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## Feminity, Frailty and Felicity: A Reading of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

Ms. M. Madhumitha.<sup>1</sup>, Dr. M. Muruganatham.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Part-Time Research Scholar, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai

<sup>2</sup>Associate Professor of English, Rajapalayam Rajus' College, Rajapalayam

### Abstract

Women are integral part of human civilization. No society or country can ever progress without an active participation of women in its overall development. Unfortunately, men have always looked down upon women as the weaker sex. Down the ages women have been denied existence as a complete and independent human being, they have been given secondary place both in society and family. A large number of women are reconciled to a life of humiliation in the form of gender while performing the roles of daughters, wives and mothers in a rigidly custom-bound environment they live in. They are expected to serve, sacrifice, submit and tolerate each evil against her peacefully. Her individual self has very little recognition in the patriarchal society. The illustration of Sita, Savitri and Gandhari are also expected to be followed by her. The emergence of women writers in the last quarter of the 19th century marks the new era of emancipation for the Indian women. ManjuKapur, a remarkable writer, voices the liberation for the women folk. Her heroines Virmati, Ida, Rupa, Nisha, Astha and Nina strives hard to ensure their recognition. Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* portray the struggles and sufferings of Virmati, to find a space for herself in the patriarchal society.

**Key Words:** Civilization, Existence, Environment, Sacrifice, Custom-bound

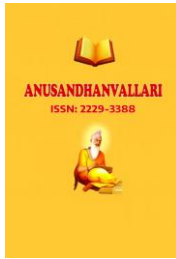
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Indian Women Writers in recent times have produced tremendous literary output. Their main focus of writing is on gender and their role in society. Writers like Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande and others probe into human relationship since it is intimately concerned with mind and heart. In order to make the process of change smooth and really meaningful, women writers have taken upon themselves this great task of their crusade against established traditions. According to the traditional concept, the women are meant to surrender and submit. To men, women are simply meant to suffer and they are depicted entirely shorn of even the needful awareness. But nowadays, there is an awareness in woman, thanks to the spread of education which has given her enough confidence and boldness to put up a brave fight against all sorts of man-made sufferings of the male-dominated society.

Woman in early English Fiction suffered mostly owing to the infidelity of her husband or the stigma of childlessness. Meena Shirwadkar observes:

The early works of Anand and Narayan are dominated by the male point of view. Both have observed, shown and given prominence to the boys in Indian family in their novels. The girls are shown as subordinate creatures. They are rarely shown in depth and come before us mainly as pictures of pity and suffering. (47)

Women all over the world have suffered right from birth. A woman is thrust with social images, rewards and punishments that are carefully designed to ensure that she does not develop any quality associated with the other half of humanity. Although *Difficult Daughters* is not overtly a feminist text but nevertheless brings forth the issue of gender discrimination and the struggle of the suffering Indian woman under the oppressive mechanism



of a closed society. Women struggle to maintain their dignity and ultimately retrieve the autonomy of their selfhood.

Manju Kapur (1949 - ) was born in Amritsar, a town in the northern Indian state of Punjab. She teaches English Literature at Miranda House College, Delhi University. Her novels are *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home* and *The Immigrant* and *Custody*. All her novels start with the seeds of hope. Manju Kapur is one of the growing number of women writers from India. She is expressing herself freely and boldly and on a variety of themes without adopting feminist postures. The struggles of women under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society is reflected in the novels of Manju Kapur.

*Difficult Daughters* (1998) pays tribute to the enduring bond between mother and daughter. It is based partly on the life of Kapur's mother Virmati, which is also the name of the novel's main character. The novel's dedication, "to my mother and her mother and to my father", emphasizes this deep and abiding woman-to-woman attachment that is also the book's central thematic concern. The title of the novel, *Difficult Daughters*, is an indication to the message that a woman, who tries in search of an identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society as well. The story tells how she is torn between family duties, and the desire for education. This is a story of sorrow, love and compromise.

