

## QUEST FOR IDENTITY: A STUDY OF MANJU KAPOOR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

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### ABSTRACT

*Manu wrote the Manusmriti in around 185 B.C. and created laws for the society. The laws that he created have governed the Indian social and cultural system since then. We all know the role of the ancient narratives in the creation of psychology of a society. Manusmriti has guided and controlled the Indian culture for long. Women have suffered the patriarchal structure of society, because the collective psychological mind set considered women lower than men, and thus the need to control, regulate women's life in every sphere. Though Manu's infamous laws belong to the past, but Modern Indian society is still based on such patriarchal system. Today also, they are under terrible triad of father-husband-son. They are still subordinated to men. They are still devalued and subjugated. Today, they are not only overburdened with family responsibilities, but also suffered the prejudices in professional life. Women are forced to compromise and tolerate injustice silently. Gender discrimination is still present in this Modern India today. In this study, I have tried to analyze the stories of different female characters who suffer from marginalization and subjugation from the point of view of society that functions under the patriarchal ideology.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Patriarchy, Gender Discrimination Marginalization, Subjugation, Ideology*

### INTRODUCTION

Difficult Daughters is the story of three daughters belonging to three generations - the grandmother Kasturi belongs to the first generation, Virmati belongs to the second generation and Virmati's daughter, the narrator belongs to the third generation.

The format is the central character of the novel, rebels against tradition in her quest for identity. She makes a dedicated effort to carve an identity for herself as a qualified woman. But the circumstances don't allow her to live an independent life.

In the generation of Kasturi, a woman's role was confined to child-bearing

And kitchen-work; the generation of Virmati took some bold steps, joining the political movement for India's freedom. Virmati becomes the difficult daughter in the family. In this novel, we find that as Virmati grows up rebelling against Kasturi, Ida too grows up rebelling against Virmati. She also becomes a 'difficult daughter' like her mother. Thus, it becomes clear that the second generation is against the first generation and the third generation is against the second one. Virmati does not want to be like her mother Kasturi and Ida Virmati's daughter also does not want to be like her mother

Virmati. In fact, she refuses to be what her mother stands for. Virmati and Ida both become ‘difficult daughters’.

Kasturi, Virmati’s mother is a typical domesticated, servile woman who is an excellent manager of the household works. She is thankful to her mother because since childhood, she has molded her in the traditional role:

During Kasturi’s formal schooling, it was never forgotten that marriage was  
Her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued in the home. Her  
Mother tried to ensure her future happiness by the impeccable nature of her  
Daughter’s qualifications. She was going to please her in-law’s... (Kapur, 57).

In the generation of Kasturi, a woman’s role was confined to childbearing and kitchen work. So Kasturi feels grateful to her mother to be from:

A good family where girls were taught housekeeping from the time they  
Could walk... Kasturi felt grateful to her mother for those long hours she spent  
In the kitchen, cutting, peeling chopping, slicing, pounding, wrapping, mixing,  
Kneading, baking, roasting, stirring and frying (deep plus shallow). It paid to  
know these things (Kapur, 188-189).

After some time, she feels that her life has become burden on her, because her life centers only on these activities and makes her feel overtired. She does not get even a single minute for herself. This gives way to her perpetual tiredness and takes a heavy toll on her health. But she finds herself unable to tell her predicament to her husband. She has become tired of frequent pregnancies and ashamed of “breeding like cats and dogs” (Kapur, 7). But being a submissive, docile wife, she has to fulfil all the wishes and desires of her husband and can never refuse him. So as a result, she becomes a mute sufferer:

Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not tired, when her feet and  
legs did not ache. Her back curved in towards the base of her spine and  
carrying her children was a strain, even when they were very young. Her  
stomach was soft and spongy, her breasts long and unattractive. His hair  
barely snaked down to mid-back, its length and thickness gone with her  
babies. Her teeth bled when she chewed her morning neem twigs, and she  
could feel some of them shaking. She had filled the house as her in-laws had  
wanted, but with another child there would be nothing left of her (Kapur, 7).

