Chapter - II

Bold and Daring Womanhood in *Difficult Daughters*
Difficult Daughters is Manju Kapur’s debut novel and it instantly acclaimed a great success. The novel won the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize in 1998. Difficult Daughters is Kapur’s first endeavor as a writer and the novel is universally accepted as a remarkable piece of literature. All her fictions present a real portrayal of modern Indian society and the plight of Indian women under the patriarchal influence. Manju Kapur’s strength as a writer lies in her vivid description of female issues that are effectively exposed in her fictions and short stories. She has a great capacity of revealing the human nature, particularly that of Indian woman. The narration of women’s predicament in her novels is eye-catching. The authentic description of a woman’s psyche is apparently remarkable. Narration of Indian family life of pre-independence era in Difficult Daughters appears much real to the readers and we experience as if the incidents are taking place in front of us. The readers get the real feel of the events during the course of reading.

Difficult Daughters is a story of Lala Diwan Chand’s joint family where his two married sons, Suraj Prakash and Chander Prakash, live with their wives and children under one roof. It represents a typical Indian joint family, living under the strong influence of Indian patriarchal social structure. Patriarchy had a stronger influence in 1940s and 1950s which is effectively explored in Kapur’s novel. Kapur has better known Indian woman’s psyche and predicament. Being an Indian woman she has herself experienced male-dominant culture in India and so her representation of modern women as social rebels comes out more authentic and real. Through the female protagonists Kapur has vividly described the predicament of women under male hegemony. Describing the fundamental issues in “Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters” Dr. Annie John rightly says:

Manju Kapoor joins the group of women writers like Bharati Mukherjee, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundathi Roy and many others who portray the image of suffering but stoic women who eventually break free from the traditional shackles and live life on their own terms and conditions. Women under the patriarchal pressures and control are subject to much burnt and social ostracism. (6)

Virmati is the protagonist in her award-winning narrative Difficult Daughters living with her family in Amritsar, Punjab. She stands for an average Indian girl of
1950s, having full aspirations for life. A clash appears through her character between women empowerment and subjugation to age-old traditions and customs set for women. Apparently, the novel is presented before the reader as a detailed account of Virmati’s life that is narrated by her daughter, Ida. In the beginning of the novel, Ida is present in the cremation ground where her family members are performing the death rituals of Virmati’s funeral. The very opening lines of the novel are eye-catching. Commencing the fiction the writer presents a sound background about the story where the reader is able to know that a mother is died and her daughter is deeply affected by the incident. The initial lines are significant enough to arouse many questions and curiosity in reader’s mind. The narrator says,

The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother. Now she was gone and I stared at the fire that rose from her shriveled body, dry-eyed, leaden, half-dead myself, while my relatives clustered around the pyre and wept. *(Difficult Daughters 1)*

Ida decides not to be like her mother. The statement made by the narrator is sufficient to create several questions and these questions are answered indirectly by the writer during the course of the novel. This simple looking statement shows Ida’s determination of not to repeat the blunders that her mother Virmati does. The opening paragraph depicts Ida’s account of grief over her mother’s death. The very first page of the novel signals the noble and outstanding character of the protagonist. Virmati once told Ida,

‘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….And, she went on, 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.’ *(Difficult Daughters 2)*

Then onwards, Ida visits her ancestral house where her mother was born and brought-up. It is an old house in Amritsar and the reader comes to know about Virmati’s life when she was just nearly seventeen years of age. Ida collects the information about Virmati’s life from her maternal relatives. Her life in Lala Diwan Chand’s family is acutely presented by the writer. Family of Lala Diwan Chand is
typical of average Punjabi families of 1940s. It is a family where Lala Diwan Chand, a well-to-do jeweler in Amritsar, lives with a widowed sister and two married sons, Chander Prakash and Suraj Prakash, their wives and children.

Suraj Prakash and Kasturi have eleven children, six daughters and five sons. Virmati is the eldest among all and her five sisters are named as Indumati, Gunwati, Hemavati, Vidyawati and Parwati. She has five brothers who are named as Kailashnath, Gopinath, Krishnanath, Prakashnath and Hiranath. Along with this large family of Suraj Prakash, the elder brother Chander Prakash and his wife Lajwanti also live with them. Chandra Prakash has one daughter named Shakuntala and a son named Somnath. Both of them, living in Lahore, occasionally visit their house at Amritsar. They are educated and unmarried having independent approach and lifestyle. Virmati’s cousins are direct examples before her who have showed their concern for independence in life. Both of them have been narrated as social rebels who have delayed marriage giving priority to their independent way of living. Among her cousins, Shakuntala turns out as a role model for Virmati to follow.

The quintessential domestic condition through which almost all Indian women pass through is well presented by the novelist. Indian families are portrayed as large joint families in Kapur’s fictions with many children and are controlled by the males. Traditions and customs are strongly believed in and followed. To be a mother of more than five children is not an exception in the conventional society like India and Virmati’s family set a proper instance where women are treated as child-producing machines. It is always expected by a typical Indian mother to give birth to male child who can be the heir of the family.

The age-old tendency and preference for traditional marriage in the same caste is presented as Virmati’s family members are only worried about the marriage of the girls instead of making them self-reliant and independent through education. Daughters for Kasturi and Suraj Prakash are not more than burden which they decide to be free from through making them marry as per elders’ wish in their caste. During a conversation with her mother Virmati says:

‘I’m not harming anybody by studying, Mati’ she pleaded.
‘You harm by not marrying. What about Indu? How long will she have to wait? What is more, the boy is getting impatient, what about him?’

‘Tell him I don’t want to marry.’

Whispered Virmati; hanging her head still lower.

‘Haire, after making him wait so long? What were you doing all this time? Sleeping?’ Kasturi’s voice was rough with exasperation.

*(Difficult Daughters 59)*

In a traditional Indian family like Lala Diwan Chand’s, there is no room for independent thinking and approach for living a free life. People are bound to follow the traditions and any challenge to the customs leads only to separation and disasters in one’s life. Women are preferred to be kept in house for the household works and to look after the children. Through Kasturi’s character the novelist here focuses on the age-old social structure wherein the women’s role is limited to child production, household chores and upbringing of the children. Women are not allowed to live an independent life. In many ways women are deprived of their fundamental constitutional rights like education, equality, independence etc. They live under complete control of male dominant social set-up wherein they are not supposed to challenge or revolt the system, instead they are enforced to follow the set traditions established by male. As Dr Arti S. Khindri mentions in an article:

Manju Kapur’s novels present a very conventional view of home. It is presented as a search, a destiny and a destination for women in the Indian patriarchal social setup. Daughters are conventionally raised in India with a training to accept, adapt and adjust to the choices their elders make in all walks of life, including the choice of their husbands. Every girl is trained from an early age to love, serve and obey her in-laws. In her first novel *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati and Ida defy the social convention and seek to carve out their own homes. They may be seen as the new women who dared to defy the social conventions and norms giving precedence to individual desire rather than social destiny.

*(233)*

Dr. Venkateswarlu Yesapogu also comments on the major fictions of the contemporary women writers in ‘The Voice of Indian Women Novelists and their
Status in the Contemporary Indian English Literature – A Critical Study”. He notices the vivid portrayal of human relations and the rebellion against the traditions and customs in the feminine fictions. He says:

Writers like Jumpha Lahari, Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai, and Arundhati Roy too have written novels of Magic Realism, Social Realism and Regional fiction, and benefited from the increasing attention that this fiction has received National and International awards. They have probed into human relationships, since the present problem is closely concerned with mind and heart and the crusade is against age-old established systems. (3)

The wretched post pregnancy condition of Virmati’s mother is a justifiable instance of woman’s plight in a conventional family. Virmati, as the eldest child, witnesses her mother’s pathetic condition after frequent pregnancies. She notices her mother sacrificing everything for children and family and in due course creating a horrible condition for herself due to more than average pregnancies. It is the situation of her mother that turns out as one of the fundamental reasons of her revolt against conventional marriage. Her mother’s pathetic situation after eleventh baby Parvati’s birth, compels Virmati to rethink the role of a woman in family. Through Kasturi’s character, the novelist presents a glimpse of first generation women who are confined in conventional marriage, serial pregnancies and domesticity. They are totally deprived of education, independent thinking, and free life that men enjoy. Kasturi’s pathetic condition after eleventh childbirth is nicely captured by the novelist:

Kasturi’s eleventh child was born on a cold December night. A small, puny little girl. The mother looked at the will of God lying next to her, closed her eyes, and let the tiredness of seventeen years of relentless child-bearing wash over her.

