

## **Thematic Examination of Selected Novels by Manju Kapur: Exploring Marginalization of Women in India.**

**Dr. P. Rajeswari**

M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D., PGDCYN

Associate Professor

P.G Department of English

Kongunadu Arts and Science college

Coimbatore-641029

**Mrs. R. Uma Mageshwari, M.A., M. Phil**

Assistant Professor of English

K.G. College of Arts and Science

Coimbatore-641025

### **Abstract**

This paper endeavours to provide a thematic analysis of the novels penned by Manju Kapur. Throughout her literary works, Kapur adeptly explores various issues such as the dynamics of mother-daughter relationships, the significance of education, the intricacies of the joint family system, and the multifaceted aspects of motherhood. Across her novels, the protagonists grapple with societal challenges, extracting invaluable lessons from their experiences.

Manju Kapur portrays women in her novels as modern individuals who consistently strive for survival while confronting the oppressive norms of a patriarchal society. This paper specifically delves into the themes presented in two of her notable works, *Difficult Daughters* and *The Immigrant*. The protagonists in these narratives are characterized by their education, compassion, and a quest for personal identity, all in pursuit of a tranquil existence within society. The educational background of these protagonists prompts them to critically assess their surroundings, leading them to find the societal and familial expectations increasingly intolerable. Kapur's novels extend beyond a mere exploration of feminism; they provide a comprehensive examination of society in its entirety, covering various facets and dimensions.

**Keywords:** Marriage, Education, motherhood, importance of education, search of identity.

## Introduction

Women constitute an integral component of civilization, and the progress of society hinges significantly on their active involvement. Without their participation, societal advancements would stagnate. However, prevailing societal norms often restrict women, hindering their ability to shine and reach their full potential. This phenomenon is observed across various cultures. Regrettably, women are yet to attain equality with men, both in our daily lives and in literature.

Historically, women have been depicted as meek souls, reluctant to assert their rights or voice their opinions, particularly in older Indian novels authored by prominent writers such as R.K. Narayanan, Kamala Markandeya, Shashi Deshpande, and others. These narratives perpetuated the portrayal of women as submissive figures, constrained by societal expectations, particularly in their roles as wives and mothers. Contrastingly, contemporary writers aspire to empower women by encouraging them to make bold decisions and tread unexplored paths. Through their novels, these authors champion independent, assertive, and defiant female characters who challenge traditional norms. The literary landscape is evolving to portray women as individuals capable of taking "the road not taken," fostering a narrative that embraces female independence and resilience.

Manju Kapur's noteworthy literary accomplishment is the novel *Difficult Daughters*. The narrative revolves around Virmati, a young woman who finds herself entangled in the complexities of hidden love, a fervent desire for education, and the responsibilities of family duties. Born into an austere and honorable household in Amritsar, Virmati faces a fateful choice: to either conform to societal expectations or pursue a clandestine love affair with her professor, who happens to be her tenant and neighbour. This professor is already married with children. Eventually, she marries him after overcoming numerous challenges, embarking on further studies in Lahore, securing a job, and ultimately settling down with her husband. Through this novel, Kapur skillfully addresses various societal issues, offering readers a glimpse into the intricate tapestry of human relationships and the struggles faced by individuals in navigating societal expectations.

This novel exemplifies the potent aspirations of Indian women, portrayed through the innocence of the protagonist. It vividly captures her battle against societal norms, and traditions, moments of self-doubt, unwavering resolution, and ultimate acceptance. Meggel Gee articulated these themes in her review for the Sunday Times: "This is a skillful enticing first novel by an Indian writer who prefers reality to magic realism." (vol5, no 9, 2017 pp420).

