Chapter-3
Difficult Daughters
Difficult Daughters is the story of a young woman, named Virmati who is born at the turn of 20th century in an austere and high minded Punjabi family in Amritsar. It tells of her illicit affair and its wider political and social implications. The major portion deals with Virmati’s love affairs with a married professor and rest part describes her fighting struggle for freedom and it is done by her daughter Ida who is determined to reconstruct her past “by piecing together the fragments of memory in search of a woman, she could know and understand.” (1) Virmati was very evasive about her past with Ida, and she hoped to fill the critical gap. Here-

The consciousness of the reader shuttles between the present and past alongwith Ida who visits different places and meets her mother’s relatives and acquaintances to know about Virmati, the woman. (2)

The story is full of Virmati’s assertion against her mother and other family members. It depicts how she passes her whole life only for getting the favour of a professor who physically enjoys her and passes a long period in amorous activities. At the beginning it seems that Virmati, being immature does not ponder over his position and takes his remarks seriously and begins to perceive him her husband but fails as later on the professor is not able to marry her for a long time. There is hardly any area of conflict that Virmati does not go through. She emerges into a new woman of colonial India and stands as a metaphor to explore the possibilities for modern women in education and economic independence who experience humiliation and disillusionment in their colonial matrix. She dares to challenge the age-old tradition; sounds bold, outspoken, determined and action oriented and lifts the cudgel against male chauvinism. The pain and horrible experience of partition is the key word of the novel. The novel’s dedication “for my mother, her mother and my father” (3) emphasizes the deep and abiding woman to woman attachment which is also the book’s central thematic concern. The title
Difficult Daughters is also an indication to the message that a woman, who tries in search of an identity, is branded as a difficult daughter by the family and the society. The whole novel shows the feminism of Virmati who opposes her family and continues her studies against their wishes. She finds that the battle for her independence has created irrevocable lines of partition and pain around her. The story characteristically opens with the frank declaration of the narrator daughter, who is named ‘Ida’ meaning ‘a new slate, and a blank beginning.’ She says, “The one thing I wanted was not to be like my mother.” (4) Ida recalls what her mother had said before her death:

When I die, she said to me, I want my body donated. My eyes, my heart, my kidneys, any organ that can be of use. That way someone will value me after I have gone. I glared at her, as pain began to gnaw at me.

And when I die I want no shor-shaar. I don’t want a chauth, I don’t want an uthala, I want no one called, no one informed. (5)

But here Ida observes all rituals contrary to her mother’s wishes: “She was being burnt with her organs intact.” (6) On this inauspicious day Ida’s relatives console her and make her realize how they are only their parents and she should visit them occasionally. Ida decides to visit her birth place and also has a great desire to know about her mother so she boards a train and reaches there without giving any information of her coming. Relatives welcome Ida and she tries fully to know each and every aspect of her mother’s life. Now relatives unfold the life of Virmati and highlight even the minute things about her. They narrate that being the eldest daughter she had to run the house and look after them. They depended on her. They tell that although she was only their sister but she acted very bossy and made them scared of her. She was very keen to study; first F.A., then B.A., then B.T. But the relatives feel incongruous on the part of Ida to ask so much about Virmati but Ida wanted another view of
her mother. So the relatives narrate the whole life aspects before Ida and the real story begins. Virmati is the eldest daughter among eleven children of Kasturi and Suraj Prakash--the girls; Virmati, Indumati, Gunvati, Hemavati, Vidyawati and Parvati and the boys; Kailashnath, Gopinath, Krishanath, Prakashnath and Hiranath. One after another Kasturi gives birth to children and thus the whole burden of household work fall on Virmati’s shoulders, being the eldest daughter. Like a mother she is very conscious of their basic and regular needs such as fooding, dressing, studies and so on. Amid numerous household works, she spares sometime for her studies. “By the time Virmati was ten, she was as attuned to signs of her mother’s pregnancies as Kasturi herself.” (7) Due to excess of work Virmati always seems tired and harassed. Whenever she sits beside her youngest sister, her mother pushes her away to perform house-hold duties. Soon she gets up to go and does her work. At times Virmati yearns for affection but Kasturi gets irritated and pushes her away. She remarks:

‘Have you seen their food- milk- clothes- studies?’

‘Arre, you think there is all the time in the world for sitting around, doing nothing.’

‘I’m just going,’ protested Virmati finally. ‘Why can’t Indumati also take responsibility? Why does it always have to be me?’

‘You know they don’t listen to her.’ (8)

Nobody cares for her own feelings whether she wants to do such work or not as Kasturi says to Virmati, “you are the eldest; if you don’t see to things, who will?” (9)

By the time Virmati was sixteen-year-old, her mother gives birth eleven times. In spite of her ill-health, her reluctance, her great efforts to escape from this “‘breeding like cats and dogs,’ ‘harvest time again’” (10) prove to be null and void. It’s the reason that Virmati has to help her
mother look after her kids and do all house-hold works. In the same connection Asha Choubey says,

Virmati is expected to treat her studies as a secondary job, the primary one being her doing the household chores, and caring for the children.” (11)

Kasturi is worried and unhealthy to give birth. Quite ironically the novelist has portrayed the condition of Kasturi. Since the time immemorial a woman is considered a baby-producing machine and she never raises her voice against this. And she accepts her new born as God’s will and in that she realizes her peace. Consequently her health reaches its fatal condition. She has no milk to feed her baby. Despite the treatment by Hakims, Vaidhyas and allopath, there is no remarkable improvement in her health. So she is sent to Dalhousie for a change. Here the cottage her husband Suraj Prakash rented for her is a pleasant one. It gives complete solace, comfort and peace. There are only three living beings- Kasturi, Virmati and Paro, contrary to their big family in Amritsar. Now Virmati is appearing for her F.A. exams. She, who was very busy in Amritsar, finds much free time here. Result is the clash between mother and daughter. The conversation between Virmati and Kasturi shows Virmati’s assertion:

‘I’m tired of knitting and sewing,’ flared Virmati. ‘Besides, I’m here to look after you.’

