

# Is Marriage a kinship or a Contract? A study of Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters and A Married Woman.

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## Abstract

Marriage has been, since ancient times, one of the most important social institutions perhaps the greatest and most significant of all institutions in human society. It has always existed in one form or the other in every culture, ensuring social sanction to a physical union between man and woman and laying the foundation for building up of the family the basic unit of society.

Marriage which is anticipated to be a constant and lasting relationship is a socially supported union between individuals. It is the basis for the family and the institution, defined by some significant functions like regulation of sexual behaviour, reproduction, nurturance and protection of children, socialization, and the passing on of certified statuses such as race. Marriage and the family rest on many beliefs, the most important of which is kinship.

## Key Words:

Marriage, self identity, new woman, family, relationship, woman liberation.

In the *shastras* marriage is viewed as a sacrament. The relationship of husband and wife, once recognized through proper customs and rituals, is believed to be unchangeable. In Hinduism marriage ceremony is said to be complete only when the customary rites and rituals are fully performed, though the customs are subject to change depending on the socio-cultural back ground.

Since marriage is regarded as a means to begin relations between two families in their..... utmost care is taken to ensure maximum cultural compatibility between the two.

Sociologists have offered several definitions of marriage:

1. 'Marriage consists of the rules and regulations which define the rights, duties and privileges of the husband and wife.'—George A. Lundberg
2. 'Marriage is more or less a durable connection between male and female, lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of the offspring.'—Western Marck

Other religions in India including Buddhism, Islam, Sikhism, Christianity and Jainism, have their own variations of marriage customs. Among Muslim communities, the joint affirmation of the *nikah-nama* (or the marriage contract) is of prime importance. Most Muslims prefer marriage among relations; first cousins are considered most suitable, failing which alliances are sought among families with earlier matrimonial links. This is done with a view to strengthening the familial ties and also to ensure the protection of ancestral property.

In Tamil Nadu, self-respect marriage has been introduced by the social reformer Periyar E.V. Ramasamy. The underlying principles of a self-respect marriage are: Marriage is a personal contract between a man and a woman; nothing is sacred, consecrated, religious or divine in the union of man and woman. A contract may be withdrawn by either party or mutually. If marriage is contractual, devoid of religious sanctity, it ceases to be a necessary condition of social life. The male or female has the choice to marry, break away, or not marry at all. In a self-respect marriage, a contract upholds equality of sex, by

implication it means that chastity is not a unisexual virtue, but is common to both sexes. Since a contract is breakable, once it is broken, the man and woman may have any other partner by remarriage. Periyar also advises the couple to wait for five years before deciding on pregnancy, and to detain themselves to one or two children, irrespective of its sex and to forget about children if they do not conceive. The woman is not a childbearing machine, says Periyar. Pregnancy is a biological burden, which is a hindrance to a woman's freedom.

Marriage, variously defined as an institution, the bedrock of procreation and family life, a gamble, a life sentence or a heaven-programmed union between two people, is an ideal medium to determine value shifts in society. Arranged marriages, not surprisingly, remain the most preferred option for most couples, but not arranged in the traditional sense. They are becoming flexible, adaptable, open-minded affairs, based on contemporary, practical and realistic factors. Match-making has come a long way from being the emotionally and socially loaded event 'fixed' by the aunt or the family *pundit*. It is now a modern industry chalked out on a bigger canvas with small middlemen playing a key role. Many marriages are fixed via matrimonial columns and matrimonial.coms.

The status of women in the family and society is another factor worth considering. The modern woman, due to her exposure to education, training and employment has developed into a self-reliant and self-confident individual. This may lead to difficulties in adjustment in families, especially for women who have lived an independent life before marriage. The scope for material prosperity has shifted social values from the spiritual and moral to the material. This change in values has encroached into the area of marriage too. The feelings of faithfulness and loyalty have become insipid and outmoded with the wave of progressive liberalism and individualism. The mass media plays an important role in changing such values. The influence of cinema, television and other media on the younger generation indirectly affects divorce rates. Besides social and cultural differences between the partners, infertility, and the social disgrace attached to it, is also a cause for divorce.

The idea that all women are meant to get married and be submissive to their husbands is given a second look when we read the novels of Manju Kapur. While Manju Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughters* is a family saga against the historical backdrop of partition, her second novel *A Married Woman* (2002) is a work of investigative reporting on the most controversial and political issue of the demolition of Babri Masjid and a woman's fascination with love and lesbianism. The novel is a kind of narrative on a woman's incompatible marriage and consequential frustration and the contemporary political turmoil in its historical context. Her third novel "*Home*" explores the complex environment of the Indian family and reveals many issues that are deep rooted within the family the revolt against the age-old traditions, quest for identity, the problems of marriage; and lastly the women's struggle for her survival.

In the first phase, the women's question emerged essentially in the context of the identity crisis of the new educated middle class. Manju Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individuals caged within the limitations of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunged into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds. The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as women caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. The writer addresses many issues that are related to the middle class women.

It is just unimaginable for Virmati to accept a physical relationship. She is obsessed by a deep sense of guilt. The formal marriage, a social and public statement, has become a compulsion for her. This alone can establish her identity even if it is as the professor's second wife. Marriage thus for her means relief from the fear of being socially condemned, a possibility which will perhaps bring her back into the fold and free her from the sense of insecurity and uncertainty. The earlier generation of her mother saw no reason to rebel. There was complete acceptance in life. Kasturi is an example of the typical feminine attitude—to produce offspring in order to bring about life and pleasure. To run her home, first a joint family and later her own, makes her content. Like Kasturi, for Ganga the Professor's wife, marriage is a religious and a social institution, where love is not necessarily the essence of marriage. She too has a superb domestic sensibility. Her cooking is enjoyed by her educated husband anglicized to a point, and who is otherwise very detached.

