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**Negotiating Identity: A Feminist-Comparative Study of Daughterhood in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts***

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a comparative feminist analysis of daughterhood as portrayed in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts*. Through an intricate examination of Virmati and Maya—the protagonists of the respective novels—it explores the ideological, generational, and emotional tensions women encounter while striving for personal fulfillment in patriarchal contexts. Virmati's bold pursuit of education and emotional freedom in pre-independence India reflects a confrontation with tradition, while Maya's disillusionment within a modern urban marriage unveils the subtle confinement of seemingly progressive roles. Drawing upon feminist and postcolonial theories, the study analyzes their aspirations, relationships, and societal entrapments to illuminate the evolving expressions of resistance, conformity, and feminist consciousness in Indian literature. The use of direct excerpts enriches this literary comparison, emphasizing the complexities of autonomy and self-realization amid the ever-changing cultural landscape.

**Keywords:** Feminist theory, daughterhood, Indian fiction, female autonomy, tradition and modernity, comparative literature

**Introduction:** The depiction of daughters in Indian literature often mirrors the cultural, social, and familial dynamics of Indian society. Indian English literature has long provided a fertile ground for the representation of women's voices, especially those negotiating the complexities of familial, societal, and cultural expectations. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts* provide rich narratives that explore the lives of their female protagonists within the constraints of traditional and modern expectations. These daughters are not mere secondary characters but are at the forefront of contesting dominant ideologies. This paper compares and contrasts the depiction of Virmati and Maya, the protagonists of the respective novels, focusing on their aspirations, relationships, struggles, and the broader societal contexts that shape their experiences. Through their stories, the paper illustrates the evolution of feminist consciousness in Indian fiction and

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examines the narrative and ideological structures that shape the representation of daughterhood.

Indian English literature has long provided a fertile ground for the representation of women's voices, particularly those negotiating the complexities of familial, societal, and cultural expectations. Two such narratives are Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts*, both of which center around the figure of the daughter navigating the traditional Indian family structure. These daughters are not mere secondary characters but are instead at the forefront of contesting dominant ideologies. This paper explores how the protagonists, Virmati and Maya, respectively, become sites of resistance, compliance, and self-reflection, thereby illustrating the evolution of feminist consciousness in Indian fiction. This paper will delve into both the narrative and ideological structures that shape the representation of daughterhood in these novels.

**2. Literature Review:** The representation of women in Indian literature, especially postcolonial narratives, is often discussed within frameworks of nationalism, feminism, and identity. Partha Chatterjee (1993) in *The Nation and Its Fragments* highlights the dual positioning of women during colonial and nationalist movements, where they were simultaneously idealized as emblems of national culture and marginalized from public life. Nationalist discourses often constructed the home as a key symbolic site for preserving cultural purity, assigning women the crucial role of its guardians. This emphasis on domesticity frequently led to the control of women's roles, mobility, and even access to education, as their primary duty was seen as upholding tradition against colonial influence. Chatterjee's framework is crucial for analyzing individual struggles, such as Virmati's conflict between educational aspirations and domestic expectations, revealing how gender became a central terrain for negotiating national identity and power during this period. Her experience reflects the broader societal tensions arising from the idealization of women's traditional roles alongside the limited opportunities for their personal and intellectual development within the nationalist project.

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" critiques the silencing of marginalized voices, especially colonized women, within dominant narratives. This resonates with Partha Chatterjee's (1993) analysis in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, which reveals the dual positioning of women in colonial-nationalist movements as idealized symbols of culture yet marginalized from public life, often confined to the home as guardians of purity. This ideological constraint on women's roles and mobility, as highlighted by Chatterjee, offers a framework for understanding the mediated voice of Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*. Though central, Virmati's narrative is filtered through her daughter Ida, hinting at a layered silencing of her female subjectivity, aligning with Spivak's concern about the representation and audibility of subaltern experiences. The tension between Virmati's potential agency and her narrative representation underscores the challenges of accessing direct subaltern female voices within historical and literary contexts.

