish, damaging her mental health. She embodies the idea of a woman bound and overworked by family obligations. Ida, Virmati's daughter, born in the years following independence, gains recognition as a strong, independent woman. Her marriage falls apart, and she sets out on a quest to learn more about her mother's past. In Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati is the oldest daughter. Kasturi was born in Amritsar into a respectable Arya Samaji business family and was delighted with her fertility, bringing a new life into the world each year. Either she is sick, or she is childbearing. Virmati must manage the home and look after her mother's children. She receives training in sewing, embroidery, and other domestic tasks after graduating, essentially completing her studies. She is expected to find a good marriage but desires to continue her education and have options. Her cousin Shakuntala, dressed in a single gold bangle and a man's watch, inspires her. Shakuntala is unafraid to discuss her open social encounters, reads papers, plans lectures, and mentors students as a member of the Gandhian freedom movement.

Virmati's persona is complex. She seeks connections with people that will allow her to be herself and wants some measure of control over her life. In a society with strong traditions like India, her desires are

rejected and mocked. She is restricted to arranged marriages because she is a woman and must compromise, adapt, and make adjustments due to the male-chauvinist culture. She decides to avoid being influenced by her mother, and her education helps instill an attitude of caution. She rebels against her family, aware that pursuing higher education will be hampered by marriage. Marriage would take away her freedom and force her under the domination of men. Eventually, she succeeds in her rebellion, escaping from her house. Virmati's mother is puzzled by this audacious move and cannot grasp what Virmati is saying.

### Conclusion

In *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur explores the struggles of women in a patriarchal society through Virmati's journey from a dutiful daughter to a rebellious woman. Her relationship with Harish exemplifies the exploitation and manipulation women endure. The narrative underscores how societal expectations force women to sacrifice their aspirations for familial obligations. Kapur illustrates the generational impact of patriarchy through Virmati, Kasturi, and Ida. Kasturi endures suffering as a traditional pre-independence mother, Virmati struggles for autonomy and education, and Ida, the post-independence daughter, seeks to understand her mother's struggles while reclaiming her own identity.

Virmati's character highlights the deep-seated conflicts women face in their quest for self-identity. Despite her efforts to break free, she remains ensnared in exploitation and emotional turmoil. Her realization of Harish's true intentions and her subsequent actions underscore the ongoing struggle for women's liberation. Kapur's critique of patriarchal exploitation and mother-daughter relationships provides profound insights into systemic oppression. Through Virmati's story, Kapur emphasizes the necessity of education, self-awareness, and resilience in challenging patriarchal norms and achieving true independence. The narrative serves as a reminder of the enduring fight for women's rights and the importance of supporting each generation in their quest for equality.

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