The novel revolves around the central theme of girls' education, with Virmati emerging as a distinctive character who plays a dual role as a semi-protagonist. From her early years, Virmati harbors a deep longing for love. As the eldest among ten siblings, her familial responsibilities intensify when her mother entrusts her with the care of her younger siblings. After completing her household chores, Virmati dedicates herself to her studies. Despite her outward gentleness, she possesses remarkable strength and unwavering determination. She adeptly withstands familial and societal pressures, demonstrating resilience in the face of various challenges. However, there is a notable vulnerability in Virmati's character. Despite her overall strength, she struggles with letting go of the professor from her life. This aspect is a conspicuous observation, emphasizing that what exists between them is not genuine love but rather a void that reflects a lack thereof.

Virmati asserts that the process of learning history is not unidirectional. It necessitates comprehending the present through the lens of the past and vice versa. Constructing history involves the careful selection and arrangement of facts from the past guided by an accepted principle or norm of objectivity, which inherently involves elements of interpretation. Without this critical approach, the past loses coherence, devolving into a chaotic array of isolated and inconsequential incidents, rendering the writing of history impossible. Therefore, the primary function of history lies in fostering a deep understanding of both the past and present through their interconnectedness. In this context, both Toni Morrison and Aleisa Phyllis Perry undertake the task of reshaping African-American history. They achieve this by meticulously choosing, organizing, and blending elements from both the past and present.

Virmati's genuine passion for education, particularly in English literature, fuels her attraction to the professor despite his numerous assurances to marry her, accompanied by sweetly worded letters steeped in literary references. The novel unfolds in India within a Punjabi family expertly depicted by Manju Kapur. Kasturi, Virmati's mother, earnestly desires her daughter's prompt marriage, while Ida, Kasturi's granddaughter, is determined not to emulate her mother.

Virmati initiates her first struggle on the educational front, in an era when women were restricted in pursuing their academic interests, especially going abroad for higher studies, Virmati rebels against societal norms to pursue her education. Amidst these challenges, she finds herself navigating the complexities of love and real married life, grappling with the professor's influence. Through this tumultuous relationship, her husband, who is also her former professor, becomes a catalyst in her understanding of the profound value of education and its implications on life.

This novel unfolds in a peculiar and contradictory period in Indian history—a time when traditional values underwent rapid transformation. It was an era marked by the near-modernization of longstanding Indian values. Mahatma Gandhi, during this time, urged women to actively participate in the struggle against British rule. This encouragement prompted highly talented and democratically inclined women to engage in nationalist politics.

Manju Kapur skillfully captures the essence of this pre-independence era within a Punjabi family, depicting the characters against the backdrop of a changing society. The novel explores the theme of a quest in Virmati's life. While she matures professionally, her personal life becomes a search for a suitable life partner. Despite her experiences shaping her from an innocent girl into a seasoned woman, she grapples with the challenge of finding true love to share her life's independence. Through the trials of suffering, she embarks on a journey toward self-discovery, eventually realizing that clarity in life is not always readily apparent; the only constant is change.

In Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, the narrative revolves around an innocent woman striving to carve out her identity within her family, seeking independence and self-realization. Society and her family label her as a *Difficult Daughter*. The story unfolds as a young girl grapples with the conflicting demands of family duty, the pursuit of education, and the yearning for genuine love to share her life. Within this framework, Kapur introduces two additional characters, Shakuntala and Swarnalatha, who chart their courses against their parents' wishes, seeking independence and proving themselves on their terms. Virmati, the central character, struggles with an inner desire for love, which conflicts with her reluctance to conform to the role of a responsible daughter.

In Kapur's notable work, *The Immigrant*, the themes shift to acculturation and the identity of a young woman. As she explores these themes, the novel delves into the complexities of immigration, echoing Oscar Handlin's assertion that

The history of alienation and its consequences for every freedom won, a tradition lost. For every second generation assimilated a first generation is one way or another spurned. For the gains of goods and services, an identity was lost and uncertainty found (An Atlantic Monthly Press Books, 1951)

Kapur depicts themes of shattered dreams, the yearning for home, a sense of displacement and isolation, the erosion of identity, a quest for self-discovery, and an acute awareness of culture and personal sentiments in her fourth novel, *The Immigrant*. This work delves into profound questions surrounding the search for identity, marital relationships, adultery, and more. The concept of 'identity' typically pertains to individual distinctions within a constrained framework.

