CHAPTER – 2
Dismantling the powerful images
Indian feminisms, since its start as a political movement, faced criticism as they had belief in the notion of man and woman as two different entities i.e. categories. Instead of demand of equality their focus was on the difference. Radha Kumar casts light on it, “in the early years of movements for women’s rights… it was more or less taken for granted that the difference between the sexes was such that their roles, functions, aims and desire were different.” (Kumar 2). Biological difference which works as a base for gender stereotyping was accepted as a norm. At the early stage, as succulently explained by Radha Kumar that Indian feminists had faith in the notion that man and woman’s issues are different so that should be tackled differently. “Over time this difference of itself adduced as a major reason for reforming women’s conditions.” (Kumar 2)

The image or representation of women in society has been contested over time. Early, they were represented as a mother which perceived women socially beneficial and celebrated as “women power as mothers of the nation” (Kumar 2). The change in the image of women in pre and post independent India abridged by Radha Kumar:

In post-independent India the contemporary feminist movement began by basing itself firmly on principles of equality and asserting the gender based structures such as the sexual division of labour, oppressed and subordinated women. … The symbol of mother now was now only rarely used as a rallying or entitling device: instead, two self-images replaced it, the woman as daughter and the working woman. Both in turn attention away from the woman as mother or wife: the former focussed on the formation of a woman rather than her role; the latter looked at her productive rather than reproductive capacities. This marked a sharp turn
from the pre-Independent movement, which was almost exclusively concerned with women in relation to men. (Kumar 2)

The division was not just visible on the basis of gender, even further spiritual and material as Partha Chatterjee pointed out in his path breaking essay. He gave the notion of material and spiritual spaces. Material space where, British had advantage over other subjects; but in spiritual space, Indian were far superior to British. This division of space developed an ideology during the Indian Independence movement. Elizabeth Jackson recapitulates it like this:

[T]he dominant nationalists developed and popularised an ideology whereby women were responsible for protecting and preserving the inner core of the national culture – its spiritual essence – ‘at home’, while men had to learn the superior techniques of organising material life ‘in the world’ in order to overcome imperial domination. So according to this ideology, the ‘new woman’ must learn literacy, numeracy and ‘modern’ housekeeping, but she must also be responsible for observing religious rituals, maintaining cultural tradition and ensuring ‘the cohesiveness of family life’ (Jackson 5).

During the movement, activists through these categories promoted their ideas in which a women has to reflect her spirituality through her manner, conduct, costume and appearance etc. The burden of spirituality confine women into a stereotypical image that is made to endure the culture. Kapur through her writing aspires to dismantle this very accepted notion and image of Indian women.

Women, under the British rule were facing double suppression, one from colonial master and other from male master at home. As the British left India, women
were liberated from one master but women of lower classes were thrice suppressed replaced by double suppression. As Mahashweta Devi and other novelists choose to write about lower class and tribal women; Manju Kapur determines to write about upper caste/class women who are educated and know the modern housekeeping. Women of lower class/ caste did not get space in her writing.

The possible reason behind the presence of middle class and absence of lower class could be explained by Partha Chatterjee’s arguments that contextualised by Elizabeth Jackson, “The new patriarchy which nationalist discourse set up as a hegemonic construct … has generalised itself among the middle class … but is irrelevant to the large mass of subordinate classes” (Jackson 5)

The choice of middle class women could be seen in the context of influence of Mary Wollstonecraft’s works. Being an educator at one of elite institutes of the country, Kapur must have read and taught about Wollstonecraft’s work. Wollstonecraft denounces upper class women for their male pleasing attitude and corruption. Arpita Mukhopadhyay in her book Feminisms simplifies, Wollstonecraft’s view on the choice of middle class women: “Her treaties particularly addresses middle-class women, who are, in her opinion, uncorrupted by wealth and luxury, not mired in the drudgery of poverty, and thus amenable to rational argument.”(Mukhopadhyay 16) Manju Kapur refrains herself from depiction of lower class / caste, she might be having the view that the depiction of lower class woman would drag her into the major social issues like poverty, corruption, murder and so on about which Kapur seems to have less interest.

