

**AN ODYSSEY OF A DEFIANT DAUGHTER: MANJU KAPUR'S "DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS"**

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**Abstract**

Literature is nothing but reflection of life be it ancient or modern. From their observations some noteworthy women writers busied themselves in portraying the trials and tribulations of women, in their works. Manju Kapur, is one such unique writer, who always focused on 'women' in her novels. Her debut novel "Difficult Daughters" bagged her "Commonwealth writers prize" under "Best First Book Category" in Eurasian region. The novel "Difficult Daughters" is set against the backdrop of India's struggle for independence. Virmati, the protagonist of the novel is an epitome of modernity. The novel illustrates her transition from the restrictions of family structure to a life of freedom and choice. Virmati rebels and defies the cultural dictates of the male dominated society in her odyssey of struggles for freedom and identity. Virmati's urge for right to education and freedom resembles the nation's search for identity and selfhood. Throughout her life Virmati strives to acquire what she desires and lives a life on her own terms and conditions but, in the process loses many precious things in her life. In a nutshell, she compels our admiration for her indomitable courage and fortitude in carrying the torch for freedom and independence for women, though it sounds a pyrrhic victory.

**Keywords:** Modernity; Rebel; Defy; Indomitable courage; fortitude; Odyssey.

Manju Kapur stars among contemporary Indian women novelists, writing in English. She belongs to the third generation of such writers. Till date, she has authored six novels – *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home and The Immigrant*, *Custody* and *Brothers*. 'Difficult Daughters' which I have to spotlight or focus on, is her debut novel, published in 1988. It received tremendous international recognition and success for her. For, it bagged the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book in 1999, from Eurasia region. She

resides in the nation's capital, New Delhi. She teaches English Literature in Delhi University.

“Difficult Daughters” is set against the backdrop of partition of the country into Pakistan and Indian republic. It is the time of India's struggle for Independence. Life in Punjab is vividly portrayed. Virmati is the pivotal character. She is the protagonist of the novel. She is a young woman for between her family, her education and the enticement of illicit love. She finds that the battle for her own independence creates irrevocable lines of partition around her, as in the case of her country. But the novel encompasses three generations – Virmati's mother, Kasturi, Victorian type of woman, Virmati, herself, incipient New Woman and Virmati's daughter, Ida, a totally ultra-modern woman. In the words of I.K. Sharma, “The novel illustrates her (Virmati's) transition from the restrictions of family structure to a life of freedom and choice” (Sharma, 63-73).

The Indian women novelists in English portray woman as an individual who breaks free from traditional constraints. They up the ante against exploitation and domestic cruelty, meted out to women in the society. They delineate women who assert themselves and who are strong, self – confident and independent. In doing so, they make smooth the transition from traditional image of woman as a passive self – effacing victim to the modern image of an independent and defiant woman. The New Woman emerges. Remember Nora in Ibsen's play, “The Dolls House”. The New Woman throws to the four winds the patriarchal norms. Education and economic independence make her self – reliant. She demonstrates to the world that she would no longer accept and succumb to male domination. She will fight for her birth right to live her life her own way.

Now I will get down to brass-tacks to a discussion and analysis of the rebel in the novel *Difficult Daughters*. By and large, women can be classified into various categories: self – assertive, self – effacing, passive and submissive, defiant and rebellious, traditional and modern and so on. Each one of the three generations – Kasturi, Virmati, Ida – falls under one of these categories. Kasturi has borne eleven children for her husband. The ever-pregnant lady is content to play a passive role, remain within the four walls of the house like a frog in a well. It is Virmati, we are concerned with in this article. Virmati is not enchanted by the idea of marriage and child bearing soon after her high school education. She aspires for higher education, which is a sign of rebellious nature in a conservative family. She longs for her own space, freedom and identity. She is against arranged marriages. She shows her rebellious nature by aspiring for higher education and by refusing to marry a man of their choice, at a time fixed by the elders. Yet, at 17, under pressure, she lets herself be engaged to Inderjeet, an engineer. Suman Bala showers praises on her for being assertive and bold. “Virmati's initial rebellion against her very traditional Arya Samaj family. In first postponing her marriage, and then refusing to marry the person she was engaged to

constitute a radical rebellious act, which predicts an individual, who would go on to carve out a niche for herself and make personal exemplary feminist statement” (Bala 150 -154).

