"I certainly believe in feminism"
CHAPTER - III

DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS AND

A MARRIED WOMAN

'Manju Kapoor's *Difficult Daughters* is about a woman, Virmati, whose life runs crushed between prevailing societal customs and her own internal longings. As a daughter, as a wife and as a mother, in no role she finds peace of heart. The novel deals with certain crucial issues right from conjugal room to political platform. Kapoor has portrayed Virmati, the protagonist's, constant swinging between these two poles quite sensibly, illustrating that a woman still has to exercise a lot of courage, fortitude and uprightness if she has to win over those discriminatory forces that wield every sort of power in the society. 'The novelist has presented a picture of a middle class educated woman of pre-Independence time and her social status as a second wife. She has presented various choices for Virmati but has shown her as emotionally dependent upon and exploited by the man who, though Western educated is of a wavering mind, talking of liberalism but indecisive in marrying his loved one and giving her the rightful place in his life and society. Virmati's responses are limited, her only desire is to marry Harish. Manju Kapoor has presented Virmati's life from her daughter's point of view though it becomes a multipoint of view. The novel at first arouses the
expectations of the readers to go back in time and experience and the social political situations in which the protagonist is placed. But she remains an observer by the road-side of the political happenings in the country ... Once married Virmati dissolves like a salt doll. Whatever identity she has in her father’s family, she loses it and is unable to make space for herself on her own'. Dora Sales Salvador maintains, ‘In this novel, one needs to stress that the disjunction between the weight of gender-determined tradition, on the one hand, and the yearning for independence and self-affirmation, on the other does not appear as a simple dichotomy of life-choices. In no case are things black and white. There is a whole range of complex emotional shades of gray between the two alternatives’.

Dr. (Mrs.) B. R. Agrawal opines, ‘The novel brings forth the issue of gender discrimination and the struggle of the suffering Indian women under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society. The novel, set in the background of partition, when all values and norms were being flouted, revolves round the life of a woman whose battle for independence from deadwood of traditions and taboos engulfs her, leaving a contour of partition and pain on her outwardly calm face. Virmati is portrayed as a new woman of colonial India – challenging old outmoded attitudes towards women and exploring the possibilities for herself in education and
economic independence. The background of a second world war, communication and partition have been utilized to recognize the potential of colonial women who had joined with their male counterparts in social regeneration and were unwilling to accept the rigid social code that was imposed upon them.  

*Difficult Daughters* is the story of a daughter Ida whose quest is to apprehend the complex life of her dead mother, Virmati.

Virmati, the eldest daughter in an austere Punjabi family in Amritsar, is barely ten but has already started playing the nerve-wrenching role of a mother. Her younger brothers and sisters hover around her day and night. It is she who takes care of their milk, food, studies and cleanliness. Her mother is too sick and too engrossed in the younger ones to show any affection towards Virmati. At times Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special. However, when she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother’s arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away: ‘Have you cared to their food—milk—clothes—studies?’

As regards Kasturi, she was trapped in a rigmarole of child-bearing, was so drained physically that she was near incapable of even carrying out day-to-day activities swiftly:
Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not used, when her feet and legs did not ache. Her back coved in towards the base of her spine and carrying her children was a strain, even when they were very young. Her stomach was soft and spongy, her breasts long and unattractive. Her hair barely snaked down to mid-back, its length and thickness gone with her babies. (7)

Breeding like cats and dogs, she shudders from within when she finds that she is pregnant for the eleventh time. She implores God to get rid of the unwanted pregnancy, and she even tries the bitter powders and distilled liquids in an attempt to abort the foetus. Her health deteriorates drastically. The root and herb juices bring no result. She is ready to put her life in danger by trying fatally unsafe procedures. But God had other plans for her and on a cold December night she delivers a baby girl. Her stoop shouldered frailty cannot take it any more. Both the hakim and the vaid declare themselves incapable of promising good health for Kasturi. Then on the suggestions of a western-educated allopath:

It was decided to send Kasturi to Dalhousie. Virmati was seventeen and studying for her FA exams, but since the tail end of her education was in sight, it was felt that missing a little of it to help her mother was quite in order. After all in a year or so the girl would be married. (9)

Virmati again shares the responsibility of looking after her emaciated mother and the newborn at Dalhousie. Here, again, she looks forward to moments when she would receive care and
affection of her mother. Kasturi has never been in the habit of showering any love on Virmati: The language of feeling had never flowed between them. (11)

The mother-daughter relationship has always remained strained, and it stays so. It is in Dalhousie that Virmati meets her cousin Shakuntala. She is Lajwanti’s unmarried daughter and a teacher in Lahore. Her unmarried state was the cause of lot of insuperable anxiety and slanders by others, but Virmati is largely impressed by her ways and manners. Everything about her bears a mark of elegance and style:

she looked better than merely pretty. She looked vibrant and intelligent as though she had a life of her own. Her manner was expansive, she didn’t look slyly around for approval when she spoke or acted... Seeds of aspiration are planted in Virmati when she sees Shakuntala, her cousin, tasting the wine of freedom. (14)

‘In the eyes of the shy and meek Virmati, Shakuntala is a woman of substance. She secretly nurtures the desire of being independent and of leading a life of her own. She wants to shoulder responsibilities that go beyond a husband and children.’

Deeply influenced by her cousin’s approach towards life, Virmati wants to be like her and follows her around:

She watched her ride horses, smoke, play cards and badminton, act without her mother’s advice, buy anything
she wanted without thinking it a waste of money, casually drop in on all the people the family knew. Above all, she never seemed to question and doubt herself in anything. (15)

Shakuntala does not conform to the traditional image, and wants her due rightful place alongside her male counterpart in Indian society. She shuns marriage, and takes her academic career and profession seriously, and cares two hoots for her preordained domestic duty.

Virmati had had her early education in Arya Kanya Mahavidyalaya, then in Stratford College. Since childhood it had been hammered into her years that after she gets a Fine Arts degree, she would be lucky enough to get married. She had been tutored that the sole purpose of education was to prepare girls to be good wives, to be fruitful and replenish the earth. But the glamorous Shakuntala propels her into wanting change, adventure and risk.

Virmati’s hopes for higher education and better future crumble down when she fails to qualify her F.A. Virmati is seventeen and so the family starts considering the marriage proposal of a canal engineer seriously. At home everything becomes hard, cold and impersonal. Kasturi is now more adamant that Virmati forget studies and concentrate on grooming herself for a prospective role of a wife.
Virmati was by now eighteen and preparing seriously for her final FA exams. It is now that she is introduced to Ganga, the wife of Professor Harish Chandra, who has returned from Oxford to join the Arya Sabha College. The family lives in the rented house of Lajwanti, Virmati’s aunt. The two become quite friendly and Virmati starts frequenting their house.

Virmati scrapes through her FA exams but, as her in-laws don’t consider it appropriate for a daughter-in-law to be too much educated, marriage was a natural corollary. But the unexpected death of the canal engineer’s father proves a blessing in disguise for Virmati. The marriage is postponed and Virmati enters A.S. College.

It is here that the Oxford returned Professor, her neighbour notices her, ‘flower like against a back drop of male students’ and forces himself into her mind and heart by spreading his anguish at her feet.’

The Professor is skillful enough to stir the secret soul of Virmati. She is ensnared by his artistic tastes and urbanity. He begs her to understand how unhappy he was with a wife like Ganga who could never match his intellectual levels. He is successful in earning her sympathy and then love by painting himself as a pitiable and much wronged character. He gains a complete control
over her heart and mind. Virmati is at her wit’s end. How could she bridge the gap that existed between them – he already married and she engaged to the canal engineer. ‘In her persistent need for meaningful life, she longs for freedom and love. She reciprocates the infatuation and love of this charming Professor, for she who was tuned to neediness, reciprocated to the Professor’s need. To her, the Professor, symbolized love.’

Days roll on, and with each successive hour the Professor becomes more and more possessive of her. He insists that somebody else’s name, if associated with hers, would be unbearable. That she should refute the canal engineer’s proposal in clear terms. This unreasonable demand flusters Virmati. Her parents were patient all these years, but now she had completed her B.A. and so marriage was inevitable. Her family would consider her insane, besides there was no substantial reason to avoid the marriage. The Professor blackmails her emotionally and he tries hard to convince her into believing him. Virmati is too vulnerable to see through things and so her love for the Professor leaves her at sea.

Virmati needed love and attention and it was the Professor who showered affection upon the neglected soul. During her early life Kasturi hardly had any time or interest in Virmati. She was
always looked upon as a foster mother but her craving for love was never understood. This lack of familial love drew her near to the Professor. Virmati considers herself special because the highly qualified Professor not only considers her as a woman but also an intellectual being.

When Virmati goes through the canal engineer’s letter she realizes that it lacked emotions, intensity and even the urge to unite with her. In contrast, the Professor’s letter was seeped in love. He professes his deep love and lavishes his literary romantic imaginations on her:

you are imprinted on my mind, my heart, my soul so firmly that until we can be united in a more permanent way I live in a shadowy insubstantial land. (52)

In his urge to win her attention he even goes to the extent of belittling the canal engineer by saying that his soul must be as ‘dull and uninspiring’ as mud. The Professor explains that the engineer was not at all personally interested in Virmati as an individual. He only believes in the institution of marriage and so she should not bear any compunctions of conscience. Then:

Virmati put these letters on the parapet and stared at them as they lay indecently side by side, the Professor’s crushed from hiding in her pocket, the fiancé’s with legitimate public folds. Quickly she tore up the latter and scattered the pieces over the wall. (53)
Thus she decides the course of her future life.

Marriage, now, becomes a bitter pill which she was being forced to swallow. She changes from a simple girl to a complex woman. Even Kasturi, her mother is bewildered at the sudden change in her behaviour. When Virmati refuses to marry she gets so furious that she bangs Virmati’s head heaping abuses on her. She rebukes her for being a cold, hard and a priggish person who was foolishly setting aside an opportunity to become a lady of the realm of marriage. The pointed argument leaves Kasturi fuming and Virmati benumbed. Kasturi fears that some spirit had induced her daughter who was voicing such unheard of words. Virmati was proving to be a difficult daughter:

‘How could she not see that her happiness lay in marrying a decent boy, who had waited patiently all these years, to whom the family had given their word? What kind of learning was this, that deprived her of her reason?... In her time, going to school had been a privilege, not to be abused by going against one’s parents. How had girls changed so much in just a generation?’ (55)

Kasturi had all through led an unresisting life. Since her early days she was tutored to believe a woman’s secondary status in society and how total acceptance of the norms would guarantee love and well being. She had seen and followed the innumerable women folk whose lives were cordoned by inhibitions and
forbiddance. The foibles in the societal arrangement and within the family were never questioned. She believed that men were the bread winners in the family and so privileged to decide upon every minor issue. A woman’s life after a bit of education was meant to be devoted to the family and children.

