



UGC Approved Journals

IJELLH

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



Editor-in-Chief

Volume V, Issue V May 2017

www.ijellh.com

[About Us](#) | [Editorial Board](#) | [Submission Guidelines](#) | [Call for Paper](#) | [Paper Submission](#) | [FAQ](#) | [Terms & Condition](#) | [More.....](#)

ISSN :2455-0108

IJO-Science

(INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL ONLINE OF SCIENCE)

PREETI KAUL¹

RESEARCH SCHOLAR

AMITY INSTITUTE OF ENGLISH STUDIES AND RESEARCH

AUUP, NOIDA

UTTAR PRADESH

DR. WALUNIR²

ASSISTANT PROFESSOR

AMITY INSTITUTE OF ENGLISH STUDIES AND RESEARCH

AUUP, NOIDA

UTTAR PRADESH

**SEEKING A SPACE OF HER OWN: VIRMATI IN MANJU KAPUR'S
*DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS***

Abstract

This paper is about the quest of Virmati, in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* to find a space in the world of patriarchal supremacy, female marginality and centrality of stereotypical definition of women. Through this award-winning novel, Kapur weaves a tale that is set in the British India of forties about a woman Virmati, who defies the rigidity of her traditional household, dares to fall in love with a married man, enlightens her mind through studies and finally gets married to live as a co-wife of her beloved. Her journey is marked by struggle to find a place of her own amidst the chaos in her family that finds expression in the political upheaval of those times. She gets inspired by Lahore where she discovers a possibility of freedom, an opportunity to taste the modernity which allures her and a chance to get redemption by overcoming her inhibitions by participating in the Indian freedom struggle. Instead, she chooses to fight for her personal

struggles – with her family, her morality, and her will to marry the man she loves. Virmati's quest for a space allures her throughout the novel. Although she is able to lead her life on her own terms, she is never able to find a total reconciliation within herself. Perhaps that is the tragedy of Virmati, she finds another Virmati in her own daughter, Ida- who refuses to tread on the path defined by her. Eventually, Ida becomes a difficult daughter for Virmati just like she was for Kasturi-her own mother.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Tradition, Education, Self-Identity, Indian Women, Female Marginality

INTRODUCTION

Over the years, Manju Kapur has earned her place among the well-known writers of Indian English literature who writes about contemporary women, their struggle with social restrictions that restrain them to follow their heart. She joins the league of celebrated women writers namely Ruth Pravar Jhabawala, Nayantara Sahagal, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamla Markendya, Arundhati Roy and many more who portray the journey of women who are oppressed by the traditions and wish to break free from the fetters of societal norms. The protagonists of Kapur are rebels who are enlightened by education and began to question the validity of stereotypical roles of women. These women have an overwhelming desire to go beyond the ordinary to find their own identity. The beauty of her novels lie in the characterization of the women who are believable and their struggle seems very real.

Often addressed as Jane Austen of India, Manju Kapur has established herself to be one of the prominent writers of India. Her works attempt to portray the nuances of upper middle class families of the northern India. The household where the protagonists are raised are well-to-do and respectable. However, they are caught in the shackles of traditions and consider it appropriate to raise a girl child within the limits of patriarchy. A middle class woman is not supposed to be individualistic and overtly ambitious but meek enough to be subjugated. She is expected to find happiness in the monotony of marriage and childbearing which is the ultimate “Dharma” for a pious woman.

“The nature of femininity and masculinity is one of the key sites of discursive struggle for individual...It is a struggle which begins at birth and which is central to upbringing and education” (Weedon 98)

Through her novels, Kapur asserts that contemporary women have their own beliefs, opinions and aspirations which make them strive for self-identity. Their decisions are marked by their desire to break free from the clutches of oppression that have been thrust upon them from generations. The greatest tool which helps woman to realize her worth is formal education as seen in almost all of Kapur’s novels. However, while education lends an introspective mind which question mindless customs and beliefs that a woman is required to follow, Kapur’s protagonist fails to release herself from the clutches of patriarchal oppression.

The purpose of this paper is to capture the desire for self-identity and freedom in a woman who is caught in the cobwebs of her domestic responsibilities and family obligations. The woman in question is Virmati, a young girl who dares to venture out of her domestic boundaries, falls in love with a married man, and goes against her family to marry the man she loves. The story of Virmati is set during the forties, when the country was fighting for independence. Her longing for freedom becomes a metaphor for Indian independence movement and the backdrop of her story is set in the time of turmoil – both for her and her country. Sunita Sinha observes-

“Kapur speaks of the idea of independence-independence aspired to and obtained by a nation and also independence yearned by a woman” (161)

THE STRUGGLE FOR SPACE AND IDENTITY IN VIRMATI’S LIFE

Virmati’s life is marked by her efforts to defy traditions and set aside the baggage of inhibitions that cages her indomitable spirit. In her journey of self-exploration, she becomes a “difficult daughter” who hopes for love and education while being trapped in her family duties. As a result, she chooses the life of compromise and sorrow in her quest to the path of seeking independence.