Today we say that women have become free, but today also we find that they don’t have any right on their body. Where is freedom if they can’t take any decision related to their bodies? When her bua says: “*Bap re*, how do you do it? And so sick all the time”, she replies: “I am going to die, Maji, this time I know it” (Kapur, 7). It is a very difficult

situation. She knows that now she has no energy left to give birth to another child but she can't deny her husband. She becomes so weak she is not even able to feed her baby. Thus we find that Kasturi leads a listless life which centres around and is totally devoted to her husband. Being molded in traditional womanhood, she fulfills all the wishes of her husband and never refuses him anything. She is tired of frequent pregnancies, but she is unable to communicate her sad predicament to her husband and fulfills his desire of children. As a traditional woman she does not show her tears to anyone. But her virtues which make her a mute sufferer become an instrument of domestic and social exploitation. It becomes clear that Kasturi is not happy in her traditional life, but she does not like when her daughter Virmati dreams, thinks of her own identity and asserts her individuality. She considers it as a revolt against her and becomes the voice of the patriarchy. Because like a traditional woman she holds those values as ideal which patriarchy has taught her. Since childhood women are conditioned to fulfil their roles handed over to them by patriarchy. Thus we find that Kasturi becomes the voice of patriarchy for her daughter Virmati and Virmati also becomes the voice of patriarchy for her daughter. In our patriarchal set-up women consider themselves in men central to their lives. A woman's identity and her perception of the self is seen in connection with husband. Marriage gives security to a woman. Without marriage, she can't be secure. So, according to traditional marriage is a very necessary part of life. Since childhood a girl is conditioned that marriage is the main goal of her life.

In the novel, women like Kasturi and Virmati show streaks of rebellion by expressing their simmering discontent with their marital life but the main dictum dominating their lives is compromise. They expose the old value system, react against the suffocation of male dominance, but their resistance is tepid and feeble in nature. Women under the patriarchal pressure and control were subjected to social ostracism.

Virmati, the protagonist of *Difficult Daughters*, is a woman of strong will. She breaks the rules and defies the traditions to achieve her objective. Her mother's frequent pregnancies train her in nurturing at an early age. She is the eldest of the long chain of children. Being the eldest among the eleven children, taking care of her siblings becomes her natural responsibility:

Ever since Virmati could remember she had been looking after children. It wasn't only baby Parvati to whom she was indispensable. Her younger siblings, she was second mother as well. She was impatient and intolerant of fuss. If they did not eat their meals, on her return home from school, she would hunt out the offending brother or sister and shove the cold food down their throats. If they refused to wear the hand-me-down clothes she assigned them, she slapped them briskly. Visually once was enough sometimes she tried to be gentle, but it was weary work and she was almost always tired and harassed (Kapur, 6)

Things become difficult when the daughters learn to dream, to think of identity and to assert their individuality. Virmati is the emblem of the new woman. She wants to walk hand in hand with men. She does not want to be a rubber doll in the hands of others. She asserts the need for woman's education and independence. She rejects the kind of life led by her mother, fights for woman's independence and social status.

People don't support girls' education because they think that if a girl is educated, she will learn to think for herself and then she will not be able to adjust in her married life. When Virmati gives the example of Shakuntala, her cousin, Kasturi replies:

Shakuntala Pehnji did not have five sisters waiting to get married either. And do you think it makes her mother

happy to have her daughter unmarried? She may say what she likes about jobs and modern women, but I know how hard she still tries to find a husband for Shaky and how bad she feels. You want to do the same to me? To your father and grandfather (Kapur, 54).

Kasturi does not like the rebellious spirit of her daughter and strongly disapproves of Shakuntala's influence on her. Referring to her way of dressing she says: "Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family. I studied too, but my mother would have killed me if I had dared even to want to dress in anything other than what was brought for me" (Kapur, 14).

All the relatives of Virmati have the same casual attitude towards girls' education. When parents of Virmati's fiancé come to see her they also don't give much importance to her education. They think that there is no use of more education for a daughter-in-law:

Her parents thought that she had gone enough. Her fiancé's parents thought that she was already well qualified to be the wife of their son, the canal engineer. They didn't want too much education in their daughter-in-law, even though times were changing. Virmati wept and sulked (Kapur, 41).

