

# Women's Issues: Quest for Love in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of suffering and stoic women eventually breaking the traditional boundaries has had a significant impact. Manju Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individuals caged within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant for them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunged into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds. Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughters* was published in 1998 and it received a huge international acclaim. It was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best first book and was a number one best seller in India.

The women's question today is no longer an issue confined to the position of women within the family or their rights to equality with men in different aspects of social life. It is a part of the total, far broader question regarding the direction of the change that our society is taking – economic, social, political and the intellectual perception and the analysis of that process. It is in this context that the role of women is discussed in the novels of Manju Kapur. Kapur presents women's emancipation and striving for some space in such a manner that we read not only just with our eyes but also with our heart.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a feminist discourse not because she is a woman writing about women but because she has understood a woman both as a woman and a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible contexts. This novel is a story of a woman torn between different forces that affect her life. Her duty towards her family, her desire to be academically well equipped, her illicit love affair with a married man and her attempts to shape her own destiny stands as the core of the novel. This is rather a story of sorrow, love and compromise. Virmati, the central character is in quest for true love. But the quest does not stop till the end.

Virmati, the eldest in a family, is the protagonist of the novel. She is the second mother of her ten other siblings who look up to her for every little thing. She was impatient, but intolerant and a hard task master. Having been loaded with domestic responsibilities at a very early age, Virmati was totally deprived of her quota of love and care, and she even lost track of her childhood years. Looking back she has no fond memories of her past.

Much importance was not given to Virmati's education. She was taught that there are many other things in life than mere education. Marriage, setting up a new home, bearing and rearing children, striving for domestic bliss and marital contentment are the many things that a woman should strive for. Very often Virmati felt like revolting and breaking the age old traditional barriers and doing something different. Virmati's marriage was arranged with an Engineer Inderjeet. Virmati thought of going for higher education. But she was denied of getting it as her parents had arranged her marriage. Finding no means of escape and all attempts at persuasion lost, she began to secretly weave a dream house filled with marital bliss. But due to the death in the family of Inderjeet the marriage was postponed for two years.

Virmati got a chance to continue with her education. Man is helpless in the face of destiny. So also the arrival of Prof. Harish Chandra in Virmati's life which brought many changes in her life. The first time Virmati met Harish, he played some of the sweetest music for her, and was rewarded by the look on her face. On the other hand Virmati was deeply

enlightened by the Professor and considered him noble for his concern towards women's education. These informal meets increased.

“He was offering a little bit of himself which both flattered and alarmed Virmati” (39)

In the Professor's class, Virmati sat in the front row with the other girls and saw her,

“flower-like against the backdrop of male students” (42)

This continued for some time and the Professor's desire to possess had extended to the heart and mind. They both were in love with each other. Virmati thought that she would be getting true love from the Professor, who is already married and also she thought that this love would be long lasting. But the path to love never ran smooth. The social barricades and moral hurdles label their relationships as 'illicit'.

There sprang a lot of tension, anger and contrasting views between Virmati and her mother. For her mother, getting married and staying at home was higher than any kind of education. She reprimands Virmati and asks her to be at least a little grateful to her grandfather and father, who permitted her to study further.

“They thought school and college would strengthen you, not change you” (54)

Virmati's mother was adamant and would not allow her to have her ways. Talks of marriage filled the air and everybody in the house could think of nothing else but Virmati's impending marriage. Virmati remained passive and silent, and every word fell on a deaf ear. Things began to get out of control and Virmati contemplates suicide. She made a futile attempt at drowning. She was locked in the godown but still remained silent and stubborn. The next few months passed by in great pain and loneliness for both Virmati and Harish. They communicated through letters, exchanging every minute detail of things happening.

Finally, it was decided, although reluctantly, that Virmati would go to Lahore for further studies. Her mother made one last attempt at making her see reason,

“If you cannot consider your duty to us, at least consider yourself. There is a time in the cycle of life for everything. If you willfully ignore like this, what will happen to you? A woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings” (102)

Virmati as the name suggests was not only brave, but also stubborn. Although she tried to live within a moral code, fate decided otherwise. Despite her resolution and pain, she was still considered to be the black sheep of the family. Meanwhile Harish was getting restless without Virmati. All his letters went unreplied. His friend Syed Hussain opted to help him in every possible way. Harish tried to meet her thrice but was rewarded only the fourth time. Virmati spent the time arguing with him and blaming him for his indecisiveness. But true to his style, the Professor tried to calm her by saying,

“There is a void in my heart and in my home that you alone can fill”. (112)

Later Virmati's meeting with the Professor became rare. Whenever she came up with the topic of marriage, he had his own genuine reasons and excuses. She holds him responsible for all that she goes through in life, right from a broken engagement to being titled as the black sheep of the family. Even in Lahore, she lives a shameful life with the tag of a 'secret wife'. At this stage Virmati thought that it is highly impossible for her to get the true love which she thought of getting from the Professor in the beginning.

After returning to Amristar, Virmati was offered the principalship of a college, where Harish came often to meet her. So she was dismissed and she decided to go to Nariniketan but on the way she met Harish's close friend who was already aware of their intimate relationship. So he did not let her go and called Harish. He performed all the rituals of marriage. Professor with Virmati returned home.

During her life Virmati felt that it would have been better if she would not have married Harish. This thought itself shows that Virmati failed to get the love from the Professor. After sometimes she gave birth to a daughter Ida and at the beginning of the novel this girl Ida pondered over her mother's life. However the path of true love never did smoothly run. She is haunted by a deep sense of guilt.

Kasturi, Virmati's mother is an example for typical feminine attitude. To run her home, first as a joint family and later her own, is happiness for her. Like Kasturi, Ganga the Professor's wife, marriage is a religious and social institution, where love is not the basis of marriage. But in Virmati, there is a struggle between the head and the heart, the physical and moral.

Ida, Virmati's daughter became a typical daughter of a 'difficult daughter' Virmati. She could not develop an understanding with her mother during her lifetime and after Virmati's death this realization engulfed her with guilt. Virmati had to fight against the power of the mother as well as the oppressive forces of patriarchy symbolized by the mother figure. The rebel in Virmati might have actually exchanged one kind of slavery for the another. But towards the end she became free, free even from the oppressive love of her husband.

Instead of waiting for true love, Virmati took the responsibility of leading her own life and became economically independent. Virmati realizes that life was really not worth all the struggle. Things are not always as they appear or seem. Throughout Virmati fights to get what she wants. She lives life on her own terms and conditions; but in the process she loses a significant part of herself and realizes the insignificance of things.

#### REFERENCES

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