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Meenakshi Mukherjee (1985) in *Realism and Reality* examines how Indian English novels portray women navigating societal norms, often occupying spaces of negotiation between tradition and modernity, and individual versus collective expectations. She argues that these female characters, while operating within socially sanctioned frameworks, actively attempt to assert their autonomy. The trajectories of Virmati and Maya resonate with Mukherjee's observations. Their actions can be analyzed as negotiations within the constraints of their social contexts, revealing their efforts to carve out individual agency amidst prevailing norms. Mukherjee's framework allows for a nuanced understanding of their agency, not as outright rebellion, but as subtle acts of negotiation within evolving societal dynamics, offering a valuable lens for analyzing their experiences in relation to broader socio-cultural transformations depicted in Indian English novels.

Mary E. John's *Discrepant Dislocations* (1996) offers a feminist critique of postcolonial modernity, arguing that women's agency is often framed through cultural nationalism, complicating their literary representation and leading to fragmented identities. She posits that women experience "discrepant dislocations" as modern ideals intersect unevenly with tradition and colonial legacies. This framework is evident in analyzing Maya in *Second Thoughts*, where the modern urban setting, while promising freedom, delivers alienation. Maya's internal struggles can be understood as a manifestation of these dislocations, arising from the tension between modern aspirations and persistent cultural norms within a postcolonial context. John's work encourages a nuanced examination of how cultural nationalism shapes female agency and how modernity can paradoxically lead to alienation for women navigating these complex social and ideological landscapes.

Sangeeta Ray's *En-Gendering India* adds another layer by emphasizing the link between female identity and national discourse. Her analysis supports the view that female protagonists in Indian English fiction often function as allegorical figures for broader socio-political themes. This can be seen in how Virmati's individual rebellion is paralleled with the Indian national movement, and how Maya's personal discontent reflects the post-liberalization malaise of urban India.

Additionally, contemporary scholars such as Ania Loomba and Chandra Talpade Mohanty provide critical frameworks that help interrogate how gender, class, and postcoloniality intersect in literature. Loomba's insights into colonial patriarchy and Mohanty's critique of universalist feminism caution against viewing Virmati and Maya's narratives through a homogenizing feminist lens. Instead, they advocate for context-specific readings that account for cultural specificity, economic class, and historical positioning.

These theoretical insights collectively provide a robust foundation for analyzing the daughters in *Difficult Daughters* and *Second Thoughts* not merely as characters in fiction, but as complex subjects situated at the intersection of gender, history, and identity politics.

**3. Methodology:** This paper employs a qualitative comparative-textual approach, focusing on close reading and interpretive analysis of two novels. Utilizing feminist literary criticism and postcolonial theory as its framework, the study examines how each text portrays key themes such as aspirations, familial dynamics, rebellion, conformity, and the broader societal context, particularly as they relate to women's experiences in postcolonial settings. Interpretations are substantiated through direct excerpts from the primary texts, and the analysis is contextualized within existing feminist and postcolonial scholarship to provide a theoretically robust and nuanced understanding of the chosen literary works. This method aims to illuminate both the specificities and commonalities in the representation of female agency and postcolonial realities across the two narratives.

#### **4. Thematic Comparative Analysis:**

**4.1 Aspirations and the Desire for Autonomy:** Virmati, the protagonist of *Difficult Daughters*, is introduced as a young woman chafing under the strictures of a large extended family that demands unwavering obedience. Her burgeoning desire for education becomes the focal point of her defiance:

**“She knew her parents would never allow her to go to college in Lahore. That was why it was so attractive, because it was forbidden, because it was far away from home.”**

This excerpt powerfully encapsulates her yearning to break free from the confines of patriarchal domesticity and exemplifies a fundamental feminist struggle for self-determination. Her pursuit of higher education transcends a personal ambition; it becomes a symbol of a wider collective aspiration among women of her era to access opportunities beyond traditional roles. As Kumari Jayawardena notes in *Feminism and Nationalism in the Third World*, the pursuit of education was often intertwined with national liberation movements, where educated women were seen as crucial for progress and challenging colonial structures (Jayawardena, 1986, p. 15). Virmati's act can be seen as a personal rebellion mirroring the larger societal upheaval.

