

# Derivations of Motherhood; an Analytical Study of Motherhood in *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapoor

OPEN ACCESS

Volume: 13

Special Issue: 1

Month: October

Year: 2025

P-ISSN: 2321-788X

E-ISSN: 2582-0397

Citation:

Thoppil, Rathi R. "Derivations of Motherhood; an Analytical Study of Motherhood in *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapoor." *Shanlax International Journal of Arts, Science and Humanities*, vol. 13, no. S1, 2025, pp. 114–19.

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.34293/sijash.v13iS1-Oct.9863>

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## Abstract

*The concept of motherhood has been regarded as both natural and cultural construct, shaped by the intersection of biological instincts and social expectations. In Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, motherhood emerges as complex, multilayered experience deeply embedded in patriarchal ideology and societal conditioning. The novel portrays motherhood not merely as a biological function but as amoral and cultural duty imposed upon women. Through the characters of Virmati and Kasturi, Kapur explores how maternity becomes a site of negotiation between personal desires and collective responsibilities. Kapur's narrative illustrates how patriarchal control transforms maternity into a mechanism of female subordination. The mother's love, through nurturing, is also disciplinary, enforcing obedience through emotional guilt and moral duty. The novel also underscores how societal conditioning moulds female identity, making motherhood a cultural performance rather than a purely emotional bond. In portraying motherhood as a product of power relations, Kapur critiques the societal structures that limit women's agency. The study thus interprets motherhood as a dynamic, evolving process shaped by cultural and ideological forces. Ultimately, Kapur's treatment of maternity calls for a redefinition of womanhood beyond the confines of patriarchal norms.*

**Keywords:** Motherhood, Cultural Norms, Moral Obligations, Societal Conditioning, Trauma

## Introduction

Motherhood is considered as both a culturally idealized and socially built up role, influenced heavily by religious, gendered and patriarchal principles. It is not just about the biological role of giving birth but also about the social, cultural, emotional and symbolic duties attached to being a mother. It has been conditioned over by age old practises in connection with patriarchy and tradition. Primarily motherhood is highly considered as a woman's biological ability to conceive, give birth and nurture a child. Society connects this with the ideas of femininity, fertility and continuity of generations. Moreover the role of a mother has been 'greatly glorified' as they are expected to be the selfless, caring and patient sufferers in not only as to define a woman's worth but also to continue the patriarchal lineage of culture.

Manju Kapur, is the prominent contemporary Indian novelist who explores how women's identities are shaped and constrained by patriarchal social structures. In *Difficult Daughters*, she portrays motherhood not as an instinctive or purely emotional role, but as a socio cultural construct

governed by duty, morality, and societal expectation. Through the live of Virmati and her mother Kasturi, Kapur exposes the intergenerational trauma that arises when women internalize and transmit the burdens of moral obligation and repression. The novel reveals how cultural norms and familial hierarchies transform maternal love into both a source of nurture and a mechanism of control. Ultimately Kapur uses the framework g motherhood to critique a society that defines women through sacrifice and obedience, urging a rethinking of womanhood beyond patriarchal boundaries.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To analyse how the depiction of motherhood in *Difficult Daughters* mirrors as a construct shaped by patriarchal ideology and cultural conditioning.
2. To highlight how the author has showcased motherhood both as a realm of emotional nurture and a tool for both moral as well as social control.
3. To navigate the exploration between individual desire and collective responsibility through the characters of Virmati and Kasturi
4. To understand how patriarchal norms is capable enough to transform maternal love into a means of subjugation for women.
5. To investigate motherhood as dynamic and evolving process influenced by ideological and societal forces.

