



## Changing Role of Women in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters

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**ABSTRACT :** *Manju Kapur has been highly acclaimed as a renowned novelist writing in English by critics at home and abroad. In the first place, she creates one type of character that is caught in the complex web of tradition that appears in two forms: firstly, it manifests itself in the form of patriarchal form of society and secondly, in the form of male chauvinism. Manju Kapur has very capably presented her characters during the period of transition that characterizes them with special distinctive traits. The novelist used the backdrop of partition to build a story of absorbing passion but it is partition in more than one way. This is what is called the spirit of time generally known as zeitgeist. A writer, worth the name must capture this time spirit because the time spirit expresses the general mood and temperament of that particular generation, quite distinctive from the one that precedes and the one that follows. Her novel touches many issues like revolt against deep-rooted family tradition, the search for selfhood, women's rights, marriage and the battle for independence at both fronts--- personal and national.*

**Keywords:** *transition, self-fulfillment, patriarchal society, suffocated, zeitgeist.*

### I. INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur has been highly acclaimed as a renowned novelist writing in English by critics at home and abroad. As on date, she has five full length novels and in each novel, she presents the protagonist endowed with distinctive traits that render her different from any other protagonist of her novels. In the first place, she creates one type of character that is caught in the complex web of tradition that appears in two forms: firstly, it manifests itself in the form of patriarchal form of society and secondly, in the form of male chauvinism. The character seems to be lost in a labyrinth of anti-forces that stunt the growth of her personality and stifle her individuality; and this makes her feel suffocated for want of freedom of thought or action. Generally, tradition appears in the person of 'a mother' and the protagonist, naturally, struggles to extricate herself from the oppressive clutches of tradition and patriarchal system of society.

This research paper is chiefly concerned here with the characters that belong to the period of transition and the changing role of women in the novels of Manju kapur with special reference to her "Difficult Daughters". These characters are distinctly different from their predecessors of the immediate past generation represented by their parents and their grandparents, and this generation gap characterized by a new way of thinking may just be called the of the transition. These people set their backs against those men of orthodox views who cling blindly to tradition like limpets. Manju Kapur very adroitly creates this transition which bridges the period of pre-independence and the immediate post-independence India. The initial period of post independence India presents new view points of the people that make tremendous progress in almost every sphere of activity. Women, especially the educated middle class women, do not lag behind men. They incessantly struggle to be on par with men and to build up their own identity both in their private and public life. This aspect of the educated middle class women is very powerfully reflected in Manju kapur's novels.

But during this period of transition, conspicuous changes have taken place. It has been well realized by one and all that education for women is a 'muster' and imperative and the government makes every effort to provide equal opportunities for women, along with men, in the field of education and employment.

Manju Kapur has very capably presented her characters during the period of transition that characterizes them with special distinctive traits. The novelist used the backdrop of partition to build a story of absorbing passion but it is partition in more than one way. This is what is called the spirit of time generally known

as zeitgeist. A writer, worth the name must capture this time spirit because the time spirit expresses the general mood and temperament of that particular generation, quite distinctive from the one that precedes and the one that follows. Her novel touches many issues like revolt against deep-rooted family tradition, the search for selfhood, women's rights, marriage and the battle for independence at both fronts-----personal and national. Here the observation of **Christopher Rollason** deserves mention:

**“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 fateful partition),but also to the independence yearned after (and finally not obtained) by a woman and members of that same nation (or of its rival communities)”. (45)**

This paper is a modest attempt to deal with the changing role of women in Manju Kapur's novel “Difficult Daughters”. The story of the novel has been cast against the political background of the partition of India. Actually, the author, Manju Kapur initially deals with the conditions prevalent before India attained Independence.

Kasturi, the mother of Virmati, belongs to that older generation. Kasturi may be regarded as the representative of the traditional women. Childhood, in general is the glorious period of innocent pleasures. But unfortunately, owing to the force of circumstances, Virmati is deprived of these pleasures. The immediate reason for this is, Kasturi has given birth to eleven children and the sad lot of looking after these children has fallen on Virmati. She has to play the role of a de-facto mother to all the children. She is often tired and exhausted because of her continuous attendance on her siblings, even at a tender age of ten. Virmati is deprived of her legitimate pleasure of being loved by her mother, Kasturi who is almost impatient owing to her repeated pregnancies. Kasturi has never expressed even a single word of sympathy towards Virmati, who is actually overburdened with domestic chores besides looking after her siblings.

