



# DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

## MANJU KAPOOR

# MANJU KAPUR THE NOVELIST

1948 (age 72 years)

- **Manju Kapur is an Indian novelist.**
- **Her first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, won the 1999 Commonwealth Writers' Prize, best first book, Europe and South Asia.**
- **She teaches English at Delhi University under the name Manjul Kapur Dalmia.**
- **She studied and received an M.A. in 1972 from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, and M. Phil from Delhi University.**
- **She is married to Gun Nidhi Dalmia; they have three children and three grandchildren, and live in New Delhi.**

# MAJOR WORKS

- *Difficult Daughters*, 1998;
- *A Married Woman*, 2003;
- *Home*, 2006;
- *The Immigrant*, 2008,
- *Custody*, 2011;
- "Shaping the World: Women Writers on Themselves", ed. Manju Kapur, 2014.

# Difficult Daughters – the Novel

- This charming novel is about educating daughters, and facing the consequences when they learn to think for themselves and begin to question the basic values of society.
- It is the old conflict again between the demands of modernity and tradition, enacted this time in an upright, high-minded, middle-class Punjabi Lalaji family in the 1930s and '40s.
- The drama unfolds with intelligence and absorbing sympathy in Lala Diwan Chand's Arya Samaj family in conservative Amritsar.
- At the centre of the storm is Virmati, who yearns for something beyond marriage.

# THE STORY

- The author brings together three generations of women.
- **Difficult Daughters** is a story of three generations of women: **Ida**, the narrator, who is a divorcee.
- **Virmati**, her mother, who marries an already married professor for love, and
- **Kasturi**, her grandmother, who comes to terms with a difficult daughter, Virmati.
- The three generations of women are very different.
- The book starts with a daughter at her mother's funeral, filled with conflicting emotions and the realisation that she didn't really know her mother.
- What comes next is her journey across India and Pakistan in search of some kind of closure, talking to family and friends and gathering information.

- The grandmother has had some education, but is sent away from her family when she marries into a good Hindu one.
- Constantly pregnant, she relies more and more on her eldest daughter, Virmati.
- While Virmati does her duty, she is starving for some sign of affection from her mother, but none is forthcoming.
- Her mother is just too worn out to give of herself emotionally. Her daughter studies longer, despite her education being interrupted by family duty.
- She is encouraged by a visit of a glamorous city-dwelling cousin, who has chosen to study rather than marry.

- Defying the wishes of her parents, Virmati keeps on studying, putting off the date of her wedding more than once.
- When her aunt (and neighbour) takes in a lodger, the U.K.-educated Professor Harish Chandra, her life is turned upside-down, torn between filial duty and love for a married man.
- Perhaps surprisingly we know least about the granddaughter, Ida, the original narrator of the book.
- She has clearly been unhappily married and estranged from her family, but we can only glean information from her reaction to her mother's story.
- The most important theme is that of women, their lives, their fate. Their only validation seems to come from marrying and having children, preferably sons<sub>7</sub>

- Those, even those from forward thinking families, who decide to continue their education, or even not to marry, are viewed with disappointment and suspicion.
- The granddaughter's own story shows that despite the time that has passed.
- The situation of women can also be seen in the secondary characters. In Lahore, Virmati shares a room with an activist fighting against the coming Partition.
- She appears to be one of the few truly happy characters, somehow managing successfully juggle family and education.
- Her cousin is also an important role-model, stressing that women need to see education and a career as a choice not a last resort.



- **Virmati's love rival is the Professor's wife, a barely literate woman chosen for him as a child. She tries to please her husband, a man who barely thinks of her, and understandably doesn't like the interloper.**
- **She tries to be a good wife, as she has been taught, sadly not realising that she can never satisfy him.**
- **Both women suffer at the hands of a man who wants his cake and to eat it, not caring about the consequences.**
- **The saddest part is the lack of communication between the women.**

- **We would hope that a mother would want her daughter to have a better life, a more satisfied existence, but the women presented here protect the long-standing traditions more than the men.**
- **It seems that tradition is more important, especially as the actions of a daughter affect her whole family.**
- **The novel is a portrait of one and then two countries through the lives of women.**
- **The struggle for independence and education in two countries finding their feet in the difficult post-Independence era.**

- **It made everyone to think about a long, hard look at the relationships between women and generations in a family.**
- **It is difficult to imagine Lahore's mesmerising pull in those pre-Independence, pre-Partition days.**
- **Virmati falls in love with her romantic neighbour, a married professor, England returned.**
- **She marries him eventually and comes into his home, alongside his furious first wife.**
- **Her family is disgraced; and the Arya Samaj movement for the education of women suffers a real setback in Amritsar.**

- It is a wonderfully gripping story by Manju Kapur, who took her five years to research and write *Difficult Daughters*.
- She has ably captured Virmati's conflict between her duty to her family, her desire for education and independence and her illicit love for a married man.
- Unfortunately, the other characters are dead and wooden - especially the professor.

