DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

Rama Mehta’s *Inside the Haveli* portrays a young educated woman who carves out her own identity as a ‘new woman’ living within the ambit of tradition. She neither shatters the ancestral dignity nor gives up essentials of modernity. Jai Nimbkar’s *A Joint Venture* also deals with an educated woman who finally emerges as a more matured woman, and comes to grips with herself. She is bold in her self-assertion and wades towards meaning of life, identity and her own individuality. Githa Hariharan’s *The Thousand Faces of Night* presents the emergence of a new woman who is true to her own self. Dissatisfied with the age-old norms that emphasize woman’s passive role as a wife, the woman protagonist attempts to establish a new order and a new sense of identity. She succeeds in transforming her status from that of victimization to empowerment. In Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things*, the woman protagonist, fights against the centuries-old oppression that society has inflicted upon women. She lives the life of a rebel and a non-conformist.

Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* deals with the yearning struggle of women to establish an identity. It is about a woman who is shredded by conflictual forces and torn apart by oppositional structures in life. The protagonist is caught between the dilemma of family duty
and personal desires. Yet she gives preference to the latter and amidst extensive physical and emotional turmoil, exercises her choice which creates further emotional rift between herself and others. The novel focuses on the struggle of an educated young woman of middle-class against the norms of a family that cherishes old values of arranged marriage. It is thus the search of the protagonist for autonomy and selfhood. India’s history of freedom and the protagonist’s struggle for freedom and identity run parallel to each other.

In this novel Kapur deals with the lives of women, who attempt to create an identity for themselves during the period when India was politically unstable and undergoing a major historical catastrophe, the partition of 1947. The story is of three generations—Kasturi the mother of Virmati, Virmati who is the main protagonist, and Ida, the daughter of Virmati. In the words of Sharma, “The novel illustrates her (Virmati’s) transition from the restrictions of family structure to a life of freedom and choice.” (Sharma, 21)

Virmati belongs to a conservative Punjabi family who lives in Lahore before Independence and settles in Amritsar after Independence. From the very beginning she has been brought up in a traditional patriarchal Indian society which confined woman to the four walls of the house. The head of the family, Virmati’s grand father, is progressive
enough in his outlook to think that basic education is necessary for girls. However, he too agrees with the societal norms that higher education should be banned for girls. Being the eldest child of the ever pregnant Kasturi, Virmati has to look after ten younger siblings where her life is smeared under the pressure of family responsibilities. She has to play the role of a second mother for her brothers and sisters, do the most oppressive of the daily chores in the house and is often abused by her mother, without any apparent reason. She never gets affection, love, care and attention from her mother which she expects, naturally, as a child. All the time she is rebuked and admonished by her mother who grumbles that, “I am tired of knitting and sewing ... What is all this nonsense? In Amritsar you were bad-tempered because you were busy and tired, here you are bad-tempered because you are idle.” (Kapur, 10-11) Virmati doesn’t like the idea of marriage and childbearing immediately after her high school study. She does not listen to her mother who persuades her to get married. Inspired by her cousin, Shakuntala, she thinks that it is possible for a girl to be something other than a wife. She longs to have her own space, identity and freedom. However at seventeen she is engaged to Inderjeet, an irrigation engineer.

Virmati falls in love with the romantic Harish Chandra who lives as a tenant in her aunt’s home with his wife and children. He is a married Professor returned from Oxford two years ago and had landed
in Amritsar at the request of one of his friend’s father who was on board of trustees of Arya Sabha College, Amritsar. He is enticed by a salary of two hundred and thirty rupees, twenty rupees more than what he gets at a college in Waltair. Virmati and all other female members of her family develop intimacy with the professor’s family. It actually starts with the exchange of food materials.

Gradually, Virmati gets herself tangled in the web of Harish’s love. His constant pleading of intense love makes the matter so worse for her that she even decides to end her life by drowning herself in the canal but is fortunately rescued by the servants. When she attempts suicide and is rescued, the family members doubt: “Was this all her education had taught her? To put herself before others and damn the rest?” (79) They lock her in the godown during day time. She is angry and doesn’t know why she is locked in the godown like a sack of wheat or dal. Indumati, her younger sister, is married off to Inderjit when Virmati is locked up. With the help of Paro, her little sister, Virmati and the professor exchange love letters. She never addresses him directly, and closes her letter with the alphabet “V”. The professor uses the words “precious love,” “Viru, love,” “Viru sweet heart,” “Vir darling,” to address her and closes the letter with “H”.