‘I can look after myself,’

‘Why did you bring me if you don’t need me, Mati?’ said Virmati, with a thick lump in her throat. ‘What is all this nonsense? In Amritsar you were bad tempered because you were busy and tired, here you are bed-tempered because you are idle,’ retorted Kasturi. ‘May be I should go back to Amritsar. Pitaji can take me the next time he comes.’ (12)
In fact it is seen that there is no flow of affection between the mother and Virmati. “The language of feeling had never flowed between them, and this threat was meant to express all her thwarted yearnings.” (13)

As a result Virmati aspires to go back to Amritsar because of her mother’s hard heartedness. On the other hand in Amritsar Lajwanti, Virmati’ aunt, arouses ill-feelings against Kasturi in her husband Chandra Prakash and says wrong–right things about Kasturi’s children. She urges to go to Dalhousie and succeeds in it. Kasturi does not mind her arrival in Dalhousie but Virmati objects by a great show of hostility. Lajwanti understands all this but she does not react. During her stay, she calls her daughter Shakuntala who lives in Lahore. Talking about Shakuntala, it can be safely said that she is an emerged woman into newness. She appears from the beginning as the ‘modern’ or ‘liberated’ woman. She is unmarried and associated with education department and is very happy with her lot and condition. She is an independent working woman, who does not consider marriage an ultimate aim of her life. The reaction against society expressed by Shakuntala evidences Kapur’s rebellious attitude against the servitude of women. She uses this character as her mouthpiece and advocates freedom and education for Indian women and their participation in national reconstruction. She shares her ‘liberated’ life style with a group of friends whose activities she explains to Virmati:

We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings, follow each other’s work, read papers, attend seminars. One of them is even going abroad for higher studies. (14)

Virmati is highly influenced by Sakuntala who has royal manner and her own views and wishes to run her life. She becomes a pole of attraction for Virmati:

Virmati listened . . . drawn towards Shankuntla, to one whose responsibilities went beyond a husband and children. (15)
Shakuntala looks different from her orthodox family, determined to follow old conventions. She is totally different in her eating, in dressing, and in living style. She also shares her feelings of being independent with Virmati in the following lines:

These people don’t understand us Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. (16)

Gradually Virmati gets impressed and motivated by her attitude. She also wants to be like her. Shakuntala gives a ray of sunshine in the gloom of heavy old conventions and traditions. She studies, teaches, and takes part in the political-Gandhian movement; even after marriage, she keeps a firm grip on her autonomy and her freedom of action and thought. Shakuntala’s visit planted the seeds of aspiration in Virmati. She also wants to study more and more like her cousin. Virmati’s desire for establishing self-identity is-

A value charged, almost a charismatic term, with its secured achievement regarded as equivalent to personal salvation. (17)

At Shakuntala’s departure Virmati clings to her. She reveals her inner planning to Shakuntala:

‘May be I will also one day come to Lahore, Pehnji,’ she wept. ‘I wish I too could do things. But I am not clever—’
‘Arre,’ exclaimed her cousin patting her on the back, ‘times are changing and women are moving out of the house, so why not you?’
Why not, indeed, thought Virmati, looking at her, almost breathless with admiration and love. (18)

Images of Shakuntala float through Virmati’s head. Shakuntala, having done her M.Sc. in Chemistry, left her house tasting the wine of freedom. Virmati decides “to go to Lahore, even if she had to fight her mother who was so sure that her education was practically over.” (19)
After finishing her class VIII Virmati is sent for higher studies to Startford College in the Civil Lines. She takes admission in Fine Arts degree but due to her home duties she is not able do well and fails. Still her assertion to her mother suggests her desire to emerge into newness:

‘Mati’ she said to her mother that evening, I’ve failed.’
‘I told you it was too much for you,’ said her mother, busy feeding the young children.

‘It’s not too much for me,’ protested Virmati. ‘Not if I have time to study.’
‘Ever since we’ve come back, you have been making difficulties,’ said Kasturi crossly. ‘You had the Kotha storeroom to study in during your exams, and still you fuss. When Shaku used to study there she never complained.’ (20)

Kasturi scolds her saying that she should leave her studies if it is going to make her so bad tempered with her family. Furthermore, she is forgetting her priorities. Virmati’s daughter Ida remarks in this context:

Kasturi found the fuss Virmati was making about failing unreasonable. It hardly made a difference to the real business of her life, which was getting married and looking after her own home. (21)

In fact Virmati grows up with the conditioning that the duty of every girl “is to get married and a woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings.” (22) Virmati gets disappointed. She wants to study, but none is there to understand her sentiments whereas she has so much concern for her brothers and sisters. Her mother plots her marriage because she is now more than thirteen year old. In those days it was considered good to get married at this age. Meanwhile Kasturi continues sickly. The temporary respite in her ill health that the hill sojourn had
brought about was soon over. Her father-in-law Lala Diwan Chand, notices that Kasturi was not benefited as much as he hoped and his son is still anxious about his wife. On the other hand there is a great dispute over the partition of property in the family. After much hue and cry it is decided to shift on Lepel Griffin Road. Lajwanti observes this as a golden opportunity to detach, and therefore, she demands a separate living quarters which she succeeds and plans for having tenants. The tenant is an England-returned professor named Harish Chandra. He has come to India for teaching English at Arya Sabha College Amritsar at the request of his friend’s father, who is in the board of trustees. He has with him his mother, wife, sister and a baby. The first introduction of Virmati with this family was through Ganga, the wife of the professor. Ganga sends mathri for Virmati by saying, “people who study need lot of food to nourish the brain.” (23) With the arrival of Harish the story takes a turn. Meanwhile Virmati passes her FA examination with marks “that were respectable enough for a girl.” (24) Though she wants to study further, her parents and in-laws consider it enough to marry a canal Engineer as she is already engaged to him. There is no argument against this. But suddenly the canal Engineer’s father dies and the marriage is postponed for one year. She enters AS College, “the bastion of male learning.” (25) It has four hundred boys and six girls. Virmati is the seventh. It shows how poor condition for girls was in that time. People were not interested in girl’s education. Even her neighbor’s wife is illiterate whose husband is a professor of English. The intimacy between the two families (the family of Virmati and that of professor) increases by Virmati’s taking professor’s wife, Ganga, for a visit to Company Bagh and Darbar Sahib. She makes Ganga buy the bangles which she refuses pleading late for home, and says that without him (her husband) she ought not to remain away from home for so long as her husband would be upset at this. She insists Virmati to go back immediately as well. While buying bangles, Ganga tells Virmati that she does not wear anything blue because her husband does not like this colour. Surprised, Virmati looks at her and thinks that she
herself and her sisters wear whatever colour they please with the objection of no one. Women’s condition of that time has been reflected through this conversation. They were not free even to choose their favorite colour for their dress. They got married at the age of twelve or fourteen. Though Ganga knows everything related to the household work, she fails to stand her husband because of less education as she is unable to give her husband an intellectual company. Now the time is changed. Virmati takes admission in a co-ed school which perplexes her mother. Her mother seeks advice for this from the professor’s wife who assures her that Virmati is quite safe there. She convinces Kasturi for Virmati’s further education. So Kasturi readily agrees to send Virmati to Lahore for further studies. Virmati’s journey to the budding of a new woman starts eventually and the impact of this is quite discernible in her later on. She goes to the AS College daily, where the chapter of her new life begins with the professor. The professor teaches her and is highly impressed by her beauty. He takes extra interest in her. When she complains of some irritation in her eyes, he takes her to the eye-doctor. By now his desire to possess virmati extends to his heart and mind.

