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## The Elements of Patriarchy and Woman Emancipation in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*: A Study

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### Abstract:

The patriarchal and emancipatory elements of Manju Kapur's debut fiction *Difficult Daughters* are examined in this research study, with an emphasis on the sociocultural limitations and the changing female identity in an inflexibly traditional Indian society. With a focus on how women internalise these standards, the research critically analyses how patriarchal institutions and norms are portrayed as controlling both the characters' private and public lives. The heroine Virmati's defiance of traditional gender norms and her fight for independence in the face of social and familial expectations are at the heart of the examination. While evaluating the constraints imposed by deeply ingrained societal ideals, the study explores the ways in which education, self-awareness, and emotional agency serve as instruments of emancipation. The fight across generations among female characters, including Virmati, her mother Kasturi, and her cousin Shakuntala, provides a window into how perceptions about gender, identity, and independence have changed over time. Additionally, the research assesses how Kapur's story, with its intricate characterisations and plot structure, both challenges and reflects feminist ideals. By tackling these issues, the study hopes to highlight the book's simultaneous engagement with tradition and change, illuminating the complex process of female emancipation in a patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** The patriarchy system, Freeing oneself, Traditional gender roles, Disagreement between generations, feminism, Education and self-discovery

### Introduction

Manju Kapur, who was born in Amritsar in 1948, becomes a well-known author with a feminist perspective. Her prominent new voices making her presence known to all. Her works explore the frustration, resistance, retribution, and rebellion of social norms experienced by women. She speaks out against male chauvinism in order to defend women's rights to economic independence.

Although patriarchy and woman emancipation are two distinct ideas, an avid reader or critical researcher will see them as two interwoven ideas that should be taken carefully. As the notions of Patriarchy and Woman Liberation each stand for contemporary thought and behaviour, it is impossible to explore one of these concepts without referencing the other. In this situation, one stands for rebutting the other. As a result, the researcher will discuss the two problems as a single notion in this paper. The concept of patriarchy refers to an unwritten societal structure in which men are granted the right to enjoy all facets of life, including social, cultural, religious, economic, and political components, while women are treated as inferior human beings. In family and social issues, women are given the least amount of consideration; their opinions are not valued, and their feelings are not taken into account. The British sociologist, Sylvia Walby states that patriarchy is “a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women” (Walby, 20). As a result, it is clear that the patriarchal system favours men and exploits women in all ways.

Women emancipation is concept in which women, and disadvantaged women in particular, are given access to and control over all types of resources. It is the action of releasing someone from another person's control. Enjoying equality, improved health and education, higher per capita income, more rapid and inclusive economic growth, and increased global competitiveness by women can be termed as women emancipation.

### **Review of Literature**

Numerous academicians' and researchers' studies provide a wide range of critical views on how gender, identity, and societal systems are treated in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. The study “Search of Identity: A Study of Manju Kapur's Novel “Difficult Daughters”” (2016) by Ajaz Ahmad Bhat, Showkat Ahmad Wani, and Alka Gopal explores how Virmati's conflict between tradition and modernity mirrors the broader search for female identity in patriarchal environments. They contend that cultural limitations taint Virmati's quest for self-liberation, making it a difficult and complicated path. By examining the generational changes in women's resistance and subjugation, Anindita Chatterjee's article “A Study of Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters: Virmati, Ida and Shakuntala” (2013) places Virmati's personal rebellion in the context of the larger family dynamics by contrasting it with the sacrifices made by other female characters, such as her mother Kasturi and sister-in-law Shakuntala. In “Manju Kapur's “Difficult Daughters”: A Feminist Perspective” (2019) by Avinash Chander explores the novel's feminist themes, arguing that although the story confronts the oppressive structures of patriarchy, it also provides a critique through Virmati's quest for education and autonomy. Mehta Kashmira examines how Manju Kapur's writings, particularly *Difficult Daughters*, examine the