In *Difficult Daughters* the author Manju Kapoor juxtaposes different variants of motherhoods. The story is partially revealed through the eyes of Virmati's daughter Ida. Kasturi, the mother of Virmati represents the primordial, quintessential Indian mother deeply rooted in the societal norms and values of the pre-independence era. Her life is completely dedicated to her family particularly for her children, and she always recognizes her identity to be tied with her role as a mother, prioritizing largely, her family's honour and societal expectations. She choose to remain a typical mother, and tirelessly trying to become the so called embodiment of virtue. Due to multiple pregnancies she became sick and constantly tired of her duties. And this make her mentally starve for care and at the same time she fails to offer her motherly care and emotional support to Virmati, which ultimately lead the latter to remain in her illegitimate affair with her age old English Professor. She serves as a political allegory for the period, representing a woman's life under oppressive patriarchal control, a victim of the culture's restrictive nature. Kasturi's chief responsibility, as she believes, or is enforced by her traditional family is to continue to make the progeny especially sons, and by thus ensure the family reputation or status. While she may not have the emotional attention or desire to guide her children in their personal pursuits, her own life choices and struggles influence her daughters and dynamics within the family.

Virmati the eldest daughter of Kasturi, becomes a mother to Ida, but also experiences a miscarriage and later an abortion. Ida, who after her mother's death attempts to construct her mother's complicated life and the struggles and pain that she has undergone. The novel centres on women's efforts to define themselves beyond ascribed roles, fighting for independence and self-fulfilment in a completely patriarchal world that surrounds them. Virmati, who is educated, and is torn between societal obligations, familial expectations, and her own desires navigating the complex interplay of these forces. The narrative highlights how rigid societal conventions and traditions create challenges for women who wish to lead lives of their own choosing. The bond between Virmati and her daughter Ida shows us how mother's experiences of hardships and struggles are passed down and understood by their daughters. And Ida chooses not to become a mother may be for this reason

The canvas of *Difficult Daughters* contains a variety of the lives of three generations of women and how intergenerational trauma tears them apart. When Virmati got pregnant from her professor (before marriage) she began to frustrate herself on thinking and her "pride prevents her from asking for help from her roommate". The women is under the brutal 'clutches' of society's constant conditioning, and they often

adapt to that and admits it's only natural to suppress the shame and feelings and cry in silence and she could not open up her mind to anyone other than her partner.

Social constructionist perspectives debate that motherhood is not a product from biological phenomenon alone but is deeply rooted in societal norms, power dynamics, and family systems. Within this framework motherhood is regarded as both culturally normalised and socially conditioned role, shaped potentially by religious, gendered and patriarchal institutions. Scholars emphasises how motherhood is often celebrated or glorified as means of asserting women's status, while at the same time maintaining it as a site of constant exploitation and systematic failure. This dual perception positions motherhood as both empowering and restrictive, bound to the male dominated culture. The novel examines this intricate and serious relationship between mothers and daughters, focussing on the social construction of 'motherhood'. For women such as Kasturi, motherhood is completely and undoubtedly tied to duty, sacrifice and the preservation of familial status. These imposed responsibilities both culturally dictated and self-internalized, results how mothers perceive and recognize their obligations, particularly toward daughters. One of the novels most significant representations of motherhood is the notion of surrender, with Kasturi's life defined by her unyielding commitment to her family.

The concept of duty in motherhood is also intricately woven with feelings of guilt and desire particularly for Virmati. Throughout the narrative, Virmati fights with the notion of guilt for disappointing her mother, even as she pursues her own desires. Kasturi's constant reminders of her duty to the family weigh heavily on Virmati, developing a psychological strain that affects her decisions. Virmati's guilt is not only about defying her mother's wishes, but also about failing to live up to the expectations that Kasturi has sacrificed so much to uphold. Kasturi too, experiences guilt in her role as a mother. Her incapacity to control Virmati and also forcing her to choose the traditional role of a dutiful daughter leads Katuri to question her own effectiveness as a mother. For Kasturi, the idea that a mother's duty is to ensure her children's adherence to societal norms and cultural practises are so deeply connected that Virmati's rebellion feels like her personal failure. This mutual sense of guilt between mother and daughter further convolutes their affinity, making the notion of duty both a source of conflict and agony.