Virmati wants to make herself free from the bondage of patriarchy that deprives her of her freedom and choice. She is a woman of her will. She rejects the world of marriage, domesticity and childbearing. She wants to make an independent life. She says: "I'll live my life, my story" (Kapur, 66). So she has to fight against the power of the mother and society. But when she tries to counter social norms, she faces several troubles. According to her mother, a woman is only meant to be a wife and a mother. These are the consciously inculcated ideals of the Indian feminine role.

Virmati grows up thinking that the duty of every girl is to get married and a woman's place is in her home and she is not supposed to go out for a job. Virmati is engaged to an engineer initially but a series of incidents propel the family members to postpone the wedding. These incidents pave way for Virmati to carry on her studies and to begin an illicit relationship with the married Professor living next door. The Oxford returned Professor finds little to share with his uneducated wife and is unable to resist the charm of Virmati who is innocent and hungry for knowledge and love. The Oxford returned Professor makes way into her mind and heart.

Virmati has a keen desire for higher education, to make her separate identity and love also because during her childhood she was ignored. She could not get love and affection even from her mother who was too busy attending to her children. So when she meets the Professor, she is infatuated by him. The Professor is also not satisfied with his married life and his illiterate wife. He tries to take advantage of her innocence and lures her with the dreams of a mesmerizing, glorious world of freedom and love. Virmati also does not realize the true nature of the professor's cunning attitude and enticing talks. As a result she begins an illicit relationship with the married Professor. After completing her B.A. her wedding date is fixed. But she does not agree to marry. When Virmati confronts her mother about the marriage-proposal and informs her about her decision of not marrying, Kasturi considers it a betrayal.

Here we find that unknowingly Kasturi becomes the voice of patriarchy and when Virmati goes against the patriarchal values, she takes it against her own self. Even after being a woman and the mother of Virmati she cannot understand her daughter. Her conscience is steeped into those values which patriarchy has inculcated in her.

Virmati's growing relationship with the Professor and her imminent marriage arouse a lot of confusion and crisis

into her mind. She struggles between both and cannot take any decision. She attempts to commit suicide but is not successful. After this incident her mother becomes hostile and cruel

Towards her. She feels humiliated and blames Virmati's education that has made her do such a deed. Instead of understanding her daughter. She plays the role of patriarchy.

However, by making use of her education Virmati very firmly resists the family's pressure for her marriage and by making her priorities in life clear Things become difficult when the daughters learn to dream, to think of identity and to assert their individuality. Virmati is the emblem of the new woman. She wants to walk hand in hand with men. She does not want to be a rubber doll in the hands of others. She asserts the need for woman's education and independence. She rejects the kind of life led by her mother, fights for woman's independence and social status. Being the eldest of the eleven children, she is burdened with family duties because of her mother's incessant pregnancies. She has to play the role of the second mother. Kasturi's repeated pregnancies made her sick. So Virmati has to manage all household works. Her childhood is lost being a young mother. She grows up thinking that the duty of every girl is to get married and a woman's place is in her hoarranges for Indumati, her younger sister, to marry Inderjit. Then Virmati goes to Lahore for higher education and tries to forget the professor. But in Lahore also he meets her and they develop a physical relationship, as a result of which she becomes pregnant. When she gets to know about her daughter's pregnancy, she feels shame and humiliation is upset with Harish for not taking the necessary precautions. She realizes her position and the meaninglessness of her activities. Then Swarna Lata, who is her roommate, helps her. She does not let her go to a 'dai' for abortion because she finds it dangerous for her. She tries to fix an appointment with a doctor. She supports her emotionally and psychologically and makes her feel better. Virmati gets the child aborted because of her unmarried status.

After the abortion, Virmati joins as a teacher in National women's college at Nahan, a college newly founded to meet the need for women's education. When again the professor comes in her life, She breaks her engagement and desires to be his legally wedded wife and a happy home. She becomes a victim of her choice, torn between duty to her family and her illicit love for the Professor. The Oxford returned professor Harish likes Virmati for her self-assertion, which is missing in his docile wife. He finds little to share with his uneducated wife. To satisfy his academic urge and intellectual hunger, he needs Virmati.