tension between traditional family values and the shifting social order in “Tradition Versus Modernity in Manju Kapur’s Novels” (2019). The article highlights Virmati’s personal development and the resistance from society to her emotional and educational liberation. In “A New Woman in Manju Kapur’s ‘Difficult Daughters’” (2019), Priyanka and Manisha Yadav highlight how Virmati is portrayed as a ‘new woman’ in the face of patriarchal conventions, presenting her as a symbol of feminist advancement while also acknowledging the constraints imposed by her society’s structure. “Narrative of Resistance: A Critical Study of “Difficult Daughters” by Manju Kapur” (2021) by Priyanka Kumari and Niraj Dang emphasises Virmati’s defiance of patriarchal norms as a crucial component of her character development, emphasising how her individual hardships mirror broader feminist movements in India. In their analysis of “Patriarchal Hegemony in Manju Kapur’s ‘Difficult Daughters’” (2016), Ranganath V. N. Ch. and Dwivedi R. S. contend that the book not only challenges patriarchy but also shows how women internalise patriarchal forces, limiting their agency even when they try to rebel against them. The idea of emancipation is further complicated by Dr veena Singh and Bijender Singh’s “From Marginality to Centrality: A Study of Female Protagonists in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* and *Home*”, which examines how Kapur’s female protagonists move from marginalised positions to central figures within their own lives. Singh suggests that this process is frequently accompanied by loneliness and a lack of female solidarity. When taken as a whole, these works add to a comprehensive understanding of *Difficult Daughters* by highlighting the difficulties of women’s liberty in a patriarchal culture and the complicated relationship between individual freedom and social expectations.

### **Objectives**

The purpose of this investigation is

To analyse how patriarchal institutions and standards are portrayed in the story

To examine the protagonist’s defiance of conventional gender norms

To investigate how women’s decisions are influenced by social and familial expectations

To examine the generational struggle for identity and independence among female characters

To look into how education and self-awareness contribute to women’s liberation

To evaluate how the plot and characters in the book either support or contradict feminist ideas

### **Methodology**

This study examines the patriarchal and emancipatory themes in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* using a non-empirical approach and qualitative textual analysis. Through critical reading, feminist literary criticism, and interpretive analysis of the storyline, characters, and narrative structure, the study investigates how the novel

depicts societal expectations, gender roles, and the protagonist's struggle for independence and identity.

### Discussion

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* offers a nuanced examination of the tension between established patriarchy and the pursuit of female liberation within the socio-political framework of pre- and post-Independence India. The tale centres on Virmati, a young woman who boldly confronts the stringent expectations of her traditional Punjabi family. Her pursuit of knowledge and emotional satisfaction manifests as a conflict between old ideals and contemporary ambitions. Kapur's depiction of rebellion is not idealised; rather, it is shown as a harrowing journey characterised by solitude, remorse, and inner turmoil.

The story illustrates how patriarchal structures—manifested via family, marriage, and society conventions—endeavor to regulate both women's behaviour and their ideas and desires. Virmati's quest for independence via education and affection is laden with emotional distress, underscoring the significant price of claiming one's agency. Through examining these challenges, Kapur constructs a story that interrogates the underpinnings of female oppression while acknowledging the fortitude required to fight. *Difficult Daughters* serves as a profound remark on the intricacies of women and the diverse aspects of emancipation.

### Patriarchal Frameworks and the Female Physique

Manju Kapur skilfully crafts a story of female oppression in *Difficult Daughters*, one that is influenced by the deeply ingrained patriarchal standards of Indian culture in the early 20th century. In the book, the female body is not just a biological thing; it is also a sociocultural location where values of honour, submission, and purity are etched. Kapur reveals how patriarchal systems control every element of a woman's life, from her education and marriage to her sexuality and independence, via the figure of Virmati.