Kasturi had no milk. The new-born sucked with all her feeble might on her mother’s dry breasts, hanging milkless and flabby against her little chest …… The chills and trembling began soon after she reached her bed. Her moaning attracted the attention of the servant who hurriedly asked Chhote Baoji to send for the hakim, Pabiji looked very bad. The
hakim declared he could not answer for Kasturi’s life if she had any more children. The vaid also said the same thing. A western-educated allopath declared that repeated births deplete the body, and no medicine could help Kasturi through another pregnancy.

(Difficult Daughters 9)

Virmati witnesses Kasturi’s desolate condition after eleventh pregnancy. Kasturi’s victimization due to social traditions affects the protagonist deeply and she decides to be free and independent in her life. Virmati in Difficult Daughters is a common Indian girl yearning for affection and love from her parents, particularly from mother. But Kasturi, always busy in taking care of household duties and other children, never identifies this. This basic need for love that Virmati craves for becomes the fundamental reason for her rebellion and independent attitude. The narrator writes,

At times Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special. However, when she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother’s arms, Kasturi would get irritated and pushed her away. ‘Have you seen to their food – milk – cloths - studies?’

(Difficult Daughters 6)

As the eldest among all siblings she is allotted the duty of looking after her younger brothers and sisters. Her relation and attachment with her younger ones is that of a second mother. Kasturi has given them birth but their food, cloths, studies and other daily routine activities are taken care of by Virmati. Gradually she develops an assumption that her role and place in her family is limited only to fulfilling the responsibilities towards her siblings. Her belief grows stronger day by day that she is only a liability for parents and as being eldest they want to get her married as soon as possible. No one cares about her desires and opinions. Her parents have nothing to do with what she likes or dislikes. Indeed Virmati is like other normal children who expect care and concern from parents. Her father Chander Prakash is always busy in the family business and spends hardly any quality time with the children. On the other hand Kasturi, always busy in household works, never identifies this need of her adolescent girl who is full of aspirations and feelings.
She thinks that it is only education that can save her from confinement in rigid customs. Therefore, she decides to study further. But eventually when she turns nearly seventeen, her parents become eager about her marriage and so her engagement is finalized with Inderjit, a canal engineer. Inderjit is a samaj boy who is selected by Virmati’s family whom she has never met with and known. It is a social tradition in India that as far as the girl reaches the age of sixteen or seventeen, the family members begin a search for a suitable match for her. Here Inderjit is the most suitable for Virmati according to her elders as he is an educated and earning samaj boy having a sound social background. These are the typical features that are expected from a young girl’s parents. And in case of Virmati the early marriage was necessary because she was the eldest among other five sisters who are believed in queue for marriage.

Here the novelist effectively presents the early marriage as one of the prime feminine issues of Indian society. Indian girls are no longer allowed freedom and independent life and so they are married early in life so that they can’t develop independent approach of thinking. Meanwhile, Virmati comes in contact of her cousin Shakuntala during her stay in Dalhousie. After birth of eleventh child, Kasturi’s health deteriorates and she is recommended fresh air of the mountains by the doctor. Virmati stays in Dalhousie for several days to take her care. Shakuntala is an educated young girl of around twenty years who happens to be the first rebel against marriage and customs in Diwan Chand’s family. In spite of repeated efforts for Shakuntala’s marriage by her parents, she remains firm in her decision and avoids marriage for the sake of career and education. The very first meeting with Shakuntala instills in Virmati a desire for freedom. During their evening walk, Virmati’s longing for free life is clearly highlighted by the writer. Shakuntala tells Virmati,

*These people really don’t 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......*

*My friends are from different backgrounds, and all have families unhappy with their decision not to settle down, as they call it....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.

‘I want to be like you, Pehnji,’ blurted Virmati. ‘If there are two of us, then they will not mind so much.’

‘Silly, said Shakuntala, stopping in the middle of the path. She turned Virmati’s face to her, caressed the flushed cheek and tucked the loose strands of hair on either side behind the ears. ‘Chachi will say I am a bad influence on you.’ (Difficult Daughters 17)

But after meeting Shakuntala, Virmati’s decision of pursuing education and living life as per her desires develops stronger. Later on the family shifts its residence to newly built house at Lepel Griffin Road. There they have separate rooms for both the families. Suraj Prakash and Kasturi along with their eleven children shift to the new accommodation and adjoining their house lives Chander Prakash and Lajwanti’s family. Chander Prakash’s both the children live in Lahore. So they had ample space vacant in their house. Consequently, they decide to give the upper part of their house on rent and fortunately they get a tenant very soon. Lajwanti’s tenant is an Oxford returned professor of English literature. Professor Harish gets a job in Arya Sabha College, Amritsar. Professor comes to stay in Lajwanti’s house with his young wife.

The arrival of the Professor as Virmati’s neighbor proves as a major turn in her life. During the initial period, familiarity develops between them just as neighbours. But this general familiarity was going to be decisive not only in their lives but also in the lives of their family members. After Virmati passes FA exam, her parents decide about her marriage. They think that Virmati has got enough education and now it is a proper time to marry her. Education for them is not a primary requirement. For girl’s education their ideology is limited to the fulfillment of the requirements of her in-laws. Virmati’s character stands for the perfect example of the typical patriarchal notion of girl’s education and priorities in life. Girls are provided that much education as it can be fit to her in-law’s family. Thus, the objective behind educating girls is not to make them able to judge life better nor it is to help them to live life better. Instead the provision of education to girls is chiefly targeted to appear cultured and to satisfy the ego of her in-laws. Kasturi and Suraj Prakash’s approach
towards their eldest daughter exposes the gender partiality. Because Virmati is a girl, she is denied further education and pressurized for early marriage.

Virmati is treated merely as a possession and her parents think that they are right in their approach towards her as only by getting married in a well settled family she can live happily ever after. They cannot think of any type of aspirations that Virmati may have. It is seen that her parents belong to conventional roots which do not permit a woman’s freedom and autonomous life. Kasturi and Suraj Prakash stand for typical Indian parents who always treat their children through age-old traditional perspective.

In the fictional background several social events are also portrayed by the novelist It presents the growing awareness about women’s independence during 1950s. But Virmati’s elders are insensitive to come out of the traditional masks that they have put on willingly or unwillingly. Actually, they have a narrow and old-fashioned outlook towards woman who think that woman’s fulfillment or the authenticity of life can only be attained through marriage. According to Virmati’s parents, the most important thing in a woman’s life is marriage and fulfilling her familial duties towards her husband and children. They can’t imagine that Virmati can have her own desires and independent thinking. On the other hand, Virmati is not willing to sacrifice her life for the sake of marriage and typical household chores that a married woman engages in. The value of education and its relevance for a young girl is beautifully explained by Manju Kapur. The writer also presents her parents’ concern for her marriage. She writes:

Virmati passed her FA with marks that were respectable enough for a girl, her parents thought. She now wanted to study further. Her parents 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. Virmati wept and sulked.