Here the story is switched to Ida, Virmati’s daughter. She asks her maternal uncle Kailashnath about the college where her father used to teach and shows a keen desire to visit there. Kailash Nath agrees. In fact Ida comes from Delhi to Amritsar to cherish the memories of her mother that are associated to her mother’s own old house. She wishes bricks had spoken where her mother slept, studied, and played with Paro, her younger sister. But now the structure of the house is totally changed due to sub divisions. Where there was a big orchard, there are little suburban plots. The fields where vegetable were grown, have been replaced by ugly concrete houses. Everything has changed, become smaller, uglier, and more developed. Ida along with Kailashnath goes to visit AS College. The novelist expresses that in the time of professor, students were interested in original books. Now they depend on keys and guides. Professor had
made the library very rich with the books of English Literature but now the college authorities afford less. At last they reach the room where the professor used to give his lectures. Students from far and wide used to come to listen to him. Ida is so much fascinated to hear all this. She feels the fragrance of the room where her “parents must have looked at each other significantly, doomed love in their eyes.” (26) Ida recalls her father mentioning: “Virmati plus fiancé, the professor plus wife. An invisible quadrangle in a classroom.” (27) Now the story begins when the love story of professor and Virmati becomes grave. Meanwhile her engagement with an engineer is solemnized. She is very disturbed and in dilemma due her approaching marriage with canal engineer. She realizes well that she cannot live without Professor. He insists her to tell the family members about their relation but she finds it impossible and suffers from the urge of her within: “Early marriage and no education? No professor and no love? Her soul revolted and her sufferings increased.” (28) She neither tells her love to her mother nor accepts her fiancé. Even physical intimacy with professor does not console her or remove her tension. One day she finds a letter from her fiancé. She reads it and tries to reach the desired conclusion of breaking this engagement. She refuses to her mother to marry by giving the example of Shakuntala who is still unmarried. Like Shankuntala, for the first time Virmati thinks that it is possible to be something else than a wife. These burning new ideas and churning thoughts in Virmati’s mind coincide with a break in the generation’s old joint family. The argument of “education versus marriage,” (29) reiterated many times in the novel, shows that with changing time old values too undergo a sea-change and education of a woman is a right step to cope with the changing times. The Virmati’s decision not to marry and a desire to continue her education create a storm in the family and she is beaten and scolded by Kasturi who in intense fury says to Virmati, “Remember you are going to be married next month, if I have to swallow poison to make you do it.” (30) Silently she bears the humiliation and furious treatment of her mother. Kasturi
compares her time to that of her daughter. Though she knew the value of education, she never went against her parent’s wish. She thinks how girls have changed so much in just a generation. Kasturi recalls her childhood age of Sultanpur, West Punjab back in 1904. When she was seven year old and was caught praying before a picture of Christ at mission school, her mother tore the picture, shouted and threatened to marry her off. Then her uncle intervened and protected her from such a mentality on the conviction of Swami Dayanandji. Her uncle advocated for Kasturi’s education until she got her suitable match. She learned reading, writing, balancing household accounts and sewing. After her graduation, Kasturi’s education continued at home. Her mother taught her everything which would please her in-laws. Now she was perfect spinster. Soon she got married with Chandra Prakash of Amritsar according to Hindu tradition. Her whole life remained quite simple and conservative.

Presently Virmati, puzzled and disturbed owing to her approaching marriage, seeks some counsel from Harish and meets him in a room of his friend’s house. He tries to console her saying “soon things will be all right. Then you will see. We will one day be together.” (31) But she hardly smiles because she is unable to solve the problem owing to her approaching marriage and-

It was clear to her that she could not depend upon the Professor to sort out any domestic situation. It was up to her. (32)

