

RESEARCH ARTICLE

## Reconstructing Female Identity in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

**Dr. Gawali Manisha Baburao**

Associate Professor, Dept. of English, Shivaji College, Hingoli. MS, India;  
awchargawali11@gmail.com

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the intricate connection between gender expectations, personal desire, and social illegitimacy in Manju Kapur's debut novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998). Set against the chaotic backdrop of India's Partition, the novel traces the life of Virmati, a young woman caught between traditional family duties and her intense romantic desire for the married professor Harish. By analysing the structural patterns of patriarchal control, the paper examines how female desire is consistently labelled "illegitimate" when it falls outside the boundaries of arranged marriage. Through the lens of feminist literary theories—including concepts of performativity, spatiality, and maternal genealogy—this study examines the multi-generational cycle of trauma and rebellion connecting Kasturi, Virmati, and Ida. It highlights how Virmati's quest for academic and emotional autonomy is complicated by her internalised compliance with male authority. Ultimately, the paper demonstrates that while Kapur's protagonist destabilises traditional family structures, her reconstructed identity remains caught in an ongoing compromise, reflecting the historical challenges faced by the emerging "New Woman" in twentieth-century India.

**Keywords:** gender, personal desire, social illegitimacy, patriarchal control

## **FULL PAPER**

### **Introduction**

The evolution of female subjectivity in contemporary Indian English fiction is closely tied to the shifting boundaries of domestic and public spaces. Writers since the late twentieth century have increasingly moved past one-dimensional representations of women as passive homemakers to engage with the internal conflicts of female characters who must negotiate patriarchal institutions (Mishra 423). Within this literary tradition, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* stands out as a foundational text that maps the complex realities of female autonomy, bodily agency, and social marginalisation. Set during the politically charged years of the 1940s leading up to the Partition of India, the novel provides a dual narrative: the historical struggle for national independence runs parallel to the deeply personal, domestic rebellion of its protagonist, Virmati.

This paper provides a close reading of how gender expectations, personal desire, and social illegitimacy interact to shape female identity in Kapur's novel. Virmati's identity crisis is not merely a localised family dispute; it is an ideological battle fought against an entrenched patriarchal system that views a woman's body and destiny as properties of the family collective. In Indian society, the family has traditionally functioned as the primary vehicle for social integration and identity formation; however, for women seeking independence, this same structure can feel like a prison (Sharrad 123). By choosing education and an illicit romance over an arranged marriage, Virmati steps into social illegitimacy. This paper analyses how this illegitimacy affects her psychological growth, her relationships with other women, and her final place in society. It focuses on the multi-generational costs of rebellion, tracing how the "difficult" choices of one generation turn into inherited trauma for the next.

### **Patriarchal Frameworks and the Social Construction of the Female Self**

To understand Virmati's identity crisis, one must first look at the social environment of the traditional Punjabi household in Amritsar, where her identity is constructed. Feminist criticism has long noted that within patriarchal systems, a woman is frequently defined as "the Other," her identity formed in relation to male authority rather than through independent choices (Beauvoir 6). In *Difficult Daughters*, this social conditioning is maintained by the older women in the family, who act as gatekeepers for patriarchal norms. Virmati's mother, Kasturi, represents the traditional ideal where a woman's worth is tied entirely to her fertility and

domestic efficiency. Kasturi's life is consumed by continuous childbearing and the management of a large home, a reality she accepts as natural and expects her daughters to replicate.

Within this framework, a young woman's body is treated as a site of family honour (izzat). The patriarchal system demands absolute control over female sexuality to protect caste purity and property lineages. Consequently, marriage is treated as the single, compulsory destination for women, a transition that must happen as soon as they reach childbearing age (Devi and Catherin 48). When Virmati expresses a desire to delay her marriage to pursue a Bachelor of Arts degree, her family views it not as a sign of intellectual ambition but as a dangerous rejection of social duty.

This reaction highlights how patriarchal structures treat female education with suspicion: it is acceptable only if it increases a woman's value in the marriage market, but dangerous if it fosters independent thought. Virmati's early life is defined by the heavy burden of caring for her ten younger siblings, leaving her feeling invisible and unappreciated. Her identity crisis begins when she realises that the future her family has planned for her—an arranged marriage to an engineer named Inderjit—will transfer her from one domestic routine to another, without ever allowing her to discover who she is as an individual.

