

# Challenging Patriarchal Stereotypes: A Study of Female Identity in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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## ABSTRACT

**Aim of the Study:** This paper explores the conflict between traditional ideologies of Indian Patriarchy and an anti-traditional struggle for individual space in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. The protagonist, Virmiti, encounters her submissive position within a male-controlled society as well as struggles for a new identity for marginalized women in *Arya Samaj* Indian family.

**Methodology:** In this paper we employ the theoretical concept of gender being a cultural product by Nancy J. Chodorow (1995). By applying this theory, this paper argues that, the cultural specific norms for a female are considered gender normative while Virmiti performs gender non-conformity within a gender biased society and "operate[s] psychologically" (Chodorow, 1995) to define her identity.

**Findings:** Virmiti fights for her own space and individuality by criticizing the division between male and female roles in a phallogocentric Indian culture.

**Conclusion:** So this paper discusses that challenging patriarchal stereotypes is not an easy task rather a woman has to strive hard against patriarchy to construct her new identity.

**Keywords:** Traditional Ideologies, Indian Patriarchy, Individual Space, Gender Normative, Gender Non-conformity.

## Introduction

Women in male-dominant territories find their domestic and social space inadequate and are unfortunately bound to defend their existence as human beings. Virmiti, the protagonist, is also a model of a subservient woman whose personal and social life is controlled by the Indian patriarchal system. She struggles hard to find herself among the dark colors of patriarchal society. As Charlotte Higgins says in the article named "The age of patriarchy: how an unfashionable idea became a rallying cry for feminism today" that, "'brutally powerful men' had 'broken' something in the culture. These men had caused women to suffer: not only actors, but domestic workers, factory workers, agricultural workers, athletes, soldiers and academics. The fight against this broken culture, she said, transcended 'geography, race, religion, politics and workplace'" (01). Similarly, the influence of patriarchy is not only on the women but also it changes the race and personality of them from every domain of life. This paper analyses the contrasting ideologies of stereotypical and innovative image of women in the primary text. This paper

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explores the aspects of tradition and education, traditional view of women, alienation and isolation, mother-daughter relationships, marital relationships, and Virmiti's struggle for the construction of a new identity within a male-controlled *Arya Samaj* Indian family.

### **Research Objectives**

This study has following research objectives

1. To find out the struggle of a woman behind the construction of her identity by challenging patriarchal stereotypes.
2. To explore the cultural norms which create hurdles in generating female's identity.

### **Research Questions**

1. What are Indian culturally specific norms? Do they play any role in the construction of gender normative?
2. Does Virmiti show any non-conformist behavior and subjugate female roles in a phallogentric Indian culture?

### **Literature Review**

Patriarchy has a long history as Mallo says that patriarchy is based on an ideology and works in hierarchal structures. Men from the elite class subjugate men from them lower class and men subjugate women in general (Mello 2004). In Hindu mythology, patriarchal structures have a unique history about the subjugation of women. There are the five perfect women namely, *Ahalya, Draupadi, Mandodari, Sita* and *Tara* who are considered as a role model for Hindus. (Williams, 2003) But at the same they are marginalized even in their legendary lives. According to Bose Hindus believe that goddess are the source of creation and power but at the same time she is also define in familial term which confines here within the gender roles given by the society (Bose, 2010). As a goddess, the woman is active but in social space her role becomes passive.

Moreover, in the Vedic era, Goddesses are considered divine but their only role is to nurture, purify, and pacify. They have their roles but their roles are not central as Gods (Bose, 2010). On one hand they are considered motherly but on the other hand, they are considered malicious and violent, in "*Sanskrit*" (Williams, 2003), it is forbidden to have alliance with them as they resemble wolves in nature. These lines suggest that the status of women even in the religious terms is lower than men. Men are restrained to make any relationship with women because women are beast like creatures. Also, their status is compared with thieves which suggest that they are liable to be prison.

Also, it is pertinent to note that the identity of these goddesses are highly dependent on their status as a mother, wife, daughter and sister which suggests that are only known by the male relations (Bose, 2010). Although they are worshipped yet they were never considered as equivalent to male Gods. Historically, Indian women faced gender discrimination in every era whether it was ancient Bharat or medieval india (Basharat 2009). So, the very initial position of female gender in Hindu tradition submissive.

