Chapter - 3

Difficult Daughters

On the horizon of Indian Writing in English, Manju Kapur has emerged as a new novelist in the world of fiction in the 1990s. Her first novel, *Difficult Daughters* received ‘The Commonwealth Award for Eurasian Region’. Manju Kapur has indeed created sensation in the literary world by voicing the inner tribulation. *Difficult Daughters* bares various whims in newly woven pattern that establish its worth as a work abounding certain novelists of the period. She appears humble, as she says –

‘Nothing is planned in a big way, but eventually things may take a grand shape. Writing this novel was not very difficult for me, but it took eight long
years before the book finally saw the light of the day.’ [Devika: 2006: 231]

In every age, woman has been portrayed either as a mother, a wife, a mistress or an object of attraction. And their roles have been defined in relationship to male counterpart. B. K. Das explains –

‘Women have been present in literature from their [male’s] view point but now women have taken the reins in their hands and they are nowadays presented in the writings of female writers form their point of view’[Das, B. K: 2006 : 231]

Manju Kapur has indeed created sensation in the literary world by voicing the inner tribulations of her protagonists in an emphatic manner. Her first novel, *Difficult Daughters* elaborates the dilemma of women. The search of one’s ‘self’ and destiny constitutes the key theme of the novel. This no doubt refers to the independence aspired to an obtained by a nation as well as by woman residing in the same nation at the same time. It is the story of freedom struggle of both Virmati and nation. Pushp Lata explains –

‘Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* can be considered a chronicler since it serves as a mirror to reflect times, place and people of India at the time of freedom struggle and immediately after independence.’ [Lata, Pushp: 2006: 56]

*Difficult Daughters* is a story of three generations of women. Ida, a divorce woman, narrates the story of her mother. The novel begins with the death of the protagonist, Virmati. Ida explains the story of her dead mother. Manju Kapur, in order to know about the story, unfolds the tale of Virmati. The novelist also describes the nature of Virmati and her desire after death shows her attitude. She says –

‘When I die, she said to me, I want my body donated. My eyes, my hearts, my kidneys, any organ that can be of use. That way someone will value me after I have gone.’ [*Difficult Daughters*: 1]

Ida, ever aloof daughter, goes to Amritsar to reconstruct her mother’s memory. Ida discovers her mother’s earlier life. Manju Kapur describes it in detail –
Virmati is described as a woman who bears responsibility of the younger sister and brother. Actually, the novelist elaborates the picture of an Indian family. Virmati in the family takes care of her younger ones. As Manju Kapur describes –

‘Ever since Virmati could remember she had been looking after children. It wasn’t only baby Parvati to whom she was indispensable to her younger siblings she was second mother as well.’ [6]

Thus, Virmati is portrayed as a common Indian woman. She has spent most of her time in the household duties. Though she wishes to spend her life freely without taking any responsibility, she is bound in the household duties. She represents the modern woman. She fights against the conventional Indian male dominant society. Sanjay Kumar explores –

‘On the surface though, Virmati seems to represent the women of 1950’s who, in a patriarchal society of that period were subjugated to man-made injustices and indignities.’ [Kumar, Sanjay: 2006]

The author does not forget to describe the plight of Indian women. Even Kasturi, her mother, is bound in the familial duties. With the description of Kasturi, the writer explains the drastic condition of Indian woman in the traditional patriarchal society. She explains –

‘How trapped could nature make a woman? She turned to God, so bountiful with his gifts, and prayed ferociously for the miracle of a miscarriage.’ [7]

The writer has vividly described the picture of the Indian woman. Actually, in Indian context, woman is always considered as an object. The society creates a rigid pathway for the Indian women. She is bound to give birth and serve male...
in the family. She never shows her own feeling and desire. The author here describes the changing life of Indian woman. Before marriage, her life is bound with the burden of parents. And after marriage, she is merely a servant in the family. Through the character of Kasturi, the writer explains it –

‘Excitement she had felt at the birth of her first child seemed to belong to another life. Everybody then had been considerate of her youth, fears and inexperience. Her mother had been present. Her mother who had come with her own food, her dal, rice, flour, ghee, and spices, with her own servant boy to buy fruits and vegetables, to draw her drinking water from the market pump, to help with the household work. Light-as-air she had passed through, with not an anna spent on her, not a grain of wheat or drop of water taken from the house of her son in law.’[9]

Virmati does not have her private life. She spends the whole time in the company of brother and sister. The family is typically bound in the traditional way. Manju Kapur seriously elaborates the facts of traditional Indian family. It is the family where the woman is inferior. Shakuntala, a cousin of Virmati, who studied at Lahore, is modern in behavior and life. But, the family takes an objection on it. Even, Kasturi is in opposition who says –

‘‘Beti’ said Kasturi, in a mock scolding voice, ‘how can family disturb? You are getting very modern in your thinking. We hardly get to see you as it is.’ [15]

The above lines describe the conservative attitude towards the girl’s education. The patriarchal society never accepts the modernity of girl. The family of Virmati is also against the modernization of female. Even, they cannot accept the change in the life of woman. But, Virmati is attracted towards the life style of Shakuntala. She thinks that Shakuntala’s life is free. She is not bound in the conservative thinking. And she is free from the family responsibilities. Here, the author represents the two different women. Shakuntala is advanced and educated. She is aware about her duties. She is not bound in the cage of old tradition and family responsibility. On the other hand, Virmati is a typical Indian girl. She is bound in the family responsibility. Her desires are always
vanished in the day to day struggle. Her dreams and hopes are merged in the old tradition. Shakuntala comments on it –

