

# Glimpse of New Woman & Evolution of Feminine Power in Manju Kapur's “Difficult Daughters”

**Dr. Jyoti Vishnoi**

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Govt. P.G. College, Budun, U.P.

## **Abstract:**

The purpose of this paper is to study the evolution of feminist power and the emergence of new woman in the novel "Difficult Daughter's". Manju Kapur is an eminent novelist who can be put in the category of those women writers who brought a remarkable transformation in the representation of women characters. As a woman she is concerned with the problems of Indian woman in the patriarchal family and deals with various feminist issues as gender equality, freedom from discrimination, right to education, marriage, abortion, autonomy, women's property rights, oppression etc. In the novel \*Difficult Daughter's\* Virmati is a typical daughter to her mother as she opposes the patriarchal norms for self identity. Women are discriminated and devoid of their basic rights in the patriarchal society. Her female protagonists are educated women with independent thinking who follow their own ideology. Her novels present the position of women and their struggle in the contemporary Indian society. As a woman, she successfully highlights the feminist struggle against patriarchy, exploitation. Her female characters reveal feminist power and represent the new women who are thinking, questioning and rational beings and raise a voice for basic rights, self identity and survival.

**Keywords:** Patriarchy, Feminist Power, Struggle for Identity, freedom, marriage, education, social restrictions, personal fulfilment, self realization, gender equality and women empowerment .

Manju Kapur is an acclaimed Indian writer who possesses a high rank among the contemporary women novelists of 20th century. As a literary artist, she is a writer with purpose as her novels reveal the fact that she deals with serious issues related to women in Indian society. As a woman, she is conscious of the gender discrimination in society. It is an accepted fact that women have been exploited and treated unequally by men for years. They have been the victims to the so-called traditional patriarchal society for years. Though India got freedom in 1947, the condition of women is unchanged as they have to struggle hard to get an individual identity in society. In spite of making various efforts, they are the sufferers and have to face many challenges to cross the boundary of the conservative patriarchal society as patriarchal norms do not allow a woman to think and act freely. As a writer, Manju Kapur can be put in the category of those Indian writers who brought a great transformation in Indian writing as she deals with the dreams, aspirations, struggle, and problems of women in a realistic manner. As a woman, she believes in feminine power and presents her female characters as bold and strong. Her novels reflect how the women pass through a period of transition and break the confining four walls of conservative patriarchal society. As a woman, she is concerned with women's need for self

expression, self -fulfillment, and self- realization . Her protagonists fight for freedom and individuality as they are in search of their true identity in patriarchal society.

Through her female protagonists, she presents the picture of society where women are aware of gender discrimination, exploitation, social injustice. Her novels are based on the actual incidents as the story of *Virmati* is based on the story of her own mother' In an interview with Jo Stimpson, she reveals the fact "I based my first novel on her. I admire her fighting spirit, her generosity , her capacity to endure. She irritated me when she was alive, but now I see these things more clearly. I think of her every day."( One Minute With: Manju Kapur) She deals with real characters representing the contemporary Indian society. Her female characters are assertive and raise voice against the social injustice and patriarchal norms. Her works reveal the feminist struggle against patriarchy, exploitation, social restrictions, sufferings of women, identity crisis etc. They crave for self identity, self-fulfillment and self- autonomy. The novel *\*Difficult Daughter's\** is about the struggle of a woman through tradition to modernity. It is the story of *Virmati*, an Indian woman craving for freedom and self-identity. Through *Virmati*, the writer presents the concept of New Indian woman who has a longing for love, freedom and individuality. As a thinking woman, she raises the questions -Why is a woman not free to take her own decision for her life ? Why is she not free to live life of her own choice? Why is she forced to follow the patriarchal norms ? Why is she restricted to the unjust shackles of conservative traditions? Has she no right to think and express her thoughts freely? Can she not enjoy life as an individual like a man? Is marriage necessary for a girl? Has she no existence without marriage? Manju Kapur is a serious thinker who raises the various problems related to women liberation and their place in society. Simon de Beauvoir says: One is not born but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the human female presents in society ; it is civilization as a whole that produce this creature.(TSS)

