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The Role of Higher Education in Shaping Feminine Identities in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*

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Abstract

This research paper examines the portrayal of feminine identities and the influence of higher education in Manju Kapur's novels *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*. Focusing on the experiences of female protagonists in colonial and post-colonial India, the paper investigates the transformative role of education in shaping their identities, aspirations, and relationships. Through a comparative analysis of the characters, Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* and Astha in *A Married Woman*, the paper explores the complexities of feminine identity formation within the context of societal expectations and educational opportunities. It examines how higher education serves as a catalyst for self-discovery and empowerment, enabling the protagonists to challenge patriarchal norms and assert their individuality. The paper also delves into the conflicts and dilemmas faced by the protagonists as they navigate the intersections of tradition, modernity, and personal desires. It discusses the tension between familial obligations and individual ambitions, as well as the impact of societal judgments on women who pursue education and independence. By scrutinizing the paths of Virmati and Astha, this paper elucidates the ways in which higher education shapes feminine identities and redefines gender roles in Indian society. It underscores the transformative potential of education in challenging gender stereotypes, fostering self-realization, and advocating for women's rights. Through the critical analysis of Kapur's novels, this research paper contributes to a deeper understanding of the complex interplay between education, femininity, and societal expectations in colonial and post-colonial India. It highlights the enduring relevance of these themes in contemporary discussions on women's empowerment and gender equality.

Keywords: Feminine identity, Higher Education, Catalyst, Conflict, Tradition, Women Empowerment, Societal Expectation, Societal Judgement

Introduction

In Indian society, where gender norms and expectations often restrict women's autonomy and opportunities, education serves as a powerful tool for challenging and transforming these dynamics, ultimately shaping a more inclusive and empowered female identity. Education is a clear assertion and a tool for developing a person's life. Education is the most important weapon for changing a person's life. Unquestionably, education makes one's existence more meaningful. Education develops charm and a clearer viewpoint in addition to improving one's intellectual capacity and abilities. The fact that education gives people career possibilities is among its most noteworthy features. A person with a good education is probably going to have an honorable position. Our cultural environment places a great deal of emphasis on education. Certain people are aware of this, but there are numerous reasons why other people are unable to give their children a quality education. In Indian society, even after 75 years of independence, woman is still struggling to get proper higher education. Education has the potential to catalyze broader social change by challenging patriarchal structures and promoting gender equality.

Legendary Indian novelist Manju Kapur is well recognised for her writings that examine the aspirations of contemporary Indian women. Her novels provide readers a glimpse into the intricate problems that women face by examining India's socio-cultural milieu in the twenty-first century. In the realm of literature, the works of Manju Kapur stand as profound reflections of the societal dynamics surrounding gender, family, and education in India. In the ever-changing context of Indian society, *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008), *Custody* (2011), and *Brothers* (2016) illustrate the complex interactions between tradition and modernization, social expectations, and personal ambitions. A diverse range of writers, works, and literary movements had a significant influence on Manju Kapur's literary career, leaving their mark on her writing style, theme selections, and narrative strategies. These inspirations were crucial in helping her develop her storytelling skills and create stories that effectively capture the complexity of Indian society. Seema Suneel in her book *Man-Woman Relationship in Indian Fiction* says:

“Following its independence, India saw a nuanced fusion of contemporary and tradition. Values, traditions, and changing social standards were woven into the fabric of society in complex ways. Because of her upbringing and experiences in this environment, Kapur was able to include these subtleties into her creative works.” (123)

Manju Kapur began to recognize early the significance of marriage as an institution in Indian society. In Indian culture, marriage is not only a joyous occasion but also a deeply ingrained custom. Every mother desires for her daughter to wed a well-educated and wealthy boy. A female can only truly attain her identity in society through marriage. An unmarried girl is perceived as insufficient and incomplete. Parents have a moral obligation to look for their daughter a compatible husband. When the daughter gets married, the parents are freed from the responsibility. Following their daughter's marriage, they visit the Ganga Ghat to take a sacred bath. In Indian society, a

woman is viewed as a weak sex and needs a male companion to take care of her and help her settle down. The adage "Man for war and woman for hearth" was well-known throughout the community. She can enjoy her individuality and strength in life because of her marriage. Through marriage, she receives saris, jewellery, and the help of a family to get by in society. Manju Kapur let the domestic environment seep into her female characters.

