



INTERSECTIONALITY OF OPPRESSION: FEMINIST SUBALTERNITY IN MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

Dr. Anney Alice Sharene

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Prince Sattam bin Abdulaziz University
Wadi al dawaser, Saudi Arabia

anneybenila@gmail.com

Abstract

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) is a seminal work that dissects the multilayered oppression of women in pre- and post-Partition India. Through the protagonist Virmati, Kapur examines the intersections of gender, class, caste, and tradition, foregrounding the concept of feminist subalternity. This article explores how Virmati embodies the subaltern figure within a patriarchal society that silences her voice and autonomy. Drawing upon Gayatri Spivak's theory of the subaltern and Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality, this analysis delves into the complex interplay of familial expectations, nationalist movements, and individual agency. Secondary sources from feminist theory and South Asian literature complement this exploration, revealing how *Difficult Daughters* critiques systemic inequalities while offering glimpses of resistance.

Keywords: Feminist subalternity, intersectionality, patriarchy, Partition literature, Manju Kapur, gender oppression, South Asian feminism.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* offers a layered portrayal of women grappling with societal expectations, personal desires, and historical upheavals. Set against the backdrop of Partition, the novel tells the story of Virmati, a young woman who dares to challenge her family's patriarchal norms but finds herself ensnared by new forms of subjugation. The narrative is framed by her daughter Ida, who retrospectively examines her mother's struggles, thereby creating a multigenerational dialogue on gender and autonomy. The novel resonates with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's assertion in *Can the Subaltern Speak?* that subaltern women often lack agency within socio-political structures. Virmati's story epitomizes this dilemma, as she navigates familial, societal, and nationalist expectations. Moreover, Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework reveals how Virmati's oppression is compounded by her gender, class, and familial roles. By employing these theoretical lenses, this article argues that *Difficult Daughters* critiques the systemic marginalization of women while highlighting their capacity for resistance.

In *Difficult Daughters*, the family serves as the primary site of patriarchal control, dictating women's choices and silencing their voices. Virmati, the eldest daughter in a conservative Punjabi family, is groomed to prioritize duty over desire. Her mother, Kasturi, embodies traditional gender roles, admonishing Virmati to "stop thinking about yourself" (Kapur 20). This refrain underscores the internalized patriarchy that perpetuates female subjugation across generations. Spivak's concept of the subaltern woman, who exists outside hegemonic power structures, is evident in Virmati's experiences. Her attempts to pursue education and autonomy are met with resistance, reflecting the systemic silencing of women



within patriarchal households. As Spivak argues, the subaltern woman “cannot speak” within structures that deny her voice (Spivak 1988). Virmati’s struggles exemplify this silencing, as her aspirations are continually overridden by familial and societal expectations.

Virmati’s subalternity is further entrenched by cultural expectations that define her value through marriage and domestic labor. Her refusal to marry an arranged suitor a decision motivated by her desire for education is met with ostracization. Kapur captures this tension: “To want education over marriage was to defy tradition, to insult one’s family” (Kapur 45). Virmati’s defiance places her in a liminal space, alienated from her family yet unaccepted by broader society. The novel critiques how women’s labor is commodified within patriarchal frameworks. Virmati’s mother, Kasturi, is portrayed as a figure perpetually pregnant and overburdened by domestic responsibilities. This depiction aligns with feminist critiques of gendered labor, such as Silvia Federici’s argument that women’s unpaid work sustains patriarchal economies (*Caliban and the Witch*). Through Kasturi and Virmati, Kapur reveals the generational toll of these oppressive structures.

Virmati’s struggles cannot be understood in isolation from her class position. As a member of a middle-class Punjabi family, her access to education places her in a privileged position compared to working-class women. However, this privilege is conditional, as her class standing is contingent upon adherence to traditional norms. Her pursuit of higher education disrupts this balance, exposing the fragility of her social position. Kimberlé Crenshaw’s concept of intersectionality is crucial for understanding Virmati’s experiences. Intersectionality reveals how overlapping systems of oppression—gender, class, and familial expectations shape her subjugation. For example, Virmati’s relationship with her lover, Professor Harish, highlights the unequal power dynamics between them. Harish’s social and intellectual authority exacerbates Virmati’s vulnerability, illustrating how gendered oppression intersects with class and educational hierarchies.

The historical context of Partition adds another layer of complexity to Virmati’s subalternity. Women during this period were often cast as symbols of national honor, their bodies and choices subordinated to nationalist agendas. Virmati’s rebellion against familial expectations coincides with India’s struggle for independence, creating a parallel between personal and political liberation. However, both struggles marginalize women, reducing them to passive symbols rather than active participants. Kapur critiques this marginalization by juxtaposing Virmati’s personal struggles with the broader nationalist movement. While men like Harish engage in political activism, Virmati’s aspirations are dismissed as selfish or inappropriate. This dynamic reflects Spivak’s critique of nationalist discourses that erase women’s voices in favor of male-dominated narratives. As Spivak writes, “The subaltern as female is doubly in shadow” (Spivak 1988).

Education emerges as both a site of oppression and a tool for resistance in *Difficult Daughters*. For Virmati, education represents a pathway to autonomy, allowing her to imagine a life beyond domestic confines. However, her educational pursuits are complicated by societal judgments and personal entanglements. The very institutions that empower her also reinforce patriarchal hierarchies, as evidenced by her dependence on Harish. Despite these



contradictions, Kapur portrays education as a means of resistance. Virmati's determination to study challenges traditional gender roles, inspiring future generations of women. Her daughter, Ida, reflects on this legacy, noting, "She had tried to break free, but in the end, she remained tied to her roots" (Kapur 258). This ambivalence underscores the complexity of feminist subalternity, where resistance is both constrained and transformative.

While Virmati's voice is often suppressed, Kapur emphasizes the significance of her silent acts of defiance. Her refusal to conform to societal expectations, even at great personal cost, disrupts patriarchal norms. This silence, as Spivak suggests, is not mere absence but a form of resistance that challenges hegemonic structures. Ida's role as the narrator further complicates this dynamic. By reconstructing her mother's story, Ida amplifies Virmati's silenced voice, creating a multigenerational dialogue on feminist subalternity. This act of storytelling transforms Virmati's struggles into a source of empowerment, bridging the gap between silence and articulation.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a profound exploration of feminist subalternity, capturing the intersectional oppressions that shape women's lives in patriarchal societies. Through Virmati's journey, the novel critiques familial, cultural, and nationalist structures that silence women while highlighting the potential for resistance. By employing theoretical frameworks from Spivak and Crenshaw, this article has illuminated the complex interplay of gender, class, and agency in Kapur's narrative. Ultimately, *Difficult Daughters* is a testament to the resilience of women who navigate the margins, carving spaces for autonomy and voice within oppressive systems.

Works Cited

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