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IN PURSUIT OF WHOLENESS: TRANSFORMING SPIRIT OF WOMEN IN MANJU  
KAPUR'S "A MARRIED WOMAN" AND "DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS"

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur, a distinguished woman novelist in the contemporary literary arena, is a master in depicting the internal conflict of Indian Women and the external oppression which results from forces that prohibits one's choice. As a writer of a woman's inner turmoil, projecting the journey of a woman for her identity and individuality, Manju Kapur dives deeply into the woman psyche and voices the unsaid and unheard chords in a woman's life. This research paper explores the transforming spirit of women in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*. The paper attempts to analyse the battle of these women against the self and society and their progressive journey of transforming themselves from an innocent victim to an empowered and assertive individual. Manju Kapur, in both of the selected novels, depicts how women with indomitable will and spirit dauntlessly encounter the shackles of patriarchal ideology and transform them into a self-assertive individual.

**Keywords:** internal conflict, woman psyche, emancipation, transformation.

Manju Kapur is a master in depicting the internal conflict which is an ongoing battle and the external oppression which results from forces that prohibits one's choice. Her women characters can be categorized into three kind women the conventional orthodox women, the emancipated women and the category to the ones who struggle between convention and emancipation which many of her protagonists such as Virmati, Ida, Nisha, Astha and Nina belong to as she says "My novels centre on women. It's about how women negotiate with the outside world . . . there is a lot of compromise but it does not end in their death because the world has changed to a certain extent" (Dixit 21 April, 2011). As a writer of a woman's inner turmoil, projecting the journey of a woman for her identity and individuality, she dives deeply into a woman psyche and voices the unsaid and unheard chords of her life.

Manju Kapur touches upon the theme of marital relationship and brings to the fore the conflicts, confusions, struggles and incompatibility arising in the married life of her protagonists in both of the selected novels. She, in her much acclaimed and prize winning first novel *Difficult Daughters* realistically depicts the women of three generation, with a special focus on Virmati, as the difficult daughter of the second generation. The opening statement of the novel, made by a childless divorcee daughter of Virmati "The one thing I don't

want to become is like my mother" (*Difficult Daughters* 1) gives a jolt to the readers and develops curiosity in their minds to know more about the relationship between Virmati and Ida.

As an explorer of human relationships, Manju Kapur, beautifully unmask the character of her female protagonist Virmati, as a daughter of a father of progressive ideas and a traditional mother. Virmati tries to seek a world that would allow her to be herself but unfortunately her desire for self-expression and self-realization is reduced to pieces by her own family members and by the man she marries. She is always burdened with the family duties because of her mother, Kasturi's incessant pregnancies. Being the eldest sister of eleven siblings and playing the role of a second mother, the expectations of family members from Virmati are always high. This creates the aggression in the relation. Virmati appears to be challenging her mother's power which humiliates her mother. Manju Kapur intends to mark the difficulties in this deliberate contrast which the women face and yet they remain the ones who continue to advocate and train others for the same. She clearly depicts the patriarchal set up of the society as the dormant factor behind the dysfunction of mother-daughter relationship through the span of three generations Kasturi and her mother, Kasturi and Virmati, and Virmati and Ida. None of these daughters ever shares a happy relationship with their mothers and always remains alienated. Their daughterhood seems to spell a doom for their mother. Exploring a wide range of experiences Manju Kapur depicts beautifully the complexity of women and complexity within each woman.