The choice of middle class gets strengthened because of its identification of itself with the revolutionary events of the West. Maitrayee Chaudhuri in Feminism in India clarifies this connection:
Historians and sociologists in India have discussed the very special nature of growth of an Indian middle class located physically in a context that offered no real bourgeois possibilities, yet caught in an intellectual world that resonated with the ideas of the French Revolution and the English bourgeois. (Chaudhuri xxxi)

The absence of domestic confinement in lower classes would void off Kapur of domestic space theme. The protagonists of middle class suffer a feeling of apathy and unhappiness arising from lack of occupation and excitement in domestic life. The middle class provides a vivacious context to deal with. Anita Desai and Manju Kapur have chosen such subjects as the major theme of their novels.

Kapur has explained in her numerous interviews that she desires to deal with the core women issues like of those women who have education and money but still face subjugation. Their problem is unnamed, like women of forties in the West, in patriarchal language. This is the way, she searches a new field to demonstrate the suffering of women who want something more than flesh and blood. To challenge patriarchal world, she has depicted numerous women, who demonstrate a new pattern of life, character who defy cultural tradition and cohesiveness of family life. Manju Verma aptly says,

Kapur has portrayed five different women in Difficult Daughters, and has put into words their aspirations, achievements and also limitations. All these women give us an inkling of all categories in which women of this transitional period belonged. (Verma, 169)

As the statement of the thesis says that characters are evolved to address the issues raised in women’s movement in the West and India. One of the core issues is
education of women. To address the issue and for her theme of middle class women. Kapur portrays the women who are well educated. The issue of Women’s education was raised during the First Wave of Feminism that was important to urge a spirit of free inquiry and independent thinking. They had firm faith in the notion that women’s right and status in society could ameliorate through education that would wipe out ignorance and corruption from society. Although Indian women face numerous challenges in society. Bhattacharya cites

Today’s Indian women have to negotiate survival through an array of oppressive patriarchal family structure: age, ordinal status, relationship to man through family of origin, marriage and procreation as well as patriarchal attributes- dowry, siring son etc.- kinship, caste, community, village, market and the state. (Bhattacharya IV)

Through the depiction of educated women Kapur has not just challenged patriarchy but its system which promotes sex based different education for male and female that would develop different qualities and characteristics in them. That helps in subjugation of women. Traces of sexist education can be found in Rousseau’ Emile (1762) as succinctly abridges by Mukhopadhyay:

Different models of education based on sexual difference. He proposed that education for boys should be intended to develop their natural instincts for freedom and autonomy training them to be ideal citizens, while girls should be so educated that they fit the mould of good mother and wife. Socialisation of women was also undertaken by the popular ‘conduct books’ that recommended feminine virtues of modesty, chastity, piety and meekness. (Mukhopadhyay 13-14)
An educated woman, Virmati, challenges this patriarchal educational valve system. As an empowered woman through education, Virmati violates all patriarchal socially constructed moral values like being a good mother and wife, shyness, chastity, piousness and timidity. She gets higher education against her family’s will, marries with a married professor and lives an independent life.

In the short time since her marriage she had learned to look at space in new way to define it and mark it. To think of what was hers and what was not in ways that should have been unthinkable in the florid areas of her maternal home. She felt contrite. (Kapur 227)

This chapter is an endeavour to demonstrate a critical understanding of the women characters of the novel *Difficult Daughters* through the lances of feminist criticism, which is performed through the close reading of the texts in the light of feminist theories. Virmati, the protagonist of the novel, has been reserved to achieve the above revealed method.

To provide voice to the marginalized women, Kapur entitled her women characters with speech that is absent in the work of the great male novelists like Richardson. Maggie Humm aptly describes how Clarissa is made void of speech: “Clarissa… is not only about a woman raped and excluded from speech but also about a woman who, like many women, excludes herself from speech” (Humm 7). By providing speech to speechless beings Kapur not just depicts ‘New Woman’ but challenges patriarchy also.

To represent speech in literary text, Kapur gives complete sentences to her women characters that consists of rational and emotional words and a proper syntactical order. Such kind of writing style was very rare in women’s writing since it started.
Women always face criticism over their writing style. Maggie Humm précises Virginia Woolf’s argument on it: “Bronte’s subversion of syntactical order, her incomplete sentences and emotional outpouring are a sign of the isolation of writing women and a lack of cultural space.” (Humm 2). Sharing of personal experiences with their emotions was perceived as a symbol of feminine instability of women characters. Kapur and her contemporary novelists defy such kind of imposition on their writing through developing new kind of writing style that helps in representation of real women.