This process continues and finally she makes up her mind not to marry Inderjeet but gets very disturbed. Finally she decides to leave her home forever stealthily but is caught by her younger sister Paro. She promises her to bring a notebook and colored pencils if she lets her go. Paro agrees half heartedly. Virmati reaches Tarsiakka alone. The bus driver and conductor recognize her and ask her for another companion. But she says that she is going alone. While traveling she thinks of the professor, her younger sister Paro and other family members. It grew dark when she
reaches Tarsiakka. She takes advantage of darkness and briskly walks up to the canal path. By chance the gate keeper steps out from behind the gate to stare thoughtfully at her disappearing figure. Before she succeeds in her attempt of suicide, she is traced by the two people and saved. On the other hand a suicide note written by Virmati reaches the professor. After reading the note he becomes speechless and conveys the message to his wife with difficulty who in turn communicates it to Virmati’s family. Hearing this, her mother Kasturi faints and curses her in different ways. Her father and brother go immediately in her search. At Tarsiakka Virmati is with her grandfather who says to her nothing at her deed. She comes back with her father and brother by a car in the night so that the world may not become aware of this truth. At home Virmati is interrogated for this shameful deed. She discloses that she does not want to marry and is willing to study further but her mother blames her study that promotes her to do such a deed. Even she suggests her mother frantically: “Let Indumati marry. Give her the khes you are making. I don’t want any bedding, pots and pans, nothing!” (33) So marriage is settled with Indumati, the second daughter. The family brands her to be restless, sick and selfish and locks her up in godown where she craves for her love. In this connection Pallavi Rastogi says,

Virmati burns with anger for the little relevance given to her life. On the one hand, she is aware of Professor’s love for her, but on the other hand, she is not ready to betray her father’s faith in her. Even though she is sure about the professor’s position and status, she had decided to marry him as ‘he was a successful academic, a writer of books, a connoisseur of culture, disseminator of knowledge. (34)"

Though locked in, Virmati succeeds in communicating with the professor through letters. It becomes possible by her younger sister Paro. Amid much positive and negative thinking, they maintain their relationship and reach the zenith of their love. Though Harish leaves her
aunt’s house and lives in another house but the distance never comes between the two. Then suddenly the flow of their love takes a turn with the disclosure of a truth; that professor’s wife becomes pregnant and she tells it to Kasturi with great enthusiasm. Virmati comes to know of this as well. She comes out from her illusionary world of love and thinks that it is needless to correspond epistolary any further. She declares,

What has happened has happened for the good. In which world was I living, to be so caught up in the illusion of your love? Just as you must do your duty to your family, and your wife, so to I must do my duty to mine. (35)

She thinks all this love affair is nothing but fraud and tells Harish about going to RBSL College as suggested by Shakuntala. She says outright,

All I want is a change from my old life and the chance to do something useful. I do not mean ever to marry . . . I do not think we need to write each other after this. (36)

With her mother she sets out for Lahore to do B.T. Thus the journey of a new woman inches in new direction. She decides not “to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed.” (37) The determined and unperturbed manner in which she burns the professor’s letters shows her resolution to close the chapter and look forward to meaningful life in Lahore. Shakuntala receives her along with her mother at the railway station. Both Virmati and Kasturi feel relaxed here. Kasturi feels at ease to have Virmati on the track. Virmati feels a bit liberated:

I’ve come, I’m going to be my own, this is a new beginning. She was filled with a lightness that made her useless in collecting the luggage, irritating her mother further. (38)

Kasturi enquires the Principal of everything. The principal assures her that there will be no problem as she has her eye fixed firmly on each one.
Kasturi also admits that her daughter would be all right here. That gives her a sense of security to her daughter. She bids Virmati farewell unmoved by the tears of her daughter's eyes. Here Virmati wants a fresh start. She meets Swarna Lata, her roommate who is an ultra committed activist. Like her name she creeps around Virmati. Virmati is very much pleased to have such a roommate for she has some resemblance to her life, as Virmati does not want to marry so does SwarnaLata. In this regard Sunita Sinha opines:

Swarna lata comes up an assertive character 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 alongwith others. . . . But they agreed because they knew I meant what I said. (39)

The influence of the professor continues, but Virmati does not care because in new awareness she has gone far beyond the socio-cultural identity of a good daughter. In spite of her initial revolt against the family and firm stand against the professor, she succumbs to his implorations and passion in Lahore. Loss of virginity pricks her conscience but then she overcomes the guilt by rationalizing it as “outmoded morality.” (40) The professor comes to Lahore to meet Virmati. She knows well that she should not trust him and that she is responsible for the break-up in the family but still meekly she yields. It is only the physical urge that unites a couple. There is much beyond that in a marriage. The professor fails to take note of that and manifests his superficiality. When Virmati asks him to marry her, he requests for some time and continues with his physical enticements. Virmati willingly agrees for a rendezvous with him every time he visits Lahore which ultimately results in her pregnancy. Their meetings continue along the general lines. They go to visit an exhibition as the Roerich Exhibition was one of the major cultural events of that season. The professor says to her that-
True test of great art is its ability to express the inner realities of life, those realities that don’t change accordingly to time and place, that have a universal application. (41)

Virmati gets involved in completing her BT. She labours a lot and consequently becomes thin and sick. Her room mate Swarna Lata, who is very much interested in politics, discusses about the situation of that time. Through their conservation one can get knowledge of the politics of that time. The impact of the partition of India and Pakistan is clearly visible even in the college elections which symbolically represent their religions. This agony is clear in this line when Swarna Lata says to Virmati, “for the first time our college was divided among communal lines.” (42)

Again the story goes back to Ida who goes to meet Swarna Lata Sondhi with her uncle Gopinath. Swarnalata tells Ida about Virmati and also describes the happenings occurred at that time. “Her voice fluttered and trembled over the division that had ploughed furrows of blood through her generation.” (43) Ida also goes to Lahore to recall the memories of her mother where she studied and taught. She takes photographs of every turn in the staircase, the corridors, the classrooms, outer and inner aspects, knowing she may never be able to come again. According to Amar Nath Prasad “this search is essential to a quest for her own selfhood and identity.” (44) Swarnalata also tells Ida of fast and furious Lahore Conference that took place in the city. Girls from different schools and colleges actively participated in it. In this political arena Virmati also seeks her position and finds herself nowhere because she is engulfed in the love of Harish. Her world is confined to professor and it’s above everything. As Pallavi Rastogi remarks,

Her inner self urged her to be like Shakuntala to do something for the country but her inhibitions failed her. (45)
Virmati’s inner voice struggles for an outlet but, “Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women.” (46) When inspired by Swarnalata to participate in Satyagrah movement, she thinks of doing away with her “useless love and doubtful marriage” (47) but she remains swinging between her passion and dream and feels “out of place, an outcaste amongst all these women” (48) and acknowledges that “these larger spaces were not for her.” (49) The agony of Virmati starts, when she discovers her pregnancy. She is too baffled to understand anything.

