

## **Virmati: An Embodiment of ‘New Woman’ in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters***

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### **Abstract**

The term ‘New Woman’ indicates the awakening of woman who asserts her individuality and voices a note of dissent to her age-long suppression in this male chauvinistic society. In Indian-English fiction too the concept of ‘New Woman’ finds recognition in the novels of women writers like Anita Desai, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sehgal, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Shashi Deshpande etc. Manju Kapur (1998-present), an internationally commended Indian woman novelist showcases the predicament of the Indian woman tangled in her own desires and yearnings as an individual and the forces of patriarchy which confines her. She is the author of six acclaimed novels and with her first novel *Difficult Daughters* she has earned global recognition. This paper is aimed at a scrutiny of the novel “*Difficult Daughters*” to examine her handling of the changing image of woman in the modern and the post modern era. The focus is laid on studying the rebellious character of Virmati, who has the courage to break the boundaries by protesting against the patriarchal set up of India. She is the woman of present generation who wants her individual worth realized, is firm and aspiring.

**KEYWORDS-** New Woman, Patriarchy, Man– Woman Relationship, Gender Discrimination, Marginalization, Rebellion and Protest

The emergence of women writers in Indian English writing has brought a drastic change in the literary field. The women writers present a true portrayal of the dilemma faced by modern women in today’s society. These writers have given an absolutely new face to the Indian Fiction in English. With their women-centered approach and keen feminist insight these writers have projected the agonised mind of the persecuted women. The writers oppose the submissiveness of the fair sex and thus give a jolt to the male dominated society to give up the thought of suppressing and ignoring the identity of women. Thus these writers have created a revolution that undermines the very thought of man to conquer or victimize women in the so-called male dominated society. Through their female protagonists these women writers have brought a sea change in the outlook of people regarding the identity of women. Today, women are no more bound to the shackles of the patriarchy; they resist the very idea of suppression and strive to redefine the cultural and social stereotypes and values that hinder their progression.

Manju Kapoor, born in 1948 in Amritsar, is one of the most notable women novelists of India. She has significantly contributed to the advancement of Indian fiction. She is a Professor of English literature at Miranda House College for Women, Delhi University. Her far-famed works has brought a drastic change in the role of traditional women in India. She has projected how women are adopting change of modernity by coming out of the shadow of the age old traditionalism. Her women characters are mostly educated aspiring women, trying to build lives for themselves

within or outside the conventional family life. Her unusual sensitivity and profundity helps to explore the psyche of the educated middle class Indian woman. She vividly portrays the dilemma of the Indian woman caught within the whirlpool of this male-chauvinist society.

*Difficult Daughters* Manju Kapur's maiden venture is a tale of sorrow, love and compromise. The protagonist of the novel Virmati, represents herself as a modern woman who flouts the rules of society, fights against her family tradition and in no terms ready to accept the secondary position given to women in this patriarchal society. Virmati's tale is about a struggling woman trying to establish her individuality. This book depicts about three generations of women beginning with Virmati's daughter Ida landing in Amritsar to find out more about her mother's past. As she slowly traces a story laden with tears, struggles and few smiles, we come to know that the novel deals with the story of Virmati along with the struggle of India's own battle for independence as its backdrop. Thus, we find a beautiful parallelism drawn in the novel between the independence aspired and attained by the nation and the independence aspired and yearned by a woman of the nation. The struggle for independence also brought unchangeable and painful lines of partition around her tender heart. The character of Virmati represents herself as an advanced and free woman of 1940s. She has an altogether modern approach and leads her life in her own terms.

Virmati, was born and brought up in an austere Punjabi family of Amritsar. Being the eldest daughter she was given the responsibility of upbringing her siblings because of her mother's incessant pregnancies. Virmati's family is thoroughly conservative where marriage, setting up a home, bearing and rearing children, striving for domestic bliss and marital contentment are the things given utmost importance. When Virmati was barely 13 years old, talks about her marriage began to surface and her parents decided to marry her to an engineer named Inderjeet. Virmati wanted to revolt and break the traditional boundaries but her pleadings and persuasions were altogether dismissed by her rigid mother as she believes: "A woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings." (102). As fate has decided something else for the young Virmati, her marriage is postponed for two years as Inderjeet's father has expired. This situation provided time to Virmati to study further.