Just living with him, and bearing his children is enough for her. However in *Virmati*, there is a struggle between the head and the heart, the physical and moral; *Virmati* gives way to her heart and body.

*Virmati*'s daughter *Ida*, who belongs to the post independence generation, is strong and clearheaded. She breaks up her marriage as she is denied maternity by her husband. The forced abortion is also the termination of her marriage. *Ida* by severing the marriage bond frees herself from male domination and power and also from conventional social structures which bind women. She has that strength which *Virmati* lacks. *Swarna Lata*, *Virmati*'s friend, is also a lucid, strong woman. She too experiences tension with her parents over the issue of marriage but unlike *Virmati* she channelizes her energy into a new direction which gives her a sense of group identity. It also breeds ideas of radicalism and militancy but what is admirable is the fact that she can build these ideas of independence into her marriage without destroying the structure of the family. Her marriage rests on the condition that it would not slow down her work.

*Virmati* enters into a disreputable relationship with her married neighbor, the Professor. The relationship parallels India's battle for freedom, and eventually *Virmati* becomes the Professor's second wife. The book is set mostly in Amritsar and Lahore. Although *Difficult Daughters* is set in a socio-political framework with reference to the unstable events of pre-independent India in the 1940s, the main concern of Kapur is to present the readers the character of *Virmati*, an assertive and bold woman based on patriarchal culture. Kapur highlights in spite of being educated and financially independent, she undergoes a lot of suffering by being the second wife to the professor. The life of *Virmati* shows that mere education and economic independence are not enough to break the patriarchal norms. What is necessary is the determination and strong will power to assert one's self-identity.

Manju Kapur's *Virmati* and *Astha* are the two protagonists who are the reflections of a new woman. Manju Kapur's basic approach to woman's life is to liberate her from the repressive measures of patriarchy. *Virmati* is Manju Kapur's 'new woman' born in Amritsar into an austere and high minded family. The story tells how she is torn between family duties, the desire for education and illicit love. She is the eldest daughter of her parents. The whole burden of household work increases over *Virmati*, being the eldest daughter. Due to her busy routine she does not do well in her studies. She falls in love with *Harish*, a professor who is already married. She is inspired by *Shakuntala*, her first cousin's liberal views of marriage and education. *Virmati* rebels against the traditional practice of the *Arya Samaj* family, sincerely followed by her parents, her paternal grandfather and aunt. Thus, the novelist has shown *Virmati* bravely fighting against the old traditional, worn-out values which attempt to oppress the free spirit of women. When *Virmati* comes to Amritsar and gets the desired space with the professor all alone at his home first time after marriage. Her mother gives a helping hand to *Virmati* and takes her to her home. Now *Virmati* gives birth to her daughter *Ida*. She now completes a full circle and gets her long cherished freedom. It is very obvious from the life of *Virmati* that education and economic independence alone do not suffice to break the patriarchal norms. One needs to possess determination and strength of character too.

*A Married Woman* is the story of *Astha*, the only child of struggling middle class parents and their aim in life is to see her happily settled. She is married off to *Hemant*, a rich bureaucrat living in the posh colony of Delhi. In quick progression, she fulfils her responsibility of producing a daughter and a son for the family. She has everything in life, but she is frustrated. *Hemant* has an inborn inability to respect her as an equal and feels that she should be the stay-at-home wife and mother. When she takes up the job of a school teacher she feels "the pleasure of interacting with minds instead of needs" but her family always finds ways to project her incapacities. The turning point in her life is the workshop in her school by The Street Theatre Group led by the intellectual artist *Aijaz Khan*. She is given the responsibility of preparing the script for the play on *Babri Masjid*. The experience of scholarly research on the topic widens her horizons about communal attitudes in India, awakens her sense of social responsibility and brings out her creativity which is lost in her domestic responsibilities.

In childhood, her father shuns her paintings and *Hemant* neglects against her poetry but *Aijaz* has wholeheartedly admired her thoughts and opens out her personality. Few days later the news of his murder makes the cause of communal harmony more significant for her. She joins the rally for peace, make paintings on the issue for the *Manch* and conducts exhibitions. She takes the bold step of joining the protest rally in *Ayodhya* where she makes her first public speech, an appeal for religious unity. But in all this she is always walking a tightrope, with constant questioning leading to great stress and frustration. *Pipeelika*, the

widow of Aijaz is a bold, independent woman, heterosexual by nature. Astha's pain, frustration, helplessness and need to have a voice drives her to Pipeelika and they bond instantly over their personal sorrows. Sharing with her is like a healing balm to Astha, leading eventually to a powerful physical relationship based on perfect understanding of each other. Both help the other to grow but finally Astha cannot consent to Pipee's demand that she should leave Hemant and live with her. The relationship ends when Pipee decides to go abroad for further studies.

Thousands of girls sit within the four walls of their houses and wonder why they do not have the right to choose their own lives, decide for themselves whether they want to be homemakers or more. Marriage is still the reason for their birth. Freedom is more than just being permitted out for shopping with friends. Manju Kapur presents women's emancipation and strives for some space in such a manner that we read not just with our eyes but also with our heart. Kapur never permits Virmati any allegation of power of freedom. Because even as she breaks free from old prisons, she is locked into newer ones. Her relationship with the professor, for instance. ....Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow....

Thus, from the novels of Manju Kapur it is revealed that, marriage is like a no exit tunnel for majority of woman. They get trapped in the chains of marriage, breaking their own wings. The institution of marriage should not bury alive the dreams and desires of the woman. But should help her to realize her dream and without breaking her individuality.

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