# MAJOR THEMES

- There is an endless argument between “*Education versus Marriage*”. But nobody listens to Virmati.
- She struggles to acquire higher education and self-dependence.
- She had shamed her family, refused marriage and she never meant to marry.
- But in Indian tradition marriage is an important and a part of the life.
- Marriage in society is major issue in ‘*Difficult Daughters*’.

- **The theme of marriage is central to the novel. Though the novel deals with childhood, youth, old age, education, marriage is the central theme.**
- **The focus is on the man-woman relationship ie- Virmati-professor Harish.**
- **Kapur also gives an important feature to the mother-daughter relationship which drew in a lot of tension. Difficult Daughters marks this theme in itself.**
- **The novel sets against the gory backdrop of Partition in the cities of Amritsar and Lahore, remains a powerful portrayal of the society.**

- **The novel spans three generations of women and exposes their sense of disillusionment.**
- **The three generations of women are Kasturi, Virmati and Ida who epitomise the three stages of Indian independence.**
- **Kasturi, the mother symbolises the pre-independence, and is shown as a victim of the offensive control of patriarchy.**
- **Through three female protagonists, Manju Kapur has revealed the life circle of a woman who is devoted from beginning of her life.**
- **As a child, Virmati has to take care of her siblings. Her whole life is dedicated to her whole family.**

- She is the eldest of eleven sisters and brothers: Virmati, Indumati, Gunvati, Hemavati, Vidyavati, and Parvati. Kailashnath, Gopinath, Krishanath, Prakashnath, and Hiranath are brothers.
- Virmati, the daughter, symbolizes the country's struggle for independence.
- Psychologically, she reveals her defiant nature against deep-rooted conventions of morality especially for a girl.
- As Susan Polis Schultz says: "The new woman arises full of confidence, she speaks eloquently, and thinks independently, full of strength. She organizes efficiently and directs proudly."



- **Ida, Virmati's daughter is the product of post-independence period, and establishes herself as an independent woman.**
- **She starts her journey to find an insight into her mother's past, denies her and revolts against the ways and follies.**
- **The opening line reveals her anguish: "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she was gone and I started at the fire that rose from her shriveled body, dry-eyed, laden, half dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept".**
- **Ida is the last character in this order of generation.**

- **Difficult Daughters is a novel on the theme of Partition of the Indian subcontinent too.**
- **Partition echoes across the socio-political and cultural discourses through its empirical legacy. This recurrence is true not only for discourses that deliberate on the position of religion in India but also “for historical interpretation of justice and minority belonging and for the tension-ridden struggle over the production of secular national culture in the subcontinent”.**
- **People of Amritsar go to Lahore for higher education, and so also people from Lahore go to Amritsar for various purposes. It is on this background of the then undivided Punjab that the story of Virmati is narrated.**

- **Being the eldest daughter, Virmati who has to look after all her siblings.**
- **Her mother Kasturi is pregnant for the last time when Virmati is hardly seventeen, and studying for her F.A. examination.**
- **Suraj Prakash, the father of the eleven children, does not worry about his daughters' higher education.**
- **Kasturi had never thought that her eldest daughter Virmati so meek, docile and homely, a surrogate mother to her siblings, would prove a great problem for the family.**
- **Difficult Daughters is the story of a freedom struggle.**
- **While India fights for freedom from the British Raj, Virmati fights for the freedom to live life on her terms.**
- **She is torn in two halves, one of which is on the side she is fighting against.**

- **India attains freedom at the cost of Partition, of losing half its soul and hundreds of thousands of innocent lives.**
- **So many lives were lost in the conflagration of communal hatred.**
- **India's hollow victory is witnessed in Virmati's.**
- **In all this the professor who is fond of everything English exerts considerable influence, albeit in a catalytic sort of way just like Britain did in the tragedy of Partition.**
- **The story of Virmati can be interpreted as the feminist version of Partition as novel enables us to study three generations of women-Kasturi, Virmati and Ida.**