Born in a well-to-do Punjabi Arya Samaji family, Virmati is the eldest daughter of Suraj Prakash and Kasturi who is forced to become a foster mother to her ten younger siblings due to her mother's constant pregnancies.

‘It wasn’t only baby Parvati to whom she was indispensable, to her younger siblings she was second mother as well. She was impatient and intolerant of fuss. If they didn’t 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. Usually once was enough. Sometimes she tried to be gentle, but it was weary work and she was almost always tired and harassed. ‘(Kapur 6)

As a girl, she is unable to find the love and attention of her mother which makes her feel weary and irritated all the time.

‘At times, Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special. However, when she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother’s arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away. ‘Have you seen to their food –milk-clothes-studies?’ ’ (Kapur 6)

She is emotionally devoid of any affection from her mother, which perhaps is the reason for her finding the love outside her home. Though, as any progressive Samaji family, her family believes in educating the girl child but her education is put aside when Virmati has to drop her FA and accompany her mother to Dalhousie while the latter is convalescing from a difficult childbirth. Her demands of completing education is conveniently ignored by her mother Kasturi who feels her daughter has studied enough and she is supposed to devote her entire time to the family than to focus on her education. The desire of completing her education is marred by her mother who requires a helping hand to look after her children. This environment sets up the upcoming life of Virmati who becomes a difficult daughter for her mother and struggles to find her own space and identity in her life. A very curious observation is made by Ruby Milhoutra in this context when she writes-

“Kasturi’s repeated pregnancies made her sickly, resulting in her total dependence on Virmati to manage her household. As a natural consequence her unique position in the

home is lost which she has to yield to her daughter quite unwillingly. Virmati thus becomes a 'substitute' and not the double that every mother wants her daughter to be. As a consequence the relationship assumes hostile dimensions" (165)

She is influenced by her glamorous cousin Shakuntala who visits them at Dalhousie for some time. Shakuntala, born in the same household as Virmati is exactly opposite to the latter in every aspect. She is unmarried (a tag that she wears proudly), highly educated and lives independently in Lahore. Virmati begins to hope for a life like Shakuntala and realizes that she needs higher education in order to come out of her miserable life as a foster mother of her siblings.

"Through the ensuing days, Virmati followed Shakuntala around. 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 all the people the family knew. Above all, she never seem to question or doubt herself in anything" (Kapur 15)

"But now sitting in Dalhousie, with only her FA exams to be taken for her education to be over, she began to feel she had not taken the whole process of learning seriously enough. Really, it was key to- what? She was not sure, but from now on she must practice her English. She could hear her mother telling not to waste her time, here were more important things to do. Like looking after children, thought Virmati bitterly, and then, as she thought of Paro's clinging arms around her neck, she began to cry" (Kapur 18)

At this point, Virmati begins to believe marriage as a hindrance towards to path of education and her eventual emancipation. She is aware of her mother's insistence of getting her married to a well-to-do Samaji family. For Kasturi, marriage is the ultimate deliverance for a girl and she considers education as a means to pollute the mind of young girls. Despite of her fervent requests to study, her marriage is fixed with a canal engineer Inderjeet. Virmati couldn't do much about her betrothal and silently awaits her marriage.

As the luck would have it, the wedding of Virmati is pushed ahead in the event of the death of Inderjeet's father. Virmati gets a chance to enroll in college and complete her higher studies. She comes in contact with Harish Chandra, an Oxford returned professor teaching in her

college. He is also the tenant in the house of her aunt. Harish Chandra teaches English Literature to Virmati, is married and has a child. Like any literature aficionado, he finds symbolism and meaning in almost every piece of art, music and nature. Virmati is deeply inclined to the ideologies of his teacher and starts seeing her redemption in him. Professor, on the other hand, is also madly in love with Virmati and appreciates her will to get higher education, a trait that he fails to discover in her own illiterate wife, Ganga. He discovers the latent thirst of gaining knowledge and education in Virmati and as a result, he gains complete control over her.