‘These people don’t really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else.’ [17]

Manju Kapur deliberately uses the independent world. In the novel, she uses the struggle for independence. She also describes the freedom struggle of nation and Virmati. The author exposes the situation of women during the freedom struggle of India. The nation has changed during the freedom struggle. But, the plight of woman was unchanged. Virmati actually thinks that she should live her life like Shakuntala. She desires to live free life without any burden and responsibility. She wishes to break the shackles of family responsibility and live free life like her cousin. But, there is difference between dream and reality. When Virmati reveals her hope to her mother, Kasturi gets angry and says –

‘Now it is you who are eating my head. What good are Shaku’s degrees when she is not settled? Will they look after her when she is old? demanded Kasturi irritably. ‘At your age I was already expecting you, not fighting with my mother.’ [21-22]

The words of Kasturi are real in Indian society. They express the situation of woman in patriarchal family. Woman in Indian family is considered inferior. She is not free to take her own decision. She is dependent upon the male. The male dominance is vividly described by Sanjay Kumar –

‘It is interesting to observe that Virmati’s struggles for emancipation from the ills of patriarchy begins almost simultaneously with her growing fascination for Harish and fulfillment of her own physical desires, hitherto untended and ignored singularly. The suggestion of the author is quite tangible.’ [Kumar, Sanjay: 2006]

The orthodox Indian society does not accept the equal opportunity of woman. Kasturi’s words reflect the reality that in the family woman never fights for
her right. Actually, there is no right for woman in old orthodox family. Shaleen Kumar Sing also explains it –

‘Manju Kapur seeks to establish in the patriarchal Indian society that there are women like Virmati who due to their inclination towards protest against male dominated world constantly struggle between the physical and the moral and if they prefer the lives of their own, they will have to bear with the travails of illicit relationship, social antipathy and defame and also have to run against the currents of social and moral dogmas. She, when writes a letter to the professor and shows her anger in a mixed tone of protest.’[Singh, Shaleen Kumar and Verma, Daisy: 2012: 66]

Virmati’s family is a traditional Indian family. Her grandfather, Lala Diwan Chand is a noted landowner who strongly emphasizes on the education of woman. Manju Kapur never forgets to emphasize on the joint family situation in India. Actually, joint family is the tradition of Indian society. Lala Diwan Chand also supports joint family system. But, joint family creates difficulty. Thus, Lala Diwan Chand is against the nuclear family. Manju Kapur explains it –

‘Lal Diwan Chand was vehemently opposed to any kind of division in the family. As long as he was alive, everybody would be provided for. But with each new child Kasturi produced, the murmurs of discontent became louder and more persistent’ [27]

The author here describes how the member of Lala Diwan Chand’s family is self centered. The writer also explains the condition of Kasturi. She struggles for her existence in the family. She is just like a machine to produce children only. On the other hand, her mother, Kasturi suffers from the behaviour of the family members. Instead of supporting her, the family murmurs against her. Lala Diwan Chand tries for the unity of the family. But, the destiny is different. The clashes in the family increase every day. The love between them was vaporized. Everybody thinks about their family. Hence, the division takes place in the family. It is a great pain for Lala Diwan Chand. He thinks that he has failed to unite the family forever. In the depressed mood, he says –
‘I have made them, fed them, clothed them, and now, they behave like this, he thought. At such a time with the drain on expenses and manpower, to be forced into further construction, further breakups.’ [29]

The drastic change appears in the family of Kasturi. Now, the separation takes place. Kasturi’s family shifts in a new house. Manju Kapur never forgets to describe the plight of woman in the family. The novelist describes the plight of other woman in Lala Diwan Chand’s family. Lajwanti, another woman in the family, suffers with separation. She suffers because of her son, Somnath who is not settled yet and hence, he refuses marriage. This is the real pain of Lajwanti. Now, the family separates and Lajwanti, Chandar Prakash and Somnath move in the new house. The house is well designed, but Lajwanti feels lonely in the house. The writer explains –

‘Inside her wonderful house, Lajwanti felt lost. The silence and emptiness seemed eerie. In the comfortable pokiness of the old city home, there was no possibility of feeling alone. The family and servants could always be heard against the sounds of the street coming up through the windows. But here hedge, garden and separate units made her feel abandoned. There were no nephews and nieces to shout it, nobody to scold. Her status had gone.’ [34]

Somnath finds that most of the rooms in house are empty. Hence, the family decides to give room on rent. A professor, Harish Chandar lives with his wife in one of the vacant rooms. Virmati first time visits the tenant and gets familiar with the professor’s family. Actually, when professor talks with Virmati, she is impressed by his speech. The professor is attracted to the personality of Virmati. He says –

‘This girl has potential he found himself thinking while listened and dreamed more intensely than she ever had of her fiancé; that shadowy figure waiting in the wings to marry her’ [39]

Manju Kapur portrays the picture of Indian family, where the education of a woman is abandoned. Meanwhile, the family of Kasturi worries about the marriage of Virmati. The family thinks that the girl is responsibility of the
family. And marriage of the girl is the prime responsibility of the parents. The family is in search of suitable life partner for Virmati. Actually, Virmati thinks about her further education. It is the impression of the professor who evokes her to study more. But the family is against the education of girl. Finally, the marriage of Virmati is decided. Kasturi says to Virmati that the decision of her further education would be decided by her fiancé’s family. The family of Virmati’s fiancé also decides that the latter has enough education. Now, there is no need to study more. The condition of Virmati is vividly explained by the novelist –