*The Immigrant* narrates the tale of two individuals who relocate from India to Canada. Ananda, a dental professional, departs from his hometown, New Delhi, to Canada following the tragic demise of his parents in an accident. Driven by ambition and determination, he is a qualified Canadian dentist. Initially residing in his uncle's house in Halifax, Ananda, with the help of his friend Gary, eventually establishes a separate residence. Together, they launch a dental clinic. Despite his success, Ananda pines for the intimacy of his homeland, gradually adapting to Canadian culture.

Ananda's marital journey begins with Nina, introduced to him through Ananda's sister in Delhi. Nina, a beautiful academician, resides with her widowed mother, having lost her

father abruptly, leaving the family to cope alone. Pursuing a career as a lecturer at Miranda House College, Nina, at the age of 30, agrees to marry Ananda after their eventual meeting. Post-marriage, she leaves Delhi to join her husband, initiating a series of experiences that challenge the notion of leaving one's homeland, prompting introspection on the strength of one's beliefs and values.

In Canada, Nina encounters significant challenges in her relationship with her husband. At times, she finds herself deeply immersed in her emotions, and at other times, unresponsive. The consequences of this ongoing struggle prove to be more peculiar than she had initially imagined. Her immigration from her homeland to Canada brings about a profound transformation. Abandoning her job results in a complete loss of identity, ultimately leading to the deterioration of the couple's life, marked by dissatisfaction, disappointment, and a pervasive sense of nostalgia.

Andy, (Ananda-as popularly known in Halifax) adopts the name change and flourishes in Canada, evolving into a renowned dentist. However, Nina faces helplessness in this new environment, particularly in the context of her teaching profession. A crucial aspect to note is the absence of children, which becomes a focal point of their struggle for livelihood.

Initially, Nina finds solace in her avid reading habits, which provide some relief from her feelings of loneliness. However, she soon grows weary of this pursuit, grappling with the conflicting values of the East and the West. Her sentiment in Kapur's narrative,

Her devotion to her mother and her willingness to consider an arranged introduction proved her Indian values, while her tastes, reading thoughts, manner of speech and lack of sexual inhibition all revealed Western influences. (86)

Immigrants often navigate assimilation or acculturation to establish a sense of comfort in their new environment. Both individuals attempt to embrace the foreign culture but encounter unpleasant instances of racial discrimination in the host country. Nina, in particular, experiences discomfort during an argument at Toronto airport while en route to Canada. The interrogators pose unrelated, humiliating questions, jeopardizing her sense of identity. This ordeal sparks a sense of rage within her. Similarly, her husband has previously faced similar situations. Unwilling to reside in his uncle's home, he gradually adapts his dietary preferences to align with Canadian norms.

## **Conclusion**

Through her novel, Kapur raises poignant questions about the dilemma faced by immigrants. The central quandary revolves around whether they should safeguard the cultural heritage of their home country or assimilate into the culture of the host nation. Kapur astutely analyzes the challenges confronting immigrant wives as they navigate the unfamiliar terrain of a new country. These women grapple with the stresses and pressures of their professional lives while striving to maintain balance and survival in an alien land.

In contemporary society, many women no longer acquiesce to the dominance of their counterparts but lead lives that are distinctly their own. Manju Kapur accomplishes noteworthy success in her portrayal of female characters, fearlessly depicting their experiences and challenges without hesitation.

**Works Cited**

Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters*, New Delhi: Penguin books Ltd, 1998

Manju Kapur, *The Immigrant*, random house India, New Delhi, 2008

Handlin Oscar, "The History of Immigrants" Atlantic Monthly press Book, 1951.

Sree, P. Sudha, "Difficult Daughters; Travels in Self-Identity". Prasad, Amar Nath. *Indian Women Writing in English*, New Perspective, New Delhi Sarup and sons, 2005, 164.