Quickly she calculated dates. When was the last time she had surreptitiously rinsed out the old cloths that were recycled to soak up the blood?” (50)

Earlier she discussed of this with Harish but he assured her that it would not happen. She came to Lahore to broaden her horizon but instead she got involved in a useless love, doubtful marriage and unwed pregnancy. The initial tenacious and assertive self gradually wanes away into a pawn whom the professor tells “just what to look for, what to admire, what to criticize.” (51) Education is considered as a mode of independence, not of lose conduct. Although she does this due to her love for professor but it creates a flaw in her character. Virmati is suffering all alone; she does nothing good in her exams, for what she comes to Lahore. Pregnancy is not such a thing that should be kept a secret and in our society these things are easily captured. In the same recourse Ida moves to her own past life. Ida was married to Prabhakar, a successful academic. But nothing was right between them. Prabhakar forced her to abort the child and forcefully she was brought to a doctor to end up the baby. He was so careful that she never conceived again. This was unbearable to Ida and that is the reason that she was without husband and child. “I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society.” (52) By this statement, Ida summarizes the concern of self-identity at conflict with socio-cultural
identity. Ida identifies this situation with a similar disaster of her licensed married life. This symbolic identification is fortifying. It is also probably one of the reasons that have been the root cause of the termination of Ida’s marriage, “In denying that incipient little thing in my belly, he sowed the seeds of our breakup.” (53) Nancy Chodorow maintains: “A daughter continues to identify with the mother.” (54) Virmati’s body was scarred by the professor to deprive her of “another choice” (55) She does not disclose this truth to Swarnalata. In this mental agony she goes to Amritsar in order to meet the professor but still there is no solution how she should send him the news of her pregnancy. Exams are approaching and she involves in such a matter. She remains puzzled and vanquished. Her mind sees each hour sluggishly dragging along. She thinks of the child:

That the 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 restraint, should meet its end like this! (56)

Virmati tries to convey her message through Kanhaiya, an old student of Harish, but nothing happens. She is still with her agony. In Lahore she tells Swarnalata about her mental agony and is consoled by her. Swarna talks to her Aunt Miss Datta and the latter manages a doctor. Both the girls go to her home where a male doctor examines her and confirms her pregnancy. Abortion is suggested on the next day and in this tortured condition Virmati gives her B.T. examination. The night before abortion passed miserably and sleeplessly. Absent mindedly she walked to the corridor-

Picked up the knife and slowly slashed at the soft skin on her calf. If she could brand her name there, that would mean she could survive the pain of tomorrow. (57)
Next morning both the girls go to Miss Datta’s guest room, and after an hour, Virmati drifts back, still on the same bed, legs down alone in the same room. She feels a deep emptiness inside her. Doctor’s fee is paid by selling the golden bangles which Virmati’s father gave her. Now she is an independent being and feels much better than before. Nothing can happen to her now that she can not bear after going through abortion. Harish is blind to Virmati’s condition in society and her family. That might be the true nature of man but it is also the true nature of woman that “she unnecessarily supplicates herself in misery to the needs of a man ruining her own identity.” (58) When Harish gets to know about all this, he rebukes her but of no use. Manju Kapur unmasks the reacting mind of Virmati who is upset by the betrayal of her lover; her agonized mind is revealed in her utterances of the following lines,

Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people if they find me out, not being able to live in peace. Study in peace and . . . why? (59)

She refers to Swarnalata’s statement about this selfishness and dominance of men over women. Virmati holds the conventional view of the purity and chastity of woman’s body. She is his for the rest of life whether he ever marries her or not. She could never look elsewhere, never entertain another choice. This is her identity as an Indian woman of ideal womanhood. Her body is marked by him; she is not able to look elsewhere. Consequently she fails to do well in the exams and after completing her B.T. she returns to her home deciding never to meet Harish. Meanwhile Virmati is offered the principalship of a college in Nahan, the capital of Sirmaur, and a small Himalayan state run by an enlightened regent, but Kasturi does not like to send her:

‘She is so young,’ Kasturi had no doubt as to what her daughter should be doing. She should stay at home until she had sense enough to get married. (60)
But Lala Diwanchand assures her:

She will be like my daughter, and Nahan will be like her home. . . . The Mahrani is interested in fostering education for girls, and the principal of the school will have a lot of status. People will treat her like Sita. (61)

After the Tarsikka episode, the family never forced Virmati against her will. Lala Diwan Chand wants to make sure the safety of Virmati. It is decided that Virmati will return to Nahan with him. Kailashnath also goes along, looks things over, and settles her in. Anyway:

Into this model of civic amenities and progressive rule came Virmati, excited about independence, still not knowing that for her love and autonomy could never co-exist. (62)

The happiest and most attractive period of Virmati’s life, beyond no doubt starts in Nahan which gives her refuge for a while as head mistress. It is there she achieves the greatest degree of control over her life. There are rules she has to obey and breaking them proves her fall. She is able to teach inside an ordered framework and her performance leaves indelible mark. Here she gets all deserving respect and exercises her responsibilities entirely herself, in the microstate to which her destiny leads her. She has no family or close friends so she attains a near exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first time, she has her own place to live. She settles there and does quite well exploiting all her learning with the best. The emergence of new woman is manifest here. Still Virmati does not help longing for the professor. She believes that she needs a man but at the same time she realizes she will make the wrong choice returning to a relationship that brought her nothing but suffering. Soon the professor comes and comes-
To be the spectre that lay between her and her life as a principal, so that she too began to look upon her stay there as a period of waiting rather than the beginning of a career. (63)

The repeated clandestine visits of the fatal professor cause Virmati lose her employer’s confidence and she is obliged to quit her school, house and employment. Urged by the gravity of the situation Lala Diwan Chand calls Virmati and says,

You know I am like a father to you. Your parents sent you here on my recommendation. I am responsible for you to the Maharani as well as to them. (64)