The conflict between duty and personal choices forms the central theme in the novel and its depiction of motherhood. Kasturi's steady perseverance towards duty creates friction with Virmati, who yearns for independence and self-assertion. Virmati's pursuit of education, autonomy and self-actualization provokes her mother's traditional insights of a daughter's role. Kasturi's tension and despair arise from perceiving the fact that her daughter's decisions are a rejection of the values and responsibilities that Katuri, as her mother instilled or tried to instil in her. This frustration undergoes a generational difference between mothers raised within conservational traditions as well as daughters who begin to question and revisit them. For Kasturi, motherhood is paralleled with duty, and Virmati's attempts to step outside these expectations appear as her personal failure. Virmati's defiance extends beyond her mother, confronting the broader cultural notion of duty that has confined women for generations. In forging her own path, Virmati seeks to redefine both the meaning of daughterhood and, by extension the very concept of motherhood.

The novel foregrounds motherhood as a complex and multifaceted concept deeply woven in socio cultural pressures and traumatic experiences. It explores motherhood deep through intersecting themes such as the stigmatization of women's sexuality, reproductive choices, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. This traumatic legacy undergoes both personal and collective dimensions, evident in agony and silence that accompany reproductive decisions like abortion and the grief operated by historical events such as Partition. These elements explains how motherhood is shaped not merely by biological functions but also by broader socio-political context and emotional histories.

The narrative specifically addresses the intersectionality of trauma in motherhood, showcasing how trauma is not imbibed in isolation but intersected with social, cultural and historical elements. The intergenerational nature of trauma conveyed in the text reflects familial and national disassociations. This creates a fertile

analytical space wherein trauma theory and cultural models of motherhood –particularly feminist and post-colonial frameworks –can be applied. These structures are used for a nuanced understanding of how collective histories suffering and resilience are imposed and enacted within women’s lives.

Consequently the novel serves as a foundational text for studying motherhood narratives alongside experiences of trauma, offering insights into how conventions, gender based roles, and traumatic personal and historical memories cut across and form women’s lived realities. This study provides a critical exploration of motherhood beyond the normative or idealized constructs, revealing the complex dynamics of power, silence, adaptations, fixations and survival that inform maternal duties in variable contexts. Through Virmati and her mother Kasturi, Kapur illustrates the generational tensions that underscore the pursuit of autonomy and identity within the patriarchy. Ultimately motherhood is depicted not just as biological or emotional duty but as a site for negotiation, mirroring the broken struggles faced by the women in patriarchal setup.

The narrative densely examines the evolving dynamics of womanhood across generations, foregrounding the conflicts between tradition, modernity, and selfhood. The novel unfolds as a layered exploration of maternal authority and filial rebellion, where the mother daughter relationship becomes the symbolic terrain upon which patriarchy contradicts them heterogeneously. Through the figures of Kasturi, Virmati and Ida Kapur captures the complex process of female identity revelations, focussing how the same cultural scripts that dominates women also create the conditions for their awakening.

The first generation, represented by Kasturi epitomizes the pre-independence Indian woman’s acceptance of domestic servitudes as her primary duty. Her belief that “It is the duty of every girl to get married” echoes the patriarchal notion that underlines or matches womanhood with marriage and motherhood. Kasturi’s insistence that her daughter learn housewifery and restrain her education symbolizes Simone De Beauvoir’s statement that “one is born, but rather becomes, a woman”. Kasturi becomes the embodiment of the socio-constructed “ideal woman” and her life is confined within the religious and moral codes that glorify this kind of submission. The institution of marriage, for her, is sacred and unchallengeable-a divine culmination of a woman’s life.

In contrast, Virmati’s generation restrains a historical moment of transition-the nationalist movement and the early stirrings of feminist consciousness. Her desire for education and independence positions her against the normative expectations of her mother and society. Yet her rebellion is tangled with contradictions. While Virmati seeks emancipation through knowledge, she simultaneously incorporated patriarchal ideals of love and respectability. Her relationship with the Professor is thus both subversive and reverse: an act of defiance that paradoxically reinforces male dominance. Beauvoir states, women’s liberation often delayed when emotional attachment controls intellectual autonomy.

