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Shades of Inequality in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* Exploring Colour Discrimination and the Politics of Beauty

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In the landscape of Indian English literature, *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur stands as a profound narrative that bridges the personal and the political, the familial and the national, the traditional and the rebellious. Set during the tumultuous period of India's Partition, the novel navigates the life of Virmati, a woman born into an orthodox Punjabi family, who dares to carve out a space for herself in a society governed by patriarchal expectations. While the novel has been widely recognized for its feminist themes, exploring women's education, marriage, desire, and resistance, it also subtly yet significantly engages with the politics of appearance, particularly skin colour. In doing so, *Difficult Daughters* becomes not just a feminist novel, but also a postcolonial one, exposing the lingering colonial hangovers that continue to shape perceptions of female worth.

At its heart, the novel interrogates the unspoken yet deeply internalized rules that govern women's bodies and their social value. Among these rules is the silent but potent preference for fair skin, an aesthetic standard so normalized in Indian society that it often escapes critical attention. The novel does not announce this theme loudly, but through quiet observations and social interactions, it reflects how fairness is silently equated with beauty, virtue, and marital eligibility. These associations, inherited partly from India's colonial past and partly from ancient caste hierarchies, form the bedrock of what we understand today as *colourism*.

Colourism, distinct from racism, is the prejudicial or preferential treatment of individuals based on the *shade of their skin tone*, particularly within a shared racial or ethnic group. While racism generally operates across racial categories, often rooted in systemic oppression based on perceived biological differences, colourism functions within those categories, favoring lighter skin tones over darker ones. In India, this takes on a particularly complex form: a deeply entrenched bias that cuts across caste, class, and religion. Fair skin is often regarded as a symbol of social refinement, beauty, and privilege, while darker complexions are relegated to the margins, perceived as undesirable or less civilized. This distinction is crucial because it allows us to see how discrimination operates not only through overt colonial binaries (white vs. brown) but also within communities, reinforced by patriarchy and cultural norms.

The obsession with fairness in India is more than skin-deep. It manifests in marriage advertisements that seek "fair brides," in the booming industry of skin-lightening products, and in popular cinema and television, where heroines are overwhelmingly fair-skinned. Literature, as a reflection of society, inevitably mirrors these biases. Indian English novels like *Difficult Daughters* provide fertile ground for exploring how colourism is perpetuated within domestic spaces, often by women themselves, and how it influences critical life decisions such as marriage. In this sense, studying

colour discrimination in Indian English literature is not simply an academic exercise; it is an act of cultural introspection. It enables us to trace how colonial aesthetic ideals have seeped into the psyche of postcolonial societies and how women, in particular, bear the brunt of these intersecting oppressions.

The lens through which this paper approaches Kapur's novel is *Postcolonial Feminism*, a framework that is particularly suited to understanding the layered nature of oppression in postcolonial societies like India. Postcolonial feminism critiques both Western feminism for its universalizing tendencies and postcolonial theory for its gender-blindness. Scholars like *Chandra Talpade Mohanty* argue that Western feminist narratives often paint Third World women as homogenous victims, ignoring the specific cultural, historical, and economic contexts that shape their lives. Postcolonial feminism seeks to recover these voices and to analyze how patriarchy, colonialism, class, and race intersect in shaping women's identities.

Colonial legacies continue to shape the social and cultural imaginary of India, where skin color remains a marker of social hierarchy and access to privilege embedding race and caste in complex ways. (Roy 47)

Frantz Fanon's insights from *Black Skin, White Masks* help us understand how colonized subjects internalize ideals of whiteness, not only in terms of racial identity but also in beauty standards. Fanon speaks of the psychological violence inflicted when the colonized subject learns to see themselves through the eyes of the colonizer. In India, this internalization is evident in the way fair skin has become aspirational, a silent prerequisite for upward mobility and social acceptance. When applied to *Difficult Daughters*, this theory helps illuminate how Virmati and the women around her are both victims and enforcers of these internalized ideals. The politics of the body, how it looks, what it wears, how it behaves, becomes a battleground where patriarchy and postcolonial legacies collide.