‘What is the matter with her?’ said her mother. ‘She was never so keen before’. ‘The girl is serious. It is natural’ said her grandfather to her mother. ‘For how long can she go on like this? There is Indumati to
think of. We can afford to wait for the boys after Indu, but what about her?’ (Difficult Daughters 45)

But meanwhile Virmati’s fiancé’s father dies and marriage is postponed. This sudden incident provides her a relaxation as she gets a chance for further education. Her parents too don’t object her further study because her marriage is delayed for two years and during this time Virmati is completely free. Hence, she is consented to pursue further education. Virmati is admitted to study BA in Arya Sabha College where her neighbor, Professor Harish Chandra, teaches English literature. It is her admission in Arya Sabha College that proves a turning point in her life. She is a young girl who craves for love and affection at this stage of her life and remarkably this want of affection is not fulfilled from her family members. At this stage Harish enters in her life who is admirer of beauty, art and literature. Actually his affection for Virmati begins earlier from his previous meetings with Virmati at his house. Once when Virmati and Ganga return from bazaar and the Professor is waiting for a cup of tea, the conversation between Harish and Virmati represents Harish’s attraction for her. Kapur writes:

‘Perhaps I will get my tea now’ the Professor said to Virmati.
‘The fault is mine.’ She replied, elegant still.
‘Mine, if you feel blamed.’

Virmati fell silent. She did not know what to say next and turned to go.
He called out, ‘Stay and have a cup.’
‘Oh, no. ‘My milk will be waiting for me at home.’
Her milk. So young, he thought.
‘Do please come in,’ he repeated courteously, putting polite pressure on her. ‘In England they say nothing is so refreshing as a cup of tea. I learnt to like it there.’ He was offering a little bit of himself which both flattered and alarmed Virmati. (Difficult Daughters 43)

Virmati frequently comes in contact with Harish as it is he who teaches English literature in her class. The familiarity develops into deep affection for both of them. This attraction turns into love as then met daily in the college. Arya Sabha College is presented as a male bastion where only six girls were studying with all other boys. The increasing love and attraction is aptly described by the novelist. Once
when Virmati arrived late at college and she does not find a place to sit, she sits in front of the professor Harish. The love-making scene is beautifully portrayed by Manju Kapur. She writes:

Ignoring the half dozen young men who rose to give her their place, Virmati sat on the floor in front of his desk, looking up at him with her large eyes. The professor drank in the symbolism of her posture greedily. It moved him so deeply that he remembered it in all its detail even when his children had grown up. The murmur and rustle of students with scratching pens, their heads receding in rows, the whirr and click-click of fans overhead, and the stillness at the heart of it enclosing him with Virmati, Virmati with her offering eyes in open face.

Later when the deed was done, and he was in love with her, insisting on death if she were so cruel as to deny him, he discovered she was myopic. She still stared at him, with that thoughtful, dreamy, not quite seeing gaze. \textit{(Difficult Daughters 47)}

When he takes Virmati to doctor for making her glasses, the narrator precisely describes the extension of love between the couple. “But by then the professor’s desire to possess had extended to her heart and mind.” \textit{(Difficult Daughters 47)} Harish and Virmati’s love affair develops gradually and secretly. At the initial level neither Virmati’s family nor Harish’s wife and mother know anything about their increased intimacy. They secretly start meeting each other and Harish frequently communicates his strong and passionate feelings towards Virmati through love letters. Shrewd Harish cheats Virmati by presenting a false excuse that his marriage with Ganga was arranged during his childhood without his or her consent and clearly convinces Virmati that it is only she who is his real love and ideal match in life. Innocent and young Virmati can’t understand the professor’s fake and baseless explanations and surrenders herself to Harish physically and mentally. The need of Virmati for having someone who can love her, whom she can believe her own and someone who can appreciate her aspirations for freedom and education, is fulfilled with her relationship with Harish.
Meanwhile her B A gets over and she passes with good marks. Virmati’s love relationship with a married-man, who has his own family, where in his legitimate wife Ganga claims her legal marital rights, is a revolutionary presentation of a delicate, social and familial issue. Manju Kapur has experimented on a much delicate topic like morality of marriage. Marriage is a social institution and social and familial norms are more important for a successful marriage. As per the social traditions marriage is not preferred with a married parson without legal separation. These types of relations are socially unaccepted and forbidden. Strong love for Harish, who is previously married, develops in Virmati. During their relationship, Harish never assures Virmati for his divorce with Ganga and Virmati is that much innocent and love-lost that she never demands this type of assurance from his lover. Harish instead keeps Virmati engaged in love-making, emotions and attraction.

Consequently, Virmati submits everything to his lover which is considered only the moral right of a husband. The novel is basically a love-story of Virmati and Harish wherein we come across the social and familial constraints that affect the life of the protagonist adversely. The basic nature of love is highlighted through Virmati’s character. It is believed that love does not follow social traditions and norms. Once it is done it cannot be undone if it is true love. Even William Shakespeare has declared in one of his well-known sonnet titled ‘Sonnet 116’:

Let me not to the marriage of true minds
Admit impediments. Love is not love
Which alters when it attraction finds,
Or bends with the remover to remove.
O no! It is an ever-fixed mark
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;
It is the star to every wand’ring bark,
Whose worth’s unknown, although his height be taken
Love’s not Time’s tool, though rosy lips and cheeks
Within his bending sickle’s compass come;
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.
If this be error and upon me prov’d,
I never writ, nor no man ever lov’d. (n.p.)

The strength and nature of love as it is analyzed in the above poem rightly matches Virmati’s character. Virmati’s love story also witnesses many tempests in the fiction. Almost all novels of Manju Kapur deal with such issues which are direct challenges to social norms and traditions. In Virmati’s case it is love-affair to a married man and engagement in unhesitant physical relations before marriage. In conventional Indian society, pre-marriage sexual relation of a girl is strictly forbidden and crossing it definitely invites serious troubles, particularly in case of woman. In Difficult Daughters the protagonist meets the same consequences later on in her life. But Kapur’s heroine appears bold and dares to take her own decisions in her life. Once she loves Harish, she submits her everything to her lover and becomes decisive to be his wife. In this way Virmati emerges as a modern woman who selects education and freedom over rigid customs and norms.

After passes BA exam, her wedding date is fixed and marriage preparation is begun by the family members. Without revealing her love with Harish, Virmati presents her unwillingness for the marriage with Inderjit. Presenting this request she seems fearful about her mother’s response because she is already in engagement with him for last three years and sudden denial of marriage can bring blemish to family’s social reputation. Moreover she does not have a valid reason for cancellation except education which was at all not necessary for Virmati as per her parents’ opinion.

Virmati thinks that she will succeed in convincing her mother so she continues requesting her but finally Kasturi becomes very serious and angry as the issue they are talking about is not ordinary. It is going to decide Virmati and her sisters’ future as well as could affect social status and prestige of Lala Diwan Chand’s family. The novelist conveys that people are more careful about public opinion and social fame. Tradition and customs are followed wearing the mask of hypocrisy and pretence at the cost of happiness of near ones and dear ones. The further discussion between daughter and mother presents a clash of opinions between a first generation woman and a second generation person of the same gender. How a girl’s desire of getting education is suppressed with domestic violence and harsh attitude is effectively presented by Manju Kapur:
`Mati, please I want to study`………Virmati faltered

`But you have studied. What else is left?`'  

`In Lahore…… I want to go to Lahore……` Kasturi could bear her daughters foolishness no further. She grabbed her by the hair and banged her head against the wall.  