“She now wanted to study further. Her parent thought that she had gone far enough. Her fiancé’s parents thought she was already well qualified to be the wife of their son, the canal engineer. They didn’t want too much education in their daughter-in-law, even though times were changing’. [45]

Manju Kapur, through this, describes the negligence of woman’s education. The women especially in the Indian family have no right to take decision for her education. It is decided by her family. The author explains that the situation is changing slowly, but the condition of woman’s education is poor. Another thing that is discussed by Manju Kapur is marriage. Actually, marriage is the ritual in Indian culture. But, the marriage of a girl is prior responsibility of family. She has no right to choose her life partner. Virmati gets upset with the decision of the family. Meanwhile, the professor’s wife and Kasturi become familiar. Kasturi is still against the further education of Virmati. Actually, she is prejudiced that in the college where most of the students are male may spoil her daughter. The professor’s wife tries to explain reality. She describes the excellence of her husband. Manju Kapur describes the mentality of Indian woman. She has not her own identity. She is often ready for the duty to her husband. She is known as a wife of professor. The author describes –

‘Her husband’s popularity was a source of vicarious pleasure for her, but she was modest and did not want Kasturi to think she was boasting about him’. [45-46]
The story in the novel now shifts in present time. Manju Kapur skillfully manages the past and present of the story. The narrator Ida, daughter of Virmati, is keenly interested in the history of her mother. She tries to unfold the past of her mother. She wants to reveal the relationship of her mother to the other member of family. Actually, the author explains the crude past of Virmati. Ida hopes that her maternal uncle and aunty help her for unveiling her mother’s past. Ida is desperate about the discovery of her mother’s suffrage and struggle. Hence, she visits Amritsar for her mother. Manju Kapur beautifully pictures the first visit of Ida in the house of her mother. Ida is nostalgic with the visit of her mother’s house. She explains –

‘Ever since coming to Amritsar I have been restlessly pacing the old house. I wish bricks could speak. This must have been where Virmati slept, this must have been where she studied, this must have been the window pare sniveled at.’ [48]

The author exposes the struggle of Virmati. When Ida visits the old house of her mother, she gets nostalgic. She thinks that every corner of the house contains the memory of her mother. Even every brick of the wall speak about the suffering and struggle of Virmati. Meanwhile, Ida discovers her mother’s college life. She imagines how her mother takes admission against the rage of her mother, Kasturi. Ida visits the college. Every corner of the college, corridor and bricks are the witness of her mother’s presence. Ida walks in the corridor. She experiences the footsteps of her mother. Ida explains –

‘My parents must have walked down these hallways, across the stone, and I felt the past hovering, cliché-like over that run-down building beckoning me into its orbit.’ [50]

Again the story moves in the past. Virmati is impressed by the personality of the professor. The professor advises her for further education. Virmati thinks about her further education. But the main issue is the permission of the parents. Manju Kapur unveils the hidden reality about Virmati. She is deeply interested in the speech of Professor Harish Chandar. Virmati takes interest in the Harish Chandar rather than his speech. Actually, Virmati takes admission
in the college for the sake of Professor Harish Chandar. Ida discovers that her history was made in this college. She says –

‘My history had started here, in this classroom. Here it was that my parents must have looked at each other significantly, doomed love in their eyes.’ [53]

Manju Kapur describes the worst condition of Virmati. Actually, the author unveils the truth of Virmati. She deeply thinks about Professor Harish Chandar. But, she forgets about her family. The traditional family never accepts the love affair of girl. In Indian society, the woman is bound in the social customs. The love affair of Virmati will create disaster in the family. On the other hand, Virmati never decides her future. Actually, she thinks about her love affair. Hence, her suffering increases. Manju Kapur explains –

‘Days passed and Virmati’s confusion grew. She could sometimes wish that... but what could she wish? Early marriage, and no education? No professor and no love? Her soul revolted and her suffering increased.’ [54]

Actually, Virmati never decides whether she accepts her love or to obey her parents. Her family already finds her life partner. But, Virmati thinks that if she accepts the proposal of her family, there is no love and emotions in the relationship. It is the fate of Indian woman who has no right to choose her love. Manju Kapur has exposed the other reality that if Virmati choose her love, it is against the social ritual and customs. The love between Virmati and Harish Chandar makes her in dangling situation. At one time, she thinks that she experiences a true love with professor. But, on the other hand, she thinks about the conventional thought of family. Manju Kapur skillfully elaborates the plight of Virmati. She expresses –

‘Later, on her stealthy way home she felt as usual tainted by her moments with the professor. The thought of her wedding was always at the back of her mind, splitting her into two socially unacceptable pieces’ [55]
As the story progresses, the author mentions the situation of Virmati. Actually, Manju Kapur describes the lovers, Virmati and Harish Chandar. Virmati is deeply involved in the love of Harish Chandar. She skillfully uses the time of freedom struggle. One freedom struggle is for nation and other of Virmati’s for her love. The orthodox Indian family never accepts the love affair. But, the plight of Virmati is difficult. She never forgets her love. Actually, Harish Chandar too is deeply involved in the love of Virmati. He writes letters to Virmati which shows his passionate love for 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’ [56]

Virmati thinks about the further education and love affair. Actually, she worries about the situation of the family. She is aware about the rage of the family on her love affair and further education. She argues with her mother and about her further education. She often says about the Shakuntala. The family is in support of education of Shakuntala. Virmati thinks that her family definitely gives support for her further education. But, her dreams are vaporized, when her mother says about Shakuntala –

‘Shakuntala pehnji did not have five sisters waiting to get married either. And do you think it makes her mother happy to have her daughter unmarried? She may say what she likes about jobs and modern women, but I know how hard she still tries to find a husband for Shaku, and how bad she feels. You want to do the same to me? To your father and grandfather?’ [58]