This paper, therefore, argues that *Difficult Daughters* is not only a narrative of gendered resistance but also a text that subtly exposes the *mechanisms of colour-based discrimination* in postcolonial Indian society. By weaving in references to fairness, desirability, and marriage negotiations, Kapur interrogates the unspoken beauty norms that define and limit female identity. The paper will explore how colourism functions as an invisible thread in the larger fabric of gender and social expectations. Through this, it aims to reveal how beauty politics, shaped by both colonial and patriarchal values, continue to dictate the lives of women, even in the act of resisting them.

To understand the subtle but persistent impact of colourism in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, one must first trace the historical lineage of colour-based discrimination in Indian society. Unlike racism, which is often rooted in clear divisions between races, colourism is insidious in its ability to embed itself within communities, families, and even individual psyches. In India, the preference for lighter skin predates colonial rule and is further complicated by caste hierarchies, colonial ideologies, and the pervasive reach of mass media.

Historically, the Indian caste system placed the Brahmins, considered the highest in social rank, at the top of the hierarchy. These upper castes were often associated with purity, cleanliness, and indoor intellectual or religious pursuits. In contrast, the lower castes, especially Dalits and those involved in manual labour, were exposed to the sun and often had darker complexions. Over centuries, this socio-economic division developed into a visual code: fairness equated with status, refinement, and respectability, while darker skin became associated with physical labor, impurity, and subjugation. Thus, long before colonialism, skin tone was already a marker of social division, reinforced by caste-based inequality.

However, colonialism intensified and codified these prejudices. The British colonizers brought with them an aesthetic and moral preference for whiteness, both literal and metaphorical. White skin came to represent not only power and modernity but also civility, intelligence, and moral

superiority. Indian elites, especially those seeking acceptance and social mobility under British rule, began to internalize these standards. Fair skin thus became a signifier not just of beauty, but of Westernization and progress. This colonial hangover is visible in many postcolonial nations, but in India, it fused with existing caste-based biases, creating a double bind that persists to this day.

In post-Independence India, one might have expected the country to reject colonial beauty standards in favor of indigenous aesthetics. However, the opposite occurred. The postcolonial Indian middle class, eager to project modernity and global relevance, continued to equate fairness with success, desirability, and modern identity. The advertising industry, particularly from the 1970s onward, capitalized on these insecurities with products that promised transformation through lighter skin. Fairness creams such as Fair & Lovely, which entered the Indian market in 1975, became household staples. Their advertisements often followed the same narrative arc: a dark-skinned woman is overlooked or rejected, whether for a job, a role in a commercial, or a marriage proposal, but once she achieves fairness, her life transforms magically. Such narratives reinforce the belief that a woman's value is directly linked to her skin tone, and that fairness is a legitimate aspiration.

This commodification of fairness has been supported not only by consumer goods but also by India's powerful entertainment industry. In Bollywood and regional cinemas, the preference for fair-skinned heroines is striking. Even actors from darker-skinned communities are often lightened through makeup and lighting to conform to aesthetic norms. Popular culture perpetuates these ideals by rarely casting dark-skinned women as leads or romantic interests, and when they are, their skin tone is often a subject of pity or ridicule. Songs, dialogues, and characters openly praise fair skin, embedding the message deeply into collective consciousness.

Moreover, matrimonial advertisements, especially in newspapers and online platforms, continue to prioritize "fair brides." Phrases like "wheatish complexion," "fair, convent-educated," or "looking for a fair, homely girl" are still common. These reflect how deep colourist ideologies run within the institution of marriage in India. Women are trained, often from childhood, to understand that their skin tone will determine not only their desirability but their destiny. Within this landscape, beauty becomes a social performance, and fairness is its most sought-after costume. "Skin color functions as a cultural code, signifying power, status, and beauty, often reflecting broader racial and gendered inequalities." (Steele 138)

It is within this cultural and historical backdrop that Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* must be situated. Although the novel is set during the 1930s and 40s, a time of political upheaval and national redefinition, the beauty politics it depicts resonate with the colourist ideologies discussed above. The novel does not overtly sermonize on colourism, but rather, it weaves the issue subtly through descriptions of women, marriage negotiations, and family expectations. Women are assessed not only for their behavior or education, but also for their physical appearance, with fairness as a quietly understood standard of beauty.