It is clearly perceptible that their points of view run along parallel lines hardly to meet anywhere. For Kasturi, Virmati seemed to be restless all the time which spells disaster in a girl and on the contrary, Virmati feels it was so difficult saying anything to her mother. Kasturi's relation with her daughter, Virmati does not let her realise her daughter's need for a separate identity and an independent existence. So Virmati has to rebel. She fought against the power of her mother as well as the oppressive force of patriarchy symbolized by the mother figure. In Virmati, One finds yearning for a way of life which would give her freedom and some sort of identity.

The first seeds of deviation from traditional thinking are perceived in Virmati when she is all admiration for Shakuntala (her first cousin). She almost unconsciously, has come under the irresistible spell of Shakuntala's dynamic personality. It was Shakuntala who has sown the seeds of aspiration for modernity in Virmati's young, fertile mind. To Virmati, Shakuntala in her most sophisticated dress appears like a vision in a dream. In spite of Kasturi's disapproval of Shakuntala's appearance and dress, Virmati is drawn towards, “Shakuntala to one whose responsibilities went beyond a husband and children” (DD-17)

Although Shakuntala gives expression to her own views about the advantages of being independent in a casual tone, Virmati almost, without her own knowledge passes through a kind of metamorphosis of her own person. The impact of Shakuntala's words on Virmati is clear from the latter's words, “I want to be like you, Pehnji, If there are two of us, then they will not mind so much.” (DD-17) and she emphasizes her modern views by asserting,

**“It was useless looking for answer inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom and the bright lights of Lahore colleges.” (DD-17)**

Virmati is being influenced by imperceptible degree by Shakuntala and unconsciously, she develops a sense of independence. Inspired by the words of Shakuntala, who, having done her M.Sc in Chemistry and tasted the wine of freedom, Virmati decides that:

**“She too had to go to Lahore, even if she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over.” (DD-19)**

The major crisis in her life, however, springs from her love for the Professor. Her craving for education and desire to be like her cousin, Shakuntala, drives her to the threshold of the Oxford returned English Professor, Harish Chandra. When Virmati, who is already engaged to a canal engineer, is certain that the Professor is deeply in love with her she doesn't yield to him downright her mind becomes a battle field of conflicts.

Virmati finds herself in a terrible grip of crisis created by the Professor's relentless pursuit after her. In addition to all this, the Professor's love making to Virmati is very subtle and insidious and moreover he is endowed with the gift of the gab that his sophistry has made her surrender to him. The Professor proves himself to

be a will-of-the-wisp. There is an element of irony in every one's life. It appears in a most inscrutable way that upsets the apperception of programmes in one's life. Had the would-be bridegroom's father not died, the marriage in all probability would have been performed and the gap of interval caused by the postponement of marriage has brought in dramatic changes in the life of Virmati.

The turning point of what Virmati's life would be is clearly foreshadowed in a brief but important dialogue between Virmati and her mother. Manju Kapur, very tactfully brings in a very serious matter from what otherwise seems to be a trivial, insignificant act of spinning the threads for Virmati's trousseau. It is in this connection, that Virmati boldly tells us that she would not marry so soon, as she would like to pursue her further studies. Kasturi becomes infuriated and bangs Virmati by grabbing her hair and banging her head against the wall. Virmati's stubborn decision to pursue higher studies in Lahore marks the new beginning of a new chapter in her life.

It is clearly discernable that there has been a conflict in the mind of Virmati when it comes to taking a decision with regard to her future life, as she feels it beyond her strength to take any decision, she decides to commit suicide. Here we perceive the ponderous weight of tradition in her mind working against a bolder step by negating the proposed marriage. Later she is saved by the servants of her grandfather and subsequently she is locked in the godown as she refuses to marry the boy of their choice.

There is a kind of volcano like eruption in the mind of Virmati, who is always fidgeting to achieve something noble which will illuminate her life and cherish a dream of education. She appears as an emerging new woman when, in one of her letters to the Professor, she is bold to say that she would rather die than be a rubber doll in the hands of others:

**“If I was to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed, then I didn't want to live.” (DD-92)**

Now that Virmati is in Lahore to pursue her studies, the professor is completely out of her mind. She feels autonomy and independence around her but, she tears herself off the natural filial bonds and gets into the illegitimate relations with the Professor.