Virmati's family, especially her mother Kasturi, upholds a strict moral code that shapes her life from the beginning. The internalised sexism that upholds the exact system that restricts women's options is embodied by Kasturi, who is far from being a liberating figure. This attitude is demonstrated by her objection to Virmati's want to pursue further education: "You will disgrace the family if you study more" (Kapur, 45). The cultural fear that an educated woman could defy male authority and cross her "natural" home limits is reflected in this remark. This dynamic is identified by Sylvia Walby in *Patriarchy at Work*, who claims that "women are subordinated through structures such as the household and the state" (Walby, 27). Virmati's experience demonstrates this framework.

Even though Virmati wants to become free by knowledge and self-confidence, her path is far from liberating. She finds herself in a difficult situation with the Professor, who is married. In the end, it places her in a different kind of patriarchy, even if it seems to provide her autonomy and choice. Virmati “stands between tradition and modernity, trying to liberate herself from the chains of custom,” as Bhat, Wani, and Gopal note (Bhat et al., 32). But far of empowering her, her eventual marriage to the Professor only serves to further isolate and subjugate her. She lives in the background of her husband’s first family, reduced to the position of a second wife. Instead of attaining equality, she is once more hushed, her aspirations unheard, her intelligence undervalued.

The female’s reproductive decisions are also subject to this control over her body. Virmati’s body becomes a vehicle for carrying out traditional gender duties, and her value is consistently linked to her capacity to procreate. The woman’s body is seen as a site of patriarchal control, according to Ranganath and Dwivedi, who contend that even her reproductive rights are mediated by male aspirations and family honour (Ranganath and Dwivedi, 266). According to Kapur, even love cannot free one from these limitations. Because of the Professor’s controlled and conditional devotion, Virmati is treated more like an object of desire than an intellectual equal. In her observation Anindita Chatterjee draws attention to this contradiction, “Virmati’s education does not become her weapon of liberation but a burden in a society unprepared to accept the educated woman as a full human being” (Chatterjee, 6). The limitations of surface-level empowerment in a society that is firmly patriarchal are shown by Virmati’s anguish. Social norms co-opt her body, her decisions, and even her resistance, preventing her from ever really escaping.

The novel shows how patriarchal systems continue to exert control over the female body and mind despite the appearance of modernity or progressive development. Kapur criticises a culture that confines women to cycles of shame, quiet, and subordination and provides them with little options for rebellion. The novel illustrates via Virmati’s tale how the struggle for freedom and individuality is not fully won until the larger structures that objectify and control the female body are destroyed.

### **Looking at Ida and Shakuntala from an Intergenerational Viewpoint**

Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* constructs a fascinating intergenerational tale that enhances its feminist critique by illustrating how patriarchal tyranny, despite its varied manifestations, endures across many historical and personal situations. The story illustrates the evolving yet persistent battle of women to express autonomy via the narratives of Virmati, her daughter Ida, and her cousin Shakuntala, within a culture that primarily resists female freedom.

Ida's retrospective narrative provides a contemporary yet disenchanted perspective on her mother's life. Despite residing in post-Independence India—a culture ostensibly more progressive—Ida continues to contend with judgement and marginalisation. Her statement, "I was a divorced, childless woman" (Kapur, 3), underscores the persistent burden of societal censure that afflicts women who deviate from traditional roles of spouse and parent. Ida's identity is defined by both defiance and remorse, illustrating that even in contemporary settings, women are subject to public scrutiny. Her attempts to comprehend her mother's decisions signify a wider examination of female autonomy throughout generations.

Anindita Chatterjee emphasises this complex dynamic, asserting that the stories of Virmati, Ida, and Shakuntala "reflect various aspects of the patriarchal society they occupy and contest in their distinct manners" (Chatterjee, 3). This resistance is intricate and multifaceted. Every woman confronts societal conventions uniquely, yet none emerges unhurt. Virmati's quest for knowledge and illicit romance results not in emancipation but in further entanglement inside patriarchal restrictions. Ida, although educated and self-sufficient, is encumbered by conventional expectations regarding gender and domestic obligations.