The writer expresses the plight of Virmati. Her mother reveals the truth that the marriage is the ultimate fate of the girl. Her education creates trouble in the marriage. Actually, Kasturi is not against Virmati’s education. But, she worries about the family condition. Marriage of a girl is a responsibility of parents. On the other hand, Virmati is torn between her desire and familial responsibility. Eventually, Virmati decides to choose further education instead of marriage. She boldly refuses the proposed marriage. Her decision creates blunder in the family. Kasturi is furious about the mad decision of Virmati.
She thinks that if the proposed marriage is canceled, her daughter will remain in the house forever. She gets angry on the decision of Virmati. She bangs her on the ground and says –

‘Remember you are going to be married next month. If I have to swallow poison to make do it.’

[60]

But, Kasturi is aware about the mental condition of Virmati. She explains her past life. Kasturi was also determined about the education. She also postponed her marriage for the sake of education. But, her family was against her attempt. She was brought up in the traditional patriarchal family where marriage was the ultimate future of the women. Marriage implies that girl has to work tirelessly to please her in-laws. The writer through this explores the boundaries for a woman in the Indian society. In the conventional Indian patriarchal family, woman is made only for marriage and taking care of babies. Even, mother has no right to take decision for her daughter. She tirelessly works to impress her in-laws. Manju Kapur explores it –

‘During Kasturi’s formal schooling it was never forgotten that marriage was her destiny. After she graduated, her education continued in the home. Her mother tried to ensure her future happiness by the impeccable nature of her daughter’s qualifications. She was going to please her in-laws.’ [62]

The novelist never forgets to describe the orthodox Indian social customs. In the old orthodox conventional family, there is no space for a girl or boy to meet before marriage. The society thinks that it is bad custom to meet girl to a boy before marriage. The marriage is decided by parents only. There is no right for a boy or a girl to choose the life partner. Lala Diwan Chand is also furious on the decision of Virmati. He says –

‘Not like her? Of course he will like her. What is there to dislike in her? He is an educated man, form respectable Samaj family, where is the room for liking and disliking? Nonsense!’ [64]
The novelist explores the marriage ceremony of Kasturi. The novelist explains that the marriage in Indian society is just like a festival. The various sweets are prepared. It is not only a marriage, but it is a bond in the two families. Kasturi describes it in detail. The aim is to change the mind of Virmati. Now, Virmati has not decided whether to choose her love or responsibility. In her family, no one understands her inner turmoil. Everyone talks about her marriage. Even, her mother does not imagine the suffrage of Virmati. She feels alone and helpless in the distressed situation. She thinks that no one supports her in her dangling situation. She says –

‘It seemed to Virmati that her family could talk and 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.’ [69-70]

Actually, Virmati experiences the aloofness in the family. Even, her mother cannot understand her feeling. She expresses her emotion to her mother. But, her mother rejects her proposal for further studies. She is nervous and thinks that if she visits her old home, it will give some comfort. But, the present situation is not for the change of place. It is her own feeling which brings her in a distressed condition. The writer expresses the condition of Virmati –

‘Then to her father’s shop, the old house, her old school, her new house, her new college, incoherent pictures jumbling about in her unhappy mind.’ [73]

There is no solution for the situation of Virmati. She is helpless in this condition. Even, her family never supports and discusses only marriage. Virmati tries to escape from the situation. At one side, there is her love and on the other side, there is reputation of her family. She fails to find the solution for her struggle. Every day, her life is full of struggle. She does not escape from the painful dilemma. Hence, she tries to suicide –

‘She stared into 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
The novelist portrays the struggle of the ‘self’ of Indian woman. Her life is often engaged with her relatives. There is no space for own feelings and emotions. The attempted suicide is an outcome of the frustration. Virmati fails to decide her future. Actually, suicide is not the solution of her problem. As the news arrives at the house of Virmati, her mother gets stunned and thinks about Virmati. When the news arrives at the house, Kasturi is found engaged in the household duties. It explores that how the relationship pertain between Virmati and Kasturi. The strain in the relationship is vividly described by the novelist. With one of the instances, the author shows –

‘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.’ [81]

The family is in sad mood. Virmati attempts suicide, but fortunately saved by one of the servants of Lala Diwan Chand. Hence, Virmati’s mother is against her further education. She thinks that the girl is merely a stigma on the family. She thinks that the education fills her mind with the evil thought. Her education creates misery for the family. She says –

‘Didn’t she owe them a moment’s worth f 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 their right senses bear the humiliation?’ [86]

Actually, at one stage the behaviour of Virmati is lunatic. She attempts suicide which creates misery for the family. But, on the other hand, the situation of Virmati is crucial. She never decides the correct path for her future. And in her family no one understands her inner pain. She scatters inside. Her family is bound with social status, where woman is made for only marriage, serving men and nourishes children. Even her father also thinks like Kasturi. When Virmati talks about her education to her father, he says –
‘But Why? You know every girl has to go to her own home. This is your right and our duty. As it is we have taken our time, not wishing to hurry you. We have let you study, as much as any girl has studied in Amritsar.’ [87]

But, Virmati rejects her father’s advice. The family thinks that the girl is going mad due to education. Hence, they decide to lock her in the junk room. The instance shows how in the traditional family, woman has to scarify her feeling and emotion. Even, her mother does not understand her feeling and emotions. Though her family is against her education and secret love affair, she shares the feeling through letters. The novelist deliberately puts focus on the letters of professor and Virmati. She vividly describes the old traditionalist Indian family. The author explores the Indian woman who scarifies her life for family dignity. If she does wrong, she will be stigma to the family. Professor writes in his letter to Virmati –

