



Manju Kapur's Realistic Perspective on Indian Women and the Social Context of "Difficult Daughters"

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Manju Kapur alongside Vikas are well-known authors who provide us with dynamic realities. *Difficult Daughters* portrays the fact that a girl needs freedom, but once she becomes a mother she wants to impose it onto her daughter, the cycle of restrictions is unending. Manju Kapur is a realist and portrays the real facets of life, and in her novels she addresses the Satyagrah Movement, Partition Woes, the struggles for freedom, etc. In ‘*Difficult Daughters*’, she showcases her political interest by describing the role of women in the freedom struggle. She portrays the era of Lahore in which conferences were held there and important personalities came to inaugurate them and encourage women with their speeches. The entire atmosphere is alive with energy, enthusiasm, and a growing sense of self-awareness. Virmati attends the Punjab Women’s Student Conference and is struck by the presence of passionate women nationalists. These women are educated, articulate, and deeply engaged—they speak confidently about the significance of the national flag, the concept of freedom, and the importance of national development. Through them, the novelist conveys her own progressive views.

During the conference, several women address the gathering, urging others to actively join the freedom movement. The traditional role of women is clearly undergoing transformation—more and more women and young girls are becoming politically conscious and are participating alongside male volunteers in the national struggle. Leela Mehta, the central figure of the Women’s Conference, emphasizes that their goal isn’t just to earn degrees, but to engage in meaningful and constructive work. She asserts: “Then indeed you are the true wealth of our nation.” (PP 143)



Manju Kapur realistically portrays this social awakening by showing how women are now engaging in serious discussions about politics, religion, education, war and peace, rural upliftment, public awareness, inflation, language policy, and the larger independence movement.

Through this portrayal, Kapur highlights a key message: education is a powerful tool that enables women to think independently and make their own choices. The women she depicts no longer blindly follow outdated traditions—they are conscious of their rights and eager to play an active role in shaping their own futures and that of the nation.

Manju Kapur reinforces the well-known belief that “*educate a woman, and you educate a family.*” Women's education, she shows, has the power to transform not only individual lives but society as a whole. Characters like Swarna Lata and other women nationalists embody a deep sense of commitment and respect for the nation. Like historical figures such as Sarojini Naidu, Kamala Devi, and Kasturba Gandhi, these women dedicate themselves to awakening and empowering other women in their communities. During the women's conference, Swarna Lata voices the thoughts of the novelist, articulating a powerful message of unity and national consciousness:

“As a woman, it is our duty—no, not duty, that word has unpleasant connotations. It is our privilege to be able to give ourselves to the unity of our country. Not only to the unity between Muslim and Hindu, between Sikh and Christian. Artificial barriers have been created amongst us to gain power over insecure and fearful minds. Let the politics of religion not blind us to this fact.” (PP 145)

As a feminist writer, Kapur emphasizes individual rights and the pursuit of personal freedom. Her female characters represent a new generation of women—ones who are independent, self-aware, and determined to choose their own paths in life. A major thread in the novel is the emotional distance between Virmati and her mother. From a young age, Virmati craves her mother's affection and attention, but her mother, preoccupied with raising a large family, is emotionally unavailable: “The language of feeling has never flowed between them and this threat was meant to express all her thwarted yearnings.” (PP 12)

This emotional neglect leaves Virmati psychologically vulnerable. She cannot confide in her mother, and this lack of communication plays a critical role in her future choices. When Virmati passes her F.A., her parents believe she has studied enough for a girl, but she dreams of continuing her



education. Defying societal expectations, she joins A.S. College—an institution dominated by men—where she is one of only seven women among four hundred male students.

It is in this setting that Professor Harish Chandra enters her life. He falls in love with her, and Virmati, longing for connection and approval, becomes involved in an illicit relationship with him. Kapur suggests that had Virmati's mother tried to understand and support her daughter's passion for education, this gap between them might have been bridged. Instead, Virmati's emotional isolation leads her into a relationship that ultimately complicates her life and challenges the traditional boundaries of home and duty. Through Virmati's journey, Manju Kapur explores the conflict between education and marriage, tradition and autonomy, showing how a woman's choices are often shaped not just by external pressures, but by the presence—or absence—of understanding and emotional support within the home.

Manju Kapur, as a woman and a feminist writer, explores the complex and often strained mother-daughter relationships in her novels. She highlights a recurring generational conflict—mothers like Kasturi (in *Difficult Daughters*) and Sona (in *Home*) uphold traditional values, while their daughters seek to break free from these conventions and pursue a more modern, independent life. The daughters in Kapur's narratives are ambitious, strong-willed, and determined to challenge patriarchal norms in their quest for personal freedom and identity.

Kapur presents women like Ishita, who strive to liberate themselves through education and meaningful employment. In her debut novel *Difficult Daughters*, the author portrays a new generation of women through characters such as Ida, Shakuntala, Virmati, Swarna Lata, and others. These women are not content with passive roles; they want to shape their own destinies. Ida, Virmati's daughter and the narrator of *Difficult Daughters*, sets the tone of the novel with a powerful opening statement: "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother." (PP 1)

She was born around the time of Partition, Ida grows up in a changed world, and her journey is marked by a deep need to understand her mother's past. Through her, Kapur not only tells the story of Virmati but also examines the lingering consequences of emotional repression, social expectation, and generational silence. Education emerges as a central theme in all of Kapur's novels. For her, it is both a means of empowerment and a gateway to independence. Virmati, despite resistance from her family, pursues higher education with passion and excels beyond the other girls. Her ambition to become a teacher takes her to Lahore, where she enrolls in a B.T. course. Education enables her to secure a job and financial independence—and more importantly, it fosters her ability to think critically and make her own choices, even if those choices come at a cost. Similarly, Nina from *A Married Woman* is highly educated



and works as a lecturer at Miranda House, embodying the modern Indian woman who is intellectually and emotionally self-aware.

