

Education, Modernity, and the Gendered Production of Selfhood in the novel *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur

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Abstract

This paper examines education as a historically contingent, ideologically mediated instrument of modernity in *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur. Situating the novel within late colonial Punjab, the study argues that education functions simultaneously as emancipatory discourse and disciplinary apparatus. Through Virmati's intellectual aspirations, the text stages a complex negotiation between nationalist reform, patriarchal domesticity, and emergent feminist consciousness. Drawing upon liberal feminist theory, postcolonial feminism, Foucault's theory of disciplinary power, Spivak's subalternity, and modernity theory, this paper demonstrates that education in the novel is neither a simple vehicle of liberation nor merely a token of reformist progress. Rather, it is a site where competing ideological formations—nationalism, patriarchy, colonial modernity, and gendered subjectivity—intersect. While education generates epistemic awakening and self-reflexivity, it fails to restructure gendered power relations within the intimate domain of marriage. The paper concludes that *Difficult Daughters* critiques the liberal-modernist assumption that access to education guarantees emancipation, revealing instead the psychological, emotional, and structural limitations of reformist modernity for women in colonial India.

In *Difficult Daughters*, education operates not merely as personal advancement but as ideological terrain where competing visions of modernity, nationalism, and gender are contested. It is a symbolic site through which colonial influence, nationalist aspiration, and patriarchal control intersect. Education carries political meaning beyond individual development; it becomes an arena where the future of the nation and the role of women within it are negotiated.

During the late colonial period, women's education was championed as evidence of social reform and national progress. The educated woman signified cultural sophistication and moral advancement. Within the novel, this discourse shapes familial debates around Virmati's schooling. Her father's partial support reflects reformist ideology, while her mother's resistance embodies anxiety about social reputation and marriageability. Education thus generates ideological conflict within the household.

The college space, particularly in Lahore, represents exposure to urban modernity. English-language instruction, academic discipline, and co-educational interactions signify colonial institutional structures. Yet these institutions are also appropriated by nationalist elites as tools of empowerment. Education therefore embodies dual allegiance—simultaneously colonial in origin and nationalist in aspiration.

Importantly, education is not ideologically neutral. It produces disciplined, self-regulating subjects aligned with modern bureaucratic rationality. Respectability, punctuality, academic merit, and moral propriety become intertwined. For women, this ideological burden is heavier. They must embody modern refinement without abandoning traditional virtue. The "educated daughter" becomes a carefully balanced cultural symbol—modern in intellect, traditional in conduct.

Virmati's experience reveals the contradictions embedded in this terrain. Her education enables critical thinking and personal ambition, yet it also heightens scrutiny of her moral choices. Her relationship with Harish becomes scandalous precisely because she is educated; transgression appears more deliberate. Education, therefore, amplifies responsibility and surveillance.

By framing education as ideological terrain, Kapur underscores that knowledge is inseparable from power. Institutions shape subjectivity; families interpret schooling through cultural codes; the nation invests symbolic hope in female literacy. Education promises liberation but also regulates behavior. It mediates between public reform and private continuity.

Thus, in *Difficult Daughters*, education is not a backdrop but a contested field. It is where colonial modernity, nationalist identity, and gender hierarchy intersect—producing aspiration, anxiety, and paradox in equal measure.

This paper proposes that education in *Difficult Daughters* operates as:

1. A symbol of liberal feminist emancipation
2. A technology of colonial modernity
3. A disciplinary apparatus regulating female subjectivity
4. A site of psychological fragmentation
5. A failed bridge between public modernity and private patriarchy

Modernity in colonial India was not a neutral process of rationalization. It was mediated through colonial governance, missionary reform, and nationalist appropriation. Women's education became emblematic of a "civilized" society.