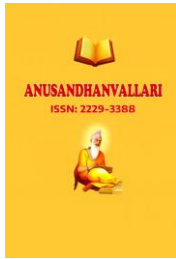
The theme of the novel is the unsuccessful attempt of the heroine Virmati to defy social conventions. She is a young girl, rebellious in nature. She, in search of her independence, gets infatuated with a married person to become his second wife. She, thus, brings disgrace to her family and despair to herself.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979), examine the notion that women writers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were essentially 'mad woman' because of the restrictive gender categories enforced upon both privately and professionally. Women are marginalized, ignored, degraded by male literary texts. In their re-examination of these writers, they argue that madness often becomes a metaphor for suppressed female revolt and anger. Thus a woman's contributory role to the role of women in society is dictated only by men and she is not granted an autonomous existence. The real merit, potential and the ranks of women are distorted in the society. The plea given by Gillbert and Gubar is to redefine the images depicted in literature either as monsters or angels and depict the role of women on par with men. In most of their writings, they have tried their best to free the female mentality from the age long control of male domination. In short, in their novels, the protagonists are mostly women characters who are desolated and isolated by an entirely sapless, hypocritical and insensitive male domination.

The novel *Difficult Daughters* is an absorbing tale of love and longing with its architectonics in which women have been fundamentally oppressed by a male-dominated society. Virmati differs by asserting her rights as a daughter, a wife, and a mother. She struggles through the winds of misfortune for the physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual well-being of herself in the bizarre, she has a constant longing for self-autonomy. Her search for freedom is otherwise proved to be self-deceptive, horrendous and meaningless. It is a feminist novel but very different from the common run of this class of fiction.

Virmati has no identity of her own, no rights to higher education. She wants to study and have a career, but is restricted by social conventions of the time and place. She has been brought up in a traditional society which confined woman to the four walls of the house. Even the authoritarian Lala Diwan Chand agreed with the rules of the society where even higher education was banned for girls. Virmathi rebels and insists on her right to higher education. She does not believe in arranged marriage. As a rebel she is conscious of her emotional needs. Her self-assertion goes to the extend of having illicit love with Prof. Harish whom she subsequently marries. Her life is a continuous struggle.

Virmati is in search of real selfhood. She asserts, feels liberated and is hardly bothered about moral codes. Virmati, in search of her selfhood, got entangled with Harish. In *Difficult Daughters*, the hunger for love and the



theme of alienation dominate the novel. An increasingly sensitive Virmati has been featured as the central lady character of the novel. Virmati takes complete care of her siblings. But she desires love and affection from her mother, which is repeatedly denied to her. Her mother thrusts her away from her side and reminds her to wash the dishes or cook the evening meal. Surrounded by clamorous children and with love denied, she begins to value her privacy and freedom. Virmati's transformation from a beloved to a wife is full of scars and stresses. It is a long and painful process, she even indulged in premarital sex.

Our society glorifies ideal wives, mothers, housewives and ideal daughter. The social institutions of each society, religion, ritual law, the family, the educational institutions, literature and art reinforce gender roles and gender stereotypes. Women generally come to accept what is socially established. A woman has to live up to social ideals. Virmati was first attracted to the Professor for his love of freedom and individuality. She willingly loses her identity into that of the Professor, she does not understand the wrongs done by the Professor, but she is not prepared to face the situation. Even when Virmati becomes pregnant, Harish is not prepared to take the responsibility. Instead of working out a solution by marrying her, he disappears leaving Virmati feeling deserted and forlorn. She aborts the child and vows not to meet Harish again. But all her resolutions prove baseless when Harish comes back. He exploits her and makes a slave out of her blameworthy if she falls short of it.

A notable example of the subdued and suppressed position of Virmati comes to us in the episode in which Virmati suggests the name Bharati for their newly-born daughter. The Professor, who does not deny offering to be polite or persuasive, dismisses as the name is not appropriate. In his characteristic highhanded fashion, he is brusque and impatient.

“Bharati,” suggested Virmati as a name. “No,” said Harish.

“No? But why? I thought with the birth our country” (DD 225)

Virmati, at one stage finds herself willing to join Swarnalatha in the independence struggle. But stops herself with: ‘Would Harish like it?’ (DD 233). After the marriage and even during their courtship, it is always Harish didn't want her to do this' or 'Harish wanted her to do that'. That Virmati could also want to do certain things and abstain from doing certain things becomes incomprehensible. The individuality of the woman is crushed beneath the burden of being worthy of him. Gradually Virmati loses her individuality. The Professor knows how to bring her round to his views. He is confident; she might protest but ultimately she had to do as he said.

Kapur aims at projecting her aim through Virmati. Virmati marries according to her own wish it spoils her dreamy life. Virmati has a disastrous marriage. She is marked with and sadness and disapproval. It engulfs in melancholy, depression and despair.

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