Binod Mishra makes an assessment of the temperaments of the mother-daughter duo, 'Virmati has been presented as a female character that looks forward and wants her own independent status as an educated individual who can think freely and decide things for herself. Her acquaintance with the Professor opens up avenues for her. She appreciates the Professor’s effort of teaching his wife. Not only does she like the Professor’s music but she creates in him a desire for her also. The delay in her marriage with the canal engineer paves way for her tet-e-tet with the Professor. Her education helps her graduate emotionally and think rationally. She is considered blunt and ungrateful when she tells her mother about her unwillingness to marry the boy of their choice. Viru symbolises the changed mindset of Indian girls who want to decide their future and refuse to be treated like things. Viru’s gathering voice symbolises the freedom the females run after. Her mother’s attitude towards education is confined to the pleasure of reading while Viru considers education to be practiced rationally in life.'
Unmindful of Virmati’s troubles the Professor arranges their clandestine meetings at friends’ houses. The Professor is earnest and vehement. He promises of a sure comforting future and advises her to be firm and banish all thoughts of marriage to the engineer:

‘Soon things will be all right then you will see. We will one day be together’ said the Professor, holding into the kissed hand with conviction.’ (62)

But even with such high sounding words he could not fool Virmati. Cold reason would come back to mock her spasmodic weakness. She knew that he could not solve her domestic problems. Virmati is caught in doldrums:

It seemed to Virmati that her family could talk of nothing else but her wedding. Every word they said had so little relation to her inner life that she felt fraudulent even listening to them, passively immorally silent. If they knew what she was really like would they tolerate her? Look upon her lovingly, do seva for her, think of her comfort – even Paro, would she push a pakora into her mouth? Would anyone let her? (64)

Caught in the inscrutable web of thought and emotion, Virmati decides to put an end to her life by drowning herself into a canal:

She took off her chappels and folded her dupatta on top of them. She stared into the water. She knew that the spot
where she was standing was where the water began to feel the strong pull of the small canal. Though a good swimmer, she did not expect to be able to resist the current. She hoped Paro would get the little presents, she hoped the Professor would forget her, she hoped her family would forgive her, with these thoughts she held her nose and jumped. (70)

She had already given a letter to Kailash Nath to deliver it to the Professor. She had taken extra pains to see that the language was flawless. She had known that he was very particular about English and hated mistakes:

‘I want you to be perfect’ the Professor had told her and she had blushed with pleasure. Nobody else had ever seen her as someone who could be perfect. (68)

Virmati was indispensable for Kasturi but no matter what she did she had never been successful in earning any love or respect. The Professor was the only one who had genuine interest in her as an individual, and in return Harish was a matter of enchantment and revelation to her. He too would miss her. But Virmati knew that he had a wife he could very well go on to consider next.

The Professor is at home admiring the sunset when Kailashnath hands him the letter. His wife who is watching him through the kitchen thought that the Professor as usual would glorify the setting sun, discuss the beauties of nature, arts, paintings
etc. This was what transcended his listeners. He was an avid admirer of everything beautiful and the listeners were held spell bound. Today when she sees Kailshnath, she is suspicious. She decides to visit Kasturi the next day and make sure that Virmati was definitely marrying the engineer.

When he receives the letter the poor Professor is in a fix. He is helpless as he couldn’t save his dear Virmati’s life. At such a crucial time shreds of convention and all moral considerations have to be cast away. He now gets out of harmony with the actual world:

He was ... He was nothing now ... Not a rescuer, not a lover, nothing in this matter of life and death. Why had she decided on this awful step? Didn’t she trust him? Didn’t she know how much she meant to him? He had told her of his love a thousand times. Now it could no longer be a secret, he had to tell his wife so she could tell the family. Well, let everybody know. With Viru not there, nothing mattered. With no strength to remain standing, he gradually slipped onto the floor, where he remained a long time, his head cradled on his arms. (72)

In a frenzied state the Professor dashes into the kitchen. His wife is pleasantly surprised but the next moment her spirits are dampened when she hears him blab Virmati’s name repeatedly. He pleads her to rush to Virmati’s mother. His wife, unaware of the whole affair, offers to make some desi tea. The Professor then cries
out at Ganga to go and tell Virmati’s family that she’s gone to Tarsikka – perhaps to drown herself in the canal. They must move fast to save her. The Professor’s voice breaks and wordlessly he pushes his wife out towards the other house.

A thoroughly devastated Ganga rushes to Virmati’s mother, Kasturi. Breaking the news is such an uphill task. With her eyes filled with tears she reluctantly begins:

‘Oh Bhenji! It is my unlucky kismet that has brought me here. Everybody’s curses will be upon my head ... Bhenji, I am so ashamed. I am unlucky. What will you think ... He told me to tell you that may be Virmati has gone to Tarsikka ... That may be she has done something to herself. Oh Bhenji, please forgive me.’ (73)

The words leave Kasturi dumbstruck and speechless. The sisters are not ready to believe a word of what their neighbour has reported. They are restless and nervous but Kasturi hushes them to silence. She does not want to expose her daughter’s deeds to everyone – that the neighbour, Ganga had brought the news and that the Professor was the one who knew about it first was enough to mortify her:

At the doorway, she turned back once to say, ‘Indu, just see the sabzi doesn’t burn, put the dal on afterwards. Start making the rotis. Use the fresh butter in the doli, the old one is for ghee’, ‘Han’, said Indu. (74)
These words from a mother at such an hour when the eldest daughter has gone to embrace death startle us. How can she be so ruthless and think of food and butter specially, instead of rescuing her daughter from the clutches of death? Kasturi was so rooted to her family that their dinner and their food habits were her sole concern. She had to serve them the best possible dishes. No matter whatever the circumstances. She could not think of anything beyond the home and hearth. The kitchen was her domain and it was her right to see to the likes and dislikes of her family – always. Kasturi’s reaction at such an hour throws light on the societally ingrained biased attitude of a mother towards her daughter.

Suraj Prakash and Kailashnath rush to Tarsikka in Lala Diwan Chand’s car. The women, worried and tensed, are left behind desperately waiting for good news. Kasturi sits in the veranda blaming and cursing. She fails to understand what ailed Virmati. Why did she resort to such a drastic step? Why didn’t she think of Bade Baoji and all his affection:

Bade Baoji, who had championed her cause, what would he think? As for herself, she could never wipe out the stigma of having a child thoughtless enough to contemplate ending her life without consideration for what her family would suffer. Then there was the Professor, how did he know before her own family? She trembled at what she might find out. (75)
All her thoughts remain a tangle of vague outlines. She fails to understand what part the Professor played in the mess that Virmati has created. She is full of dread to face the reality.

At home the Professor’s wife bangs his door. The Professor is lost in his thoughts. His wife doubts his behavior and fears some untoward mishap. With these misgivings she shrieks and pounds on the door relentlessly. She even reminds him that the food is ready and might get cold. The Professor is disgusted with her preoccupation with food. She too, like Kasturi, could think of nothing else except serving the right food at the right time. Finally the Professor surfaces. His eyes are dazed and red, his usually carefully done hair wild and disheveled:

‘What is it?’ he demanded cantankerously. ‘I was sleeping.’ His authority in the house meant that nobody openly questioned this statement. (77)

His wife had sensed the Professor’s illicit relationship with Virmati but she could never muster enough courage to question him. She just mutely bore the insult and injury.

Virmati is rescued and brought back. She is sorry for what she has done. She expects her father to support and understand her and show some concern, but Suraj Prakash, her father is rigid and constrained. He shows little readiness to forgive Virmati. The
incident turns the family up in arms against her. Everyone frets and fumes and wants to know the reason behind her deed:

‘Why? Why had she done this thing? Why run away? And worst of all, why tell a total stranger of her intention, and leave them to find out from an outsider what she was doing? And what about her relatives that were going to be? Didn’t she owe them moments worth of consideration. Was this all her education had taught her? To put herself before others and damn the rest? How would Bade Baoji bear it? How could anyone in his or her right senses bear the humiliation?’

(79)

Once again the subject of her marriage is broached, and Virmati once more expresses subduedly that she wants to study instead. Lajwanti insinuats that some body else has poisoned her mind otherwise she is hardly the academic type. Kasturi pours out all her ire upon Virmati damning and cursing her. But Virmati maintains her stubborn refusal to marry Inderjit, the canal engineer on the pretext that she doesn’t like him and finally she is locked up in the godown for days. A tenuous link with the outside world is the letters she wrote to the Professor. Paro would slip in some paper and pencil through the window. For hours she would stare at the sky yearning for a few drops of rain. She writes to the Professor how her carefree life is shrunk to a few feet. She is lonely and terribly sad. The family is left with no alternative. Virmati’s foolishness compels them to confine her. Indu’s marriage, to
Inderjit promised a happy future. But she knows that she would not be permitted to attend the marriage. She too wants to avoid the serious undertones of social and cultural criticism by relatives. In the evenings the dim light of the lantern casts large shadows in her room. She fears the shadows. She wants to shun mankind and hide in a tomb:

My grandfather dealt in spices, dry fruits, pickles, and morabbas all of which we weren’t supposed to touch. That’s what he said, but sitting in his little office that opened on to one side of the godown, do you think my grandfather didn’t know we were helping ourselves from the sacks and jars, and running into the outer courtyard to eat what we had stolen? What has happened to that girl? Her family used to love her, how has she lost it all? (83)

She ruminates over her bygone days in the godown lying stripped of dignity and love by her loved ones. She finds her life transformed from innocence to maturity, from happiness to suffering, and from heaven to hell. The Professor is thankful to Paro who is very innocent and facilitates the correspondence between himself and Virmati. In reply he writes very sentimental letters expressing his unflinching love for her. He considers himself responsible for Virmati’s poor state and beseeches her never to contemplate suicide again. He vehemently expresses his inability to stand beside her in her hour of need. The Professor writes that he has to go through hell every minute when he
pretends to overlook whatever news his wife brings. Though information is sparse, his wife is very particular about updating him with the events in the neighbours’ house. He is overborne with guilt and helplessness. Virmati’s suicidal attempt has shattered him. The fear of losing his precious love overcast his being. He is also proud of Virmati for refusing to marry the engineer and in turn enforcing the bond between them.

The Professor, a worldly wise man, is concerned with world war and politics. Through his letters he conveys to Virmati the various ideologies of nations, mobilization of armies, freedom, war, democracy etc. He also informs her that Lajwanti has asked them to evacuate the house just to get rid of an irksome tenant.

Imprisoned in the godown Virmati feels lonelier than ever. She longs for the moments she spent with her sisters. Those happy hours of careless abandon, when life was as light as a feather. However, nothing could take her back in time.

Virmati’s conscience pricks her. She knows that she would be punished for her sins. She wants to accept her fate as she has been the offender. However, she feels better now as the shadows of her impending marriage have been cast away. She couldn’t let others treat her as a showpiece. The conventions, the traditions and
their subsequent acceptance are not in tune with Virmati’s ideas and ideals.