Not just the change in writing style, Kapur follows those issues and relations of women that were always undervalued in traditional writing and criticism. ‘Mirroring of mothers and daughters’ or ‘textual moments of mother/daughter empathy’ have given prominence in her writing. (Humm 8). Kapur in Difficult Daughters challenges traditional representations of mother-daughter relationship. It faces patriarchal marginalization in male’s writing. She depicts women of three generation namely Kasturi, Virmati and Ida. None of them has a sweet relationship with their mothers.

Such representations defy the conventional image of mother who sacrifices everything for her children and children in return do the same. Kapur like an iconoclast breaks such images and portrays woman like Ida who says that she never wants to be like her mother. It shows another aspects of women psyche which is absent in the male writings that show women in accordance with the prevailing ideological, cultural and social norms.

The emergence of prosperity and progress after the liberalization empowered the women of middle class to obtain comfort to not just read but to write more freely. This results into existence of women’s experiences and issues in public domain. Kapur opts
this method and choose to depict middle class women; reasons behind this have already discussed above.

The theme of domestic lives such as free speech to women’s experience in family, rebellion, breaking established societal rules and regulations. And portrays them as independent and assertive, Virmati is shown as independent and assertive at a time when India as a country was struggling to get Independence and girls could not think about rebellion against family norms. It was a time when women were supposed to be submissive.

Virmati takes charge of her life as she rebelled against her family to marry a married professor. On the issue of taking charge of her life, Kapur follows Jane Austin as she is known for depiction of such kind of women. Her women were well versed and aspire to be more moral beings at a time when other women were physically and spiritually confined and encouraged to get married with a prosperous man at the earliest. Among the similarities and dissimilarities of their women characters. One thing is different in their writing that is economic condition of women. Jane Austin’s women always found themselves in precarious economic situation but Kapur’s women belong to well to do families.

Virmati, as a daughter, refuses to marry, fights with her mother, against the will of her parents marries with a married professor. Throughout all her actions before marriage and after marriage, she does not lose her ‘self’ but constructs a new one; she is never ashamed of being born as a girl rather presents an opposite picture of symbolic image of daughter that kind of which was prevalent in the pre and post independent Indian society that, as illustrated by Radha Kumar:
The use of a daughter symbol appears especially significant because it moved into a new kind of self-exploration, starting from childhood itself. In a series of exhibitions, plays and pamphlets, contemporary feminists have emphasized the pain and helplessness of being born a girl; the shock of puberty and the associated development of sexual fear; the terrible rejection of being ‘sent away’ at marriage, loneliness and loss of the self after marriage; and a repetition of entire cycle of pain, fear rejection through the birth of another daughter. (Kumar 2)

The dismantling of a powerful gender stereotypical image like of mother-daughter is an important feature of feminist criticism. To search out the reasons behind the construction of such kind of stereotypes in social and cultural environment is another feature of feminist criticism. The stereotypical images like instability, spirituality and passivity ascribe to women only. Virmati breaks such stereotypes through her actions and affirmativeness. She breaks the image of instability by taking firm stand on her education and marriage. Her positive view towards life and fight against the anti-women norms make her an active woman who affirms her new identity.

Kapur rejects the stereotypical image of mother-daughter to show an actual image of the same, based on experience of woman. Through this dismantling she challenges patriarchal myth of relationship. Kapur has included some events of her mother’s life, with her written permission, in the novel. It is an instance of what Maggie Humm summarises on the basis of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and Hirsch’s works:

They (psychoanalytic feminist critics) suggest that women writers replicate their own mother-daughter bonding in the development and realization of female character’s identities. Women writers frequently
describe female identity as rooted in early and continual connection with a mother or mother substitute figure. (Humm 75)

The complexity of relationship between mother and daughter could be replication of Kapur and her mother’s relation. Women writers hardly acknowledge such kind of theories. But psychoanalytic critics who do study of psychic relation of mothers and children to understand the influence of writer’s relation on textual representation of characters. “Gilbert and Gubar claim that women writers strategically reveal their psychic and social anxieties in recurrent images of enclosure and doubles.” (Humm 75) Marianne Hirsch continued the Gilbert and Gubar’s theory on reflection of writer’s personal experience on text. Maggie Humm summarises:

Hirsch’s the Mother/Daughter plot utilizes object-relations theory in order to analyse mother-daughter relationships. She argues that the maternal is continually being repressed in women’s writing but if released it could validate the pre-oedipal world of the semiotic. (Humm 74-75)

Kapur along with her contemporary women novelists like Kamala Markandaya, NayantaraSehgal, Arundhati Roy, Githa Hariharan, Shoba De, Anita Desai, Shashi Despande and many other women writers, champion in analyses of the problems harassing the Indian women. They in majority depict educated women of middle class society.

Her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* is set at the time of partition, the time when the country was in unrest and eager to achieve independence. Kapur has given words to women’s aspirations, achievements and limitations through depicting five different types of women of this era. All these women show individual as well as types of this
transitional period. Kapur is known for depicting their women character in a unique way, she represents her characters in a culture which suits the situation and surrounding. That's how, her character became lifelike and vital. A realistic description of Virmat’s beauty is given by the writer:

She had a long, fine face with large, widely spaced eyes, eyes with a dazed and distant look. Her nose was thin and straight, her colour pale as the inside of a banana stalk. Her lips were full and a natural red, her chin small and rounded. She was short-sighted, and did not notice when people looked admiringly at her. (Kapur 22)

*Difficult Daughters* highlights the woman’s requirement of self-rule, self-sufficiency, independence, individuality and self-actualization which is located predominantly in the India of that time in which this story is set, Kapur expresses of the picture of independence – the desire of liberation and achieved by a country and freedom longed by a woman. Surrounded by the writers who have depicted the ‘new woman’ with motive to take it into new direction among them Manju Kapur certainly captures a prominent place.

It symbolises the rise of the ‘New Woman’ in a very tenderly way revealing the manifold hindrance faced by the chief character who holds a very fascinating story of a woman torn between opposing forces Virmati, the central character of the novel shows pure spirit and willpower while combating her own combat of liberation.

She has a desire to educate and establish herself. Although, Virmati desires to take the road less travelled and is chastised for this from every quarter; she understands the value of education and other's higher things in life which makes her aware of that
life's horizons are not only wider, but there are things even beyond the horizons. Her longing for individualism and self-realization reflects in her answer to Shakuntala:

“No, no really”, said Virmati, catching her hand. May be here was the clue to her unhappiness. It was unless looking for answers inside the home. One had to look outside. To education, freedom, and the bright lights of Lahore colleges. (Kapur 18)

*Difficult Daughters* is the story of the complex relationship between mother and the daughters. Next generation of women have a problem with her older generation women. Novel's starting lines shows the complex relationship between a mother and daughter. Ida, the daughter, is talking about her mother Virmati and says ‘the one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother’ (1). Generally, a girl wants to resemble her mother but here situation is different, the daughter does not want to be like her mother. There is a love-hate relationship between mother and daughter.

A mutual understanding does not found between Virmati and Ida. It shows when Virmati says what to do after her death and Ida responses by saying… ‘Why bother having funeral at all.’(1). And Virmati says … ‘Why do you deliberately misunderstood me?’(1). this conversation is enough to show how much misunderstanding lives between mother and daughter. A mother is talking about her death and her daughter does not show any affection or love or sympathy towards her. Lack of emotion is visualized in the character of Ida by this conversation.

Ida never gets delight in joyful moments with her mother. When she looks at the photograph of her mother's youthful age, she thinks that "I could not remember a time it had been right between us' (2). This rudeness towards her mother and society is result of her being a childless, divorced woman. It is a stereotypical interpretation of women in
which a woman is perceived normal only when she is mother or wife. Women have to bear the burden of motherhood.

