

## The construction of gender identity in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and *Home*

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**ABSTRACT:** Manju Kapur, a renowned Indian English novelist and feminist, has explored the complexities of Indian patriarchy and the women's experience within it. This article examines the construction of gender identity in Manju Kapur's novels *Difficult Daughters* (1988) and *Home* (2006), from a feminist perspective. These two novels offer the life-experiences of the protagonists Virmati and Nisha as they cope with the complexities of patriarchal expectations and stereotypes in India. The novels throw light on the hidden traps in societal expectations, cultural norms, gender-based oppression, limiting women's autonomy in the family – structure etc. This study argues that Kapur's novels offer a powerful critique of patriarchal double - speak.

In *Difficult Daughters*, we see Virmati's struggle for autonomy and self – expression, braving the societal pressures. Similarly, in *Home*, Nisha's quest for independence and financial security are seen floundering on others in the family expectations. Through these characters, Kapur sheds light on the complex relationship between women and the societal norms that govern their lives.

**Keywords:** *gender construction, patriarchal society, resistance, resilience, societal norms*

Simon de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and many other canonical Feminist writings speak of the systematic subjugation of women and the need for their rebellion. The feminist theories have been articulated by creative writers at global level. Manju Kapur is one of the significant novelists in contemporary Indian Writing in English. She is deeply immersed in issues of gender equality and justice. But her approach is analytic and synthetic, descriptive rather than argumentative, except by implications. She is a clever artist, who can advocate the rights of women without sounding propagandist. Her novels portray sensitive, educated women from various generations of colonial India, Pre - independence India and Post - Independent India. Her range moves from domestic issues to public, international issues that will capture the imagination of the reader by its very simplicity and understatement. She is an analyst of the dynamics of gender relations, slightly at work in a predicamental tradition-bound society even as it is trying to keep the advantage of English education and Western thought. The picture we get is psychologically realistic and cruelly so on a sociological plane. It is in this light; this article attempts to study the gender dynamics in two of her early novels *Difficult Daughters* (1998) and *Home* (2003).

*Difficult Daughters* as the title indicates, is a study of filial relationships among generations of women. The irony is that the daughters experience difficulties at every level but are judged difficult by their mothers. The title ironically points to patriarchal institutions and stereotypes. We see in the novel, women from three generations. We have Kasturi, her daughter Virmati and her daughter Ida. The irony is each daughter eagerly wishes not to be like her mother.

Kasturi is the traditional woman, bound by customs and family traditions, a willing slave and unpaid servant to her husband and in-laws. She is perennially pregnant; her children are never waned from her breast but are pulled out by the next sibling. This situation of a baby begetting engine is the socially approved norm. She is thankful that she is not infective. Some other women like Lajwanti, are infertile due to habitual abortion; but their infertility is attributed not to medical reasons but to

horoscopes and fate. But by the time Kasturi begets her thirteenth child, she is at the end of the tether and tries to abort her baby, using some herb, which doesn't work but has ill effects on the health of the baby. Her first daughter is Virmati and she has to sacrifice her childhood for taking care of the surrogate mother to her siblings. But she has all the normal desires of growing girls. She hungers for maternal affection which Kasturi has neither the power nor the will to give her. On the other hand, Virmati is lectured on familial duty and responsibility.

“At times, Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special.

However, when she puts her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi gets irritated and pushes her away. ‘Have you seen their food milk- clothes, and studies?’ ‘Arre, you think there is all the time in the world for sitting around, doing nothing?’ ‘You know they do not listen to her,’ you are the eldest. If you do not see two things, who will?’ (DD 06).

It is Virmati's business to grow up, get married and beget children for another home which will become hers by the right of marriage. But Virmati is of a different fibre. She seeks to get educated like her cousin Sahuntala and her brother who is preparing for IAS at Delhi. The following lines reveal Virmati's academic ambitions: “Maybe I will also one day come to Lahore, Pehnji, and she wept. ‘I wish I too could do things. But I am not clever. (DD 18).

But at the college which she enters after a bad miss, she is trapped by Harish, her English teacher; the man is already married, but his wife who is very good in house - hold duties cannot sympathize with his literary studies. So, he seduces Virmati and makes her pregnant. The baby is aborted but the relationship continues as an illicit romance. So when a proposal comes for her to marry an Engineer Indrajit, she spills the beans and gets her younger sister Indumathi married. She chooses to go for higher studies, but the professor scents her out and his pursuits do not end till Ida is born. Virmati undergoes the agonies of a typical second wife in the Indian social milieu. She refuses to abort Ida, wants to name her ‘Bharathi’ but has to allow Harish

the upper hand in naming the girl Ida. She parts ways with Harish and settles as a teacher. In ultimate analysis, Virmati falls for her passion for a man who cannot see her as another individual but just as a pet animal or something beneath that. Unfortunately, she doesn't live up to her name as there is no heroism in her. She remains a passive sufferer, and she has the responsibility of taking care of Ida. But history repeats itself and Ida too must abort her baby and parts ways with her lover. But she is better than Virmati because she does not seek a second innings with the man who suggested the abortion. She understands the foolishness of being sentimental about motherhood and she opts to be alone but like Virmati, she too doesn't want to be like her mother. So the second and third generation women have no good model as a mother in a land, where there are many women goddesses.

