



Exploration of Parent Child Relationship in *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*

Dr.T.Mahendran

Associate Professor of English,
A.V.V.M. Sri Pushpam College,
(Affiliated to Bharathidasan University)
Poondi, Thanjavur
mahendranavvm@gmail.com
63823691802

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Abstract

This paper explores the complex dynamics of the parent-child relationship as portrayed in Manju Kapur's novels *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*. Both novels delve into the emotional and psychological nuances of familial bonds, particularly between mothers and daughters. In *Difficult Daughters*, the protagonist Virmati's struggle for self-identity is deeply rooted in her turbulent relationship with her traditional mother, Kasturi, reflecting generational conflict and societal expectations. Similarly, *A Married Woman* centers on Astha's internal conflict and emotional detachment, shaped by parental influence and societal conformity. Through a comparative analysis, this study examines how parental expectations, cultural norms, gender roles, and emotional disconnect shape the protagonists' journeys toward autonomy and self-discovery. The paper highlights how Kapur presents the parent-child relationship not only as a source of emotional support but also as a site of resistance, negotiation, and transformation within patriarchal Indian society.

Keywords: Parent-child relationship, Mother-daughter conflict, Manju Kapur, Indian society
Gender roles, Generational gap

This paper attempts to explore the multifarious dimensions of the parent child relationship in the novels: *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur. It is divided into four sections. The first section includes the biography of the writer. The second section analyses the novel, *Difficult Daughters* which captures the various minefields of the conflicted relationship between mothers and daughters with poignancy and penetration. The third section investigates the novel, *A Married Woman* which delineates the complex maze of the relations between parents and children against the conventional middle-class Indian ideology. The fourth section summarizes the key features of the chapter.

Manju Kapur: Life, Works, and Influences

Manju Kapur, born in 1948 in the city of Amritsar, Punjab, India is the daughter of a veteran educationalist Raghuvansha Kishore Kapur, who was Vice Chancellor of Sambalpur University at Sambalpur, Odisha, India. She completed her BA Honours in English Literature from Miranda House University College for Women, Delhi, India. Afterwards, she went to Canada for MA in English at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. She had done her MPhil from Delhi University and after that joined her alma mater Miranda House College as a Lecturer in English. After teaching English Literature for almost thirty years, she took voluntary retirement from her service. Currently, she is a full-time writer and lives in Delhi. She is married to Gun Nidhi Dalmai. The couple has three children and three grandchildren.

Kapur's first novel, *Difficult Daughters* was published in 1998 and was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for the Best First Book (Eurasia). Her second novel, *A Married Woman* was published in 2002, was a bestseller in India and the UK, and was shortlisted for the Encore Award. *Home*, the third novel by the writer was published in the year 2006 and was shortlisted for the Hutch Crossword Book Award. Her fourth novel, *The Immigrant* was

published in the year 2008 and was shortlisted for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. *Custody*, the fifth novel by the writer was published in the year 2011. *Ye Hai Mohabbatein*, the Indian soap opera telecasted on Star plus under the production house Balaji Telefilms is based on this novel.

Kapur started writing at the age of forty-one while juggling her career in teaching and familial responsibilities. The trepidation of mortality of humans facilitated her to look beyond her home, husband, children and job, and provided the necessary push to her nascent ambition to write a book in order to express herself proficiently in her middle age. When she found it difficult to do justice to both of her professions, she chose to leave her job and concentrate completely on her writing work. Kapur's works are significantly influenced by her ardent love for reading and her career in teaching, which provided her the nuanced quality to look beneath the placid surfaces. She is interested in writing about families as she reckons that they form the core of individual's life. Moreover, she is fascinated by the lives of the women and finds their struggles and aspirations of worth consideration. She takes inspiration from the lives around her and the things she is well acquainted with, nevertheless her novels are imaginative reconstructions.

