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Masculinity, Male Authority, and Patriarchal Privilege in *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur's fiction offers a sustained examination of gender relations, family structures, marriage, education, sexuality, and the struggle for individual identity within Indian society. Her women characters frequently negotiate social systems in which male authority and patriarchal privilege determine the boundaries of acceptable female behaviour. A feminist reading of Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* reveals that women's oppression cannot be understood separately from the structures of masculinity that sustain it. Masculinity in the novel is associated with authority, education, economic power, social legitimacy, sexual freedom, and the capacity to make decisions affecting women's lives. Men occupy positions of privilege within the family and social institutions, while women are expected to remain obedient, modest, domestic, and concerned with family honour. Through the character of Virmati and her relationship with Professor Harish, Kapur exposes the contradictions of male authority. Virmati's desire for education, self-expression, and control over her life constitutes resistance to a patriarchal order, yet her relationship with Harish demonstrates how apparently liberating relationships can reproduce unequal power structures. This paper argues that Kapur does not present patriarchy merely as individual male oppression; rather, she represents it as a social system maintained through family, marriage, gender expectations, surveillance, and internalized patriarchal values. The paper therefore examines masculinity, male authority, patriarchal privilege, marriage, education, family honour, and female resistance in *Difficult Daughters*.

Keyword: Feminist criticism, gender, male authority, masculinity, patriarchy.

Introduction

Indian women's writing has increasingly challenged conventional representations of gender, domesticity, marriage, and female identity. Among contemporary Indian English novelists, Manju Kapur occupies an important position because her fiction explores the complicated relationship between women's aspirations and the social institutions that regulate them. Her novels frequently place women within families governed by tradition and examine how they negotiate education, marriage, sexuality, motherhood, and personal freedom. A feminist approach to Kapur's fiction therefore requires attention not only to women's experiences but also to the structures of masculinity and male privilege that make those experiences possible.

The material provided for this study identifies patriarchy as a central concern in Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. Feminist criticism understands literature as a site where unequal relations between men and women can be represented and questioned. The material draws upon Simone de Beauvoir, Kate Millett, and Elaine Showalter to establish a theoretical framework for examining gender inequality. It particularly emphasizes de Beauvoir's argument that womanhood is socially constructed and Millett's understanding of patriarchy as deeply embedded in the institution of the family. Within this framework, masculinity becomes significant because patriarchal privilege is exercised largely through institutions and relationships in which men possess greater authority. Male authority does not necessarily appear only in overt acts of violence or domination. It can operate through decisions concerning women's education, marriage, sexuality, mobility, respectability, and social identity. The material demonstrates that Virmati's family attempts to regulate her behaviour according to marriage, family honour, social reputation, and gender conformity.

Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* presents Virmati as a woman who refuses to accept these restrictions passively. Her desire for education and independence challenges conventional expectations. Yet her rebellion is complicated by her relationship with Professor Harish, a married man. Consequently, the novel does not provide a simple opposition between an oppressive male world and an emancipated female protagonist. Instead, it reveals how patriarchal privilege can remain active even within relationships that appear to provide women with freedom. This paper argues that Kapur's representation of masculinity is closely connected with male authority and patriarchal privilege. Men occupy socially privileged positions, while women are required to negotiate their desires within structures created and maintained by patriarchal society. At the same time, Kapur exposes the limitations of masculine authority by showing the emotional and social consequences it produces for women.

Feminist Framework: Masculinity and Patriarchal Power

Feminist criticism provides an effective framework for understanding the representation of masculinity in Kapur's fiction. The material supplied for this study states that feminist criticism examines unequal power relations between men and women and emphasizes the manner in which patriarchy constructs women as subordinate. Simone de Beauvoir's influential formulation that woman is socially produced rather than naturally destined for a particular role is particularly relevant to Kapur's representation of gender. The material connects de Beauvoir's argument with the social expectations surrounding Virmati. The same principle can be extended to masculinity: if femininity is socially constructed, masculinity too is produced through cultural expectations concerning authority, responsibility, sexuality, decision-making, and control.

