

## Empowerment of Women characters in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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### ABSTRACT

The desire to house an identity is inherent in every human being. It is a state of mind that differentiates a person from others and it may be defined as a person's own sense of self. For a girl, this quest for identity begins from the day she is born. She may be born in India or in any other part of the globe. There is no room for her personality, her mind and her desire. Virtues like patience, sacrifice, tolerance, humbleness and submissiveness should be ingrained in a woman as she is acceptable only with these virtues, whereas man is free to go otherwise. This identity crisis will always be there in a woman who desires to be someone. Portia in *Hamlet* says, "We know what we are, but not what we may be" (Shakespeare 64). Hence, in order to get some recognition a woman will have to break the boundaries of discrimination, in a society which is gender biased and encourages gender inequality. This scuffle to prove oneself is born not only in the main protagonist (Virmati) in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) but also in several other women characters of the novel. In *Difficult Daughters* Kapur presents "the existential predicaments of women and their identity crisis, aspiration and frustration when they try to achieve self-identity in life" (Web 21 Sept 2016).

Manju Kapur's women characters challenge the stereotypes created by men. They are seen as women struggling against all odds. They are shackled by the strong bars of traditional patriarchal norms; even then they rebel against the accepted and existing moral codes and social norms. "Manju Kapur's novel enables us to get the impression that women's life is just like love of a nation which is passing through

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various trials and tribulations” (24 Oct 2016). Kapur very acutely brings this fact to the forefront in her works. Her focus in most cases is the married Indian woman and her struggles. “Kapur’s books reveal the unimagined uncertainties of matrimony. The wife’s sense of suffocation, the husband’s fear of loneliness and the constant shifting from one home to the other, are evoked with painstaking sincerity” (Web 12 Aug 2015). Her protagonists are mostly educated but caged within boundaries of a conservative society. They struggle between tradition and modernity and in the process carve an identity for themselves. In most of her novels, male characters are dominating but fail to fit into the character of a hero. “They are affecting the psyche of women to such an extent that all the major women characters are on the verge of secluding themselves from the company of men” (Web 30 May 2013).

The novel *Difficult Daughters* published in 1998 won the Commonwealth Writers Prize. Manju Kapur has presented the problems of the Indian women in a joint family in a male dominated society. The major emphasis of the novel is on the issue of patriarchy which refuses to accept woman’s voice. Problems of man–woman relationship, love, infatuation, extra-marital affair and gender roles have been presented in the novel.

Manju Kapur in *Difficult Daughters* highlights the condition of Hindu women particularly, as Indian women suffer from many social injustices. This story is set around the time of partition and the condition of women in those days was definitely different from that of the women of today. Status of women has certainly undergone a change in all these years, but the fact is that India is from the core a male dominated country. Even though Indians worship numerous female deities but these pseudo worshippers molest, beat, harass, torture and rape women.

Our traditions are misinterpreted by society and it still casts women as helpless victims rather than free thinking individuals in control of their own destiny. Through *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur has thrown light on the struggle a Hindu woman from an orthodox family has to undergo for education, marriage, higher studies or anything else. She articulates the nature of female desire in *Difficult Daughters*, “...by subverting the rigid social gender norms and exploring her protagonist’s struggle for self-determination” (Bande 64).

The novel begins with Virmati’s death and Ida’s (Virmati’s daughter) quest about her mother’s life. Virmati is the eldest daughter of Kasturi and is overloaded with responsibilities of helping her mother. Kasturi

expects Virmati to excel in the art of home making whereas she wants to build an identity of her own. She is influenced by her cousin Shakuntala and yearns for an independent life like hers. When she is unable to get love and affection at home, she is easily swayed by Harish- a married Professor. She refuses marriage at home. Unable to get any support and understanding from Harish, she attempts suicide. It is actually her desire to attain education and identity that attract her towards Harish. Later on, circumstances force her to sacrifice her self-esteem and request her male counterpart –Harish (a Professor of English) for marriage. Her marriage is also a result of her strong determination and it is after marriage that she realizes her folly of considering marriage as cure for all her ailments. Her ailments do not lessen but increase when she faces the reality of being a second wife. Now her condition is like – out of frying pan into the fire. She finds it very difficult to share her husband with his first wife.