Virmati undergoes the agony and humiliation of failed love with a married man and after an unsuccessful suicide attempt, wants to change
herself. She convinces her parents to let her join in a training college in Lahore for her B.Ed. degree. She rebels and insists on her right to higher education. She doesn’t yield to the age old traditions of Arya-Samaj family. When permission is granted by her father, Virmati decides to go to Lahore to complete the B.T. course, despite strong protest by her mother, Kasturi, who is totally dissatisfied with her daughter and says, “God has put you on earth to punish me.” (102) Kasturi accompanies Virmati to Lahore and puts her in a hostel. Virmati’s refusal to marry Inderjeet, she is engaged to, reveals her rebellious nature. Reena Kothari opines, “Her rebellion against her traditional Arya Samaj family in postponing her marriage and then refusing to marry the person she was engaged to, suggests a radical rebellious act, and provokes the reader to assume that she will succeed in carving out a niche for herself.” (Kothari, 106) Suman Bala too thinks on similar lines in calling Virmati a rebel and praises her for being assertive and bold when she remarks:

Virmati’s initial rebellion against her very traditional Arya Samaj family ... in first postponing her marriage and then refusing to marry the person she was engaged to, constitutes a radical rebellious act, which predicts an individual, who would go on to carve out a niche for herself, and make a personal exemplary feminist statement. Her stoic and heroic suffering for the sake of her love, and marriage to Professor Harish Chandra, who is already married to Ganga and has a child, point towards a ‘self’ which is tenacious and assertive. (Bala, 152)
Virmati is a young docile girl but Harish is matured, married and free to follow his whims as he is the lord in the patriarchal society. She falls in love with him and to give legitimacy to her love, she strives for marriage with him inspite of her family’s opposition and, in the process, becomes “... the black sheep of the family.” (104) While love brings happiness for him, it robs Virmati of even the little peace of mind that she earlier has. While the woman faces ignominy and life stigmatised, the man pretends as if nothing has changed. She looks up to him as her ideal, but Harish selfishly thinks about his own needs, his own cravings. He keeps sending a list of all that she has to do through letters but never bothers to face Virmati’s parents and propose marriage. On the one hand he leaves her alone to face humiliation and on the other, he keeps instigating her to revolt against her family. He writes to her:

Do you know how an earthworm lives? It inhibits an extremely limited space ... uneducated people are like that. We are being murderers towards ourselves if we do not develop our intellect. Any part of us that is not used will atrophy and die ... it was through your desire to learn that we were first drawn to each other. (94)

By introducing Virmati to the canons of English Literature, the great western civilisations, and the nuances of cultured living, Harish succeeds in providing her a false feeling of woman’s emancipation. After meeting him and getting no suggestions from him it is clear to her that “... she could not depend upon the Professor to sort out any
domestic situation. It was up to her.” (63) She does not retaliate, nor does she feel resentment but follows his orders little realising his selfishness. It is not her education or the development of her personality that the man is interested in, it is rather his need for her and also the fact that for as long as Viramti does not leave the safety of her home, he would not be free to prey on her. Lahore is to serve more as their rendezvous than a seat of learning. He continued his clandestine love affairs with her, going to Lahore very often.

Viramti, who is first attracted to Harish, for his love of freedom and individuality, willingly loses her identity. To liberate herself from family pressures, she believes that education is the only means but falls prey to Harish’s snare. She realises how vulnerable her position is and pressurises him to marry her so that there will be some respectability to their relationship. She holds him responsible for all that has happened to her – breaking of her engagement, blackening of her family’s name, being locked up inside her house and sent later to Lahore etc. She accuses him thus:

Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people will say if they find out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace ... and why? Because I am an idiot ... ‘Now you want to prolong the situation. Why don’t we get married? Be honest with me. I can bear anything but this continuous irresolution. Swarna is right. Men do take advantage of women! (137-138)
Her furtive meetings with Harish in the safe haven of one of his friend’s residence inside the campus lands her in yet another difficult situation of being pregnant with his child. On the pretext of her preparation for her B.T. Examination, she rushes to her place only to talk to Harish. But by that time he has left Amritsar for his village for the Mundan ceremony of his son. Not knowing what to do, Virmati returns to her hostel, confides to Swarnalatha, her roommate, who comes to her rescue in getting her pregnancy terminated. Her family knows nothing about the goings-on. The news of Ganga’s pregnancy makes Virmati to think of starting her studies again. She does not want “…to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed.” (85) Shilpi Rishi Srivastava remarks that, “…the journey of ‘a new woman’ starts…” (Srivastava, 17)

