

A Reflection on Modern Perspectives in *Difficult Daughters* of Manju Kapur

Lintomon. T. A¹, & Kumar K²

¹ Ph. D, Research Scholar, Department of English, Periyar University, Salem-636011, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail: lintoandrews83@gmail.com

² Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Arts and Science College, Harur-636903, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail: harurkkumar@gmail.com

Correspondence: Lintomon. T. A, Periyar University, Salem-636011, Tamil Nadu, India. E-mail: lintoandrews83@gmail.com

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Abstract

Literature is the timeless and boundless realm of human expressions and it deals with life from time immemorial and is endless as long as life exists. Literature encompasses different aspects and realms of life and it explores the reality of life in multiple ways and each theme and character reflects society and people. It is a perfect vehicle for social commentary and exploration of social issues, challenging norms and advocating for change. Feminism is a prominent topic in literature, addressing various issues related to women in traditional society. They endured prejudice and masculine chauvinism for many years. Manju Kapur is a well-known novelist who has been greatly influenced by modern perspectives. *'Difficult Daughters'* (1998) by Manju Kapur is an excellent literary lens that examines the significant transitions from tradition to modernity. The women characters of Manju Kapur make an urge to a higher stage. They struggle hard to have identity, self-sufficiency and education. Kapur's work skillfully captures the complexities of socio-cultural transition, sacrifices and difficulties that come with the transition from tradition to modernity. Virmati's life starts to symbolize the social changes that Indian society went through in the mid-1900s. The present paper delves into how Kapur appeals to Modern Perspectives in *'Difficult Daughters'*.

Keywords: women, education, male chauvinism, modernity, feminism, tradition and equality

1. Introduction

The goal of feminism is to initiate the dialectics of power structures and relationships existing between the sexes. It has become a significant, multifaceted force. It emerged as an open response to the abolition movement in the mid-nineteenth century, marking the beginning of an important societal shift. Over the last century, feminism has evolved through three major waves, each addressing issues related to gender equality and women's rights. The 'First Wave of Feminism' started in the nineteenth century and continued to the early twentieth century gave women a new political identity through suffrage (right to vote), legal victories and public liberation. The fight for the right to vote was not merely about casting ballots but about gaining recognition as equal citizens with a voice in the political process. This wave laid the foundation for future feminist movements by establishing that women could and should have a 'say' in the laws and policies that govern their lives. Whereas, the 'Second Wave of Feminism' from the 1960s to 1980s was to tackle unofficial inequalities related to sexuality, family roles, workplace discrimination, and reproductive rights. This wave was marked by its audacious challenge to deeply ingrained societal norms, pushing for changes that would allow women greater control over their lives, bodies, and futures. The impact of this wave was profound, leading to significant shifts in both laws and attitudes. Again, the 'Third Wave Feminism' has been characterized by its focus on diversity and intersectionality. Unlike the previous waves, which often centred around the experiences of white, middle-class women, 'Third Wave Feminism' emphasizes the varied experiences of women across different races, social classes, and sexual orientations. It has been instrumental in broadening the scope of feminist activism and ensuring that the movement remains relevant to a wider range of women.

Ultimately, the common goal of all feminism is to bring out equality and avoid inequality and sexual discrimination. It has been an audacious resistance against the traditional fortifications of male dominance. It is a vociferous act of extending support for the rights of women and a stiff resistance to the discrimination she faces in society and the family. It strives to break down inequality, gender discrimination and patriarchal systems. Feminism is the voice of the oppressed people who are dehumanised due to social customs and male chauvinism.

Manju Kapur takes a deep interest in society as a whole but focuses more on issues related to women. Her novels portray the mundane and seemingly uninteresting realities of the everyday life of ordinary women, as well as the complexities of the social structure being influenced by politics, religion, education and other factors. Feministic and feminine perceptions influence characterisation. Her characters are drawn from life and engage the attention of the reader who could probably identify with the sensibilities of the characters. Her novels depict women in conflict with themselves, with their families, with the men in their lives and with society at large. According to a critic,

Compassion, sympathy, sacrifices and cultural loads are linked with womanhood. Kapur's unique sense of feminism in her novels is well displayed in her novels in understanding manner. She presents human beings in the context of conflict, especially family conflict has been recognized as the core issue of her novels.' (Singh, 2015).

