

---



---

**PORTRAYAL OF NEW  
WOMEN IN  
MANJUKAPUR'S  
DIFFICULT  
DAUGHTERS**

**J. Augustin Selvaraj**

*M.Phil English,  
Sadakathullah Appa College*

---



---

**Abstract**

*Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters is one of the legendary novels in which much study has been already done since she is a thoroughbred feminist whose writings allure the attention of critics and researchers. Kapur's novels are essentially full of symbols and motifs which enrich the theme of her writings. This paper tries to bring out the portrayal of New Women in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters. All the female characters of this novel symbolise "New Women". And so, this article is more of a study in Feminism. Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters stresses on the woman's need for self-fulfilment autonomy, self-realization, independence individuality and self-actualization. Located primarily in the India of the 1940's, among the writers who have portrayed the 'new woman' who is inclined to take the 'road not taken', and walking on their 'own road', Manju Kapur undoubtedly arrests attention.*

**Keywords:** *Feminism, Motifs, Modern Women, Representation, New Women*

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* stresses on the woman's need for self-fulfilment autonomy, self-realization, independence individuality and self-actualization. Located primarily in the India of the 1940's, among the writers who have portrayed the 'new woman' who is inclined to take the 'road not taken', and walking on their 'own road', Manju Kapur undoubtedly arrests attention. This paper entitled, Portrayal of New Women in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughter* saims at discussing the idea of Manju Kapur, who speaks of independence – independence aspired to and obtained by a nation and independence yearned after by a woman. Kapur says that she is interested in the lives of women, whether in the political arena or in domestic spaces. One of the main preoccupations in all her narratives is how women manage to negotiate both inner and outer spaces in their lives – what sacrifices do they have to make in order to keep the home fires burning and at what cost to their personal lives do they find some kind of fulfilment outside the home.

*Difficult Daughters* represents the emergence of new woman who is no longer the "chaste wife whose suffering can only make her more virtuous, the nurturing mother who denies her own self, the avenging Kali or a titillating strumpet" (Rao 242). The story based partially on the life of Kapur's own mother, the novel movingly evokes the multiple frustrations encountered by the central character, Virmati, in her efforts to educate herself and establish a domestic space, and she can call home. Born in Amritsar in Punjab in 1940, Virmati, the daughter of a father of progressive ideas and a traditionalist mother seeks human relations that would allow her to be herself. Her desire for self expressions and self realization is condemned to failure by her own family as well as that of the man she marries. Through Virmati's character, Manju Kapur has dealt with the theme of travails in self-identity versus socio-cultural identity. *Difficult Daughters*, set against the bloody backdrop of partition in the cities of Amritsar and Lahore, remains a powerful portrait of a society where shame is more important than grief; the novel spans three generations of women and unveils their sense of disillusionment. The three generation of women (Kasturi, Virmati and Ida) symbolize the three stages of Indian independence. Kasturi, the mother represents the preindependence and is shown as a victim of the offensive control of patriarchy. In the beginning, Kasturi is being presented as an epitome

### PORTRAYAL OF NEW WOMEN IN MANJUKAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

of motherhood who bears pain and suffering. "Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not tired, when her feet and legs did not ache" (7). Through these three female protagonists, Manju Kapur has revealed the life circle of a woman who is devoted from beginning of her life. As a child, a girl has to do domestic, house hold activities [as Virmati does], after marriage, she has to bear pain to give birth to child [as Kasturi's condition is revealed after having 11 children] and after being mother, her whole life is dedicated to her whole family. A very pointed statement brings attention: "How trapped could nature make a woman? (7)" Virmati, the daughter, symbolizes the country's struggle for independence on macro level. Psychologically, she reveals her rebellious nature against deep-rooted conventions of morality especially for a girl. She undertakes her journey to the path leading to one's individuality but to her, it leaves in the midway with no achievement. But her image is of a woman unfettered: "Here she comes running, out of prison and off the pedestal; chains off, crown off, halo off, just a live woman" – remarks Charlotte Perkins in an article on the new woman. As Susan Polis Schultz says: "The new woman arises full of confidence, she speaks eloquently, and thinks independently, full of strength. She organizes efficiently and directs proudly." (Schultz 39) Ida, Virmati's daughter is the product of post independence era and establishes herself as an independent woman. She starts her journey to find an insight into her mother's past, denies her and revolts against the ways and follies. The opening line reveals her anguish: The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she was gone and I started at the fire that rose from her shrivelled body, dry-eyed, leaden, half dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept. (1)

The narrative opens with the frank declaration of the narrator, Virmati's daughter Ida, a childless divorcee, who undertakes a journey to know her mother's history, "the one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother". (1). Through Ida's conscious decision to be different from her mother the readers are introduced to the question of defiance and generation gap. Every new generation seeks to rebel or challenge its predecessor, and fight against the anxiety of influence, Virmati challenged Kasturi's principles, Ida could not accept Virmati's principles. Although Virmati's case may be seen as representative up to a point yet she could not live up to it completely. It is true that she represents the spirit of "New Woman" in India with her assertion individuality. The happiest and perhaps the most successful phase of her life was the episode at Nahan, when she became the headmistress of a girl's school. She almost attained the autonomy over her life, which she had craved all along and eventually discovered.

