Education to Women: A Passport to Emancipation: A study on the select work of Manju Kapur`s Difficult Daughters

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"One child, one teacher, one book, and one pen, can change the world."
-Malala Yousafzai

Abstract

Education is the key that opens the door to life by widening one’s vision, develops a sense of concern towards the fellow-being and thus promotes national development. The education of girls and women has been recognized for several decades as a fundamental human right and a developmental necessity. All over the world, education is regarded as the key factor in overcoming the barriers that women face and the basic tool for empowering women and bringing them into the main path of development. Education does not only provide basic knowledge and skills to improve health and livelihoods, but it empowers women to take their rightful place in society and the development process. Manju Kapur is one of the most admired novelists of Indian Writing in English who voiced out for women education and emancipation. Manju Kapur’s literary oeuvre is an expression of her keen observation and association with the different facets of woman’s struggle to achieve her autonomy. Her debut novel Difficult Daughters (1998) fetched Commonwealth Prize for her novel and went to become a best seller in India. Manju Kapur speaks of the middle class and even has earned several comparisons with Jane Austen for her middle-class character portrayal that are often caught in an excruciating situation and also for her very keen, sharp and chiseled characterization of the feminine self.

Manju Kapur faithfully describes self-dependence as the backdrop theme of colonial-era which encounters issues like women liberation and
education. She truly presents the predicament of Indian women in her novels. Lack of education makes them dependable and vulnerable to both the inner and outer worlds. Manju Kapur, in her novel *Difficult Daughters*, delineates the pathetic realities of women in the most befitting manner. She advocates that education brings dignity, honor and power. She holds that the emancipation and empowerment of women are possible through education only.

**Keywords:** Subjugation, Education, Emancipation

**Introduction**

Educating a girl child is like planting a seed. It is a long term asset that will continue to offer enormous benefits to society for a very long time in the future. There is continued inequality and vulnerability of girls in all sectors - Economic, Education, Social, Political, Health Care, Nutrition, Right and Legal etc. Girls oppressed in all spheres of life, they need to be empowered in all walks of life. In order to fight against the socially constructed gender biases, girls and women have to swim against the system that requires more strength. Such strength comes from the process of empowerment and empowerment will come from education. This paper emphasis on women education because it enables them to response to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their life.

Manju Kapur, a well-known Indian writer, has not only portrayed the insecure condition of women in Indian society in her novels but also portrays how they were kept ignorant about education and emancipation. She also exposed how patriarchy creates havoc in the lives of women by denying proper education to them. Manju Kapur in her novels has tried to divulge various ways in which patriarchy relegated women to the periphery. She has portrayed as to how patriarchy restricted female freedom and independence. Education, if at all imparted to them, was only to hunt down a good husband and become a perfect house-wife and a daughter-in-law representing “Indian womanhood”. Thus, marriage was the ultimate institution where all women should enter after the successful completion of education.

Manju Kapur plays a vital role in bringing about incredible transformation to discover the predicaments and bring them out of the social taboos thrust upon them. Women in her novels no longer characterized to surrender, submit and to suffer. In *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur speaks, with great narrative eloquent, the idea of independence through education and
especially through the character of Virmati. She rebels against her destiny and insists on the right to be educated. In *Difficult Daughters*, not only Virmati but also other difficult daughters struggle to access education by going beyond and achieving their goal by breaking chains of traditionalism. The key theme of *Difficult Daughters* is to find self-identity through education.

*Difficult Daughter* is a story of three generations of women wherein she vigorously portrays the character of Virmati, the female protagonist of the second generation who boldly faces the patriarchal principles of the time. Women were ordained to be trustworthy to their counterparts. So far as *Difficult Daughters* is concerned Kasturi is found transgressing the laws of the threshold by praying before the picture of Christ to which her mother objected. Kasturi was allured towards other things of life and told that once she gained proper education she would be on her way to becoming one of the finest flowers of Hindu womanhood. She learned to read and write but all that was to maintain household accounts and to look after domestic affairs.

Her education ruined with imprisonment to the kitchen and domestic affairs. It hardly distorted her to any extent that. She resented Shakuntala’s lifestyle of staying away from home for the sake of the job. But when Virmati, her daughter, insisted on getting the education she became furious because she wanted Virmati to look after the siblings Kasturi gave birth to. Virmati, after passing FYBA wished to study further as her cousin Shakuntala did but her mother refused to that and instead wanted her to get married. But Virmati, being much influenced by the idea of Shakuntala, insisted on pursuing higher studies to soar high in the intellectual horizon to which her cousin had already reached. When Shakuntala narrates her stay at Lahore as to how she entertained with other attaining seminars, reading papers etc. It shows Manju Kapur’s vision for emancipatory education.

Critics have made similar observations about the state of education for women. Noted feminist and existential theorist Simone de Beauvoir sees education is the portal through which women are able to fully experience the world. Beauvoir remarks,

“The restrictions that education and custom impose on woman limit her grasp of the universe the spirit with all its riches must project itself in an empty sky that is its to fill” (748-9).
Woolf and Beauvoir share similar views also concerning professions for women, with Beauvoir stating very similarly to Woolf that “women raised and educated exactly like men would work under the same conditions and for the same salaries” (760).