2. Objectives of the Study

The struggling faces of women awakened Manju Kapur to fight for them, especially for their recognition and equality. The snubbed women community has to be empowered as a woman who wants to be a real being. The entire women's community can be empowered only through education and should learn that 'Nothing Equals Knowledge'. The age-old customs and patriarchal rules are structured and codified for discrimination and male chauvinism. Empowerment through education is the key to success and to eradicate ignorance and promote enlightenment which makes them uplifted. Every woman's community should understand that knowledge is powerful and has got immense impact as it makes everyone critically wise and creative. The knowledge empowers the women to the leadership and helps them to know the gender inequalities. Education helps them to think philosophically and enable them to question the visible discriminations that exist in the society. The knowledge ignites everyone to fight for social justice and oppose traditional and immoral discrimination. The aim is to convince and promote basic justice and also women's empowerment and self-realisation through education.

3. Literature Review

'*Difficult Daughters*' is a powerful and touching novel that explores the challenges faced by women in a traditional Indian family. The novel sheds light on the remarkable resilience of women in the face of adversity. To appreciate the full depth of this resilience, it is important to consider the historical and cultural context in which the story takes place. The partition of India had a profound impact on society, causing widespread disruption and particularly affecting women's lives. The protagonist, Virmati, embodies the resistance and determination of women who refuse to be constrained by societal expectations and patriarchal norms, making her a compelling and inspiring figure.

In '*Difficult Daughters*', Manju Kapur presents the conflict between tradition and new outlook even at the time of partition. She ironically writes about the conflict between personal grief and the existing tradition. She thinks that there is relevance of personal emotion especially for women in the traditional family, (Singh, 2015).

Manju Kapur is a renowned Indian English novelist who is regarded as one of the best Indian authors and is widely recognised for the feminist topics she explores in her writing. She talks about the different roles that women play in society and how customs and traditions encourage male supremacy, which pushes women to the periphery. She has depicted in her works the plight of repressed Indian women living in joint families in a society where men are predominant.

Thus, the novel is not only about difficult daughters but also about difficult mothers. About mothers, who do not understand their daughters, about daughters who want to break out into new paths? It starts very well and is quite gripping at the beginning with a daughter's quest to understand her mother, when she is in the heavenly abode and no longer with her. (Ali, 2015).

Manju Kapur's characters almost all struggle against discrimination and inequality that exist in society and she tries to display it through her works. Manju Kapur's international popularity was further confirmed in 1999 when her work '*Difficult Daughters*' won the prestigious Commonwealth Writer's Award. The author has adeptly depicted the women of 1940 with a focus on the experiences of urban middle-class women specifically. According to Nitonde,

It explains Kapur's indubitable ability to explore the psyche of the present-day urban, educated middle-class woman who is trapped in the midway between tradition and modernity.' (Nitonde, 2011).

The novels are a clear portrait of the struggling face of women. The importance of the novel is revealed through the character Virmati by opposing the age-old tradition. Many underprivileged women have found a voice and a platform in Kapur's novels. The central tenet of feminism is to empower women to have equality with men in society. As a movement, it supports women's equality and their right to parity in opportunities and status within society.

Kapur has highly developed sense of aesthetic appreciation. All books are equally impressive for their lifelike depictions of everyday situations. In her writings, she assumes the position of an objective spectator. She doesn't take a stance and instead points out both the good and bad aspects of the current social order. (Ahlawat, 2016).

4. Methodology

The researchers have used qualitative research and they have used a descriptive approach to bring this research to the next level. The author has used a discussion method and the objective of the article has been met through analysis and discussion. The primary source of the research is the novel, '*Difficult Daughters*' by Manju Kapur published in 1998. The secondary sources are collected from research articles, internet data and videos. Additionally, we analyzed many books to investigate the cultural issues and modern perspectives.

5. Analysis and Discussions

5.1 Background of the Study

Indian writing has gained recognition and acceptance on a global scale because of its unique presentation style, creativity and the subjects it explores. It conveys the way that members of the society live. Indian writer's mottos were to convey the state of women's lives in

society and to raise awareness of equality and rights. The phrase 'Educate to Empower' was circulated in silence. Women gain confidence and knowledge as a result of their education. K K Singh, in 'A Critical Companion to Manju Kapur's Novels' says that

'They (characters), show revolt against the traditional concept and they would like to stand on their own feet for everything. In all her novels, Manju Kapur has laid emphasis on the importance of education for women.' (Singh, 2015).

6. Goal of Feminism

Feminism as a movement evolved from centuries of struggle for women's rights. The primary goal is to strongly denounce sexual discrimination and male oppression while advocating for gender equality. The majority of Western culture is patriarchal, with men viewing women as inferior human beings and rarely allowing them to assume positions of leadership. They were compelled to stay in the family and denied significant opportunities in the social, political and economic domains. The wave of women gradually voiced their desire for freedom and equality in writing.

