

# Yearning for Autonomy and Seperate Identity in the Novels of Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters, A Married Woman & the Emmigrant

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**Abstract – Manju Kapur is a famous Indian English novelist whose writings reflect man– woman relationship, human desire, longing body, gender discrimination, marginalization, rebellion and protest. The present paper will highlight a woman's struggle for her autonomy and quest for her identity in a patriarchal society. Kapur adopts to scrutinize the problems besetting the Indian woman. The issue of gender discrimination revolves around the life of the female protagonists Veermati, in The Difficult Daughters, Astha, in A Married Woman & Nina in The Immigrant respectively. They are suppressed by their families because of their efforts to prove their identities. The comparisons of ideas between the male and the female regarding the differences in freedom, autonomy self-identity and gender disparity are the main issues discussed in this paper with the analysis of the female protagonists.**

**Her novels manifest women's struggle for emancipation from economic, political and social bondages. The present paper also focuses on the role of women in traditional families oppressed under the patriarchal or cultural restraints. Manju Kapoor's perception of women's liberation and autonomy are deeply entrenched within the socio-cultural and economic spaces. They challenge the male domination and patriarchal mechanisms of surveillance and control over women's body. The three protagonists struggle, for self- existence in this vast universe. They are the true representatives of oppression which women are facing in the world today. Kapur's works project the transgression of a silent and a submissive woman to an assertive, awakened and an empowered woman, who gradually defy patriarchal norms.**

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## INTRODUCTION

Feminism as a social movement sought to redress the imbalance in society by providing women with same rights and opportunities as men, in order to be able to take their rightful place in the world. It throws a challenge on the age-old tradition of gender differentiation and attempts to explore and find a new social order. The major component of feminist theory is to challenge the patriarchal ideology for attaining individuality and identity.

Women living in India or Indian women living abroad are still the victims of sub-ordination.

The situation of women in India is quite miserable. In this regard, Manju kapoor is a great voice of Feminism in India. Her novels are the significant contribution towards the realm of Indian English Fiction. Her novels reveal the suppression of women. It's not only that woman is shown as dominated by men but also by women. She creates the female characters in a manner in which they rebel against the oppressive mechanisms of the male dominated

society. Let us examine how the female protagonists struggle hard to gain autonomy and self-identity in her three novels:

- 1) Difficult Daughters
- 2) A Married Woman
- 3) The Immigrant

### 1) Difficult Daughters:

Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters presents Virmati and her intellectual thirsts. Virmati acts and behaves like a difficult daughter for her parents and also for her daughter Ida. But in due course of time, intern Ida becomes more difficult daughter to Virmati. Both Virmati and Ida eventually end up bearing a disproportionate burden of coercion and exploitation. Manju Kapur projects the images of the rebellious but stoic women ultimately breaking traditional confines in the backdrop of a conventional narrative thread. In the very first line,

the exploitation of Virmati is seen when Ida bursts out:

"The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother." (*Difficult Daughters*, 1)

The theme of *Difficult Daughters* is the search for control over one's destiny through autonomy and independence. Virmati is the eldest child, born in Amritsar in the Punjab in 1940. Her father, Suraj Prakash has progressive ideas and a traditionalist mother Kasturi, is obliged to give birth for 11 children; 6 females and 5 males.

Virmati lives under the pressure of family responsibilities, she lost her childhood in bringing up her brothers and sisters; still she never breaks her further study. She belongs to a typical traditional family that believes of marrying off their daughters after receiving the basic qualification of housekeeping traditionally. Virmati has to face lots of problems and tribulations due to her desire for higher education.

The struggle begins when her mother Kasturi presses her to get married. It becomes chaos in the story when she falls in love with Harish Chandra, a Professor in English, who is already married and living as a tenant in her aunt's home with his family-a mother, wife and children.

The impact of her cousin Shakuntala, a professor in Chemistry, her thoughts and life style on Virmati was much because she is educated and participates in the political movements. She wanted to be like her cousin to identify herself independently. When Kasturi and Lajwanti reminded her of marriage, she gets angry and said:

"Another word about shadi, and I'm going back to Lahore".

