SOCIAL THEMES IN MANJU KAPUR'S
DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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Abstract

This paper deals with the social themes in Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters. Manju Kapuris one of the best-known post-independence writers in Indian-English Literature. She explores sociological, psychological and sensitive issues prevalent in Indian families. She has written six novels to adore her fame, namely- Difficult Daughters, A Married Women, Home, The Immigrant, Custody, and Brothers. In the Eurasian region, Difficult Daughters has fetched the prestigious Commonwealth Award being the first best book. Home was shortlisted for the Hatch Crossword Award while "Immigrant" was shortlisted for the DSE Prize of South Asian Literature in 2011. She depicts the plight of Indian women in our patriarchal society through her protagonists like Virmati, Nisha, Astha, Nina, Shagun and Tapti and inspires women to be aware of their equal rights, break the silence and raise their voices for individual identity to evolve into a "New Women".
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Manju Kapur's thematic perceptions in *Difficult Daughters* (1998) throw light on the various shades of Indian social life and culture. She explores social themes like marriage, girls' education, the search for identity, mother-daughter relationships, gender discrimination, and conflict between tradition and modernity in her first novel, *Difficult Daughters*. She speaks about the empowerment of women in the patriarchal society. These women are humiliated by their own families. They bear it silently because, in a patriarchal society, all social norms, social rights and ownerships favour men only. While women's home, their belongings, and their respect are all due to their husbands. Manju Kapur depicts the complete view of the position of traditional women to modern women in our society. Education, for any child, can open the doors to a brighter future. When girls have access to education,

they develop the knowledge, life skills, and confidence, necessary to explore and adapt to an ever-changing world. Women's education came into vogue after the independence with the introduction of the Westernized education system in India. Manju Kapur in her *Difficult Daughters*, has revealed that education for a girl is an alternate option to marriage. A daughter is not educated to go out and take up a job. But her education is regarded as a trap to hunt down a good husband and prosperous in-laws and to become a perfect wife and daughter-in-law. In *Difficult Daughters,* Manju Kapur speaks about women of three generations. Kasturi, the mother of Virmati knows how to read and write but all that is used to maintain household accounts and to take care of domestic affairs. Her education led her to become one of the finest examples of Hindu womanhood. Her education gets ruined by her imprisonment in the kitchen and her constant childbearing role. But Virmati was drawn towards Shakuntala whose responsibilities and thoughts went beyond the husband and children. Virmati is inspired by Shakuntala's narration about her stay in Lahore, attending seminars, reading papers, etc. So she refuses to marry Inderjit and she says "Study, mumbled Virmati like a mantra, she swallowed 'study…. And not marry" (DD 87). Thus Virmati has toface many difficulties to accomplish her desire for higher education.

Kapur begins the novel "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother". These are Ida's words as she does not want to be like her mother Virmati. Virmati also does not want to be like hermother Kasturi, who is a prisoner of married life. The mothers are conventional and the daughters are rebellious. They choose to live differently looking for love, fulfillment, and independence. A woman whotries to search for her identity is named as Difficult by her mother, family, as well as society. Virmati spent her childhood nursing her siblings. While her mother, Kasturi spends her life reproducing. Virmati, being the eldest of 11 children, has the duty of helping her anaemic mother, babysitting and studying. Sheis deprived of her mother's love right from the early stage. Virmati is a *Difficult Daughter* in the prosperous merchant family of Lala Diwan Chand. While in the generation of Kasturi, women's roles are confined to childbearing and kitchen work, the generation of Virmati strives to get an education and self-identity. This generation gap is the reason for the conflict in the mother-daughter relationship between Kasturi and Virmati. Kasturi feels, "It is the duty of every girl to get married" (DD 15). But Virmati makes up her mind not to get married to Inderjit.

Virmati opposes her mother in continuingher education, refusing to marry Inderjit, and falling in love with the married professor. Thus, posing a difficult daughter to Kasturi."What will happen to you after I am gone?" (DD 279). This is Virmati's question to her husbandless childless daughter.

I grow up struggling to be the model daughter. Pressure, pressure to perform day and night….. ……. My mother tightened her reins on me as I grow older, she said it was for my own good (DD 279).

These are the words of another difficult daughter Ida. The mother-daughter relationship is full of love, affection, and selfless devotion whatever the generations may be. Ida includes this by saying: "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" (DD 280). Thus the novel gives us a critique of the mother-daughter relationship, tracing it through 3 successive generations. The *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur portrays how Indian marriage reflects the societal and cultural expectations placed on women during that time period. The novel presents a critical examination of traditional arranged marriages and the limited agency that women had in making choices about their own lives and relationships. The protagonist, Virmati, is married off to a man named Harish, who is chosen by her family. The marriage is arranged based on considerations of social status and economic stability, rather than personal compatibility or love. This arrangement highlights the prevalent practice of arranged marriages in Indian society, where familial and societal expectations often take precedence over individual desires. Through Virmati's experiences, the novel portrays the challenges faced by women within such marriages. Virmati's marriage is marked by a lack of emotional connection and understanding between her and her husband. The relationship is strained, and Virmati struggles with feelings of dissatisfaction and a yearning for love and companionship.