**“She thought he was right, she was meant to be his, what was the point in foolishly denying it on the basis of outmoded morality.” (DD-125)**

Manju Kapur very adroitly, as time passes, presents Virmati as one in the evolution of her growth, standing on the periphery of modernity. Obviously, there are two persons in Virmati that come in conflict with each other. The Virmati under the influence of Swarna lata, her roommate at Lahore when she wishes to be almost like Swarna lata, the modern activist involved in other people and waiting for no man when she thinks:

**“This is what is going on around me. This is the life I should involve in. Not useless love and doubtful marriage.” (DD-134)**

and the Virmati that has almost surrendered herself to the professor and it is the latter that pulls her back from the thoughts of modernity. The emerging new world which we call the modern world is not for Virmati. It has been sealed for her once and for all as she lives for the most part of her life in a romantic world reliving her past experience with the professor. She remains there a spectator of the emerging world deriving vicarious pleasure listening to the activities of Swarna lata and other women. According to **Mayur Chhikara,**

**“The novelist has portrayed her protagonist as a woman caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. The women of India have indeed achieved their success in half a century of Independence, but if there is to be a true female independence, much remains to be done.” (189)**

Virmati's love -----if it is called love -----for the professor, is her chief tragic flaw. From Virmati's talk throughout the novel, she betrays one flaw-----that is, she is not capable of taking a firm decision on anything that is intimately related to her life and this, of course, is largely responsible for her own tragic life. This flaw in her becomes more accentuated when compared to Shakuntala and Swarna lata, who stick to their decisions. Swarna lata speaks to Virmati in her own modern idiom of participating in active politics and going to jail as an alternative to marriage. This idiom is quite alien to Virmati's thinking. Though on the spur of the moment, Virmati feels convinced of Swarna lata's words, she is still doubtful whether she is capable of leading a life for herself without marriage. Virmati seems to be more inclined to compromise with her present unalterable situation than to court any new life as suggested by Swarna lata.

One prominent feature about Virmati's character is that she oscillates between tradition and modernity. Here we must recall the situation when Virmati and the Professor indulge in sexual congress for the first time, she flouts the tradition without any qualms and justifies that it is an outmoded morality to be chaste before marriage; Here she sounds like a modern woman but at the same time, she thinks like a traditional woman who thinks that a woman once touched by a man entirely belongs to him.

Virmati's family decides to send her to Nahan as the headmistress of a girls school. She welcomes the opportunity, though dispassionately, as it helps her widen her vision and serve the nation's literacy.

**"Here B.T. had left restless and dissatisfied, hungry to work, and anxious to broaden her horizons. She had had a taste of freedom in Lahore, it was hard to come back to the old life when she was not the old person anymore." (DD-181)**

At Nahan Virmati happily settles and becomes acclimatized to the new environs and busy with her teaching and administration of the school and subsequently, she marries the married professor and becomes his second wife and Virmati feels that it is her personal triumph. This makes the beginning of another chapter in her life marriage. She is drunk with a sense of personal pride; all her near relatives, parents and grandfather are relegated into the background of her consciousness. For the present, Virmati finds her own identity as the wife of the Professor. We see that Virmati is more traditional than modern since she gives such religious importance to her union with the Pro

**"Virmati was sure that neither her parents nor grandfather would ever forgive. The process of rejection that had started with Tarsikka would be completed. Let them damn her as they might at least she had this new life-----she promised herself a blissful marriage; after all they had gone through so much to be together. Her husband would be every thing to her. This was the way it should be, and she was pleased to finally detect a recognizable pattern in her life." (DD-207)**

A clear image of Virmati emerges through the pages of the novel as one less assertive and more wavering in her decision and above all a tendency towards romantic leanings and this finally proves to be her tragic flaw. One perceives that Virmati struggles to free herself from the tight grip of tradition in order to pursue her strong inclination for education, which is a mark of modernity. When the reader critically analyses Virmati's life, the root cause of her tragic situation is she married the Professor, a refined villain of the piece, who with his subtle sophistry wins over inexperienced, naïve and simple Virmati. Virmati's idealism has luminous wings but they are too ineffectual to have a flight into the desired realm of realisation. Virmati's saga of quest for identity and aspirations in the life finally quenched with her eventual death and extinguished in the funeral pyre. As **Binod Mishra** observes,

**"However educated or innovative an Indian woman is, her Indian background and psyche cannot feel satisfied unless society approves of her endeavours and her relationship. Virmati's tragedy is the tragedy of ambition, obsession and un-claimed ovation." (151)**