The conversation between Shakuntala and Virmati gives the clear picture of her character. She craves for freedom to gain knowledge and wishes to go with her cousin. She says:

"We travel entertain ourselves in the evening, follow such other works, read papers, attend seminars, one of us is even going abroad for higher studies." (DD 17)

The above lines show Virmati wants to be free and break the shackles of the society at the early stage. At the age of seventeen her parents think about her marriage with a canal engineer, Inderjeet. By that time she had come in contact with Harish who inspires her for further studies. Her marriage is postponed due to the death of her father-in-law and she makes her attention towards further studies.

She gets admission in A S College where Harish was a professor, who feels attracted towards her beauty. Her decision of not to marry disturbs the whole family and she even decides to commit suicide. Then Inderjeet marries to Indumati, her younger sister, and then her family decides to send Virmati to Lahore for further studies. This entire thing shows Virmati's firm determination and strong will power to get higher education. Veermati feels to make her own existence and lead a life on her own terms. She suffers from lack of love from her the parents and family.

Virmati is ready to sacrifice her family and all the principles of the male dominated society in order to continue her higher studies. She wants to prove that she does not want to be a puppet in the hands of others. She becomes the rebellion because she has strived hard to realize her own self. In this sense Virmati becomes the difficult daughter to her parents because they always desire that their children must do what they said. She also becomes the difficult daughter for the difficult mother because, Kasturi believes that woman leads a comfortable life only under the male dominance. Here, it is clear that woman becomes woman's enemy.

Virmati, breaks the tradition and family norms and becomes the pendulum between education and marriage. She is treated more harshly when she rejects the marriage proposal. She just beholds each happening around her and keeps silent and soon she takes her decision in spite of several unprecedented hurdles:

"Virmati, like so many other sub continental women, is asked to accept a typical arranged marriage. She rebels against that destiny, to the lasting shame of her family, above all of her mother. Insisting on her right to be educated, she manages to leave home to study in Lahore. "(Rollason 2)

Virmati joins at A S College for BT, where Professor Harish was there. Here she becomes the target of the attraction of the professor who taught her English Literature. She has to pay the price for her education. Professor was not happy with his married life, because he himself was the victim of the child marriage with Ganga. Professor Harish creates a lot of space for another woman i.e. Veermati. And this is the transition period of Virmati's life. She desires education and her dream to be independent makes her to come closer to the Professor. The seeds of love rooted in her also and Harish writes to Virmati the letters:

"How difficult it is to teach while you are sitting before me! Your face is the fixed point to which my eyes keep returning. Let the world-the class- notice and remark, I do not care. You are imprinted on my mind, my heart, my soul so firmly that until we can

be united in a more permanent way I live in a shadowy insubstantial land.” (DD 56)

The English Professor was wise enough, to fill the rhythm of love in her heart. By his effective letters Virmati shows her defiance to patriarchal authority and arranged marriage. She gets completely lost in the whirlpool of the misplaced passion for the professor. She refuses to marry Inderjit and tried to commit even suicide. When she begins to revolt against the family, Kasturi, her mother always scolds her and bursts out the following words:

“What crimes did I commit in my last life that I should be cursed with a daughter like you in this one?” (DD, 59)

The soaring balloon of the imagination of her love for the Professor gets punctured when she learns about Ganga’s pregnancy. She feels cheated. A woman can tolerate anything except another woman in her life. Here Virmati is another woman for Ganga because Ganga is first wife of the Professor.

The professor’s double standards baffled Veermati very much. In this state of mind she asks him to stop writing any more letters to her and decides to go to Lahore for doing BT. At this moment she keeps herself to be outspoken, bold, determined and action oriented. She burns all his letters and decides to do nothing with him. She makes strong determination for doing BT. Kasturi and Shakuntala go with her to admit in the college for BT at Lahore. At the time of departure Kasturi, moves by the tears but Virmati, is unbent to give her an affectionate farewell. It is her attempt to gain gradual autonomy and freedom.