Virmati, the novel's central character, navigates a world where a woman's body becomes a site of negotiation, not just in terms of chastity and obedience, but also in appearance. In scenes where prospective brides are evaluated, or where mothers discuss their daughters' prospects, one can sense how much silent weight is placed on looks. While Virmati attempts to transcend these boundaries through education and intellectual defiance, she remains enmeshed in a world where beauty, and particularly fair beauty, opens doors. Even her mother's disappointment in Virmati's choices is laced with the concern of social image, of how a woman's worth is always visible and judged.

Through such portrayals, *Difficult Daughters* critiques the commodification of beauty and the racialized hierarchy of skin tones, even when it doesn't center them directly. It exposes how these values are transmitted across generations, often by women themselves, mothers, aunts, matchmakers, who have internalized fairness as currency in a patriarchal economy. These dynamics make the novel not just a feminist text, but a

postcolonial one that reflects the cultural residues of both caste and colonialism. “The homogeneity of 'third world woman' as a singular monolithic subject is a fabrication of Western discourses, which ignore cultural and historical particularities.” (Chandra 65)

By placing *Difficult Daughters* within the broader history of colourism in India, we see how the novel contributes to a vital literary discourse: that of examining not only how women are controlled and silenced, but how beauty, especially fairness, is weaponized to enforce gender roles and sustain colonial hierarchies long after political freedom is won.

In Indian households, compliments often carry layered meanings. A baby’s complexion is observed in hushed excitement, “So fair, like milk!”; a teenage girl is advised not to stay too long in the sun; mothers, out of genuine care and inherited anxiety, massage their daughters with turmeric or sandalwood, hoping to preserve that “fair glow.” These seemingly innocent acts and remarks, passed down like family heirlooms, trace a quiet but powerful social current: colourism.

The preference for lighter skin in India is neither a new nor isolated phenomenon. It is an intricate web of caste, colonial legacy, and consumer culture that silently influences people’s choices, relationships, and self-worth. Long before the British arrived, Indian society already harbored colour-based preferences deeply embedded in caste dynamics. In the traditional caste system, higher castes, especially Brahmins, were associated with indoor, intellectual labor, and by extension, fairer skin. Lower castes, engaged in agricultural or manual work under the sun, were typically darker. Skin tone, then, became a visual shorthand for one’s social position, subtly linking fairness with purity and darkness with pollution. This correlation, though rarely stated explicitly, seeped into daily life, dictating standards of beauty and marriage eligibility.

Colonialism, however, didn’t just reinforce this hierarchy, it refined and institutionalized it. The British rulers, draped in white skin and white clothing, brought with them Victorian ideals of beauty, civility, and class. To the colonized mind, whiteness became synonymous with power, prestige, and desirability. British governance not only dominated the political landscape but also reshaped psychological terrain. The notion that fair skin was aspirational took deeper root, spreading across caste lines and embedding itself in the newly forming middle class. The colonized, as Fanon might argue, began to see themselves through the eyes of the colonizer, often wishing they were lighter, fairer, closer to the imagined ideal.

But the story of colourism doesn’t end with the fall of the British Empire. If anything, post-independence India saw this obsession with fairness evolve into a full-blown industry. By the 1970s, fairness creams like Fair & Lovely started appearing in households across the country. Their advertisements told predictable stories: a woman is passed over for a job or a suitor, but after lightening her skin, opportunities blossom. The message was loud and clear, fairness is not just beauty, it’s success.

These ideals were further cemented through cinema. In Bollywood, the silver screen rarely celebrated darker heroines. Leading ladies, whether North Indian or South Indian, were invariably fair-skinned, their desirability made more “marketable” with makeup and lighting. Even in songs, metaphors for beauty often revolved around whiteness, “gori” (fair girl), “chaand si” (like the moon), or “doodh jaisi” (like milk). Fairness became a visual shorthand for femininity and virtue, while darker tones were relegated to the sidelines, used for comic relief, villainy, or marginal characters. Popular culture, thus, didn’t just reflect society, it reinforced its biases, turning fairness into a social currency.

