

**WOMEN SEEKING SPACE AND PEACE IN MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT
DAUGHTERS
AND A MARRIED WOMAN**

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Abstract:

The safe existence of women folk in society is a big threat nowadays, be it a girl child or a woman. The victims are those against whom atrocities are levied in the names of tradition, culture, religion and societal norms. Her survival in a chauvinistic society is a big hardship for her. Manju Kapur has joined the group of feminists who voices the equality of womenfolk. Her female protagonists are mostly born in a conservative family who aspire to enjoy the liberty and independence. This paper throws light on the female protagonists of Manju Kapur's two famous novels *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married woman*. Their struggle to find space and peace and establish an identity of their own throughout their life is of great concern.

Keywords: Manju Kapur,space and peace,female identity, traditional prejudices, compromise.

The role of women in India is quite widespread in all walks of society. Women were generally considered as secondary beings to that of their male counterparts. In literature, women were portrayed as subordinate to men who carried a lead role in the story. They act as a supporting role to add flavor to the story plot. However, the scenario started changing after the colonial rule and the influence of the western movements. Slowly but steadily, the role of women and her prominence started gaining importance in the works of many writers. Gynocentric novels are gaining grounds rapidly in the current scenario. Women writers like Anitha Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Nayanthara Sahgal, Geetha Hariharan and Sudha Murthy are appreciated globally for their intricate portrayal of womenfolk and their challenges in the society. Their increasing importance in the post-colonial era is inevitable as they have made an indelible mark in the minds of the readers of Indian fiction in English.

Even the image of women in fiction has undergone a tremendous change in the last six decades. Writers have moved away from conventional portrayal of enduring, self-sacrificing women towards assertive characters searching for an identity. They are no longer presented as passive characters. The most happening of these works is the idea of conflict and subtle interpersonal relationships. Earlier, in a society where liberation for the rights of women is an alien idea, the works of these women writers are a central focus. These works present woman as an individual rebelling against the traditional role.

One such noted women novelists are Manju Kapur who has six novels to her credit (Difficult daughters, A Married Woman, Home, The Immigrant, Custody, Brothers). Her women characters struggle to emerge against all odds. She teaches English at Delhi University. Her first novel Difficult Daughters has won the Commonwealth Prize (Eurasia section) in 1999 and received tremendous international acclaim. Her second novel, A Married Woman published in 2002 highlights the struggle of a woman to liberate her soul and find peace. In a drastic search of peace, her heroines ultimately feel the pangs of alienation and dissatisfaction in everything. Both the stories weave in the background of political unrest, communal disharmony and changing the social scene in the country.

The current paper proposes to study the struggle of women against the stale societal regulations, their attempt to fight against the patriarchal taboos and to liberate themselves from the shackles of traditional prejudices. Her characters suffer for self-assertiveness, but in the end, loses her identity altogether. Difficult Daughters, a maiden venture of the writer is written against the backdrop of the freedom struggle, the partition of India. The book offers an interesting insight into pre-partition middle-class Punjabi family, their trails as one of their many daughters dare to defy convention.

The story is a panoramic view of the struggle of the three-generation women. Ida, the narrator, who is a divorcee, her mother Virmati, who marries an already married Oxford

returned Professor Harish and her grandmother Kasturi. Kasthuri's repeated pregnancies made her sick, resulting in her total dependence on Virmati to manage her household. As a natural consequence, her position in the home is lost. Kasturi, in order to maintain the integrity, develops hatred to her daughter and her insecurity results in humiliating Virmati. Instead of compassion, she behaves inhumanly towards her daughter. She finds fault in Virmati, who receive education with the support of her father. Virmati attends to all her siblings and is in a position to act as a surrogate mother to them.

Virmati's life would have ended with a happy note if, at all she has agreed on herself to be married to a canal engineer, her family finds for her. Virmati is fascinated by the young professor, Harish. She sees education as an escape from the clutches of the family life and for being close to her lover. She thinks education makes a man complete, but her family thinks education has led to her moral degradation.