In Hinduism, a girl's childhood is different from a boy's. Men are not trained culturally by any rigid principle in domestic space However "for girls, the beginning of puberty means greater participation in household activities and restrictions on movement" (Mishra, 2012).

Women are not only restricted from outdoor activities but also are the victim of domestic violence. Domestic violence accentuates the male supremacy on female identity (Kelly, 1994).

Furthermore, the ritual of *sati* in Hindu culture is still an issue and is performed by several women (Spivak, 1988). Living widows are supposed to spend their entire lives in "*ashram*" (Sidhwa, 2013) after the death of their husbands. No one questions about men in traditional setup of India.

In post-colonial India, stereotypical image of women still exists. Women still perform their cultural specific roles. So, a woman is bound to perform her biological function as her social function in a patriarchal society. Ultimately, dominant cultural norms play a great part in forming stereotypical image of subservient women. The dependence of women on men is due to the power structure of patriarchy.

## Research Methodology

This qualitative paper explores the female identity in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. Via using interpretive approach this paper investigate the primary text through textual analysis. To support the analysis, various other web sources, research journals, books and articles are consulted and quoted. For the theoretical framework Nancy J. Chodorow's theory of gender has been employed to explore culture as gender normative and to analyze the struggle of Virmiti; the female protagonist as a non-confirmative behavior in a patriarchal society. By applying this theory, the research contends that the cultural specific norms for a female are considered gender normative while Virmiti performs gender non-conformity within a gender biased society and "operate[s] psychologically" (Chodorow, 1995) to define her identity. She fights for her own space and individuality by criticizing the division between male and female roles in a phallogocentric Indian culture.

## Analysis

The plot of the novel revolves around the life story of Virmiti as a rebel against her traditional family. Virmiti's daughter, Ida, narrates her mother's life story in retrospect as the narrator of the novel. Virmiti's childhood, adulthood, and death provide continuity to the story of the novel. It is through her life story the novel discusses the moral, traditional, social, and political aspects. The main focus of the novel remains on the experiences of Virmiti. As Gurcharan Das says in reviewing *Difficult Daughters*: "It is a fine love story, set in the sentimental days before Partition" (Das, 1998). Hence, there are other themes and aspects but the life of Virmiti remains the main focus of the novel. The novel represents traditional ideologies of patriarchal Indian society as well as narrates Virmiti's struggle in order to construct an independent identity. So, the traditional beliefs are rejected by anti-tradition efforts.

Education becomes a traditional issue in the novel when it comes to women's education. In the beginning Kapur represents two daughters of *Arya Samaj* family, Virmiti and Shakuntala. Virmiti gets no time to study because of her domestic chores. Moreover, she acts as a "second mother" to her siblings (Kapur, 1998). She complains that "they all dance on" her head. Any quarrel and they come" to her and this problem "never ends" (Kapur, 1998). This is the environment provided to Virmiti for her education. In her family education for women is considered secondary to the domestic responsibilities. Virmiti is forced to obey the same system constructed by her father according to whom education is good for sons and bad for daughters.

Besides, Shakuntala represents an educated and unmarried lady with freedom. She has no time for suitors and enjoys her single status. Kasturi is the most typical character in the novel. She in any condition follows stereotypical and traditional view of women of her culture. Kasturi gives importance to domestic life for women rather than to education. She questions that "what is the need to do job?" and concludes that "a woman's *shaan* is in her home" (Kapur, 1998). Moreover, she justifies her own education as: "Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family" (Kapur, 1998).

When Virmiti assumes Shakuntala as a role model for herself, Kasturi insults her daughter by giving her a conservative comment that at her age she "was already expecting", "not fighting" with her mother (Kapur, 1998). She disapproves Virmiti's study because of her rude behavior. She proclaims: "Leave your studies if it is going to make you so bad-tempered with your family" (Kapur, 1998). She not only blames Virmiti's education but also reinforces the conventional concept of marriage by explaining to her daughter that "Shakuntala pehnji did not have five sisters waiting to get married either. And do you think it makes her mother happy to have her daughter unmarried? [...] I know how hard she still tries to find a

husband for Shaku” (Kapur, 1998). Thus, daughters are considered as burden in the traditional setup of patriarchs and their lives depend on males figures either they are fathers, brothers or husbands.