This colour preference wasn’t limited to film and TV screens. It extended into the deeply personal realm of matrimonial advertisements. Phrases like “wanted: fair, slim, educated girl” became a norm in newspapers and matrimonial websites. Here, fairness was no longer just a beauty preference, it was a marriage requirement. Prospective brides were judged not only for their education or family background but for the shade of their skin. This obsession with fairness, passed down through generations, continued to shape women’s identities, not by direct force, but through

expectation and conditioning.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters,* though set in the pre-independence era, reflects this cultural inheritance with remarkable subtlety. The novel follows Virmati, a young woman navigating a world of familial duty, romantic desire, and educational aspiration. In her journey, one can sense how appearance, particularly feminine beauty shaped by fairness, plays a silent but potent role. While Virmati resists arranged marriage and yearns for intellectual freedom, the world around her continues to judge women by their looks. In family gatherings, matchmaking scenes, or the comparisons between daughters, we witness how beauty, often equated with fair skin, is valued as a crucial asset in determining a woman's worth.

What is most compelling in *Difficult Daughters* is how the politics of fairness are passed on not just by men, but by women, mothers, aunts, and elder sisters, who have internalized these ideals themselves. The desire to secure a "good" match for their daughters, the fear of social shame, and the weight of generational expectations compel women to uphold the very standards that restrict them. This cyclical inheritance, of fairness as virtue and beauty as social capital, forms the emotional and cultural bedrock of the novel.

Kapur doesn't offer overt critique, but her portrayal invites readers to observe. In the quiet spaces between conversations, in the choices characters make, and in what they value or fear, we witness how colourism intersects with patriarchy, shaping women's destinies. In positioning *Difficult Daughters* within the broader discourse of fairness as commodity and colourism as social ideology, we see how Indian English literature becomes a mirror to society, a reflection not only of resistance and rebellion but also of the lingering shadows of colonized minds and commodified beauty.

In the layered struggle for identity, women in postcolonial societies find themselves caught at the crossroads of history and gender. They inherit the weight of colonial subjugation while simultaneously navigating the age-old chains of patriarchy. To understand the complexity of their experience, we turn to Postcolonial Feminist Theory, a framework that does not treat gender as a universal experience but situates it within the nuanced contexts of culture, history, and power. In Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, the relevance of this theory becomes evident as we examine how colourism, tied deeply to colonial inferiority and gender expectations, plays a quiet but persistent role in shaping female lives.

Postcolonial feminism emerged as a necessary response to the shortcomings of Western feminism, which often spoke for "all women" without considering the cultural, racial, or economic differences that define the lived experiences of women in the Global South. Scholars like Chandra Talpade Mohanty have critiqued how women from non-Western societies are frequently represented as passive victims, devoid of agency or complexity. In her seminal work *Under Western Eyes*, Mohanty argues against the portrayal of a "universal woman" and instead advocates for the recognition of cultural specificity, the ways in which history, colonialism, religion, and social norms influence gendered experiences.

This emphasis on contextualized gender realities helps us better understand Virmati's world in *Difficult Daughters.* She is not merely a woman struggling against patriarchy; she is a woman doing so within a postcolonial Indian society still grappling with the residues of British cultural domination. Her rebellion, through education, through love, through marriage, is shaped not only by Indian familial traditions but also by inherited colonial standards of respectability, modernity, and beauty.

One of the more insidious legacies of colonialism lies in the realm of appearance, particularly the internalized preference for fair skin. Here, we turn to Frantz Fanon, a foundational postcolonial thinker. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon explores how colonized subjects internalize the ideals of their oppressors, leading to a psychological inferiority complex. He writes, "The colonized is elevated above his fellows in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards." In many colonized cultures, this included the European ideal of beauty, specifically, white or fair skin.

In India, this preference was not invented by colonialism, but it was certainly intensified by it. As Fanon would argue, fair skin came to symbolize access to privilege, power, and modernity. Even after political independence, many Indians, especially the upwardly mobile middle class, continued to view fairness as desirable. This internalized colonial aesthetic did not just influence individuals; it shaped industries, media, and social practices. It became a quiet but persistent voice whispering into the ears of mothers, daughters, and brides-to-be: fairer is better.

In this context, beauty becomes a site of control, particularly for women. Under patriarchy, a woman's value is often assessed based on how well she conforms to societal ideals of appearance and behavior. In postcolonial settings, these ideals are doubly burdened, with traditional expectations on one side, and colonial hangovers on the other. Fair skin, slim bodies, delicate manners, and subdued voices become symbols of "marriageability," and by extension, family honor. Beauty, thus, is no longer a personal trait, it is a social weapon, used to reward conformity and punish deviation.