The novel also explores the impact of societal norms on marriage. It highlights the pressure on women to conform to societal expectations, including their roles as dutiful wives and obedient daughters-in-law. Virmati's desire for personal fulfilment and independence clashes with these expectations, leading to tensions within her marriage and her family. In contrast to Virmati's arranged marriage, her love affair with her professor, Harish, provides a contrasting view of relationships. This relationship is marked by passion and a sense of personal choice, but it is also

fraught with its own set of challenges and consequences within the conservative society of the time. *Difficult Daughters* presents a complex portrayal of Indian marriage, showcasing the conflicts between traditional expectations and personal desires. The novel highlights the limitations faced by women in arranged marriages and the yearning for love, companionship, and personal fulfilment. It offers a critical examination of societal norms and the impact they have on individual lives and relationships. "Women are one half of the sky," says a feminist writer Julia Kristeva. But in reality, women have been struggling to achieve equality with men in racial, social, and economic status. To achieve this equality, they are deviating from the rigid sex roles assigned to them by society. They no longer accept the Temysonian separation of roles. The quest for identity is a central theme in *Difficult Daughters*by Manju Kapur. The novel portrays the protagonist, Virmati, as a woman on a journey to discover and assert her individuality in the face of societal and familial expectations. Virmati's pursuit of education becomes a catalyst for her quest for identity. Through her studies, she gains knowledge and develops a strong sense of self.

Education serves as a means for Virmati to break free from the confines of traditional gender roles and explore her own interests and passions. It becomes a tool for her empowerment, allowing her to challenge societal norms and assert her own worth and potential. Virmati's journey also involves navigating the complexities of her personal relationships. Her love affair with her professor, Harish, and the subsequent conflicts with her family forces her to question her own desires, loyalties, and choices. Through these experiences, Virmati grapples with the expectations placed on her as a daughter, wife, and mother, ultimately striving to forge her own path and define her own identity. The novel portrays the challenges and sacrifices Virmati faces in her quest for identity. She confronts societal judgment, familial disapproval, and personal doubts along the way. Yet, despite the obstacles, Virmati's journeyis marked by her resilience and determination to assert her true self. Kapur's exploration of the quest for identity in *Difficult Daughters* reflects the broader struggle faced by individuals in a society that often imposes rigid roles and expectations. Through Virmati's story, the novel invites readers to reflect on their own journeys of self-discovery and the importance of embracing one's true identity, even in the face of adversity. Overall, *Difficult Daughters* highlights the significance of self-identity and the pursuit of personal

fulfilment.It emphasizes the importance of individual autonomy, the freedom to make choices, and the recognition of one'sown worth and potential. Through Virmati's journey, the novel encourages readers to embark on their own questsfor identity, authenticity, and self-empowerment.

"In *Difficult Daughters*, we do not listen to Virmati's voice. She could not speak out, being certainly situated atthe junction of two oppressions; colonialism and patriarchy. What we have is her daughter's reconstruction and representation" (Sales, 2004).

Virmati's history is reconstructed in retrospect by her daughter Ida. She emerges as a New woman of colonial India and her urge to acquire education and freedom resembles the national's quest for identity and freedom. Family dysfunction is a significant theme that runs throughout the narrative. The novel explores the complex dynamics within Virmati's family, highlighting the conflicts, tensions, and emotional struggles that arise. One aspect of family dysfunction portrayed in the book is the generational divide and clash of values. Virmati, representing the younger generation, challenges traditional norms and expectations by pursuing education and seeking personal fulfilment. Her aspirations and choices create tension with her conservative parents, who struggle to understand and accept her desire for independence.

The novel also delves into the strained relationship between Virmati and her mother. Virmati's mother, who adheres more closely to traditional gender roles, finds it difficult to relate to her daughter's ambitions and aspirations. This lack of understanding and communication contributes to a strained mother-daughter relationship, characterized by misunderstandings and emotional distance. Furthermore, the novel examines the impact of societal pressures and cultural expectations on family dynamics. The pressure to conform to societal norms and maintain a respectable image often stifles individuality and authentic expression within the family. This leads to a lack of open communication, emotional suppression, and unspoken conflicts that further contribute to the family's dysfunction. In addition, the portrayal of Virmati's marriage reflects family dysfunction. Her arranged marriage to Harish, a man chosen by her family, lacks emotional intimacy and genuine connection. The marital relationship becomes strained, contributing to a sense of dissatisfaction and unfulfilled desires within the family unit. Through these various narrative elements, *Difficult Daughters* sheds

