



## WOMEN BEYOND TRADITIONS: MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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### ABSTRACT

Women all over have suffered the brunt of patriarchal control. Right from birth, a woman is thrust with social images, rewards and punishments that are carefully designed to ensure that she does not develop and quality associated with the other half of humanity. Although *Difficult Daughters* is not overtly a feminist text but nevertheless brings forth the issue of gender discrimination and the struggle of the suffering Indian women under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society. They struggle to maintain their dignity and ultimately retrieve the autonomy of their selfhood. The narrative fabric of *Difficult Daughters* set around the time of partition is the story of a woman whose battle for independence engulfs her, leaving a contour of partition and pain on her outwardly calm face. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* makes an absorbing reading and pushes the reader to break through the silence of suffering Virmati, who is seen struggling with her desires for education and illicit love in the face of hardship that threaten to destroy her inner self. The aim of this paper is to make a study of the novel where a woman bound in tradition seeks to satiate her unsuppressed desires and is ultimately devoured by pain and isolation.

**keywords:** Patriarchal, Gender Discrimination, Independence, Education, Hardships

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The search for control over one's destiny, surely the key theme of *Difficult Daughters*, refers to the Independence aspired to and obtained by a nation (despite its cruel division by a fateful Partition), but also to the independence yearned after (and finally not obtained) by a woman and member of that same nation (or of one of its rival communities). Virmati, the heroine, seeks human

relations that will allow her to be herself and to exercise the degree of control over her life which, as an educated woman, she knows she deserves. Born in Amritsar in the Punjab in 1940, the daughter of a father of progressive ideas and a traditionalist mother (Kasturi, obliged to give birth to no less than 11 children), she aspires to a freer life than that offered her by those around her. This aspiration is

condemned to failure, thanks to the incomprehension she receives from both her own family and that of the man she marries - but also thanks to her own mistakes, for no-one obliged her to marry who became her husband, and she was free not to make the choice she did.

Ida, the narrator seems distanced from her mother Virmati in time and space and yet Virmati remains a vibrating presence all through Ida's life. Although not physically present, Virmati hovers close to Ida's surface of consciousness and is often a cause of inner turbulence. The void in Ida's life at her mother's funeral becomes more pronounced and unbearable. Apparently Virmati's presence has failed to provide Ida with a sense of fulfillment and security during her life and thus Ida made every effort to stay clear of the image that she had of her mother. Nevertheless, the unconscious affiliation with the absent mother propels her to excavate the other unknown view of her mother and she sets out on her journey. Her restlessness had led her to a relentless quest which is initially a mental search: "To be totally innocent.....would be to be utterly unknown, particularly to one's self." The concept of a 'good' and 'bad' mother is a worldwide phenomenon and acquires an added significance in the Indian strengthens her. In Ida's case, she reminisces that she "could not remember a time, it had been right between us"(Pg. No.2) which naturally left her rebelling and struggling along with an in-built infirmity just as a cripple without crutches. Ida may not have been consciously aware of this deficiency for the simple reason that the image she carried of Virmati was of a woman who was "silent, brisk and bad-tempered."(2)

Ida, determined to unveil her mother's past, experiences the "excitement of discovery"(258) which finally culminates in establishing a strong bond between the narrator and the mother with "each word a brick in a mansion"(259). Having accomplished this task, she seeks to be liberated and pleads earnestly to her dead mother. "Do not haunt me anymore".(259) The anxiety thereby bringing an end to the traumatic transition period. The "escape routes"(258) she had been looking for all her life came in the form of the book. The melancholy and despair caused by the knowledge "I was nothing,

husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society" (258) appear to be dispelled having sunk into her mother's past without Virmati's hindering presence. Ida, groping for the 'self' lost in an attempt to be a model daughter under pressure from her parents, tried to "bridge the contradictions in her life by marrying a man who was also an academic"(258) to end up in a "disastrous marriage".