### **The Transgressive Nature of Female Desire**

Virmati's entry into social illegitimacy is caused by her intellectual and romantic attraction to Harish, an Oxford-educated professor who is her family's tenant. Harish represents an intellectual world that Virmati desperately wants to join. However, their relationship is deeply unequal from the start. Harish is already married to Ganga, an uneducated woman chosen for him by his family, whom he looks down on intellectually but refuses to divorce due to social pressure. For Virmati, desire becomes a liberating but chaotic force. It gives her the courage to break off her engagement, an act that brings immense shame to her family and causes an emotional rift with her mother. In a traditional society, a woman's desire is considered legitimate only when it is directed toward her husband within an arranged marriage. Any desire that exists outside these boundaries is viewed as a threat to social order (Devi and Catherin 50). By giving in to her love for a married man, Virmati breaks two major social rules: she rejects the husband her parents chose for her, and she participates in an extramarital affair.

Kapur presents female desire not as a simple romantic escape but as a complex experience that both empowers and constrains the protagonist. While

Virmati's love for the Professor allows her to escape a conventional marriage, it also creates a new form of dependence. Her actions are driven less by a pure desire for academic freedom and more by her longing to be with the man she loves (Sijapati 8). This dynamic creates a paradox: Virmati uses her education to escape family control, yet she repeatedly compromises her autonomy to stay connected to Harish, showing how difficult it is to step outside patriarchal thinking fully.

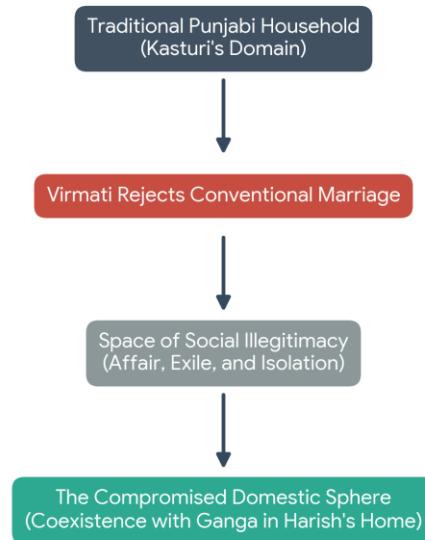
### **The Burden of Illegitimacy and Social Isolation**

The social consequences of Virmati's choices show how patriarchy punishes women who break its rules. After refusing to marry Inderjit, Virmati is placed under house arrest by her family, illustrating how the home can shift from a protective space to a prison. Her family's silence and disapproval are designed to force her back into compliance. When she tries to commit suicide by jumping into the River Ravi, it highlights the extreme psychological pressure on a woman who finds herself trapped between her family's demands and her own desires. Virmati's subsequent exile to Lahore to study at the A.S. College for Women offers a brief period of personal growth and freedom. In Lahore, away from her family's constant scrutiny, she experiences a taste of independence, earning her degree and later taking a job as a school principal in Sirhind. However, her illicit relationship with Harish follows her, preventing her from fully building an independent life. Wherever she goes, her unmarried status and her secret association with the Professor make her an object of gossip and suspicion.

Kapur demonstrates that for a woman in 1940s India, true independence is nearly impossible to sustain without a recognised social status. Virmati's illegitimacy isolates her from both the traditional family network and the respectable public sphere. Her loneliness in Sirhind, where she is eventually dismissed from her job due to rumours about her private life, emphasises that patriarchy effectively controls women by denying them economic and social support when they choose to live outside conventional norms.

### **The Illusion of Agency: The Reality of Polygamous Coexistence**

The turning point in Virmati's life occurs when, after years of secret meetings, abortions, and public scandal, she finally marries Harish. This marriage is not a victory; it occurs only after Harish's family pressures him and without the traditional blessings of Virmati's parents. Instead of bringing her the freedom and respect she sought, entering Harish's home as his second wife marks the beginning of a new, more painful phase of confinement.