In a patriarchal social structure, masculinity is frequently associated with authority. Men are permitted greater freedom in matters from which women are restricted. Their education is valued, their mobility is less severely controlled, and their decisions possess greater social legitimacy. Women, by contrast, are frequently defined through their relationships with fathers, husbands, and families. The material observes that Virmati's struggle involves precisely this conflict between an identity imposed by social expectations and the desire to establish an independent self.

Kate Millett's in *Sexual Politics*. 1970 observation that the family constitutes a major institution of patriarchy is particularly useful in reading *Difficult Daughters*. The supplied material explicitly applies this idea to Virmati's situation, where family structures enforce

patriarchal values. The family therefore becomes one of the principal spaces where masculinity and male authority are reproduced.

Elaine Showalter's feminist literary approach is also significant and observed in *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* that the supplied material argues that feminist literature provides space for women's experiences that have historically been ignored by patriarchal discourse. Kapur's novel performs this function by foregrounding female subjectivity, conflict, and resistance. Yet giving women a voice also exposes the structures of masculine privilege against which that voice must struggle.

Masculinity and Male Authority in *Difficult Daughters*

The representation of masculinity in *Difficult Daughters* is inseparable from the distribution of authority within family and social institutions. Male authority is not simply the personal power of an individual man; it is supported by cultural assumptions about what men and women should be. Men are associated with decision-making, while women are expected to conform to decisions made for them.

Virmati's family illustrates this structure. Her parents are concerned with marriage arrangements, family honour, social reputation, and gender conformity. The supplied material emphasizes that Virmati's personal desires are repeatedly dismissed because the family prioritizes social respectability and conventional gender roles. This situation reveals an important aspect of patriarchal masculinity: male authority operates through institutions rather than merely through individual male characters. The authority of the father, husband, teacher, and other socially powerful men is reinforced by the family and community. The woman who refuses these expectations is consequently perceived not merely as an individual making a choice but as someone threatening the established social order.

Virmati's resistance to arranged marriage therefore becomes a challenge to patriarchal authority. The material identifies arranged marriage as a system in which women may be excluded from decision-making and presents Virmati's refusal as a significant act of resistance. Her decision is important because marriage is not represented as a purely private relationship. It is a social institution through which gender roles are reproduced. Male authority also becomes visible in the unequal distribution of freedom. Virmati's family expects her to become a wife and assume domestic responsibilities, whereas her desire for higher education is treated as a challenge to established norms. The supplied material states that Virmati yearns for education and regards knowledge as a means of escaping limitations imposed upon women.

Thus, the novel associates masculinity with a social order in which men's aspirations are normalized while women's aspirations require justification. Virmati must struggle to obtain something that should theoretically be available to every individual: the right to determine the direction of one's own life.

Education, Masculine Privilege, and Female Autonomy

Education is one of the most important areas through which Kapur explores gender inequality. Virmati's desire for education represents her desire for an identity beyond domestic expectations. The material identifies education as a means of empowerment and states that educational institutions provide intellectual freedom, social interaction, personal growth, and critical thinking. From a feminist perspective, education challenges patriarchal privilege because knowledge can provide women with intellectual and economic

independence. The material specifically connects education with economic empowerment and notes that financial dependence reinforces women's subordination.

The significance of masculinity becomes clear when educational opportunities are viewed in relation to gender. A patriarchal society does not simply deny women education; it constructs different expectations for men and women. Men are conventionally associated with public life, employment, intellectual activity, and economic responsibility, while women are associated with marriage and domesticity. Consequently, when Virmati demands education, she challenges the gendered division between the public and private spheres. The college becomes an important space of resistance. The material describes it as an environment in which Virmati encounters intellectual freedom, social interaction, personal growth, and critical thinking. Education therefore allows her to imagine an alternative identity.

However, Kapur also refuses to suggest that education automatically guarantees emancipation. The material explicitly states that education alone cannot completely free Virmati from patriarchy. Even after becoming educated, she continues to experience social judgment and emotional constraints. This observation is crucial to the study of masculinity because it demonstrates the resilience of patriarchal power. Institutional access does not necessarily eliminate unequal gender relations.