The protagonist reveals her experiences when her dreams shatter in front of her. She is a victim of a patriarchal society where her identity is crushed by her lover Harish. She also reveals the trauma of bearing the narrow attitudes and comments of the society not only on her marriage but also, when she expresses her desire for education. The thirst of education brings her to such a phase of life where she finds herself alone. She craves for love and undergoes a lonely tormenting life. Her heart craves for independence and her destiny seems to mock at her. Though not assaulted physically, the numerous atrocities she suffers turn her into a woman who has no reason to smile. She stops dreaming as she had dreamt before. Her life shatters into pieces and she stands amidst them in a perplexed state gathering them in an attempt to reconcile them. Finally, she achieves a respectable status in the society which otherwise was opposed to her. After independence of the country, Ganga (Harish's first wife) evades from her life and Virmati now comes forward to help the victims of partition. She is not only accepted by her family but also applauded by it. Her life once more gives her a reason to smile with a distinguished identity. "Kapur's heroines have also been strong enough to challenge the norms of traditionalism, thereby, becoming difficult to suppress and ignored. These women go out of their prescribed boundaries and do whatever they want to. They represent the sensibilities of a modern woman who wants to tread on the unexplored path and try to make her own space in the prohibited territory of a man's land" (Web 16 Oct 2016).

The story is seen through the eyes of Virmati's daughter, Ida (the narrator) from whom her mother's past has always been kept a secret.

The novel talks about Virmati's struggle through life, how she tries to gain her identity by expounding her rebellious ideas against the male dominated society. The first person Virmati rebels against is her mother, Kasturi who is a beautiful educated lady, a perfect house wife and is well versed in the art of cooking, embroidery and other things necessary for a woman to know. She used all her education in satisfying the needs of her in laws. She totally depends upon her husband for identity. Her father-in-law is happy that she has filled the home with invaluable laughter of kids. She is always found amidst work. Giving birth to eleven children completely deteriorates her health. One day she realizes that her body lacks the strength to endure more. Her hidden desire for abortion is a plea to save the woman inside her. "For Kasturi bearing eleven children is not an easy proposition, she is always tired and irritated and though she laments being so trapped by nature, she cannot talk it over with her husband because of socio-culture-imperatives" (Bande 67). Her husband loves her but love is not enough to rejuvenate her health. At times, her sister-in-law Lajwanti also ridicules her. "Every day, Kasturi entered the dark and slippery bathroom to check whether there was any promising reddish – looking mucus between her thighs – Nothing, always nothing, and tears gathered and flowed in the only privacy she knew. Her life seemed such a burden, her body so difficult to carry. Her sister- in- law's words echoed in her ears, 'Breeding like cats and dogs,' 'Harvest time again.' Kasturi could not remember a time when she was not tired, when her feet and legs did not ache" (7).

One major reason behind Kasturi's predicament is that she is the victim of an unfortunate practice i.e. child marriage which denies a girl the right to education and choice. Deprived of the pleasures of childhood, the tender minds are not mature enough to handle responsibilities. Unluckily, it is the girl who suffers the most in such cases, both physically and mentally. As is the case with Kasturi, with incessant deliveries, her body becomes frail; even her breasts are dry and she is left with no milk for the child. She is so weak by this time, that "...even 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. She needed to build up her strength; she needed the fresh air of the mountains immediately, as much as she needed to be removed from the crowded and unhealthy bazaar permanently" (10).

It is only when Kasturi is nearing death that her husband and father-in-law are worried about her deteriorating health. The picture, this society

frames for a typical Hindu woman is one who is engrossed in household works from morning to evening, never complaining.

Kasturi is an epitome of suffering whose silence pushes her towards her death bed, but she never grumbles, accepts everything as her destiny. Her rebellion is also inaudible. "... rebellion filled her. Why should she look after her body? Had not it made her life wretched enough?"(9). She is so accustomed to the male-dominated culture that in her rebellion also, she blames herself. An Indian woman is so used to the patriarchal way of life that a slight deviation from the aforesaid path of an ideal woman engulfs her with guilt. Unvoiced thoughts articulate within her but she never expresses them. She is also unable to express her love for Virmati. Kapur presents her as a victim of the derogatory central of patriarchy and she expects the same from her daughter. She wants Virmati to sacrifice her studies and think of the family first. "You are forgetting what comes first" (21). Unknowingly, somehow, she compels her daughter to follow her. She dare not challenge norms of Indian society so she challenges her daughter's dream.

Kasturi has always followed the norms of society. Now the question is -What does the society do for her? This picture is defied by Virmati, Shakuntala, Swarna Lata and lastly Ida.

Like Kasturi, Virmati belongs to the same society where examples cited are that of Sita and Savithri from Hindu mythology and if one goes against these norms, one is easily labeled as shameless. Under so rigid and strict Hindu society norms, Virmati does not want to marry because she wants to study and settle down first. It is like a challenge for which she faces the wrath of her family and society both.