Harish tries to meet her at Lahore though she refuses to see him. But the blooming buds of individuality and self-respect are very soon infected by the canker of her emotional weakness. She fails to withstand the pressure of the passion and implorations of the Professor. He brings her to his friend Syed’s guest room at Lahore where she succumbs to his emotional and physical needs. She lost her virginity and also her conscience for a moment and she cries but very soon she overcomes from the guilt and tries to rationalize. But the tyranny comes when she finds herself pregnant. She is torn between education and illicit love. She is also tired of the excuses of Harish and one day she tells him verbally:

“I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family’s name, am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people will say if they find out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace....and why? Because, I am an idiot.” (DD 149)

She realises that, ‘Education led her to independence and also lose her conduct’. After some time she participates in various activities like seminars, conferences, attending speeches, and movements. Another mode of life begins when she starts her career as a principal in Pratibha Kanya Vidyalaya in Himachal Pradesh. Virmati runs her school, her home, and passed the days busy and happy. Here also Professor visits her and spoils her career and she is compelled to resign. She decides to go to Shantiniketan to forget him for her good. But again she falls in the trap of the professor. Once again his friend manages everything. He calls not only Harish there but also compels him to marry her. The proverb comes true ‘A friend in need is a friend indeed’. Later, she undergoes an abortion to marry the professor. She becomes the second wife and goes with him to Amritsar. In this regard education led her to take an independent decision according to her pace.

Viramti is ignored and has to face hostile gestures and gibes of family members of Harish. Professor also has to face many problems. Kishori Devi, Professor’s mother scolds him for second marriage. Virmati gets only a marginal space in the house. Harish turns a deaf ear to her complaints. Time is the dosage of every trauma. Her Mother-in-law turns hostile when she undergoes an abortion. Veermati is treated as a curse for not boring a child to the family by her mother-in-law. She becomes victim of fate. She feels to visit her patriarchal home, but the words like ‘badmash’ and ‘randi’ by her mother prevented her from going.

Professor has decided to send her to Lahore to do MA in philosophy-a subject which is dull, according to Virmati. On return she comes to know that all her patriarchal family members have gone out because of communal tension. And then Virmati finds she is pregnant again. the baby girl is born and is named ‘Bharati’ by Virmati after the name of our country, but Harish rejected and said:

“I don’t wish our daughter to be tainted with the birth of our country. What birth is this? With so much hatred? We haven’t been born. We have moved back into the dark ages. Fighting, killing over religion. Religion of all things. Even the educated. This is madness, not freedom. And I never ever wish to be reminded of it.” (DD 276) Then the girl is named Ida because Harish has its own meaning. It means a new slate, and a blank beginning. This also indicates extended sophistication on the part of Harish.

Ida wants to live independently herself. She refused to show any signs of intellectual brightness in her. Ida protested when her mother asked her not to disappoint her father, she rebelled by saying: “Why it is so important to please him?” It is the repetition of difficulty with Ida to Virmati. The thoughts of feminism and self-syndrome can be

seen in her agony of deficiency when she bursts out the words in the epilogue of the novel:

"I grew up struggling to be the model daughter. Pressure, pressure to perform day and night. My father liked me looking pretty, neat and well-dressed, with kaajal and a little touch of oil in my sleeked-back hair. But the right appearance was not enough. I had to do well in school, learn classical music, take dance lessons so that I could convert my clumsiness into grace, read all the classics of literature, discuss them intelligently with him, and then exhibit my accomplishments graciously before his assembled guests at parties. My mother tightened her reins on me as I grew older; she said it was for my own good. As a result, I am constantly looking for escape routes. Of course, I made a disastrous marriage....." (DD279-280)

The lines in the end match with the lines of the beginning. No doubt, her daughter Ida refuses to be like her mother but the questions that hover in our mind are whether Ida may divorce the man? Remain childless? Or she is not intending to marry at all? Veermati leaves Ida to fill the gap of her life's motive by the intelligence touch of her own.

## 2) A Married Woman:

The background of this novel is set up in Delhi. The novel covers the study of life of Astha from her childhood to her forties through various hopes and despairs, complements and rejections, and recognition and frustrations. She brings up in middle class values and seems to enjoy her mental joy for a long time but she feels that there is something lacking in her life certainly. She suffers from a sense of incompleteness depression and despair which is further aggravated by her involvement into the outer world of rebellion and protest.