Professor Harish and the Contradictions of Male Privilege

Professor Harish occupies a particularly complex position in the novel. His relationship with Virmati appears to provide her with an alternative to the conventional marriage expected by her family. Yet the relationship is structured by unequal circumstances because Harish is already married. The material explicitly notes that Virmati's relationship with Harish creates another form of dependency rather than complete autonomy.

Harish therefore represents the contradictions of masculine privilege. He can exercise personal freedom in ways that are more difficult for Virmati. His status as an educated man gives him intellectual and social authority; while Virmati has to bear the consequences of transgressing conventional expectations. The relationship complicates a simplistic understanding of feminist resistance. Virmati rejects an arranged marriage because she wants to choose her own life. However, choosing Harish does not necessarily result in equality. Instead, she enters a relationship in which the balance of power remains unequal. Her emotional attachment can coexist with dependency.

This is one of Kapur's most significant insights into patriarchy. Patriarchal privilege does not disappear simply because a woman rejects traditional marriage. A relationship may challenge one social convention while reproducing another form of inequality. Virmati's resistance therefore remains incomplete. The material identifies the consequences of her marriage as isolation, emotional neglect, social criticism, and lack of acceptance. These consequences reveal that the social authority surrounding masculinity extends beyond the individual relationship. Virmati must carry the burden of social condemnation more intensely because female sexuality and behaviour are subject to stricter surveillance.

Marriage as an Institution of Patriarchal Privilege

Marriage is perhaps the clearest institutional expression of patriarchal authority in *Difficult Daughters*. The supplied material describes marriage as one of the most powerful patriarchal institutions in the novel and emphasizes that traditional society defines marriage as a woman's primary duty. Marriage establishes expectations about obedience, domestic

responsibility, sexuality, and family identity. The woman is expected to adjust herself to the demands of the marital family, while the man's authority is normalized. Such a structure demonstrates how masculinity acquires institutional privilege. Virmati's refusal of arranged marriage challenges this system because she attempts to transform marriage from a social obligation into a personal choice. Yet the Harish-Virmati relationship demonstrates that personal choice alone cannot eliminate unequal gender structures.

The novel therefore distinguishes between **choice** and **equality**. A woman may choose a relationship but still remain subject to patriarchal power. This distinction is central to understanding Virmati's tragedy. Her rebellion gives her a degree of agency, but the social structure within which she acts remains patriarchal. Kapur's critique is consequently directed at the assumption that marriage automatically provides fulfillment or security for women. The material states that the novel instead demonstrates how marriage can reinforce patriarchal hierarchies and become a mechanism of control and oppression.

Family Honour, Masculinity, and Social Surveillance

Family honour is another important mechanism through which patriarchal authority operates. Virmati's behaviour is continuously evaluated in relation to family reputation. The supplied material identifies modesty, obedience, domesticity, and sexual purity as the standards through which women's behaviour is monitored. This surveillance demonstrates that masculinity is not limited to individual men. Patriarchal privilege is maintained collectively through social expectations. Family members, relatives, and the wider community participate in regulating women's behaviour. The material observes that even women may become participants in maintaining oppressive structures, a phenomenon described as internalized patriarchy.

The concept of honour is gendered because the reputation of the family is frequently attached to women's conduct. A woman's sexuality and choices become matters of collective concern. In such a system, masculine authority is protected by controlling female behaviour. Virmati's transgression therefore becomes a challenge not only to her family but to the larger social system. Her individual decision becomes a political act because it questions the authority of those who believe they possess the right to determine the boundaries of female behaviour.

Masculinity, Female Identity, and the Crisis of Selfhood

The conflict between masculine authority and female autonomy produces an identity crisis for Virmati. The supplied material identifies several oppositions at the centre of her experience: personal desire versus social duty, education versus marriage, independence versus obedience, love versus family honour, and selfhood versus tradition. These oppositions reveal the psychological effects of patriarchal power. Virmati does not simply fight external restrictions; she internalizes competing expectations. As a result, her struggle produces anxiety, loneliness, guilt, and emotional fragmentation. Masculine privilege contributes to this crisis because the social order provides men with greater legitimacy in defining women's roles. Virmati has to construct her identity against already established expectations. Her desire for independence is therefore interpreted as disobedience. The material connects this problem with de Beauvoir's argument that patriarchal societies define women primarily through relationships with others. Virmati attempts to establish an identity independent of familial roles but never achieves complete fulfilment. Kapur's representation is significant because she avoids presenting female emancipation as a simple process. Virmati's identity is neither completely liberated nor completely defeated. Instead, she occupies an unstable position between resistance and conformity.