*Figure 1: Strategic Progression and Regressive Spatial Shifts in Virmati's Lifecycle.*

Inside the house, Virmati faces the cold hostility of Harish's mother and his first wife, Ganga. Ganga represents the traditional, legally recognised wife who, despite her husband's neglect, holds a secure moral position within the family. Virmati, the educated "New Woman," is treated as an intruder who has stolen another woman's husband. Kapur uses this domestic tension to critique the false promise of modern liberal relationships. Harish, despite his Western education and progressive talk, proves to be a conventional patriarch at home (Sijapati 8). He expects Virmati to quietly endure his family's hostility while providing him with intellectual companionship and emotional comfort. In this environment, Virmati's hard-won education becomes irrelevant. Her life is reduced to a bitter, daily struggle for space and recognition against Ganga. This domestic reality exposes the limits of Virmati's agency: she rebelled against her own family's traditions only to wind up trapped in a deeply conservative polygamous household, where her status remains fragile and contested.

### **Mother-Daughter Genealogies and Inherited Trauma**

A central theme in *Difficult Daughters* is the fraught relationship between mothers and daughters, which serves as a way to explore how gender roles and trauma are passed down through generations. The novel uses a frame narrative, opening with Ida's blunt declaration after her mother Virmati's death:

*"The one thing I wanted was never to be like my mother." (Kapur 1)*

This opening statement establishes a cycle of rejection and repetition that connects the three generations of women in the novel.

Generation	Character	Primary Role / Status	Nature of Identity
First	Kasturi	Traditional Matriarch	Formed entirely by domesticity, childbearing, and family duty.
Second	Virmati	Rebellious Second Wife	Divided between a desire for education and an illicit romance.
Third	Ida	Modern Divorcee	Independent but emotionally isolated; seeks to understand her roots.

Kasturi's anger toward Virmati is driven by fear. She recognises that her daughter's rebellious behaviour threatens the family's social standing. When Virmati breaks social codes, Kasturi views it as a personal failure of her parenting. This rejection inflicts a deep psychological wound on Virmati, who spends the rest of her life longing for the maternal approval she forfeited. In turn, Virmati passes this emotional distance down to her own daughter, Ida. Growing up in a tense home where her mother was marginalised, Ida internalises Virmati's anxieties and frustrations. She views her mother not as a brave rebel, but as a weak, compromised woman who gave up her independence for a flawed marriage. Ida's own adult life—marked by a failed marriage and a refusal to have children—represents a radical break from traditional expectations. However, her journey to Amritsar and Lahore to reconstruct her mother's history shows that she cannot fully understand her own identity without confronting her mother's past. The narrative structure suggests that female identity is never formed in isolation; it is always shaped by conversations with the maternal past, where daughters must sift through their mothers' compromises to find their own path forward.

### **The Historical Context: National Partition vs Personal Fragmentation**

The choice to set Virmati's personal life against the backdrop of India's freedom struggle and the Partition of 1947 is a deliberate narrative strategy. Kapur draws a clear parallel between the political divisions that split the nation and the internal conflicts that tear Virmati's life apart (Ghimire 7). While the public sphere is filled with slogans of liberation, independence, and the birth of a new nation, Virmati's private world is defined by loss, emotional exhaustion, and confinement. As public spaces become increasingly violent and divided along religious lines, Virmati's ability to move freely between Amritsar and Lahore ends. The physical violence of the Partition mirrors the emotional toll of her long struggle with Harish's family. The breakdown of social order during the Partition reflects the collapse of Virmati's early dreams of an independent, intellectual life. By the time India gains independence, Virmati has achieved her goal of marrying Harish, but she is emotionally drained and isolated from her family. This contrast suggests that national independence did not automatically bring true liberation for Indian women, who remained bound by deep-seated patriarchal structures long after the colonial rulers left (Ghimire 7).

### **Conclusion**

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* provides a nuanced look at the challenges that accompanied the emergence of the educated, independent woman in mid-twentieth-century India. Through the character of Virmati, the novel demonstrates that female desire and the pursuit of independence often carry a high cost of social illegitimacy, family estrangement, and deep personal isolation. Virmati's attempt to reconstruct her identity outside the boundaries of an arranged marriage reveals the adaptability of patriarchal structures, which can easily transform modern spaces like higher education into new forms of domestic confinement.

The novel avoids offering a simple, triumphant narrative of liberation. Instead, it presents female agency as a messy, continuous negotiation. Virmati fails to become a completely liberated figure, but her willingness to challenge social boundaries paves the way for her daughter, Ida, to live with greater freedom. By mapping this multi-generational struggle, *Difficult Daughters* highlights that reconstructing female identity is an ongoing historical process—one where each generation of women must negotiate the boundaries of their independence, using the struggles and compromises of the past to redefine what it means to be free.

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