Furthermore, Kasturi being a mother also unleash violence on her daughter only to keep her family’s so-called respect. Virmati wants to study in Lahore and her mother does not tolerate her daughter to even talk about study and declares it as her foolishness. She becomes ferocious and grabs her daughter “by her hair” and bangs “her head against the wall” (Kapur, 1998). She exaggerates the situation by wailing at the same time. She says to her daughter: “What crimes did I commit in my last life that I should be cursed with a daughter like you in this one?” (Kapur, 1998). She becomes so cruel that she forces marriage upon her daughter. She imposes marriage by saying to Virmati that “you are going to be married next month, if I have to swallow poison to make you do it!” (Kapur, 1998). Kasturi represents the traditional role of female gender in a male dominant *Arya Samaj* family. But “gender cannot be seen as entirely culturally, linguistically, or politically constructed. Rather, there are individual psychological processes in addition to, and in a different register from, culture, language, and power relations that construct gender for the individual” (Chodorow, 1995). So, Kasturi represents Hindu womanhood and her role as a traditional mother is not constructed only by patriarchy but also by her own mental acceptance for men’s superiority over women. Hence, women like Kasturi are also responsible for women’s submissiveness because they embrace stereotypes and internalize the patriarchal assumptions.

The traditional view of women is represented in the whole text. Kapur gives the concept of home for women in a traditional family. Kasturi says that “every girl has to go to her own home” (Kapur, 1998). Moreover, it is also a tradition that women can only leave their father’s house when they get married. So, there is a concept of daughter’s own home which belongs to her husband and her father’s house which is not her own home according to male-controlled ethnicities.

Additionally, it is a submissive obligation of women that their only purpose is to give birth to children “like cats and dogs” (Kapur, 1998). They reproduce once a year and it is considered as their “harvest time” (Kapur, 1998). Kasturi becomes a shrunken thing after giving birth to her eleventh child. “Her back curved in towards the base of her spine [...] her hair barely snaked down to mid-back, its length and thickness gone with her babies. Her teeth bled [...] and she could feel some of them shaking. [...] with another child there would be nothing left of her” (Kapur, 1998). Along these health issues, in Indian tradition “marriage” is acceptable for women “but not independence” (Kapur, 1998). Also, there is an art to keep daughters in order. Daughters are not allowed to go alone anywhere and if they do so they are considered as “shameless” (Kapur, 1998). These references suggest that female biology is also controlled by the male family members. The condition of submissive women become unbearable when they are caged in domestic spaces for procreation without their own will. Their space for oxygenation is also male-controlled and patriarchal dominance deoxygenates the breathing space of Indian women.

Kapur epitomizes the conservative belief in gender discrimination and the protest against it in the novel. Kapur not only represents the traditional narratives of patriarchal society but also gives the counter narratives in order to challenge the stereotypical identity of women constructed by men. For instance, there is gender discrimination in AS College where Virmati goes for study.

Besides educational problems there is a counter narrative which questions the issues of gender in the Indian society. The educated group in the novel interrogates the ostensible traditional system. Harish, the professor, says that “Who is responsible for this state of affairs? Society, which deems that their sons should be educated, but not their daughters. [...] I cannot be an adherent to stultifying tradition after this” (Kapur, 1998). Therefore, the novel suggests that the issues are generated because of the traditions in Indian society however these problems can be solved by questioning and by analyzing the cultural narratives.

Furthermore, Kapur inserts in her characters a sense of freedom within the congested environment of their society. The women’s plight and their struggle against patriarchal society also provide a feminist perspective to the text. She provides optimism in her characters to look up for the freedom in their lives.

Shakuntala mentions the importance of freedom as: “These people don’t really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent” (Kapur, 1998). Kapur challenges the traditional image of women when Shakuntala says that “times are changing, and women are moving out of the house” (Kapur, 1998). So, there is a hope in the characters for “tasting the wine of freedom” (Kapur, 1998). Shakuntala shakes the roots of patriarchal structure by constructing new gender roles for women. According to her, “gendered meanings are certainly indeterminate and contested, but they are indeterminate and contested not only culturally and politically but also as they are shaped and reshaped by an emotional self” (Chodorow, 1995). She introduces her emotional self to define women’s gender roles.