Virmati is blinded by her love for him. She cannot gauge the self-centered and disloyal attitude of the Professor. Finally she breaks her engagement and refuses to marry Inderjit and tries to end her life by drowning. Her family does not acknowledge her feelings towards Harish. This compels Virmati to end her life as she cannot accept another man as her husband. Even under such circumstances, the Professor does not openly acknowledge his love and acts meekly. Virmati decides to leave her house for good. Besides carrying her luggage only takes "the packet of Harish's letters which she attaches to herself" (Kapur, 182). All the attempts by Virmati to elude her marriage are resented. When she confronts her mother with the proposal of not marrying, she considers it a betrayal to the family values. She does not feel the need for freedom for which her daughter is opposing her and going against her. She considers her daughter's desire of freedom as sheer selfishness smacking of ingratitude. Here Kasturi becomes the voice of patriarchy and conspires with others to subdue her and crush her rebellious spirit:

This affair begins a new thrill in her life for which she is ready to sacrifice everything. After completing her B.A. her wedding date is fixed. But she does not agree to marry. When Virmati confronts her mother about the

marriage-proposal and informs her about her decision of not marrying, Kasturi considers it a betrayal.

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Virmati's growing relationship with the Professor and her imminent marriage arouse a lot of confusion and crisis into her mind. She struggles between both and cannot take any decision. She attempts to commit suicide but is not successful. After this incident her mother becomes hostile and cruel towards her. She feels humiliated and blames Virmati's education that has made her do such a deed. Instead of understanding her daughter. She plays the role of patriarchy.

However, by making use of her education Virmati very firmly resists the family's pressure for her marriage and by making her priorities in life clear she wins her independence. Now her family arranges for Indumati, her younger sister, to marry Inderjit. Then Virmati goes to Lahore for higher education and tries to forget the professor. But in Lahore also he meets her and they develop a physical relationship, as a result of which she becomes pregnant. When she gets to know about her daughter's pregnancy, she feels shame and humiliation is upset with Harish for not taking the necessary precautions. She realizes her position and the meaninglessness of her activities. Then Swarna Lata, who is her roommate, helps her. She does not let her go to a 'dai' for abortion because she finds it dangerous for her. She tries to fix an appointment with a doctor. She supports her emotionally and psychologically and makes her feel better. Virmati gets the child aborted, because of her unmarried status.

After the abortion, Virmati joins as a teacher in National women's college at Nahan, a college newly founded to meet the need for women's education. When again the professor comes in her life, she struggles between the physical and the moral; the head and the heart. Finally, she gives in to the demands of her heart and her body. And she forces him to marry her. The idea of becoming the second wife does not occur outrageous to her. After her marriage, she returns to Amritsar. But Virmati's married life with the professor in Amritsar turns out to be a disaster.

She wilts under the and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband's first wife, with whom she has to live her life. Ganga never lets Virmati enter her kitchen, do the household work or any work related to the professor. Her relationship with the children of her husband's family is also not a healthy one. They hate her without knowing the reason. Ganga's son remarks 'who is this *gandi* lady? Send her away.' (Kapur, 192, italics in original). They don't like her even when they grow up. Her sister-in-law also feels uncomfortable in her presence and does not talk to her.

Since the Professor does not feel comfortable with Ganga and she could not win his love and admiration, he gets married to Virmati. Though all rights are with Ganga but her poor soul craves for her husband. Virmati manipulates to send Ganga away from Harish's house, but the distance does not diminish her love for her husband. She wears daily her *bindi*, *sindoor* and *mangalsutra* though she is not with him.

In spite of being legally wedded, she cannot live a happy life. She never gets admiration from her kids. Her father and grandfather die without forgiving her and her mother is also angry with her. After marriage her life becomes isolated, silent and withdrawn. She finds herself a victim of her choice, torn between her duty to her family and her illicit love for the professor. Virmati is reduced to being the Professor's wife and loses her spark for ever after marriage. She realizes that

the professor, despite his literary taste and intellectual thirst, is nothing more than a lascivious male.