Her parents try to ward off the Professor’s consideration from her mind. They want her to realize that the Professor is a married man with responsibilities and he would snap the relationship soon. He was insincere to his wife and would never remain true to Virmati. Such antipathetic voices hurt like barbs and Virmati feels hurled into a dungeon of endless sufferings. Kasturi blames the higher education, which has made her prudish and self-centered, and holds her responsible for spoiling the name of her Arya Samaj School and its effort to educate young girls.

The Professor is compelled to shift his residence to Moti Cottage. His friends keep dissuading him from continuing his relation with Virmati. They suggest that he should drop the idea of marrying her and instead keep Virmati as a close friend. They argue with him that wives are all the same. But he says that nobody could fathom his love for her nor could anybody apprehend the true meaning of being one with one’s beloved.

The Professor, considers Virmati as an intellectual person with enough perception. Even though they face troubles and are emotionally spent in their private lives, he considers Virmati understanding enough to share all the issues like college elections,
rising prices, poor quality of goods, the fear of the impending war and how countries like Britain and Germany were at loggerheads. The Professor is split between his duty to stand by his family, and especially his mother, and his ever-intensifying love for Virmati. He is so restless and beside himself, that he doesn’t mind involving his student Kanhiya Lal into his illicit affair. He sets aside all regard and restraint and hands over his letter to Kanhiya Lal.

Virmati’s family again asks for her willingness to marry. Her mother taunts her saying that so disgraced a woman should be thankful and marry mutely. So blemished was she that it was difficult for them to find a respectable suitor. She would say that even large vistas of knowledge do not guarantee happiness as her education had ruined their family. These consistent rebuttals make Virmati feel that her ultimate offence was having a mind at all. Cut from moorings she is left to sulk in captivity. She resolves to be free and to even fend for herself. She is confident that she would be able to survive without her family. But her arguments further infuriate her family that expects nothing but a promise from her to marry.

Conscious of the affairs, the Professor asks Virmati to use her knowledge judiciously which would assure a better life. He wants her to not to permit herself to become flustered or irritated; if
she does, her chances of success will deteriorate. Education will help her to discover her true self and this then will lead to establishing her personality. Her well read mind will make her decisive and constant:

The tradition that refuses to entertain doubt, or remains impervious to new thoughts and ideas, becomes a prison rather than a restraining life force. Even the smallest one of us has a social function, but that function is not to follow blind beliefs that may not be valid. (94)

The Professor emerges as a radical and condemns ancient ways. He implores her to protest against the medieval ideologies, and asks her to listen to her inner voice and establish a separate identity and not to be swamped by the male-dominated society. Everyone in the society should be made visible and offered a freedom to choose a life of his own. His captivating and compelling vision of life and society seems very profound when he compares the uneducated to an earthworm that lives and dies in an inconscient state. He bemoans that the society has wronged two individuals terribly by marrying him and his wife at an age of three. He invokes her to make up her mind and set up on a journey to the quest of the soul.

Days pass on but Virmati does not write to him. To her utter disbelief she is informed that the Professor’s wife is pregnant. She is crestfallen. She fails to bring herself to believe that the Professor
who claims his unflinching love for her could at the same time make love to his wife. Mati forces her to see his wife and make sure for herself. She hopes that common sense would now illumine Virmati, who would not drift to some greater mistake as the duplicity of the Professor is laid bare. In a state of searing pain Virmati writes to the Professor that his wife is his legal woman and so she has the right to all such significant wifely attainments:

'I understand she is your wife after all. Goodbye. Goodbye, forever.' (96)

'Harish is very unethical and insincere in nature. Stating that he is unhappy with his wife he loves Virmati and forces her to cancel her engagement but could not abstain from exercising his conjugal rights. Virmati discovers his wife in the family way when she is locked up in a dark room because of her love towards Harish. When Virmati accused him of what has happened, he sends her a poem about "loves unity" to change her mind and to drag her from practicality to realms of fantasy.' The Professor wants to have the best of both the worlds. At home he wants to keep everybody happy while he covertly tries to establish his relationship with Virmati. He wants to maintain his identity as a chaste husband but at the same time keeps professing his undying love for Virmati. He explains that he could not ignore his wife's claims as his wife tries to blackmail him emotionally through tears. He does not want to
punish his wife for no fault of hers. He clarifies his position in the following lines:

'He does what he can to bring back domestic harmony. He feels guilty about ignoring the suffering of one who is also in a way blameless. An act is performed mechanically, with what results you have already seen.' (97)

He says that his wife qualifies not as an identity but only as a relational term. He had been so far devaluing her as a non entity but she is authorized to have a conjugal relation. He contends that this does not in any way diminish his love for Virmati. She should understand that he is walking on thin ice with his wife and mother hovering around him.

Here the novelist exposes the diabolical views of the Professor who denounces the society which dislikes liberal upbringing but he is himself not inclined to challenge the system. Throughout his earlier letters he had guided Virmati to fight against all odds at several levels – social, cultural and personal and Virmati proved herself through it by inflicting untold miseries and humiliations upon herself. However, he himself could not deal effectively with the seething atmosphere at home. He does yield to the pressures that bring about the conjugal union with his wife. Virmati is furious and feels betrayed. She had not expected this perfidy from a man of principles. He does not put into practice his
self-proclaimed uplifting theories. She realizes his double standards in life and how he treded a warped road of self-gratification and selfishness.

Virmati now gears up for a new challenge after understanding the futility in chasing a married man with biased opinions. Now, she prepares herself to pursue her interests in studies. Lahore was a place of her dreams where she continues her B.T. Kasturi insists on admitting her to RBSL School and college where the high brick wall guaranteed no untoward outside influences on the girls.

In Lahore, Virmati’s roommate, Swarna tells her how she too faced the similar pressures at home to marry, and how she challenged her parents and managed to pursue her studies. Virmati is amazed at Swarna’s outburst against her parents. But she knew that she could never cross the thin border of decorum with her parents.

She tries to put the thoughts of the deceptive Professor behind and carry on life with renewed seriousness. However, the Professor is anxious to restore his relationship with Virmati by hook or crook. He keeps writing to her under assumed names and tries every device to convince her. The Professor’s eloquence and adroitness is enough to dissolve Virmati’s resolve of having
nothing to do with him. His friend Syed Hussain goes a long way in helping the Professor in achieving his goal. It is in his house in Anarkali that the Professor is successful finally in establishing a sexual relationship with her. Virmati is now persistent and wants him to marry her if he so loves her but he is shrewd enough to express his love only through sex. His idea of love for Virmati is based on self-gratification and he ardently justifies his indulgence. She is left with little to do than oblige him:

She cried afterwards, but not much. He dried those tears while she thought, he was right; she was meant to be his, what was the point in foolishly denying it on the basis of an outmoded morality? (114)

Thus begin the Professor’s and Virmati’s surreptitious lovemaking. Even the novelist does not elaborate but states the natural corollary in the following words:

Their meetings continued along these general lines, though not as much time was spent on the preliminaries. (115)

Virmati has only one desire in her little heart and that is to marry the Professor. She considers their lovemaking as a step closer to marriage and is happy to spend Diwali with him:

This was the first Diwali they had spent together, and she saw it as a step towards public statement, matrimony and the fruition of love. (115)
But the Professor does not have marriage on cards at all. Though she enjoys this new acquired proximity, the prolixity and uncertainty in their relation worry her. Besides she fails to shrug off the sense of guilt of defaming the family honour.

When Swarna motivates Virmati to assert herself boldly in matters concerning the social causes of the day she hesitates:

Would the Professor want her to be like Swarna? She didn’t want to do anything that would alter the Professor’s undying love for her. May be she could be like Swarna from the inside, secretly. (124)

History reveals that women have constantly been under the stress of living up to the expectations of their male partner. Even Virmati couldn’t detach herself from this value system so believed and nurtured by the society. Virmati who wanted to forge a ‘self identity’ is vulnerable when it concerns the Professor. Though free from the confined life in Amritsar, Virmati has now been gripped by an overpowering love for the Professor. Now she comes to feel the urgency of getting married more so. Her status as a secret wife unnerves her. When the Professor is not with her loneliness and frustration leave her numb. She starts questioning and rejecting the role thrust on her. Her life has transformed from heady joy to confusion and bewilderment. The Professor who is part of the
patriarchal setup advises her to learn to make compromises and still remain sympathetic towards him.

The world around does not exist for her and the events drift into nothingness. When Virmati attends the Punjab Women’s Students’ Conference with Swarna, the stage, the speakers with the thundering speeches, the claps, the intensity and energy within the hall make her reel. Even in the midst of enthusiastic supporters and the inflammatory oratory by the leaders she fantasizes herself in the arms of the Professor whispering endearments to her and making love at the same time. The only priority in her life is an early marriage to the Professor. But the Professor’s attitude leaves her flustered because even though her course was about to finish he has no plans of marrying her. This disconcerting discovery makes her burst out at him:

‘I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family’s name am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. 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.’ (137)

Virmati’s discomposure reveals her agony and helplessness. The Professor’s abrupt transition from a strong lover into a vulnerable person whenever she insisted marriage upsets and fills
Virmati with bitter repentance. Eventually she is left blaming herself for being so haughty and inconsiderate. But the Professor’s evasive answers and beating around the bush make one thing clear to Virmati:

That her future plans must not include marriage. Only this series of furtive meetings in borrowed places. (138)

As Virmati is trying to reconcile with the situation and look towards life from a broader perspective, the discovery that she is pregnant shakes her very existence. She is now trapped into a quagmire of emotions. Without Harish’s support at such a crucial hour she feels as if coursing in a dizzying vortex of helplessness. She is at her wit’s end as the Professor would not be in touch with her for at least a month more. She had trusted the Professor but Virmati had always dreaded pregnancy. He had assured her:

‘what talk is this? Are we poor, uneducated, unenlightened clods, to leave such things to chance? Don’t you trust me?’ (142)

Virmati pays the price of loving and trusting him. His neglect and selfishness has brought her at crossroads with nowhere to go. Poor Virmati still nurtures the fond hope of unification considering the pregnancy as a blessing that would smoothen the path to marriage. Back in Amritsar she is taken aback when she learns that Harish has gone to his native place for his son’s
mundan. Though shaken she plans to send a word to him but in her heart of heart she does not rely on Harish. He who had shunned responsibilities would never accept her as a wife immediately to save her from disgrace in society. She had no answers and nowhere to go. 'What was she to do now?'

Through these observations the novelist has voiced the frustration of thousands of women who are impregnated by men and are shunned by society. Unmarried girls like Virmati are discriminated and are considered as nothing but disgrace. The men on the other hand go scot-free living a life of honour and respect. Since ages women have been used and deserted as a saleable commodity in the name of love. Man's adultery is seldom questioned but a woman is chastised as a depraved slut. With her unwed pregnancy, Virmati too goes beyond the socio-cultural identity of a good daughter. Her insidious affair with the Professor undermines her status, reputation, respect and self-confidence. Virmati is aware that by virtue of her birth she had the privilege of being the daughter of a high minded family. But because of her shameful deed she had ruined this heritage.