The act of abortion with the help of a friend and the shame and humiliation of an illegitimate baby becomes too much for Virmati to bear. She completes her B.A in Lahore. However, at each point in her life, whenever she encounters freedom, Harish’s presence in her life impedes her decisions she make. Virmati, no doubt, is revolutionary in spirit and fights for her rights at every stage of her life. She is also capable of managing her situations in moments of crisis. But every time she rebels and aspires to live a freer life, she is condemned because of Harish whom she loves.
Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent being in love. Wasting it. (131)

She becomes critical of herself and wants to curb her longing for enhanced intimacy with him. She desires to realise her strength and regain her self respect through education and profound competence.

Inspite of her frequent requests, Harish is reluctant to marry her. He seems just another chauvinist steeped in patriarchal traditions. He is a hypocrite who, at his own convenience, has moulded his opinions about social traditions and sexually exploits Virmati:

> What can I do? I am hemmed in and tortured on all sides. I know I have been unfair to her- I know. And yet what can I do?’ Harish turned an agitated face to the poet. ‘Everybody will condemn me, her. My children will never accept it, nor my mother. You know the constraints. Surely I need not explain my self to you! (185)

Luckily for Virmati, she is offered Principalship of a girls’ school, Pratibha Kanya Vidyalaya, at Nahan where nobody knows about her past. But Harish follows her even to Nahan and much against her wishes, goes to bed with her and becomes responsible for the termination of her services in the school. At Nahan Virmati makes a wrong choice that is to return to a relationship that brought her only suffering. Whenever Virmati speaks about their marriage, Harish has his
own genuine reasons and excuses. In Delhi, on her way to Shantiniketan, she contacts an acquaintance who is also a friend of Harish. It is this friend who persuades him to marry Virmati. Ultimately their marriage takes place in the house of Harish’s friend. In this regard, the remarks of Christopher Rollason are pertinent when he says, “The glimpse of a spiritual awakening, of a renewed autonomy, fades into the distance.” (Rollason, 180)

Virmati is unwelcomed by his family as expected. On reaching home, by the remarks of the family members and sometimes introduced as gandy lady to the children of Ganga, Virmati is forced to realise; “I should never have married you ... and it’s too late now. I’ve never seen it so clearly. It’s not fair.” (195) Virmati succeeds in marrying Harish, but she fails to secure any space for herself in his family. As a second wife, she is resented by the first wife, Ganga, her children, her mother-in-law and ostracized by her own family. Ganga, as the first wife, exercises her full right on everything. Her each and every movement is restricted by both Ganga and Kishori Devi, her mother-in-law. She finds herself as a pariah in the family and wondered drearily “… whether this isolation would continue till the end of her life.” (199)

Ganga, the first wife of Harish, is married to him at the age of three years. Her mother never bothered to send her to school instead has trained her in good housekeeping. Ganga enters her in-laws house at the
age of twelve, and tries to prove herself as a good housewife, but has never made any attempt to be an intellectual companion to her husband. She is the mother of his children, and is anxious to protect their present and future. To her, marriage is a religious and social institution where love has no importance at all. After Harish’s marriage with Virmati, Ganga protests at first, but her protest is weakened after few days. Ganga, being illiterate and having been married in childhood, is faithful to her husband as a typical Hindu wife. She believes that Indian wives suffer but are able to adjust themselves tremendously. She feels isolated with the entry of Virmati. She knows that she has to fight her own struggle. She serves him as a chattel, while Virmati, the second wife serves as a vassal for his sexual gratification and intellectual stimulation.

