
The Representation of the Female Psyche in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

Dr Manne Shobha Rani

Assistant Professor of English, Govt. Degree College, Sircilla, Rajanna Sircilla

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Abstract:

Manju Kapur, through her novels, deeply examines the psychological struggles faced by her female characters. The protagonists often undergo inner conflicts, confusion, dilemmas, emotional strain, and mental distress as they confront repressive social forces. These come from gender discrimination, patriarchal domination, silencing of women's voices, and strained familial relationships. Kapur's women characters, while fulfilling the roles expected of an "ideal woman," reveal the complexities of the feminine psyche, marked by emotional dependence, self-sacrifice, devotion to love and marriage, and the fear of losing one's identity. This research paper focuses on the portrayal of the female psyche in *Difficult Daughters*, highlighting how Kapur gives voice to women's inner experiences and their struggle for selfhood within restrictive social structures.

Keywords: Female psyche, women characters, gender discrimination

Introduction:

Manju Kapur mainly writes about the relationship between men and women, showing how women often suffer because of the patriarchal idea of marriage in Indian society. In this system, a woman's individuality and emotions are ignored, which leads to deep psychological pain. Kapur presents this suffering in a very realistic way, describing both the physical and mental struggles that women go through in such a rigid environment. Her novels give us a clear picture of the troubled mind of women, expressed in both a confessional style and a reflective style. She traces the life of a woman from childhood to adulthood, showing how challenges continue at every stage of life. In her works, Kapur highlights many issues faced by women such as frustration, rejection, anger, guilt, oppression, exploitation, betrayal, and unfulfilled desires. She also questions the ironic and paradoxical traditions of society that expect women to sacrifice yet deny them freedom. At the same time, her characters often express a strong desire for independence and self-expression, even if it leads to conflict or rebellion. Through this, Kapur not only portrays women's suffering but also exposes the urgent need for change, making her writing both powerful and socially meaningful.

Difficult Daughters tells the story of Virmati, a young woman whose life journey from childhood to adulthood is full of struggles. On one side, she has a strong desire for education and independence, but on the other side, she is caught in family pressures and social expectations. Her life becomes a mixture of hopes, disappointments, fears, anger, and dreams that never fully come true. Manju Kapur shows Virmati as a deeply troubled and lonely soul. She feels suffocated within her family and longs for peace. In her search for comfort, she decides to marry Harish Chandra, a professor who is already married. Instead of giving her happiness, this choice only brings her more pain and disappointment. Dwivedi notes: “Virmati’s identity keeps shifting, sometimes breaking apart and sometimes expanding because of both family conflicts and the larger national struggles of her time. This constant push and pull leaves her confused and restless” (105).

Traditional Indian society expects women to compromise even women are losing their individuality. Virmati’s story reflects the clash between a woman’s personal dreams and the heavy weight of patriarchal traditions. She loses her childhood joys because she has to take care of her younger brothers and sisters. Her early life is filled with domestic duties, since her mother, Kasturi, is often weak and unwell due to repeated childbirths. As the eldest daughter, Virmati carries most of the family responsibilities on her shoulders. She deeply longs for love and attention from her mother, but Kasturi fails to understand her needs. Kapur describes a moment where, whenever Virmati tried to rest close to her mother, who was feeding the baby, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away. This shows how Virmati’s emotional hunger was never satisfied. From a young age, her heart yearned for her mother’s affection, but there was no emotional bond or free flow of feelings between them. This lack of affection shapes Virmati’s life in two ways. First, it makes her more determined to pursue education as a way to find meaning and escape from emotional emptiness. Second, it leaves her vulnerable to the attention of Professor Harish Chandra, who takes advantage of her longing for care and recognition. Her soul strongly rebels against early marriage, which society expects of her, and instead craves education and independence. Thus, Kapur shows how Virmati’s early family environment not only burdens her with duties but also pushes her toward choices that shape her future struggles. Kapur captures the confusion of Virmati thus: “Days passed, and Virmati’s confusion grew. She would sometimes wish that but what could she wish? Early marriage and no education? Her soul revolted her sufferings increased” (54). She vacillates between marriage and education and is confused what to choose. She, in a letter to the professor, states:

When I first heard, how I suffered, how I cried. I thought, this is the real punishment for what I have done. I had to be strong to bear the pain, silently, without anyone knowing. I did not want them to believe I was so stupid that no matter what you did, I would go on fighting with them over you. (109)

Manju Kapur shows that in patriarchal Indian society, women like Virmati often struggle because they question or rebel against traditional rules. These women face a conflict between what they truly want and what society expects from them. If they try to live their own lives, they often face social criticism, insults, and the difficulties of forbidden or frowned-upon relationships. This constant pressure causes deep psychological trauma, as society's strict rules leave them little freedom to make personal choices. As a result, women like Virmati are forced to live a life full of trials, hardships, and emotional suffering. Kapur uses her story to highlight the heavy burden of rigid social norms on women and the mental and emotional struggles they endure when trying to assert their independence. The constant lack of love from her mother, Kasturi, makes Virmati emotionally vulnerable. Her strong need for affection makes her overlook the fact that the professor is already married. Kapur shows how sometimes mothers and daughters fail to understand each other, especially when daughters try to follow new paths or seek independence. Because Virmati missed love and care in her childhood, she deeply values it when someone finally gives it to her. So, when the professor shows her attention and affection, she welcomes it eagerly, hoping to fill the emotional void left by her mother's neglect. This situation highlights how early emotional deprivation can shape a person's decisions and make them vulnerable to choices that society may not approve of.

Karen Horney, a psychoanalytic theorist, explained that when children feel strong anxiety and helplessness, they try to get support and acceptance from other people. Because of this, they may fall in love quickly or form deep attachments to people they do not know well. In the case of Virmati, her mother's rejection makes her emotionally vulnerable, so she eagerly accepts the love and care of the professor. Horney also believed that neurosis comes from this kind of basic anxiety, which is caused by problems in human relationships. According to Horney, basic anxiety and emotional difficulties can develop for many reasons, such as lack of love, neglect, or conflicts in early family life. This shows how childhood emotional experiences strongly affect a person's behavior and choices later in life. direct or indirect domination, indifference, erratic behavior, lack of respect for the child's individual needs, lack of real guidance, disparaging attitudes, too much admiration or the absence of it, lack of reliable warmth, having to take sides in parental disagreements, too much or too little responsibility, over-protection, isolation from other children, injustice, discrimination, unkept promises, hostile atmosphere, and so on and so on. (41)

Virmati's upbringing and cultural values first prevented her from getting involved with the professor, as she was already engaged to the canal engineer. Society and tradition expected her to follow this path. However, from a very young age, Virmati had developed a strong instinct to respond to someone in need. When the professor expressed his need for her, this instinct overcame her self-restraint and cultural conditioning. Her natural empathy and emotional vulnerability made it difficult for her to resist, showing how early emotional experiences can influence

adult decisions, even against social norms. “Eldest and a girl, she was finally tuned to neediness, it called to be her blood and bones” (50). Confusion bred, “her soul revolved and her suffering increased” (50).

Virmati is torn between duty and love, while also having a strong desire for education, which makes her feel very troubled. She lives in two worlds at once. Her inner world wants freedom, self-expression, and personal growth. Her outer world, her parents and family, pressures her to marry and follow traditional expectations. Despite this, Virmati gives more importance to her inner desires and tries to ignore social pressures. When she spends time with the professor, she experiences a rare sense of happiness and emotional satisfaction. This pleasure fills the gap left by her unmet emotional needs, even though society would not approve of such a relationship. Virmati feels confused and uncertain about the nature and future of this relationship. They exchange several letters, but all the while she remains in a dilemma, unsure whether to follow her heart or obey social norms. This situation highlights the conflict between personal desires and societal rules, and the emotional struggles women face when trying to balance the two.