`Maybe this will knock some sense into you, she cried. What crimes did I commit in my last life that I should be cursed with a daughter like you in this one? She let go of the girl’s head and started to wail, rocking to and fro. (Difficult Daughters 59)`

The strong hold of traditional psyche is apparently seen in Kasturi’s behaviour towards her young daughter. Old mentality of controlling the children anyhow and interfering in each and every matter in their life is beautifully highlighted by the novelist:

Kasturi slapped her hand away. `Leave them there you ungrateful girl!’ she hissed. `Otherwise you do just what you want! Why bother with the show of picking up the thread. Get away from my sight.’ Kasturi’s face was purple with fury. As Virmati got up she said coldly `“Remember you are going to be married next month, if I have to swallow poison to make you do it!” (Difficult Daughters 60)`

At this stage, even Kasturi can’t understand what is wrong with her young daughter because she is totally unaware about her love relationship with the professor. The family background is such conventional of Lala Diwan Chand’s family that she even can’t think of any such activity from her daughters. Changed perspective of education of first and second generation women is further elaborated by the novelist. As a first generation woman Kasturi thinks education should be taken to get a good husband and for pleasure of reading books whereas education for a second generation woman like Virmati is a platform to be independent, a medium to live a free and autonomous life. On the following lines Kasturi’s confusion seems apparent about the effect of education that Virmati has achieved so far. Kasturi thinks:

`What kind of learning was this that deprived her of her reason? She too knew the value of education, it had got her husband, and had filled her
hours with the pleasures of reading. In her time going to school had been a privilege, not to be abused by going against one’s parents. How had girls changed so much in just a generation? *(Difficult Daughters)*

Fierce rejection of marriage cancellation by her mother makes Virmati’s mental condition worst that leads her to commit suicide. She selects a canal near Tarsika to end her life where her grandfather Lala Diwan Chand lives in a farm house. Leaving a suicide note for Harish, she attempts suicide by jumping into the deep water of canal but fortunately two servants of her grandfather’s farm house accidently recognizes and rescue her. They bring Virmati out of the water and inform Lala Diwan Chand about the incident. In no time, Virmati’s grandfather and father arrive at the place and bring Virmati back to her house.

But during these proceedings, Virmati’s suicide note reaches to the professor and frightened of Virmati’s death attempt he tells his wife to immediately inform this to Virmati’s Mother. Upon Harish’s insistence Ganga urgently goes to Virmati’s house and informs Virmati’s recent departure for suicidal attempt. Meanwhile, Suraj Prakash is informed by his father Lala Diwan Chand to reach urgently to Tarsika. Before Ganga spreads the news to Kasturi, Virmati has already attempted suicide and is successfully rescued by the servants of the family. Finally, Virmati is brought back to the house. At this juncture, Virmati’s parents become suspicious about Virmati and professor’s relation as they have received the news from his family. They make consequent inquiry of Virmati to know the reason of suicide attempt. Finally, Virmati hesitantly declares before all the family members that she wants further study. Upon asking reason of suicide attempt, she tells that she doesn’t like the boy with whom her marriage is arranged.

Eventually she is locked up in the warehouse and is denied to come out and meet anyone. On the other hand having a strong suspicion over Harish’s role behind critical and revolting behavior of Virmati, Harish is told to leave house. Having a strong connection with Virmati, Harishrents another house nearby on Lepel Griffin road. Locked-up Virmati communicates to Harish through love letters and innocent Parvati, Virmati’s youngest sister, becomes the messenger between the lovers. To save the family’s social reputation, Virmati’s younger sister Indumati is married to the
canal engineer. Eventually after several days Virmati is freed from confinement in the warehouse and is permitted to help in kitchen and in other household work.

After sometime, Virmati’s parents think it better to fulfill her desire of further education instead of locking her up in the house with restrictions. Finally it is decided that Virmati will be sent to study B.T. in Rai Bahadur Sohanlal College for women in Lahore. Till now the family gets aware about Harish and Virmati’s affair. Meanwhile, Virmati gets information that Harish’s wife Ganga is pregnant. Ganga’s pregnancy adversely affects Virmati and she informs him through a letter that they should end up their relationship. She believes Harish is unfaithful to her since he has continued his physical relation with Ganga. But anyhow professor convinces her that Ganga was restless with a desire to have a baby and he could not stop her.

Virmati is admitted in Government College Lahore, a teachers’ training college for women which is identified as Oxford of East. In the college hostel her room partner is Swarnalata, a girl who is a strong believer of woman’s independence and woman’s rights. Swarnalata and Virmati become best friends and share everything with each other. Lahore is depicted as more cultured and a modern city compared to Amritsar in terms of life-style, modernity and education. Virmati feels as a free bird in Lahore as here she hasn’t any restriction and she is almost in a strange and free-cultured city distant from her family’s vigilance. This provides a feel of space and freedom to the protagonist and Harish takes the utmost advantage of that. Virmati has already informed him about her admission in teachers’ training college, Lahore through her letter.

Virmati’s stay in Lahore turns out as a blessing for the lovers. They frequently meet each other without any fear and hesitation. Professor often meets Virmati and their secret meetings are planned at Harish’s friend professor Saiyad’s guesthouse where the couple spends some of the precious romantic moments. Virmati already yearned love and attraction from someone and the freedom of hostel life in Lahore provides her much space for autonomous life. Puffed in by feeling of freedom and being needy for love, young Virmati submits herself completely to Professor Harish. She enters in pre-marital physical relations with the Professor. It is quite a daring and bold step as in a country like India where sexual relations prior to marriage are strictly
forbidden. They are severely condemned by the society and ultimately it is the woman who gets victimized in this type of relation.

Here it needs to be noted that Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* is such a woman character who dares to enter into the forbidden relations as per the society. Physical relation of woman prior to marriage is not allowed in the society. It is believed as a moral sin to engage into pre-marital physical relations in Indian society. Virmati does not engage in pre-marital sexual relation with an intention to be rebel against society and family. It is rather her need for love and desire to live an independent life that makes her engage in physical relationship with a man who she thinks values her wish for education and respects independence. Virmati has nothing to do with traditions and customs. She wants only the fulfillment of her desire to own her life. She wants to take her own decisions in life and these are the characteristic features of a modern woman who doesn’t surrender herself to social pretense and hypocrisy of following the traditions and customs blindly. She appears modern in her way of thinking, in her approach towards life. She chooses to be called as rebellious rather than to be identified as a *Devi* as per the Indian culture by sacrificing her life which she alone wants to claim at.

Harish and Virmati spend secretly intimate moments and consequently, Virmati gets pregnant. To be pregnant before marriage proves a pathetic experience for unmarried Virmati. She knows that it is strictly prohibited as per social standards for women. She knows too that if this fact is revealed to her family members, they will certainly kill her for the sake of social reputation and familial prestige. She makes an attempt to inform Harish about the pregnancy but she finds that Harish has gone to ancestral house in Kanpur and will not return soon. Through help of her roommate Swarnalata, she gets abortion privately by a doctor.

One major incident of clash in their relation needs to be mentioned here. The pain and the consequences of her secret physical relation with her married lover are elucidated by the novelist. During her stay at Lahore, once when even after repeated requests to get marry when Harish doesn’t seem that much serious about their marriage, she presents her grief. Virmati says:
‘Hari –’ Virmati spat out the name. ‘How long is it you say you have been in love with me?’

‘Three years.’

‘I break my engagement because of you, blacken my family’s name, am locked up inside my house, get sent to Lahore because no one knows what to do with me. Here I am in the position of being your secret wife, full of shame, wondering what people will says if they find out, not being able to live in peace, study in peace …… and why?

Because I am an idiot.’

‘No, no Viru –’

‘Now you want to prolong the situation. Why don’t we get married? You say your family makes no difference. But still you want to continue in this way. Be honest with me. I can bear anything but this continuous irresolution. Swarna is right. Men do take advantage of women!’ (Difficult Daughters 149)

Along with description of love-story of Virmati and Harish, Manju Kapur also narrates several incidents that are related to women’s empowerment and women’s upliftment in society. Virmati’s roommate Swarnalata appears as a staunch supporter of women’s education and rights. Lahore is depicted as a center for education, social movements and events. The importance of independence, public awareness and incidents are described effectively to raise the issue of social consciousness and women’s participation Manju Kapur writes:

Winter in Lahore, and conferences take place fast and furious in the city. Important people arrive, inaugurate them, make speeches, have their photographs printed in the newspapers, along with an account of what they said, and then move on. In one month alone there is the Anti-Pakistan Conference, the Arya Bhasha Sammelan Conference, the Urdu Conference, the Indian History Conference, and the All India Sikh League. The atmosphere is changed, and voices reverberate with self-awareness. (Difficult Daughters 139)

After finishing the BT degree Virmati returns to her house in Amritsar. She still keeps all her history a secret to her family members. She can’t make a direct
request to her parents for her marriage with Harish. She predicts well the consequences if she risks doing so. She knows that her family is a strict follower of social customs and traditions. They may cut off their relation with their daughter, but will never endure social disgrace or invite any blot on family’s reputation.