Virmati's family is not against the education she has already attained but going for higher education is something that disturbs her mother because her views and thoughts have never gone beyond a particular limit. For Kasturi learning household works and attaining perfection in it is what a girl should really be educated in. She feels that Virmati is probably out of her senses. "She too knew the value of education; it had got her husband, and filled her hours with the pleasure 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?" (60).

Besides Virmati's adamant decision to say no to marriage for education can hinder the marriage of her younger sisters also. It is much disappointing that our society ignores the education of the girls, which generates problems for them throughout their life. If a girl aspires for

education, she is categorized as being difficult. Kapur throws light on this fact, and also the need for educating girls to maintain the balance and develop the society. Many other women characters in the novel are also considered as difficult. Shakuntala and Swarnalata are difficult as they break the patriarchal hegemony and cherish the change of being modern women. It is Shakuntala who influences Virmati and brings a change in her. Somnath, the son of the family also breaks a number of norms of the family but he is not tagged as a difficult son. "...but despite all the pressure, nothing would induce Somnath to change his mind about marriage" (32).

It becomes very challenging for Virmati to go for higher education and that too after denying arranged marriage. She also annoys everybody by her boldness to love a married man who not only is a husband but also a father which means Virmati wants independence to marry a person of her whimsical choice. She finds nothing wrong in wanting to marry a person, who she thinks, loves her, thinks like her and cherishes education like her. The situations like this raise alarms even today. So, it is but natural for everyone to get bewildered by Virmati wanting to study and maintaining relation with a married man.

Love is not only the motivation behind Virmati. She wants to do something meaningful. Wanting to go for higher studies is not only an alternative for her to avoid marriage. Deep inside, she respects her role model (Shakuntala) who is educated, confident and independent. Her looks and manners impress Virmati and she gets aspiration for further education from her. "These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life" (17). Lajwanti and Kasturi, on the other hand, get into clash with Shakuntala's ideas. In one of the passages Lajwanti says: "All the time in lab, doing experiments, helping the girls, studying or going to conferences, I tell her she should have been a man" (16).

Both Lajwanti (Shakuntala's mother) and Kasturi have to yield before the demands of their difficult daughters. By and by with the help of Kasturi, Virmati shifts to Lahore for higher studies, taking her to Lahore for studies Kasturi once again tries to make Virmati understand the ways of the world- the way she herself understands them. "A woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings. 'When I was your age', continued Kasturi, 'girls only left their house when they married. And beyond a certain age....' Her voice quavered and she stopped, looking at her daughter helplessly" (111).

Lajwanti and Kasturi hold the stereotypical opinion that only a man is free to do a job, to go outside and fulfill his desires. A woman,

according to them has to stick firmly to the norms of the society. Her life should be entirely dedicated to the cause of her family. While talking to Shakuntala, Kasturi remarks: “Hai re, beti! What is the need to do a job? A woman’s *shaan* is her home. Now you have studied and worked enough. Here Kasturi’s eyes glistened with emotion. After you get married, Viru can follow (16).Shakuntala shares her views with Virmati: “These people do not really understand Viru... Women are still supposed to marry and nothing else” (17).

Kasturi accompanies Virmati to Lahore to ensure her safe stay in the girls’ hostel. This exhibits that her soul is not necessarily adverse to Virmati’s education. She probably wants to support Virmati but her patriarchal dominant conditioning does not allow her to do so, she still hopes Virmati to change her decision. Moreover higher education for girls was not very rampant those days and sending a grown up daughter to a city for studies was not easily acceptable. “What with their modern education and their modern women. Do you know, in the city they already have grown-up girls, fit enough to be mothers of two or three children, going to the universities? And they talk to this boy and that boy; and what they do amongst themselves, heaven alone knows” (Rao 34).

In a society similar to the one mentioned above, Virmati wants to be an independent woman who can take decisions on her own, a woman who does not have to ask her family members for every little work she wishes to do. Now she does not want any male in her life to interfere with her decisions. She goes to Lahore for studies and wants to be away even from the Professor and from marriage both.