In *Difficult Daughters*, these ideas do not shout; they whisper in the margins of everyday life. Virmati's family, like many others, measures worth through a subtle but clear lens of appearance. Marriage proposals are often tied to physical attractiveness, where beauty is shorthand for worthiness. While Virmati seeks education and autonomy, the societal lens continues to evaluate her on how well she fits the mold of the ideal daughter and wife. This evaluation is not limited to men; it is perpetuated by mothers, sisters, aunts, women who, having internalized these ideals, now transmit them as survival tools to the next generation.

Here, Mohanty's critique becomes especially relevant. She warns us not to assume that all women are victims in the same way. The women in *Difficult Daughters* are both enforcers and sufferers of patriarchal norms. Their complicity is not a moral failing, but a reflection of a deeper structural condition. They are navigating a world where beauty is a currency and fairness is a kind of social capital that buys acceptance, marriage, and security.

Postcolonial feminist theory, then, allows us to read *Difficult Daughters* not just as a story of personal rebellion but as a social text, one that reveals how the bodies of women become battlefields for cultural and colonial conflicts. The politics of skin colour, while never the central plot, remain part of the atmospheric pressure that shapes decisions, silences desires, and narrows freedoms.

In conclusion, *Difficult Daughters* offers a compelling canvas to explore how postcolonialism and patriarchy intersect, often in the most intimate aspects of life, appearance, marriage, and womanhood. By reading it through the lens of postcolonial feminist theory, we do not just see the oppression; we see its origins, its quiet pervasiveness, and the small acts of resistance that women like Virmati begin to carve out. In her struggle, and in the societal forces around her, we find a mirror, reflecting not only the past but the persistent questions of identity, beauty, and autonomy in postcolonial womanhood.

In *Difficult Daughters,* Manju Kapur vividly portrays the entanglement of skin tone with social desirability and upward mobility, especially in the context of marriage, the most pivotal institution shaping a woman's life in mid-20th century Indian society. The novel captures how fairness is not merely a matter of physical appearance but is intricately linked to perceptions of virtue, social worth, and familial honor. Through scenes of marriage negotiations, proposals, and family assessments, Kapur reveals the subtle yet powerful ways in which colour discrimination operates as a gatekeeper of opportunity and acceptance.

One of the most telling aspects of the novel is how Virmati's skin tone and that of other female characters come under scrutiny during marriage discussions. Virmati, the protagonist, is described as having a relatively fair complexion compared to some of her peers, which initially places her in a more favorable position within the marriage market. Yet, even Virmati is painfully aware of the pressures and judgments related to appearance.

Her mother and extended family constantly weigh her desirability not just on the basis of her education or character, but also on her complexion, which is seen as a key factor in securing a "good" match.

In one significant scene, the matchmaking process unfolds with an almost clinical assessment of Virmati's attributes, where skin tone subtly colors the conversation. A potential suitor's family expresses preference for fair-skinned brides, reflecting the entrenched bias that equates lighter skin with purity, cleanliness, and better health. This preference is not incidental but tied deeply to historical and social prejudices, which associate fairness with upper-caste status and Westernized notions of beauty introduced during colonial times. Virmati's fair complexion is thus interpreted as a symbol of her family's social standing and suitability for a prosperous marriage alliance.

Fairness becomes a currency within matrimonial ads, family negotiations, and community gossip, all of which are depicted with sharp insight in the novel. Matrimonial advertisements frequently emphasize fairness as a desirable quality, reflecting the commodification of skin tone. These ads often highlight "fair, educated, and well-settled" women as ideal brides, underscoring how fairness is interwoven with social mobility. A fair-skinned bride is not only considered more beautiful but is also thought to bring honor and prestige to her new family. This conflation of physical appearance with moral and social virtues demonstrates the symbolic power of colour in shaping life trajectories.

Virmati's internal struggles highlight how these societal ideals permeate personal identity and self-worth. Though she is relatively fair, Virmati is acutely conscious of how her family's approval depends on conforming to these beauty norms. At times, her self-perception is clouded by doubts about her desirability, a reflection of the larger cultural conditioning that values women primarily as objects of marriage and social exchange. Her narrative reveals the emotional toll of living under such scrutiny, where her worth is measured by an arbitrary and exclusionary standard.