The goal of feminism is the same, even though the aspect varies from nation to nation and place to place. While, American feminism is a struggle against capitalism and persistent male dominance, Russian feminism is influenced by communist ideals and beliefs. The feminist movement in Russia has different dimensions compared to Western feminism. In the words of Jonas Egbudu Akung, 'In Russia, the focus of feminist criticism is on social, political and economic issues and not so much on the creative and liberty.' (Akung, 2013). In Austria, it is associated with Sigmund Freud's psychological and psychoanalytical worldview. In contrast, feminism in India suggests equality and equal opportunities. It opposes male chauvinism and discrimination. The substantial point is that all women should be effectively protected from all forms of exploitation due to the country's exclusive ideological, sociocultural and political framework. The expansion of feminism in India can be ascribed to the impact of Western literature on feminist matters. Several notable authors have contributed to the rise of feminism in India, including Tarabai Shinde, Anita Desai, Jasodhara Bagchi, Suzanna, Arundhati Roy, Meena Kandasamy, Shashi Deshpande, Sarojini Naidu, Nayantara Sahgal, Mahasweta Devi, Githa Hariharan, Sushmita Banerjee, Lalithambika Antharjanam, Kamala Markandaya and Manju Kapur.

8. Why Women Education

Education is essential for gender equality and the empowerment of women in the community. A woman who has access to education attains equality, skill development and knowledge acquisition. Women's education in Indian history has evolved significantly over time. Traditionally, women's education was limited and often confined to domestic skills and household duties. The ancient texts, the Vedas and the Upanishads acknowledged the importance of teaching women. Women had equal positions and possibilities during Vedic times. There are reports that many female candidates attended Takshila, Vikramshila, and Nalanda for education. On the other hand, women's status began to steadily decline around 500 BC. In India, efforts were undertaken to advance Western education for women and men during the British colonial era. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy supported social changes and women's education. They put up a determined resistance to the cruel practices that were pervasive in society as well as gender inequality. Rajaram Mohan Roy, the great social reformer who stood for the pathetic social evil 'Sati' which was a practice in the Hindu religion, in which the wife of the deceased husband would sit on the pyre and be burned alive along with the pyre and it was considered a noble practice and symbol of loyalty and devotion. The British realised that education was the sole path to enhance Indian women's status or else it would be unattainable. They insisted on using English as the primary language of instruction for all Indians. The establishment of British control in India led to the abolition of wicked customs such as female infanticide, child marriage and sati. In fact, education helps women to know that knowledge is powerful and valuable which can bring tremendous transformation in society.

9. Manju Kapur and the Indian Society

Manju Kapur being the mirror of the society realised that women experience chauvinism in a society dominated by men. Tradition had to give way to modernity if their lives were to improve. Education was the only way to make this shift happen. Like many other regions of the world, Indian culture was engulfed in a rigid, dehumanising caste system throughout the 1940s. Strange and enigmatic traditions that ignored scientific rationality were also prevalent. The political landscape in India was culminating in the war against the British Raj and preparing the country for independence; nonetheless, women's lives continued to be as pre-independence as they had been before. It was clear from their lives that they were illiterate and ignorant. The same problems that pervaded society before 1947 persisted and women were still shunned and mistreated everywhere. Women were pushed out of the family and society as a whole because of the persistent assertion of male hegemony. Tradition is a broad phrase that includes not only the time aspect of literary works but also the ideas and way of life of the era. Even if the Indian landmass has quickly adopted prodigal and wayward themes from other places, its culture and civilisation are deeply ingrained in an almost timeless tradition. Conversely, modernity is the gradual adoption of new practices in place of outdated ones. 'Traditional values, beliefs, practices, and norms are the target of modernism. Modernism's goal is to eliminate the unfairness, exploitation, and other forms of oppression at the heart of its philosophy.' (Ramakrishnan & Baskaran, 2024) The great cultural legacy of India is well known and it is a spiritual location where followers of various religions learn about dharma, equality and spirituality. A prominent characteristic of the land is its 'Unity in Diversity and Diversity in Unity.' The 'Right to Equality,' which is safeguarded by 'Articles 14 to 18' of the Indian constitution, guarantees equality to every Indian citizen. Although everyone knows the above-sacred truth, nobody is ready to consider it.

Manju Kapur's all novels seem to analyse various problems in life faced by woman. Her first novel 'Difficult Daughters' seems to present the story of Virmati who faces much difficulty in handling her daughter in the right way. (Singh, 2015).