In Lahore, Virmati is surrounded by many women who have left their family behind in order to seek education. Shakuntla is already there who on her part is happy that her family at last understands that higher education can be meant for girls also. “She was glad that her family was at last waking up to the fact that women had to take their place in the world, but must it always be when marriage hadn’t worked out?” (112). Shakuntla’s life is devoid of any male interference and hence it can be seen that she in the long run happens to be more independent than Virmati. Virmati’s roommate Swarna Lata is qualified and Virmati is highly impressed by her. Swarna Lata is in Lahore for pursuing her M.A. In the context of Virmati’s questions about objections which might have been raised by Swarna Lata’s parents, she replies care freely, “They probably were. I don’t know. But they agreed because they know I meant what I said” (118).

The life of Swarnalata offers a contrast to the life of Virmati. Now she wants to be like Swarna but her love life becomes a huge hindrance in her way to independent life. In spite of her efforts to avoid Professor and his love, frequent visits of the Professor to Lahore do not let her concentrate on her studies. She loses confidence she had gained in Lahore and once again becomes a weak, submissive creature. Here, Shakuntala and Swarnalata happen to be really strong characters. In an attempt to adapt to the ways of Swarnalata, Virmati tries to think like her. She also joins her in conference but in vain. The memories of Harish's love are so dominant that she feels 'out of place' amongst so many women whom she likes to be with.

Torn between the desire to study and craving for love Virmati's life is very complicated. She wants to study, she wants to be independent like the woman around her but finds herself being pulled back by an unknown force, may be her love affair. In Lahore, once again she meets Swarna Lata who is still the same independent lady even after her marriage. This time Virmati feels out of place even with her. Swarna Lata invites her to demonstrate against the *Hindu Code Bill* but Virmati finds her married life a constraint to attend such demonstrations. Here it is apparent that women at times place limitations for themselves. "Lamely she said, 'I, wish I could come, Swarna, but I'm married. 'So? I'm not asking you to commit adultery. We have plenty of married women working with us. I' m married, aren't I?'" (252).

Swarn Lata is privileged here, for her marriage is no constraint to independent thinking or to education. As the time passes Virmati does become independent in some matters for example, she does not go to Amritsar at weekends, she resists going there during summer vacation also. Harish has to literally force her to come to Amritsar. Though Harish wants her to study and become independent, yet the paradox is that the subjects for her MA are also chosen by him. She hated philosophy, although Harish called it a noble subject. It was dull, abstract and meaningless, but studying it was her only means of escape. She wished Harish had thought another subject suitable for her. She also wished it was not such an uphill task, being worthy of him (257).

Since the establishment of the society, woman is divided as per social security, political awareness and economic liberation. In this context, Simon De Beauvoir comments: "Women are still for the most part, in a state of subjection. It follows that woman sees herself and makes her choices not in accordance with her true nature in itself, but as man defines her" (Beauvoir 169). This is because in a male dominated society laws for women are also made by men. Men never think of



elevating women to higher positions in society. Once in a conversation with Harish, Virmati expresses a different opinion and is called an 'idealist' by him. "I see Lahore has made you an idealist...Virmati was silent. Were her thoughts idealistic, and not worth taking seriously?" (127). Being the product of the patriarchal society, the Professor is unable to digest the fact that Virmati also has independent thoughts. Later when Virmati gives birth to Ida, she suggests that her daughter be named Bharti but her husband names the child, Ida. She is thus devoid, even the freedom of naming her own child.

It is not only Virmati who suffers. The novel has other women characters also who suffer due to this patriarchal society. One of them is Ganga, bound to Harish by nuptial knot. She was a child when she got married, Harish is upset due to this childhood marriage but how can Ganga be blamed for this. Ganga was also an innocent child like Harish when they got married. But unlike Harish, she has no contempt for this marriage; she is attached to Harish emotionally. Ganga is in contrast to Virmati, while Virmati wants independence; Ganga is satisfied leading the life of a house wife who is supposed to be obedient, submissive and perfect in everything. The male dominated society considers these qualities essential, for a wife and daughter-in-law, and not education. So, the urge of studying never arose in Ganga. Besides, women particularly of that era, once married had loads of responsibility upon them. When Virmati became Ganga's friend, she had noticed how engrossed Ganga used to be in household work. "Don't you ever go out? Virmati asked the woman. They were quite friendly now. Arre, where to go? He is busy and there is so much to do in the house'. Virmati nodded. That she could see. There was much the woman was constantly doing, especially in the kitchen" (39).