Shakuntala stands as a fundamental character of feminist defiance in the narrative. Virmati's cousin serves as an early influence, embodying an alternative path—a woman who opts to stay unmarried, committing herself to study and nationalist politics. Her existence represents a daring challenge to conventional female roles, exemplifying the traits of the "New Woman," a notion sometimes linked to modernity and female empowerment. However, as the story delicately indicates, Shakuntala is not wholly impervious to the impact of conventional conventions. Her boldness is moderated by the recognition that genuine freedom for women continues to be a challenging endeavour in a patriarchal culture.

Priyanka and Manisha Yadav accurately assert that "Kapur's characters epitomise the tension between personal aspirations and societal norms, a defining characteristic of the 'New Woman' archetype" (Yadav and Priyanka, 903). This conflict is clearly depicted in the experiences of all three women. Shakuntala's political involvement and rejection of marriage, Virmati's conflict between amorous and intellectual ambitions, and Ida's divorce and lack of children exemplify many manifestations of dissent—each influenced by distinct historical contexts yet united by a common defiance of gendered conventions.

*Difficult Daughters* effectively illustrates, through its intergenerational framework, the adaptability of patriarchy over time, discreetly permeating even

ostensibly progressive environments. The novel posits that the pursuit of female freedom is not linear nor definitive, but rather an ongoing process characterised by instances of bravery, struggle, and concession.

### **The Role of Education in Individual Liberation**

Manju Kapur depicts education as a location of paradox: it may be a means of empowering individuals while also serving as a battlefield for social and familial strife. The heroine, Virmati, rebels against the restrictive systems of patriarchal society for the first time via her pursuit of knowledge. She tries to develop an identity that goes beyond conformity and domesticity through schooling. But as the story progresses, it becomes clear that, in a patriarchal society that is firmly established, education does not always guarantee emotional or social liberty, even while it provides intellectual emancipation.

Her family opposes Virmati's desire to pursue her education, especially her mother Kasturi, who sees education as a danger to traditional values. The attitude that educated women are disruptive to the family order is encapsulated in the statement, "You will disgrace the family if you study more" (Kapur, 45). Kasturi is a symbol of the internalised patriarchal voice that controls female aspirations in the home. According to Sylvia Walby, patriarchy subjugates women through "structures such as the household and the state" and operates concurrently in the public and private domains (Walby, 27).

Even though Virmati is able to complete her higher education, this accomplishment causes her to feel more alienated than free. Her battle is made more difficult by her choice to pursue a relationship with her professor, who is married. Her social position as a second wife, which deprives her of social legitimacy and mental stability, eclipses the career options her schooling offers. "Virmati's journey is a tragic struggle between the pursuit of intellectual freedom and the constraints of emotional dependence," as Avinash Chander correctly notes (Chander, 207).

In Kapur's writings, "education acts as a double-edged sword; it liberates women intellectually but intensifies their conflict with tradition," according to K. Mehta (Mehta, 6). Virmati's story demonstrates this, since her education separates her from her family's and her community's expectations while failing to offer a different setting for acceptance. The old gender norms that still determine her identity and value continuously undercut her achievements.

Ajaz Ahmad Bhat, Showkat Ahmad Wani, and Alka Gopal have the opinion of Virmati who "stands between tradition and modernity, trying to liberate herself from the chains of custom," (Bhat et al., 32). However, education and individual choice—the very means by which she attains liberation—also end up becoming



causes of suffering and exclusion. The feminist criticism of *Difficult Daughters*, which avoids romanticising liberation and instead presents it as a difficult, multifaceted path, revolves around this paradox.

According to Anindita Chatterjee, Virmati's aspiration for education is both political and personal; it is an act of agency in a society that aims to stifle the voices of women (Chatterjee, 5). However, such an agency comes at a great cost. According to the novel, education by itself cannot guarantee liberty in a patriarchal society unless it is combined with more extensive structural and cultural reforms.