The constant discussion about her marriage in the house makes Virmati feel even more disturbed. She feels trapped and suffocated, especially when she learns that Ganga, the professor’s wife, is pregnant. This makes Virmati realize that her love for the professor is hopeless and cannot lead to happiness. She is confused and hurt by the professor’s double standards. On one hand, he expresses love and affection toward Virmati, but on the other hand, he is making his wife pregnant. Virmati feels lost and trapped in this situation, caught in the whirlpool of the professor’s misplaced passion. This experience leaves her deeply disappointed and dismayed, showing how women like Virmati often suffer emotionally when their personal desires clash with social realities and the selfish actions of others. In her despair, she writes a letter to the professor, expressing her feelings and confusion:

Now I know there is still some life in your feelings for your wife as it is proper there should be - it would be very wrong of me to come between you, especially when there is going to be another baby. But for the pregnancy, I would never have known. What has happened has happened for the good. In which world I was living, to be so caught up in the illusion of your love? Just as you must do your duty to your family, and your wife, so too I must do my duty to mine (107).

She again decides to start her studies. Realizing that the professor could not solve her problems, Virmati feels completely hopeless. In a moment of extreme despair, she tries to end her life by jumping into the canal. Fortunately, she is saved by her grandfather’s servants. This incident increases the distance between Virmati and her mother, showing how family relationships can break down under emotional stress. It also reflects the deep psychological trauma caused by unfulfilled love, social pressure, and lack of understanding from those closest to her. “The brave thoughts of

renunciation” (79) was over, she mutely faced her mother’s anger “but her silence though was not one of acquiescence, but refusal” (80). After this attempt Virmati was not offered any solace but is rather humiliated further by her own mother who fails to recognize the evil comments of her co-sister, Lajwanti. “Kasturi hit her. Across her face from cheek to cheek. For this, I let you go to college. So that you are ruined permanently? Are you mad? She has been taught by somebody that much is clear. Otherwise Viru is hardly the academic type” (87).

Suicidal behavior usually happens because of a combination of many factors. Women are often more vulnerable to such behavior due to emotional stress, psychological distress, or depression. They may try to harm themselves when the pain they feel becomes too much to handle. In Virmati’s case, her life experiences are the main reason for her suicidal feelings. She does not receive love and warmth from her family, especially from her mother, which is important for emotional bonding and support. At the same time, her mind is torn between her strong desire for education and her love for the professor. These conflicts make her feel completely distressed, hopeless, and emotionally trapped. This shows how lack of family support, unfulfilled desires, and emotional confusion can push women toward extreme actions when they feel there is no way out.

Finally, Virmati is locked in the godown. During cold winter nights, she is let out, only to be locked again in the daytime. She does not understand why she is treated like a sack of wheat or lentils, with no respect for her life or feelings. This treatment makes her feel angry, humiliated, and unimportant. At this time, Virmati feels completely alienated from her family and those close to her. To cope with this isolation, she begins to share her thoughts and emotions with the professor through letters. This shows how extreme neglect and lack of care can push a person toward seeking comfort and understanding outside the family, even if it is socially frowned upon. She writes thus:

I couldn’t think, and all I heard around me was the talk of marriage. If I was to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed, then I didn’t want to live....Each time I hear the door shut, I burn with anger and humiliation. What have I done? I am just like the sacks of wheat and dal here, without my own life. (92-93)

In many cases, mothers follow the rules set by society, even when these rules harm them or other women. They often become the strongest supporters of patriarchal values, enforcing traditions that limit women’s freedom. By doing this, they accept their suffering silently and ignore their own emotional pain. This shows how social pressure can shape people’s behavior, making even women uphold a system that causes them psychological and emotional harm.

