

## Women on The Margins: A Study of Female Characters in the Select Novels of Manju Kapur

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### Abstract

Manju Kapur is gifted with a fine faculty of artistic perception. The realistic presentation of life in all novels impresses one and all. She plays the role of a natural observer in her works. She attempts to show her concerns at the growing tendency of unrest in our society caused by man's attempt to exploit man for selfish gains and motives. Through her fictions, she gives fresh insight into the ambivalence of change in woman and man and human nature. She is convinced that emancipation is closely linked to the eradication of poverty; hence she provides a platform, against the evils of society. She has drawn the realistic characters and situation to represent the realistic change the world is going through. Manju Kapur's description of society is graphic and clear. Social values and sanctions, as they are different from class to class and from society to society, present a panoramic view of Indian society. Kapur highlights the factors which curbs the freedom of the female to live, grow and actualize herself the way men do. The manner in which religion, tradition and myth are misused to condition women into an acceptance of their secondary status causing them to lead claustrophobic and circumscribed lives. The female protagonist resist and overcome the ideological suppression and reshape ideals and existing value systems to re-invent themselves in a meaningful way. In this sense, her novels are a significant contribution towards the realm of Indian English fiction and feminist psychoanalysis in India

**Keywords:** emancipation, eradication, secondary status, ideological suppression

Manju Kapur's perceptions of women's liberation and autonomy are deeply entrenched in the Indian women's situations within the socio-cultural and economic spaces and paradigms of the country. The protagonists in Manju Kapur's novels are caught in the continuous dichotomy between the personal needs and the institutional and social obligations and responsibilities. They challenge the male domination and patriarchal mechanisms of surveillance and control over women's body.

Kapur, in her *Difficult Daughters*, deals with the tale of protagonist's struggle for career and identity against the dominant ideology of domesticity. Set around the turbulent years of World War II and the partition of India, she realistically depicts women of three generations focusing on Virmati, the Difficult Daughter of the second generation. The novel is the story of a woman torn between family duty, the desire for education and illicit love. The search for control over one's destiny is the key theme. While India fights for freedom from the British Raj, Virmati fights for the freedom to live her own life. The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as women caught between the passion of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of political and intellectual movements.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a feminist discourse not because she is woman writing about women but because, as Jaidev puts it " She has understood a woman both as a woman and as a person pressurized by all kinds of visible and invisible context" (2)

*Difficult Daughters* is a skillful, enticing first novel by an Indian writer who prefers reality to magic realism. Manju Kapur's sensuous pages re-create an intimate world where family groups sleep in the open air on the roof

and wash themselves in the yard in the dewy cool of morning, where love-making is furtive and urgent because another wife may be listening, and women's lives move to a complex choreography of cooking, washing, weaving and mending, growing, picking, chopping and blending. This book offers a completely imagined, aromatic, complex world, a rare thing in the first novel. Manju Kapur presents the yearning for autonomy and separate identity in her women protagonists in this postmodern novel in a traditional thread.

It is impossible for Virmati to accept a physical relationship. She is haunted by a deep sense of guilt. The formal marriage, a social and public statement, is must for her. It is this which will establish her identity even if it is as the professor's second wife. Marriage thus for her means deliverance from the fear of being socially condemned, a possible which will perhaps bring her back into the fold and relieve her from the sense of insecurity and uncertainty. The earlier generation of her mother saw no reason to rebel. There was a complete acceptance in life. Kasturi is an example of the typical feminine attitude-to procreate in order to bring about life and pleasure. To run her home, first a joint family and later her own, is happiness for her. Like Kasturi, for Ganga the professor's wife, marriage is a religious and a social institution, where love is not the basis of marriage. She too has a superb domestic sensibility. Her cooking is enjoyed by her educated husband Anglicized to a point, and who is otherwise very aloof. Just living with him, and bearing his children is enough for her. However in Virmati, there is a

struggle between the head and the heart, the physical and moral; Virmati gives way to her heart and body.