Like the noted feminist's ideas, Manju Kapur created her character Virmati. Virmati was enticed and inspired by what she had listened to. She wanted to escape from her meaningless life and to pursue higher education to be as independent as Shakuntala but was betrothed to a canal engineer and was to be married soon. She refused to accept the groom and when insisted she attempted to commit suicide. Virmati decided to go to Lahore to pursue higher studies but as a matter of fact, she was in love with the professor and wanted to be away from him. Her father, being tolerant in his outlook, allows her to pursue higher studies. Virmati did challenge Kasturi’s conventional thoughts.

The author presents the spirit of ‘New Women’ with her vehement claim to the right to education and independence. Her decision to go to Lahore was because of her mother’s constant nagging and the professor’s entreaties. She came to Lahore with a mission to expand her mental horizon but then her involvement in meaningless love filled her with pangs and remorse. She wished to come up and be like Swarnalata, a freedom activist, by doing something meaningful. Ida, her daughter desires to forget her mother’s past and move further in life. The novel alludes not only to the difficult daughter Virmati, but also peeps deeper into the psyche of Difficult Daughters who crossed the threshold of their homes and pursued higher studies to contribute to the issues of the society and nation at large. Though Virmati failed to attain complete autonomy, her efforts were very significant in breaking the shackles of patriarchal society. What Virmati tried to do in the forties was a great achievement.

Virmati is presented as a ‘New Woman’ of pre-independence India and her urge for the right to education and freedom resembles the nation’s quest for identity and selfhood. She audaciously crosses patriarchal thresholds and came in contact with leading women like Mohini Dutt, Sita Radha and others who were occupied in the national struggle for freedom. She reproached for being unlike these women who involved themselves in organizing and participating in intellectual as well as political conferences. Her daughter was unlike her mother because she broke with her husband only on the ground of getting rid of the fetus. It reveals how Ida of the third generation was a step further to her mother. It was all because of her education that changed her way of thinking. Through Virmati’s character, the author rightly recalls the other critics on women's emancipation.
Simone de Beauvoir in her paramount work *The Second Sex* expresses a similar view to that of Woolf’s on the education of women. In the last chapter of *The Second Sex*, titled “The Independent Woman,” Beauvoir states:

“To be a complete individual, equal to man, a woman has to have access to the male world” (725).

She discusses educational inequality and comes to the conclusion that women must receive equal education to men in order to lead the type of self-actualizing and fulfilling lives that Woolf describes. Her short work *A Room of One Own* explores this claim: in order for women to lead fulfilling and self-actualizing lives, they must have equal access to the same quality education that men receive.

Similarly, Manju Kapur’s protagonist Virmati, for the quest of identity, revolts against tradition and her family. Her inner urge encouraged her to be loved as an individual rather than looked upon as an object. Virmati successfully breaks boundaries and shakes the conventions after undergoing great mental suffering. Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* is a depiction of a constant struggle of women through generations. Her efforts have been to comprehend women both as a human being and a female. The crux of the matter is that it is through the awareness of education that a woman can cross the threshold and establish her identity as a woman. Virmati was much influenced by Shakuntala and Swarnalata as they came up to the level of ‘New Woman’ through education and were emancipated from the narrow parochial world of patriarchal society.

A modern example of the application of Manju Kapur’s vision on emancipation through education is the story of Malala Yousafzai. Malala is the daughter of a teacher and school owner in the Swat region of Pakistan. Despite having grown up in a culture where women are not typically educated, Malala attended school since she was a young child and, because of open-minded, educated parents were never made to feel restricted by her gender. Rather than have her freedoms restricted, Malala continued to attend school and began traveling the country with her father while giving speeches about the importance of education. She eventually began speaking about the topic to major news outlets like BBC. She also wrote a blog for BBC about the everyday threats girls face pursuing education like school bombings and occasional attacks, but she wrote under the safety of a pen name (Yousafzai, 154). She recalls an incident in which she knew she had to do something about educational equality:
Malala is a living embodiment of Manju Kapur's ideas concerning the education of women and educational equality. Malala is the crystallization of what Manju Kapur, hoped-for future female students and epitomizes her idea of the self-actualized, fulfilled, and educated woman. She famously remarked,

“When someone takes away your pens you realize quite how important education is” (Yousafzai, 160).

Malala finds herself in her education and is the person that she is today because of it. Despite the continued need for improvement in the educational system, Manju Kapur's ideas on education and their implications for modern society have enabled the increased freedom, liberation, self-actualization, and fulfillment of women.

**Conclusion**

Manju Kapur is convinced that the new, educated Indian women have the capacity to determine her priorities for self-discovery. Her *Difficult Daughters* is a depiction of a constant struggle of women through generations. Her efforts have been to comprehend women both as a human being and a female. Like Woolf, Beauvoir, Manju Kapur also sees education as the portal through which women are able to fully experience the world. Manju Kapur stresses the importance of education through her protagonist Virmati. Education saves and improves the lives of girls and women. It allows women greater control of their lives and provides them with skills to contribute to their societies. It enables them to make decisions for themselves and to influence their families. It is this power that produces all the other developmental and social benefits. Virmati was much influenced by Shakuntala and Swarnalata as they came up to the level of `New Woman` through education and were emancipated from the narrow parochial world of patriarchal society.

Like Woolf, Manju Kapur also believed that women could not be self-actualized and fulfilled individuals unless they had access to this type of reformed, egalitarian education. Hope remains, though, for the future of education and for the women of the future in individuals like Malala Yousafzai who fight tirelessly for every person’s right to an equal education that promotes peace and cooperation. So the author strongly believes that the future of India lies largely in their hands, for as wives and mothers they had the task of training, guiding and forming the character of the future rules of India. So they need greater strength to face society with sound knowledge.
References