Difficult Daughters and *The Immigrant* are two of her novels which are evidently semi-autobiographical in tone, however, the tinge of the writer's personal life could also be traced in her other novels from the factors such as the representation of the urban middle-class milieu through the city of Delhi and teaching as one of the desirable choices of profession by her protagonists. *Difficult Daughters* is partially based on the life of her mother and the love story of her parents, which she finds captivating to relate in her first novel. The jacket of few of the editions of the novel carries the faded sepia-tinted picture of her mother on the front cover and at the back of her father. The novel presents the story of the writer's mother with the help of the protagonist, Virmati. The tale of Virmati which is central to the

book is represented in terms of her relationship with her family members, especially her mother, Kasturi; husband, Harish; and daughter, Ida. The characters Ida and Harish are partly based on Kapur and her father respectively. Ida reconstructs her mother's past to relive the latter's life in the same manner in which the writer chronicles the matter for the narrative. Another significant aspect of the novel is the challenging mother daughter relationship between the three generations of women: Kasturi, Virmati, and Ida, which makes cognizant the complicated dimensions of the writer's own familial relationships. At this point, the following declaration by Kapur would shed more light on this aspect:

Conflict between mother and daughter is inevitable and I suppose I was a difficult daughter. The conflict carries on through generations because mothers want their daughters to be safe. We want them to make right choices- 'right' in the sense that they are socially acceptable. My mother wanted me to be happily married, I want my daughters to have good jobs. (qtd. in Bala and Chandra 107)

This assertion by the writer and the reading of *Difficult Daughters* provides an insightful understanding of the intricate relationship between Kapur and her parents. Accordingly, it could be stated that akin to the protagonists of the novel, Kapur herself had been a difficult daughter who both conforms and confronts her mother with the choices of her life. The reason behind this complex dynamics in the mother daughter relationship is the dichotomy between tradition and modernity. As far as the writer's relationship with her father is concerned, it also shows the traces of convoluted dimensions in terms of Ida's struggle to meet the standards set by Harish. *The Immigrant* is based on the experiences of the protagonist, Nina who leaves her motherland, India during the Emergency, which is one of the most controversial periods in the history of the country. The upheaval brought forth by this period induced many Indians to leave their country and seek shelter in foreign lands.

Kapur, who was also amongst these people, chose to escape the tumultuous times as a student in Halifax, Canada. Unlike many others who chose never to return, she did return back to her country. The darkness of the times of Emergency and the alienation and homesickness suffered by her in Canada, which she wanted to convey is canvassed in her fourth novel. Kapur draws attention to this fact in her interview with Sukhmani Khurana by her assertion: “I experienced being away from India . . . so I wanted to write about it”.

Difficult Daughters: An Introduction

Difficult Daughters is set against the backdrop of the independence of India and the following partition. Virmati, the protagonist belongs to a joint family which is headed by Lala Diwan Chand and lives in Punjab. Lala Diwan Chand is a prosperous man who is revered by the society for his simplicity, strong moral values and charity. He endeavours to balance the traditional values, which he considers supreme, with the contemporary needs in adherence to the teachings of his idol, Dayanand Saraswati. At this instance, it could be noted that before Independence of India, Arya Samaj, the Hindu reform movement by Dayanand Saraswati in response to British influence in the country, considerably impacted a large number of people in Punjab. Arya Samaj condemned idol worship, animal sacrifice, and child marriage. It believed in the infallible authority of Vedas, equality of human beings, and empowerment of women. Lala Diwan Chand, corresponding with his faith in Dayanand Saraswati, encouraged women education. He has two sons: Suraj Prakash and Chandra Prakash. Chandra Prakash is married to Lajwanti and has two children: Shakuntala and Somnath. Suraj Prakash, the younger one, is married to Kasturi and has eleven children: Virmati, Indumati, Gunvati, Hemavati, Vidyavati, Parvati, Kailashnath, Gopinath, Krishanath, Prakashnath and Hiranath.

The novel is subtle in the exploration of the various dynamics of parent child relationship as central to its narrative focus. Kapur crafts the ambiance in her narrative with the complex terrain of the women’s world engulfed in the upheavals of domestic life

comprising of cooking, washing, weaving, chopping, blending, mending, growing, and picking. The book presents the life of difficult daughters who defy the laws of nature and are not able to idolize their mothers as daughters naturally do. This complex matrix of the tangled female bonds between mothers and daughters finds representation in the narrative through Kasturi (Virmati's mother), Virmati, and Ida (Virmati's daughter). The starting of the novel is demarcated with Ida's proclamation: "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother" (Kapur, *Difficult* 1), and thus sheds light on the incomprehensibility between the two. Ida always misunderstood Virmati and could only remember her as "the mother I knew, silent, brisk, and, bad-tempered" (2). Hence, she decides to unearth Virmati's past after her death in order to comprehend her life. Ida's quest leads her to Amritsar, her birthplace, which she shares with her mother. She traces the history of Virmati with the help of her relatives and friends. Also, she visits the places which could help her to reconstruct and relive the past of her mother. Accordingly, the tale of Virmati, which is the core of the novel, is the recollection of materials, fragments and words interwoven by a daughter in the form of a narrative. Ida, who commences the novel, gradually shifts to the periphery, giving space to the experiences of Virmati as a daughter by interpreting her relationship with her mother, Kasturi.