Harish thinks that Ganga, his illiterate wife, could never prove a soul mate. He wails out the social disparity in thoughts: “They do not recognize that I need the companionship of an educated, thinking woman nor that I feel lonely and desolate among all these people who care for me.” (86) Now Harish finds an educated and thinking wife in Virmati. However, like a traditional wife, Virmati wants to take care of all the chores and responsibilities of a wife. She doesn’t feel complete without doing them. On the contrary, Harish treats his second wife a companion, a company for his thoughts and academics. He tells the
same to Virmati. “You are my other self. Let her wash my clothes, if she feels like it. It has nothing to do with me. I don’t want a washerwoman. I want a companion.” (201)

Virmati becomes pregnant, and her mother-in-law now takes care of her and shows concern for her. But, unfortunately she suffers a miscarriage and Harish sends Virmati to Lahore to do her M.A which, he thinks, will bring her out of her depression. There she lives with her husband, but later it becomes difficult for him to come to Lahore frequently since he is promoted as the Principal of AS College. Virmati returns after her M.A. course and comes to know that her husband’s family has been shifted to Kanpur because of communal tension. Ganga and the family go to their home town and Virmati gets united to Harish. Legally she becomes the second wife of Harish and once they shift to Delhi, she acquires the much awaited status of wife and mother of a daughter. Still she never feels that belongingness which a newly married couple should do. She feels depressed and alienated. She attempts to find out her identity and her freedom. “I feel so utterly left out, so utterly cold. Will there be any change in my life, I wonder?” (235)

Lack of love and humiliation from the family makes Virmati steadfast to uphold her right to self-assertion through education at Lahore and through economic independence by becoming a teacher in a
school at Nahan. However in her pursuit of identity, she loses it at every stage and struggles to make space for herself on her own.

Even as a child, Virmati never likes to be like Kasturi, her mother who is only a home maker. Kasturi, on the other hand, wants to groom Virmati to be one like her. In a patriarchal family, it becomes painful for an elder daughter like Virmati to enjoy her childhood under the pressure of responsibilities. “The conditioning begins at home and women are supposed to walk from mother’s womb into mother’s shoes.” (Choubey, 387) Virmati is constantly torn between the two worlds- one wanting to get married and settled and the other craving for an independent and socially responsible life. Also, she does not believe in arranged marriage: “Early marriage, and no education? No Professor, and no love? Her soul revolted and her sufferings increased.” (50)

Kasturi is never given a chance by her mother and perhaps, that is why, she is not ready to allow any choice to her daughter, Virmati. She is least concerned about educating her daughter further. Jaideep Rishi points out in his essay:

Kasturi unknowingly becomes the voice of patriarchy. She holds those values as ideal which patriarchy has taught her to be so. And when her daughter rebels against such values she takes it to be a rebellion against her own self. (Rishi, 92)
Kasturi believes in the patriarchal assumptions about the superior worth of male experience because, “During Kasturi’s formal schooling, it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny .... Her mother tried to ensure. ... She was going to please her in-laws.” (57) In the same way, Virmati is well aware that Kasturi sees to that, “She was to be supervised like a jailbird on parole. Marriage was acceptable to her family, but not independence.”(106) Kasturi is so traditional and conservative in her outlook that she does not approve the dress of Shakuntala, daughter of Lajwanti and glamorous cousin of Virmati. According to Kasturi, “Study means developing the mind for the benefit of the family.” (14) For Virmati’s family, marriage is for the parental pleasure and family prestige: Kasturi argues,

Shakuntala Pehnji did not have five sisters waiting to get married either. And do you think it makes her mother happy to have her daughter unmarried? She may say what she likes about jobs and modern women, but I know how hard she still tries to find a husband for Shaku, and how bad she feels. You want to do the same to me? To your father and grandfather? (54)

Shakuntala’s behaviour is viewed with contempt and disdain especially within her own family because she smokes, disobeys her mother, and acts as she pleases. Her behaviour is considered as manly. She also does not comply with the standards of her society. She neither
depends on her father nor is married. She is self-sufficient and shows no interest in marriage. She becomes a role model for Virmati and gradually Virmati tends to think of a life without marriage, husband and children.

Virmati never shares her feelings with Kasturi. As a child she keeps craving for a little understanding from her mother but with the passing of time she learns to accept the situation as it is. In this novel the mother-daughter relationship marches from identification to alienation. Sudarshan Sharma points out that “It is a first-rate realistic novel about a daughter’s reconstruction of her troubled past hinging on her mother’s story describing how she was as a daughter.” (Sharma, 46) Most of the mothers are firm believers in the view, as Simone de Beauvoir puts it, “What was good enough for me is good enough for you, I was brought up this way, you shall share my lot.” (Beauvoir, 533)

Like Virmati, Maya of Anita Rao Badami’s The Hero’s Walk, defies tradition and marries for love. Maya wins a scholarship to study at a Canadian University and before she leaves, she is engaged to a young Brahmin. But Maya breaks her engagement to marry Alan Baker with whom she has fallen in love in Canada. She is banished and humiliated from her parental home like Virmati. But she lives a happy life with her Canadian husband till her death in a car accident. Both the
protagonists rebel against their parents and the society and are successful in their struggle against the oppressive mechanism of a closed society.

