

## Repression and Identity Crisis: As a Thematic Study of the Novel Difficult Daughters by Manju Kapur

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### Abstract:

Indian patriarchal social system nurtures women in the way that they suffer from distressing thoughts, emotions, desires, and memories. Their social conditioning plays pivotal role to suppress their feelings and choices. These unfulfilled dreams and desire unconsciously stay in their minds. The present research paper is an attempt to study those unconscious repressed emotions those endanger the identity of Indian –middle class women in the patriarchal society. The turmoil between internal feelings and external societal expectation shapes their identity. There is no space for individuality in the life of middle - class women. Their roles as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers leave no space for their individual self. The patriarchal society not only encroaches the identity of women but restrict their space and agency in the society.

**Keywords:** repression, identity. Individuality, patriarchal society.

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### Introduction

The subject of women identity in Indian social context is very dynamic and uncertain because she can ever be individual or herself. Her image in the society is the shadow of a man and her identity is the roles played by her since ages. A woman being a mother, daughter, wife is acceptable but cannot sustain as an individual because her identity is relaying on male relationships. Modern woman is an educated, economically independent, intellectual and skilled but her modern approach does not able to incarnate her identity. Manju Kapur as an author depicts emotional and psychological perspective of Indian –middle class women who are subjugated and compel to navigating for their individuality and freedom. The novel *Difficult Daughters* portrays women constant repression cause sense of emotional insecurity and turbulence in their life. The paper presents the tribulation of women identity that debase gender equality notion in patriarchal social system.

Simone de Beauvoir says about the identity of a woman in her book *The Second Sex* that, “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman”(293). It solely indicates that nature is not bias towards any gender but it is the society that confines and shape the identity of an individual. In Indian context the conditioning deeply embedded in every traditional family structure that often shapes and confines women’s roles, limiting their personal growth, freedom of expression, and individual desires are such causes of identity crisis. Indian middle –class traditional social system also cultivated a character and conduct of an ideal woman that is implanted not only in society but in sub-conscious of a woman. The novel *Difficult Daughters* is a specimen of traditional patriarchal social system that

encapsulated women into an ideal image. The novel is about three generations of women Kasthuri, Virmati and Ida. Each generation intersects between personal desires and social expectations. Virmati's endurance to intersect this traditional image then she becomes a difficult daughter not only for family but also for society. Manju Kapur narrated the story of Virmati who also becomes a difficult daughter for her family because of her modern beliefs. Even she was brought up in a traditional family and her mother nourished her as a typical mother. But her mother's life filled her with stress and she becomes aspirant of freedom in life. She subtly observes the life of her mother Kasthuri who bears birth to eleven children, exposes male domination and their nature of possession on women as a body. Women become victims of tormentation that gradually prevails in Indian middle-class society.

The novelist draws a state of discrimination of upbringing a girl child who becomes a victim of the process of women socialization in the society. A mother forcefully makes aware and trains her female child of her future role as a woman and as a mother. Manju Kapur writes about the routine of her life in these words: "Ever since Virmati could remember she had been looking after children. It wasn't only baby Parvati to whom she was indispensable, to her younger siblings she was second mother as well. She was impatient and intolerant of fuss. If they didn't eat their meals, on her return home from school she would hunt out the offending brother or sister and shove the cold food down their throats. If they refused to wear the hand-me-down clothes she assigned them, she slapped them briskly. Sometimes she tried to be gentle, but it was weary work and she was almost always tired and harassed (6). Virmati seems a replica of her mother in the family as she feeds her siblings after school. The burden of duties shattered her childhood and unconsciously she is trained as a mother. She desires to enjoy life without performing any household duties.

Manju Kapur portrays the rebellious nature of Virmati who wants to escape from traditional gender roles. She became a typical girl after completing her schooling and against modernity but she attracted towards the life of her cousin Shakuntala, who studied in Lahore. She is free from traditional and family responsibilities in her life. The life of Virmati is rather bound in responsibilities of family. She suppressed her desires of freedom since childhood. As Shakuntala says to her, "These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else" (17). Manju Kapur brings to notice the restricted life of Indian middle-class women who are sticking to traditional roles in their lives. Many women participated in the freedom movement but are unable to attain freedom and independence in the life of their own mates.

Virmati is extremely influenced by the life of Shakuntala and dreams about her life in Lahore where she studied in M.Sc. in Chemistry. She finds herself in the conflict between modern aspirations and traditional expectations. She wishes to relish freedom in her life and realizes that here in Amritsar it is not possible. Manju Kapur writes: "Through the ensuing day's Virmati followed Shakuntala around. She watches her ride horses, smoke, play cards and badminton, act without her mother's advice, buy anything she wanted without thinking it is a waste of money, casually drop in on all the people the family knew. Above all, she never seemed to question or doubt herself in anything" (18). But Virmati's reality is quite different from Shakuntala because she has the burden of responsibilities as the elder daughter of the house. Her mother Kasthuri is aware of her changing attitude towards life. She does not let her educate for freedom but never intends to burden her daughter's life with traditional

conventions. Virmati wishes to get higher education in Lahore instead get marry. She wishes her own world to flourish her individuality as Virginia Woolf describes in *A Room of One's Own*.