Kasturi: An Ideal Wife, Daughter-in-law and Mother

Kasturi belongs to the era which is demarcated with staunch orthodox principles ingrained in patriarchy. She begins her married life with a large trousseau and endurance. The promise of marriage and the duty towards her husband, Suraj Prakash and in-laws is everything for her. Accordingly, she serves the patriarchal canon by her contribution of eleven children to add to the family lineage. This relentless childbearing makes her body difficult to bear, and fatigue, pain and fragile health become her constant companions. As remarked by Bijender Singh: "She becomes the victim of . . . unrestricted birth" (2). So, when she is

pregnant for the eleventh time, she finds it difficult to carry the child inside her womb. Her predicament is made explicit by the writer through the following lines of the novel:

Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not tired, when her feet and legs did not ache. Her back curved in towards the base of her spine, and carrying her children was a strain, even when they were young. . . . Her hair barely snaked down to mid-back, its length and thickness gone with the babies. Her teeth bled when she chewed her morning *neem* twigs, and she could feel some of them shaking. She had filled the house as her in-laws had wanted, but with another child there would be nothing left of her. (Kapur, *Difficult* 7)

Eventually, she wants to free herself from this child as well as from the clutches of procreation. However, when this child survives in spite of the interference, she accepts the inevitable as the will of God. The cycle of unrelenting childbirths ceases for her only when her body finally gives up, and doctor and *vaid* declare that further childbirth could take her life. Apparently, Kasturi could be deemed as a traditional woman who has devoted her life to become an ideal wife, daughter-in-law and mother. She is a silent sufferer who believes in fate and is satisfied with the reverence she receives from her in-laws in return for her sacrifices. At this juncture, the views of Adrienne Rich on the distinction between the motherhood and mothering would shed more light on the anguish of women like Kasturi, who are staunch followers of values of patriarchy:

The term “motherhood” refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word “mothering” refers to women’s experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centred and potentially empowering to women. In other words, while motherhood, as an institution, is a male-

defined site of oppression, women's own experiences of mothering can nonetheless be a source of power. (qtd. in Reilly 2)

Thus, it could be said that patriarchal ideals relegate the unique power of reproduction, which is endowed to women, to a merely symbolic entrapment. The exploration of parent-child relationships in *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur and *A Married Woman* by Anjum Hasan highlights the complex and evolving nature of familial bonds within the socio-cultural fabric of India. Both novels depict relationships that are shaped by generational conflicts, traditional expectations, and the pursuit of individuality.

In *Difficult Daughters*, the strained relationship between Virmati and her mother, Kasturi, serves as a representation of the tension between tradition and modernity. Kasturi, a product of conventional values, sees marriage and family as a woman's ultimate duty, while Virmati, driven by education and personal desire, challenges these norms. Their conflict reflects a broader struggle of women seeking autonomy in a patriarchal society. Virmati's choices, however, do not necessarily bring her fulfillment, suggesting that breaking away from tradition comes with its own set of hardships.

Similarly, in *A Married Woman*, Astha's relationship with her parents, particularly her mother, underscores the pressure of societal expectations. Her mother's insistence on a traditional marriage and a stable family life contrasts with Astha's inner turmoil and desire for self-discovery. The novel portrays how parental influence shapes individual identity, often compelling children to conform while also creating a sense of emotional estrangement.

Both novels underscore the ways in which parental authority, especially maternal figures, play a pivotal role in shaping their daughters' lives. While mothers in these novels represent tradition and cultural continuity, daughters struggle to carve their own paths, leading to inevitable conflicts. However, the narratives also reveal moments of reconciliation and understanding, suggesting that even in the face of generational divides, love and familial bonds persist.

Ultimately, *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* offer nuanced portrayals of parent-child relationships, demonstrating that while cultural and personal struggles often define these bonds, they also provide the foundation for growth, self-awareness, and, at times, reconciliation. The novels illustrate that the journey of self-discovery is inevitably tied to one's familial roots, making parent-child relationships both a source of conflict and an enduring connection that shapes personal identity.

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