‘I knew you were locked up, that you refused to marry Inderjit that Indu is going to preserve the family integrity.’ [90]

Virmati remains silent. Even though, her family is against her and locked her in a dark room, she still loves Professor much. The word which she uses in her letter reveals her inner turmoil. She thinks that there is no change in her life. Even before being locked, she spends her life in a same confinement. Actually, she is not a bad daughter. She thinks that it is her fate. She never blames her family. She says –

‘My fate is cast, and I am free now. I feel far more peaceful in the godown that I did in the days before I went to the river. Then, the confusion in my mind was terrible. I couldn’t think, and all I heard around me was talk of my marriage. If I was to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed, then I didn’t want to live.’ [92]

The author expresses that in the traditional Indian family, the situation of woman is inferior. She has no right to take decision. She is made just to obey the order of her master. There is no space to think for her. Virmati reveals the
drastic truth of the woman in the family. She considers her much fortunate than other. She writes –

‘One of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves. Even if we arrive at the same conclusions that have been presented to us, our faiths in those beliefs are stronger for having been personally thought out’ [102]

The love letter between Virmati and Professor reveals the drastic condition of Virmati in the junk room. In her letter, she writes about her lonely life. ‘Despite all this, I am lonely, lonely, lonely’ [103]. Her writing is about the condition of all daughters in the Indian family. She has expressed her feeling in the letter. Her words are naked reality of the conventional Indian family. The society also does not give her the cultural identity. She writes –

‘Who is responsible for this state of affairs? Society, which deems that their sons should be educated, but not their daughters.’ [103]

The novelist reveals mentality of the Indian society. The Indian family is desperate about the male child. Actually, in every family, the plight of girl is always inferior. The author vividly describes the situation of Indian woman in the Indian society. Being a woman, the writer is aware about the place of woman in the family. Kasturi says –

‘Mati told her it will be a boy, and this is what every man wants, even if he is educated’ [104]

In the confinement, Virmati takes decision for her love. She denies her passionate love. The author describes the drastic condition of Professor Harish Chandar. He is actually deeply involved in Virmati. The rejection makes him helpless. He writes in his letter –

‘Vir, revile me as you wish, curse me, be rate me. Only do not punish me so harshly as to deny me yourself. If I have sinned against you, it has never been in spirit, my darling never that. My love and devotion has remained ever yours, it is that which gives my life its meaning.’ [106]
The Novelist explores the love between the Professor and Virmati. Actually, their love is against the social customs. The traditional Indian society never accepts the extra love affair of a married man. The conventionality is the huge hurdle in the love affair of Virmati. But, the situation is out of control. Virmati never debates against her family. Though she involves in the love of Professor, she is not doing any wrong against her family. Hence, she decides to go to Lahore for further studies. She thinks that the further education can change the situation. She decides that she should start her new life. But, her mother, Kasturi again argues about her further education. She says –

‘If you cannot consider your duty to us, at least consider yourself. There is a time in the cycle of life for everything. If you willfully ignore it like this, what will happen to you? A woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings.’ [111]

The situation is skillfully portrayed by Manju Kapur. Kasturi reveals the ultimate truth of an Indian woman. The marriage is the ultimate fate of a woman. According to her, marriage gives completeness to a woman. A woman without marriage is merely a stigma to a family. But, this time, Virmati succeeds to convince the family that the education can change her life. Eventually, her family agrees on her further education at Lahore. Both Virmati and Kasturi visit Shakuntala at Lahore.

Actually, Kasturi is not satisfied with the family decision of further education. She thinks that much education may spoil the life of Virmati. On the other hand, Shakuntala is happy on the arrival of Virmati. She is well established in Lahore. Her thinking is modern rather than her family. She thinks that every girl should be well educated. She says –

‘She was glad that her family was at last waking up to the fact that women had to take their place in the world, but must it always be when marriage hadn’t worked out?’ [112]

The thoughts of Shakuntala are modern. But, Kasturi never accepts the modern thought of girl education. Meanwhile, Virmati is admitted in a
women’s hostel. It is tiny little room attached with the college premise. When Kasturi visits the room, she has an ache in heart. She thinks –

‘Kasturi looked around, a tightness in her throat. My poor girl, for this she wouldn’t marry. For living in a solitary, poky little room in a strange city, for eating hostel food, for the loneliness of single life.’ [115]

In a tiny room, Virmati stays with her roommate Swarna Lata who also flees from her home and is admitted at Lahore by her parents. Her parents also oppose her further education. Her parents behave like Virmati’s family. Swarna Lata, who is assertively triumphant in her tune, says –

‘I was very clear that I wanted to do something besides getting married. I told my parents that if they would support me for two more years I would be grateful. Otherwise I would be forced to offer Satyagraha along with other ….. but they agreed because they knew I meant what I said….thank God all this is over,’ said Swarna Lata. ‘It was quite unpleasant while it lasted. I prefer not to quarrel with my parents, but sometimes there is no alternative.’ [Devika: 2006: 235]

In the novel, the condition of woman is abruptly described by the author. Even, it reveals the position of a woman in society and family. Through the characters of Virmati and Swarna Lata, the novelist describes the struggle of woman for individual freedom. The character of Swarna Lata is stranger than Virmati. She is very clear about her life –

‘It’s not that she doesn’t get married. She does get married but when she considers herself fit to shoulder the responsibilities of a wife and later on a mother.’[Ibid : 231]