Virmati has to go through the ignominy of termination of her unwanted pregnancy. Swarna and Miss Datta has manage everything. The doctor agrees to operate on her in an auntie's
house, Virmati’s soul accuses her for the barbarous act of killing the baby. Counterbalancing all the sin appears to be a kind of physical reverberation of the excitement she had felt when Harish had touched her. But there is no way out of the muddle that is her life. Her shambolic psyche cries for support and strength to suppress the chaos in her lonely heart:

Her mind saw each hour sluggishly dragging along till the day after, when deliverance from this unwanted burden would come. That a child of their union, the result of all those speeches on freedom and the right to individuality, the sanctity of human love and the tyranny of social and religious restraints, should meet its end like this! Glancing at her Swarna saw tears in her eyes. (157)

Deeply wronged by the Professor and expiating in agony for his act she still longs to be in his arms even after the abortion. Her heart aches to hear his compassionate words. And with this quavering and cyclonic event ends Virmati’s B.T.

The antipathetic voices from her loved ones and the storm of moral hobgoblins never allow her a moment’s respite. She has broken the accepted social laws and despised all social forms and observances just to establish an identity. But her relation with the Professor and its desecrated outcome derides her lofty intentions.

In Amritsar, meeting Harish is nearly impossible and she is hard pressed to fill her time too. She longs for a vocation which
would afford independence and longs to taste anew sweet independence at any price. The past was past, whatever it had been was no more at hand. When the Diwan Sahib offers her the Principalship of Pratibha Kanya Vidyalaya at Nahan she accepts it willingly as she has to pave her way to future life without aid and with little sympathy.

She takes it as a blessing and develops an unconquerable aversion to the parochial social mores. 'Freedom and Censure have both been integral parts of a woman's life and women who have refused to buckle under patriarchal pressure have very often succeeded in changing their own lives and those of others dependent on them. One such woman is Virmati in Difficult Daughters who has been placed in a private, domestic world where emotions and feelings are her bridge to experience but with education bringing enlightenment and empowerment she is equipped to challenge confidently the traditional framework of knowledge and to steer her way through the boulevards of familial and social oppression and discrimination to arrive at a new consciousness of her own worth and place in society. Virmati strives to overcome the prescriptive norms of her family and society and eventually emerges from the shadow of patriarchal dominance with a transcending awareness of a new identity, an
identity that gave her space, which she had never enjoyed till this moment of being.  

At Nahan Virmati devotes herself religiously to the administration and teaching at the School. She simply soaks herself in the ambience of Nahan. The cottage allotted to her is situated on a hillock. The scenic beauty of the place tempts the Professor. He writes to her everyday but Virmati takes care to avoid his visits and forbids him from doing so. But the Professor couldn’t be content with letters and he did go to Nahan.

Thus, the initially tenacious Virmati gradually wanes away into a pawn who succumbs to his implorations even at Nahan. All her plans to establish herself as a lady of decency and decorum go awry when the Professor forces himself in her house costing her, her job.

The novelist has portrayed the character of the Professor in shades of black. The man who does not in deepest feel sympathy for the innocent Virmati is himself beyond compassion. He is too intense for her restraining sense of manners and comfort. His force, fierceness and masculinity are a threat to the decorous, sublime world of manners in which she has chosen to live. The Professor is suddenly unmindful of all social norms as it would only affect Virmati and not him. The hypocritical Professor has
high regard for public opinion when it concerns his position in society but he does not consider it in matters of love to Virmati and infidelity towards his wife.

So, Virmati is fired from the school. She sees before her a desolate highway which she would have to tread alone. Vague in her bearing and regard and with no definite aim or concern she decides to go to Shantiniketan. Harrowed by an array of questions she pours her heart out in the following words:

‘How long can I go on waiting? People talk. They are bound to. I know his position is difficult. But so is mine.’ (183)

There is no regret and no hope. Her love for the Professor acquaints her with the revulsions and disgusts of life. His callous attitude compels her to strange, dimly-lit and pathless lands. The Professor still keeps postponing their marriage not giving a moment’s thought to how his attitude affected Virmati. It is the timely intervention of Harish’s poet-friend that brings about the forced and hurried marriage. The Professor still gives uncertain replies and marries her only because there is no option and he really dreads losing her. He would have carried on with his earlier arrangement of a secret affair for quite a number of years. He was afraid of contemplating marriage even though Virmati flitted from place to place in desperation. He was the one responsible for
dragging Virmati into a whirlpool of futile existence but is still concerned about the rejection he would face by his family.

Virmati looks forward to her marriage as a great relief and the end of years-long wait for dignity and self respect in society. But it is not to be. Even her own family disowns her for her insolent and shameful act of marrying an already married Professor. The whole family has no option but to forsake all relations with her. She remains a social derelict abandoned by her near and dear ones, and cursed and neglected by the Professor’s family at the same time. As Seema Mallik observes: ‘To some extent Virmati even conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social codes yet she lacks confidence, self-control, and farsightedness and is physically imprisoned with an underlying need to be emotionally and intellectually dependent on a superior force.’

Ganga’s character is one that is discriminated no end by the diabolical ideologies of her husband. He blames Ganga for being uncouth and uncivilized in her ways but apart from trying to educate her he had done nothing to uplift her status, support her and understand her pitiable existence. He would go on wallowing in self pity by accentuating her foibles. He justifies his immorality by blaming the circumstances and the orthodox society which had
brought about his marriage to Ganga at the age of three. Ganga who is forced to live a confined life accepts her fate unquestioningly. All her life she tries to please and oblige her husband and her in-laws in every possible way but his discountenance is almost perpetual. While she cleans the crockery she tries to touch the rim of the cup. Her husband’s lips had rested there. She is neglected all her life and such minor insignificant acts give her all the pleasures. She is like a ‘blank page’ without art or guile and the world is unaware of her dumb misery.

She is concerned with nothing except winning the heart of her disgruntled husband and she tries hard to make the most of whatever little space is offered to her after marriage. Ganga leads her life of nothingness devoid of physical and emotional bonding. She waits haplessly for the gracious consideration of her husband who always keeps his distance. He is practically a stranger for her and every action of his is a formal courtesy for her. She is unfortunate to suffer privation in various ways as she isn’t harassed physically but discriminated on an emotional level. Her husband loves and enjoys life without scruples but she lives marginally curbed by scruples. When Virmati drowned herself Ganga took it as a blessing in disguise. She abused Virmati for dragging her husband into the sordid affair. She thought that even after her death Virmati would be successful in making them all pay for it and only
her death would resolve Ganga's painful distress. But she feared
the aftereffects of such selfish thoughts. If she harboured such
vicious thoughts for another woman she too may one day be
inflicted with penalty. We notice that not once does she grudge
against her husband but blames Virmati although. So deep is her
respect for the man that she is not ready to accept that in fact he is
the one who is the perpetrator of all the follies.

The novelist has portrayed Ganga's character with
considerable sympathy and understanding of feminine feelings.
Along with Virmati she is also a much neglected and segregated
figure. Though she is quite happy to perform traditional tasks of
wifehood and motherhood she occupies a near extinct and
peripheral place in her husband's life. Ganga is hesitant and lacks
confidence. Besides the ire of the Professor lurking at the back of
her mind makes her jittery. She does not have the freedom to spend
a few moments on her own. Harish, though modern and educated,
fusses over everything and is very particular about the cleanliness
and upkeep of the house. He is fastidious about the food cooked
but cares little about her household skills. Ganga knows how
formidable he is, never satisfied with her natural and
unsophisticated ways. On the other hand she notices that he is very
courteous with Virmati and goes out of his way in being polite to
her. Ganga knows how difficult it was for her to please her
husband and is really scared of him. 'He expects his wife to do all the household tasks assigned to her and to show genuine interest in the areas of his work interest. At the same time he does not even recognize the work his wife does ... he is very insensible towards his wife Ganga who is "exemplary, thrifty, efficient, industrious and respectful" according to his mother."

Ganga has always been given a secondary status by the Professor, but Virmati’s appearance as his second wife poses even far weightier concerns. She is forced to swallow the bitter pill of accepting Virmati in her own house and share with her the same husband. She wails and complains in subdued tones to the mother-in-law but nothing dispels her grief. Virmati’s presence undermines her status and selfhood. Life and its events have evaded her since her marriage but since Virmati’s arrival everything grows more scary. The irremediable antagonisms of interests between Harish and herself entrap her into a situation which gnaw and corrode her heart. She is reduced to a weathercock in the hands of fate. She couldn’t even dream of separating from her husband because in the Indian reality it would be difficult to lead a life of dignity without a husband. So she mutely bears the ignominy of having to put up with another woman. The emotional drain is very exhausting and it builds up frustration, fear and resentment. To vent out her anger she damns Virmati covertly but there is nothing much she can do to
improve her situation. She is totally dependent upon the Professor and is wary of change. She looks for the security her mangalsutra and bindi offer her. She keeps the facade of marriage when there is nothing left in the relationship. She is subjected to the worst form of exploitation and that is emotional. The Professor tramples her rights without inhibitions but the callous and indifferent system only makes it worse for her. When Virmati is sent to Lahore for her M.A. she thinks it would mark a new dawn but uncertainty still looms large.

Finally poor Ganga is sent away to their village never to be accepted by the Professor again. Her life seems to be going through a wringer but she avoids any kind of altercations and just gets on with her morose life. Ganga could only place her private life on the accommodating bosom of her mother-in-law who herself has to bow down before the male member of her family though she is his mother. Even in the later yeas of her life the Professor loathes and neglects her but Ganga pines for his solicitous consideration. She never disregards her mangalsutra and her red bindi though they hold no significance as she is estranged forever by her husband.

After marriage Virmati is ensnared in a vicious spiral of anonymity of relations. Everybody in the household has relevant aim and a purposeful existence, only she drifts alone in life.
Everything is looked after and attended to by the Professor’s wife. She is made aware of her outsider status in innumerable ways. She is not even allowed in the kitchen. Her life is confined to her cramped room. She feels like a caged bird beating her wings in desperation against the bars. The Professor is no doubt happy to have her for company but even their love-making remains hushed and hurried. Whenever Virmati complains about the treatment meted out to her he evinces indifference and her troubles lie nearly forgotten. Her sense of isolation drags her to her parental home where she is received like a pariah. ‘At her married home, the mother-in-law feels she is a woman who ‘strayed’, the step son calls her ‘gandi (bad) mummy’ the step-wife/co-wife doesn’t allow her into the kitchen or do the household jobs of caring for family members. The mother beats her up and abuses her, when she attempts to come home and visit her siblings. Virmati, the daughter, isn’t allowed into the family’s midst even at the time of her father’s death, while the son-in-law is acknowledged courteously. All this makes her desolate and she acquires ‘a hardened heart and a new tight smile.’ She realizes she isn’t forgiven by her maternal and paternal family, for the mistake of trying to put her own needs first above other’s needs.’