Here one point that needs to be discussed is social disgrace that is caused by women which differs from the disgrace brought about by men. In society woman stands for prestige and reputation. If a woman reacts against the set standards, she is always accused of dishonoring the family and so she is punished accordingly. But this is not the case with men. If a man behaves apposite the ideal standards in relationships, he is hardly believed guilty and seldom gets any punishment. Here in Harish’s case this example fits appropriately. His illicit relation is not hidden from his wife and mother. But both of them remain neutral over the issue. Harish’s mother finds fault in his horoscope and prediction of Harish’s two marriages made by an astrologer. This dual standard or gender partiality is beautifully highlighted by Manju Kapur in the fiction. Severe code of conduct for women and relaxation and behavioral freedom to men are the characteristic features of patriarchal society which is effectively presented in Difficult Daughters through characters of Virmati and Harish.

With completion of BT Virmati is offered a job of principal in Pratibha Vidyalay, Nahan. Nahan is a small town of a princely state Sirmaur and the school is managed by queen of the state. Virmati is happy to receive a respectable job where she also gets a separate quarter to live in. But here misfortune intercepts in form Harish’s frequent visits. Without thinking of the possible consequences, Harish repeatedly visits Virmati at Nahan, once spending a whole night making love with her. Consistent visits of a strange man to an unmarried female principal of a school result in unpleasant attention of the school authorities Virmati can’t resist Harish’s visits because ultimately he is the only person in her life whom she considers her own and intimate. Virmati is in physical relation with the professor for more than three years. Being confident that Harish will marry her soon and she will lead a happy life thereafter, she willingly submits herself physically whenever they meet. But sometimes feeling of guilt as if she has done something wrong is strongly felt by Virmati. Pre-marital secret physical relation with a lover disturbs her psychologically.
Once during their meeting at Nahan, She is very upset about her engagement with Harish. She Says:

‘You think it’s so easy for me!’ She turn on him ‘It isn’t, people wondering all the time! Why I ‘am 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?’ Virmati had never dared to say so much. She stopped. She hadn’t realized how angry and humiliated she was, and her eyes filled with tears. *(Difficult Daughters* 193)

Virmati’s anguish and pain affects Harish intensely and her reaction makes him feel insulted. Harish experiences a dilemma between his family and his sweetheart. He finds it very difficult to marry Virmati without divorced from Ganga. Harish’s reaction upon Virmati’s anger is well presented by the novelist. The narrator writes:

The Professor flushed. How dare she insult him like this? He knew men whose second marriages had been condemned socially, resulting in nothing but humiliation and misery to everybody. And she was blaming him for being carful! All he had taught her had led to this! Such insensitivity. And after last night too, when he thought she had felt as much as he did. He started to walk away. *(Difficult Daughters* 194)

Being a woman Virmati’s plight is beautifully explored by Manju Kapur. A Woman can better imagine other woman’s predicament and grief in a patriarchal world and Manju Kapur succeeds in this task effectively. A woman’s mental agony is finely portrayed who has lost her everything, which is believed morally and socially precious for any woman, to a lover who is now hesitant to marry her. She is confused about her identity. What type of recognition she is having? Is she a concubine of the Professor having physical relationship without marriage? How society will react to her? How her own family will treat her when they realize the fact about their daughter. Virmati feels herself in a situation from where she can’t retreat. She has to carve out her future anyhow by her own efforts without any moral and mental support of family relatives and society.
Her pathos effectively gets highlighted when Harish leaves feeling insulted and confused. Kapur writes:

Virmati watched him go. She turned slowly and looked across the valley. Harish was right. It was beautiful. A peaceful resting place. It was a great pity she couldn’t die straight away and rest there too. She fell down on the grass and closed her eyes, crying noiselessly for a long time, her face pressed against the earth. Her body felt too heavy for her to lift and take home; it would have to remain there, where it had dropped. (*Difficult Daughters* 194)

Harish’s visits to Nahan bring misfortunate to Virmati. An unmarried female principal’s secret meetings with a stranger male become a talk of the town and these types of secret meetings between lovers do not appear endurable in the small town like Nahan. Moreover, Virmati is a school principal and it is also a question of reputation of a princely state run school Pratibha Vidyalay. As a result Virmati is asked to resign from the job by Diwan Saheb who manages the school which is established by the queen of Sirmaur. After being terminated from the job Virmati turns decisive that if Harish does not marry her, she will go to Tagore’s ashram Shantiniketan and will pass the rest of her life there, forgetting Harish forever. From Nahan Virmati goes to Harish’s friend’s house in Kolkata. Harish’s friend is a poet who lives with his mother. Virmati selects the poet as a mediator between herself and Harish. She clearly expresses her critical situation caused by Harish through not marring her and she requests the poet to talk to Harish to take a final decision in her case. She now no more can endure the secret identity as a woman having a physical relation with a married man without social acceptance. She now wants to have a concrete identity for her relation with Harish. Virmati gives two choices to Harish; either he marries her or forgets her forever.

Getting his poet friend’s telegraph mentioning urgency, Harish immediately goes to Kolkata and is informed about Virmati’s demand of marriage. After initial hesitation he agrees to marry because he can’t bear separation from Virmati forever. Marriage is organized secretly in the presence of poet and his mother at poet’s house. After marriage Harish brings Virmati to his house in Amritsar.
Here it becomes evidently clear about Harish that he marries Virmati only for her contentment. He does not divorce Ganga. He keeps Virmati in his house as a secret second wife. Thus, Virmati doesn’t get legitimate status of a wife and her marriage with Harish is not publicly accepted. Hence Virmati is victimized by Harish and he makes her live in such a humiliating condition that she finds herself only fragmented and alienated. Harish’s condition is also troublesome. He can neither divorce Ganga nor can he leave Virmati and thus just like Virmati, Harish’s condition also becomes traumatize after his love marriage with his beloved. In their relationship, Harish is hesitant in accepting Virmati as his wife but on the contrary Virmati willingly submits herself completely rejecting the possible reactions from family and society.

Virmati’s condition after marriage in Harish’s house only augments her difficulties because both Ganga and Harish’s mother Kishori Devi do not accept Virmati as Harish’s wife but as the Professor has already married her and brought her to live with them, they let her live in the house as an unwanted and unwelcomed guest. Not a single family member, except Harish talks to Virmati in the house. She is allotted a small dressing room to live in. The newly wedded couple sleeps in the dressing room and the rest of the family members live in another room. Initially Ganga and Kishori Devi weep severely for the immoral and unethical act of Harish. But they feel themselves Helpless and accept their marriage as God’s wish. Both of them tolerate Harish’s re-marriage but they never accept Virmati as a part of their family. Unwillingly they endure her in the house. Children are not allowed to talk to her and it is only Harish with whom she communicates her feelings and thoughts.