*\*Difficult Daughter's\** is the story of *Virmati* who is born in an Arya Samaji Punjabi family in Amritsar. Being the eldest daughter in the family, she has the pressure of household works and other family responsibilities. She has eleven siblings and she was sixteen years old when her mother conceived the eleventh child. Since childhood she remains busy in looking after her siblings and helping her mother *Kasturi* in other household duties. Here Kapur presents the picture of an Indian family where the eldest girl child is supposed to support her mother in performing domestic duties and other household tasks and the same is the case of *Virmati* as she is supposed to do the homely tasks and other responsibilities related to her siblings. The novelist calls *Virmati* the second mother to her siblings. she has a keen desire to study and to do a job but her mother *Kasturi*, a traditional woman is of the opinion that a girl should have study only to read and write as her basic need is to learn knitting, sewing and cooking and other household works. As both *Virmati* and *Kasturi* have different opinions, the rising conflict is quite obvious between the mother and the daughter. *Virmati* has a dream to be educated like her cousin *Shakuntala* who is a progressive independent woman. Manju Kapur accepts the fact that women's higher education makes them more confident and ambitious as educated women emerge more successful and prove their individuality. *Shakuntala* is a new woman who opposes family tradition of early marriage. She has done M.Sc in Chemistry and is teaching science in a college in Lahore. *Virmati* is much impressed by her dressing sense, activities and modern life style. Through *Shakuntala*, Manju Kapur presents the image of an empowered woman who is leading a free life of her own choice as herr

outlook is modern, As a new woman, she is assertive and defies the patriarchal restrictions and fights for her rights. She is bold, outspoken and determined and inspires Virmati to study and to look outside to education, freedom as time has changed. Virmati is so much influenced by her that she realizes that education is a great weapon for freedom and thinks that being educated is a way to get freedom and happiness. The novelist remarks:

Shakuntala's visit planted the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. It was possible to be something other than a wife. Images of Shakuntala Pehnji kept floating through her head, Shakuntala Pehnji who having done her M.Sc. in Chemistry, had gone about tasting wine of freedom....No, she 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)

Here the novelist presents Virmati as the embodiment of liberation. Virmati wants to study further, and even she is prepared to fight her mother Kasturi who opposes her idea to continue her study further. Kasturi believes in the ancient popular Indian myth that a girl is Paraya dhan and it is the destiny of every girl to get married and to follow the family traditions. She doesn't like the life style of Shakuntala who defies the family traditions. As a mother, Kasturi has the responsibility of the marriage of five daughters and is worried for them. To her, study doesn't mean to defy or disgrace family tradition as study helps in the development of the mind for the benefit of the family, so she thinks that Virmati should not think like Shakuntala and says:

Leave your studies if it going to make you so bad tempered with your family. You are forgetting what comes first....

...what good are Shaku's degrees when she is not settled. Will they look after her when she is old? demanded Kasturi irritably. 'At your age I was already expecting you, not fighting with my mother'. (DD, 21-22)

However, the novelist depicts the true picture of an Indian traditional family that is against the modernization of women. The discussion between Virmati and her mother Kasturi depicts the conflict between traditional and modern outlook. Shakuntala is the embodiment of modernity but her ways are not approved by the traditional women like Kasturi, to whom marriage and family are more important than study and freedom. Kasturi is the symbol of tradition and patriarchy. Vera Alexander remarks:

In the juxtaposition of marriage and education, education is either described in terms of a threat, or portrayed as a dead end, reducing accomplished female characters to obedient wifedom and dependency rather than enabling them to make a living out of their training. (REINE)

Though Virmati hopes to live a free life like Shakuntala, she feels herself bound to the orthodox traditional shackles of patriarchy. Here the writer depicts the difference between Shakuntala and Virmati as the former is like a free bird while the latter is like a caged bird fluttering its wings to break the cage open. Soon the family finds a suitable match for her marriage and forces her to get engaged with a canal engineer Inderjit But Virmati does not lose her hope and shows great courage to continue her study even after her engagement. As a woman of strong will, she struggles hard to continue her studies and follows her own way. She joins AS college to do B.A. and meets Harish, an Oxford return married Professor. As a mother, Kasturi does not realise her daughter's need for love as she has no time to understand or share her daughter's feelings and enthusiasm and thus consequently Virmati shares her feelings with Harish, the professor and falls in love with him. At this point, she does not realise that her affair with a married man will be a cause of her sufferings in future. It is a bold step on her part that she

refuses to marry Inderjit and thus challenges the family custom and patriarchal norms. Here Virmati is the prototype of liberated woman who thinks of her happiness only and takes the bold step against the wish of family. Though she finds herself torn between her passion and her duty towards family, she refuses to marry. She challenges the family tradition as she has yearning to be loved. Though She realises that she has failed in performing her duty as a responsible sister and has disgraced the family, she rejects the Idea of marriage . P.Sudhashri remarks:

..... Virmati, the protagonist rebels against tradition. Yet she is filled with self-doubt. She pleads for studying further and postponement of her marriage. She attempts suicide, when faced with prospect of marrying the canal engineer. The family brands her ' to be restless, sick, selfish. and locks her up.' (P..Sudhashri,2005)