Kasturi heaps curses upon her and finally hurls her out of the house. Amidst such malevolent circumstances where her family
despises her, the Professor's family curses her and the Professor does not sympathize with her, Virmati writhes through a miscarriage. Once earlier she had to choose between a mother's life and her own derided chastity and she had chosen to abort. Her conscience could not forgive her for that. She seemed to believe that Providence had punished her by snatching her second baby in return. Harish too is crestfallen to see his dear Virmati waste and vanish before his eyes and her place being taken by a 'block of wood.' But, this in no way reduces Ganga's malice and hatred for her. Ganga's slander and denunciatory remarks keep piercing and wounding her. Once pink and flawless Virmati now turns pale and pathetic. Her loneliness and grief occupy her nebulous existence. The Professor is worried but fears to offer any solution to pacify her aggrieved soul. He shudders to challenge the existing arrangement in his family. He requests Virmati to understand and adjust. But Virmati is no longer happy and satisfied with her life.

The Professor, however, fails to understand that what ails Virmati is her loneliness in his family and the aversion and antipathy shown by her own family. The sense of isolation that encroaches upon her after her marriage and the miscarriage disorganize her self. Virmati, from a vibrant and vivacious person, becomes a 'museum piece' to creep through life. Confusion, anger, and pain - sum up her life now. It is under such an exacting
situation that the Professor comes forward with an escapist’s solution. He sends her to Lahore for her M.A philosophy. The harried Virmati has no option but to comply with his wish. He is unable to face the practical problems at home and thus proves his incompetence. The imposition irks Virmati but what choice could she exercise when tangled in such a situation. With Virmati in Lahore, Ganga and his mother pose no problems for him. Besides he enjoys going to Amritsar with renewed urgency as a lover goes to meet his beloved. Virmati’s depression is completely overlooked by the Professor who himself does not sacrifice even a little bit of convenience or pleasure for the sake of others in his family. Perhaps his eccentric ideas make him expect too much from his wife. Virmati is sent to Lahore at his insistence and it is he who later complains of her neglect and her avoiding returning home on holidays. He finds it difficult to meet the expense and so wants her to return. He misses her terribly and needs her to satiate all his physical and emotional needs.

But Virmati chooses to lead her life on her own terms. She does so to defy the patriarchal canons and to live with dignity without hiding, slithering and hushing away in her dressing room. But in fact Virmati only adjusts to her pitiable situation and makes a compromise. She only descends without a challenge to the socially accepted standards.
Virmati is an unmistakable new woman who is conscious and wants to carve a niche for herself. She is partly successful in doing so by disregarding contemporary social codes. But what she lacks is confidence and self-control. She always needs to be supported by some superior force on intellectual and emotional levels. This dependence and her helplessness make her a loser and she fails to establish herself firmly in the deeper psychological sense. She is disowned by her family and can never really settle down with Harish's family. She tries desperately to adjust with the circumstances and chooses not to fight the agents of life. Getting married to Harish is only a part of the ordeal for her; the bigger battle is getting respect and liberty. Social parameters far overweigh the bonds of love and Virmati takes recourse to the new demands of societal rules. She is unnerved at how much misery there is in her life, where she pretends to be liberated but grapples with fears and problems. Challenging the patriarchal canons and decoding gender equations leave her concerned but powerless. Alive but no longer free, Virmati is split between the professed and the real, and between illusion and reality. To conclude in the words of B. R. Agarwal, 'The novel touches myriad issues like revolt against deep-rooted family tradition, the search for selfhood, women's rights, marriage, gender discrimination, and battle for independence at both fronts — personal and national. The novel
depicts the triumph of the women's spirit, her longing to beat the odd, to conquer weakness and to move forward. Kapoor has shown Virmati bravely fighting against old traditional hackneyed values which attempt to oppress the free spirit of woman... Like Hardy's Tess, for Virmati, too, sexuality becomes a site of her oppression. Having once experienced sex-trespassed — the flesh is now violated, and a year later, one abortion and one miscarriage leave her cold and in different. She is reduced to an object, a body that is conquered and a consciousness that is violated. Even her education fails to take her out of this trap. For her education and independence both come with a heavy price. Her attempt to move out of the patriarchal enclosure is looked at as a significant departure from duty and domesticity. Her education fails to free her from the shackles of male-dominance, social tradition and popular prejudices.
References:


8. *Family and Society as Operative Determinants in Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters*, Critical Response to Literature


A MARRIED WOMAN

The events from socio-political upheavals and their effects on women have been the prime concern of a host of writers. Most importantly the institutions of marriage and family preoccupy them because these are the altars where gendered subjectivities play supreme. The institution of marriage in particular is examined and cross-examined from diverse angles as it is through it that issues related to property, religion, honour, status, prestige and most significantly the patriarchal ideology of succession emerge and function.

Considering various complexities of the institution a Professor of Gender Studies and Sociology at the University of Southern California, contends that ‘the traditional marriage is naturally prone to inequity’ and therefore she propagates the idea of single mother family which she terms as “family of woman.” ‘Perhaps the postmodern “family of woman” will take the lead in burying The Family at long last. The (married nuclear) Family is a concept derived from faulty theoretical premises and as imperialistic logic, which even at its height never served the best interests of women, their children, or even many men… the (nuclear married) family is dead. Long live our families!’

Taking into account different aspects of matrimony Barbara Ehrenreich concludes that, ‘men and women are naturally attracted
to one another and therefore male-female relationships should be ad-hoc and provisional. She dislikes the notion of long term marital commitment between spouses. Regarding children, she is of the view that they may be raised by communal groups of adults where they will grow into better persons than those who are brought up within the deep impacted tensions of nuclear married family.  

In the same vein Germaine Greer argues, ‘The plight of mothers is more desperate than that of other women, and the more numerous the children the more hopeless the situation seems to be... most women... would shrink at the notion of leaving husband and children, but this is precisely the case in which brutally clear rethinking must be undertaken.’

Similarly in the opinion of Robin Morgan, the feminist author, marriage is slavery like practice. She insists that “we can’t destroy the inequities between men and women until we destroy marriage.”

Manju Kapur, in her novel, A Married Woman, brings forth those hard facts that go a long way in demystifying marriage, ‘Through her protagonist, she exposes those half truths, the traps, the losses, the hard realities, the anxieties, the depression and the dangers associated with it. The experience as women and the experience as people form the basis of conflict of these two divergent states. Through the personal, private lives of these
characters Manju Kapur exposes the existing tension and the oscillation of the self between the two states of mind. The novel is, ‘a kind of narrative on a woman’s incompatible marriage and resultant frustration and contemporary political turmoil in its historical context. In the novel, Kapur has taken writing as a protest, a way of mapping from the point of a woman’s experience. She negotiates different issues emerging out of social-political upheaval in India.’ And further, ‘In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas, and marital bliss and the woman’s role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact.’

The novel is about Astha who is born and brought up in a middle class household in Delhi. Her father works in a government office and mother is a teacher in a school. Her parents are of different temperaments. The father believes in the new, and that his daughter’s future lay in her own hands. He wants to strengthen those hands by the number of books that passed through them. He doesn’t want his daughter to be like himself, dissatisfied and wasted. He inspires her to sit for the competitive exams because he
strongly believes that a good job leads to confidence and independence. Astha often feels flattered by his attention but also irritated by his words. The mother believes in the old ways:

Her mother often declared, ‘When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?’ (1).

She is all worried about her marriage and everyday in her temple corner in the kitchen, she prays for a good husband for her daughter and:

Well familiar with social trend of huge dowry she secured in a steel almirah another spoon, sheet, sari, piece of jewellery towards the girl’s future. (1)

She insists Astha to pray for a worthy husband which she follows:

Asth a obediently closed her eyes to delicious images of a romantic, somewhat shadowy young man holding her in his strong manly embrace. (1)

Asth a, despite numerous instructions, doesn’t approve her parent’s views. She wants to follow her own ways. In her adolescence Astha is preoccupied with:

a diet of mushy novels and thoughts of marriage. She is prey to inchoate longings, desired almost every boy she saw, then stood long hours before the mirror marveling at her ugliness. (8)
She is often in a flux whether she would ever be happy and
‘would true love ever find her?’ (8). From her early years she has
been starved of love and companionship. ‘A斯塔 is chained by her
middle-class values to her roots. She is the only child of simple,
God-fearing parents who are very protective of her and expect her
to conform to traditions. Though her father is quite emancipated in
his wishes for his daughter to have a successful marriage. Brought
up in such an atmosphere, Astha’s natural talent of painting takes a
back-seat and her ‘diet of mushy novels and thoughts of marriage’
give her the wings to search for a boyfriend.’ Then the day dawns,
the day Astha is introduced to Bunty, whose face never leaves her
and she spends hours nursing to death his slightest word, look and
gesture ... Astha, a dreamy eyed adolescent, is swept off her feet:

Day and night the thought of him kept her insides churning;
she was unable to eat, sleep, and study. Away from him her
eyes felt dry and empty. Her ears only registered the sound
of his voice. Her mind refused to take seriously anything that
was not his face, his body his feet, his hands his clothes. (8-9)

She is obsessed with him and spends hours together planning
meetings with him. Her friend Gayatri comes forward to manage
everything. But unfortunately their love fails to bloom because of
the stubbornly traditional intervention of parents. Her young heart,
then bleeds and bleeds. At the same time the affair makes her
mother more rigidly vigilant. She presses her husband for her marriage as early as possible:

'The girl is blossoming now when the fruit is ripe it has to be picked. Later she might get into the wrong company and we will be left wringing our hands. If she marries at this age, she will have no problem adjusting. We too are not so young that we can afford to wait.' (26)

Asth a wonders over the whole issue. Romantic by nature, Astha wants nothing of an arranged marriage. She has already tasted love and she believes that love alone must be the base of a life-long relation like marriage. When her mother invites a boy to see her Astha refuses to meet him:

The mother finally gave up, leaving Astha collapsed against the bathroom door, tears falling, crying, crying for Bunty, crying for the lack of love in her barren life, crying because she didn’t want to see a dull solid man in the drawing room who advertised for a wife and asked about sports. (21)

Days roll on monotonously and this monotony is broken by Rohan, a final year student in the college. In him she finds a sure respite from the agonies she had been through in the past. She is so passionately involved with him that she crushes her parent’s restrictions and misses no chance to live to the heart’s core each and every moment of his company. She feels transformed:

He kissed the fingers, nails, palms, he felt the small hair on the back with his closed lips. Astha felt something flow
inside her as she stared at his bent head. She had never been so aware of her body’s separate life before. (24)

Asthya is so deeply in love with him that she dreams of marriage with him. Here again fate deceives her. Rohan ditches her. He sneaks off to America never again to be hers. His deception further shatters Asthya:

Every day was painful to her. She was constantly reminded of Rohan, in the coffee house, at the back gate, at home. As for old black cars, they made her physically sick. (31)

Her only aim now is to complete her education, as she is frustrated with everything else:

After two years were over she supposed she would drift into teaching, that is what women like her did. (31)

Ashta is in her final year when Hemant Wadera’s family sends a proposal. He is an MBA, and foreign returned son of a bureaucrat. Her parents are more than happy to find that the boy does not believe in dowry. Ashta on the other hand is nervous because of her former secretive affairs.