Conversely, darker-skinned women in the novel face overt exclusion and diminished prospects. Kapur portrays these characters as often sidelined or deemed less desirable, which perpetuates cycles of marginalization and limits their agency. This dynamic is poignantly illustrated in family conversations where fairness is linked directly to notions of virtue and upward mobility. Darker complexions are unfairly associated with lower social status, less refinement, and even questionable character, a set of assumptions that reinforces caste and class hierarchies under the guise of aesthetic preference.

The portrayal of marriage negotiations in *Difficult Daughters* thus becomes a powerful lens to examine how colour discrimination operates as a social regulator. Family elders and matchmakers act as gatekeepers who enforce these norms, often prioritizing skin tone over personal qualities or individual happiness. Virmati's experience illustrates the tension between her own aspirations and the communal pressures she faces, making her story a compelling critique of a society that privileges appearance over substance.

Moreover, fairness as a marker of desirability intersects with the larger postcolonial context of India's evolving identity. The colonial legacy, which elevated European features as ideals of beauty, continues to shape matrimonial choices long after independence. Kapur's novel subtly critiques this legacy by revealing the emotional and social costs borne by women who must navigate these inherited prejudices. Virmati's life, caught between tradition and modernity, embodies the contradictions of a society still grappling with colonial influence and its impact on gender and social relations.

Difficult Daughters uses the institution of marriage to expose the intricate ways skin tone shapes women's lives. Through Virmati and other characters, the novel lays bare how fairness is linked to virtue, desirability, and social mobility, functioning as a powerful but exclusionary ideal. Marriage negotiations and family judgments serve as microcosms where these biases play out with real consequences, reinforcing patriarchal and

colonial power structures. Kapur's narrative thus invites readers to critically reflect on how colour discrimination continues to influence gender and social dynamics in India, underscoring the need for greater awareness and resistance to these enduring prejudices.

In Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, colourism is not simply an external social prejudice imposed by men or society at large, it is a complex, internalized force, often perpetuated by women themselves. Mothers, aunts, and elder female relatives, despite being victims of patriarchal control, play a critical role in maintaining and transmitting colour bias across generations. This internalization shapes female identities, restricts agency, and exerts a profound psychological impact, especially on young women navigating adolescence and courtship.

The figure of Kasturi, Virmati's mother, exemplifies this dynamic. As a woman deeply rooted in traditional norms, Kasturi's attitudes towards marriage, respectability, and appearance reflect a worldview where skin tone, often unspoken but always understood, is a crucial marker of worthiness. Kasturi's concern is not just for Virmati's education or moral character but for how she appears to others, how she fits the ideal of the "good daughter" whose skin tone, demeanor, and marriage prospects bring honor to the family. Her insistence on grooming Virmati to conform is an expression of survival within a society that judges women by these standards. Far from being a mere enforcer, Kasturi herself is a product of this conditioning, having learned to value fairness and external beauty as pathways to social acceptance and security.

Similarly, aunts and elder women in the novel embody this transmission of colour bias, often using their experiences as cautionary tales or practical advice for younger women. Their voices carry the weight of lived histories where darker skin was linked to fewer opportunities, diminished desirability, and limited social mobility. Their warnings, critiques, and sometimes subtle shaming remarks reveal how deeply ingrained these biases are, regardless of women's own suffering under patriarchal systems. Through their voices, the novel highlights how colourism is perpetuated from within families, often disguised as concern, love, or pragmatism.

This internalized bias manifests in how darker-skinned female characters experience shame and reduced agency. Though Kapur does not foreground a particular dark-skinned protagonist as central, the peripheral characters, cousins, and acquaintances in the narrative show the unspoken but palpable disadvantage faced by those who do not fit the fair-skinned ideal. These women often remain on the margins of family attention, receive fewer marriage proposals, or must accept matches considered inferior. Their experiences are marked by invisibility and undervaluation, reinforcing a social hierarchy where skin tone is a critical axis of discrimination.

The psychological burden of this discrimination becomes especially visible in moments of adolescence and courtship, stages of life where identity formation and social acceptance are intensely felt. Young women like Virmati, caught between personal desires and societal expectations, absorb these messages early on. The constant comparison to fairer peers or cousins fosters a sense of alienation, a feeling that their natural selves are inadequate. This leads to self-consciousness, anxiety, and a diminished sense of worth. The adolescent girl's struggle is not just about finding love but about reconciling her body and appearance with the ideals imposed upon her.