Astha is brought up in a typical middle class family. She is the only child of her parents. Her orthodox mother wanted to install in her tradition, religious piety, and proper rituals. Her father is a bureaucrat. He is very much concerned with her education and wants to inculcate good habits, tastes and manners in her. She develops romantic love with Bunty, an Army Cadet. On the revelation of it Astha's mother puts an end. It is clear indication of Astha's aspiration for autonomy and freedom.

Then, she comes in contact with Rohan in the final year of her graduation. She begins to meet Rohan in his car at the dark corners of the streets. Boiled up with the passions of youth, the impatient youngsters often transgress the bounds of modest limits which are very common in the modern days in every household. When the girls are accustomed to this kind of act it is a great baffle to parents' spirit. Astha and Rohan kiss and touch each other, press each other to take delight in such actions. His exploring hands encounter no defense. She is ready to float all

conventions to gratify her body like the hungry haste of the river. It can be seen by the following lines:

"All she wanted was for him to start, so that the world could fall away, and she be lost. This is love, she told herself, no wonder they talk so much about it." (A Married Woman 24-25)

But this relation ends when Rohan departs to Oxford for his higher studies. Astha's father is deeply willing to marry his daughter before his retirement from the Indian Civil service. But she refuses to everyone who comes to see her. Girls are the biggest responsibilities to their parents. In this novel, Astha is the responsibility of her parents, but she is not an easy child to be tied to anyone so easily.

Hemant is M.B.A. graduate from America and working as an Assistant Manager in a bank in Delhi. He marries her and seems to be an ideal and honest husband in the beginning. He usually calls her "my baby" and shows the usual Indian traditional husband's attitude of patronizing, caring and considerate. According to the Hindu customs, marriage is a sacred bond between male and female. After few months, their marriage bond begins to taint. She chooses a job of a teacher.

Since Hemant remains very busy with his office works, Astha keeps herself busy with her school. The wheel of time brings happiness in their life when she finds herself pregnant. When hemant's mother wishes to be a son, Hemant denies this statement and says:

"In America there is no difference between boys and girls. How can this country get anywhere if we go on treating our women this way?" (AMW 57) Astha becomes a mother of a sweet girl named **Anuradha**. But after her birth Hemant's attitude is changed and he wants to have a male child as a son. In Indian custom, people believe that the name of the heritage is going to run through a boy but not by a girl. Here Hemant, an America return, believes it and wants a son. Fortunately Astha delivered a male child and named Himanshu.

Astha becomes busy with her two children and a job. Hemant also succumbs to the compelling necessity of materialistic needs and starts his own factory in the name of Astha. And this makes him all the more busy and distant. His wife almost complains that he talks only of business, house and children but not of her as he did before. Hemant promises her that he would give more time to family.

To compensate her husband's timeless situation she desires to give more time to her children but they are already engaged with their grandparents. Again she experiences loneliness and alienation. Her tears trickle down from her eyes. But Hemant fails to understand what actually troubles her. She



continues with her sketching, but finds herself scribbling poetry, her future prospects was more firm in her mind now than before. She writes about gardens and flowers, the silent dark faces of gardeners, tending plants but never getting credit from her husband. Hemant proved himself as the greatest money investor, when Astha's mother hands over the money to Hemant to invest safely for his children. Astha feels bad for not consulting her. She went on paying more attention to her school, poetry and painting in order to sooth her bruised emotions.

There is another turn when she meets Aijaz, a theatre personality. At first Astha does not pay much attention to Aijaz. He begins to show his praise on her script, poetry and painting which fascinates her. She loves to look at him when he is performing on a stage. In this regard Satish Kumar writes about Astha:

"Astha feels sensation and romance when Aijaz touch on her knee. She thinks that what did it mean, did he like her, did he want to have an affair with her, why had she been so startled by his hand on her knee, why hadn't she responded, but she was a married woman, with two children and those rights before her eyes." (AMW 114)

A few months later she learns that Aijaz is going around with a woman working in an NGO viz, **Pipeelika Trivedi**. She lives alone in Delhi, sufficiently isolated from conventional society. She is also blinded by the personality of Aijaz like many. Despite of all opposition from both the families they got married. Here, we can find an autobiographical syndromes of the author; equated with the life of her female protagonists. The lives, education and habits of her protagonists are matching with the writer.