Indian culture fetishizes virginity on the wedding night. Nearly in all patriarchal cultures men disdain women who have been had by others. The girls are instructed to protect their virginity as it is the gift they have to offer their husbands on the wedding night so that they are not categorized with sluts and
bumbling fools. In fact ‘woman’s virginity is protected in order to ensure marriageability and determination of paternity and inheritance.’ It is these and many more things which bother Astha, and she asks herself:

Should she tell him about Rohan, but what to tell? That though she had kissed a boy, her hymen was intact? That he had broken her heart but she hoped to find happiness in marriage? How could she say this to someone she didn’t know? (35)

The wedding is fixed in June when Astha’s MA exams would be over. Contrary to her romantic dreams, she is married traditionally:

The pundit was chanting. They were taking the seven steps around the fire, the steps that meant they were legally married. It was stifling, perhaps she was going to faint. Her cousins clustered around her, fussing with her jewellery, adjusting her palla and teasing the bridegroom (37).

When all the rituals are over both of them leave for Kashmir. The consummation takes place in a houseboat in Dal Lake:

Sex. There was so much of it. The pain Astha felt between her legs was never quite absent. She could only thank God they never spent that much time actually doing it. Hemant attacked the whole thing with great urgency, gazing at her a little anxiously after each time, while she uncertainly smiled back to a look of satisfaction that came over his face. (38)
Astha still remembers Rohan, and his soft and caring kisses. ‘How slow his kisses had been, how infinitely long, how thorough.’ (38) But she holds Hemant in high esteem for marrying her. She wants to capture her pink hours with Hemant in colours and words:

She tried sketching her surroundings, but the beauty was too overwhelming… looking out on the lake she wrote a poem about the sky, the shikaras, the sound of the birds, the sun behind the mountains reflected in the water. She wrote that she, the watcher, was part of that harmony, and it was fitting that her new life begin in beauty. As she put down her pen, tears filled her eyes” (39).

Ashta fails to find the cause of this hidden turmoil, though she is happy to find her husband taking care of every sigh and sob. Hemant is overwhelmed to find an innocent, unspoilt, simple girl as his bride. He is a motivating person and initially encourages Astha for writing. His encouragement enthralls her. She feels life opening up before her in golden vistas:

‘Do you think there will be golden vistas in our life, darling?’ She asked taken with the sound of the words. ‘Of course, baby’ he replied. ‘Golden like your body in the sunlight when it comes through the window touched by the water in this lake’ (42).

His words fill her heart with love as the lake was full of water.
Back in Delhi Astha devotes herself in the household chores of a daughter-in-law and a wife. Her dedication wins her the appreciation of her in-laws. Not only do they adore her, but seek and value her suggestions in family matters also. Equipped with a facile hand and an artist’s imagination she plans to make journalism her profession, but Astha’s spirit is dampened when her husband considers it quite out of question, as it would require total devotion. A teacher’s job instead is considered a good time pass. Astha is left wondering ‘whether all women were destined to be teachers or nothing’ (47) Her in-laws and her husband don’t prevent her from doing a teacher’s job in a school and thus career wise too everything seems fine with her for a while. Later her job is never considered seriously. Astha tries to balance her home and job well, but Hemant neither respects it nor her involvement with the activities in school. Everybody considers her teaching only as a medium to kill time:

Oh – ho what is there in teaching? Hardly a serious job, you just go, talk to some children about poems and stories, organize a few clubs, and come back. (68)

The early days of care, comfort and passion wane off. Hemant becomes engrossedly materialistic and keeps fumbling with the tactics of earning and hoarding more and more. He has almost no time for Astha, which makes her feel alienated:
She felt cold, dreary and distanced from him. She had been waiting for him all day, thinking of their being together, but nothing of this was reciprocated. He was a criminal, destroying her anticipation, ruining her happiness. (50)

The home gradually turns from heaven into a place of recrimination. Their relation cannot develop beyond raw sexuality. Hemant fails to provide her needed companionship and emotional compatibility. Even trivial matters often become the cause of indifference and annoyance. Astha as a simple middle class girl has very few material needs. She deeply values love and belongingness within the family. She slowly realizes that there is a sea difference between her and her corporate husband with his love for success and prosperity. Hemant is educated in a foreign land and looks ahead to professional progress and even to minting money. This temperamental incompatibility leads her to anxiety and depression. In this sense, ‘A Married Woman’ has a sophisticated plot. Its story of love is honest, set at a time of political and religious upheaval and is narrated with sympathy and intelligence for any one who has known life’s responsibilities. It is a sincere confession of a woman about her personality cult in the personal allegory of a bad marriage.9

When Astha’s father dies she wants her mother to stay with her but Hemant is unhappy with the idea:
Asth a tried to interest Hemant in the problem of her mother. He was a good son-in-law, everybody said so, his own parents in particular, closely echoed by the mother-in-law herself. If there was an illness he would call the doctor, if she needed money he would offer it, if she needed help in shifting he would provide it. But appeals beyond this irritated and annoyed him. (54-55)

Her uncared and unattended mother finds shelter in a Swami's Ashram. It further distracts Astha from her husband. She feels hurt and discriminated.

Asth a receives further shock sensing Hemant's reluctance to see her become a mother. Astha's repeated requests and wish to be a mother is granted only when Hemant is ready. She gets some solace to observe Hemant's caring attitude all through her pregnancy period:

Asth a had heard men were revolted by the way women looked when they were pregnant, but not Hemant. He loved touching her belly and breasts, her breasts especially, sucking on them experimentally, drawing a little milk when he sucked long enough. (57-58)

Her dream is fulfilled with the birth of a girl child, Anuradha. Astha feels like a complete woman with Anuradha in her arms. Hemant is proud to be a father but now he is more inclined to father a son:
‘I was so pleased Anu was a girl. But that doesn’t mean we should not try for a boy I am the only son... of course we will have a son, and if we don’t we needn’t stop at two.’ (61)

Even the Pan-American husband couldn’t abstain from desiring a son and an heir. So, though outwardly very modern and broad-minded we see the unmistakable hints of sex discrimination in Hemant’s views.

Asth a becomes pregnant second time, and this time everyone around her expects a boy:

every body, her colleagues, her in-laws, her husbands friends’ wives, her mother, the cook, the gardener and the part time help – all had an opinion about her baby’s gender, and that almost universal opinion was that it would be a son and heir. (69)

Asth a comes true to their expectation and gives birth to a son. ‘The family is complete at last’, says Astha’s mother piously feeling her own contribution, and overwhelmingly happy because of the birth of her grandson, ‘carrier of the line, the seed, the name.’ (68)

Asth a dislikes the gender prejudice in the family. She is amazed to see the reaction of the family that comes forward to celebrate the birth of a boy. The boy’s birth is celebrated ceremoniously:
Asthा was given gold jewellery and a new Sari. Anuradha and the child’s aunts were given gold necklaces. The newborn was given gold guineas. (69)

Anuradha’s birth on the other hand could draw only a lukewarm response and felicities. She takes pride in her risen status as the mother of a son and Hemant’s happiness flows through her like a river, lapping at her mind:

Asthा often looked at her family, husband, daughter and son. She had them all. She was fulfilled. Her in-laws frequently commented, ‘Women is earth’, and it is true she felt bounteous, her life one of giving and receiving, surrounded by plenty. (60)

She feels as if she has become the part of those archetypal experiences exclusive for the female race, but she hates the superstition and biased opinions regarding a male and a female child.

Everything in the family is in proper tune now. Hemant makes significant progress in his business. With this expansion, his working hours too extend from native to foreign tours. The glamour of international references enters the house:

He invariably came back in great good humor, with generous presents for everyone: perfume, chocolate, sweaters, jeans, toys, Japanese dolls, games for the children, underwear for Astha, toiletries, soaps, creams, shampoo, kitchen and
electronic equipment. Gradually their house acquired the
gloss of a house with money. (71)

This prosperity however proves a baneful boon to Astha. She feels
more like a single mother. Between her marriage and her children
she undergoes a change from a love-desiring woman to an
independence-loving woman. The once looked-down-upon job
becomes her top priority and Hemant too expects that she should
bear all her expenses.

Though every thing is well in place, Astha’s misfortune
follows her. The two kids, husband, servants and job scenario has
ill effects on Astha’s health and she starts having headaches and
deteriorates into a fatigue struck woman with wrinkled eye-brows
and drawn face. In this state of poor health, instead of providing
care to her, Hemant turns into an inattentive and absent husband.
Her impression that ‘with good job comes independence’ (4) is
soon proved wrong as it adds up to her responsibilities at home and
school with no time left for herself. Astha had hoped that Hemant
would prove a caring father and they would make a perfect set of
parents sharing the responsibilities of bringing up the children, but
Hemant considers this as ‘a woman’s work.’ Astha outpours these
feelings of rejection and alienation into her poems. She intends to
publish her poems but Hemant takes no interest in her plan. To him
the poems remain symptomatic of a person who is ‘positively neurotic’ (81).

Hemant is a thorough businessman with keen acumen and deep insight. His foresight has helped him establish a profitable business. With his expanding business increase Hemant’s foreign trips making Astha the virtual father as well as mother of the children. Hemant’s indifferent attitude disappoints Astha. His cool stance shakes even the last shred of her confidence. She feels like a derelict having no goals to pursue and no destination to follow.

Astha believes that marriage is not only a lifelong love alliance but an institution that encompasses many other equations of life. All she wants is an understanding relationship with her husband. Hemant is too practical and devoid of any sympathy for her. Astha realizes that their relation has become very superficial, one that has lost genuineness. Every reasoning with Hemant invariably leads to bitterness and pettiness. Hemant’s imperious virulent remarks cause a disconnect so deep that she is thrown into an emotional swirl. All her aspirations are blighted making her instable in return. Astha is terribly lonely like her mother, in spite of all the members of her family around. She is left alone to tackle the anguish growing within her heart. Unresolved personal conflict and emotional pain leave her appalled. An indifferent attitude of
the near ones and inability to find a meaning in life hurt Astha. She wishes she could be viewed in her entirety and not only as a sacrificing and accommodating woman. She wants her family to respond to her needs as well. She wishes Hemant had time to listen to her and validate what she feels. She knows that one does not always need to have an answer for everything, just being with each other and offering unconditional love and support can make a difference.