Through the portrayal of Virmati, the novelist presents a woman of unyielding will power who has a zeal to live a free and meaningful life and decides to break her relationship with the professor. She informs the Professor that she is going to Lahore for further studies as she desires to be a teacher like Shakuntala. As an optimist, she has great hopes for her future. So she decides to end her relationship with the Professor and burns all the letters he has ever sent to her. She is termed as the difficult daughter to the family as she challenges the family tradition. The family was against her study but they have to yield to her wish and finally she is sent to Lahore for further studies. Here her life takes a positive turn and she starts a new phase of her life. As a strong woman, she possesses the strength of mind and decides to give a new turn to her life. In Lahore she came under the influence of strong independent women like Shakuntala and Swarna Lata who constantly motivate her to take part in social and political movements. She is much impressed by her room mate Swarna Lata who is an active participant in the freedom struggle movement. Swarna Lata, a new woman, is a clear headed committed activist who follows her own ideology and fights for women liberation and the upliftment of the social values . Through the character of Swarna Lata, the novelist depicts an assertive, dynamic, modern woman who emerges as the stout champion of womanhood. As a committed feminist, she is firm advanced, and action oriented young lady. She asks Virmati 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)

As a woman, the novelist' feminist concern is quite obvious here as she supports the equal rights for women in the male dominated patriarchy where men are not ready to accept women as their equals. According to her it is a matter of great surprise that women who have the equal intellectual and mental capacities like men, are regarded inferior to men in a patriarchal family. Swarna Lata may be called the mouthpiece of the novelist as through her, Kapur expresses her own views regarding the equality of women' in patriarchal family.

Virmati is so much influenced by her dynamic and advanced life style that she desires to be an intellectual dynamic personality like her. Swarna Lata attends various political conferences and rallies and wants to do something beyond marriage and family. Her modern outlook is quite obvious in her

conversation with Virmati:

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, going to jail, wake up from your stale dream .(DD,151)

Though Virmati feels much impressed by her opinions, she is unable to check her passion for the Professor who comes to meet her in Lahore. She falls an easy prey to the Professor and gets pregnant. Swarna Lata helps her in aborting the child and motivates her to get involved in social activities of women liberation. Swarna Lata is an advanced, straight forward and mature thinker who follows her own opinions independently without any fear or doubt. According to Christopher Rollason :

The pages of \*Difficult Daughter's\* speak not only of Virmati, but of other 'difficult daughters', who succeed better than she did in their parrallel struggle 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 doubt less representative but still symbolic figures, we encounter - as will be seen below - other women, whose relative success points the way to the future.(WOM)

As a realist, Manju Kapur has successfully presented the fact that women played an active role in the Satyagraha movement and other social and political movements related to women's rights and freedom struggle. Virmati noticed that women are crossing the threshold of homes and coming outside to be the part of social activities. She also attends many conferences and rallies with Swarna Lata and hears many inspiring speeches delivered by strong intellectual women like Leela Mehta and other women nationalists. She realises that these women are fully devoted to the cause of women liberation and independence of the country .She feels an inner conflict and asks herself \_ Is she an intellectual like these women who are free, strong and taking part in the freedom struggle ? Is she free? The author says:

Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent being in love. Wasting it. Well, not wasting time,no,of course not, but then how come.I never have a moment for anything else?(DD,142)

However, she feels great confusion in her mind as what to do . There is a conflict between her passion for love and freedom struggle. She blames the professor for disturbing her life in Lahore. She curses herself to be an easy prey to Harish. Again she shows marvellous will power in overcoming her passion for Harish and starts a job of a headmistress of a girl' school at Nahan. It is a respectable job and now she is an independent woman living her life like a free bird without any problem. Her job made her economically independent and her life takes a positive turn as it is happiest period of her life. She finds a suitable place to live , away from her family, earning her own money. She is leading her life happily, teaching girls at school. As an educated woman, she succeeds in asserting herself and establishes her individual identity in society.

However, Virmati emerges as a bold self- reliant woman who has a positive vision of life. She adjusts herself in the new surroundings and shows remarkable courage and power to control her life. As an educated woman, she possesses the sense of self-worth and finally succeeds to find a proper place in

society. As a rebel, she challenges the social practices and breaks the shackles confining women within the four walls of home and gets a proper identity of her own. Though she is happy and satisfied with her free life here, she has no desire to live a lonely life. As a woman, she feels the need of a man in her life as she wants to fulfill her life with love. Unfortunately she develops her relationship with the professor again and loses her job as the school authorities come to know about her illicit relationship with the Professor. In spite of losing her job, she has courage and goes to Shantiniketan. She decides to marry the Professor and becomes his second wife. But she is still restless as she feels herself alienated in the family. His family does not welcome her and she has to bear insults in his home. Virmati has married to get love, happiness, peace and security but it seems that her life is devoid of the desired peace and happiness. Though she succeeds to get the marital status, she has to bear opposition in the family and thus her search for identity and proper place in her husband's home restarts. To her, the only comfort is the love of her husband, Harish who always wants an educated companion. Actually she knows it well that being the second wife she has to bear some opposition in society, as her family is also against her marriage with the Professor. She is sure that her family will never accept her relationship with him as she has disgraced family in the past and her mother and family curse her yet she is happy with the man of her choice and promises herself a blissful marriage. She accepts her marriage as her husband is everything for her. Thus she takes a bold step by marrying the married professor. As a bold woman, she succeeds to show the society that women can defy the patriarchal dogmatism and conservative taboos in society and can bring a revolution in the society.