Now she decides not to go back to Amritsar. She feels-

She would go to Shantiniketan, if that was the last thing she did. She would never go back to Amritsar. What face did she have left to show there? (65)

She catches the train to Calcutta. Unfortunately she has to change train in Delhi, and the long waiting period opens up a trap that she falls into. She contacts an acquaintance in the capital, who is also a friend of the fateful professor. She tells her relation with professor to him. Nonplussed, Harish’s friend appeals her to delay the departure for three or four days as he would write to the professor. Virmati reluctantly agrees. Again with the ray of hope, she waits for Harish to solve the matter. There is an unresolved dichotomy in the portrayal of Virmati, the female protagonist. While she is strong willed to resist all kinds of social and family pressure, she is not strong enough to stay away from Professor’s influence. Virmati needed love and an identity which she missed. The professor symbolized the only hope of fulfilling this need and achieving the desired identity. While leaving for Shantiniketan, Virmati perceives that “there was a life of dedication and service ahead for her, and in that she would forge her identity.” (66) But fate has it otherwise. Harish comes and after some
arguments with his friend agrees to marry her at his home. Now both are husband and wife and return back to Amritsar. Though Virmati succeeds in marrying the professor, who very reluctantly administers the occasion, the protagonist is given a pariah status and faces exclusion from hearth though she dares to cross one patriarchal threshold, she is caught into another where her free spirit is curbed. She wilts under implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband’s first wife, with whom she has to live. She loses all sense of identity. In the balance of marriage ritual, one side is Ganga and other is Virmati, former is legal wife and latter is illegal, the first one is neglected, second is selected. Professor’s first wife is only a maid, like who does his work timely and properly, the second wife shares his bed and gives company before his guests. No one is there with whom she can talk except her husband. In such condition she feels totally isolated, neglected, and unwanted in her husband’s home. Professor convinces her saying that co-wives are part of the society. In fact to some extent Virmati wants to carve a life for herself as Seema Malik observes:

To some extent, she 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. (67)

Virmati goes to her mother’s house but there too she finds no space for her in the heart and home of her mother. Rather she is humiliated by her mother in a fit of anger. She returns her home with heavy footsteps. Her husband sends her to Lahore for further studies in order to escape from this situation. Amar Nath Prasad opines in this regard:

Lack of love and humiliation from both the families make her steadfast to uphold her right to self-assertion through education. Probably once again, education is a means to revitalize her. (68)
Though Virmati seeks escape through education but it is also devoid of any enthusiasm. Alka Singh thinks: “M.A. in Philosophy, dull, abstract and meaningless but studying it was her only means of escape.” (69) Virmati just can not help wishing:

Harish had thought another subject suitable for her. She also wished it was not such an uphill task, being worthy of him. (70)

In the heat of partition in 1943, the communal riots snatch the life of Suraj Prakash, father of Virmati. He has been hit on the back of the head. This is followed by the death of Lala Diwan Chand. These two deaths make Virmati dumb and senseless. She does not speak to anybody. She goes to her mother's house but dare not speak even a single word to her mother. After sometime with accumulated strength she speaks to her mother in a low voice but Kasturi blames Virmati for her father's death. She feels so much grief-stricken that she comes back to her home. The professor tries every possible way to console her. She becomes pregnant and now starts a new phase of her life. Virmati's mother-in-law forces Harish to make her lie with her so that she may recite The Gita to her every night as she is of the opinion that a pregnant woman must be governed by pure thoughts, loose clothes, and sweet cooling liquids. Harish finds himself defenseless before these oblique references. Virmati too hears this and gets surprised at her concern. But she can not do anything. She lies with her mother-in-law every night restlessly. Suddenly she gets a shock. She could not continue her pregnancy. She loses her baby. Both husband and wife feel sorry for that. After one abortion and one miscarriage Virmati feels better but totally vacant within her heart. To come out of this mental agony Harish sends her for further studies to Lahore. It is now 1944. On the war front the Allies are slowly winning. India continues to feed this effort with money, goods and manpower. On the National front after the 1942 agitations, most of the congress leaders are still in Jail. In Lahore, Virmati stays at Harish's sister. Here she meets Swarnalata who is now married and has a son. Still she is involved in her
political activities while Virmati lingers with her marriage, M.A., and husband. Harish comes to Lahore whenever he gets free time to meet her. Both recall their memories of Lahore how they passed their nights secretly in Sayyid Hussain’s House. Harish also expects Virmati to come to Amritsar in her vacation as he has no holiday. But she is not at all willing to go back to that suffocated home which belongs to his wife Ganga. Communal riots are at the extreme. Harish sends his whole family back to Kanpur, in his old house. Now he is alone in Amritsar waiting for his beloved Virmati. She comes back after completing her exams. The dreadful scene of partition floats in the eyes of Kailash Nath, Kanhaiya Lal, Swarnalata, Indumati, Shakuntala and Parvati’s husband. All of them express their views on the division of India to Ida who is making her mother alive again along with the event of formation of India and Pakistan. Gopinath says,

I will never forget the sight of that train. I threw up on the platform. It was taken straight to the shed to be washed. There was blood everywhere, dried and crusted, still oozing from the doorways, arms and legs hanging out, windows smashed. (71)

Indumati also recalls:

The Mussulmans chopped our people’s heads off, raped our women, cut off their breasts, all of which they claimed was in retaliation for what the Hindus were doing to them. (72)

Now Virmati lives with her husband in Amritsar. There is nobody except both. She is now six month pregnant and gives birth a girl baby in due time. Both name her as Ida for India also emerges as an independent state after a long slavery. Ganga never comes back to her husband. Virmati adopts Harish’s first two kids Giridhar and Chhoti as her children along with her daughter Ida. Ida once said at the beginning of the novel that the one thing she had wanted was not to like her mother, and now in
the end after knowing her mother’s legacy says, “Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore.” (73)

The domination by her mother always instigated Ida to search for escape routes. Her position as a divorcee obviously does not help in her situation. Alka Singh writes: “Virmati remains a vibrating presence all through Ida’s life.” (74)