Virmati’s struggle exemplifies the psychological duality that Julia Kristeva identifies in her theory of the maternal. For Kristeva, the maternal body is both at the same time; nurturing and restrictive as well as, identity and confinement. Virmati’s longing for her mother’s affection co exists with her strong will to escape the maternal control. This ambivalence turns motherhood into a site of both love and conflict, where resistance to patriarchal order begins at the functionality of the performance of role. Kasturi’s insistence on conformity becomes a means of protecting her own accepted subjugation, while Virmati’s rebellion reflects the repressed desire for an alternative choice of identity and that is specifically not the one mediated by men or motherhood.

Swarnalatha, Virmati’s contemporary, opens a clear and politically conscious insight to Kapur’s feminist vision. Her participation in the Sathyagraha movement ,her refusal to marry, and her assertion that “marriage is not the only thing in life” elevate her from the level of domestic struggle to that of collective emancipation. Swarnalatha’s activism displays what Gayatri Spivak describes as “strategic essentialism” –a temporary unification of women’s experiences against patriarchal oppression, even as individual subjectivities differ. Kapur wants to share through Swarnalatha that self-liberation can be sought through personal defiance and that guarantees attain socio-political consciousness too.

The generational arc culminates in Ida, Virmati's daughter, who inherits the scars of her mother's compromises. Ida's choice to remain unmarried and independent reflects radical departure from the traditional model of femininity. Yet, as Nancy Chodorow explains in *The Reproduction of Mothering* daughters often construct their identities in opposition to their mothers thereby perpetuating the emotional ambivalence of maternal inheritance. Ida's rejection of marriage is less an act of empowerment and more symbolic disassociation from her mother's failures. She does not seek connection but separation –an attempt to reclaim her autonomy by negating the maternal influence that once constrained it.

Adrienne Rich's concept of "matrophobia"- the fear of becoming one's mother – resonates throughout *Difficult Daughters*. Each generation of women struggles to avoid the repetition of maternal patterns, yet each remains emotionally attached to them. Kasturi's submission, Virmati's ambivalence, and Ida's renunciation represent different stages of resistance and co-existence within the same cultural norms of patriarchy. The maternal figure, once idealized as the moral core of the family, becomes the site of contestation-the locus where individual desire confronts social duty

Kapur's narrative artistry lies in her ability to highlight these generational tensions not as isolated conflicts but as reflections of India's broader cultural transformation. The mode of systemic change from colonial dependence to national self-definition equals the movement of women from domestic confinement to intellectual agency. Even as her characters claim autonomy, they are shadowed by disillusionment and social alienation. Through the introspective voice of Ida the author conveys that freedom achieved through negation remains incomplete.

In Kapur's words, motherhood is thus a site of oppression and metaphor for continuity. We can contrast the daughter's rebellion against their mothers as a mirror of India's rebellion against colonial authority-a movement toward self-definition that is both liberating and painful. Kapur reclaims motherhood from its glorification and project it as a lived experience of negotiation, frustration and love. She out shadows her women from passive sufferings and make them participate in the slow reconstruction of gender identity within the flux of modernity.

By weaving the personal with the political, Kapur includes the domestic sphere as a microcosm of feminist resistance. Her portrayal of women-from Kasturi's conformity to Ida's self-assertion-articulates what Toril Moi rightly describes as "woman's struggle to become a subject within a patriarchal symbolic order".Kapur's fiction, therefore, does not merely critique patriarchy; it exposes the intergenerational complex patterns that sustains it and envisions the possibility of new feminine subjectivities grounded in choice, awareness and consciousness.

In the final analysis, *Difficult Daughters* stands as a feminist re-imagining of Indian motherhood, where motherhood and daughterhood are not biological destinies but ideological constructs open for re interpretation and analysis. Through the shifting relationships of her female characters, Kapur invites readers to witness the painful but necessary dismantling of inherited hierarchies. The novel's enduring relevance lies in its insistence that liberation is not a singular event but an evolving dialogue – between mothers and daughters ,past and present, self and society.

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