Virmati's mother notes that a woman's progress greatly benefits from marriage. She says: "A woman without her home and family is a woman without moorings" (102). For Virmati, "Marriage for her is a means of freeing from the harsh societal treatment with which, she can refrain herself from insecurity and uncertainty" (Sharma 2). But she falls in love with an already married man Harish. Virmati thinks that her ultimate life objective is to be married. In her relationships with Harish, she relishes the sensual pleasures. As Swarnlata who is an educated and progressive girl notes:

"Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war- the satyagraha movement- because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream" (*Difficult Daughters* 151).

Once, while taking a stroll in the evening, Shakuntala told Virmati:

"These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else" (*Difficult Daughters* 17).

Kasturi grew up in a conservative environment where a girl's primary goal in life was marriage:

"During Kasturi's formal schooling it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued at home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by impeccable nature of her daughter's qualifications. She was going to please her in-laws"(58).

Kasturi reprimanded her daughter in this way:"When I was your age, girls only left their house when they married. And beyond a certain age" (111). She pressurised her to settle down in life, "a woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings" (111). But Virmati who is the result of modernist thought, materialism and liberal ideals, flew to Lahore to pursue an independent life after escaping all the constraints of patriarchy. Virmati makes an appearance as a New Woman, driven by her love of learning, creativity, and romance.

In Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, Kasturi is an object of patriarchy. The destiny of women was up to males. Kasturi maintains the rigid Indian society's conventional values and plays the part of the traditional. She refuses to give her daughter Virmati the opportunity to get education and feels that marriage is more crucial to her daughter's development than schooling. She thinks that Virmati's education will empower her and eventually harm her marriage. She discourages her from pursuing a higher degree by instilling in her the traditional views of strict patriarchy. She dislikes seeing her daughter become more progressive and modern. Virmati delays her marriage to canal engineer Inderjit and enrolls in college to further her education, defying her mother's

wishes. With an unwavering attitude, she leaves her home and pursues her dream of happiness through higher education as “to education, freedom and the bright lights of Lahore colleges” (15).

Through her novels *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*, Kapur intricately weaves narratives that delve into the complexities of womanhood, familial expectations, and personal aspirations within the backdrop of a rapidly evolving society. In her interview with the BBC she says that "India is such a diverse country and full of contradictions, and it's the most wonderful place to write about" (9). This research paper embarks on an exploration of the themes presented in Kapur's novels, particularly focusing on the experiences of the female protagonists in the context of higher education. *Difficult Daughters* portrays the journey of Virmati, a young woman who defies societal norms and familial expectations to pursue higher education and assert her independence. Kapur writes, "Society's expectations and familial dynamics often shape an individual's identity, and I have sought to portray these complexities in my characters." (Kapur, *Interview with The Telegraph*, 5). Her novel *A Married Woman* follows the life of Astha, who grapples with the tensions between her roles as a wife, mother, and individual with academic aspirations. The significance of this study lies in its examination of the intersectionality of gender, education, and familial dynamics as depicted in Kapur's novels. Through a literary lens, this research aims to uncover the challenges, aspirations, and individuality of female characters navigating higher education in a patriarchal society. By analyzing the narratives of Virmati and Astha, this study seeks to illuminate broader societal attitudes towards women's education and autonomy in India. Higher education of women in Indian middle-class society represents a complex interplay of challenges, opportunities, and socio-cultural dynamics. While progress has been made in expanding access to higher education for women, persistent barriers and entrenched gender inequalities underscore the need for concerted efforts to promote educational equity and empowerment. By addressing systemic barriers, challenging gender stereotypes, and fostering supportive environments, Indian society can harness the transformative potential of women's higher education to advance social inclusion, economic development, and gender equality.

In Manju Kapur's seminal work *Difficult Daughters*, the character of Virmati encapsulates a poignant struggle for higher education within the constraints of societal expectations and familial obligations. Virmati feels the importance of education in individual's life and says, “One of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves” (102). Set against the backdrop of pre-Partition India, Virmati's journey reflects the challenges faced by many women striving for academic empowerment in a patriarchal society. Virmati's aspiration for higher education is juxtaposed against the traditional norms of her conservative Punjabi family, where women are expected to prioritize marriage and domestic duties over personal ambitions. Dr. Ram Sharma comments on Manju Kapur's portrayal of women characters thus:

“Manju Kapur desires to prove through her woman protagonist that a woman should be aware, self-controlled, strong-willed, self-reliant and rational having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense. She seems to bring out the implicit fallacy in Aristotle's dictum that man is a social animal” (Sharma 32).