Ida’s search of her mother’s root is symbolic journey. It is Ida’s journey to know herself. A daughter identifies herself with her mother. As Ida does not know her mother well so it could be the possible reason behind her sense of alienation. Either it could be a miscommunication between both of them. The emptiness and solitariness which she feels in herself, stop her from communicating at the emotional level with others even with her own mother. There is an issue of mistrust when Ida misunderstood her mother by accusing her for a guilt which she did by marrying a married professor. This mistrust towards her mother forces her to go to the birthplace of her and her mother. Ramesh P. Chauhan examines the identity crisis as a theme of the novel:

Through her very first protagonist Virmati, Manju Kapur has dealt with the theme of travail in self-identity vis-à-vis (sic) socio-cultural identity. In the same novel, the second protagonist or the third generation Ida again revolts against the ways and follies of her mother Virmati. She embarks on her search to know her mother’s legacy after she dies. (Chauhan, 176)

Ida’s search of the root of her mother is a projection of her search of her root. “Projection is a psychoanalytical term for the process by which unconscious feelings are pushed out from the self on to another person or object.” (Humm 79). So, Ida has a projection of her desire on her mother Virmati. She has a desire to meet true self of her mother. It’s a kind of fulfilment for Ida. “The wish for fulfilment with the mother is also and always a source of anxiety and fear psychoanalytically.” (Humm 79)
She wants to reveal the character of her mother by going to her birthplace and by asking to relatives and companions of her mother, which she fails to reveal by living with her in Delhi. It is a very strange thing mother and daughter live together but daughter wants to understand her mother’s character by others’ opinions. It shows a very lack of understanding and complexities of human relationship between them. The other possible interpretation of this complex relationship could be, Ida is not satisfied with whatever she know about her mother. She wants a complete understanding of her mother’s character. The eagerness to know about her and not being satisfied what her relatives tell her about Virmati. Ida says, “My relatives gave me one view of my mother, I wanted another one.”(5)

To understand one’s character it’s not compulsory to give her personality details but it evaluate the understanding of reader by giving details about her physical appearance that’s why it’s essential to write about appearance of protagonists. Virmati, as Ida describe watching her mother's youth photo: “the girl is about fifteen, and stands stiffly before the camera. Her hair straggles untidily, her sari hang limp and careless on her. I peer at the face and see beauty and a wistful melancholy. Should my memory persist in touching her, the bloom will vanish into the mother I knew, silent, brisk, and bad-tempered.”(Kapur 2)

Virmati’s desires and yearnings became secondary under the pressure of the surrogate motherhood which is imposed on her. Virmati, the eldest in a family, was the second mother to her ten other siblings who search her for every little thing. She is annoyed, but liberal and a hard worker. She was totally neglected in the matter of love and care which she need or wish to get from family as a child. She even lost her childhood years because being overloaded by domestic responsibilities at a very early age. As Malati Mathur summarises:
Virmati has been brought up with the conventional ideas of a woman’s destiny swirling around her in the air of her house. Although both her maternal and parental grandfathers were enlightened men and encouraged the education of girls, the overall expectation was that it is a women’s duty to marry and raise a family. (Mathur 94)

It resembles the traditional set up for Indian women made by male-dominated society. Kasturi starts concerning about Virmati when she was just 13 years old. Very often she felt like revolting and breaking the age-old traditional barriers and doing something different. Virmati's marriage was fixed. No amount of persuasion could make her mother see reason. She irritable shouts: "At your age was already expecting you, not fighting with my mother". (19)

Kasturi’s harsh nature and behaviour convert Virmati into a frustrated restless girl. Kasturi situation develops her into a human being for whom any changes and excitement are increase frustration. She does not have any way to out from it. So, her eldest 11 years old child Virmati is an easy victim of her frustration. This type of condition convert Virmati into adult at mental level not at physical level, in the age of playing with other children and doing silly things are forbidden for her. She becomes a premature adult woman by rearing and caring children.

Kapur relates the struggle of women to realize themselves as subjects and to escape their roles as objects. An endless victim of bad circumstances Virmati harbours an aspiration of being as self-regulating, self-confident and bold as her cousin Shakuntala, who is independent. She has all the valour of a modern woman. She is an educated girl who can shape herself as she wishes, in the context of personal as well as social
All doings of Shakuntala are fluctuating over Virmati’s head. She acquires many new things from her cousin as study, desirable lifestyle, liberal idea, fight against restrictions etc. Shakuntala has a deep impact on the character of Virmati; she follows her footsteps by going behind her college for further study. But for Kasturi, Virmati’s is enough educated and further education will spoil her, she believes as, which is a precise thinking for a woman like kasturi, who is merely educated.