India's social structure is distinct from that of every other nation on the planet. After independence, the society remained conservative and controlled by men. Social evils continue to rule society and everyone just follows them without question. Women are frequently the ones who suffer as a result of these harmful traditions and behaviours. They were taught to believe that the old practices and norms were just for them, but in actuality, the rules were for them, due to their lack of education and conservative mindset. Everyone in the family and society used to warn and curse someone who had different ideas, saying, 'You will bring a bad name to the family'. (Kapur, 2010).

10. Educate to Empower

It is worthwhile to think of the famous saying 'Nothing Equals Knowledge' because of its positioning in the socio-historical realities through which mankind has trailed. The primary goal of empowering women through education is to eradicate societal inequality and exploitation. So, they can become self-sufficient in all spheres of life. The Sanskrit saying 'Vidyadhanam Sarva Dhanam Pradhanam' means, 'knowledge is the most valuable thing' and is worth considering, knowledge makes everyone enlightened and makes them potential at multiple levels likewise the empowerment of women is possible only through education and it plays a key role in empowering women. It gives women great encouragement to combat inequality. Women's education is typically necessary for the advancement of the family and society. Women live in a world where there is discrimination based on gender and other forms of injustice, but education will help them understand their rights and responsibilities in society, halt the cycle of prejudice and build a better future than the one they currently have. The development of the family, society and equality are all aided by educating women and women become self-reliant and self-assured with education. It is true through Nehru

If you educate a man you educate an individual, however, if you educate a woman you educate a whole family. Women empowered means mother India empowered. (Gosh, 2013).

Education and knowledge are crucial steps toward women's empowerment. Women's groups were harshly rejected by society and the ruling elite, who viewed women as inferior to men in all spheres of life. They experienced rejection from their families, discouragement from pursuing higher education and gender discrimination. Numerous books, both modern and classic, have shown how education can change a woman's life and pave the way for her empowerment. Manju Kapur carefully crafted her characters to use their strength and intelligence to combat dehumanising behaviours in society. The characters of Manju Kapur represent each issue of society such as divorce, inequality, illiteracy, discrimination, sexual issues and dowry. The Indian society before independence is depicted in '*Difficult Daughters*.' The story is centred on a Punjabi family. Kasturi, Virmathi and Ida are the major characters of the story. Kasturi stands for the conservative society and she doesn't allow her daughter to go modern, she considers that a woman's ultimate goals in life are family, marriage and maternity. According to Arpitha Gosh

A daughter is educated not to go out and take up a job, on the contrary, her education is a trap to hunt down a good husband and become a perfect wife and daughter-in-law representing 'Indian womanhood'. (Gosh, 2013).

11. Tradition to Modernity

Manju Kapur's writings are influenced by the powerful dialectic between tradition and modernity. As the plot moves to modernity, her conventionally grounded characters undergo a gigantic change. In contrast, modernity in Manju Kapur's works describes a transition from inequality and discrimination to equality and equal rights. Women today attempt to leave the house and kitchen, which is a symbol of modernity, in contrast to the invalid traditional belief that they should be confined to these spaces.

Her novels present a long, unending struggle of women to establish and make a position equal to man in the society herself. The distinction between the man and woman in the Indian context becomes the major theme of her fiction. (Ali, 2015).

Any deviation from the tradition could be seen as a break from the far stricter rules and restrictions of the male-dominated family and society. Why does discrimination exist? God created everyone equal in his own image The Holy Bible says, 'So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.' Whereas, traditional culture and masculine chauvinism created a division and discriminatory environment in the community where they lived. According to Rohidas Nitonde

Kapur's novels reveal the lives of women describing their struggle for basic rights, quest for identity and survival. With education, they become aware of their self-reliance which helps them to walk on new horizon. They have substantial freedom of expression and thoughts. In every field; they not only compete with men but also work efficiently like their male counterparts. (Nitonde, 2014).

'*Difficult Daughters*' reveals the horrifying tale of a woman's plight in an Indian family where, a young progressive woman battles against gender stereotypes and tradition, displaying a strong commitment to modernity. Nitonde has clearly stated that

In the novel, there is a constant struggle between traditional approach of Kasturi and modern views of Virmathi. ((Nitonde, 2014).

The novel narrates the strange story of Virmathi, a young woman who challenges societal norms and gender inequity in her family. Born and raised in a conventional family, she had a great desire to live a modern lifestyle and pursue higher education. The desire to complete her education overrode her family's desire for her to defy convention. The protagonist, a woman, finds herself engaged in the harsh dialectic between the new realities that are constantly attacking her and the traditional moral boundaries.

Kapur has achieved success in narrating live tales describing the lives of middle-class Indian women. Through all her novels she explores the difficulties of reconciling the devotion to family expected of middle-class Indian women with their aspirations and desire for a life outside. (Gosh, 2013).