Though she has to bear the hatred and curses of Ganga, Harish' first wife and his mother, she tries her best to adjust in her husband's home. At last she enjoys the company of her husband at his home when the whole family shifts to Kanpur due to partition riots. Finally she gets free space for which she has struggled hard. Yet sometimes she feels guilty as she becomes the cause of the sufferings of Ganga. She also realizes that she did not fulfill her responsibility as a daughter and sister and destroys the good name of her family. Through she is bold enough to overcome the social and traditional barriers, she has to suffer a lot for all this. She conceives and gives birth to a daughter Ida. N.P. Sharma remarks:

Virmati has to fight against the power of the mother as well as the oppressive forces of patriarchy symbolised by the mother figure. The rebel in Virmati might have actually exchanged one kind of slavery for another. But towards the end, she becomes free, free even from the oppressive love of her husband. Once she succeeds in doing that, she gets her husband all by herself, her child and reconciliation with her family. (ISNMK)

Ida, Virmati's daughter is also portrayed as a rebel who revolts against social conventions. She is not prepared to become a puppet in the hands of her husband Prabhakar who was approved by her parents for marriage. She married him to please her parents as Ida says: "because you thought Prabhakar was so wonderful and I was glad that in the choice of my husband I have pleased you." Prabhakar denies Ida maternity and forces her to have an abortion. As a result, Ida breaks up her marriage as he does not want a baby from her. As a new woman, she rebels against the deep rooted family norms of male dominated society. Ida is the product of post-independence era, she establishes herself as a new independent woman. She transcends the social restrictions and fights for her identity, dignity and individuality. Again the novelist presents the difficult relationship between mother and daughter as the very first line of the novel "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother," depicts the

complicated relationship of Ida and her mother Virmati. Ida says: When I grew up I was very careful to tailor my needs to what I knew I could get. That is my female inheritance. That is what she tried to give me. Adjust, compromise, adapt. Assertion, though difficult to establish, is easy to remember. (D D, 236). Regarding mother daughter conflict, Manju Kapur herself asserts that " conflict between mother and daughter is inevitable and I suppose I was a difficult daughter. The conflict carries on through generation because mother's want their daughters to be safe. We want them to make right choices- right in the sense that they are socially acceptable. My mother wanted me to be happily married; I want my daughter to have good jobs." ( Bala and Chandra 107)

Ida is a difficult daughter to Virmati as the latter was to her mother Kasturi. Ida rebels against Virmati and follows her own way. Ida refused to show any signs of intellectual brightness.' There are other things in life' she told her mother.' Like what?' asked Virmati. "Like living, you mean living only for yourself. You are disappointing your father. Why is it so important to please him?..... I grew up struggling to be the model daughter. Pressure : pressure to perform day and night" She is not ready to bear pressure any more and decides to break her loveless marriage with Prabhakar. She is introduced to the reader as a middle -aged divorcee who visits Amritsar and Lahore and meets her mother's relatives to know about her mother's painful past. She wants to understand her mother Virmati's life. She relates to her mother Virmati when she comes to know that Virmati too had an abortion. Ida feels miserable as her husband and her abortion both were not chosen by her. The book connects both mother and daughter as both were not different. She experiences a strong bond with her as she says " without her I am lost, I look for ways to connect (3)

Ida is strong independent woman who takes a bold step by freeing herself from the hollow relationship. On the other hand , Virmati, who is also an educated woman with her individuality and challenges the patriarchal norms but fails to show her courage in matter of love and can't think beyond her husband and marriage. But Ida is brave enough to end her relationship with Prabhakar as he had forced her to abort the fetus. Ida's conscious decision shows her strength of mind and heart.

Thus it becomes clear that Manju Kapur is a committed writer who has firm faith in the female strength. As a feminist writer she has successfully presented the concept of New women and their struggle to freedom in patriarchal society. Her female characters Ida, Shakuntala, Virmati, Swarna Lata are assertive, self -reliant progressive women who show remarkable will power and transcend the age old social restrictions. Through their portrayal the novelist portrays the female desires, ambitions and expectations. They are high-spirited women who fight to be free from the stale social restrictions and attain freedom. They are aware of gender discrimination, women liberation and their empowerment and raise voice against social injustice and gender inequality and get victory over it by establishing their identity. As new women, they participate in social and political movements for freedom struggle. They are aware, strong - willed, self -reliant beings having faith in the inner strength of womanhood.

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