light on the complexities and dysfunctions that can arise within families in Indian society. It explores the conflicts between traditional expectations and individual desires, the impact of societal pressures on familial relationships, and the emotional toll of unfulfilled aspirations. The novel presents a nuanced examination of family dysfunction within the context of a changing society and the challenges faced by individuals striving for personal freedom and happiness. The novel highlights the unequal treatment, societal expectations, and limitations imposed on women intraditional Indian society. One aspect of gender discrimination depicted in the novel is the disparity in educational opportunities between men and women. Virmati's pursuit of education is met with resistance and disapproval from her family, as it challenges the belief that women should prioritize marriage and domestic responsibilities over personal development and intellectual growth. The restrictions placed on Virmati's education represent the wider systemic discrimination that restricts women's access to knowledge and opportunities. Another manifestation of gender discrimination is the limited agency and autonomy given to women in matters of love and marriage. Virmati's arranged marriage, devoid of emotional connection and based solely on social considerations, reflects the lack of control women have over their own marital destinies. The novel exposes the power dynamics and unequal treatment within marriages, where women are expected to be subservient and obedient to their husbands and in-laws. Additionally, *Difficult Daughters* highlights the double standards and societal expectations imposed on women's behavior and sexuality. Virmati's love affair with her professor is met with judgment, condemnation, and moral policing.

The novel exposes the societal stigma surrounding women's sexual agency and the harsh consequences they face for challenging social norms. Throughout the novel, Kapur confronts these forms of gender discrimination head-on, shedding light on the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society. The portrayal of Virmati's journey serves as a critique of gender in equality and highlights the urgent need for societal change and the empowerment of women. By exploring the theme of gender discrimination, *Difficult Daughters* encourages readers to critically examine and challenge traditional gender roles and expectations. The novel emphasizes the importance of equal opportunities, autonomy, and the recognition of women's rights and contributions to society. It serves as a powerful call for

gender equality and the dismantling of discriminatory practices that restrict women's agency and hinder their personal growth and fulfilment. Towards the end of *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati undergoes a journey of resilience and personal growth as she navigates the difficulties and challenges in her life. Despite the numerous obstacles she faces, Virmati finds inner strength and emerges as a strong-willed and determined individual. One way Virmati survives through her difficulties is by pursuing her education and career. She becomes a successful professor, which not only provides her with financial independence but also empowers her intellectually and emotionally. Education becomes a source of empowerment for Virmati, allowing her to break free from traditional expectations and find a sense of fulfilment and purpose. Additionally, Virmati finds solace and support in her relationship with her daughter, Ida. The bond between mother and daughter becomes a source of strength for Virmati, as she nurtures and guides Ida, instilling in herthe values of independence and personal choice that she herself fought for. Through her daughter, Virmati finds hope and a sense of continuity, passing on her struggles and aspirations to the next generation. Furthermore, Virmati's relationship with her love interest, Harish, though complex, also provides her with moments of emotional connection and understanding. Their shared experiences and affection for each other offer Virmati a sense of companionship and validation. Overall, Virmati's survival through her difficulties is driven by her resilience, determination, and the pursuit ofher own individuality. By asserting her independence, pursuing her education and career, nurturing herrelationship with her daughter, and finding emotional connection where she can, Virmati finds strength and resilience in the face of adversity. She emerges as a woman who has learned to navigate the complexities of her society and find her own path to fulfilment and happiness. In conclusion, Manju Kapur's novel *Difficult Daughters* offers a powerful exploration of the challenges and triumphs experienced by women in traditional Indian society. Through the compelling protagonist Virmati, the novel delves into themes of rebellion, family dysfunction, societal expectations, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment. Virmati's journey serves as a metaphor for the larger struggle faced by women in a patriarchal society, where individual desires often clash with societal norms. Kapur skillfully portrays Virmati's resilience, determination, and growth as she defies conventions, pursues education, and seeks emotional and intellectual fulfilment.

Virmati's character represents the courage and strength needed to challenge societal expectations and forge one's own path. The novel also explores the complexities of family dynamics and the impact of societal pressures on relationships. It delves into the generational divide, the strained mother-daughter relationship, and the consequences of traditional arranged marriages. Through these explorations, Kapur highlights the importance of open communication, understanding, and empathy within families, as well as the need to challenge oppressive gender roles. *Difficult Daughters* is a thought-provoking and emotionally charged novel that sheds light on the struggles and triumphs of women in Indian society. It encourages readers to question societal norms, embrace individuality, and strive for personal fulfilment and happiness. Overall, the novel serves as a reminder that overcoming societal expectations and family dysfunction requires strength, resilience, and the courage to defy convention. It offers a nuanced and insightful portrayal of the challenges faced by women, while also celebrating the indomitable spirit and determination that can lead to personal growth and empowerment. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a powerful literary work that resonates with readers, prompting introspection and a deeper understanding of the complexities of societal expectations and individual freedom.

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