After the few unsuccessful attempts, Harish Chandar finally talks with Virmati. With his subtle words, Virmati skips and now she again involves with Professor. Though she is aware that he is a father and husband, his affection and words allure Virmati again. She is fascinated by the look of Professor:

‘She turned her head and saw the professor’s distinguished looking head, hair brushed back from

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high forehead, suit immaculate and English, glasses
earrest and gleaming, and felt enclosed in a cocoon
of exclusivity.’ [128]

The novelist not only describes the struggle of woman, but nation also. It is the
time when India was undergoing with freedom struggle. The hint of partition
was condemned by the leaders. It is the most painful incident for every Indian.
The social situation was getting worse. The communal crises appeared in
every place of nation. The novelist has vividly exposed the communal
situation with the instance with Lajwanti:

‘So many things are deeper that friendship. In this
case it must have been religious identity, maybe
Muslim fear and insecurity. They must have told
her she would be disloyal to the Muslim cause.’
[134]

The story again shifts in the present time. Now, Ida meets Swarna
Lata. Ida thinks that, from her, she knows more about her mother. Then, she
visits Lahore where her mother studies. Swarna Lata explains how Virmati
and she are engaged in the freedom struggle. The novelist mingles both the
national and individual freedom struggle. Swarna Lata explores their freedom
companion. Mohini Datta, leader of freedom struggle at Lahore explains the
individual freedom. She is desperate about the woman’s freedom. The
freedom is necessary for both social and individual growth. The author
explains –

‘Now Mohini Datta was explaining the meaning of
the flag, how freedom was necessary for the
development of the human spirit, how war
especially affected woman, how profess was their
object so that freedom could be enjoyed by all
classes of people, even the lowest of the low.’ [142]

Virmati is aware about the situation of her love. It is not possible for
Professor to accept love in the orthodox society. In this clutching situation,
Virmati became helpless. She says to Harish –

‘I break my engagement because of you, blacken
my family’s name, I am locked up inside my house,
get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to
do with because of you, blacken my family’s name, 
I am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore 
because no one knows what to do with one. 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.’ [149]

Manju Kapur elaborates the two different women. Virmati ruins her life for 
love. She exploits her life for the sake of illicit relation. The novelist exposes 
the emotion of Virmati. On the other hand, Swarna Lata is prominent about 
her future. She is clear about her life. She is firm on her decision. She is open-
minded. Her thinking is wider than Virmati. Her thoughts about marriage are –

‘Marriage is not the only thing in life, Viru. The 
war - The Satyagraha movement - because of these 
things, women are coming out of their home, taking 
jobs, fighting, going jail. Wake up from your stale 
dream.’ [151]

Actually, Swarna Lata asks her to wake up from her dream. But, Virmati finds 
herself locked in new prison even as she has broken old ones. She silently 
endures her pain and frustration. She reproaches herself for being selfishly 
engaged in her own world of love and miseries. Now, she thinks that she is 
pregnant. Now, more drastic situation arises for Virmati. Ida discovers the 
pain of her mother. Actually, she herself has gone through the same situation 
of illicit pregnancy. Ida says –

‘You believed too strongly in the convention that a 
mother has no place in a daughter’s home to stay 
with me, so you never really get to see the 
dynamics of our relationship close at hand.’ [157]

Further, Ida narrates that Virmati decides to go home at Amritsar. Though she 
understands that there is no warmth welcome, still she decides to go to 
Amritsar. When she arrives, there is no change in the house. But the 
strangeness is found in the relations. Virmati experiences the strangeness in 
the relationship. At night when Virmati shares the naked sky, she is nostalgic 
with the past experience. Manju Kapur, through this, tries to unfold the pain of 
Virmati. She bears the pain from several years. She thinks –

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‘Everything she could see from the roof was a reminder of some stage or another in her past. There at the water pump they had played as children in the summer, building miniature canals and dams, there were the fruit trees they had climbed, hiding from the mali, there her tai’s house, where the Professor had been a tenant, where she and her brother used to go for help with their English lessons, there the gate through which she had walked that fateful day, two years ago, to throw herself into the canal at Tarsikka. And right above, in the store-cum-bedroom, she had been kept locked by her mother because she had been so bad.’ [162]

Though Virmati is in the company of her family, she often strives to hide her secret. Every day, she tries to hide her illicit pregnancy –

‘Virmati mentally prepared herself for another day of appearing normal as she walked quickly towards the house, listlessly swinging her brass toilet *lota.*’ [164]

Virmati considers that it is not easy to hide the secret from the eyes of family. She everyday struggles to hide reality about her pregnancy. Hence, she decides to visit Lahore. Swarna Lata now discovers the suffering of Virmati. The latter decides for abortion. It is the pre-independence era, where the abortion is difficult. It would also create trouble for the family. The feeling of abortion creates more pain to Virmati. She feels alone. No one helps her in this distressed situation. Actually, she is against abortion. But, she is unable to do anything. She is helpless and isolated. Her agitation is minutely described by author –

‘That child of their union, their result of all those speeches on freedom and the right to individual, 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 …. Riding home, Virmati wished the road could swallow her up. Her nothingness was total. She felt severed from the body that was causing her friend’s friends so much trouble. They were kind, they didn’t say anything outright, but she knew herself
to be a crawling worm dependent on other people’s
good wishes for survival.’ [171]

Now, Virmati is alone. There is no one from her family to support her. Even her family, her love left her alone in the drastic situation. She decides to start her new life. She is now headmistress of a school at Nahan. But, the family is worried about the future of Virmati. They think –