As **Dora Sales Salvador**, the Spanish translator of 'Difficult Daughters' says:

**"In Difficult Daughters, we do not listen to Virmati's voice. She could not speak out, being certainly situated at the juncture of two oppressions: colonialism and patriarchy. What we have is her daughter's reconstruction and representation".**

Manju Kapur introduces two other women Shakuntals and Swarna lata as women of modern views leading independent lives. Shakuntala, the first cousin of Virmati, has been endowed with a clear vision for future against the background of tradition which her mother, Lajwanti represents. Shakuntala is intelligent, independent, sophisticated and above all rebellious in her attitude. She deprecates the concept of marriage as the summum bonum of life and reacts to this traditional idea.

Shakuntala has emerged out as an anti-traditionalist. She is impelled by a new vision that stubbornly opposes the traditional point of view. The first unconventional view of Shakuntala is that a woman should have higher education so that she could lead an independent life and to her, marriage comes next:

**"These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else". (DD-17)**

In the words of **R.K.Mishra**,

**"This reaction expressed by Shakuntala evidences Kapur's rebellious attitude against the servitude of women. She uses this woman character as her own mouth organ and advocates freedom and education for Indian woman and their participation in National reconstruction. What authenticates this advocacy is Swarna lata's involvement in freedom struggle." (58)**

Shakuntala possesses the traits of a young lady emerging into modernity. Although the role of Shakuntala is limited in the novel, Kapur brings out certain prominent traits in Shakuntala to illustrate her unmistakable manifestation of her life style that is out and out modern. Shakuntala has imbibed the spirit of modernity so much that she has left behind her an unbridgeable gulf between the old world of tradition and the

new world of modernity to which she belongs. She seems to be self assertive and a woman of independent decision. She appears more unwavering and emotionally stronger to accept the hegemonic structures of the traditional society. During her stay at Dalhousie, Virmati watches Shakuntala's unconventional way of life:

**"She watched her ride horses, smoke, play cards and badminton, act without her mother's advice, buy anything she wanted without thinking it a waste of money, casually drop in on all the people the family knew. Above all, she never seemed to question or doubt herself in anything." (DD-18)**

Shakuntala Pehnji having done her M.Sc., in Chemistry, had gone about tasting the wine of freedom, gets on her soap box with regard to marriage, education and independent life of woman. Thus the main role of Shakuntala in the novel consists in bringing about a total metamorphosis in Virmati and thus Shakuntala stands apart from the other transitional characters as one with a dynamic identity.

Swarna lata is another modern woman character introduced a little after nearly one-third of the novel is over. She happens to be the room-mate of Virmati at Lahore where she does her M.A., postponing her marriage to an indefinite date. Swarna lata is portrayed as a young, dynamic lady with a keen social consciousness. She is very much inclined to perform some kind of social service; she, like many young educated ladies of those times, comes under the influence of Mahatma Gandhi. It is against this background, Swarna's mother insists that she should be married as she completed her B.A., By then Swarna lata had had a different mindset. She believes that there are other things for her to pursue besides marriage. Obviously, she is not against marriage; it is a question of priorities. Like a good many of young, educated associates she wants to pursue further studies in Lahore.

She pleads her parents that she might be left alone at least for two years before she could think of her marriage and she would be highly grateful to them if they concede to her request; otherwise, she would offer Satyagraha. She tells Virmati as what has transpired between her parents and herself before coming to Lahore:

**"I told my parents that if they would support me for twomore years I would be grateful. Otherwise I would be forced to offer Satyagraha along with other Congress workers against the British. And go on until taken to prison. Free food and lodging at the hands of the imperialists." (DD-118)**

Christopher Rollason remarks in this context:

**"The pages of Difficult Daughters speak not only of Virmati, but of other 'difficult daughters', who succeed better than she did in their parallel struggles for independence in their lives. At the centre of the narrative, we are confronted with a woman who fights but falls by the wayside; but at its edges, as no doubtless representative but still symbolic figures, we encounter---as will be seen below---other women, whose relative success points the way to the future." (3)**

That part of the novel that deals with Swarna lata, reconstructs the whole personality of that lady. Swarna lata seems to have been possessed by a strong spirit of patriotism. She is very much against segregation of Hindu-Muslim communities. A vision of united India floats before her. Swarna lata's voice is the voice of millions of Indians-----Hindus and Muslims, is against the artificial segregation especially on religious lines. While addressing the Punjab Women's Student Conference, held at LajPat Rai Hall Swarna lata makes the following pertinent observations:

**"As women, it is our duty, no, not duty, that word has unpleasant connotations. It is our privilege to be able to give ourselves to the unity of our country. Not only to the unity between rich and poor, but etween Muslim and Hindu, between Sikh and Christian. Artificial barriers have been created amongst us to gain power over insecure and fearful minds. Let the politics of religion not blind out to this fact." (DD-145)**

Swarna lata, somehow, has gained a broader understanding of herself in relation to society and vice versa. Virmati, as far as her views are concerned, appears dwarfish before Swarna lata's catholicity of social understanding. This is due to her exposure to the times which pass through a vortex of changes such as enslaved India attaining Swaraj and subsequently the sub-continent of India being divided into two countries----Hindustan and Pakistan---which in its wake has caused Saturnine blood path of people belonging to both the religions. Swarna lata shared directly or indirectly all the trials and tribulations of the time; nothing gives a man such a deeper wisdom about life as his intimate experience.

Virmati receives certain pieces of enlightenment and insights about life in general and about her own life in particular at the hands of Swarna lata. She is the one who instilled courage and confidence to look forward to her future during the days of sheer despondency. Incidentally, Swarna lata presents the image of a modern woman before Virmati saying:

**"We are responsible for our own futures. Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war--the Satyagraha movement--because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream." (DD-151)**

Swarna lata is a young lady who lives for her ideology which includes political and other activities which are meant to ameliorate society. Only when her fiancé concedes to her request that she must have complete freedom, she is prepared to marry him. This shows the stout champion in her towards the upliftment of social values and most importantly, Women's empowerment. It also breeds ideas of radicalism and militancy but what is admirable is the fact that she can build these ideas of independence into her marriage without destroying the structure of the family. Her marriage rests on the condition that it would not hamper her work. At no cost would she mortgage her ideology and in her letter she tells Virmati, in unambiguous terms about her marriage:

**“And then came Swarna's note saying she was married. He had accepted all her conditions. She was going to be allowed continue her other activities, remain treasurer of the Women's Conference, go on working for the party. Everything to do with the house they would share as much as possible.” (DD-188)**  
It is apt to quote **Malashri Lal** in this context:

**“Indian women despite their acceptance of the intellectual message of individual, gender based critique from the west, wish to remain in active link with family and community concepts in India.” (28)**

It is this aspect of her character that Swarna lata emerges as a unique one. Although comparatively small space has been allotted for her character in the novel, Manju Kapur has very powerfully depicted Swarna lata.

Swarna lata appears to be a clear-headed social activist. Unlike Virmati, she channelizes her energy in new directions, which gives her sense of group identity. She is an ultra-committed activist, she appears as the mouthpiece of contemporary women who fights for her rights. She is bold, outspoken, determined and action-oriented. Swarna's words as well as actions reveal her as a staunch feminist, fighting for every right of women. Swarna lata, in her second encounter with her old friend and roommate Virmati, who comes to Lahore to study M.A. Philosophy asks her to join the demonstration against Draft Hindu Code Bill:

**“Come and demonstrate with us against the ‘Draft Hindu Code Bill’ next Saturday outside the railway station. Men don't want family wealth to be divided among women. Say their sisters get dowry, that's their share, and the family structure will be threatened, because sisters and wives will be seen as rivals, instead of dependents who have to be nurtured and protected. As a result women will lose their moral position in society! Imagine!” (DD-251-252)**

She also exhorts Virmati saying:

**“It's important that our voice be heard, Viru, some men are planning to demonstrate against it. Won't you add your strength to ours?” (DD-251-252 58)**

**B.R.Agrawal** writes that

**“The novelist seems to be questioning the traditional systems of child marriage, gender discrimination, women's education and other outmoded value systems which lie at the root of modern malaise. Hence, there is a need to modify and not to change them.” (246)**

Thus, Manju Kapur brings out the changing role of women in her novel and how the women, passing through a period of transition, crossing the threshold of patriarchal hegemony make a relentless crusade braving through the stifling circumstances until they emerge as emancipated women. Manju Kapur's fiction stresses the women's need for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self-realization, and a fight for her own destiny, independence, individuality and self-actualization. She presents the hidden intricacies of woman psyche in her novels. Her protagonists make an effort to dismantle the gender polarization up to a great extent.

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