Harish's love letters written to Virmati while she is locked up in her house after their scandalous affair becomes public, gives an insight about his real self. He professes his love in the most poetic and passionate manner to her beloved without caring about the ramifications of their illicit affair on her young mind. As a result, Virmati refuses to marry the canal engineer and even tries to commit suicide by drowning in a canal in order to escape her fate. She conceives that the professor would never be able to give a viable solution to her miserable life. He could only write about the lofty ideals of love in the flowery tones of his love letters to her and dream about the glory of true love than to take out a substantial solution to the problem.

“The koel is singing of its mate, a pair of squirrels is running up and down the Jamun tree in the corner of the hedge. We too will one day be together. It's the faith I live by”
(Kapur 52)

Virmati manages to convince his family to study further and is enrolled in Lahore for her BT course. The fabled city of Lahore is completely different from Amritsar-the only city that she knows about. Lahore has an air of modernity in its life and it promises to bestow her independence from the chains of traditions. This phase of her life is marked by vivid experiences which shapes the decisions of her coming life. She comes in contact with women like Swarnlata who are emancipated and unapologetic about their modernity.

Lahore is presented as a metaphor of modern Indian city which represents freedom, education and modernism. Swarnlata, her roommate in Lahore is a fiercely independent woman, who is actively involved in the freedom struggle against British Raj and is a bold image of feminists of India in the forties. Virmati attends a meeting of the Women's Student Conference Swarnlata gives a fiery speech on women and their role in the freedom struggle. Despite being in

the company of women like Swarnlata, Virmati is never able to come out of her association with the Professor and gets even more deeply involved with him. Lahore gives her the freedom of enjoying the company of her lover without any inhibition.

During this phase, Virmati also gets physically involved with Harish although she is not comfortable with the idea initially. This phase makes her more dependent on the Professor. Harish, it seems takes an undue advantage of her by deriving carnal pleasures from her without any consideration of her will. On one hand, he professes his true love and how much he loves her on every occasion but is not ready to get married to her. He doesn't want to take a stand and accept Virmati as his wife but he wouldn't let go of her. This makes Virmati miserable and despondent. It is rightly observed by Devika -

“This man of seemingly sublime and sober nature, in verity, turns out to be a sycophant who spoils the life of Virmati to satisfy his thirst for keeping a woman in his awe” (234)

Her physical relation with the Professor makes her pregnant. She manages to get an abortion discreetly without any help and support from Harish. It makes her extremely depressed and takes toll of her health too. In absence of any relief or security from her beloved, Virmati leaves Lahore and takes up a job of a school principal at Nahan in the princely state of Sirmour. She seems relieved in her new found career and her own space. However, her affair is revealed to the authorities when Harish comes to meet Virmati and spends a night at her official residence. As a result, Virmati is expelled from her job.

Distressed and miserable, Virmati considers the idea of escaping to Shantiniketan . Enroute to her destination, she stops at Delhi to meet a friend of Harish and reveals her further plans as she sees no possibility of settling down with Harish. However, upon the behest of his friend, Harish comes to Delhi and marries Virmati with a great reluctance.

“In the evening the wedding ceremony proceeded smoothly. The poet's parents did the Kanya-daan, the seven pheras were taken, the couple pronounced man and wife. As Virmati rubbed her eyes, watering from smoke, she knew, rather than felt, that the burden of the past five years had lifted” (Kapur 186)

The life after her marriage is not easy for Virmati. She has to face the silent resistance from Harish's wife and kids. From sleeping in the tiny dressing room to not being allowed to take part in domestic chores, Virmati bears all of it. As expected, her own family breaks all their connections with her. It makes her very upset and frustrated as marriage which she so badly wanted fails to offer any comfort to her. She feels utterly displaced in the house of her husband. All the household duties and Harish's personal chores are done by Ganga and despite all her efforts; Virmati fails to make a place in the house as is always treated as an outsider. Harish asks her to keep herself busy in studies rather than wasting her energy in the household politics.

Virmati becomes pregnant soon after her marriage with Harish, but her happiness is cut short by miscarriage owing to her bad health and constant tension. As a result, depression engulfs her making her question her decision of marrying the man she loved and her unconventional choices in life. She begins to feel that she is paying the price for going against her family and disobeying traditions. Sensing her vulnerable condition, Harish sends her to Lahore to pursue MA in philosophy. Once again, going back to Lahore gives her a respite from her isolation. She is able to study and focus on her higher education. She refuses to go back to Amritsar for vacations and festivals and prefers to stay in Lahore. Christopher Rollanson writes-

“She wilts under the implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband's first wife, with whom she has to live. She loses all sense of identity: the continuation of her education (she studies for a higher degree in philosophy, but without enthusiasm) feeds no more dreams of independence. In the end her individual history disappears and becomes all but relevant, swallowed up in the greater and more resonant collective tragedy of Partition.”