‘What kind of Kismat is ours that our eldest daughter remains unmarried like this? After Indu, it is now Gunvati, turn, but still that girl sits there, stubborn as a rock, never mind the disgrace or what world thinks, or what her future will be said Kasturi miserably?’ [181]

In Nahan, Virmati experiences the new different life. Harish Chandar regularly visits Nahan to meet Virmati. But, he never dares to reveal his love in the family. Actually, the author describes the deep love of Virmati for Professor. Though he ruins her life, he really loves her. He visits Nahan for the sake of Virmati. At first, Virmati denies to maintain the relationship. She thinks that she has started her new life with great efforts. But, her love makes her helpless and they meet again in a new place. The novelist explores the passionate relationship between Virmati and Harish –

‘This was the first time they had spent the whole night together. No fear of curfew, or of home, no fear of anybody hearing anything. For a brief moment Virmati lived that night as though there was no tomorrow. In bed, they had looked at one another and smiled, the love flowing thick and strong between them. He kissed the strands of wet hair on her face, he gently dried the sweat away with the palm of his hand. While she slept within the circle of his arms, he caressed and stroked her. Intermittently waking, she felt her year at Nahan, melt away into nothingness.’ [190]

She is aware about the destiny of her love. Harish does not dare to reveal his illicit relationship in the society. She is unable to expose her love affair in the family. In distressed situation, she complains Harish –
‘You think it’s so easy for me! She turned on him. It isn’t people wondering all the time. What I’m not married. What should I say? That my lover is a coward? That he is waiting for permission from his family to bring home a second wife?’ [193]

Now, Virmati faces new problem at Nahan. The visit of Harish causes her more problems. Diwan Sahib of the province notices the visit of Harish. He says to Virmati that it is a small village and her visiting Harish has been creating the gossip among the people. The new life of Virmati is in trouble. The authority declares her dismissed order and Virmati again remains at the starting point of life. She is now at the house of poet, where a meeting is set between Virmati and Harish. The latter also thinks about his unfair behaviour with Virmati. He says to his poet friend –

‘What can I do? I am hemmed in and tortured on all sides. I know I have been unfair to her- I know. And yet what can I do? Harish turned an agitated face to the poet. ‘Everyday will condemn me, her. My children will never accept it, nor my mother. You know the constraints. Surely I need not explain myself to you!’ [201]

Eventually, Harish and Virmati decide to get marry. Actually, a marriage in the life of a girl is a precious event. This is the time when her new life starts. But, here, Virmati’s marriage is unnoticeable. Even her family is unaware about the marriage. The marriage in Indian context is not merely the unity of two souls. It is the new starting of their life. But, this marriage creates some comfort for Virmati. Her burden is lighten, which she carries form last five years. The writer expresses –

‘In the evening the wedding ceremony proceeded smoothly. The poet’s parents did the Kanya-dan, the seven pheras were taken, the couple pronounced man and wife. As Virmati rubbed her eyes, watering form the smoke, she knew rather that felt, that the burden of the past five years had lifted.’ [202]

Virmati explores it when Kasturi leaves her father’s house and goes to her new house after getting married. Actually, the novelist expresses contrast between
Virmati’s marriage and Kasturi’s marriage. Kasturi’s marriage was socially accepted. But, Virmati’s marriage is secretly prepared. It is not accepted by society. The marriage of Kasturi was grandly celebrated, whether Virmati’s marriage was privately arranged. The novelist describes the awaited marriage of Virmati –

‘Virmati could feel herself being taken in, the sindur in the parting of her hair that the professor had himself put, her tikka, the sari palla over her head, the red ivory bangles from her wedding ceremony.’ [208]

Virmati and Harish visit the house at Amritsar. Actually, both of them are aware about their welcome. The family of Harish is in distress. His mother gets surprised and curses her destiny. Professor’s wife Ganga weeps. Actually, she is unaware about the situation. The novelist expresses the unfair destiny of Indian wife. Professor’s mother is distressed and says –

‘In this life we can do nothing but our duty. Serve our elders look after children, walk along the path that has been marked for us, and not pine and yearn for those things we cannot have since our destiny is predetermined, that is true only way we can know any peace. Duty is our guide, and our strength. How can we control the thing outside us? We can only control ourselves.’ [211]

Professor’s mother, Kishori Devi elaborates the drastic situation of Indian woman. She spent their whole life for the family. She considers that it is their destiny and it is predetermined. Meanwhile, Virmati has her separate room, but in the family, she is alone. No one talks to her. Even, Kishori Devi neglects her new daughter-in-law. In the family, she has nothing to do. She has never permitted to enter in the kitchen. She discussed this with Harish. He says –

‘She is a housewife; you know somebody has to do these things.’ Harish was getting irritated.’ [216]

Virmati also is surprised with the behaviour of Harish and thinks –
‘And about her what kind of wife was she going to be if everything was done by Ganga’ [216]

She feels aloofness in the family. She has no status, no place in the house. She remains in the house like unknown furniture. After getting married with Harish, she arrives first time at Amritsar. She thinks that, her family should support her. But it makes illusion to Virmati –

‘On her arrival in Amritsar she had written and told them she was married, but nobody had come to see her, not one brother or sister, not any of the young ones to whom she had practically been a mother.’ [220]

Virmati thinks that though her family is justifiably angry with her, she has transgressed. She was willing to make attends. Full of desperate hope, she visits her father’s home. But, all her hopes dissolve, when she appears in front of her mother. Kasturi says angrily –

‘Get out of here! Why bother to come now? Kasturi’s harsh word hit Virmati, and she bent her head, hoping this was understandably hurt.’ [220]