In her advocacy for women's rights, Manju Kapur aligns herself with literary figures like Margaret Atwood, Bapsi Sidhwa, George Bernard Shaw, and John Galsworthy. Through her narratives, she challenges the deep-rooted norms that restrict women's access to education, freedom of thought, decision-making power, and basic human rights. She asks hard-hitting questions: Why are women denied autonomy? Why are they silenced in family and society? Why are they still expected to conform while men enjoy unquestioned freedom and superiority? Kapur's protagonists serve as her mouthpiece—asserting that a woman must be self-reliant, self-aware, and in control of her own life.

The tension between freedom and tradition is especially visible in Ida's story. Her mother always expected her to be the "ideal daughter," yet denied her the space for independent thought. In contrast, Ida dares to think for herself. She breaks away from an unhappy marriage after her husband coerces her into aborting a child she wanted. The emotional trauma of that experience haunts her: "Prabhakar had insisted I have one... feeling unloved, because he didn't want a baby from me." (PP 156)

This moment reveals the emotional cost of denying a woman the right to her own body and choices. Kapur uses such episodes to underscore the need for female agency, not just in the public sphere but in the most intimate aspects of life. Ultimately, Manju Kapur's work is a powerful voice in Indian feminist literature. Through layered characters and emotionally resonant narratives, she challenges the status quo and insists on a world where women are not only educated but free to shape their own lives.

Like Nina, Ida is portrayed as a bold, independent, and self-assured woman who refuses to become a passive follower in her marriage. She is determined to live life on her own terms, valuing personal freedom and individuality above all. Both characters reflect Manju Kapur's vision of the modern woman—strong, self-reliant, and unwilling to conform blindly to societal expectations. As a progressive thinker, Kapur strongly advocates for women's education, viewing it as a transformative force. For her, education is not merely academic—it is a means of awakening the mind and soul. It enables individuals to think critically, understand their own purpose, and differentiate between right and wrong.

This belief is voiced through Professor Harish, an intellectual who encourages Virmati to pursue her studies. He reflects the author's views on the value of education:

"One of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves. Even if we arrive at the same conclusions that have been presented to us, our faith in those beliefs



is stronger for having been personally thought out. If, as sometimes happens, our education leads us to question some of the value systems by which we live, that is not to say we are destroying tradition. Even the smallest one of us has a social function, but that function is not to follow beliefs blindly that may no longer be valid.” (PP 102)

Harish goes further, drawing a stark contrast between the educated and the uneducated. He likens the uneducated mind to an earthworm—living in darkness, confined to a limited world, unable to see or feel. In his view, those who fail to develop their intellect and consciousness waste the true potential of life.

Through Harish, the novelist also explores the emotional complexities of a mismatched marriage. Though he respects his wife Ganga for her loyalty, domestic skills, and dedication to his family, he feels intellectually isolated. He confesses to Virmati that while Ganga is a good woman, they share no emotional or intellectual connection. He yearns for companionship that extends beyond domestic responsibilities—something Ganga, shaped by traditional expectations, cannot provide. Harish expresses his frustration:

“Who is responsible for this state of affairs?... I cannot be an adherent to stultifying tradition after this, but Viru, you must make up your own mind about these matters. You are intelligent and capable.” (PP 103)

Through these reflections, Manju Kapur critiques the traditional institution of marriage that often pairs individuals without considering compatibility beyond social norms. She questions the system that denies women both education and agency, and challenges the structures that keep men and women emotionally disconnected due to outdated roles. In essence, Kapur’s narrative pushes for a redefinition of relationships—ones built not just on duty and tradition, but on mutual understanding, intellectual companionship, and personal freedom.

Manju Kapur expresses concern over the low participation of Muslim girls in higher education, especially in degree colleges. She also highlights the grim reality faced by girls from marginalized and backward communities, whose access to education remains severely limited. In her novel, Kapur addresses the complexities of the quota system in educational institutions, particularly how it affects deserving students. Through the character of Shakuntala, she shows the unintended consequences of this system—how capable students often lose opportunities due to rigid reservation policies. Shakuntala observes:



“In Government Colleges, the quota is so high that good Hindu students have to wait until the Muslim quota is filled—though of course, their quota is hardly ever filled because those people don’t like to study... And only then are the Hindu girls—really very good students, some of them—allowed seats. The quota system is part of politics, and we mustn’t get upset about something we can do nothing about.” (PP 119)

This commentary, while reflective of a character’s viewpoint, opens up a larger debate around access, fairness, and the role of politics in education.

As a real life writer, Kapur doesn’t shy away from raising difficult questions about religious disparities, social divisions, and gender inequality. She challenges systems that impose political or religious barriers on women’s education and freedom. Manju Kapur, a firm believer in the ideals of equality, liberty, and fraternity, uses her fiction to advocate for a just society where every individual—regardless of gender, religion, or social background—is given equal opportunity and respect. Through her characters and narratives, she makes a strong plea for dismantling the barriers that prevent women from realizing their full potential.

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