However, as Chatterjee notes, the "new woman" of nationalist discourse was modern yet spiritually traditional (Chatterjee 131). She was to be educated but modest, articulate but obedient. Virmati disrupts this template. Her desire for higher education exceeds ornamental literacy. She seeks intellectual autonomy. Her insistence that marriage must wait marks a rupture in nationalist domestication of modern womanhood.

Yet the novel exposes how deeply entrenched the "inner domain" remains. Even as Virmati gains education, domestic expectations persist. Modernity reforms surfaces while preserving structures. A liberal feminist reading of *Difficult Daughters* foregrounds access to education, individual choice, and legal-social reform as pathways to women's emancipation. Virmati's struggle for higher education aligns closely with liberal feminist principles: she demands the right to study, postpones marriage, and seeks economic independence through professional employment. Her insistence on self-determination challenges the patriarchal assumption that a daughter's destiny is confined to early marriage and domesticity. Education, in this framework, becomes a vehicle for equality—an instrument enabling women to compete in public intellectual life.

Virmati's trajectory initially appears to validate liberal feminist optimism. She attends college in Lahore, becomes a teacher, and gains financial independence. These developments signal movement into the public sphere and participation in modern institutional structures. Her academic achievements destabilize the older generation's belief that female virtue lies solely in obedience and reproductive capacity.

However, Kapur complicates this progress narrative by exposing the structural limits of liberal feminism. While Virmati acquires education and employment, she does not secure relational equality. Her marriage to Harish positions her as a second wife within a polygamous arrangement. Despite her intellectual competence, she remains emotionally dependent and socially vulnerable. The law permits her marriage; education legitimizes her professional role; yet patriarchal authority persists in domestic space.

Liberal feminism assumes that equal opportunity will produce equal status. The novel demonstrates otherwise. Access to institutions does not dismantle cultural hierarchies embedded within marriage and kinship. Harish, though educated and reform-minded, exercises control in subtle ways—prioritizing his convenience and maintaining the privileges of first-wife domestic structure. Virmati's agency is thus partial and negotiated.

Moreover, education intensifies her isolation. Her intellectual consciousness separates her from her mother's generation but does not integrate her fully into a modern egalitarian community. She inhabits a transitional zone—neither traditionally secure nor modernly fulfilled.

Through this tension, Kapur reveals that liberal feminist gains—education, employment, individual choice—are necessary but insufficient. Without structural transformation of patriarchal norms, legal and educational reforms produce what might be termed "formal equality" without substantive emancipation. The novel therefore critiques liberal feminism's faith in incremental progress by illustrating how patriarchy adapts to modernity rather than collapsing before it.

Michel Foucault's theory of discipline provides a critical lens for understanding education in the novel. Educational institutions in *Difficult Daughters* do not simply impart knowledge; they regulate behavior, produce norms, and construct modern subjects. Discipline operates through surveillance, examination, and internalized control.

Virmati's college education grants mobility, yet it also subjects her to scrutiny. Respectability becomes central. The educated woman must embody propriety, punctuality, and moral restraint. Institutions produce what Foucault terms "docile bodies"—individuals who self-regulate according to normative expectations. Virmati internalizes these standards, policing her own conduct.

Examinations and certifications function as technologies of power. Academic success becomes measurable proof of worth. This quantification aligns with colonial bureaucratic rationality. Education thereby links personal aspiration with institutional validation. Virmati's identity increasingly depends on performance within structured systems.

Importantly, discipline extends beyond campus into domestic life. The family mirrors institutional surveillance. Mothers monitor daughters; community gossip enforces conformity. The panoptic effect—constant possibility of observation—shapes behavior. Even in Lahore, spatial distance does not eliminate moral oversight; reputation travels.

Harish, as professor, embodies institutional authority. His dual role as lover and educator intensifies power imbalance. Virmati's intellectual admiration merges with emotional dependency, blurring pedagogical and personal hierarchies. Knowledge becomes intertwined with control. Yet Foucault also notes that power produces resistance. Educational spaces enable new forms of discourse. Virmati learns to articulate dissatisfaction precisely because she inhabits these institutions. Discipline creates subjects capable of critique, even if that critique remains incomplete.