The women characters in ManjuKapur's *Difficult Daughters* are divided into three generations, with their values, mindsets and relationships. Virmati's history is reconstructions in retrospect by her daughter Ida. Virmati's stands as a symbol of a new woman of colonial India and her urge to acquire education and freedom resembles the nation's quest for identity and selfhood, but she fails to completely live up to her wishes. Although she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she gets caught into another, where her free spirit is curbed and controlled. Kapur sets Virmati's story against the background of changing India. The air was filled with political affairs like the Anti-Pakistan Conference, the Urdu Conference, and the All-India Sikh League. Virmati came across women like MohiniDatta, SitaRallia, Mary Singh, Mrs.Leela Mehta, all engrossed in the National movement.

**PORTRAYAL OF NEW WOMEN IN MANJUKAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS**

They all appeared remote to Virmati for she was enmeshed in her own problems and trials. She reflects in regret and guilt, "I am not like these woman. They are using their minds organizing participating in conference, politically active, while my time is being spent in love. Wasting, it."(142).

However it is actually Virmati's difficult daughter Ida who in her determination to live life despite all odds, symbolise the real face of a modern woman. Ida could not accept her mother's decision to about the foetus and terminate the life growing within her. She had broken her relationship with her husband Prabhakar for he had forced her to go for an abortion-"I knew Mother, what it was like to have an abortion. Prabhakar had insisted I have one. In denying that incipient little thing in my belly, he sowed the seeds of our break up."(156) Ida had never shared this secret with her mother. She confessed how the death of foetus haunted her and how she had endured the trauma of her loss alone, "Mother, I never told you this, because you thought Prabhakar was so wonderful, and I was glad that in the choice of my husband I had pleased you. Why should I burden you with my heartaches when you had enough of your own?"(156-157).

She knew that her mother liked Prabhakar and since she never came to stay with her daughter, Virmati was not aware of the real dynamics of their relationship. Ida was resolute to leave her past behind and live for the future. She did not wish to make the compromises which her mother had made. Shakuntala, Swarnalatha and Ida symbolizes "Modern Woman", conscious, introspective, educated, emancipated, driven by the zeal to assert their autonomy and separate identity and find a place for themselves in society. ManjuKapur's novel brings out glimpses of woman of the forties in India trying to assert to establish their own identity. In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati, in her quest for identity, rebels against her family tradition. She is impelled by the inner need to feel loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. India's victory against the imperial rulers is mirrored through Virmati's life. No doubt India attained freedom from colonial rule but at the cost of partition and communal hatred. Virmati was victorious in breaking the age old shackles of a patriarchal society in a tradition bound country but at the cost of much mental, torture and constantly struggling but failing to erase the tag of being the 'other' woman.

Symbolism is a figure of speech used when an author wants to create a certain mood or emotion in a work of literature. Symbolism is the use of an object, person, situation or word to represent something else in literature. The very title of the novel *Difficult Daughters* subtly alludes to the patriarchal convention that a woman, who undertakes a quest for an individual identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well. Although Virmati succeeds in breaking all man-made boundaries, there are certain priorities so deeply embedded within her that she struggles to shake through the shackles. In the course of the novel she grows up from a naïve girl to a woman matured by suffering and through experience. (John, P. 1) Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a feminist discourse not because she is a woman writing about women's issues, but because she tries to understand a woman both as a woman and as a human being pressurized by visible and invisible contexts. She presents a glimpse of feminism keeping in mind the Indian context. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* manages to be simultaneously both Indian and Universal.

**PORTRAYAL OF NEW WOMEN IN MANJUKAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS****References**

1. Amar Nath Prasad, S. John Peter Joseph. Indian Writing in English: Critical Ruminations. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons. 2006.
2. Kapur Manju, *Difficult Daughters*, and London: Faber and Faber, 1998, Print.
3. Rao, Maithili: "To Be a Woman" in *Frames of Mind: Reflections on Indian Cinema*, ed. by Aruna Vasudev. UBSPD. 1995.
4. Rowbotham, Shiela. *Women's Consciousness, Man's World*. Pelican. 1973.
5. Schultz, Susan Polis. *I Want to Laugh, I Want to Cry*. New York: Continental Publications. 1973.
6. <[http:// www.languageinindia.com/feb2016/ jeyasudhadifficultdaughters.pdf](http://www.languageinindia.com/feb2016/jeyasudhadifficultdaughters.pdf)>