Virmati is impelled by the inner desire to be loved as an individual rather than as a responsible daughter. The story focuses on the plight of an individual torn among family duty, the desire for education and longing for love. A perchance holiday at Dalhousie with her sick mother helps Virmati to know the different independent life of her educated cousin, Shakuntala. At this moment of time she decides to take her education seriously. Shakuntala's visit to the hill station "planted the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. It was possible to be something other than a wife" (19) for Virmati "Shakuntala Pehnji . . . had gone about tasting the wine of freedom. Wine, whereas all Virmati had ever drunk had been creamy milk in winter, designed to deaden the senses with its richness" (19). She rebels against the tradition and society. With the sown seeds to taste the wine of freedom Virmati secretly nurtures the desire to lead an independent life. She wishes to flout the age old traditional hurdles set by her family and craves to do something different than her peers. In her persistent need for meaningful life, she longs for freedom and love. Due to the projection of her individual need for love, the family brands her as "restless, sick and selfish" (43). At this phase of life, luck favors Virmati and her marriage is postponed due to her fiancé's father's death. Her fate gives her golden opportunity to continue her education in college where the arrival of Prof. Harish Chandra brings a wave of immense change in her life. Deprive of any love and affection at home, she finds it with Prof. Harish. Harish's initiation of topics such as the beauty of English literature, the great Western civilization and subtlety of cultivated living in his discussion with Virmati reflects his attention towards her. The influence of the professor develops into a full-blown affair which is not socially acceptable, but she does not care for the new awareness. Rather amidst a lot of tension, anger and contrasting views between Virmati and everything around her, their intimate relationship gets warmer. She tries to go beyond the socio-cultural identity of a good daughter. During this period Virmati also clears her FA and denies for marriage. She takes the help of her education in calculating her spirit of diffidence and rebellion against her family. By gathering all her courage, she defies her marriage which gets conflicted by the idea of her mother Kasturi says tartly that "where Virmati was concerned no course of action was right, the girl was so stubborn and independent, no matter what they did for her, she wasn't grateful" (113).

Virmati's illicit affair with the professor, her denial of marriage to a canal engineer, her determination to study further and her suicidal attempt create a rift between her and her family. Manju Kapur asserts the attention of her readers by giving a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition and offers an analysis of the joint family system, with the particular gendered spaces and hierarchies of power. She also explores how these factors dictate the interaction of a woman's life.

On one hand Virmati is very strong and determined to resist all kinds of social and family pressure, but on the other, she is very weak, because she just cannot kick the professor out of her life. Within a span of few years, through various experiences she grows up from a naïve girl to a woman, matured by suffering. Manju

Kapur very beautifully captures the turns and twists in the life of Virmati who ultimately succeeds in marrying the man of her choice and goes to live with him in Amritsar but her efforts to control her destiny, her attempts to elevate her female voice, her negotiation with conservatism and her efforts for liberalization all seem to fall into pieces in front of personal trauma, social and communal problems.

Virmati displays courage only after shattering the shackles only to be shackled again. The emotional void exercises a great influence over the incidents and decisions in the lives of the characters. Professor's wife is unable to fill the emotional void in her husband's life which is filled by Virmati. "There is a void in my heart and in my home that you can alone fill" (112). The same emotional void victimizes Virmati "at times Virmati yearns for affection, for some signs that she was special but is disappointed to get one" (6). Torn between her guilt and desire to make her family happy she constantly faces emotional and physical turmoil. She fights for her emancipation; her struggles to get herself free from all the oppressive powers imposed by the society and its patriarchal system as well as free herself from patriarchy symbolized by her own mother. As Virmati grows rebelling against Kasturi, struggling for her emancipation for her own identity and individuality in the same way Ida can be seen rebelling against Virmati, rejecting the periphery drawn by her, her crave for the centrality brushes off the tags as a divorcee or as a childless mother, refusing what her mother stands for, creating her own space and its definition. Even a rebellion Virmati gets her own rebel in her daughter. Though Ida tries to place herself as very negative to her mother yet she keeps Virmati in the centre as she has no escape from her. Virmati's entire life can be seen as a battle against her parents, against the inevitable circumstances and against the tradition.

Manju Kapur's second novel *A Married Woman* is also an honest exploration of human psyche and focuses on the various relationships between man-woman and woman-woman in the life of its main protagonist, Astha. Astha is the sensitive daughter of an enlightened father and orthodox mother from the middle class educated family in South Delhi. Manju Kapur catches hold of all the ties between the main protagonist of the novel Astha with her husband Hemant in the mundane and frustrating atmosphere of marriage. She explicates the married life of Astha and reveals her trapped life in the claustrophobic environment comprising of a passionless married relationship with her husband, burdened with the responsibilities of motherhood and overarching in-laws.