Thus, education in the novel is neither purely emancipatory nor wholly oppressive. It is a disciplinary apparatus that generates modern female subjectivity—self-aware, aspirational, and internally regulated. Kapur's insight lies in demonstrating that modern institutions reshape patriarchy rather than abolish it. Freedom emerges within regulation, not outside it, producing the fractured consciousness that defines Virmati's life.

A postcolonial feminist reading foregrounds how gender intersects with colonial modernity. The nationalist movement in *Difficult Daughters* articulates resistance to British rule, yet women's voices remain circumscribed. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—resonates within the novel's structure. Virmati attempts to speak through education and choice, but her speech is mediated by patriarchal frameworks.

Colonial modernity introduces reformist discourse—female education, social uplift, rationality. However, these reforms are filtered through elite, upper-caste, urban perspectives. Virmati's access to education is itself class-inflected. Domestic servants and rural women remain peripheral, indicating layered hierarchies among women. Thus, not all female subjects occupy the same position within modernity.

Virmati's rebellion does not constitute full subaltern speech because it operates within elite structures—college education, English language, urban mobility. Her voice is audible but constrained. She cannot openly reject marriage; she negotiates within its terms. Her "speech" is compromised by dependence on male validation, particularly Harish's intellectual approval.

Moreover, the nationalist rhetoric of the "new woman" instrumentalizes female education as symbolic progress. Women become bearers of cultural authenticity while men engage in public politics. This division mirrors Partha Chatterjee's argument about the separation between "outer" (material/political) and "inner" (spiritual/domestic) domains in nationalist thought. Virmati's struggle exposes the limits of this model. The home remains sacrosanct, resistant to structural change.

Ida's retrospective narration complicates subaltern silence. By reconstructing Virmati's life, she transforms muted experience into articulated narrative. The novel itself becomes a space where suppressed female histories gain textual presence. Yet this articulation occurs within literary form—an elite medium—raising further questions about representation.

Postcolonial feminism thus reveals the layered paradox: colonialism is resisted, but patriarchy adapts and persists. Women's speech emerges, yet it remains filtered through institutional and familial power. Kapur's narrative suggests that political decolonization without gender transformation reproduces silencing in subtler forms.

Virmati's trajectory can be productively examined through psychoanalytic feminism, particularly in relation to female desire and the formation of subjectivity. Her attraction to Harish disrupts normative expectations of arranged marriage and filial obedience. Desire, in this context, is not merely romantic inclination; it is a claim to selfhood.

From a Lacanian perspective, Virmati's desire exceeds domestic containment because it is structured around lack—an aspiration toward intellectual recognition and emotional validation. Harish, as an English-educated professor, symbolizes both erotic and intellectual fulfillment. He represents access to a world beyond the confines of her natal home. However, this desire is mediated by patriarchal