One day, Hamant reads a news headline to Astha that the 'Theatre Group Burned Alive in Van'. Astha learnt that Aijaz Akhtar Khan was also in it, tears came in her eyes. A few days later a forum was set up in the memory of The Street Theatre Group. Astha, by donating the paintings paid homage to Aijaz.

She becomes politically active also and begins to attend the meetings of the Manch. Now she devotes cause beyond family and husband. It is during these activities that she happens to meet peepilica. She gets a good recognition of her painting exhibition and gets remuneration of thirty thousand rupees by the Manch. But her sense of self-respect and independence is deeply injured when her husband doesn't let her purchase antique silver box at Goa. Hemant's dominating attitude, superiority complex and, arrogance hurt her. Her sufferings alienate her further when she came in contact with Pipeelica. The like mindedness of Pipeelica brings Astha very closer to her. These emotions develop in them a lesbian relationship. This relationship becomes stronger during their pilgrimage to Ayodhya. Astha feels more

confident and stronger in the company of Pipee. But when Astha comes to know of Pipee's lesbian relationship with Neeraj and Sameera, She is disillusioned for her past associations. In this regard she tells Pipee:

"I love you, you know how much you mean to me, I try and prove it every moment we have together, but I can't abandon my family, I can't. May be I should not have looked for happiness, but I couldn't help myself. I suppose you think I should not be in a relationship, but I had not foreseen..... Oh Pipee, I'm sorry I am not like you." (AMW 242)

Astha's family alarmed when Hemant has a heart attack

**3) The Immigrant** is an intimate portrait of an arranged marriage and mesmerizing saga. The focus is shifted from India to Canada. In *The Immigrant*, Manju Kapur has discussed the two aspects which are important in man woman relationship- first is sexual and second is the psychological. Sex is an important matter of life but in this novel the female protagonist is bent upon in outmanoeuvring the male counterpart.

Nina's educational career and job as lecturer at her Alma Mater equates with the career and job of the author. While in M.A. course she falls in love with Rahul who chewed her like a cake, then mashed into pulp and swallowed her. She grieves, silently. Her mother knows nothing of the anguish and joy. She thinks Nina a sweet and virgin girl.

Ananda a young man in Canada marries Nina and settles in Canada. From the moment of birth, Ananda had been surrounded by the rituals of his caste. Ananda's family doesn't want to lose him to the West. But Ananda's brother-in-law in this regard gives his opinion:

"Opportunities are very insistent. If you neglect them they promise to retaliate by filling you with regret for the rest of your life. A lost opportunity refuses to hide; it pops out at every low moment, dragging you even lower". (*The Immigrant* 17)

Ananda landed in Halifax on the 15th of August, his country's day of independence, as well as his own liberation from it. Ananda was worried of his sexual difficulties and wonders whether the break through moment would come with an arranged marriage.

Ananda accepts the proposal sent by Nina's mother for Nina, and they meet. The wedding is fixed and they want a court marriage for less expense from Nina's side. And finally the marriage is held in the Arya Samaj Mandir in Mount Kailash Colony. And the registry of the marriage took place at Alka's home in the afternoon. And the bridal

night comes. The whole thing is described by Manju Kapur very delicately:

"The bridal night, now that the moment was close, Nina felt shy. Ananda closed the door and grabbed her. His hands leapt all over, under her blouse, her petticoats; they forced her on the bed to enable an even speedier exploration of her body. Startled, she tried to slow him down, but in five minutes he had come, five minutes and he had not even entered her. The rest was done with his hands, but that was stuff she could have done on her own." (The Immigrant 91)

And then the inner conflict of Nina begins with some consummation. She compares Ananda with Rahul, with his obsessive talk of sex, endlessly curious about what she felt in what position, this technique versus that, So much so that at times she felt objectified.