In a search for a groom Astha's family zeroes on Hemant, who belongs to a well to do bureaucrat family. Hemant appears as to be more professional and less a true husband. Manju Kapur explicates the married life of Astha, the reader becomes aware that she feels trapped in the claustrophobic environment comprising of a passionless marriage, responsibilities of motherhood and overarching in-laws whereas Hemant is liberal in his attitudes to women, ambitious and sexually adventurous but more involved in his business. He is more professional than a true husband. The marital bliss for Astha ends up soon "Her marriage itself had entitled her to the same emotions" (62). The soreness of the marital failure dawns upon in the relationship of Astha and Hemant.

Manju Kapur gently digs the depths of their battered relationship where Astha longs for a better relationship but Hemant says "I don't have time for these games" (66). As a husband he is engrossed in making love sometimes caring but it is only when he has to ready Astha for his purpose. He does not like Astha's whims and fancies; her being an artist even he frowns at her pursuing a job of teacher. He comes to the surface as a lover of Astha's body and skin not a lover of Astha as a being. He can be said to sex maniac as he is very much conscious of having sex and relishes the details of it. She doesn't like the smirk on Hemant's face as it can be observed in the words of Manju Kapur:

Astha was a woman, and she was sick of sacrifice. She didn't want to be pushed around in the name of family. She was fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail. Excuse me, stop the juggernaut and let me off. I have had enough . . . if marriage is terrible; it is good to be able to leave. (168)

when Astha is pregnant again, he also desires for a son and finds nothing wrong when her mother engages a priest to perform rituals to ensure that she gives birth to a son.

Like every married woman, no doubt she has a liberty for motherhood but she does not like a sex-subjugation of her in-laws. She is surprised at the reaction of the family and society when they remain ciphered of Anuradha's birth but gets an overwhelming approach of motherhood at the birth of Himanshu. (Nayak 130)

Not only this, but his Indian male ego is outpoured when Astha considers her job important. He takes teaching in derogatory terms "Hardly a serious job, you just go, talk to some children about poems and stories, organize a few clubs and come back" (68). Thus Astha is hit again and again by the male dominated treatment which causes malfunctioning of their marital relationship. Astha becomes the victim of mood swings and these regular interruptions of Astha's irregular changes of mood worsen their relationship more. It oppresses her more and the longing for a better relationship with him does not materialize. "Being caught up in the web of daily life, (84) she develops anxieties, restlessness and tensions "the disease of modern life" (76) Their marriage bed is their meeting point otherwise they live in armed truce. Her husband changes into an adversary than a lover. The conflict grows in Astha's life resulting in migraines and then growing distance from her husband. She tries to find rescue by indulging herself in painting and creating poems but fails to find some room for self

Juggling for a job, and the dominant demands of growing children, facing pressure at home, silent disapproval of in-laws and the attitude of an unresponsive and non-understanding husband, Astha finds her escape in writing and painting but it also proves futile. In such a scenario the political upheaval of the Ram Janam bhoomi- Babri Masjid movement serves as a turning point in her life. In their reference she meets a social worker Aijaz. The meeting with Aijaz fills color in the life of Astha during summer holidays when Aijaz comes to teach the nuances of play production to school children. Aijaz asks Astha to write a script highlighting the Babri Masjid Ram Janambhoomi discord. Aijaz recognizes her talent as a writer and a narrator. His praises brings a glow of happiness on her face. "Suddenly her life seemed less constructed" (115). She cherishes the moments spent in his company but Aijaz's untimely death leaves a long-lasting imprint on Astha's mind but she does not let it to depress her. Instead, she tries to make peace with this death by actively participating in rallies against communalism and depicting her message of peace and secularism in her painting. Within the boundaries of marriage, she discovers a latent sexuality, which is driven by love and passion of her husband. She leads a seemingly blissful life finding her feet in teaching profession and painting as well as bearing two children yet somehow underneath all these lives of repression and anguish.

Astha's life reveals her inner quest for equality in the home and in the society. For Astha marriage is a means a union of physical, spiritual and emotional cravings in all the spheres of life. At such a time Astha meets Peepilika, the widow of Aijaz. A rapport is quickly built between them. Their relationship grows so strong that they both become intense lovers. The intimacy and comfort she revives from this affair, contrasts strongly with the distance she feels in her rightly defined role as a wife and mother. By being in the relationship with Peepilika, Astha learns to challenge her husband's domination and also seems to derive more pleasure with Peepilika than to Hemant which shows how she nullifies the existence of a male in her life. In this act of vengeance, sex relationship, excitement, impatience and imagination, she enjoys her freedom but it also cripples her married life.

