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Transforming Images of Women in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

*The present paper focuses the suffering of females because of the inner conflict between their internal ambitions and the actuality. *Difficult Daughters* is a first novel by Manju Kapur who prefers actuality to magic realism. The novel presents an entirely imagined, fragrant, compound world. The story starts with Ida's narration about her mother Virmati who has no longer with her. Virmati is the protagonist of the novel. She rebelled and defied the age old norms of patriarchal construct that is why she is termed as difficult in *Difficult Daughters*. Manju Kapur portrays an ambitious woman in the protagonist, Virmati. Virmati lives her life with tediousness and aloneness which makes her sense sad about herself. Her life is a steady struggle from one frontage to another. The second protagonist Virmati's daughter Ida is strong and completely aware concerning the socio-political game. As she is denied maternity by her husband, she smashes up her marriage. Her woman in the novel seems to be a representation of a transforming woman, who has been constantly attempting to throw off the burden of embarrassments she has carried for ages. Manju Kapur has deep concerns about the constraints being faced by the woman in a male-dominated society.*

Keywords: Representation, Transforming, Individuality, Self-confident, Struggle

Manju Kapur was born in 1948 in Amritsar (Punjab). She has lived through confused times in India. She obtained graduation degree from the Miranda House University College for Women. She went to take an M. A. degree at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia and Master of Philosophy from Delhi University. She teaches English literature at Miranda House, Delhi University. She is married to Gun Nidhi Dalmia and lives in New Delhi. She has a son named



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Agastya and three daughters Amba, Maya and Katyayani. Manju Kapur is one of the female writers in India, whose female protagonists, not only attempt to keep equilibrium in life, but also rupture the restraints of custom and injustice. She teaches as a professor of English at Miranda House University College for women in Delhi. She is one of the famous writers ruling this age. She has appeared as the most dominant feminist writer in Indian English Fiction. Her novels reproduce gender discrimination, sex, man–woman relationship, human desires, exploitation and marginalization. Her novels also focus on feminine emotional response, women’s repression and their challenges for their liberty in the male dominated society. She has written five novels entitled *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody* which are published in 1998, 2002, 2006, 2009 and 2011, respectively. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* received an immense worldwide praise. *Difficult Daughters* was a number one best seller in India and was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best first book (Eurasia).

Manju Kapur is one of the prominent Indian English novelists. The novel, *Difficult Daughters* is the story of a woman ragged between dissimilar forces that change her life. Her duty towards her family, her wish to be rationally well prepared, her illegal love affair with a married man and her attempts to form her own fate stands at the center of the novel. Though, the historical events presented in the novel are purely imaginative reconstructions. The novel is about difficult daughters and difficult mothers. It is about mothers who don’t catch ideas of their daughters, and about daughters who don’t recognize their mothers. The novel portrays two types of women. First are conventional type of women who firmly attach to the age old values and customs. Her first novel is a feminist communication because it is a female writing about females’ issues. In this novel Ganga and Kasturi symbolize this group. The other is that kind of women who are contemporary in their viewpoint. Swarna Lata and Shakuntala are representatives of this class.

Difficult Daughters is a first novel by an Indian novelist who prefers actuality to magic realism. The novel presents an entirely imagined, fragrant compound world. The story starts with Ida’s



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narration about her mother Virmati who is no longer with her. Ida reminds her mother's sayings what she had said before her death that her kidneys, heart, eyes and other useful organs should be donated. On this unfavourable day Ida's relatives console her and make her realize that how they are only her parents and she should visit them occasionally. Ida decides to visit her birth place. She also has a great wish to know about her mother. Therefore, she boards in a train and reaches without giving any information of her coming. Relatives welcome her and she attempts completely to know each and every phase of her mother's life. Now her relatives open out about the life of Virmati. They describe that being the eldest daughter she had to run the house and look after us.

Virmati is the protagonist of the novel. She rebelled and defied the age old norms of patriarchal construct that is why she is termed as difficult in *Difficult Daughters*. She is drawn into household hard work because she is the eldest daughter in the family. She is a young Punjabi girl who belongs to an ascetic, high minded and strict family of Amritsar. She devotes herself completely in taking care of her younger siblings. She becomes the second mother of her ten other siblings. She is an open-minded girl who works very hard. But she is very intolerant. The care and love is never allotted to her, which she estimated from her family, particularly her mother. She never finds time for her own because since her childhood she was restricted by the duties of the home. Since her childhood she had always been working for others. Her cousin, Shakuntala is her ideal. The first seed of getting education and liberty comes to Virmati's mind after meeting Shakuntala at her home. Shakuntala is doing M. Sc. in Chemistry. Shakuntala shares various activities. She does - participation in conference, experiments in laboratory, read each other's work etc. Virmati clangs when she leaves for Lahore and says:

Maybe I will also one day come to Lahore, Pehnji,
'she wept.' I wish I too could do things. But I am
not clever. (DD 18)



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Here Manju Kapur portrays an ambitious woman in the protagonist, Virmati. She wants to get her right to study and get married. According to Manju Kapur liberty for females is most imperative. The protagonist is the personification of liberty. After her failure in F. A. her mother presses her, to get married but she wants to have her own individuality, her own space and wants to feel the sweetness of the liberty like Shakuntala. She doesn't like her mother, Kasturi because her mother was too traditional. Kasturi is a conventional woman who obeys orders of others throughout her life. In traditional family such as Lala Diwan Chand, she bears the whole thing mutely. She works night and day in the home. She becomes tired each night because of overload of household works. Kasturi is a mother of eleven children. She has to move her load of child nurture to her eldest child Virmati. Her mother always repeats her that it is the responsibility of every girl to get married. When Virmati is offered to marry an engineer, she refuses the offer. If a boy refuses a girl, the society will not ask anyone but when she refuses the engineer, she is reprimand by several people. Kasturi says her:

“When I was your age, girls only left their house when they married. And beyond a certain age...” (DD 111).

Virmati does not succeed in persuading her mother and get herself engaged with an engineer named Inderjeet. She has to fight a lot to carry on her education after her engagement. She joins a college. Here she meets an oxford return Professor, Harish Chandar. He played some of the sweetest music for her, when he met Virmati first time. On the other side, Virmati was extremely enlightened by the Professor and measured him gracious for his apprehensions towards education of women. She contrasts Inderjeet with Harish Chandar. Therefore, she rejects Inderjeet and recommends her mother to let Indumati marry him. She wants to be a teacher like Harish and Shakuntala. She takes a decision to begin her studies once again. She writes to Harish that she is going to Lahore to complete her BT. She burns Harish's letters and decides to close her chapter with him. She begins a significant life in Lahore with her roommate Swarna Lata. She goes to



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Nahan to become a principal of Pratibha Kanya Vidyalaya. She teaches English Literature in school. It is perhaps her finest period. She takes pleasure in a free life here. Here she has no friends and family. Her search for individuality ends here. She achieves the position of woman independence. But destiny has written something else for her as Harish comes here to meet her. She meets him clandestinely at night. She has to leave her job as she has lost employees' confidence because trustee of the school finds her guilty. She didn't know how many more starting she would have to construct. She understood that she had a long life ahead and would certainly forge an identity for herself. Even though desperate, she started to think stronger with every mile that she travelled. She makes a decision to go to Shantiniketan but on her way she meets a Harish's friend. He calls Harish at her house. She gets married with Harish and becomes the second wife of him.

She doesn't know that it is going to turn to be a disaster. She too feels that she has misplaced autonomy that she had before the marriage like many Indian women. Her troubles were begun as she was residing with first wife of her husband. Virmati searches for love and affection and loses her individuality. Virmati feels trapped in the Harish's home as a second wife. She is incapable to project herself in the house. She has no permission to wash Harish's clothes. She is not allowed to enter the kitchen. Once Virmati ventures into the kitchen but that is followed by a cry:

“...but there had been such weeping and wailing that day, such ritual rinsing of every pot and pan to wash away her polluted touch, that she felt intimidated. It was clear that not an inch of that territory was going to be yielded.” (DD, 230)

The whole thing is done by Harish's first wife Ganga. Ganga is a typical conventional woman. She is an illiterate woman married to a professor. As she is uneducated, Harish attempts to teach her. She does each type of work in her house. At house she does the whole thing from washing clothes to polishing shoes, mending clothes, dusting of the books, tidying of the desk, stitching of shirts,



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filling fountain pen she did it all. Virmati's marriage with Harish comes to her as a big shock. She is disheartened by his act. She thinks about her guilt but could not find out. Ganga is an obedient and unqualified woman. She becomes the sufferer of the male dominated society. Virmati is self-confident but in her in-laws house she never blooms to the complete. She feels trapped in with Ganga as a co-wife in the home, as she is separated from her family members and mother. Ganga thinks that her rights are taken away by her husband's second wife. Virmati feels free only in the company of Harish. She finds herself an invulnerable in the home. And she doubts Harish's love:

“Now you want to prolong the situation. Why do not we get married? You say your family makes no difference. But still you want to continue in this way. Be honest with me. I can bear anything but this continuous irresolution. Swarna is right. Men do take advantage of women!”(DD 149)

Virmati lives her life with tediousness and aloneness which makes her sense sad about herself. Her life is a steady struggle from one frontage to another. Her mother-in-law does not like her. Ganga's children also pay no attention to her. When she becomes pregnant her mother-in-law takes care of her. She someway feels nice. She loses her child because of miscarriage. She becomes pregnant again and gives birth to a girl child. Virmati wants her to name 'Bharati' but as Harish refuses it, Ida name is given to her.