In Harish’s house she tries to engage in household chores but it is denied by her husband because Ganga claims it as her moral and marital right. Virmati wants to do the household work related to her husband like washing his clothes, pressing the clothes, arranging his items in order, prepare food for her in-laws etc. but all these things are done by Ganga and snatching out these works from her can invite further severe disturbances in the family. So Harish denies Virmati to engage into these activities. He instead gives her books of literature to read and discuss with him the ideas and themes depicted. Doing domestic duties related to husband and his relatives
is considered common duty of a married woman in society after the marriage. Virmati assumes it as her right to do domestic duties related to Harish. She tells Harish:

‘She continues to wash your clothes.’
‘And?’ asked Harish in surprise.
And? And – what? As your wife, am I to do nothing for you? Just be in your bed?
Harish looked upset ‘You are my other self. Let her wash my clothes, if she feels like it. It has nothing to do with me. I don’t want a washerwoman. I want a companion.’ (Difficult Daughters 217)

The need of Harish is very clear. He requires such a female companion who can understand his ideas, interests and feelings. Ganga is always busy in fulfillment of the domestic tasks not bothering about her husband’s psychological and emotional needs. It can be considered a basic reason for their marital rift and Harish’s diversion towards Virmati. In Harish’s house Virmati lives an alienated life because no one seems willing to talk to her. Virmati experiences humiliation and being trapped in the house due to hatred of the family members. During this time she gets pregnant and she is taken care of by Harish’s mother. But after several days she faces miscarriage which enhances her grief further. In such a traumatic condition after marriage to be a mother was her only hope and that is shattered by miscarriage.

Her love-affair and marriage with married Harish, isolation and grievance in Harish’s house, boycott from her own family compels her to rethink her decisions. The marital bliss that she had expected in marriage with Harish is completely absent in her married life. She feels alone and rejected in her in-laws’s family. The reaction of the family members and Virmati’s feelings are nicely captured by the novelist when the couple enters the house after marriage and Virmati faces Harish’s wife, his mother and children. Kapur writes:

Virmati was tired and depressed. Now that she was actually in Harish’s house for the first time she could see it was going to be difficult to live separately from everybody else. Where would she sleep, how would they manage? Gandi, wicked, go away, that is what the little boy had said. She looked at Harish, her brow wrinkled with unhappiness.
‘I should never have married you,’ she said slowly, ‘and it’s too late now. I’ve never seen it so clearly. It’s not fair.’ She faltered and stopped. How many times in their past relationship had she said those very same words. I should not, cannot, will not marry you. It will not be fair. And now she had married him, but the old words were still springing to her lips, so many futile noises in the air.

*(Difficult Daughters 212)*

After her marriage, Virmati had informed her family members through a letter but not a single person of her family visited her. She knows that her family members are strictly against her marriage to a married man. The novelist beautifully narrates Virmati’s first visit to her home after marriage:

One morning, when she felt she could bear the dressing-room no longer, she started off, her heart in her month. What would they say? 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. They were justifiably angry with her, but she realized she had transgressed; she was willing to make amends. Full of a desperate hope, Virmati shuffled down Lepel Griffin Road.

*(Difficult Daughters 220)*

It is here first time that she wants to confess her wrong decisions and wishes to repent and expects sympathy and support in the critical situation. A mother is considered closest to a child, whether son or daughter. Here Virmati too wishes mental and emotional support from her mother. In childhood too she needed same attention and love which was unconsciously denied to her and which ultimately led her to be autonomous in life. Her autonomy ruins her life in the true sense. But expecting that at least her mother will understand her situation and may stand by caressing her, she visits her house. But her mother seems rigid and insensitive towards Virmati’s condition and her behavior shows that she is much more worried about social prestige and family’s reputation than agony of her own daughter. Her visit to her house is accurately portrayed by the novelist. Kasturi says:
‘Get out of here! Why bother to come now?’ Kasturi’s harsh words hit Virmati, and she bent her head, hoping this was just the initial reaction, her mother was understandably hurt.

‘Didn’t you hear me?’

Virmati remained standing. Kasturi came closer. ‘It would have been better if you had drowned in the canal than live to disgrace us like this!’

‘Mati-Mati-’ choked Virmati. ‘I shouldn’t have-’

‘Why are you telling me you shouldn’t have?’

‘What had I been telling you for five years? But no! You were too conceited to listen to anybody – why should you? – you are so educated, aren’t you?’

Virmati looked at her mother’s face. The eyes were cold and narrowed, the brows contorted with rage. There was implacable hostility there. She thought she should die with the pain she felt.

(∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗∗ (Difficult Daughters 220)

Kasturi’s anger symbolizes the rigidity of traditions and customs wherein she appears bound completely. She stands for the first generation woman who never advocate for women’s freedom and independence. For Kasturi familial domestic duties can be one and only contentment in a woman’s life. She finds the meaningfulness of a woman’s life in her involvement in domesticity only. Kasturi is born and brought up amid the stereotype traditional environment wherein women’s freedom and independent life hardly found any sense. Kasturi’s perspective is that of conventional and she is having strong faith in patriarchal social set-up wherein the only right place for any girl can be her marital house where she is supposed to serve the in-laws fulfilling household work.

Manju Kapur signifies that even women can’t understand women’s plight and become too much harsh in their behavior. Women like Kasturi take everything from the prospective of social reputation of family. They themselves have undergone the pains and sufferings of false system and the same servitude is expected from the younger generation but the modern girls don’t seem agreed for this type of subjugation towards patriarchal values.
Actually Virmati goes to her house to confess the wrong decision of marrying Harish expecting some solace that can console her in difficult condition of her married life. But unfortunately she receives only hatred and rejection from her mother. The conversation between mother and daughter is appealing. Narrator depicts:

‘I shouldn’t have come’, she managed bitterly. ‘I should have known what to expect.’ Kasturi grew red with rage. ‘Yes, you should have, you shameless’- she shouted. She took off her chappal and raised it. Involuntarily she ducked and took the blows on her back. ‘You’ve destroyed our family, you badmash, you randi! You’ve blackened our face everywhere! For this I gave you birth? Because of you there is shame on our family, shame on me, shame on Bade Pitaji! But what do you care, brazen that you are! (Difficult Daughters 221)

The novelist further writes:

Kasturi pushed Virmati so hard that she fell. ‘Who is keeping her? Let her go to her cheap, dishonored home! Could we ever stop her? Go! What are you waiting for?’

Virmati got up and faced Kasturi. ‘I’m going.’ Her heart was breaking but her voice was determined. ‘You will never see me again.’ With a last look at Paro, whose face was twisted with grief, she turned and left. (Difficult Daughters 221)

After this incident Virmati is never approached by any family member except Parvati, the youngest sister who once meet her on the road. For Lala Diwanchand’s family Virmati is now dead for ever. Her family boycotts her completely and cut off all the relations with her. When she is informed about her father’s sudden death in communal riot, she attends the funeral and other rituals with Harish. During that time Harish communicates with other men of her family but no one talks to her. She wants to weep at her mother’s shoulder but she can’t because the distance that was created by hatred still existed between them.
After several months she comes to know about Kailash’s forthcoming marriage when she suddenly meets Parvati on the road. She feels completely neglected as she, being his sister, is not invited in the marriage. Conversation between Parvati and Virmati shows Virmati’s expectations from her family members and her grief of being boycotted. Manju Kapur writes:

Virmati stopped walking. That was how far she had gone 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. *(Difficult Daughters 225)*

The above lines depict Virmati’s anguish and alienation from her family members. As well as these lines also signalize her expectancy from her family and her need of parental warmth in a situation of her life wherein she is hated and rejected by Ganga, Kishori Devi and Harish’s children, and lives with an uncertain identity of being a second wife without social and legal acceptance. Her intimate feelings and attachment with her own family members is aptly portrayed by the novelist during the same meeting with younger sister Parvati. Virmati confesses:

‘I miss you all. Very much. I think of you all the time. That is why I ’m crying, although I am so happy.’ Saying this Virmati dabbed her eyes and blew her nose with the end of her dupatta. *(Difficult Daughters 226)*

Feeling guilty of her actions, later on she decides to repent and ask forgiveness of her grandfather, Lala Diwanchand. She expects forgiveness for the grief that she caused to him by bringing blemish to the family’s reputation. But to her surprise she comes to know that her grandfather also died after several days when her father died. She is informed that the grandfather died due to grief of her father’s death and the grief of the blot on family’s prestige that was caused by Virmati. Virmati’s last hope of repentance, confession and expectation of condolence is lost forever.