Therefore, education is shown in *Difficult Daughters* as a place where the fight for female autonomy is both started and disputed. It highlights that genuine liberation must include not just intellectual freedom but also emotional and social acceptance, and it sheds light on the difficulties experienced by women who want to reinterpret their positions in society.

### **Marriage and Love in a Patriarchal Society**

Manju Kapur portrays marriage in *Difficult Daughters* as a deeply ingrained patriarchal institution that aims to subjugate women under the pretence of obligation and love, rather than as a passionate or freeing union. The story highlights that love does not equate to equality in a culture where male domination is still the norm by exposing the ways in which both self-selected and arranged weddings may uphold systems of control via the experiences of the protagonist, Virmati.

From the beginning, Kasturi, Virmati's mother, is shown as a patriarchal tradition's agent who is fixated on finding her daughter a "suitable" marriage. According to Kasturi, a woman's main responsibility is to become a wife and mother; any departure from this course jeopardises the honour of the family. Her constant demands that Virmati fit in, regardless of her daughter's preferences or intelligence, are a reflection of the internalised patriarchal notion that a woman's value is inextricably linked to her married status. According to Sylvia Walby, gendered norms and expectations are reinforced by institutions such as the household, which uphold patriarchal dominance (Walby, 27).

Virmati is caught in yet another type of patriarchal bondage, even when she selects her mate against the wishes of her family. Despite appearing well-educated and progressive, Harish shares Virmati's traditional family's tendency towards dominance. His acceptance is dependent on Virmati's ability to carry out the customary responsibilities of a wife, and his attachment is conditional. He regulates her movements, sets social rules for her, and decides whether she may receive an education. V. N. Ch. Ranganath and R. S. Dwivedi rightly note "Harish's progressive



exterior conceals a deeply patriarchal mindset that seeks to control Virmati through emotional and intellectual manipulation" (Ranganath and Dwivedi, 265). This highlights the pernicious ways in which patriarchy may reinforce dominance while disguising itself in terms of love and intellectual camaraderie.

A larger feminist critique of the institution of marriage is exemplified by Virmati's battle. The culture that equates female virtue with obedience constantly thwarts her desire for both liberty and love. Virmati does not, however, stay completely inert in the face of the tremendous circumstances. Even in the midst of an abusive marriage, her determination on finishing her degree, speaking up, and making her own decisions are examples of subtly resisting. Priyanka Kumari and Niraj Dang describe the novel, "narrates a quiet but significant resistance, where personal choices become acts of defiance against male dominance," (Kumari and Dang, 107).

The idea that Virmati "stands between tradition and modernity, trying to liberate herself from the chains of custom" is mirrored by Ajaz Ahmad Bhat, Showkat Ahmad Wani, and Alka Gopal (Bhat et al., 32). Her nuanced emotional journey exposes the toll that society exacts on individuals and how marriage and family, two institutions that are supposed to provide love and stability, may really be used as tools of tyranny.

In the end, the novel offers a potent critique of the ways in which male rule is upheld via marriage and love. Kapur debunks the idea of romantic liberty by exposing Virmati's internal and external tensions and emphasises the pressing need to rethink partnerships based on equality and respect for one another.

### **Conclusion**

The story of independence in *Difficult Daughters* is not a simple one. Instead, it is an intricate examination of the difficulties of resistance in a patriarchal culture. The various ways that women oppose, adapt to, and occasionally absorb patriarchal norms are reflected in Virmati's fight for identity, education, and love. By use of characters like as Virmati, Shakuntala, and Ida, Manju Kapur presents a comprehensive feminist analysis that recognises the constraints and potentialities of liberation. Although resistance is necessary, the novel maintains that it is frequently unpleasant, insufficient, and partial.

This knowledge is supported by the novel's critical analyses. The literature as a whole shows how *Difficult Daughters* captures the complex link between patriarchy and women's agency, from the psychological depth examined by Bhat et al. to the feminist readings by Chatterjee, Chander, and others. Manju Kapur portrays

liberation as an ongoing process that is full of inconsistencies, concessions, and bravery rather than as a destination.

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