The immigrant who comes as a wife has a more difficult time in Canada. When the house and its facilities can no longer completely charm or compensate, then she realizes she is an immigrant for life. They meet in the night and Ananda thinks sexually he is doing better than before even without the anaesthetic he sprays on his penis to delay his climax. Even now Ananda feels that Nina is not taking interest in her routines because her thoughts centre on her warm home and a cup of hot tea. We can see their growing dispute in relation through their conversation:

"Here I am thought of as a cultured man, as Canadian as everyday else. So I don't want folks to get the wrong impression.' 'What impression?' 'That you are a traditional, backward Indian girl, like some of these women you see at the India Club. Can't even speak English properly.' 'How can you live here and not speak English properly?'"

Once in a home, Ananda glorified his wife by insisting that she may be pregnant. Tears gathered in her eyes. She also looks worried, she does not understand why he had suddenly hostile surely he was aware he had a problem. Even the writer believes that sex is a form of communication, and if they cannot communicate on this basic levels, what about everything else?

"For years and years Nina had masturbated, hoping the day would come when a loving partner would circumvent the furtive, dissatisfied feeling this left her with. Thrice, a day an average, and this restraint only due to the fact that she was working. Guilt ridden, she would promise herself, this is the last time, but her restlessness made this impossible". (The Immigrant 181)

His needs are obviously different and she does not want to impose, hesitant about putting him off. Finally Ananda goes through two weeks sexual therapy and returned with more confidence and hope to build the

castle with, suitcase full of books to be read but he cannot satisfy her fire fully which covered under ash of disappointment.

Nina also visits Gynecologist for her treatment and satisfaction but it was a fault of her husband than hers. She also read many books on sex and learns many stages like anal sex, erogenous zones, oral sex, stroking messages. She also believes in the therapy of Semone de Beauvoir after reading *The 'Second Sex'* "that one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman. During this time, she gets a job in library and becomes officially busy which paves room for her husband to do unsuccessful sexual experiment with white women like Sue and Mandy. Among the students of the Library School Anton is one who looks upon Nina and finds her attractive. He likes Asian women as he finds them warm, intelligent, gentle and empathetic. She goes to Ottawa on tour of the National Library in December. On the contrary here Ananda spends his every night with Mandy.

Thursday night is the last day of the tour. Anton has been prepared for all his best to do with Nina. For the first time she has a sense of her own self, entirely separate from other couple, autonomous, independent. And it's so guilty that the sex does not make her feel guilty, not even beyond the initial shock. Her first lover has taken her virginity and her hopes, her second lover has been her husband and her third has made her international.

As the summer holiday comes, Anton has to leave for three months- and the period is intolerable to her. Nina comes back to India but returns with a strong determination of not to repeat it. But one day Anton tried his best in spite of her refusal:

"Her legs were wide apart now, his pants off, he was pushing himself into her. Her tightness and reluctance increased her pain, but could not keep him out. His arms were heavy weights against hers, her breath was caught inside her chest, she was panting and gasping. What was once so pleasurable was now agonizing." (The Immigrant 311)

Nina is a toy to be used, abused, misused and finally to be thrown from the human phase. When she was young, she was a prey of Rahul who exploited her and squeezed her body like lemon and enjoyed the moment when she was married she was just a time pass nipple in the hands of her impotent husband. Ananda who always used to do experiment with white women, when she was married at the threshold of a job of Librarian, she is molested, teased, fucked and finally rapped by Anton. Even the writer thinks herself which may be her own experiences Perhaps that was the ultimate immigrant experience:

"The continent was full of people escaping unhappy pasts. She too was heading towards fresh territories, a different set of circumstances, a floating resident of the western world. When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, a new family. It had been possible once, it would be possible again. (The Immigrant333-334)

## CONCLUSION

Manju Kapur has shown veermati, Astha and Nina, as an, educated, self-assured, valiant and self-determined new women. Manju Kapur feels education brings many changes in the life of women to attain freedom and autonomy. Therefore our priorities should be to "uplift" the women's issues and maintain a balance within the socio-economic and political scenario of India. To end discrimination and move forward with visions of a better life where both men and women will live as liberated human beings. Gone are the days when female protagonists were fitted into an all-domestic scene with muted voice. The need of this hour is to rise above the limitations and to deconstruct patriarchal structures through individual questionings. Only through this process of reinterpretation and interrogation new images will be created and new histories written.

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