In contrast, Maya in Shobhaa De's *Second Thoughts* does not engage in overt rebellion against societal norms but experiences a subtle yet profound dissatisfaction with her restricted existence. As a newly married woman in Mumbai, Maya reflects:

**“Sometimes I felt like a well-decorated puppet, placed in a show-window for society to admire. Nobody cared how I felt inside.”**

Her discontent is more existential, a quiet erosion of her sense of self. Unlike Virmati, Maya has had the privilege of education and exposure to a degree of modern urban freedom before her marriage, making her marital confinement a more psychological than physical entrapment. This resonates with Betty Friedan's concept of the “feminine mystique,” where women in seemingly comfortable domestic situations still felt a deep sense

of unfulfillment (Friedan, 1963). Maya's internal struggle highlights how even within seemingly progressive urban settings, traditional expectations can stifle a woman's inner life.

**4.2 Familial Dynamics and the Burden of Expectations:** In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati's complex relationship with her mother, Kasturi, forms a crucial element of her conflict. Kasturi embodies the traditional role of a strict disciplinarian and serves as the initial enforcer of patriarchal control in Virmati's life:

**“Girls from good families don't do such things,” her mother said. “What will people say?”**

This ingrained fear of “what will people say” is a pervasive trope in Indian families, where a daughter's conduct is inextricably linked to the family's honour and social standing. As Veena Das argues in *Family and Gender: The Cultural Idiom and Structural Constraints*, the family often acts as a primary site for the reproduction of social norms and hierarchies, placing significant pressure on women to conform (Das, 1995). Virmati's decision to move to Lahore for education and to pursue a relationship with a married professor precipitates a deep and irreparable rift within her family.

Conversely, Maya in *Second Thoughts* experiences emotional detachment from her natal family. Her marriage is portrayed as an arranged affair, more a matter of societal obligation than a union based on mutual affection or compatibility. She finds no solace or connection within her husband's household:

**“The walls of the apartment seemed to close in on her with each passing day.”**

This sense of suffocating isolation within the marital home underscores a critique of the superficial modernity often associated with urban Indian marriages. The physical comfort and apparent progress do not necessarily translate into emotional fulfillment or genuine connection, echoing concerns raised by feminist scholars about the limitations of modernization without fundamental shifts in patriarchal structures (Chakravarti, 2003).

**4.3 Rebellion: Overt and Covert:** Virmati's rebellion is characterized by its directness and defiance. She actively chooses education and romantic autonomy over familial obedience, a decision that comes at a significant personal cost, including alienation from her family, social ostracization, and instability. Kapur portrays her as a tragic yet courageous figure, embodying the struggles of a subaltern individual who dares to speak and act against societal norms, albeit at a steep price:

**“She felt alone, unsupported, and yet she could not turn back.”**

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's seminal essay, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, becomes relevant here. While Virmati does speak and act, her story is ultimately mediated through

her daughter Ida's narration, raising questions about the extent to which the subaltern voice can be truly heard without being filtered or interpreted through a dominant perspective (Spivak, 1988). Virmati's agency, though powerful, is framed within the narrative control of another.

In contrast, Maya's rebellion is largely internal and covert. Her extramarital affair with Nikhil becomes her means of reclaiming a sense of agency and emotional fulfillment within a stifling marriage. However, she never directly confronts her husband or openly challenges the marital dynamic. Her diary serves as a private space for truth and self-expression:

**“I had imagined our marriage as a partnership of equals... but Ranjan had other ideas. His way was the only way.”**

Maya's external conformity, coupled with internal resistance, signifies a shift towards a more individualized and psychological form of rebellion. This modern manifestation of resistance suggests a move away from collective feminist activism towards personal emotional assertion as a means of navigating patriarchal constraints within a changing social landscape.