In *Home*, Kapur presents the protagonist Nisha as a bold, educated and a balanced woman. Initially, Nisha undergoes a series of traumas but finally succeeds to live like a free woman without resorting to any extreme step as in the case of Astha in *A Married Woman*. Nisha asserts her womanhood boldly because she is iconoclastic and modern in her approach to life. Through her love for freedom and sustenance to face the challenges, she realizes the immense potentialities of a woman, her unique position in the family and society. Kapur shows the protagonist, Nisha, who is both modern and Indian – calm, composed and complete unlike the extreme protagonists – Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* who only wants to love and Astha in *A Married Woman* who values her independence.

Swarnalata, the roommate of Virmati, is an extrovert and she believes in leading a full life and handling her own affairs with firm determination. Generous at heart and always eager to help others, Swarna is equally committed to political goals and tries very hard to orient Virmati too in this direction by inviting her to various political events and actions. However Virmati’s desire both for independence and
for unconditional love from her husband cannot go together. The constant clash of the two, mirrored in the history of country’s freedom movement, shows that the path of attaining Independence of heart, mind and action for a modern woman is not an easy one. She tells Virmati:

I was very clear that I wanted to do something besides getting married. I told my parents that if they would support me for two more years I would be grateful. Otherwise I would be forced to offer Satyagraha along with other Congress workers against the British. And go on offering it until taken to prison. Free food and lodging at the hands of the imperialists. (107)

When Swarnalata shares her ideas about the congress and Muslim League coalition and how she thought that they must together fight a common enemy, the British, Virmati thinks, “This is the life I should be involved in. Not useless love and a doubtful marriage.” (122) Virmati’s mind is 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. Virmati, along with Swarnalata, attends the Punjab women students’ conference. Here she sees and hears women who exude confidence and strength. Swarnalata tries to make Virmati realize how she is wasting her life on a love which cannot be trusted.

Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The war - the Satyagraha movement - because of these things, women are coming out of their homes. Taking jobs, fighting, going to jail. Wake up from your stale dream. (139)
Virmati’s fertility is metaphorically connected with the ongoing political events and, after an abortion and a miscarriage she is finally able to give birth to Ida, her only child, after Independence. She and Harish argue over her suggestion that their daughter be called Bharati, but finally Harish comes up with a Persian name- Ida, neither Hindu nor Muslim- because he does not wish their daughter to be tainted with the birth of their country.

At times Virmati tries to assert her autonomy and identity but she is censured and ordered by her husband to be part of the contemporary society, its culture and rituals. Virmati seems to have a gnawing feeling that she is not given the importance she deserves. She tells Ida that she is not to be mourned in any way when she dies. She further tells Ida, “When I die ... I want my body donated. My eyes, my heart, my kidneys, any organ that can be of use. That way someone will value me after I have gone.” (1)

Virmati has no respect for family traditions but paradoxically she forces Ida to be bound by them. She tries to keep her under her control. Ida comes to know why Virmati, who herself has flouted the norms of idealized femininity all her life turns out to be a stern and strict mother, because in patriarchy, a mother has to become strict for the safety of her daughter. This novel captures the complex relationship between mothers and daughters over a period of three generations.
Initially, Ida, belonging to the same sex, identifies herself with Virmati. Then a stage comes when in her attempt to assert her identity, she breaks away from Virmati and feels alienated. However, after being an experienced self, Ida looks back at the past of Virmati and realizes what it is to be a mother in a patriarchal society. In this way, again an identification and understanding takes place between the daughter and the mother.

Ida can very well be compared to Saru, the protagonist of Shashi Deshpande’s *The Dark Holds No Terrors*, as no complete understanding takes place between Saru and her mother also. A better realization of her relationship with her mother descends on Saru when she tries to accept the elements she hitherto neglects and detests because they, in one way or the other, belong to her mother. Like Ida, Saru too hates her mother and does not want to be like her. When Saru, like Ida, puts her feet into her mother’s shoes, then she realizes what it is to be a mother in the patriarchal society.