Professor's second marriage is occasioned because of his incompatibility with his illiterate wife, Ganga and his failure to educate her invokes in him an urge to get the companionship of an educated woman, Virmati. Now, after his marriage with Virmati he enjoys both: his wife Ganga attends him as a maid servant and manages all the household work and Virmati satisfies his academic urge. Virmati realizes that 'a man who is already married can never give happiness to any women'. After marriage, she finds herself caught into another tangle where her free spirit is curbed and all she does is to adjust compromise and adapt.

Thus Virmati's life becomes a series of struggle against all odds. She wants to get herself free from the bondage of patriarchy that denies or deserts her freedom and choice. But she is not successful. She tries to counter social norms, she faces several troubles, but as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones.. She resists living in the new home, which constantly reminds her of Ganga's presence. When her husband insists on her coming home from Lahore, she admits her dislike for home to the Professor: "I don't mind going on a holiday with you, but I will not come home"(Kapur, 236).

Ganga, the Professor's wife plays her role as a devoted and dutiful wife. She serves her whole family especially her husband, who does not care for her. She thinks that through her devotion she will win her husband. She fasts twice every week for her husband's long and prosperous life, rarely goes out and never wears anything blue because her husband Harish does not like blue colour and presses his legs daily.

The Indian community expects every woman to merge herself with her husband, thus earning the status of 'ardhangini'. Though these women are devoted and caring, they are devalued. Their virtues become instruments of domestic and social exploitation. Putting others before self results in compromise and tolerating injustice silently. Such women always remain unhappy. In India women pass the laws of *stree-dharma* from one generation to other, which are backed up by patriarchy and become instruments of oppression.

Finally we find that the professor fails to do justice to both, especially the vulnerable Ganga, who, in the end, is abandoned by him. He does not care for Ganga's devotion and abandons her and Ganga silently suffers the anguish of emotional abandonment. She suffers her husband's apathetic attitude who has snatched her marital rights from her. She wants to rebel against Virmati but she is unable to do so because her husband is with Virmati but as a result of her anguish and frustration, she does not let her enter the kitchen or wash his clothes. He cannot do justice with Virmati also. He does not care about their happiness. He is selfish to the core, but she is not able to gauge the egotistical and cunning attitude of the Professor. She wants to be the Professor's legally wedded wife and a happy married life but finally fails miserably.

Harish can relate to Virmati only because of his education, but he is not able to connect with his kids. She adopts Harish's first two kids Giridhar and Chhoti as her children along with her daughter Ida. Giridhar marries against the wishes of his parents. Chhoti excels in studies to get her father's attention, but refuses to get married. She joins IAS to accommodate her mother and grandmother. When Virmati becomes the mother of Ida she wants to get the best for her. But again the younger generation decides to go against the wishes of the parents. Ida does not study properly; she simply wishes to live for herself, something which younger Virmati herself has done. Ida sums up her resentment in one line, "*I grew up struggling to be the model daughter. Pressure, pressure to perform day and night*" (Kapur, 258, italics in original).

Ironically, Virmati also becomes the same mother with whom she herself could not accommodate when was young. Ida is tired of being a model daughter. She wants to live her own life. But now Virmati also becomes instrument of patriarchy. Having learnt from her experience, she tries to make learn her daughter Ida 'adjust, compromise, adapt', the values she has neglected herself. But the question arises as to why these women create problems for themselves and alienate their daughters by their uncompromising attitude? Why Kasturi could not understand her daughter's intense quest for higher education and to exist as an individual. Why a mother creates hindrance in the path of her daughter? The answers to all these questions lie in patriarchal conditioning and social and cultural taboos. In India mothers consider their daughters as carriers of family-traditions and customs which are essentially patriarchal in nature. They feel threatened if their daughters do not fit in the patriarchal image of an ideal daughter, ideal wife or daughter-in-law. If they fail in doing so, they are ostracized by the society. So unknowingly they become the voice of patriarchy and compel their daughters to follow the social sanctions.

Pallavi Rastogi points out:

In *Difficult Daughters* we do not listen to Virmati's voice. She could speak out, being certainly situated at the juncture of two operations – colonialism and patriarchy. What we have is her daughter's reconstruction and representation (Rastogi, 110).

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