Meanwhile, communal disturbance arises in pre-partitioned Punjab. Political background in the novel is created through depiction of the events related to Second World War, Independence Struggle, Partition of India and Pakistan and Independence of India. The political events mentioned above correlate with the protagonist’s life
and Virmati’s struggle for freedom is effectively symbolized with a nation’s struggle for independence.

It is the time of 1947 and communal disturbance augments day by day because of the strong demand of Muslim league to have a separate nation called Pakistan for the Muslims of India. Lahore had majority of Muslims and the nearest city Amritsar too had approximately fifty percent Muslims in the city. With the increasing demand of partition of India and Pakistan by Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the communal violence begins in the nation and the whole country witnesses its ugly face in Bengal. Hindus and Muslims are in equal amount in the state of Punjab and the demands for Pakistan already began from Karachi and Lahore. When congress rejects the idea of partition, communal harmony gets completely disturbed in Amritsar and some incidents of communal conflict occur which set a background for the havoc of communal violence in pre-partitioned Punjab.

Ganga and Kishori Devi get afraid of this situation and they decide to go to Kanpur, their ancestral city, with children till the condition in Amritsar becomes normal again. With their departure Harish gets alone in Amritsar. During this time Virmati is living in Lahore as she is admitted in a college to study M.A. to lessen the family tension between Virmati and his family members. Harish had planned further study for Virmati which she had accepted neutrally. Now when Ganga and other family members are in Kanpur, Harish calls Virmati to live with him. Harish and Virmati spend intimate moments without anybody’s disturbance. They often love each other freely during this period. Virmati enjoys the authentic marital life in the absence of Ganga who used to make her realize of being unwanted and hated her severely. The marital bliss that Virmati dreamt for previously now comes true. Virmati gets pregnant and it is her third pregnancy after two miscarriages.

At this stage the communal riots are narrated by the novelist. The social and political condition of the state takes a reverse turn. The peace, harmony and communal concord for which Punjab was previously known for now suddenly disappear. Communal tension between Hindus and Muslims arises suddenly and as partition of India and Pakistan is declared, the communal peace in the country, particularly in Punjab and Bengal, gets disturbed. Bloody riots spread over the country creating the disorder and chaos all over. Thousands of Hindus and Muslims
living in different locations of pre-partitioned Punjab migrate as per the emergence of two separate nations. Punjab state of British raj is divided into two parts, one part including Lahore is merged with Pakistan and other part including Amritsar stays with India. Partition of Punjab resulted into cruel bloodshed of thousands of innocent Hindus and Muslims. The incidents of riots and communal tension are presented by the novelist.

The Calcutta riots of August 1946 are narrated by the novelist with minute details. The novelist writes:

In mid-August the killings in Calcutta start. They go on and on. The drops of bloods in the distance come nearer and nearer. Only now it is not drops, but floods. The sewers of Calcutta are closed with corpses, they float down the Hooghly, they lie scattered in the streets.

People die-roasted, quartered, chopped, mutilated, turning, 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 in silence. (Difficult Daughters 263)

Amritsar’s condition during India’s partition was similar to Calcutta. Thousands of people passes through Amritsar leaving all valuables behind in Pakistan. The communal riots and violence that breaks out during partition becomes a history of innocent murders, rapes, robbery and killings of innocent men, women and children. The violence and communal tension of Amritsar is well depicted by Manju Kapur through perspectives of different characters in the novel. Virmani’s brother Kaniha Lal says:

My parents, brothers, uncles and aunts, most of my cousins, left Amritsar in ’47. After what we had seen, there was no question of staying in that hellish place, where people killed each other like hooligans. On 5 March, the killings started, and we lay low. The birth is going to be bloody, we thought, but then things will get back to normal. (Difficult Daughters 268-269)

He adds here that several incidents of burning continued in the city for longer time. They could smell the smoke caused through fire and the sky used to appear red.
People rushed with lathis and swords in their hands. Kapur’s heart-rending narration of these incidents questions the humanity itself. Along with narration of bloody riots that took place in Amritsar, Manju Kapur discusses the responsibility of these riots that destroyed the lives of thousands of innocent people, completely faultless of any crime. Through character of Gopinath, Kapur discusses the misleading of people on the grounds of religion. Gopinath says:

But ultimately, the fault was ours. It we were stupid, greedy and uncivilized enough to allow religion to be used in this way, why blame them? The same thing is happening on a smaller scale even now, when there are no British around. People blame them for this legacy, but how long can you keep doing that? There is always the past to contend with, in one way or another, hidden or openly, one’s own or one’s country’s. Births and deaths are messy, raged affairs. (Difficult Daughters 268)

Thousands of people move here and there from Amritsar to Lahore and Lahore to Amritsar. Many rehabilitation centers are opened to help the helpless mass. People lose everything in riots; their property, relatives, money, etc. It is depicted as a new beginning for all the migrants. Kapur captures a clear picture of the partition that created havoc throughout the county, particularly in Punjab and Bengal. Virmati and his brother help the displaced people through opening a langar and providing the food and shelter to the needy people free of cost. Thousands of people come and pass through Amritsar. Many of them arrive without any extra pair of cloths. Virmati brings all the cloths that Ganga and Kishori Devi left in the house when they departed for Kapur. Virmati’s human approach is highlighted when she helps the victimized people. She wants to serve in rehabilitation centers but as she is pregnant, Harish denies her to engage because the danger and fear of the riots still prevails in the town.

During this critical situation when people attacked the houses at night and killed innocent people, once Virmati and Harish receive a message that their whole street will be targeted next day. In the same street Virmati’s old house was also located where her family members including Kasturi, her daughters and sons were living. To save themselves from the attack all of them hide in Sardar Hukam Singh’s house which was the only house situated at the height from where they can keep an eye on the robbers and rioters.
The reported attack turns out a rumour but the incident of gathering of all family members becomes advantageous for Virmati as she comes closer to her mother. The people in Amritsar during this time live in such a critical situation that they forget their individual differences with each other. Many of them support each other without considering the other person’s religion. Virmati is passing through sixth month of pregnancy during this time. In this condition Kasturi keeps her resentment no further for Virmati and her hatred diminishes. Virmati goes to her old house and helps her mother with many other women in the langar. Virmati’s brother Kailash has opened a langar in the house and many homeless people escaped from Pakistan are fed free of cost daily. The diminishing of Kasturi’s hatred is outlined by the novelist. Manju Kapur writes:

The attack proved to have been a rumour, but it did serve one purpose. Virmati’s mother sent for her. The times demanded from Kasturi that she carry resentment no further. Virmati shifted to her mother’s, where she helped with the cooking along with the other women, because the need of the hour was to feed the scores of people who passed through their house fleeing from the mobs in Pakistan. No one mentioned the past. The present was too drastic for such luxury.

(Difficult Daughters 274)

Virmati gives birth to a girl child. Since she is born around the Indian Independence Virmati proposes the name Bharathi. But Harish rejects the idea thinking that he doesn’t want to co-relate his daughter with India’s freedom which caused only bloodshed, riots and chaos in the country. As per his opinion the freedom is useless if it brings this much misery to the people. This incident is meaningfully described by the novelist. The narrator says:

I was born.

‘Bharathi’ suggested Virmati as a name.

‘No’ said Harish.

‘No? But why? I thought with the birth of our country…..’

‘I don’t wish our daughter to be tainted with the birth of our country. What birth is this? With so much hatred? We haven’t been born. We have moved back into the dark ages. Fighting, killing over religion,
Religion of all things. Even the educated. This is madness, not freedom. And I never ever wish to be reminded of it.’