Frantz Fanon's postcolonial insights provide a powerful lens to understand these internalized dynamics. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon explores how colonized subjects develop a fractured identity through what he terms mimicry, the attempt to emulate the colonizer's standards in order to gain acceptance, and alienation, the painful realization of never fully belonging to either the colonized or the colonizer's world. Women in *Difficult Daughters* enact this mimicry by striving to embody the Europeanized ideal of beauty, fair skin, slender features, and delicate comportment, in hopes of social mobility and acceptance. However, this mimicry comes with a psychological cost: the alienation from their own bodies, cultures, and selves.

This alienation is especially acute for adolescent girls whose identities are still forming. They face a double bind: the desire to be accepted

by family and society requires adherence to beauty standards that often feel foreign or unattainable. The emotional toll includes lowered self-esteem, internal conflicts, and at times, resentment towards their own heritage or community. Virmati's subtle insecurities and moments of self-doubt, woven throughout the narrative, echo this internal struggle.

Moreover, Fanon's notion that colonial ideals become the invisible norm through which all worth is measured sheds light on how even resistance can be complicated. Virmati's pursuit of education and autonomy, while revolutionary, does not fully free her from these ideals. She remains entangled in the politics of appearance, knowing that her skin tone and demeanor will influence her social and marital prospects. This reflects the ambivalence of mimicry, it offers a way to navigate power structures but risks reinforcing the very systems it seeks to challenge.

The psychological impact extends beyond individual identity to influence relational dynamics. During courtship and marriage negotiations, young women internalize the judgment of families, prospective suitors, and community elders. Their sense of self-worth is constantly measured against an invisible scale of fairness and beauty. Failure to meet these expectations can lead to social exclusion, stigma, or pressure to conform through cosmetic or behavioral changes.

Difficult Daughters exposes the quiet, painful ways in which colourism is internalized and perpetuated by women within the family. Through characters like Kasturi and the social milieu surrounding Virmati, the novel reveals how deeply colonial legacies and patriarchal expectations are inscribed in women's psyches. Fanon's concepts of mimicry and alienation provide a critical framework to understand the fractured identities and emotional struggles faced by women caught between inherited ideals and their own emerging selves. This internalized colour bias shapes female identity profoundly, impacting not just appearance but the very possibility of agency, acceptance, and self-love.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a nuanced exploration of a young woman's struggle not only against the strictures of patriarchy but also against the pervasive and often invisible norms surrounding female beauty and desirability. While much of the novel reveals how colourism and appearance-based judgments are internalized and reinforced by women themselves, it also presents moments of subtle, poignant resistance. The protagonist, Virmati, embodies this tension, she challenges traditional gender roles with courage and conviction, yet simultaneously grapples with the deep-seated appearance norms that shape her sense of self.

Virmati's resistance to traditional roles is most evident in her decision to pursue higher education and assert autonomy in her marital choices. At a time when women were expected to marry young, be submissive, and prioritize family honor above personal aspirations, Virmati's insistence on continuing her studies is a radical act of defiance. She refuses to accept the life scripted for her by society and family, disrupting the expectations imposed on daughters to be obedient and compliant. This rebellion challenges the very foundation of the marriage market and the gendered power relations embedded within it.

However, this act of defiance is complicated by Virmati's internalization of other social norms, including those related to appearance and skin tone. Though she pushes against patriarchal control, she is not entirely free from the desire to conform to ideals of beauty and fairness that are valorized by her family and community. Virmati's reflections and interactions reveal moments where she measures herself and others by these standards, showing the deep psychological grip such norms hold. For instance, she experiences self-consciousness about her looks and compares herself to lighter-skinned women, suggesting that resistance to patriarchal expectations does not automatically dissolve internalized colour biases.

This duality in Virmati's character reflects the complex reality of social change, it is rarely absolute or linear. Resistance often coexists with accommodation, and personal rebellion can be circumscribed by the very systems it seeks to challenge. Virmati's nuanced portrayal invites readers to

recognize that breaking free from societal norms is a layered, ongoing process rather than a singular, triumphant act.