Despite facing vehement opposition from her orthodox mother and enduring societal stigma associated with educated women, Virmati's determination remains steadfast. Her pursuit of education becomes a symbolic defiance against the constraints of gender roles and cultural expectations, embodying a quiet rebellion against the status quo. Throughout the novel, Virmati's quest for higher education is fraught with obstacles, both internal and external. Internally, she grapples with feelings of guilt and inadequacy, torn between her desire for personal fulfillment and the sense of duty towards her family. Despite these challenges, Virmati demonstrates resilience and, finding ingenious ways to pursue her studies clandestinely while resourcefulness navigating the complexities of familial relationships. Virmati's struggle for higher education also exposes the inherent contradictions within the societal fabric. On one hand, she is encouraged to embody traditional virtues of obedience and self-sacrifice as a dutiful daughter. On the other hand, her defiance of societal norms and pursuit of education challenge the very foundations of patriarchal authority. Through Virmati's narrative, Kapur sheds light on the transformative power of education in dismantling oppressive structures and empowering marginalized voices. Ultimately, Virmati's journey in *Difficult Daughters* serves as a testament to the resilience of women in the face of adversity and the transformative potential of education in challenging social norms. Her struggle for higher education transcends the confines of personal ambition, symbolizing a broader quest for autonomy, self-determination, and societal change. In Virmati's story, Kapur crafts a powerful narrative that resonates with readers, inspiring reflection on the enduring relevance of women's empowerment and the imperative of educational equity in fostering a more just and inclusive society.

Education serves as a transformative force in Astha's life, empowering her with independence, and a sense of identity amidst the complexities of marriage and societal expectations. Through Astha's journey in *A Married Woman*, Manju Kapur highlights the profound impact of education in shaping women's lives and challenging traditional gender norms, underscoring the enduring significance of educational empowerment in fostering individual freedom and societal progress. In Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*, education plays a central role in shaping the identity and personal development of Astha, the protagonist, amidst the complexities of her marital and familial responsibilities. Astha's journey unfolds against the backdrop of urban middle-class India, where traditional gender roles intersect with the pursuit of education, career aspirations, and personal fulfillment. Education serves as a catalyst for Astha's intellectual and emotional growth, providing her with a sense of agency and empowerment beyond the confines of her domestic sphere. As a teacher and a painter, Astha finds solace and purpose in her academic pursuits, immersing herself in the world of ideas and intellectual discourse. Her passion for painting and teaching become a sanctuary where she can explore her own identity and assert her individuality amidst the pressures of marriage and motherhood.

Astha's education fosters critical thinking and self-awareness, enabling her to interrogate the societal norms and gender expectations that constrain her autonomy. Through her engagement with political and intellectual debates, Astha begins to question the prescribed roles of women in Indian society, challenging the dichotomy between tradition and modernity, duty and desire.

Education also empowers Astha to navigate the complexities of her personal relationships and societal expectations with greater resilience and freedom. As she grapples with the tensions between her roles as a wife, mother, and individual, Astha draws upon her intellectual insights and emotional intelligence to negotiate her autonomy within the constraints of her marriage. Her education becomes a source of strength and self-affirmation, allowing her to assert her identity and pursue her aspirations amidst the turbulence of her marital life.

Astha's educational journey exemplifies the transformative potential of learning in fostering empathy, compassion, and understanding towards others. Through her interactions with students, colleagues, and literary texts, Astha develops a deeper appreciation for the complexities of human relationships and societal dynamics, transcending the narrow confines of her own experiences. Education plays a profound role in shaping Astha's identity and empowering her to navigate the complexities of marriage, motherhood, and societal expectations in *A Married Woman*. Through her political and intellectual engagement, Astha emerges as a resilient and empowered individual, challenging traditional gender norms and asserting her autonomy within the patriarchal structures of Indian society. Astha decided to travel to Ayodhya to see the seeds of concord there and dedicates her artistic talent to painting. Hemant had rendered the decision in line with his strict patriarchy, so "As my wife, you think it proper to run around, abandoning home, leaving the children to servants" (188).

Astha dedicates her life to painting since she found that "work" is the one place she can truly forget about everything and transform into her hand, her intellect, and the image in her head. In the end, she finds comfort in the realm of art, best exemplified by her husband's painting exhibition. Her display turns out to be a success. Over 50% of the paintings are sold, bringing in nearly two lakhs for Astha.