Ida, determined to unravel the truth about her mother, goes to Amritsar, a place associated with her mother and feels quite lost without her. Virmati, the eldest of eleven children, didn't work. Despite the encumbrance of the household activities and her brothers and sisters, she found time to study. The first in family to be a F.A., B.A., B.T. and finally M.A. In the process of endowing responsibilities, she acquired the feeling that she was "indispensable." (6) Virmati watches her weak, ailing mother harassed by childbirth and yet tolerant. The unmarried Shakuntala, her first cousin, appear to be Virmati's ideal and Virmati soon realized that answers to her unhappiness lay outside the house: "To education, freedom and the bright lights of Lahore Colleges." (15)

The family disputes led to arrangement of separate establishments by Lala Diwan Chand and "what he thought was a final solution, however, turned out to be the beginning of a long chain of partitions." (25) Professor Harish Chandra at Arya Sabha College came to be her aunt's tenant and later seized the young heart of Virmati despite his married status. As fate would have it, Virmati's marriage had to be postponed due to the death of the canal engineer's father and thus Virmati entered the college, the seventh girl among four hundred boys. Her open myopic stare at the Professor was misinterpreted but the "dead was done" (43) prior to the realization.

The rawness and restlessness in Ida persists and she further digs and goes to the fateful college where her father was the principal. While walking, she "felt the past hovering, cliché-like, over that run down building, beckoning me into its orbit."(46) She went to the particular classroom where he taught and the realization dawned that her "history had started here, in this classroom. Here it was that my

parents must have looked at each other significantly, doomed love in their eyes.”(49) Ida recalls her father mentioning her mother’s fiancé but never his wife: “Virmati plus fiancé, the Professor plus wife. An invisible quadrangle in a classroom.”(49)

The cultural conditioning had initially prohibited Virmati from getting involved with the Professor. She was already engaged. At the same time her in-built response to a person’s need from a very tender age broke down her reserves when the professor cried out his need for her: “Eldest and a girl, she was finally tuned to neediness, it called her blood and bones.”(50) con fusion bred, “her soul revolved and her suffering increased.”(50) The professor continued to pressurize her to do away with her finance and Virmati torn between duty and love along with a strong desire for education continued to be agonized. The dryness of the canal engineer’s letter, in comparison to be warmth of the professor’s letter gave her strength to seek permission to study further for she claimed that she was not really ready for “initiation into womanhood, intimacy, procreation”(60) and her mother wondered as to how her sensible dutiful daughter had “changed so much in just a generation.”(55) The incessant talk of her marriage in the house and the knowing full well that “she could not depend upon the professor to sort out any domestic situation”(63) she decided to go to Tarsikka, to her Bade baoji, Lala Diwan Chand and drown herself in the canal. “The brave thoughts of renunciation”(79) over, She mutely faced her mother’s anger “but her silence though was locked in the godown and her younger sister married to Inderjit, Ultimately one does bow down towards one’s fate or karma and so did Virmati in her newly acquired situation. May be what is happening to me now is part of it, and there is no use protesting.”(85) Paro, her five year old sister, is the sustaining force for Virmati in the family. Although the “enforced stillness”(84) helps her to build her self control yet she burns with anger and humiliation for the little relevance given to her life.

To elevate the society “above the practical and the convenient”(86) was impossible for rhe realization has yet to dawn that “ what is society made up of, but individuals.”(90) Education for Kasturi (Virmati’s mother) was just a means of

destruction”(91) of the family. The indecisive state of living finds an alternative in continuing her studies in Lahore to do B.T. after learning that the Professor’s wife is pregnant. His justifications appear futile and weak “and in this moment of weakness it seemed I could not in all conscience ignore the claims of those around me.”(97) The “autonomy and freedom”(125) the place provided helped her to overcome the pain and the illusion of love. The sisterly bond established between the unmarried cousin Shakuntala and Virmati, placed in a more or less same situation afforded solace despite the concept of the traditional family: “A woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings.””(102)