Virmati is fed up with the traditions and norms of the society. She decides to break up the shackles of the society. She displays courage to fight for her right to education, for her right to choose her man in life and economic independence. She makes several attempts at asserting her individuality. Every time she rebels to liberate herself and aspires for a
freer life, she fails to create a space for herself and proves to be a loser. The male dominated society, the incredulousness of her family and finally her husband himself could be responsible for her failure. It is a matter of concern that her marriage with Harish turns out to be disastrous.

Another view is that the maternal indifference destroys Virmati. If she had an understanding mother, she would not be a victim to a much married man like Harish. Asha Chaubey remarks that Virmati, “... jumps into a blind, bleak future with Harish because her mother could never understand her dreams.” (Choubey, 393)

Ida is shown as a radical modern woman of contemporary India. She does things to please herself, thereby questioning the patriarchal structure. Ida, an educated woman, divorced and childless, apparently leads a freer life than her mother. Yet she is also not free from pain and anxiety that plagued her mother: “No matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately ...” (3) The self-willed Ida marries Prabhakar, a fellow of academic pursuit to settle certain contradictions of her personal life. But she hardly ever seems to be happy with him. It results in divorce very soon. She confesses: “Of course I made a disastrous marriage ... I was nothing,
husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society.” (258) Ida refuses to submit to the dictates of the male dominant society and believes in the personal freedom. She is not willing to follow the traditions and customs of the society. She hates her voice to be suppressed and believes in the personal freedom. She always tries to reach that goal which her mother aimed in her life.

Virmati, in being educated, makes a departure from the established path of Indian social custom and tradition. Yet, paradoxically she follows the same established norms of the Indian tradition and finds fulfilment and contentment in her own way. It appears that she is neither successfully emancipated nor confined truly to the traditional role expected of her. Thus it can be said that she fails to carve a strong and independent identity of herself. There are other women, like Shakuntala, Swarnalata and her own daughter, Ida, who demand equal opportunities and go beyond convention and they

... succeed better than she did in their parallel struggles for independence in their lives. At the centre of the narrative, we are confronted with a woman who fights but falls by the wayside; but at its edges, as no doubt less representative but still symbolic figures, we encounter – as will be seen below – other women, whose relative success points the way to the future. (Rollason, 178)
Shakuntala, Virmati’s cousin and Swarnalata, her roommate in Lahore fight for their independence and rights in the patriarchal set up and have a voice of their own. They attain fulfilment in being independent and leading their own lives. “Both are representatives of an emerging ‘New Woman’ that recurs in Indian literature: the emancipated woman militant.” (Srivastava, 19)

The most important question that needs to be answered is whether Virmati blossoms herself into a “New Woman” in the real sense of the term. No. Inspite of her initial revolt against the family and firm stand against Harish, she succumbs to his implorations and passion in Lahore. She feels guilty at her loss of virginity but resorts to self deception by calling it as ‘outmoded morality.’ She plunges herself willingly in a useless love, doubtful marriage and unwed pregnancy. Disregarding decency or honour, she awaits furtive meetings with Harish with her eyes wide open as she knows fully well that there are “… myriad instances of where she felt she had been weak or wronged.” (129)

Though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is locked into newer ones where her free spirit is curbed and all she does is “Adjust, compromise and adapt.” (236) She could have put her foot down saying “she will be her own mistress and relate to him with
dignity or not at all ... (236) but she does not. The time Virmati spends as a headmistress of a girls’ school in Nahan is the most happiest and satisfying period in her life. She is a competent teacher and her performance gets her a deserved respect. There she has no family to look after and no responsibilities to fulfil. She has a house of her own and lives independently.

Thus in Virmati, an incipient new woman is seen who is aware, introspective, and educated. A desire to strike independent roots and grow is also seen. To some extent she becomes successful in defying social conventions. Yet she lacks confidence, self-control and farsightedness which stop her in reaching her goal. More than these her need to be emotionally and intellectually dependent on Harish wrecks her. This is because, as Nahal rightly says, “... she fails to break the dependence syndrome.” (Nahal, 17)

Seema Malik argues that Virmati’s defiance and rebellion results in nought. She calls her a loser:

Trampling patriarchal norms, Virmati defies societal expectation to assert her individuality and hopes to achieve self-fulfilment. But what does she really get? She is a loser whose acts totally alienate her from her own family and she fails to create a space for herself for which she had been striving all along. (Malik, 175)
In her quest of Identity, she loses it at every stage and struggles to make space for herself on her own. Her rebellious attitude takes back stages whenever it has to be strong to refute Harish’s sexual oppression. Sadly she becomes submissive and succumbs to the whims and fancies of Harish.