Beyond Virmati, the novel presents other subtle acts of resistance to beauty norms, often in the form of quiet endurance or refusal to engage with the marriage market on conventional terms. Some women in the story, marginalized for their darker skin or less "desirable" features, carve out lives defined by intellectual pursuits or emotional resilience rather than external validation. These acts may seem small or insufficient in a society that equates fairness with value, but they serve as important gestures of autonomy and self-definition.

Moreover, *Difficult Daughters* critiques the societal obsession with beauty norms without offering neat resolutions. Kapur's narrative exposes how these norms are deeply embedded in cultural practices, family dynamics, and individual psyches. The novel lays bare the tensions and contradictions of a society in transition, a postcolonial India caught between tradition and modernity, where old hierarchies persist even as new opportunities emerge. This critique is embodied in Virmati's story, which ends without a clear victory over colourism or patriarchal control, underscoring the enduring nature of these struggles.

Kapur's refusal to resolve these tensions invites reflection on the complexity of social change. By portraying resistance as imperfect and ongoing, the novel honors the lived realities of women who negotiate multiple, often conflicting pressures. It suggests that true transformation requires not only challenging external structures but also confronting internalized beliefs and biases. In this way, *Difficult Daughters* becomes a powerful meditation on the slow, painful process of self-discovery and social critique.

In conclusion, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* presents a layered exploration of women's resistance to beauty norms, embodied most poignantly in Virmati's character. Her defiance of traditional gender roles coexists with her internalization of appearance-based standards, illustrating the complex interplay between rebellion and conformity. The novel's critique of societal beauty ideals is profound, even as it acknowledges the absence of easy solutions. This nuanced portrayal invites readers to empathize with the multifaceted challenges women face and to recognize that resistance, though often incomplete, is a vital step toward greater agency and self-definition.

This study has brought to light the pervasive and complex nature of colour discrimination as depicted in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, revealing how deeply it is entwined with gendered expectations and postcolonial power dynamics in Indian society. Through the narrative of Virmati and her family, the novel exposes colourism not simply as a superficial preference but as a systemic tool that shapes women's lives, dictating their marriage prospects, social standing, and even their self-worth. The research underscores that colour discrimination cannot be seen in isolation; rather, it operates at the intersection of entrenched patriarchal norms and the lingering legacies of colonialism, which valorized fair skin as a marker of superiority and modernity.

One of the key insights is how colonial beauty standards continue to haunt contemporary Indian culture, manifesting in everyday practices such as matrimonial advertisements, media portrayals, and consumer industries centered around fairness creams. These standards reinforce a narrow and exclusionary ideal of beauty that marginalizes darker-skinned women, perpetuating cycles of shame, limited agency, and internalized oppression. Importantly, the novel and this analysis reveal that women themselves, even as they resist patriarchal control, sometimes unknowingly reproduce these biases, highlighting the complexity of social conditioning and the challenges of transformative change.

The postcolonial feminist lens used in this study illuminates how beauty becomes a site of power, where women's bodies are regulated not only by men but also by cultural expectations inherited from colonial histories. This intersectional approach helps us understand that combating colourism requires more than addressing gender inequality alone, it demands confronting the racialized hierarchies embedded in societal values and

personal identities.

Looking forward, this research opens several avenues for further exploration. Comparative studies could examine how colour discrimination is portrayed in other Indian English novels, such as Kamala Markandaya's *Nectar in a Sieve* or Shashi Deshpande's *That Long Silence*, to trace continuities and divergences in narrative strategies and thematic concerns. Additionally, visual media like Bollywood films and television serials, with their powerful role in shaping public perceptions of beauty, deserve critical scrutiny for their reinforcement or subversion of colourist ideals. Advertising and consumer culture also provide rich ground to study how fairness is commodified and how resistance movements like campaigns for "dark is beautiful" are reshaping these narratives.

Addressing colour discrimination in India is not just about changing appearances or challenging preferences; it is about dismantling the historical and cultural structures that assign worth based on skin tone. By recognizing the intertwined legacies of colonialism, patriarchy, and caste, scholars, activists, and cultural producers can work toward fostering a more inclusive and equitable understanding of beauty, one that celebrates diversity rather than enforces conformity. *Difficult Daughters* thus stands as a compelling call to interrogate and resist colourism, inviting readers to reflect on the silent yet powerful forces that shape women's lives and identities.

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