Lost and disillusioned she looks for her mother’s consoling words. Her mother, who is living in an Ashram on the banks of the Ganga in Rishikesh, mails her a small booklet, along with a letter in which she advises her to hold firmly the life which seems to be slipping from her. She writes:

‘Accept without condition if you want to live in peace ... In time of difficulty don’t lose heart... accommodation and acceptance keep families together. What you cannot change accept gracefully, cheerfully as Prasad from the Lord? Create a home where you are.’ (83-84)

Asth a finds it hard to reconcile to the preaching of her mother. She envies Hermant’s straightforward relationship with his parents. She suffers one more shock when her mother entrusts Hemant with her flat and possessions. She is further shaken when Hemant donates all her father’s books to a library. The act seems as the worst of conspiracy against her:
Together her husband and her mother had deprived her of the dearest part of her father, and continue before her eyes to be oblivious of their crimes. (87)

Even her mother considers Astha incapable of handling certain issues. She is seldom consulted in matters related to her parents. It is Hemant who can and must decide things. Astha is made to realize that the house belongs to Hemant who naturally would decide upon things. She is forced to think ‘then who am I? The tenant?’ (87) Astha feels that she belongs to nowhere and has no place to call her own. Her situation is that of a hopeless person who can’t alter the situation and also the prejudices harboured against women in general. People around her seek her to realize that being a woman she has no natural claim to property and thus no voice of hers. She wishes ‘she had a house that was more clearly hers.’ (89) Even her mother’s investments and other money matters are looked upon by her father, and then Hemant. It is just so natural. Astha, the daughter, is sidelined for obvious reasons. She is a woman and so can be sidelined easily. Hemant becomes too much possessive of every material thing in his charge to ever let Astha have any say. Except money and material things, he becomes philistine to other aspects of life. ‘The silent negation on Hemant’s part made her stand up in self defence for she was not ready to submit to ignorance.’

"10"
Life to Astha becomes a boat that could not be rocked. She is so chaotic from within that when she comes in contact with Aijaz Akhtar Khan, the founder of The Street Theatre Group, she immediately develops a liking for him. Aijaz is full of admiration for Astha, and eagerly resolves to harness her artistic talents. He is a performer as well as a teacher of history. He unfolds an altogether new world of love, upheavals, comity and apathy before Astha. He dispels melancholy thoughts out of her life and helps her grow into a woman of independence, confidence and enterprise. In contrast to Hemant who rarely took her talents seriously, Aijaz implores her to develop her artistic potential. Aijaz regenerates her identity, self-concept, and her sense of individuality.

Aijaz juggles painting and writing but her heart is always in conflict. Aijaz’s sudden death in a communal disharmony disturbs Astha. Her intelligent views about Hindu Muslim coexistence and the apathy of the government are derided and she is very slyly asked to keep to what she knows best, the home, children, teaching. Hemant never gives a patient ear to her thoughts and perception about life. This time too he does not bother to understand her feelings. Aijaz’s death gives him one more chance to get preoccupied with his business dealings. His asypathetic attitude and curt replies lead Astha through a gamut of frightening emotions, yet she continues working for and supporting the cause.
of the new society. Much against the wishes of Hemant and her mother-in-law, Astha participates in the rallies and is proud to be a part of the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch. Hemant practically fails to understand Astha’s conviction and her slogging for the cause of the Manch. While battling the blues in her life she is often pushed to the threshold of neurosis. The stress and depression inwardly corrode her being and she soon realizes life is not all smooth sailing. Though Aijaz comes into her life for a brief interlude, and is killed later on in a communal riot during Ramjanma Bhoomi-Babri Masjid demolition, she still fantasizes about love and sex with him:

That night as the pain receded and she fell asleep, she dreamt. She and another person were riding close together in a scooter rickshaw. The person turned, it was Aijaz with long silky hair, which brushed across her face. Astha leaned closer, the corners of their mouths met and pressed, alone against the commotion of the street. ... Aijaz took care of everything. Together, they walked in a room full of doors and windows, with a huge double bed in the centre. Blue and white curtains waved in the breeze, sunlight came flowing through, the bed was covered with soft, printed Rajasthani quilts... slowly they fell on the bed, kissing all the while, when Aijaz, entwined around her... She woke. (154–155)

The strong emotions of the dream change her mindset. Her sexual relations with Hemant now onwards turn into interludes of passionless unfulfillment.
That night, Hemant started his sex routine.

‘No’ said Astha, ‘I don’t feel like it.’

Heman paused. This was the first time his wife had not felt like it. ‘What’s up?’ he demanded.

‘Nothing.’

‘Then?’

‘Then what? Do I have to give it just because you are my husband? Unless I feel close to you I can’t – I’m not a sex object, you have others for that.’ (224)

It is during this phase that she meets Pipeelika, the widow of Aijaz. Both of them have been the victims of male tyranny – one of communal political frenzy and the other of the paralyzing male negation. The similarity of fatelessness helps to establish a bond between the two. Both the women cross social boundaries to find solace and understanding in each other’s arms. Besides enjoying an unparalleled emotional fulfillment, the relation spurs them to get united for the cause of social awakening. She commits herself to spread public awareness on the issues of religious tolerance and harmony. Aijaz’s death in communal riot thrusts her into sociopolitical matters of deep relevance. Fraught with the dishevel around, Astha becomes a spokesperson for religious coexistence:

In essence women all over the world are the same, we belong to families we are affected by what affects our husbands, fathers, brothers and children. In history many things are not clear, the same thing that is right for one person is wrong for another, and it is difficult to decide our path of action. We judge not by what people tell us, but by what we experience in our homes. And that experience tells
us that where there is violence, there is suffering, unnecessary and continuous suffering. When we look to righting wrongs committed hundred of years ago, we look to the past. But the past cannot feed us, clothe us, or give us security. History cannot be righted easily, but lives are lost easily, pain and trauma to women and children come easily. Tomorrow your sacrifice will have been forgotten because the duty of life is towards the living. (197 – 198)

‘Astha is ensnared into misalliance with her male partner of an extremely different temperament and character. Her life contends with pressures much greater than those exerted by her attachment to Pipeelika, a woman she meets half way through the narrative of her life’s journey. Both Astha and Pipeelika have failed to reach the climes of their emotional and physical passions with men – one due to her rich socio-political understanding and the other for her misfortune. The murder of Aijaz has sterilized Pipee’s feminine sensibilities. Rather by falling in love with each other both have made their loves refreshing.’

In her own home Astha does not have a place that she can call hers. Her painting interest needs space and so Astha has to convince everybody to oblige her by granting her a little room on the terrace. Even in day to day matters Hemant is the one who makes all the decisions. How much should be spent and how. Hemant grumbles if Astha goes out on days when he is free:
Asthya thought of all the evenings she had been free and waiting and wondered if there would ever be a day when she could feel the same right to complain that Hemant did. (172)

Her place in the family is that of an unpaid servant. Despite marital vows, the dance of life did take place. She knows that the situation is dark. She is leading a life of a nonentity, without moral support and bonding:

A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth. (231)

She is expected to be a desirable daughter-in-law acting out to stereotype role of an all sacrificing mother and a tolerant wife. Even after resigning from the job of a teacher Astha is mentally and physically shackled to the needs of her family. Her interest in the Ramjanma Bhoomi-Babri Masjid issue is considered quite unnecessary and only an act of ‘rabble rousing.’

Asthya struggles to secure her rights in the changing social and political dynamics leading to her metamorphosis. The Ram-Janmabhoomi Babri Masjid issue as the background of the novel too focus on the politics of culture in the Indian ethos. It has turned into a cocktail of Hindutva, Parochialism and violence where there is practically no space for debate and dialogue.

The male hegemony in society intensifies the persecution of women as their relationship with their husbands boils down to be
merely superficial and very little genuine. Astha too finds her marital life psychologically unrealistic and unconvincing but at the same time she is aware that her lesbian relationship would never be accepted as a means of emancipation but would merely remain a synonym of flirtation and lustful physicality. Astha is disillusioned because of lack of conviction and integrity in her relation with Hemant. She realizes his inadequacy as a supportive and compatible partner.

Before further examining Astha – Pipeelika relation, it is in fitness to throw light on lesbianism as concept and theory.

Lesbianism is an asserting form of feminism though outrightly rejected by conventional feminists. Lesbianism strongly challenges the age-old themes of marriage and is one of the outcomes of feminism. As Anne Coedt comments, 'The consideration of lesbianism as a personal option grew out of a very different reason. For many feminists there had always been a logical, theoretical connection between the elimination of sex roles and the possibility of loving other women. With some this became a reality when they met a woman they were attracted to. For others, lesbianism has meant a freedom from male relationships in general, a release from the task of looking for that elusive “special” man who wasn’t a male chauvinist. Other feminists saw a love
relationship with a woman as a positive thing because they felt other women could not encourage the passivity and submissiveness that they had previously found themselves falling into with men most important of all, perhaps, women found that there were other women to love in their own right as persons."^{12}

Lesbianism asserts the priorities and rights of women to define and stress their sexuality. It recognises a beneficent female principle maintaining that women entangled in same-sex relation are exceptionally active, intelligent and creative, and may understand human relations through their mature and insightful perspective more intensely than those who are hetero-sexual, and therefore they must not be forced to live a blemished life of societal rejection.

Adrienne Rich’s essay ‘Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence’ is considered as the first effective piece of writing, stating sensitive and sensible aspects of lesbian ideology, and justifying the concept of lesbian identification. She maintains rationally that compulsory heterosexuality is a ‘lie’ forced upon women ‘through which lesbian existence is perceived on a scale ranging from deviant to abhorrent or simply rendered invisible’^{13} Adrienne Rich successfully argues that heterosexual societal forces ‘wrench women’s emotional and erotic energies away from
themselves and other women and from women–identified values. Lesbianism challenges this atrocious compulsion. Lesbianism is not at all pervert or an abnormal school of thought which stresses only on a woman’s longing for genital sexual intercourse with another woman, rather lesbianism is an honest experience leading to self-identification, and disclosing solidarity of gender.