discourse. Harish occupies a position of authority—older, married, academically superior. Thus, Virmati's longing is entangled with asymmetrical power. Psychoanalytic feminism emphasizes how women internalize normative codes of shame and guilt. Virmati's emotional life is saturated with anxiety. Even when she asserts autonomy, she experiences self-reproach. Her subjectivity is divided between aspiration and moral conditioning. This division produces psychic fragmentation: she desires transgression yet fears social exclusion. The secrecy of the affair intensifies repression. The hidden nature of the relationship parallels the repression of female sexuality in conservative settings. Virmati cannot articulate her desire publicly; it must operate in concealment. This secrecy produces neurosis-like symptoms—withdrawal, depression, self-doubt. Desire becomes both liberation and punishment. Importantly, psychoanalytic feminism also interrogates motherhood. After marriage, Virmati's identity becomes subsumed within maternal expectations. Her earlier erotic and intellectual longing is displaced into routine domestic life. The shift illustrates how patriarchal marriage reorganizes female desire into reproductive function. The passionate subject becomes the dutiful wife. Kapur does not romanticize desire. Instead, she reveals its ambivalence. Virmati's pursuit of love does not culminate in fulfillment but in emotional isolation. Psychoanalytically, this suggests that desire under patriarchy cannot fully resolve itself because its object is embedded in structures of inequality. Female desire becomes transformative only partially; it exposes repression but cannot dismantle its conditions. The result is heightened consciousness accompanied by psychic cost. Despite her rebellion, Virmati enters marriage. The structure absorbs her resistance. Harish's authority remains intact. Domestic hierarchy persists. Ganga's presence as first wife underscores patriarchal elasticity—men accommodate modern ideas without relinquishing privilege. Education relocates Virmati geographically but not structurally. Patriarchy adapts. Ida's narrative frame transforms *Difficult Daughters* into a text structured by generational memory. As Virmati's daughter, Ida functions not merely as narrator but as an inheritor of unresolved maternal history. Her attempt to reconstruct Virmati's life after her mother's death reflects what Marianne Hirsch conceptualizes as "postmemory"—a relationship to the past mediated through fragments, silences, and emotional residues rather than direct experience. Ida's investigation is therefore both archival and affective. Ida's own life mirrors patterns of estrangement. Her failed marriage and emotional detachment echo Virmati's isolation, suggesting that trauma is not biologically inherited but psychically transmitted. The novel implies that Virmati's emotional ambivalence—her struggle between desire and duty—creates an atmosphere that shapes Ida's understanding of intimacy. Ida grows up sensing her mother's dissatisfaction, though it remains unspoken. This silence becomes formative. Memory in the novel is unstable and layered. Ida must navigate contradictory accounts, family secrets, and gaps in narration. This fractured retrieval underscores the difficulty of accessing female history within patriarchal archives. Virmati's story was never fully articulated in her lifetime; Ida reconstructs it retrospectively. In doing so, she performs an act of feminist historiography—recovering suppressed female subjectivity. Yet Ida's recovery is not purely redemptive. Her narrative voice often carries skepticism toward Virmati's choices, especially the relationship with Harish. This ambivalence complicates maternal idealization. Ida neither wholly condemns nor celebrates her mother. Instead, she confronts the cost of Virmati's partial rebellion. The generational distance allows critical reflection, but it does not dissolve inherited tension. Thus, Ida embodies the paradox of generational transmission: she seeks understanding to escape repetition, yet she remains shaped by what she uncovers. Memory becomes both burden and agency. By narrating Virmati's life, Ida asserts interpretive authority—an epistemic autonomy denied to her mother. In this sense, generational memory functions as feminist reclamation, even as it exposes the enduring psychic consequences of incomplete emancipation. In *Difficult Daughters*, the nationalist struggle provides the historical and ideological backdrop against which personal lives unfold. Set during the final decades of British colonial rule, the novel situates its characters within an atmosphere charged with anti-colonial activism. Public discourse emphasizes freedom, self-rule, reform, and national regeneration. Education—especially women's education—is celebrated as a marker of progress and modernity. The emerging Indian nation imagines itself as enlightened, rational, and forward-looking.

Yet Kapur exposes a deep irony embedded within this rhetoric. While men participate in political debates and anti-colonial mobilization, women's struggles remain largely confined to domestic interiors. The language of freedom rarely translates into gender justice. Virmati's pursuit of higher education unfolds within this nationalist climate, but her intellectual growth does not automatically secure autonomy within familial or marital structures. Her choices—particularly her relationship with Harish—are scrutinized not as acts of self-determination but as moral transgressions.