The Professor’s persistence and his friend Syed Hussain’s help and encouragement finally enabled the professor to get virmati around. He dinned it into her: “Co-wives are part of our social traditions.... I don’t live with her in any meaningful way.”(112) Virmati too justified herself in the illicit relationship by consoling herself that there was “no point in foolishing denying it on basis of an outmoded morality.”(114) Nonetheless the trouble had been created by “letting others do your thinking.”(121) Her individual self told her that she ought to be doing something like Swarna Lata, her room-mate whom she admired so much rather than being involved in a “useless love and a doubtful marriage.”(122) It was a self-revelation that she could not express but cherish nonetheless. Pining for a life beyond, she acknowledges her limitation that “these larger spaces were not for her.”(133) Torn between her passion and what she would really want to do; the guilt of all those wrongs come to her mind with the blunt observation that the ecstatic begging of illicit relationship had no future plan of marriage. Despair was all that was hers and the thought that it would be far better to be like Swarna “involved in other people, and waiting for no man.”(138)

She decided that finally her studies would be “her passport to independence”(140) but fate had it otherwise; she was pregnant. In unraveling Virmati’s with my [Ida’s] knowledge.”(144) Ida identifies this situation to a similar disaster of her licensed married life. This symbolic identification is fortifying. It was also probably one of the reasons that had been the root cause of the termination of Ida’s marriage: “in

denying that incipient little thing in. my belly, he sowed the seeds of our breakup.”(144) Virmati was able to revive the courage that she possessed in doing away her unwanted pregnancy by herself in absence of Harish. Swarna Lata was the sturdy pillar in that hour of need. She achieved independence by paying a heavy price along with the realization that now she could endure any pain for none could be greater than the one her body underwent “through knives and abortion.”(161) The body was scarred by the Professor to deprive her of “another choice”(163) ever in her life.

Her B.T. had made her “anxious to broaden her horizons”(167) and she took up Principalship at Nahan. But the Professor was not to allow her peace. His visit there cost her job. She decides to go Shantiniketan . Every mile strengthened her. She perceived that “there was a life of dedication and service ahead of her, and in that she would forge her identity.”(182) Fate had it otherwise. Now it was Harish to face the dilemma and agony of being torn between his family duty and illicit craving for Virmati. No escape, so he married her, breaking the last thin tie with her own family: “this separation is ordained from birth.”(187) In face of all hostility at her in-laws, she moved with a determination on the path her destiny had carved out for her.”(196) She wonders whether “this isolation would continue till the end of her life.”(199) Virmati, in trying to establish “the domain if her kingdom” (213) beside her husband, felt strangely “isolated from women” (211) since her marriage, she had learned to look at space in a new way to define it and mark it, to think of what was hers and what wasn't in ways that would have been unthinkable in the fluid areas of her maternal home. She felt contrite.(210)

She found ways to “be content”(213) in various new adapted ways alien to her earlier for she was not willing “to feel hurt”(215) and forged an oblivious state of mind to inquiries that she was not equipped to face: “Identities, loyalties, futures and nations were becoming a matter of choice rather than tradition.”(217) The innate passivity that she developed after marriage drove her once again to Lahore to do M.A. In Philosophy. Probably once again education was a means to revitalize her: “May be this

was really what she had fought for all along, space to be.”(253)

Virmati's sojourn is in three stages; the first when she deserts her family, religious and political authorities who appear as captors. The freedom and unlimited possibilities drive her to the powerful figure of her seducer. She thus awakens in a world of experience to achieve wholeness and autonomy. The realization dawns there after that the seducer too is a captor. She then makes the final journey back home to be united with the family and discovers that it's the mother with whom she wishes to be rejoined. This rescue figure helps her to free herself, from the myth of female inferiority and in identifying a valuable female tradition. The rejection too enables her to discover the strength within herself got from self determination. She thus appears to be in tune with herself, her desires and careful not to succumb that valuable self to any external pressure.

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