The intense desire of Virmati to attain individuality and freedom in life seems blurring when she does not get any support from her mother. Her mother as a traditional mother rejects her modern notions that give her utter stress. Kasthuri emphasis on her marriage and engage her with irrigation engineer Inderjit. Virmati does not want a life of a married woman with burden of children. Her marriage fixes with Inderjit but sudden death of his father postpone marriage for some time. Virmati gets admission in B.A. and goes to A.S. College where she falls in love with Harish Chandra who is a married professor of the college. He lives next door and both have intellectual bond and does not go against traditional norms of her family. She moves forward to study. Virmati, like many other Indian girls, is expected to accept arranged marriage. After her study in college she wants to go Lahore for further study. Her family rejects her decision but her firm determination leave no space for rejection. Kasthuri goes with her to RBSL College Lahore for her admission. Now Virmati gets her world of aspiration and company of her influential cousin Shakuntala. Shakuntala tells her about the broad of thinking of people of Lahore as: "You will find, Viru, that in Lahore people are not so narrow-minded. It is a pity the man was married. But you have done the right thing. Together we will face the family. After all, I have experience in resisting pressures" (115).

Virmati meets here Swarn Lata who is her roommate and active social and political activist. She is modern in thinking and independently takes decisions of her life. Her thinking left a deep impact on Virmati because she rejects to play women's tradition roles emphasizes on individual identity of women. But Virmati is still attracted towards the professor and she enjoys his sexual inclination. Swarn Lata brings her to conferences and meetings where women participate in struggle of freedom and she realizes that "Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent in love. Wasting it"(142). Then she understands about her misdeed but it was too late because she became pregnant. Now Harish is unwilling to marry her and exploited her emotionally and physically. "Now you want to prolong the situation. Why do not we get married? You say your family makes no difference. But still you want to continue in this way. Be honest with me. I can bear anything but this continuous irresolution. Swarna is right. Men do take advantage of woman" (149). Manju Kapur portrays Virmati as another victim of patriarchal society who treats women as an object of pleasure. Virmati went to Amritsar and manages to abort her child. She blames professor for this calamity in her life, "I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family's name, am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of being your secret wife full of shame, wondering what people will say if they find out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace... and why? Because I am an Idiot" (p.149). Virmati undergoes intense pain after this episode and keep herself away from professor.

Virmati begins her journey in Nahan as headmistress in a girl's school. She enjoys her freedom and autonomy and her work wins respect. Her identity as a single headmistress keeps her sublime but she is away from her dear ones. Her decision to get marry Harish proves wrong and converted her life modern to traditional wife. She lost everything in her that she attained with lots of struggle. Manju

kapur presents tragic condition of traditional Indian middle- class women who are subjugated and suppressed in patriarchal society. Women like Kasthuri, Harish's mother and his first wife Ganga all lead life of victims in the orthodox society. Virmati's self-esteem life becomes curse for herself. Now she is unable to study and lost both identity and autonomy. Sigmund Freud's theory of repression offers a valuable lens to know the emotional suppression experienced by many middle-class Indian women. Freud's theory of repression deals to the psychological mechanism under that desires, distressing thoughts or memories are sent into unconscious mind to keep away the emotional pain. Peter Berry quotes Freud's, "Repression is the first mechanism by which we avoid pain; it is the basis of all defense mechanisms" (97-98). Virmati and many other Indian women keep away their sense of exploitation so that they may get rid of the pains and sufferings from their inner guilt. Women's traditional roles and moral values pushed their dreams and aspirations aside merely to please the society. They compelled to prefer the roles of daughter, wife and mother as their primary roles in their life rather their ambitions and autonomy. Virmati reconciles with the situation and suppressed her emotions just to establish herself as wife of the professor.

The relationship of mother and daughter in the novel is also affected by patriarchal norms. Each daughter does not want to be like her mother as modern Virmati reacts against traditional mother Kathuri, Virmati's own daughter Ida also opposes her mother. But after certain time each daughter realizes the difficulties of mothers. As Ida says: "My mother tightened her reins on me as I grew older, she said it was for my own good. As a result, I am constantly looking for escape routes" (279). Every mother conditions her daughter in a way that they may exist in male dominated society. Judith Kegan Gardiner observes that "the word 'identity' is paradoxical in itself, meaning both sameness and distinctiveness, and its contradictions proliferate when it is applied to women" (347). The statement clearly point out that identity of a woman is not only identification with her mother but as an individual also. This contradiction is resulted as the strictness of mothers is another tool of patriarchal system to suppress female children.

### **Conclusion**

One can conclude that Virmati brought up in traditional middle- class family but being educated she transfers herself as a lighthouse of freedom. She executes her dreams into reality by attaining individuality and freedom as a women in the novel. She struggles with every hurdle to ensure her identity. But her individuality and freedom collapse due to her decision to get marry professor who embarks her journey of life towards individuation. The professor is representative of patriarchal society that marginalized women. The middle- class women of India like Virmati being educated reconcile and negotiate with her freedom and identity to exist in the society.

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