Manju Kapur presented here an image of helpless woman who trapped due to decisions taken by her only for physical appearance of a man. She highlights the problems of second wife and hopelessness of a woman through the protagonist, Virmati.

The second protagonist Virmati's daughter Ida is strong and completely aware concerning the socio-political game. As she is denied maternity by her husband, she smashes up her marriage. Certainly the enforced abortion is also the annihilation of her marriage. Being a contemporary girl,



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she has contemporary ideas. She left her husband to survive without anyone's supremacy. But Virmati doesn't have the potency as Ida has. Ida had left her relationship with her husband Prabhakar because he had enforced her to go for an abortion. Ida's mother, Virmati likes Prabhakar very much. She doesn't know about the relationship between her son-in-law and her daughter. Ida also recalls what her mother thought in the starting. She wants liberty and does not compromise as her mother. At the end of the novel, Ida says:

“This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a 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.” (DD 259)

The image that Ida conjures up at the end of the novel is that of an individual engaged in a struggle to redefine herself against social opposition. But her efforts finish with her lack-luster marriage and her consequent cooperation with life's actualities. In brief, she lacks the courage to stand alone; she is always seen in need of some back support.

Manju Kapur here depicts the comparative analysis of Virmati and her daughter Ida. She explores that Virmati adopts an adjustment policy in life. On the other hand, Ida believes in liberty and doesn't tolerate effect of any old tradition. Manju Kapoor provides a stage for both modern and traditional views through her first protagonist Virmati and second protagonist Ida. Ida becomes the representative of a 'difficult daughter' Virmati. She couldn't create an understanding with her mother during her lifetime and after death of her mother this understanding surrounds her with guilt. Ida embarks on a voyage into the past of her mother in quest of a woman she could understand and know. But although she experiences a strong bond with her mother, “without her I am lost, I look for ways to connect” (DD 3).



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Manju Kapur challenges the inflexible social gender rules and explores her protagonist's fight for self-determination and self-identity. Although Virmati does well in breaking all man-made limitations, there are certain priorities so extremely embedded within her that she struggles to shake through the shackles. She grows up from an immature girl to a woman matured through experience and by suffering. During her whole life, she travels through the realms of several experiences. In addition to higher education and a much talked about illegal love affair, Virmati feels that there are other things also to be done. She is in the search in true love, search for liberty, search for the consciousness of the self and the search doesn't stop.

Every daughter is a difficult daughter to her mother and every mother is a difficult mother to her daughter because ideas are dissimilar from one to another. However, many people don't agree that it is fact. When the daughter is adolescent, mother affectionately receives her though her daughter does any types mistakes. Till she gets adult age, there is no difficulty but the feelings and views are unexpectedly transformed from both sides when she comes to 15 years old. The daughter wants to see the contemporary tastes and to be contemporary girl in approach and dressing. All mothers are always conservative. Sometimes they are not conservative but they would not admit their daughter's ideas.

Virmati revolted against the patriarchal arrangement but didn't succeed in making her life a productive one. Her fight to declare her individuality resulted in insecurity in life. The story of Virmati conveys attraction, insight and economic independence that are essential for women. Only autonomy is not sufficient; a woman should have self-control, self-assurance and self-confidence to change her life in the best way. Manju Kapoor through her protagonists in *Difficult Daughters* focuses on the women requirement for self-sufficiency, self-realization, sovereignty and uniqueness.



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Difficult Daughters project women attempting to generate a space for them in a male dominated society. She reveals the suffering of females because of the inner conflict between their internal ambitions and the actuality. Manju Kapoor investigates profoundly into the consciousness of females. It presents the image of three generations of women. Kasturi who entirely surrenders herself to custom and admits it without any issue, Virmati tattered by conflicts as a result from the conflicts between custom and modernity with her strong wish for freedom and quest for identity. Ida presented as a totally self-governing woman of modern times without any admiration for responsibility. Her woman characters, Virmati, Ida and Shakuntla protest against the social norms to become self-dependent, but at last compromise for the sake of social agreement.

Manju Kapur depicted various images of woman in *Difficult Daughters*. Her woman in the novel seems to be a representation of a transforming woman, who has been constantly attempting to throw off the burden of embarrassments she has carried for ages. Manju Kapur has deep concerns about the constraints being faced by the woman in a man-dominated society. The glorified woman is transformed into an actual woman in the novel. The contemporary transformed woman does not want to be the rubber doll for the other hand to act according to their wish, they can struggle to uplift their status and survive in the society. The potential of a transformed woman could be seen in the novel.

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