Virmati wants to study further against the will of her mother. But Virmati was under domestic burden. She has to care and pamper her ten siblings all time like a second mother. Her conduct with brother-sisters is very harsh, tough and fast. Perhaps, she has heavy tasks on her shoulders of household, and never relishes according to her own desires like the other children. Ida, her daughter comes to know about this facet of her mother after her death.

Virmati is a character which represent her own age but at the same time shows qualities of new woman through her thought and action. Her thought process does not match with her time, her unorthodox thinking puts her into a new category of woman who thinks for self not for family, as of that time women and girls were doing. Her way of looking world takes her ahead from her time and age. She is rebellious in nature. She wants to control the things as she wish but it was not possible at that time and not even present time, incident happen as time passes and we all has to live our life as it’s occurs. She wishes to live her life as an individual but she belonged to a colonized British India where country was not free than how can a woman be.

This makes her rebellious because from inside she is not that type of girl who doesn't dare to utter a single word against the family will. She is girl who can sense of her existence, feel it and overall a self-belief to achieve what she desires. She does not
want to give her study its shows that she has sense of what is right for her and what is wrong which her mother, Kasturi fails to understand that.

There is difference between Virmati and Shakuntala. Sakuntala characterizes the cultivated, brave and fearless woman who is not be pleased resolving only her individual complications. She is gifted with gusto, a sharp intellect and wisdom to realise the undercurrents of the time. She is aware about the activities at the national and international level. She is aware of civil rights, freedom and women’s movement. Her lively spirit will not let her remain indifferent to and unpretentious by the activities around. And unlike Virmati she is not dominated by her personal problems. But the number of such developed and enlightened woman in the forties could only be marginal. Sakuntala, independent in nature, has moulded out her future and has made her career academically and she shows Virmati a new aspect of woman by doing so. Shakuntala resembles and identifies Gandhi’s view on women as explained by Bhattacharya:

M.K. Gandhi though legitimised and expanded Indian women’s public activities by initiating them into the non-violent civil disobedience movement against the British raj. He politicised the traditional feminine roles of caring, self-abnegation, sacrifice and tolerance and introduced those to public space. (Bhattacharya VI)

On Shakuntala’s view on men; Virmati thinks, “Swarna is right. Men do take advantage of Women! (149). It reveals a new look of Virmati who can fight against all odds, even with her lover who seems to ditch her.

Despite her education, her silence gets louder as her own individuality and agency were forced to merge with her husband’s powerful will and personality.
Virmati, who is treated as an outsider in her marital home, finds space not as an individual but as a mother.

During her lifespan, she journeys through the realms of numerous experiences. In accumulation to higher education and a much gossiped about an illicit love affair, Virmati recognizes that there are other things also to be done. She is in the quest for true love, freedom. Later on, Virmati considers: Was life really worth the quest? Did she really succeed what she targeted at?

Shuda Shree rightly says: “She is an example of feminine suffering. This suffering is also largely due to the individual awareness in a conservative community, becoming an outcast in a family, as if in exile, due to a woman’s rejection of the mythical model of an ideal daughter.” (Shree 175) The blissful and possibly the most positive phase of her life was the experience of living.

but she did not have the heart to deny. Virmati is being an educated and liberal girl but not liberal enough to take her decision by own. It's a major fault of her character which leads her towards destruction at mental as well as physical level. Virmati lacks resistance in her personality. It was hard for her to come out totally from male-dominated society mentality. For every little thing, she called out Harish. He had to be discussed in everything- what subject she should opt for to do her M.A. or what name to be given their child or whether she should join the campaign against the Hindu Code Bill. It's really very surprising to see that highly educated woman letting her be subjugated and manipulated.

Even after the disgrace and loss of a respectable job she fails to grow up as a mature and wise woman. We have never even once seen her rebel against Harish to defend her self-respect and pride as a living being. During the course of her life, she submits to his purposes and wishes. All these apparently point to her lack of inner
strength. Although Virmati is seen as an educated girl with modern thinking from deep of her heart she is a conventional traditional girl who follows lots of traditional myths of Indian social system.