(5)

In the wake of communal riots of during the partition of India and Pakistan, Virmati leaves Lahore forever and comes back to Amritsar. Her inner chaos becomes one with that of the tumultuous times of the independence. She immerses herself fully into the social work as a measure to atone her actions which come as a result of her breaking away from traditions. Her peace of mind is slowly restored when she is able to reunite with her own family. Harish's family moves back to United Provinces in order to escape the riots.

“In the evening, Virmati would sometimes fill the tank with a little water, climb down the steps, and lie down. Her mind was drained of all emotion. Her limbs were heavy with torpor. Harish would sometimes join her. Submerged in the depth of the tank, all they could see was the far away sky and the grey walls. Often they made love. There was no one to see them, no one to mind anything they did. Virmati had never had so much space around her. May be this was really what she had fought for all along, spaces to be. She conceived.” (Kapur 253)

Virmati finally gives birth to a baby girl, Ida and settles in Delhi with her husband and daughter eventually. To conclude, Virmati is a bold and educated woman who is ahead of her times. She longs to find a space of her own by defying the moral diktats of society and tradition but ends up in reconciliation with the traditions and patriarchy. To sum up, in the words of Maria Elena Martos Hueso -

“Virmati’s quest for freedom from the patriarchal moulds of tradition casts upon her eventually proves an erratic one, for she gets caught in the net of allocated female role that she was trying to evade” (160)

CONCLUSION

When looking closely, Virmati’s life moves inversely- the more independence she finds, the less happy she becomes. While she is an educated woman with a career, she is always considered as a black sheep of her family. She is kept under house arrest in order to prevent her from getting involved with the professor. Her family breaks all ties with her when she crosses the line and marries the professor. She is not even invited to the wedding of her younger brother and is shooed away by her family when her father passes away. She forsakes the love of her family to become an unwanted co-wife of professor which makes her feel hopelessly trapped in the prison of her choices in life.

Though Virmati is a manifestation of a new age woman who is aware, thoughtful, contemplative and educated with a will to go by her own choices in life and going against the social codes of traditions, she is in a state of constant dilemma, confusion and lack of self-control. This makes Virmati emotionally dependent on Harish. She loses her own will in the process of making Harish happy with her actions. Consequently, she escapes the oppression of

her family but finds herself subjugated again by Harish, the same progressive professor whom she considers her savior.

Virmati defies the traditions in order to live on her own terms and to seek self-identity. But her unconventional decisions come with a price. She loses self-respect and dignity in the process and fails to find a space for herself. Her life is spent in awe of Harish and appeasing him before and after marriage. Harish, as an alpha male keeps on dominating her forever with his intellectual superiority over Virmati.

The greatest tragedy of Virmati is perhaps her failure as a mother. It is evident from the opening lines and the last lines of the novel.

“The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother.” (Kapur 1)

“This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore.” (Kapur 259)

Her own daughter Ida gets disillusioned with Virmati's expectations of forcing her to be an ideal daughter. As a result, Ida becomes another difficult daughter for her mother when she wants to escape from the clutches of her parents' pressure. Therefore, Virmati never really is able to achieve emancipation in her life.

Works Cited

- Devika. "Disastrous Synthesis of Desire and Duty in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*." *Studies in Women Writers in English*. (Vol. V). Eds. Mohit Kumar Ray and Rama Kundu. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2006. Print.
- Kapur Manju. *Difficult Daughters*. New Delhi: Penguin, 1998. Print.
- Hueso, Maria Elena Martos. "Women, Genealogy, History: Deconstruction of Family and Nation in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*." *Odessea*, 9.2008. Print.
- Milhoutra, Ruby. 'Existential Images of Women in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*.' *New Lights on Indian Women Novelists in English (Part 3)*. Ed. Amar Nath Prasad. New Delhi: Sarup, 2005. Print.
- Rollanson, Christopher "Women on the Margins: Reflection on Manju Kapur's '*Difficult Daughters*'". *Novels of Manju Kapur: A Feministic Study*. Ed. Ashok Kumar. New Delhi: Sarup, 2010. Print.
- Sinha, Sunita. 'Discovery of Daring and Desire in Manju Kapur's Fiction'. *Post Colonial Women Writers: New Perspectives*. New Delhi: Atlantic, 2008. Print.
- Weedon, Chris (1989) *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*. New York and Oxford: Basil Blackwell, (1987). Print.