In a struggle to find the real self in her, Virmati loses herself and her identity in a futile attempt to establish as a wife of Harish in the society. She indulges in a cold war with Harish's first wife, Ganga. Her effort to seek space is defeated by proving herself a fallen woman. With the spread of education and influence of freedom struggle, Virmati tries to evolve from the traditional image of a dependent daughter, a sensitive wife and an austere mother to an independent human being accomplished with spiritual depth, moral vision, and intellectual flights. All her hardships end in vain at last.

In a frugal attempt to create a space and identity of her own, Virmati happens to face many hurdles from many sides. Virmati doesn't live her life without making a compromise. When Ganga goes to live with her parents during the partition time, Virmati installs herself in her husband's home finally attaining the space and peace which she was longing for a long time. In spite of all the repeated attempts, Virmati's life is a futile search of her identity. The women characters in the novel are not stereotypes. No two women are alike in the novel. They have their own values, morals, and goals. The novel can be read as the journey of the growth of an adolescent mind into maturity, the experience of the female child towards arriving at a sense of identity.

Manju Kapur takes a leap in her second novel *A Married Woman* (2002) which is set in the time of the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India in 1992. It deals with the crisis of a middle-class woman from Delhi caught in an unhappy marriage. Astha succumbs to her parents' finding a husband in the traditional arranged marriage. She leads a blissful life finding her feet in the teaching profession as well as bearing two children. Yet somehow underneath all this lies a life of repression and anguish. Against the backdrop of communal unrest in India with the Hindu Muslim conflict over the sacred ground in Ayodhya, Kapur develops the unrest with Astha's life. She meets the grieving widow of a Muslim protester,

Pipeelika. The two women crossing the social boundaries try to find solace and understanding in each others' arms. The book ends on a note of inconclusive compromise as the two women find their own ways, knowing that they cannot have a future together.

Astha brought up by a cultured mother and an orthodox mother, desired for a utopian world in her husband's house. But on the other hand, Astha is dominated against and discriminated at her in-law's house. Her marriage with Hemant was a poetic one in the beginning, but later he proves to be a typical member of a patriarchal society. Astha is bound to be submissive in behaving as a dutiful wife and sacrificing mother. Being depressed of emotional discharge, she recklessly falls a victim of an extramarital relationship. She justifies saying that she needs freedom from being marginalized in her own home. She silently abhors the narrow-minded socio-cultural traditional practices of dominating women, be it a baby girl, a daughter, a wife or a daughter-in-law.

The personal injustices in her life are the reason for her to break the transitional norms and turning to lesbianism with Pipeelika, who in turn is the prey of social aggression. She starts seeking her fulfillment and meaning for her life in the new relationship, where it provides ease to her emotional hassle. Both Astha and Pipeelika are in a way victims. One is the victim of domestic violence; the other is of societal violence and becomes a widow when her husband dies in a riot. Astha and Pipeelika have nothing to lose in their life. Astha has no passion to live her life. Pipeelika has nothing to lose after the death of her husband. They find peace in the arms of each other. In this novel, Kapur vehemently attacks the social code of marriage which chains the liberty and independence of women in the name of patriarchy.

Both the novels revolve around the time of turbulent years of India Pakistan partition time and the Babri Masjid demolition. When the country marches towards the phase of peace through the road of utter chaos, Virmati fights for the freedom to live life on her terms and Astha endures to find harmony in the family. In the end, it appears that these two characters might have achieved all that they aspired but it is important for, in the horrors of the struggle, they lose a part of themselves. In *The Married Women*, when the mistrust and intolerance between the government and people grew intense, the novel closes on a note of inconclusive compromise between Astha and Pipeelika finding their own ways, knowing they cannot have a future together.

Virmati and Astha are two typical modern women characters pictured by Kapur with the quest for identity trying to find an identity in the society and family. These two characters seek space by maintaining individuality, freedom, and liberty to materialize their desires in the social circle. Women characters of Kapur are not rebels to break the chains of tradition; they want co-existence and equal rights in the social-political forum. They are the epitome of all divineness until their individuality is defied.

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