Moreover, Kapur gives a lucid difference between an educated and an uneducated person. The professor says to Virmati: “Do you know how an earthworm lives? [...] its whole life is spent within the darkness of the soil. It can neither feel nor see. Uneducated people are like that” (Kapur, 1998). These lines suggest that the patriarchs are uneducated hence are unaware of women’s rights. Awareness is only possible through education. She conveys the significance of education in these words “it leads us to question some of the value systems by which we live, [...] The tradition that refuses to entertain doubt, [...] (and) becomes a prison rather than a sustaining life force” (Kapur, 1998). Therefore, it becomes clear that it is through education a person can bridge the gap between the social roles of both the genders.

On the other hand, the element of alienation and isolation can also be observed in the novel. Virmati suffers through isolation and loneliness and as a result her psychological condition remains unstable in the novel. Likewise, her family also excludes her from their matters and considers her as other. In addition, She is not “invited for her own brother’s wedding” (Kapur, 1998).

Furthermore, the novel represents the mother-daughter relationships. There is the relationship between Kasturi and Virmati; and Virmati and Ida. Both the daughters do not accept the rules and regulations of the previous generation and characterize themselves as a new generation with new identities. Therefore, the conflicts between mothers and daughters remain unresolved till the end of the novel.

Virmati longs for “affection” or “some sign” that she is “special” for her mother but Kasturi pushes her away with irritation as well as reminds her about the domestic duties and responsibilities (Kapur, 1998). Thus, the “language of feeling” never flows between them (Kapur, 1998). Likewise, Ida feels the same for her mother, Virmati. Ida rejects her mother’s influence on herself. She remembers that according to Virmati’s “convention [...] a mother has no place in her daughter’s home” hence Ida thinks that her mother “never really got to see the dynamics” of their “relationship close at hand” (Kapur, 1998). Even at the end of the novel Ida concludes as a narrator: “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” (Kapur, 1998). By this resolution she throws away all the disturbances and troubles in her life which are there because of her mother. The disturbance between the mothers and the daughters is the outcome of patriarchal system.

Additionally, the marital relationships are represented in the novel. The professor, Harish, and Virmati get involved into a romantic relationship. Virmati is aware of the fact that Harish is already married; even then she allows the sexual bond between them. Correspondingly, Ganga, Harish’s wife, is a traditional and uneducated woman and because of that Harish, being a professor, feels a lack in his marital relationship. Thus, he finds an alternative in Virmati. Harish expresses his feelings for Virmati as: “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” (Kapur, 1998). He curses his traditional family that “they do not recognize” that he needs “the companionship of an educated, thinking woman” (Kapur, 1998). At last he marries Virmati, an educated and a thinking woman. So, the marriage of Virmati with Harish also suggests a reaction to the cultural and traditional concept of marriage. Harish marries Virmati because of his dissatisfaction from the first marriage and Virmati marries Harish to encounter the patriarchal notions about marriage.

Alternatively, Virmati suffers enormously because of Harish. She not only attempts suicide to break her engagement with a man selected by her father but also aborts her illegitimate child. It is because of her constant argumentation, Harish marries her. So, Virmati breaks the barriers between her and Harish by rejecting the traditional values and by blackening her family's supposed name and respect. Virmiti denies the traditional setup when she marries Harish without telling her parents.

But Ganga, Harish's first wife, remains a housewife and lives with Virmati in the same house. She performs all the domestic duties like an obedient wife. Moreover, Ganga hates Virmati and does not allow her children to go near the "witch" (Virmati). When Ganga sees her, she turns "her face away [...] stares intensely at her" and at night, Virmati hears "sounds of Ganga crying" (Kapur, 1998). Ganga's children call Virmati as "gandi mummy" (Kapur, 1998). So, Virmiti becomes Ganga's enemy but at the same time encounters her in the same house to rebel against the traditional notion of a woman.

## Conclusion

Therefore, the novel represents the traditions of an Indian *Arya Samaj* patriarchal family in which the aspects of tradition and education, traditional view of women, alienation and isolation, mother-daughter relationships, and marital relationships are discussed. The novel analyses the conflicting ideologies of stereotypical and innovative image of women and explores Virmiti's struggle for the construction of new identity by conflicting against biological, psychological, and social victimization syndrome within a male-dominant Indian family.

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## Conflict of Interest

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