Kapur's portrayal of Astha's educational journey underscores the transformative power of education in fostering personal growth, empowerment, and self-realization amidst the constraints of societal expectations and familial responsibilities.

"Astha turns inward and starts writing and sketching a passion she generated during her school and college days. She felt relieved as she vent out her anguish and alienation through her sketches and poems. Writing alleviated the heaviness within her and in the struggle to express herself, she found temporary relief. One of her poem titled „Changes“ expresses her feeling of loneliness and relief"

In Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, the theme of gender discrimination is pervasive in Virmati's pursuit of higher education, reflecting the societal norms and patriarchal structures that constrain women's autonomy and aspirations in pre-partition India. Mary Wollenscraft rightly said in her book *The Vindication of the Rights of Women*, "I do not wish them [women] to have power over men, but over themselves." (81) Virmati's desire for higher education is met with vehement opposition from her conservative mother, who embodies traditional patriarchal values and rigid gender roles. Her refusal to support Virmati's academic aspirations is rooted in deep-seated notions of male authority and female subservience, reflecting the prevailing societal attitudes towards women's education during that era. Virmati's father views education as a privilege reserved for

men, reinforcing the systemic discrimination and unequal access faced by women seeking to pursue academic opportunities. Moreover, Virmati encounters resistance and skepticism from her family members and community, who perceive her educational ambitions as a threat to social order and familial honor. The stigma associated with educated women further exacerbates Virmati's struggles, as she becomes a subject of gossip and scrutiny within her conservative milieu. But Virmati turns out to be the modern world's actual challenging daughter. Her terrible situation is made worse by Virmati. Because of her desire to be unique, she loses everything, including her reputation and name. Although she frees her, she must pay a high price for her ambition. To her cousin Shakuntala, she conveys her desire to live a free life as follows: "I want to be like you, Pehnji. I wish I too could do things. But I am not clever" (17-18). She is motivated by Shakuntala to smash every barrier to her liberation and progress, as well as to transform and evolve. Her motivation lies in rejecting the inflexible society, as she argues:

"Times are changing, and women are moving out of the house, so why not you? These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else" (Kapur 17).

Virmati finds inspiration in Swarna, her flatmate, who instills in her the newfound values of modernism and sensuality. "She stared at Swarna. What a girl! Her opinions seemed to come from inside herself, her thoughts, ideas and feelings blended without any horrible sense of dislocation" (135). Gender discrimination manifests not only in overt acts of resistance but also in subtle forms of marginalization and belittlement, as Virmati's aspirations are dismissed and devalued on account of her gender. After being influenced by Swarna, Virmati becomes an assertive and liberal woman. They instill in her the importance of pursuing higher education in order to break free from the damaging patriarchal society. Vina Mazumdar says aptly:

"The revival of the women's movement in the late 1970s brought new dynamism and directions of women studies. Issues of violence-domestic and social, sexual exploitation in old and new forms identification of complex structures of domination and their reassertion in new forms" (44).

Her college education was the only path to true independence and release. Education is a powerful instrument for gaining independence from the cultural and social constraints preventing advancement. Women can move up the socially and alter the social order with the help of education.

Virmati's journey highlights the intersectionality of gender and class, as her lower-middle-class background exacerbates the barriers to her educational pursuits. Economic constraints, coupled with societal expectations of women's domestic roles, further impede Virmati's access to higher education, underscoring the intersecting layers of discrimination and privilege that shape her experiences. Harish's role in Virmati's education in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is pivotal, representing both a source of support and a catalyst for conflict in her pursuit of academic empowerment. Initially, Harish serves as Virmati's mentor and ally in her educational journey. As a progressive and educated individual, Harish recognizes Virmati's potential and encourages her

to pursue her academic aspirations despite societal and familial opposition. He berates the custom and laments his suffering in a letter to Virmati, which reads as follows:

“Who is responsible for this state of affairs? Society, which deems that their sons should be educated, but not their daughters. Society that decides that children-babies really should be married at the age of two and three as we were. As a result, both of us needlessly suffer for no fault of ours” (103).

He becomes confidant for Virmati, providing emotional support and intellectual stimulation as she navigates the challenges of studying in a conservative and patriarchal environment. Krishna Rathore comments on Virmati thus:

“Virmati looks like the emancipated women of the late Victorian Age. In her confrontation with her lover Harish she looks fragile and passive but she voices her agony and protests against the male hegemony. She was indeed free to record her experiences in her diaries or confide in one or two intimate women friends. There are strong taboos against sharing them with men. It was her sole duty to make her marriage successful even if the husband strayed” (54).