Since her childhood, Virmati had a longing to get her mother's love but she receives no "language of feeling" from Kasturi. Thus the desire of leading an independent life is nurtured in the tender mind of Virmati. She was highly influenced by her cousin Shakuntala who is educated, refined and, lives in Lahore, "I want to be like you, Pehnji" (15). It was Shakuntala who made her realize that through education only freedom could be attained by women. She encouraged Virmati to follow her dreams by saying, "Times are changing, and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?" (16) Thus Virmati realized that she cannot confine herself in the typical, traditional marriage institution and lead the life of a housewife.

To pursue her dreams Virmati started going to college and came in contact with Oxford returned Professor Harish Chandra who is a married man. Virmati got enamoured by the physical charms and English ways of the professor and has fallen in love with him. Professor too, was deeply attracted towards her and motivated her to pursue studies. Virmati, too much passionate and devoted for her lover and career

wanted to soar high and break the shackles of traditions. She knew the consequence of her relationship with the professor still she is unable to keep her away from him. She did everything for the sake of her love for Professor- refused to marry the boy she was engaged to, attempted suicide and was kept captive in her own house. Soon she realized the futility of her illicit love when she came to know about the pregnancy of the Professor's wife. She was determined to take hold of her life and aspired to change it and so, "She had carried all the letters the Professor had ever sent her to the *kotha*. At the furthest point where the topmost branches of the neem tree could touch her face, she watched them burn undisturbed. When the fire had finished its job, she collected the ashes and flung them towards her aunt's house, where he had once lived, watching the tiny black specs of her lost love float about." (104). This shows Virmati's marvellous strength of mind to close the chapter and lead a meaningful life in Lahore.

There is a burgeoning of 'a new woman' in Virmati who is determined to take the reins of her life in her hands and pursue higher studies in Lahore. She tries to follow the lines of her cousin Shakuntala who inspired Virmati by leading a progressive lifestyle in Lahore as she describes, "We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings; follow each other's work, read papers, attend seminars." Her effort to leave home to study in Lahore, was in reality an attempt to break her relationship from the professor. But no sooner does she begin to realize the vainness of such relationship, the pleadings of illicit love from the professor became too strong that made Virmati feeble in her moral strength. Her secret meetings with the professor in one of his friend's residence inside the campus landed her with conception of the 'sinful burden'. The traumatic experience of abortion shattered the very self of Virmati "she felt a deep emptiness inside her...." (160). She feels void when she aborts the child, she laments, "That a child of their union, the result of all those speeches on freedom and the right to individuality, the sanctity of human love and the tyranny of social and religious restraints, should meet its end like this!"(157).

Virmati returned to Amritsar after completing her B.T. and is offered the post of headmistress of a school at Nahan. This was the most awaited and successful phase for her since she had always pined for an autonomy over her life. But this period did not last for long because in Nahan too, the professor visits her and their meetings were observed by Lalaji. Virmati was terminated from her service and decided to go to Shanti Niketan. On the way she meets Harish's close friend who calls Harish. Finally her marriage with Harish took place and they got the license to move together freely. The Professor returned home with Virmati but was unable to give Viru her due status. She craves for a wife's space instead of which she was given a pariah status. It was a catastrophe of her life that she has to share her husband's love along with his first wife, Ganga. Thus, marrying the professor did not bring any happiness to her life; all blood relations from her parental home were broken as her family never accepted her relation with the professor.

We can say that Virmati is a true embodiment of a 'New Woman' who is not moving along the traditional stereotypes but rebels against tradition, and fights against the oppressive forces of patriarchy for her rights as a human being. The novel thus projects the story of a woman striving towards attaining her own aspiration and yearning for education as she believes in the notion, "that society would be better off if its females were effective and capable."(150). Virmati was victorious in crossing

the patriarchal threshold but, it is unfortunate on her part that she fails to show her strength of mind in love. Thus the theme of a nation's independence along with Virmati's battle for freedom ran parallel where both achieved freedom at the heavy cost of partition and losing a part of their own self.

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