Focusing on the impact of dislocation, in both positive and negative terms, on gender issues, on the role of education, religion, political upheaval played in effecting social change as well as the whole issue of female identity, the tale of Virmati sounds like that of the protagonist Laila of Attia Hosain’s *Sunlight on a Broken Column*. Both the novels are concerned with the growth from childhood to adolescence and towards individualization of characters caught up in a changing social scene when the imperial power is threatened and the freedom struggle is at its peak. They can be read as Bildungsroman, a tale of the growth of an adolescent mind into maturity, the experience of a female child towards arriving at a sense of identity. Education and family are at crossroads in both the novels. Laila is brought up in the *purdah* culture which represents conservatism, confinement, restriction, suppression of emotions, repression of sexuality and complete patriarchy, but her western education exposes her to a totally different world- a world of new political, social and economic ideas, which encourages her to question, assert and grow. To make it more evident we can quote Laila:

When we were not arguing we were dissecting and questioning life, with the fear and the courage, the doubts and the certainty of inexperienced, questioning youth . . . I used to forget that the world was in reality very different, and the voices that controlled it had once been those of Baba Jan, Aunt Abida, Ustaniji. . . . Always I lived in two worlds, and I grew to resent the ‘real’ world. (75)
Putting difficult and searching questions to herself, Laila evaluates individual happiness above the concept of family honour and respectability. For her there is no dichotomy between what the heart says and what the mind thinks. The male domination has neither been able to cripple her mind nor destroy her personality. For her marriage is neither a surrender, nor an escape, a compromise, a social necessity, or a matter of family honour and respectability. It is love and trust in the loved man for what he is. Laila’s love for Ameer and subsequently her marrying him, who has no social status or money, gives her the courage to flout uncle Hamid’s authority and to face aunt Saira’s angry glares. Thus, her decision about her future is a triumph over the social world that she inhabits. In a way taking a decision is also an appropriation of the role which was, till now, looked upon as a male role. Like Laila, Virmati is also educated with the potential of being economically independent through her life. She is a rare accomplishment for women of the times. She marries a person of her choice and thus goes against the wishes of her family and fights for her desire of education. In her quest of identity, she rebels against familial tradition; rebels against her destiny and insists on her right to be educated. In the end it appears that she might have achieved all that but it ceases to be important because in the throes of the struggle, she loses a part of herself. She is torn in two halves, one of which is on the side she is fighting against. In *Difficult Daughters* Virmati is asked to accept a typical arranged marriage. But unlike Laila, Virmati does not put questions to herself and does not evolve as an individual. Virmati’s love for professor is not a matter of pride nor does it mean safety and completeness. It is an embarrassment which gives her the feeling of insecurity and rootlessness. The formal marriage, a social and public statement, is must for her. It is this which will establish her identity even if it is as professor’s second wife. Thus for her marriage means deliverance from the fear of being socially condemned, a possibility which will perhaps bring her back into the fold and relieve her from the sense of insecurity and uncertainty. In Virmati, there is a struggle between the
head and the heart, the physical and moral. The stumbling block in her
life is her sexuality. Though Virmati is never free from the qualms of
conscience, she, nevertheless, enjoys the biological consummation of her
body. Her obsession with physicality and marriage does not make her
take advantage of the opportunities that come in her way. It is her sexual
fulfillment, a desire, she knows is morally condemned, yet she cannot
transcend it. The conflict between her desire and reality intensifies and
thus ensues an inner struggle in her heart as she is drawn into a life of
chaos and confusion. The inner voyage of Virmati in the novel is greatly
influenced by what Virginia Woolf maintains:

Life is not a series of gig lamps arranged symmetrically, life is a
luminous halo, semi transparent envelop surrounding us from the
beginning of consciousness to the end. (76)

Laila has no such urge for gratification. The reason perhaps is her
exposure to the outside world and the presence of other male cousins in
the house. This has helped her grow intellectually and emotionally. When
her lover Ameer kisses her or holds her she experiences a feeling of purity
and completeness which sustains her while he is away. On the other hand
Manju Kapur’s Virmati is tugged to conformity.

In the same connection Ruchira Mukharji’s Toad in My Garden
traces the trajectory of romantic love in the life of a young college girl
Megha. There are striking contrasts between the two college girls Virmati
in Difficult Daughters and Megha in Toad in My Garden. While Virmati is a
woman of pre-independence who strives to go to college, Megha does not
have to fight for higher education. Her class and times have put her in a
privileged position. While for Megha need for love becomes an essential
corollary for growing up, love becomes a permanent trap from which
there is no respite for Virmati. Megha’s childhood infatuation for her uncle
Nilu continues until adolescence. The rich and arrogant aunt Monica takes
her to task for having developed an illicit relationship with her husband.
On the other hand unlike Monica, Ganga in *Difficult Daughters* can do nothing to control or challenge her authority as a married woman. She is dependent, has children, is bound by tradition and conformity and resigns herself to her fate. She sulks in private and her anger and ire is directed not at her husband but towards Virmati. Even for Virmati this fairy tale romance has no happy ending. It brings with it indignity, anger, frustration and suffering. It is a suffering to which she can give no name. Unlike her, Megha has a chance to recover. Taking this into consideration in literature there are several examples of romantic love as an “unattainable ideal.” In modern times romance has “moved from being about a male subject to becoming a commodity about women, for women.” (77) It is the voice of Jane Eyre hunting through the passage of *Difficult Daughters*:

I longed for a power of vision which might overpass that limit; which might reach the busy world, regions full of life I had heard of but never seen; that then I desired more of practical experience than I possessed; more of intercourse with my kind, of acquaintance with variety of character, than was here within my reach. (78)

It can be compared with the desire of Virmati:

It was useless looking for answers inside home. One had to look outside to education, freedom and the bright lights of Lahore Colleges. (79)