Love, in Virmati’s case, does what even strong patriarchal traditions could not do. The girl who has refused to be cowed down in the name of family honour, to marry a man of their choice, now does not move her fingers without the prior permission of Harish. At one stage she finds herself willing to join Swarnalata in the independence struggle but checks herself. She is not sure “Would Harish like it?” (233) During their courtship and even after the marriage, it is always ‘Harish didn’t want her to do this’ or ‘Harish wanted her to do that.’ That Virmati could also want to do certain things and abstain from doing certain things becomes a matter of no importance to her. All that she cares for in the world is to be “worthy of him.” (237) Gradually unwillingly though unknowingly Virmati loses her individuality. Harish knows how to bring her round to his views. He is very confident: “She might protest but ultimately she had to do as he said.” (244)

Virmati differs from other traditional women by asserting her right as a daughter, a wife and a mother. In her love for Harish she has a
constant longing for self-autonomy but her search for freedom is otherwise proved to be self-deceptive, horrendous and meaningless. (Nayak, 163)

The dreams of emancipation that Virmati has dreamt and fought for still elude her. At the end of her journey she finds that she is still dumb and mute and she is still expected to follow and never to lead. All her efforts in that direction become awry, simply an exercise in futility. On the very first day of her marriage does she realise: “She would walk tight lipped, mute on the path her destiny had carved out for her.” (196) Even her education becomes a matter of Harish’s convenience. When he wants her by his side she does not think of education but when Harish thinks that she must pursue studies further, she does it without raising her voice. Unknowingly she has become a puppet in his hands.

Vandita Mishra rightly argues:

Kapur never permits Virmati any assertion 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. While it does provide an escape for a loveless arranged marriage; it is itself furtive and claustrophobic, offering only a stolen togetherness behind curtained windows. Even years of studying and working alone do not give her the confidence to strike independent roots and grow. (Mishra, 227)
On the contrary, Charumati reveals great admiration and respect for Virmati when she draws our attention to the fact that more than the outcome, it is the attempt that is to be given value for.

... Virmati’s attempt to succeed in her fight to assert herself is to be esteemed for though she failed, she has made an attempt. She tramples and defies the patriarchal constraints and expectations to assert her identity and achieves self-satisfaction and self-fulfilment in her life. (Charumati, 8-9)

Fully agreeing with Charumati’s remarks, Jaydeep Rishi adds:

That Virmati did not live her life without making compromises does not mean that she achieved little. It hardly matters that she could not voice her own words. What matters is that she at least tried to voice her own words. (Rishi, 93)

Virmati is praised and is labelled ‘the modern woman’ when it is argued that “... the two factors which enable the modern woman to assert are education and economic independence. Therefore Virmati comes to us as modern woman, being both educated and having a job before marriage.” (Bala & Chandra, 105)

Virmati’s fight against her mother symbolises the oppressive forces of patriarchy. Defying patriarchal norms that enforce a woman towards domesticity, Virmati asserts her individuality and desires to
achieve self-reliance through education. Thus she can be called a rebel who is bold, determined and action oriented. However, when she falls in love with Harish, she has actually exchanged one kind of slavery for another. But towards the end she becomes free, free even from the oppressive love of her husband. However, Virmati, finally, realizes that a woman should be aware, self-controlled, strong willed, self reliant and rational. She should have faith in her innate strength. And once she succeeds in doing that, she gets her husband all by herself, her child and the reconciliation with her family. Though providence plays a part in it, symbolically it makes her true emancipation. Indian women have realised their potential and achieved a lot in half a century of independence. But if there is to be a true female independence also, much remains to be done. The following words of Bijay Kumar Das reflect his positive opinion of Virmati:

Manju Kapur portrays Virmati as a progressive woman who would not forsake her desire to acquire a higher academic degree in life. To continue her studies, she is prepared to sacrifice her family and all norms of male dominated society. Not only that, her decision to marry a man with a wife and children is clear defiance of the conventions of the society to which she belongs. A woman’s right to love and choose her male cannot be questioned. That is the message Manju Kapur seems to convey through the character of Virmati. (Das, 141)
Gur Pyari Jandial is full of appreciation for Virmati when she says that it would be a mistake to devalue Virmati’s struggle. “... what mattered was to have made the attempt. What is necessary is to break the patriarchal mould, and for Virmati to have tried to do that in the forties was a great achievement.” (Jandial, 108-128).