In her novels Manju Kapur exhibits a new facet of women Astha and Peepilika as disillusioned in their life with their suspicion of male integrity and male frailty. They find their husbands as "embryonic Othellos" (221). The stigmatization of such sexual lesbian relation which is traditionally odd relationship tears them apart very soon. Astha realizes the futility of her sexual forays with Peepilika even though she is in love with her. Though in Peepilika's company she finds the tranquillity like never before but she also feels a strange burden on her head due to this relationship. In this respect Manju Kapur asserts "there was no aphrodisiac more power than talking, no seduction more effective than curiosity" (218).

Peepilika compels her to desert her seemingly happy marriage and but Astha is not ready to leave her husband and family. This worsens her situation as it complicates the matters more. Astha is torn between her needs and duty. Her decision to bear the vagaries of her marriage and her regular visits to Peepilika paralyze her relationships more with both Peepilika and Hemant. Astha forms many relationships with different people, all

the while searching for her identity. Her quest for an identity reminds one of the words of a notable poet who recommends a “whole new look at women not as the property of father, husband or son and dependent on their bounty but as valuable human material to be bought to full flower out full participation in her life and events” (Sahghal 1971).

Manju Kapur shows the struggle of both of them for self-hood and self-definition in a man’s world and their search for strength in their lesbian relationship and their common victimization as they are victims of communal riots and their shared identities. Manju Kapur’s feminism in the novels exudes forth in the muted colors the man-woman relationship seems not to be disowned culturally and emotionally Astha’s plight can be observed in these words:

To establish a relationship with Peepilika was an individual woman’s choice to find an alternative from the tyranny of a heterosexual relationship. It gave her an escape from the coils of an oppressive and inappropriate heterosexual union. Although it was in a way saying ‘no’ to patriarchy but the fears of the newly acquired relationship existed side by side. (Singh 172)

Both the selected novels show the emergence of woman from marginality to centrality. She explores the impact of patriarchy in both the novels in different ways at this she says:

In *A Married Woman* I was looking at patriarchy in contemporary times. *Difficult Daughters* had a historical bias but the freedom movement impacted the women in different way. I try and look at things in a different way because, if I don’t, I will get bored. (Dixit 21 April, 2011)

Virmati takes care of her siblings but she desires love and affection of her mother which is denied to her, Astha takes care of her children and home but is denied to the loving companionship of her husband. Virmati starts finding love in a married professor and Astha gets it in a widow-woman Peepilika. Both the novels also talk of chaos, horror and senseless killing in different time frame. They show the political, cultural and social changes taking place at the backdrop of the plot.

*A Married Woman* deals with the socially critical and women -oriented themes quite as powerful as the *Difficult Daughter* and it appears to be thematically more challenging by representation of lesbian relationship. Manju Kapur minutely captures the shifts in the relationships, the power struggle within a family and the suppressing individuality in both of the novels with her art to handle the theme in a matter of fact manner and dreams the attention to the failure of relationship as realities through lying under wraps. Both the novels have a head strong female protagonists but the novel shows the awakening of women how every hint of individuality expression of her women threatening the solidarity of the joint family.

A thorough look in the novels of Manju Kapur exemplifies that she is an artist of a woman’s world who through resonating with feminine assertion, explores the various ways of a woman psyche. She attempts to be not only on her paths for exploring womanhood but towards the exploration of her psyche and towards her celebration of self.

Manju Kapur’s both of the novels is a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. She does not portray her woman characters as living up to the traditions, sacrificing for family, putting herself behind, being content to live for family and children. Rather both Virmati and Astha’s character comes in conflict with their post-modern sensibilities. Both of them have the sensibilities to question the established norms, search for an identity, to long for a soul-mate, even to develop socially forbidden relationships. They are Manju Kapur’s new women “conscious, introspective, educated, wants to carve a life for herself, to some extent she even conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current codes” (Malik 171). Her women grow, evolve through various conflicts and various relationships and transcend into more talented individuals. This also marks the growth of Manju Kapur as a writer of transforming spirit of women. As a sensible and practical writer she portray a plethora of women in a broad spectrum and gives a new dimensions to the depiction of transformation of her women.

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