Moreover, Harish facilitates Virmati's access to educational resources and opportunities, enabling her to continue her studies despite the barriers imposed by her family. He offers guidance and encouragement, helping Virmati overcome self-doubt and societal stigma as she endeavors to carve out her own path in defiance of gender norms and expectations. However, Harish's involvement in Virmati's education also precipitates conflict and tension within their relationship and with Virmati's family. Their growing emotional attachment and intellectual affinity challenge the boundaries of propriety and morality in a society bound by rigid codes of conduct and familial honor. Virmati's burgeoning independence and academic pursuits clash with her familial obligations and societal expectations, leading to discord and disapproval from her conservative father and relatives. Harish's privileged position as an educated man highlights the disparities and inequalities in access to education between men and women in Indian society. While Harish enjoys the freedom to pursue his academic and professional ambitions, Virmati grapples with systemic barriers and familial resistance that threaten to derail her educational aspirations. Their relationship thus becomes emblematic of the broader struggles faced by women seeking to assert their autonomy in a patriarchal society. Harish plays a complex and multifaceted role in Virmati's education in *Difficult Daughters*, embodying both support and conflict in her journey towards academic empowerment. His encouragement and mentorship empower Virmati to challenge societal norms and pursue her educational dreams, yet their relationship also exposes the tensions and inequalities inherent in a patriarchal society. Through Harish's character, Kapur underscores the transformative power of education in empowering women and challenging gender-based discrimination, while also highlighting the complexities and contradictions of personal relationships in the face of societal expectations. Manju Kapur explores her state of mind thus:

“Virmati looking at her glamorous cousin marveled at the change Lahore had wrought in her. What did it matter that Shakuntala's features were not good? She

looked better than merely pretty. She looked vibrant and intelligent, as though she had a life of her own. Her manner was expansive, she didn't look shyly around from approval when she spoke or acted" (16).

The exploration of education's role in shaping the identities of women in Manju Kapur's novels *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* illuminates the transformative power of learning in challenging societal norms, empowering individuality, and fostering personal growth amidst the complexities of gender, tradition, and modernity. As Betty Friedan discusses in her famous work *The Feminine Mystic*, "For woman, as for man, the need for self- fulfillment-the autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-realization is as important as the sexual need" (282). Through the characters of Virmati and Astha, Kapur illustrates the profound impact of education on women's lives, offering meticulous portrayals of their struggles, aspirations, and triumphs in the pursuit of knowledge and self-realization. Swathi Krishna in her research paper comments about Astha, "When she demands a separate room 'a room of her own' to work in peace her husband looks distinctively annoyed and rejects it. For her paintings, Astha receives Ten Thousand Rupees. This new identity as an artist raises her status in her family." In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati's defiance of patriarchal constraints and pursuit of higher education symbolize a broader quest for autonomy, empowerment, and social change. Education becomes a means of resistance against oppressive structures, enabling Virmati to assert her identity and challenge traditional gender roles amidst the tumult of pre-partition India. Simon De Beauvoir in her famous book *The Second Sex* contends writes:

"Since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of racial memories in spite of the fact women constitute numerically at least half of the human race, and further that the secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural feminine characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men" (9).

Similarly, in *A Married Woman*, Astha's engagement with education serves as a catalyst for personal growth, self-discovery, and empowerment within the confines of her marital and familial responsibilities. Education empowers Astha to challenge traditional gender roles, question societal norms, and assert her individuality amidst the complexities of marriage, tradition, and modernity. She would spend her free time in "scribbling poems; she wrote about gardens and flowers, the silent, dark faces of the gardeners tending plants" (78). The exploration of education in Kapur's novels underscores the intersecting dynamics of class, gender, and education in shaping women's identities and experiences. While education offers opportunities for empowerment and self-realization, it also exposes the disparities and inequalities in access to educational opportunities between men and women, privileged and marginalized communities. Kapur's portrayal of education in *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* highlights the transformative potential of learning in challenging oppressive structures, fostering personal agency, and empowering women to navigate the complexities of identity, tradition, and societal expectations. Through the stories of Virmati and Astha, Kapur invites readers to contemplate the enduring relevance of education as a catalyst for social change, individual empowerment, and the pursuit of a more just and equitable society.

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