Virmati is distressed and goes back to the house. Actually, she feels alone. Even her mother goes against her. She thinks that –

‘Virmati stopped walking. That was how far she had come from her family, how much they hated her. She was not to be invited for her own brother’s wedding, when the furthest, most removed relative would be pressed to come. She started to cry.’ [225]

In the family of Harish Chandar, Virmati is merely like junk furniture. Even, her appearance is considered as bad omen for Ganga. Even, the latter’s behaviour is acceptable. Ganga behaves irrationally with Virmati –

‘She had once tried going into the kitchen, but there had been such weeping and wailing that day, such ritual rinsing of every pot and pan to wash away her polluted touch, that she felt intimidated.’ [230]
The novelist respectively describes both struggles. One is the national struggle for freedom and the other is the struggle of Virmati. Manju Kapur deals with the sensitive issues with great precision –

‘It is 1943, and the strain of being the colony of a warring nation shows. There are shortages and the costs of living are rising. In the market place, bureaucratic procedures multiply. The government seeks to introduce fixed prices as profiteering spirals. The dark face of control emerges the black market, hoarding raids, and punishment.’ [234]

The situation of freedom struggle has grounded on communal strain. It is the worst situation for both Hindus and Muslims. The communal disturbance causes strain between Hindus and Muslims. The riot takes place. Everywhere there is burning, killing and looting. In the riot, Suraj Prakash is killed. Manju Kapur expresses the condition of widow. In India, widowers have ruined life. They consider the stigma on the family. The novelist describes both a married woman and widower through Kasturi. The situation becomes critical. Kasturi’s husband dies in the riot. Kasturi scatters, when she hears the news of his death –

‘Kasturi sat next to her husband, almost as still, head bent, eyes closed. Her tikka was smuggled across her forehead, her thick green Khaddar sari crumpled. Her children were sadly aware that by tomorrow, their mother’s red and green would be replaced by a while that should be hers till death.’ [238]

All her children support her except Virmati. She is still unwanted in the family. Even, her mother blames for this disaster –

‘Kasturi shook the hand off. ‘Why are you here?’ she managed, her eyes red and swollen. ‘Because of you he died. Otherwise is this the age to go?’ [239]

Meanwhile, because of the pain of his son’s death, Lala Diwan Chand dies next day. This time also, the family neglects Virmati. Now, she is in real distress. She thinks about forgiveness of her father and grandfather. But now, she has the burden of this. It very realistically portrays –
‘Her father had died without forgiving her, and now her grandfather too. Not one of her family cared for how she felt. It was clear that they did not want to see her, or have anything to do with her.’ [240]

Virmati gets pregnant. The news is spread in the house. Suddenly behaviour of Kishori Devi is changed. She takes care of Virmati. But, those happy moments in the life of Virmati are shorter. It is disgrace of the God. May be, he punishes Virmati for her offence. She thinks that taking care of her is merely because of pregnancy. Actually, in the family, no one is concerned with Virmati. She says –

‘God was speaking. He was punishing her for the first time. Maybe she could never have children. She had robbed her own womb three years earlier, just as she had robbed another woman of her husband’ [246]

She is aware about her guilt. She thinks that she has robbed happiness from the life of Professor’s wife Ganga. But, she is helpless because she loves Harish very much. Her destiny is now with Harish. But, the situation is difficult. Harish decides that Virmati should complete her graduation. He takes decision without asking Virmati. He has not even consulted her –

‘She couldn’t read and Virmati was to do an MA! If that much attention had been given to her, she would not be in the position she was in today. She had taken her duties as a wife seriously, looked after the house, children, in-laws, and husband’s salary, but she had got no recognition for her hard work and years of sacrifice.’ [250]

The novelist sensitively pictures the Pre-Independence violence. The morality was demolished. The communal instability causes massacre in many places. The novelist vividly describes the picture of violence. She deliberately uses this scenery. The nation and Virmati go under the drastic condition. Both of them are futureless. There is no certainty about their fate –

‘People die roasted, quartered, chopped, mutilated, turning and turning, meat on a spit- are raped and converted in rampages gone mad, and leave a
legacy of thousands of tales of sorrow, thousands more episodes shrouded silence.’ [263]

Manju Kapur beautifully mingles both pains. One is of the nation and the rest is of Virmati. The situation is changed. Even, Virmati also changes –

‘The city had changed, she herself had changed. Perhaps things will be different later she thought as she left.’ [265]

In these drastic situations, Ganga and Kishori Devi leave Amritsar. Now, in the house, Virmati and Harish stay and they work for the needful people. This is what Virmati wishes. In their house and in the heart of Harish –

‘There was no one to see them, no one to mind anything they did. Virmati had never had so much space around her. May be this was really what she had fought for all along, space to be she conceived.’ [273-274]

Meanwhile, one night, the rumour is spread about the attack. Though it is rumour, it brings Kasturi closer to Virmati. The strain between the relationship of daughter and mother is evacuated.

After then, Virmati gives birth to a girl child. The child is a witness of sufferings. Ida narrates the story and a witness of her mother’s struggle. She struggles in her life. Actually, she tries to live her life like her mother. She says –

‘I was nothing husbandless children. I felt myself hovering lie a pencil notation on the margins of society.’ [279]

The novel ends with the description of the settled life of Virmati. The novelist describes the life of Virmati after she gets settled with Harish. Though her life is filled with miseries, she has a place in the house of Harish which she wishes from the first day of marriage. Now, Ida, the narrator describes her own life, which is full of miseries. She thinks that she has a memory of her mother which helps her to spend her life with full of grace.
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