The dynamics of gender relations in the novel is heavily tilted against women and womenhood. Though there are stray voices supporting a girl's desire for education, even they turn conservative in later life and settled down to ordinary lives, forgetting their initial ambitions. This happens despite freedom struggle that facilitated women's emancipation in public life but ordinary women like Virmati and Ida are confirmed with their victimhood.

Rather than gender dynamics, one could speak of gender slavery in the novel. The lesson to be that the poor and richer strata society may redeem themselves through equality of sexes. But women of the middle class are caught in the labyrinth of patriarchal expectations and compromises or at impotent rebellion.

In the novel *Home*, Kapur narrates a multigenerational story set in a single locale, a mansion in Karol Bagh, Delhi, that physically grows through annexes to accommodate the growing family of Banwari Lal. It is a setting that reflects and perpetuates the partition of India and the dislocation, and deprivation suffered by the family, at the time of the partition of India in the wake of independence. They lose their prosperous and peaceful life at Lahore and the textile shop that used to keep them will luxuriously comfort and become migrant refugees in Delhi. Slowly Banwari Lal re-establishes himself starting a shop and owning a house, the family grows and Kapur treats us to a real hierarchy of familial relationship and the inner and outer dynamics of the front porch, the hall, the kitchen, the backyard and the

hierarchical interaction among members of various units of the Lal's household. The two sons Yashpal and Pyare Lal become somewhat patriarchal in their expectations, get married, beget their own children and run the business. Their sister Sunita has a different experience. Her poor father Banwari Lal can find her only an average alliance and her in-law's home is a semi- hell, for the Bahu. She has no freedom to visit her parents, and we hear of her death by fire due to accidental stove bursting that is under an eternal shadow of doubt of suicide or murder.

The dynamics of the relationship between Yashpal- Sona and Pyare Lal - Susheela are chiefly controlled by the dowry brought in by the bride. Yashpal falls in love with a young customer by name Sona, and she brings in little dowry, whereas Pyare Lal marries Susheela, from a rich family, who comes in with lots of furniture, jewels, vessels and money. So, she becomes the desired one, for the mother - in - law. She also begets children and overtakes Sona in bridal status. She has two sons, while Sona must wait ten years for a daughter, Nisha who is a Manglik. The manglik status of the child worries the grandparents, but soon Sona has a son, Raju. Thus, the familial dynamics of the second generation is governed by dowry. The sex of the children and horoscopic complications. The two Bahus are rival claimants to the residential comfort, and the younger Bahu is considered the luckier one and housed upstairs comfortably, while Sona must remain downstairs, in the old quarters. She is also saddled with the responsibility of caring for Vicky, the son of late Sunita, as a surrogate mother. It is a highly testing situation for Sona. But she cannot speak out her mind to her husband, who is always a parent's son. We see a kind of contrast in the same household among the two brides and their children.

When we come to the next generation, the situation worsens. Vicky molests the child of Sona. Sona's child Nisha must move over to her auntie's house. Rupa who is childless is kind to her. So too is Prem Nath, Rupa's husband but the grandmother's illness and the eagerness to put Raju the younger brother of Nisha under Prem Nath's care, compels Nisha return to her parental house. This costs her higher studies, for a time and thereafter she has a chequered academic career. She has difficulties in picking up her lessons but is helped her boyfriend Suresh, with cribs and ready-made notes from Bazaar. Their intimacy and semi-romances noted by the family and the

lack of attendance and regularity reported by the college, drives Nisha to confession. That provoked conciliatory advice and punitive action against the boy, finally the lovers' part but Nisha develops skin problems because of her long sufferings, neglect, abuse and feelings of deprivation. That triggers psychosomatic symptoms. Finally, she is given in marriage to a widower Arvind, who treats her well. The manglik Nisha finds a decent life. But not before patriarchy and traditions, have taken their toll out of her.

However, she has found her niche as the granddaughter of Banwari Lal with her father's help. She is also happy with her twins and new-found home. True, her day has dawned but not without sufferings.

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, both the novels reflect Kapur's abiding interest in the construction of gender relationship. The two forces in action are patriarchal values stereotype and expectations and progressive ideas on women's role in public life. India has witnessed the signal participation of women in the freedom struggle. It has been women become Govers, Ministers, Chief - Ministers and even Prime Minister and President. But at home, in the offices and in factin all her private and public roles, she is within a fence, hemmedin by mannish attitudes that have spawned from, patriarchal values. The implied message is that mear legislative, protection will not ensure women's liberation. Women as individuals should become self-aware and assertive. This doesn't mean assuming public postures but in realising that she is different from man. But in no way inferior to him. Both Virmati and Nisha are victims of a society that fails to overgrow past assumption and social mores and ideas of acceptable appropriate feminine behaviour. Even from emanicipated women. Women maythink aright but society will not permit them to act aright.

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