The long-anticipated marriage with him also does not help her in enunciating and establishing her status as a respected woman. Virmati is tired with the journey of her life. She believes that she does not valuable for anyone in this world. She is worthless that's why she does not want to give importance to herself. “And I want no one called, no one informed.”(1) Her relationship with society was not good but she wants to give something to society which she fails to give till she is alive so she wants to donate all her body part after her death. ‘When I die, I want my body denoted. My eyes, my heart, my kidneys, any organ that can be of use. That way someone will value me after I have gone.’(Kapur 1)

In her fiction, Kapur treats the gendered body as both empowered and disempowered, subject and object, a source of rejection and celebration in socio-political culture. In brief, the body is treated as the centre of existence, consciousness and identity. Yet, the body is constantly called into doubt in the writer’s novels, which depict protagonists trapped between asserting their identity and submitting to cultural dictates of society.

When women like Virmati and Shakuntala break out of tradition to forge a new path they often complain of not having enough freedom, space or the right sense of place in their lives. When we discuss place/space here it includes the various features that impact its comprehension for us:

“Place”, then, is a configuration of highly flexible subjective, social, and material dimensions… “place” can be conceived as a matter of (social) “locale”, and “sense of place”. It combines elements of nature (elemental
forces), social relations (class, gender, and so on), and meanings (the mind, ideas and symbols). (Buell 60)

With respect to this phenomena, Buell in his essay ‘The Place of Place’ comments that: “The more a site feels like a place, the more fervently it is so cherished, the greater the potential concern at its violation or even the possibility of violation.” It is this very sense of place/ space that has been violated in these women’s lives. To narrow down this idea of space one would have to understand how these women were or could have potentially been in their natural environment, without the burden of societal restraints. For both of them domestic space seems to be the territory at fault. Nonetheless, what makes these women unique is their reaction to the situation, they choose to speak up.

What becomes interesting is the means of escape that Kapur provides to these women, the quaint homely institution of marriage! Shagun is a dissatisfied wife, she gets out of one marriage to enter another, whereas Virmati, who is a pseudo mother to her siblings also escapes her situation through marriage. What exactly does that tell us about the author’s use of this particular social institution? Brave, empowered women choosing to disregard one tradition only to validate another. These are some features that make a feminist reading of Kapur’s texts slightly problematic. Her texts move in a clear line with the intent of a sharp attack only to tangentially round off an otherwise fine argument.

This takes us to the next segment of the argument, that of ‘choice’, something that eventually decides the fate of the protagonists. Hughes in her book Key Concepts in Feminist theory and Research (2002) quotes Giddens saying that choice forms part of the ‘new mechanism of self-identity’. This mechanism of identifying oneself is the
mechanism of choosing and both protagonists choose marriage. However, the act of ‘choosing’ itself is aided by various factors and Hughes quotes four of them:

First, the signposts of how to act that are commonly found in traditional societies are no longer present. Late modernity is characterized not only by a plurality of choices but also by no guidance as to which choices should be made. Second, late-modern societies contain diverse, segmented lifeworlds. Individuals are surrounded by, and have knowledge of, alternative ways of living. This is, third, reinforced through a global media that brings to the individual an even greater array of milieux. Fourth, in marked contrast to the reasoned certainty of the Enlightenment, the reflexive nature of late modernity is marked by doubt. (Hughes 83)

Keeping in mind the aforementioned characteristics, the choices the protagonists make are rather traditional. The only condition that their choice seems to meet is the last (fourth) one, that their time is marked by perennial doubt. Either the first three tenets of the idea do not fit the ideals of their era, that is, late modernity that Hughes seems to be writing about has not entered the timeline of the respective years when these novels were published. Or, Kapur simply disregards them. In light of the above argument, can the reader perceive the character’s ‘choice’ as a traditional success? Since it is definitely not an unconventional one.

Kapur questions the notion of image making of women as mother-daughter-wife. These are the accepted and celebrated images of women not as widow-lover-rebellious. Such women are demonised and marginalized in society as well in the textual representation. The powerful image of mother-daughter was prevalent during
the independence movement of India and was a driving force for people who perceived country as a mother goddess. Kapur devised the characters like Kasturi, Virmati, Ida and Shakuntala to dismantle and to tarnish the prevalent and celebrated images by merging the desired and not desired images of women which challenges as well as preserves certain values. Chandra Talpade Mohanty aptly says, “third world’s women’s writing as a tool for self-preservation and revolution.”(9)
Works Cited