The feminist author Gloria Steinem candidly criticizes the common notion that lesbianism is a form of sexual deviation: ‘If the point of patriarchy is to restrict women as the most basic means of production and reproduction and direct all sex into having children inside patriarchal marriage, so they are properly owned, then any form of sexual expression that can’t end in conception is the adversary ... any form of sexual expression that doesn’t take place inside patriarchal marriage and isn’t directed toward conception is the enemy. The adversaries of love between two men and two women and the adversaries for equality for women are still the same people.’ She, therefore, wishes to earn esteem to lesbian mode of sexual intimacy and expression ‘Most obviously because all women can be stopped from bonding and rebelling by the word lesbian as long as that word is a bad word. So we all have common cause in making it honorable, because we will be stopped by it, all none conforming women will be stopped by it until it becomes as honorable a word as any other.’
It is asserted by Lesbian theorists like Charlotte Bunch, Marilyn Frye, Ti-Grace Arkinson, Andrea Dworkin, and Monique Wittig etc. that to understand feminine sexuality lesbian experience is very essential. In their view the only sexual and political choice that could lend freedom to women from the dominant patriarchal set-up is Lesbianism. "Lesbianism is the only concept I know which is beyond the categories of sex (women and man), because the designated subject (lesbian) is not a woman, either economically, or politically, or ideologically. For what makes a woman is a specific social relation to a man, a relation that we have previously called servitude, a relation which implies personal and physical obligation as well as economic obligation (forced residence domestic corvee, conjugal duties, unlimited production of children etc.) A relation which lesbians escape by refusing to become or to stay heterosexual."^16

Wittig is very blunt in declaring that the existing creation of two sexes i.e. man and woman is totally patriarchal and thus a lesbian is not encompassed in this characterization. Wittig rejects the social code where a woman is compelled to live under the dominance of the man just for being termed as an ideal woman in standards set by men. She considers the category 'woman' oppressive because it is the creation of a heterosexual society which is held in high esteem by the male sex. To her the word
‘woman’ clearly suggests the inferior, secondary and subservient status. To interpret her in the words of K. L. Kerber, ‘Heterosexual systems are one that organize reproduction via heterosexual practice that requires the production of two sex/genders so that sexual desire can be heterosexualised. It also requires sex/gender map onto reproductive differences. Thus, within heterosexual systems, ‘intelligible’ genders are those, which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire. Individuals who violate the unity of reproductive anatomy, heterosexual desire and gender behaviour fall out of the domain of intelligible gender identity.’

He further maintains, ‘The lesbian option is to be a not-woman, where being a not-woman is played out by insisting on being neither identifiably woman nor man, nor by enacting femininity as drag, nor by insisting on switching gender categories and thus being a man, which within patriarchy means being dominant in relation to women and potentially also misogynistic.’

Sue–Ellen Case is a lesbian academic who in her article, maintains that lesbian role playing make women strong enough to resist the dominant construction of femininity.

Manju Kapur’s, ‘A Married Woman’ is a specially notable for a very candid portrayal of lesbian relation between Astha and Pipeelika.
With her growing interest and intimacy with Pipeelika, Astha forgets her past miseries and frustrations. Every dawning day brings her new hopes of life and warmth, till, one day, she accidentally finds a condom in Hemant’s suitcase. It is an intolerably ruinous incident which arouses commotion within her:

she stared at it for a long time, its implications running through her head. What should she do? Leave it in the suitcase, throw it, or confront him? Who had he slept with, he who was never in any place for very long, it could not be that he was in love or had a relationship or may be he did. Some woman might travel with him, how would she ever know? Maybe the distributor had supplied him with someone, she had read somewhere that woman were often a part of business deals. (212)

She feels more cheated, deceived and deprived than ever. Hemant attempts a lot to convince her variously and gloss over the issue but she cannot come to terms with his explanations. This abominable discovery of the condom leaves an indelible scar on Astha’s self-esteem. She is hurt but has expected a soft humanitarian approach from Hemant. But his initial take is a stout denial. If Hemant had made a clean breast of it Astha might have forgiven him but he mocks at her and her misinterpretation of the situation. His cover ups only worsen her pain.

Asta forced herself to be content with this. It was too dangerous to venture further. (214)
Because of her low self-esteem she fears rejection. Even after being married to Hemant, a successful businessman, for years and leading a seemingly comfortable life in a well to do household Astha cannot define herself, her priorities and her essence. She still can’t take charge and speak out. ‘Being marginalized by the affluence of her family, vicious social atmosphere, sheer hysteria of communalism and quarrel of two communities for God over a small thing, she is disillusioned in the empirical study of man’s nature and his framing of social values.’ Dr. Ashok Kumar further adds, ‘Almost all the female characters of Kapur are educated, aspiring individuals cased within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society becomes intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity and develop the awareness of the New Woman, who has a voice of her own. Marriage, the social institution, traps and curbs their spirit by binding them to the responsibility of a home.’

Thus she finds one more reason to turn to Pipee, as an inseparable part of her life:

They began to meet more often. Astha was circumspect in revealing the amount of time she spent with Pipee. She knew it would be frowned upon as excessive. When the boundaries of what might be considered normal interaction passed she
started to lie. Thus an element of secrecy entered the relationship and gave it an illicit character. (218)

Their meetings increase. Whenever she is alone Pipee comes to join her. Even during busy hours Pipee never misses occasions to phone her. Their regular talks and meetings generate a new fire in Astha:

She started to fantasise about her, imagined her hair between her fingers, her skin beneath her own, and her hands on the back of the neck? (225)

She becomes bold enough to break the stony silence between Hemant and herself. She is assertive to declare:

please, Hemant. I am thirty six. I need to be independent. I am always adjusting to every body else’s needs. (227)

She is so deeply involved with Pipee that her school-going children, Himanshu and Anuradha, are of little concern to her. She starts neglecting them and the result is that Himanshu cannot do well in his mid terms and Anuradha too does badly in Science and Maths. She wants all her precious minutes to be fully utilized with Pipee and Pipee alone. In one such emotionally turbulent state she rushes to Pipee’s apartment. The moment is so tempting that both of them cannot restrain themselves yielding to the tidal waves of passion:
Slowly Pipee put her arms around her. She could feel her hands on the narrowness of her back, on the beginning of her hips. Gently she undid her blouse hooks, and slowly she continued, feeling her back with her palm, coming round up towards her breasts, feeling their softness, especially where the nipples were, feeling them again and again, in no hurry to reach any conclusion. They were enclosed in a circle of silence, the only sound, the sound of their breaths close together and mingled.

In the small bedroom, Astha tense with nervousness. She was afraid, yet there was no going back. Sensing how she felt, Pipee took her time, touching every crevice of her body with her mouth. The sweaty patches of her armpits with small stiff hair beginning to poke out of the soft fold of flesh where the arm joined the Torso, the hard bony part behind her ears, the deep crease between her buttocks the hairiness between her thighs.

In between they talked, the talk of discovery and attraction, of the history of a three month relationship, the teasing and pleasure of an intimacy that was complete and absolute, expressed through minds as much as bodies.

Afterwards Astha felt strange, making love to a woman took getting used to and it also felt strange, making love to a friend instead of an adversary. (230 – 231)

Pipee becomes demanding as their relation ripens. She feels unsatisfied by their fitful meetings, and asks Astha to sever all ties with her earlier life, and her Vasant Vihar house, and shift to Pipee’s flat along with her children. Though her heart had sought freedom from her demanding family, and she had willingly
abandoned her once upright and moral behaviour in society, such an arrangement is quite unacceptable to Astha’s conventional mindset. But Pipee’s longings also need to be appeased.

She is curbed in her heterosexual life and chooses to establish a relationship with Pipee. She challenges the dominant societal traits and the unquestionable familial rules. She deviates from the accepted general concepts by loving Pipee but the fears of the relationship exist within, tormenting her further. Astha is pushed over the edge with the thought of separating from Hemant and is always afraid of being abandoned and rejected. Her irritability and rebelliousness lead her to the brink of the society she so dreaded to be isolated from. She tries hard to conform to the cultural values which the following lines express aptly:

Asthा felt her absence every minute, and when Pipee called her in the evenings, she went, but her house situation was such that the meetings had to be hurried, not more than an hour, not much for lovers, certainly not much for Pipee. (240)

Asthा’s relation with Pipee provides only momentary relief from her ongoing suffering. Initially it is dream like and is expressively fulfilling but gradually everything involved in it loses its passion and luster. As days role on Pipee, who has been an active partner, starts pressing Astha against her will even on trivial
matters. Astha, a victim of male discrimination and dominance, is aggrieved to find Pipee too in that role of an over-demanding partner. She feels as if she has jumped from fire into a frying pan. Her agonies are evident from the notes taken during the Yatra:

Awful, awful couldn’t sleep. Last night we fought. She left this morning without telling me where she was going. What did I do, it was nothing ... she glared at me, pointedly left the table and began clearing away the distress. Doesn’t she realise what I go through because I want to be with her? I am in the same city as my children and I cannot meet them. Still she broods. Is this how she wants to spend our time in Delhi? To fight, sulk and turn away from me? Why is she like this? I wish Aijaz were still alive, but then she would never have been interested in me. They had the perfect marriage, she hankers after that wholeness. What can I do? I live my life in fragments, she is the one fragment that makes the rest bearable. But a fragment, however potent, is still fragment? (264).

Pipee’s constant threats to leave to America, leaves her more forlorn than ever and make Astha an unpredictably morose person. At times she fails to judge whether she has committed a severe mistake, a hideous crime, an irredeemable sin to be a paramour of Pipee. Her insensitive desertion ruins the very secret chords of life in Astha:

‘So, she gone,’ said Hemant when Astha returned. Awake at that late hour and witness to his wife’s face and eyes. ‘Yes.’ ‘Was the plane on time?’ ‘I don’t know. I did not stay.’ ‘How was she?’ ‘She?’, ‘I’m tired,’ she said, ‘I want to
sleep.' Mechanically she changed, brushed her teeth, put cream on, got into her side of the bed, pulled the sheet up and turning to the very edge lay absolutely still. Motion of any kind was painful to her. Her mind heart and body felt numb. It continued like this for days. She felt stretched thin, this across the globe.' (306-307).

'Kapur has made a thorough sociological study in the Astha–Aijaz–Pipeelika relationship. In their complex relationship Astha and Aijaz have their ideological love for man, religion and society, Aijaz and Pipeelika have their secular love and Astha and Pipeelika have their lesbian affair.'

Through Astha and Pipee’s relation, Kapur means to convey that despite many choices – social, sexual, political, - women are still prone to discrimination on different fronts. Lesbianism, it is true that, is now not considered evil, sinful, illegal, perverted deviant and antisocial, but still needs pressing and chiseling if at all it is to grow into an acceptable norm of life. If has been a long journey form middle ages when such women were burnt alive as witches, till the contemporary times when they have niched an identity of butch femme and have developed defence mechanisms on socio-political level, Lesbianism still remains a somewhat fragile and fiddle concept. It has still to win an equal recognition with widely prevailing heterosexual human behaviour.
A Married Woman, thus, establishes Manju Kapur as a sensitive novelist, possessing a deep and mature understanding of the inner subtlety of women’s psyche. Her portrayal of women is credible, sensitive and sympathetic.

In fine, ‘In her writing Manju Kapur has emphasized on the issues in the context of patriarchy, inter-religious marriage, family bond, male-female bond, co-existence of past and present in the socio-political facts. She has narrated her woman protagonist as a victim of biology, gender, domestic violence and circumstances.’\(^{22}\)
References:


9. Dr. Ashok Kumar. *Portrayal of New Woman: A Study of Manju Kapur’s A Married Woman*, Indian Writing in English,


17. Ibid., p. 285.

18. Ibid., p. 286.