**4.4 Socio-Political and Cultural Contexts:** Virmati's narrative is deeply embedded in the socio-political context of India's struggle for independence. The prevailing nationalist fervor and the calls for liberation at a national level resonate with Virmati's personal quest for freedom. Kapur skillfully interweaves the personal and the political, drawing parallels between the fight for national self-determination and the individual woman's struggle for autonomy within a patriarchal society. As Partha Chatterjee argues in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, the figure of the “new woman” was often central to nationalist discourse, embodying both modernity and tradition in complex ways (Chatterjee, 1993). Virmati's pursuit of education and love outside the bounds of tradition can be seen as a microcosm of this larger societal transformation and the tensions inherent within it.

Maya's story unfolds in post-liberalized India, a context where women ostensibly have greater choices and opportunities. However, De's novel reveals that traditional expectations and patriarchal structures continue to exert a significant influence on women's lives, often manifesting in more subtle and insidious ways. Maya's psychological confinement underscores how the superficial trappings of modernity in urban India may not necessarily translate into genuine gender equality or a dismantling of traditional domestic hierarchies. This aligns with postcolonial feminist critiques that highlight how modernization projects can often perpetuate existing inequalities under new guises (Mohanty, 1988).

**4.5 Evolution of Feminist Consciousness:** Virmati embodies an early form of feminist assertiveness, characterized by direct action and a willingness to face the consequences of challenging patriarchal norms. Her journey aligns with the tenets of first-wave feminism,

which primarily advocated for equal access to education, property rights, and the right to vote—fundamental freedoms that Virmati actively seeks. Her struggle is outward, a direct confrontation with societal and familial constraints.

Maya, on the other hand, represents a later stage in the evolution of feminist consciousness, perhaps aligning more closely with third-wave or postmodern feminist perspectives. Her concerns are more introspective, focusing on emotional fulfillment, individual agency within existing structures, and the complexities of navigating personal desires within societal expectations. Her resistance is not primarily through activism or direct confrontation but through internal reflection and the search for meaning beyond traditional roles. This shift reflects a broader evolution in feminist thought, moving from a focus solely on legal and political rights to a deeper engagement with issues of identity, subjectivity, and the nuanced ways in which power operates in personal lives.

**5. Discussion:** The comparative analysis of *Difficult Daughters* and *Second Thoughts* reveals an evolution in the portrayal of daughters in Indian fiction. Virmati's overt rebellion against patriarchal constraints in pre-independence India contrasts sharply with Maya's internal struggle for autonomy within the seemingly modern context of post-liberalization. Virmati's story, viewed through Spivak's lens of the subaltern voice, highlights issues of narrative control, while Chatterjee's work contextualizes her fight within the national liberation movement. Maya's silent suffering, resonant with de Beauvoir's concept of *The Second Sex*, underscores the persistence of gendered oppression in the private sphere. This shift from outward action to inward contemplation reflects not only changing societal roles but also evolving literary perspectives on women's resistance. Ultimately, the juxtaposition of Virmati and Maya illuminates the diverse ways in which Indian women have navigated and challenged patriarchal structures across different historical and emotional landscapes, enriching our understanding of the complexities of gender and agency in Indian fiction.

**6. Conclusion:** Virmati and Maya, though separated by time and circumstance, embody the multifaceted struggle for autonomy in Indian society. Kapur presents a daughter defined by overt rebellion against societal norms, while De portrays one navigating internalized resistance within modern constraints. These contrasting narratives highlight the evolving landscape of women's experiences and the diverse forms their pursuit of agency takes. Ultimately, both characters underscore the enduring tension between societal expectations and personal fulfillment, offering valuable insights into the complexities of identity and resistance in a transforming world.

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