Her plight is like some of the nineteenth century women in literature. It is like Jane Eyre who falls in love with Rochester and comes to know much later that he has a mad wife in the cellar, or a twentieth century love story Daphne Du Maurier’s *Rebecca* who too falls in love with a married man, or Maggie O’ Tulliver of the *Mill on the Floss* who falls in love with a man engaged to be married to her cousin. We see that women writers are rewriting the romance by shifting focus and creating a hiatus by making
the woman an “object of the romantic tale itself.” (80) In all the novels cited earlier we notice that a woman’s first encounter with her body becomes a significant point of departure for her. The female body is always at a disadvantage. The woman is either silent about her sexuality or defiant. For a woman sexuality is a “domain of exploration, pleasure and agency.” (81) It can also be argued that sexuality becomes a site of women’s oppression. Grounded in cultural, religious and social traditions, a woman’s body is pure as long as it is untouched by man. Having once experienced sex- trespassed- the flesh is now violated, offered and hence bound for good. Loss of virginity has multiple implications in their lives. This happens in marriage, outside marriage. A sense of shame is inflicted and the woman gives in. What is gratification for one is sin for the other. What is desire for one is a disgrace to the other. What is amusement for one is a scandal for the other. As suggested by de Beauvoir:

The young girl has hardly more than her body which she can call her own: it is her greatest treasure; the man who enters her takes it from her. . . . She is overpowered, forced to compliance, conquered. (82)

According to Chris Weedon Virmati too moves into the “forbidden territory” and is compelled to think:

Wasn’t her future partner decided by the first touch of a man on her body? The nature of femininity and masculinity is one of the key sites of discursive struggle for the individual. . . . it is a struggle which begins at birth and which is central to upbringing and education. (83)

It is important to note that education plays a dominant role in the lives of women. If in certain cases it fails to free them from the shackles of male dominance, social tradition and popular prejudices, it also gives them the authority to doubt and question, to assert and reshape their lives. As suggested by Woolf:
But it is not education only that is needed. It is that women should have liberty of experience; that they should differ from men without fear and express those differences openly. . . be . . . encouraged to think, invent, imagine and create as freely as men do. (84)

And it is this “difference” that alone would bring in a difference to women’s lives.

Thus, Manju Kapur has dealt with mind and the soul of protagonist, her inner workings and hidden and silent thoughts rather than her appearance. Virmati who has sacrificed so much in her life to marry Harish is insouciant of her own identity. Virmati who has taken the first steps towards the journey of women liberation from the clutches of the egoist male society, vehemently opposes male-supremacy and wishes to exercise her right to equality. She clearly repudiates the role of being victims at the hands of dominating males of the society.

Infact, the whole story is a mingling of past and present. It also answers to the narrator Ida’s unambiguous declaration at the beginning that she wishes not to be like her mother. Indeed the treatment of women in the novel is unique in this sense that it creates ‘an intimate world.’ After shuffling the whole novel it enlightens us that the treatment of woman which she has depicted is not new. The condition of a woman in more or less proportion is same till now-

While the novel portrays India of forties, a conservative, when women could not assert. But then the two factors which enable the modern woman to assert are, education and economic independence. Therefore, Virmati comes to us as modern woman being both educated and having a job before marriage. (85)

If we see her character, from the very beginning she is marginalized and ill treated by her mother. In spite of her great effort to go near her mother-
Her pleasures, her pains, her pathetic life as a mistress and then a second wife, all remained her private sorrows. She could never share them with her mother. There seems a barrier between them which Virmati fails to pull down. (86)

Ida tells the readers:

From time to time Virmati glanced furtively at her mother, and the wall she encountered forbade her from making the attentive gestures that might have made the journey bearable for both. (87)

Not only Kasturi but her daughter Ida also rejects her. Ida’s outright declaration of not wanting to be like her mother evokes the curiosity in the reader as to why Ida does not like to be like her mother. And it is revealed that it is not discovery of Virmati as a woman or as a mother but a quest for selfhood and identity for Ida, who is a divorcee, childless and isolated. Infact this-

Mother-daughter relationship marches from identification to alienation. Years later- through Ida marching from alienation to identification. (88)

Ida is shown as leading a freer life than her mother in external terms, yet inside her she feels the same anxieties as her mother did. Through Ida, Kapur speaks,

In Difficult Daughters we do not listen to Virmati’s voice. She could speak out, being certainly situated at the juncture of two operations--colonialism and patriarchy. What we have is her daughter’s reconstruction and representation. (89)

If we cast a glance over the whole life of Virmati, it is seen that she remains a failure but it establishes her as the representative destiny of each Indian woman. Here Gur Pyari Jandial correctly points out that it is
mistake to devalue Virmati’s struggle just because she failed for what mattered was to have made the attempt

to break the patriarchal mould and for Virmati to have tried to do that in the forties was a great achievement. (90)

Throughout her life Virmati was confined within these three words: “adjust, compromise and adapt” (91) before marriage in her parents’ home and after in her husband’s. She tries to adjust and compromise with professor’s first wife Ganga but of no avail. And if we talk about Ganga’s character, it is a flat character which does not change from beginning to the end of the novel. She is a perfect, ideal, and caring daughter-in-law and a wife. She does not let Virmati do any work for the professor and does everything herself – washing clothes, ironing, cooking, and other things which are her own way of asserting her right as a socially approved wife. But the professor betrays her trust, her submissive meekness and traditional modesty by bringing Virmati as a second wife. But what about Virmati – what is her fault? Day and night she hears the harsh comments of Ganga and of her mother-in-law. She is cramped in a corner of her room and is not allowed even to talk to Ganga’s kids. Thus her hardships do not leave her but come before her always in changed colours. Torn between duty and desire, loving and knowing, responsibility and restraint, her innate strength and vitality failed to cheer her up. She has been deprived of all freedom since her birth and her rebellion against her parents aggravates her sufferings. Even her education fails to take her out of this track, for her education and independence both come with a heavy price. She has presented an authentic picture of a woman in male chauvinistic society, portraying her conflict between tradition and post modernity. And this conflict and fight for autonomy remains an unfinished combat; and it is from that perspective that, in her second novel, A Married Woman, published five years later that the treatment of women is both Indian and universal.
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