Virmati's daughter Ida who belongs to the post-independence generation, is strong and clearheaded. She breaks up her marriage as she is denied maternity by her husband. The forced abortion is also the termination of her marriage. Ida by severing the marriage bond frees herself from male domination and power and also from conventional social structures which bind women. She has that strength which Virmati lacks. Swarnalata, Virmati's friend, is also a clearheaded, strong woman. She too experiences tension with her parents over the issues of marriage but unlike Virmati she channelizes her energy into a new direction which gives her a sense of group identity. It also breeds ideas of radicalism and militancy but what is admirable is the fact that she can build these ideas of independence into her marriage without destroying the structure of the family. Her marriage rests on the condition that it would not hamper her work.

The fight for autonomy and separate identity remains an unfinished combat and a million dollar question. Throughout this novel Ida's declaration echoes that she doesn't want to be like her mother and wants to assert her autonomy and separate identity. Ida wants liberty and doesn't want to compromise as did her mother. According to Gajendra Kumar, this idea of the novel can be summed up in the utterance of angry Ida:

This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word-brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, mama and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore (13)

Perhaps it is this inability of Virmati to strike independent roots and grow that makes Ida remark like this. The search is that of Virmati's daughter, Ida, as she seeks to reconstitute her mother's history. Ida, an educated woman, divorced and childless, apparently leads a freer life than her mother's in external terms; yet inside her she feels, even if not quite so acutely, some of the same anxieties as had plagued her mother: "No matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my Existence as a single woman reverberate desolately." (DD157)

Trampling patriarchal norms, Virmati defies societal expectation to assert her individuality and hopes to achieve self fulfillment. But what does she really get? She is a loser whose acts totally alienate her from her own family and she fails to create a space for herself for which she had been striving all along. Rollason comments:

In the micro-state to which her destiny leads her, she has no family or close friends. She attains a near-exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, Virginia Woolf's famous 'room of one's own': and yet she falls (10) Things might have changed, but how much really?

Even today thousands of girls sit within the four walls of their houses and wonder why they do not have the right to choose their own lives, decides for themselves whether they want to be homemakers or more. In her novel *A Married Woman*, Manju Kapur has taken writing as a protest, a way of mapping from the point of a woman's experience. Kapur negotiates different issues emerging out of a socio-political upheaval in her country. The novel is a sincere confession of a woman about her personality cult in the personal allegory of a bad marriage. In a realistic way, she has described the Indian male perception of woman as a holy cow even though women are not very interested in history and those in power trying to twist and turn historical facts to serve their own purposes. As a writer of new generation in an atmosphere of the nation's socio-political flux, Kapur has recorded the truth in her fictive narrative. With zeal to change the Indian perception, she describes the traumas of her female protagonists from which they suffer, and perish in for their triumph. *A Married Woman* deals with women's issues in the present context. It is an honest and seductive story of love, passion and attachment set at the time of political and religious turmoil in India.

Driven by a powerful physical relationship with a much younger woman, the main character of the novel risks the closing of the acquisition of her conventional marriage and safe family. The novel raises the controversial issue of homosexual relationship in a challenging way. After all gay and lesbian relationships are not mere fancies. This is getting more and more visible in modern societies though we may or may not accept it.

Astha's longing for a purpose in her life other than being a wife and mother against a vividly realized backdrop of Indian sectarian politics. It presents an interesting collage of the problems, insecurities and unrest faced by middle class woman and nation both at the verge of transition. The author presents a lesbian relationship between Astha and Pipeelika but in the end regularity norms are set in play to confine women's sexuality within the framework of heteronormativity-i.e., relationship that are monogamous, within marriage and often with opposite sex. Manju Kapur presents the changing image of women moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards self assured assertive and ambitious women making society aware of their demands and in this way providing a medium for self expression.

Kapur highlights those issues of feminism that are endemic to the situation in India in order to help us understand how difficult it is for women here to arrive at an evolved state of mind being trapped within the matrix of religion and tradition. Her novels manifest women's struggle for emancipation from economic, political and social bondages. She has tried to evolve her own stream of emergence of new women grounded in reality. Kapur's novels significantly add to the growing tradition of Indian women's literature in English.

Like other novelist of India, Manju Kapur highlights those evils which are weakening our society. She never comments on any evils herself but her way of presenting incidents and situation bring those evils into light. Her fiction consists of an artistic exploration of the human consciousness in the context of complex cultural values. This concern for individual consciousness and its growth is hallmark of her fictional art.

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