Resistance to Patriarchal Masculinity

Resistance is central to Kapur's portrayal of Virmati. Her pursuit of higher education constitutes intellectual resistance, while her decision to choose her own partner represents romantic resistance. The supplied material identifies both forms of resistance and further emphasizes Virmati's emotional refusal to submit completely to patriarchal expectations.

Her resistance challenges several dimensions of patriarchal power:

1. Patriarchal authority – she questions the right of family members to determine her future.
2. Traditional marriage – she refuses to accept marriage as an unquestionable obligation.
3. Gender inequality – she seeks educational and intellectual opportunities.
4. Social conformity – she refuses to allow social expectations to completely determine her identity.

However, Kapur also demonstrates that resistance carries significant costs. Virmati experiences family alienation, social stigma, emotional suffering, and psychological conflict. This complexity is essential to the representation of masculinity. Patriarchal masculinity is powerful precisely because it is embedded within social institutions. Challenging one individual man does not necessarily dismantle the system. Virmati can resist her family's expectations, but she cannot easily escape the wider cultural system that determines the consequences of her choices.

Patriarchal Privilege beyond Individual Men

One of the major implications of Kapur's representation is that patriarchy should not be understood simply as a conflict between men and women. The supplied material repeatedly demonstrates that family, marriage, social reputation, and cultural expectations participate in maintaining gender inequality. Consequently, patriarchal privilege functions through a network of relationships. Men possess authority because social institutions authorize their authority. Women may also reproduce patriarchal expectations when they enforce standards of obedience, modesty, and family honour. This explains why resistance becomes so difficult. Masculinity, therefore, is not merely a personal identity; it is also a social position that may provide greater access to authority and legitimacy. Kapur's novel exposes this unequal distribution by placing Virmati's individual aspirations against the institutions that regulate them.

Her struggle demonstrates that gender inequality is sustained not only through explicit commands but also through assumptions about what constitutes respectable masculine and feminine behaviour.

Conclusion

A feminist reading of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* reveals that masculinity, male authority, and patriarchal privilege are fundamental to the novel's exploration of female autonomy. Kapur represents patriarchy as a complex system operating through family, marriage, education, social honour, sexuality, and cultural expectations. Male authority is strengthened by institutions that grant men greater freedom and decision-making power while requiring women to conform to obedience, domesticity, modesty, and family responsibility. Virmati's character provides the central perspective through which these structures are questioned. Her desire for education represents a challenge to gendered restrictions, while her refusal of arranged marriage constitutes a rejection of patriarchal authority. The material identifies her as a feminist protagonist precisely because she seeks education, independence, self-expression, and control over her own life. At the same time, her relationship with Professor Harish demonstrates the limitations of individual rebellion. Although the

relationship initially appears to offer an alternative to conventional patriarchy, Harish's existing marriage and social position create an unequal relationship in which Virmati experiences dependency and emotional suffering.

Kapur's achievement lies in presenting female resistance as complex, contradictory, and incomplete. Virmati's rebellion gives her agency, but it does not completely free her from patriarchal structures. Her experiences demonstrate that personal choice cannot by itself dismantle institutional inequality. Ultimately, *Difficult Daughters* challenges the assumption that masculinity and male authority are naturally entitled to social privilege. By foregrounding the consequences of patriarchal expectations for women's education, relationships, identity, and emotional lives, Kapur exposes the structures through which gender inequality is reproduced. The novel's feminist significance lies not simply in its portrayal of a woman who rebels, but in its exposure of the social system against which that rebellion takes place. Virmati's incomplete struggle thus becomes a powerful representation of the possibilities and limitations of women's emancipation within a patriarchal society. The supplied material similarly concludes that Kapur presents female agency as both empowering and constrained, emphasizing that women's resistance may challenge patriarchy while remaining shaped by its structures.

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