(‘Difficult Daughters’ 276)

Harish names his daughter as Ida. Ida is a Persian name that means a new beginning. Harish identifies it as a ‘blank slate.’ The words used by Harish for his daughter are symbolic and meaningful. The birth of Ida is also significantly compared with the birth of India. Just like Ida, India as a nation gets a new beginning after independence. India emerges as a democratic nation and attains self-reliance after being independent. As India becomes a sovereign country and applies a democratic system of administration, Ida also gets autonomous life and freedom over traditions and customs. As India faces challenges like distorted and tense relations with Pakistan and disputed Kashmir issue, in the same many Ida gets the legacy of broken relations at both the sides, maternal and paternal. At her paternal side, because she is the illicit child of Harish, she can’t establish the healthy relations with her father’s family relatives. At the maternal side, it is Virmati’s revolt against family that deprives Ida of strong relative ties with maternal relatives. Thus, after independence as India faces issues like riots on religious grounds and political tensions with Pakistan and terrorism of Kashmir, Ida also receives the legacy of distortion, fragmentation and isolation in relations.

Indian independence marks communal killings based on religion. And even after independence the communal conflicts occur occasionally. Thus, through ‘Difficult Daughters’ Manju Kapur sensitizes the issue of real freedom. She makes us ask ourselves if we have achieved the freedom from religious divisions. The frequent communal killings in the country signifies that even after attaining political freedom, the people of our country still have not liberated themselves from religious discrimination. In the same way, Ida’s freedom is also questioned indirectly by the novelist. After enormous struggle and pursuit of independence, what Virmati get in return is social and familial boycott, misery and unhappiness only.

The reader also comes across the accounts of Ida’s life later on in the narrative. After partition, Virmati and Harish shift to Delhi with their daughter. Harish gets a job of principal in one of the colleges of Delhi University and the couple settles down in Delhi for the rest of their life. Ganga wishes to return to Harish but could
never do that. She weeps over Virmati’s entrance in Harish’s life and that grief continues throughout her life. Ganga’s children come to live with their father. Giridhar gets educated and opens a chemist shop in Delhi. He later on marries one of his customers. Chhotti, Harish and Ganga’s daughter, could never marry as her father could not find a proper match for her. She excels in education and joins Indian administrative service with an intention to get government accommodation where she can live with her mother and grandmother.

Ida doesn’t show any sign of intellectual brilliance like her father. The conversation between Virmati and Ida presents her as a woman having a free temperament who insists on pleasing oneself rather than others. Manju Kapur writes:

Ida refused to show any signs of intellectual brightness.

‘There are other things in life,’ she told her mother.

‘Like what?’ asked Virmati

‘Like living.’

‘You mean living only for yourself. You are disappointing your father.’

‘Why is it so important to please him?’ Ida protested her mother.

(Difficult Daughters 279)

Ida stands for modern woman who is not bound by shackles of traditions. She gives more significance to self and so she desires to make herself happy first. But Kapur sarcastically remarks here that she seems unaware about what pleasure she actually wants. Ida gets married to Prabhakar who is an academic like his father. During the marital life Ida gets pregnant but Prabhakar pressurize her for abortion which is denied by Ida initially. The idea of abortion and Prabhakar’s pressure for that makes Ida skeptical and doubtful for his love towards her. She is worried about possible love affair of Prabhakar with any other woman. Finally, abortion is done unwillingly but that sows the seeds of their separation. Ida is divorced and pursues the rest of her life alone in isolation. Ida, the narrator of the novel, tells about her life. She says:

Of course I made a disastrous marriage. My mother spent the period after my divorce coating the air I breathed with sadness and
disapproval. ‘What will happen to you after I am gone?’ was her favorite lament. I was nothing, husbandless, childless. I felt myself hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society.

For long periods I was engulfed by melancholy, depression and despair. I would lie in bed for hours, unable to sleep, pitying myself for all I didn’t have, blaming my mother, myself. *(Difficult Daughters 279)*

Manju Kapur concludes the novel with the autobiographical tone when she says:

> This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore.

*(Difficult Daughters 280)*

Both the opening lines and ending sentences are much significant in the fiction. The first sentence of the fiction expresses the grief of the narrator: “The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother.” *(Difficult Daughter 01)* The opening of the novel creates suspense and it is revealed gradually as the story advances. The last line, ‘do not haunt me anymore’, clarifies that the fiction is actually a tribute from a daughter to her mother, a mother who does not appear as a submissive follower but as a bold female who dares to take her own decisions in life rather than being a stereotype supporter of age-old traditions and customs.

P. Samuel and P. Hephzibah comment on mother-daughter relationship in an article. As per P. Samuel’s opinion Kapur’s fiction presents before the readers a discourse on this delicate and sensitive issue. According to P. Samuel we come to know about three generations of mothers and daughters in *Difficult Daughters*. Through characters of Kasturi, Virmati and Ida, the novelist beautifully brings out the evolution of Indian woman’s psyche. The saga of liberation is noted in cases of Shakuntala and Virmati who prioritize their own aspirations. Samuel further conveys that the women who defy the traditions are bound to face rejection by the society and family, even by their mothers.
The title of the fiction is also appealing and most appropriate as the protagonist of the story, Virmati, comes out as a difficult daughter in Lala Diwan Chand’s family because her rebellion creates a blemish on the social reputation of the family. Social status and prestige is given much more importance in conventional societies like Indian. The title is also ironical and meaningful. The story reveals the fact that rebellious and revolting attitude of modern daughters makes them difficult to deal with in a society wherein conventions for women are strictly adhered to. In the true sense the women are not difficult but as they raise their voice for basic rights like education, freedom and equality, they appear as difficult daughters or difficult women because in Indian society women are always meant for domestic duties only. The fulfillment and meaningfulness of their lives is always believed in looking after the home, children and husband. This traditional notion is also uttered by Virmati herself in the novel. She says, “A woman’s happiness lies in giving her husband happiness.” *(Difficult Daughters 227)* In “Difficult Mothers in Difficult Daughters” by Manju Kapur” Aachal Mundafale rightly says:

In recent years *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur is a novel which shows mother-daughter relationship in a new light. It appeals that in this novel the author rather than focusing on the daughters being difficult she more focuses on how daughters lose their way when they get no motherly support and so become “difficult”. There is something sacred about mother-daughter relationships that leave women feeling empty and less whole when a motherly presence is absent from their life. The present paper tries to depict the mother daughter relationship between the female protagonist Virmati and her mother Kasturi, and Ida, the daughter of the protagonist and Virmati herself from a negative aspect that makes the respective mothers responsible for the failure of their daughters as individuals. (38)

Commenting on Virmati’s situation in “Quest for Identity in Manju Kapur’s Novel: Difficult Daughters” Manzoor Ahmad Wani says:

Virmati tries to assert herself, but the search remains elusive for her. She prepares herself for the task of emancipation but she knows it at the back of her mind that it is meaningless. It makes her struggle
inconsequential to prove her to redefine her reality. She becomes angry at her own inadequacy and feels that her position is very much similar to the fool in King Lear. (32)

Actually, Virmati is an average Indian girl who wants freedom to take her own decisions in life in terms of marriage, education etc. It must be acceptable because as a human being she must have the ownership of her life. But from the social and patriarchal perspective she sounds difficult as freedom, particularly in terms of marriage, is denied to women. Virmati comes out as a modern woman who indirectly challenges set patriarchal norms for women. She dares to reject the traditional marriage. It can be said that she proves herself brave enough to face isolation caused by boycott from both the families, her own and her in-law’s. She justifies the quality and meaning of her name. ‘Virmati’ word basically signifies a brave woman. She bravely tackles the critical issues in her life and even with Harish she becomes very courageous when she says to him to be honest in their relation.

Even after five years of physical relationship when Harish seems reluctant for marriage, she bravely indicates him to take a final decision for their relationship. Her readiness to join Shantiniketan for the rest of her life, if Harish doesn’t marry her, points out the strength and spirit of her character. Virmati stands for advocacy of women’s right over education and independence. She can be the role model for thousands of innocent girls who are deprived of education and pushed by their parents into traditional marital confinement where they find themselves only trapped and helpless to raise their voice and to assert their desires.
Works Cited