# **‘Marriage & Repression’ as Major theme**

- **Being a woman writer, Manju Kapur has focused on some of the common issues pertaining to the life of women, especially Indian women.**
- **Some of the most dominant themes found in her fiction include marriage, family relationships, mother-daughter relationship, husband-wife relationship, separation, and extramarital relationship.**
- **Marriage is one of the most prominent themes.**
- **It aims to point out how repression is carried out as a common and overt practice through the institution of marriage. An attempt is made to understand the role of patriarchy seem transparent and natural.**
- **Women themselves are taught and conditioned to derogate their own sex and cooperate in their own subordination.<sup>21</sup>**

- **Ms. Kapoor highlights, how women negotiate with the outside world. There is a lot of compromise but it does not end in their death because the world has changed to certain extent.**
- **Using the Indian middle class milieu, she foregrounds the condition of women in a very explicit manner.**
- **Her female characters try to revolt against the patriarchal society, but they realize that it is far from easy to bring about a change in the situation.**
- **Finally they end up with a compromise with all their expectations unfulfilled.**

- **Imprisoned in domestic responsibilities, bound by social accountability, burdened by duty and devotion, chained by loyalty and fidelity, Manju Kapur's women Characters have to suppress and kill their desires at every step.**
- **The protagonist Virmati, her mother, her sisters and her acquaintances are pitted against hostile circumstances, wherein fate and ideology complicate their path.**
- **Manju Kapur successfully depicts the traditional conservative old set up to show the miserable plight of women in the past, present or future.**

- **Marrying off female characters is of utmost importance.**
- **The reasons can be social, religious or even status related to save the family from external criticism for not getting married 'at the right time'.**
- **Kasturi, mother of Virmati, feels, "it is the duty of every girl to get married".**
- **Kasturi, as a daughter becomes a homemaker as she is taught that marriage is her destiny and she follows the tradition without questioning it.**
- **But her daughter, Virmati, becomes the difficult daughter as she goes against the family to fulfill her dream of marrying the person she loves.**



- **The third generation daughter that is Virmati's daughter Ida, who turns out to be a very independent individual not conforming to the social norms is divorced and is also childless.**
- **She becomes a difficult daughter for Virmati.**
- **Daughters do not want to be like mothers as they do not want to suffer the way their mothers did.**
- **While Kasturi always pesters her daughter to suit the society and traditions, Virmati, who herself is an educated woman, also wants her daughter to be a successful woman in the Indian society by marrying, giving birth to children and having a secured place called home.**

- **The novel begins with Ida, daughter of Virmati, confessing "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother".**
- **Virmati's daughter who wants to know the less known saga of her mother who has been considered a social outcaste because of her precarious position.**
- **Even Virmati's mother, married at a very early age, had no other aim than to bear the burden of regular pregnancies and double responsibilities.**
- **Taking care of a large family comprising of her father-in-law and mother-in-law, her daughters and sons, she had hardly any time to come out of her ignorant bliss.**

- **Kasturi had never thought that her eldest daughter Virmati so meek, docile and homely, a surrogate mother to her siblings, would prove a great problem for the family.**
- **She had been critical of women getting education more than the custom permits as it can spoil them.**
- **She used to mock Shakuntala, the elder sister, cousin to Virmati for her remaining single even after attaining marriageable age.**
- **Beautiful Virmati is very keen at her studies and the professor finds a suitable disciple in Virmati.**
- **By dint of her hard work and the keen interest of the professor, she successfully qualifies in her exams and in disregard of the opposition of the family takes admission at the college.**

- **Choice of a husband has never been the prerogative of women and the choice of love is a remote possibility.**
- **By falling in love with her teacher, Virmati commits a great sin in the social context.**
- **Virmati looks at love as a means of escape from the restraint of tradition.**
- **She delivers a baby girl. While selecting a name for their daughter, Virmati's 'Bharti' commemorating India's independence is rejected in favour of the European name 'Ida' condemning the independence, which was marred by unprecedented communal violence.**

- **Ida's effort to know her inheritance brings before us the history of insignificance of the woman, be it Virmati, Virmati's mother or Virmati's sisters.**
- **Ida bursts out in the epilogue of the novel.**
- **Manju Kapur is perhaps, in a way, rewriting a history.**
- **The period depicted in the novel was full of political upheaval.**
- **The pre-independence era saw our country under the clouds of the Second World War and at the threshold of the partition.**
- **The tumultuous action of the period is dominated by male actors.**
- **Perhaps a few women like Swama Lata were involved in it. Perhaps, most women remained confined to their old domestic chores.**
- **At any rate, Manju Kapur tries to view things afresh with a female pair of eyes.**