The contradiction becomes stark: political sovereignty is demanded from colonial authority, yet patriarchal authority inside the home remains intact. Fathers decide marriages; mothers enforce domestic norms; husbands exercise emotional and social control. Even progressive, English-educated men like Harish advocate reform in theory but practice hierarchy in private life. The nationalist ideal of the "new woman" valorizes education but expects continued devotion to family and tradition. Education, therefore, becomes symbolic capital for the nation rather than a mechanism for structural gender equality. It prepares women to be better companions, mothers, and cultural bearers—but not necessarily autonomous subjects. Through this tension, Kapur critiques the incomplete modernity of nationalist reform. The novel suggests that independence from colonial rule does not automatically dismantle internal systems of domination. Freedom, in the public sphere, coexists with subordination in the domestic sphere—revealing the gendered limits of nationalist modernity.

In *Difficult Daughters*, education functions not as a straightforward emancipatory force but as a deeply paradoxical structure that both enables and constrains female subjectivity. Through Virmati's journey, Kapur reveals that education generates feminist consciousness while simultaneously embedding women within new forms of discipline and hierarchy.

First, education undeniably **generates feminist consciousness**. Virmati's exposure to higher learning introduces her to intellectual autonomy and critical thinking. Unlike her mother Kasturi, who internalizes domestic ideology, Virmati begins to question the inevitability of early marriage and the reduction of womanhood to reproduction. Her insistence on completing her studies before marriage represents a radical assertion in the socio-cultural context of pre-Partition Punjab. Education gives her the conceptual vocabulary to imagine a self beyond domestic confinement. It awakens aspiration and self-reflexivity.

However, education also **produces disciplinary subjectivity**. While it expands Virmati's intellectual world, it simultaneously intensifies her awareness of moral judgment and social surveillance. Her relationship with Harish demonstrates this tension. Even as she exercises choice, she internalizes guilt and anxiety. She constantly measures herself against social norms of respectability. The modern educated woman must not only succeed academically but also maintain moral propriety. Thus, education creates a self-monitoring subject—someone who is free to think yet conditioned to regulate her behavior within acceptable boundaries.

Education further **enables resistance**, particularly against arranged marriage. Virmati uses education strategically to delay matrimonial commitments. It becomes her shield against immediate domestic absorption. Her move to Lahore for further studies symbolizes spatial and ideological mobility. Yet this resistance is partial; it does not dismantle patriarchal authority but merely postpones confrontation.

Paradoxically, education also **reproduces hierarchy**. After marrying Harish, Virmati becomes the second wife, occupying a marginal position within a polygamous household. Despite being educated and professionally employed, she cannot escape the structural hierarchy of marriage. Harish retains authority, and Ganga's position as first wife maintains domestic precedence. Education does not redistribute power within the household. Instead, it coexists with inequality, revealing the elasticity of patriarchy.

At the same time, education undeniably **expands epistemic agency**. Virmati becomes a teacher, economically contributing and intellectually engaged. She inhabits public space, participates in academic discourse, and embodies the nationalist ideal of the "educated woman." This epistemic empowerment marks a significant departure from earlier generations.

Yet this expansion comes at a psychological cost. Education **intensifies emotional alienation**. Virmati's heightened self-awareness creates distance from her natal family, while her marital life fails to provide emotional fulfillment. She belongs fully to neither tradition nor modernity. Her loneliness is the byproduct of inhabiting an in-between space. Modernity fractures continuity without guaranteeing stability.

Thus, Kapur refuses simplistic optimism. Education in *Difficult Daughters* is neither salvation nor illusion; it is contradiction. It destabilizes but does not reconstruct. Modernity appears uneven—progressive in the public sphere yet stagnant in private structures. Through Virmati, Kapur illustrates that intellectual liberation without structural transformation produces not harmony but fragmentation. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* stages education as a contested ideological terrain. It destabilizes patriarchal certainty yet fails to restructure domestic power. Through Virmati, Kapur critiques liberal feminist teleology and nationalist modernity alike.

Education marks the beginning of female self-consciousness—but not its culmination. Modernity, in Kapur's rendering, is not liberation; it is negotiation.

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