Since she declines to marry Inderjeet in an arranged wedding, her younger sister, Indumati, is wedded to him. As for Virmati to the shock of all members of her family, she falls in love with Harish Chandra who is a professor, returned from Oxford two years ago. But he is already married, with a wife and a child. He lives in the vicinity of their home. He is a selfish guy. With help of her little sister, Paro, she exchanges love letters with him. When the family members learn about it, they lock her up in a godown during the day time. In a fit of depression, the rebel attempts to end her own life unsuccessfully. Fed up and irked by her daughter's rebellious behaviour, Kasturi says, “God has put you on earth to punish me” (Kapur 111). She becomes “the black sheep of the family” (Difficult Daughters 113). As a consequence of her furtive meetings with the professor, at a Lahore rendezvous, she becomes pregnant. Her room – mate, Swarnalatha, comes to her rescue. She gets the pregnancy aborted. Virmati exerts tremendous pressure upon the professor to marry her. He does; A host of problems arise after she marries him. She fails to secure any space for herself in the family. Ganga, the first wife who married him at the age of three years, resents her as second wife. Her own family ostracises her. She finds herself to be a pariah in his family. Harish Chandra has no problem, for he looks upon Ganga as chattel, while he regards Virmati as an intellectual companion. He has best of both the worlds, whereas it's the woman who suffers psychologically. Once they shift to Delhi, she acquires the long - delayed status of a wife and mother of a daughter, whom they name ‘Ida’ because it sounds like neither Muslim nor Hindu (Even in christening their daughter she has no choice. His word counts).

Learning lessons of life from her own life, Virmati does her utmost to put her own defiant and difficult daughter on the right path of life. She fails. Ida is more rebellious than her mother. Soon after her marrying, a fellow academic, she walks out of the marriage with him. Thus, Ida comes to represent the radical, modern woman of contemporary India. She opens up and displays her desolation, “I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself like a pencil notation on the margins of society” (279).

The million-dollar question that needs to be answered is whether or not Virmati is entitled to be called a ‘New Woman’ in the real sense of the term. The answer is ‘No’. In spite of her initial revolt against the family, love undoes her defiant attitude. Her love for Harish is her Achilles heel. She dare not move a finger of hers without prior permission of Harish. At one stage she is willing to join Swarnalatha in the independence struggle, but soon she curbs herself. She is not sure that Harish would okay it. During their courtship and even after their marriage, it is always Harish's likes and dislikes that count. Thus, whenever she breaks the shackles, with his plausible excuses, he puts back the fetters on her. She becomes a puppet in his hands. It is he who holds the strings always. All the time her one

concern is “Adjust, compromise and adapt” to be worthy of him. She fails to break “the dependence syndrome”. Seema Malik maintains that Virmati’s defiance and rebellion result in nothing, “she is a loser whose acts totally alienate from her own family and she fails to create a space for herself for which she had been striving all long”. (Malik, 132-137).

But it will be a big mistake to devalue the rebel’s struggle. Gur Pyari Jindal aptly says “What mattered was to have made the attempt. What is necessary is to break the patriarchal mould and for Virmati to have tried to do that in the forties, was a great achievement” (Jindal, 93).

To sum up and conclude Manju Kapur depicts Virmati as a progressive woman who would not give up her desire to acquire a higher academic degree. “To continue her studies, she is prepared to sacrifice her family and all norms of male dominated society. Not only that, her decision to marry a man with a wife and children is clean defiance of the conventions of the society to which she belongs. A woman’s right to love and choose her male (mate) cannot be questioned. That is the message Manju Kapur seems to convey through the character of Virmati” (Das 137).

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