Kasthuri's daughter Virmati was destined to follow her family's and community's traditions and superstitions because she had only a basic education. In her view, marriage is a woman's ultimate goal in life and education is only a prerequisite for marriage and starting a family. Her family is extremely important to Kasturi, but her viewpoint is constrained by her upbringing and traditional beliefs. Women, according to the dominant class, were meant to take care of the family and have children—like Kasturi, who had eleven children and kept them inside the four walls of the house. Manju Kapur tells through Kasthuri that,

Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family. I studied too, but my mother would have killed me if I had dared even to want to dress in anything other than what was bought for me. (Kapur, 2010).

Virmati, the daughter of Kasturi, is fed up with how society restricts and manages the lives of women. Virmati thought that women didn't belong in families or in society because she was rejected. Professor Harish is a representation of the educated male population and it is depressing to see that attitudes about women are still prevalent among even the well-educated people. Professor Harish claims that Virmati is just something he enjoys looking at, which creates a real picture of a world where men control and is the clearest illustration of how men see women. Virmati's great desire for education and her clear image of modern living drive her to strive for her basic rights in society. No doubt, Virmati represents the strength of new women in India as she proclaims her identity and longs for education. (Ahluwalia, 2014).

Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin, was engaged in Lahore and delighted in the city's freedom with hints of European consciousness. She was a fearless woman with the capacity to encourage other women to behave and think differently from the expectations of their gender. Virmati's evident influence and spell cause her ambitions to soar to dizzying heights. Now that she has her academic support behind her, it is up to her to carve out a career and become financially independent. Shakuntala's comment during her visit had motivated Virmati;

Times are changing and women are moving out of the house, why not you? (Kapur, 2010).

Virmati shares a room with Swarnalatha in Lahore and even as Swarnalatha travels to the city, Lahore to do her MA turns into the playground of her idealistic fulfilment. She now dares to tell her parents that their failure to comprehend her idea of marriage would inevitably result in Satyagraha, which is the epitome of Gandhian idealism, even if it means inviting arrest and incarceration. In the end, it presents the things she charts when courting a husband who now has to obediently comply with her justifiable requests without questioning her while starting to work as a college teacher.

Swarnalatha and Shakuntala defy age-old tradition and discriminating social rules. They pushed back against the long-standing custom and headed toward modernism. These two figures represent modernity and serve as Virmati's motivation as she pursues a life of dignity and self-worth. Shakuntala and Swarna Lata are the representatives of the burgeoning 'New Women' and from the start of the novel; Kapur has highlighted Shakuntala as a paradigm of the 'Modern or Liberated' woman. They represent today's modern women in their rights-fighting capacity. They appear to represent the 'New Women' who want to do away with the inhibitions that have been a part of women's lives for so long. 'They are not silent rebels but are cold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented'. But Virmati, a personification of civic unrest, defies conventional wisdom since she is a highly literate, inquisitive learner. In a patriarchal society, Kasturi conforms to social standards. Virmati disregards societal norms and rejects her mother's perspective, adopting an independent perspective on life, education and marriage; contrary to her mother's belief that a woman is not truly a lady if she is single. The novels of Manju Kapur straight away present the need for improvement for women in the field of education. The novel emphasises is on self-realisation, self-reliance, and self-actualisation and teaches that 'Knowledge is Powerful'.

12. Result of the Study

- a. The study raises awareness that women need to be respected and should not have their rights or social positions diminished.
- b. To guarantee women's empowerment, advance women's rights and eradicate gender disparity.
- c. To understand that education fosters critical thinking and challenges gender discrimination and patriarchy.
- d. To be unaffected both emotionally and physically.

13. Conclusion

Indeed, feminism does not attempt to promote female superiority over males, but rather equality and the deconstruction of patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequity. Feminism has made important contributions to progress, rights and continues to be a powerful force in influencing social and political landscapes across the world. Manju Kapur's novels are a classic representation of Indian society and the pre-independence state of women in India. The illiterate majority in India has always been wary of women's desire to establish their independent existence apart from the repressive socio-psychological burdens of men. The story reflects the fixation of society on traditional conceptions of women, superstitions, male progeny and marriage. The ignorant Indian community prevents any woman from deviating from the path of tradition and rejects modernization. Women suffer because males view them as things for personal satisfaction and as people who have to follow social rules. The conventionalist darkness is dispelled by Kapur's works, and her novels are the voice for the voiceless in society. The traditional evil practice and male chauvinism have to be eradicated for a better tomorrow and it is

possible through education. The novelist's theme of female freedom, with all its debilitating orchestrations of tradition and culture attempting to undermine the enormous potentials, capabilities and sagacities she bore within needs to be freed.

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