“The mother often symbolizes the paralyzing force of the family in the structuration of personality and limitations of potential” (Davaseeli 54). In many cases, mothers

follow the rules set by society, even if these rules harm them or other women. They often become the strongest supporters of patriarchal traditions, enforcing practices that limit women's freedom. By doing so, they accept their suffering quietly, ignoring their own emotional pain and struggles. This shows how social pressure and long-held customs can make people, even women, maintain a system that causes harm, keeping the cycle of oppression alive. Harit fittingly remarks:

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 passion and implorations of the professor. He takes her to his friend's guest room where she succumbs to his emotional and physical needs. (97)

Virmati refuses to marry Inderjeet, a match arranged by her parents. She attempts suicide at Tarsikka but is luckily saved by her grandfather's servants. Later, she is locked in a store room, decides to pursue higher education, and eventually marries the professor. All these actions create a distance between Virmati and her family, especially her mother. Virmati's choices embarrass her mother, Kasturi. Instead of showing love, understanding, or support, Kasturi reacts harshly and inhumanly. To protect herself from the ongoing shame, she disowns Virmati completely, refusing to accept her daughter or her decisions. This situation shows how strict social norms and family expectations can destroy mother-daughter relationships and push women into emotional isolation. These attitudes of Kasturi makes Virmati feel, "Her mother's inaccessibility even more (58). It also makes her realize how desperately "she was trying to live within a moral code, but her mother would never understand that" (113). The distance between the two increased as Kasturi stands a total stranger to the world of knowledge and self-assurance which Virmati enters. Asha Choube rightly observes:

As a child she (Virmati) keeps craving for a little understanding from her mother but with the passing of time she learns to escape to the situation as it is. This mother-daughter relationship marches from identification to alienation. Years after Ida, the daughter of Virmati relives her relation with her mother, marching from alienation to identification. (110)

Kasturi was often angry with Virmati because she could not bear her daughter's restless nature. Neither the mother nor the daughter was able to openly share their true feelings with each other. Kasturi believed that such restlessness in a young girl could only bring trouble and shame to the family. As a result, there was no closeness, no sense of bonding, and no emotional understanding between the two. This lack of communication created a distance that weakened their relationship even further. A mother's role is usually to guide, comfort, and support her daughter, but in this case, silence and anger replaced love and care. This shows how the absence of emotional connection between a mother and daughter can damage trust and prevent the growth of a healthy relationship.

Virmati's future is deeply shaped by Kasturi's habit of ignoring her. Because she does not receive attention, care, or emotional support from her mother, she feels lonely and unwanted. When Harish shows interest in her, she responds in a confused way because he is the first person who makes her feel loved and valued. This situation shows how the lack of affection at home pushes Virmati to seek love outside, even if it is uncertain or unsafe. Her confused response to Harish is not just about attraction, but also about filling the emotional emptiness created by her mother's neglect. In this way, the weak mother-daughter relationship directly influences her personal choices and future. "Nobody else had ever seen her as someone who could be perfect" (74). She even says "Nobody here cares to discuss anything seriously with me" (99).

Virmati's struggles, both inside and outside, became stronger when her mother, Kasturi, began to see her daughter's wish for independence as selfishness and ingratitude. Instead of understanding Virmati's feelings, Kasturi judged her harshly. This made Virmati feel more trapped and lonely. Because her need for love was denied at home, she could not clearly understand the difference between true love and mere desire. As a result, she was drawn into relationships that led her towards a life of shame and insecurity.

Manju Kapur shows the deep conflict inside Virmati when she goes to Lahore. Even though she tries to separate herself from that place, the memories of her past with the professor continue to haunt her. Because of this, she is unable to move forward in life with peace or clarity. Harish follows her to Lahore, and once again their closeness grows, trapping her in the same cycle of dependence and confusion. At the Punjab Women's Student Conference, Virmati begins to think seriously about her own identity and existence. Surrounded by many women, she still feels completely alone, sitting quietly with no real sense of belonging. This moment reflects her inner emptiness, her personal choices have not given her freedom but only isolation. Virmati's experience highlights the painful gap between women's desire for independence and the social and emotional chains that hold them back. Instead of finding strength in education and new surroundings, she is pulled back by her past, showing how difficult it is for women to escape emotional entanglements in a patriarchal setup.

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