Even then, Ganga has to undergo a lot of sufferings and it is sad that the person, for whom she does all this, marries another woman and brings her to stay with Ganga under the same roof. On the other hand, when Ganga goes out with Virmati to visit places like Darbar Sahib and the Company Bagh, she is amazed to see that Virmati knows so much about the trees, she appreciates her knowledge and thinks about the numerous times her husband had tried to teach her. "But the woman found it difficult to learn letters... The woman's own mother had never read, nor ever felt the need" (40). After Ganga's marriage, when the Professor tries to teach her, she witnesses a teacher student relationship, rather than a husband wife relationship. Poor Ganga was laden with household responsibilities between studies and home. Already a mother of a daughter she is unable to concentrate on her studies. Her husband

wants her to become his companion quickly but at the same time gets impatient and angry when the food is badly cooked and the house managed carelessly. It probably became impossible for Ganga to manage both studies and home. She must have been caught up between the both thereby, faltering in both fields. Harish and Ganga's child marriage is a fault of the society resulting in differences between the two. M. K. Gandhi in *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* calls child marriage a "cruel custom" (Gandhi 12). When Ganga goes out with Virmati, her nervousness can be felt when it starts getting late. She seems to be in awe of the Professor. "No, no, it's getting late. What'll he say?" hesitated the woman, remembering that she ought not to be away from home for so long. Without him... Her voice trailed off. How could she explain all the different qualities of silence that could thicken the air in a house, and that to someone who was not married? It was impossible" (42).

Thus the reason for Ganga not being able to concentrate on her studies can be clearly seen. In fact she ought to be praised for her efforts to study despite having so much work laden upon her shoulders. Harish desires an intellectual companion for him while Ganga is the total contrast in this loveless marriage. Neither Harish nor Ganga is responsible for their sufferings. In one of his letters to Virmati Harish writes: "Who is responsible for this state of affairs? Society, which deems that their sons should be educated, but not their daughters. Society that decides that children – babies really should be married at the age of two and three as we were. As a result, both of us needlessly suffer for no fault of ours" (103).

Marriage is a pious bond which requires devotion and understanding. Both Virmati and Harish lack such a dedication. He has no respect for his partner in the institution of marriage with neither Ganga nor Virmati. The beauty of relation with a life partner is unseen by Harish. That is why he remains satisfied in his carnal pleasures with both his wives. Ganga manages his social requirements and Virmati manages his intellectual demands. Education is one thing which Ganga lacks and Virmati possesses. The society which detests Virmati's education and her marriage with Harish is indirectly responsible for all the circumstances that these three people are going through. Indian society is known particularly for setting separate norms for boys and girls.

After Virmati goes away to Lahore, suddenly Harish is physically attracted to Ganga. "He wondered why she wore her munga sutra inside her blouse. One day he reached in and pulled it out gently, and was flattered by the look of abject gratitude on Ganga's face" (263). Ganga who had meant nothing to Harish is now able to attract Harish

physically. Once Virmati goes to Lahore, she increases her hold on the house. “When she tentatively presses his legs, he does not object. She takes to doing this every day. She talks of the activities of their children, of the wellbeing of his mother and sister, of house hold concerns, and desperately tries to weave a family structure that includes them both” (262).

On the contrary, Virmati is a woman who is aware of her independent status. She is educated and the power of education gives her strength to defy the social norms set up by the patriarchal society. It is not only Virmati who opposes these norms. In fact there are signs of rebellion in most of the characters. Shakuntla is the first woman character in the novel who breaks the norms and decides to do what she wishes. Ganga also voices out her feelings when Virmati stands as an ally before her. Only Kasturi remains attached to the norms. Lajwanti also is one of the smart and outspoken ladies in the novel that is why she is also able to achieve her desires. By voicing out her thoughts, she is able to get a separate house for her family. Swarna Lata is another woman who defies the conventional norms for a liberated life. She shares her tale of independence with Virmati. The way she declares her decision to her parents clearly shows her determination. “I was very clear that I wanted to do something besides getting married and I told my parents that if they would support me for two more years I would be grateful otherwise I would be forced to offer satyagraha along with other congress workers against the British”(118).

Then there is Ida who completely belongs to the new generation. She does not care about her family and steps out into the world to live a life of her choice. She breaks her marriage bond with her husband because she is not comfortable in it. Her mother is always anxious about her future so after Virmati’s death, Ida asserts, “This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each work 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” (280).

As a mother there is a difference of opinion between Kasturi and Virmati. Kasturi never showers love and blessings on Virmati as she is so engrossed in her incessant pregnancies that she is never able to understand Virmati’s pains and her desires. “The answer to the mother-daughter conflict can be located in the cultural concept of ideal womanhood. The patriarchal ideology of culture necessarily presents women’s subordination to men as normal, natural and legitimate and since women are conditioned to believe that way, they do not contest it” (Bande 123).

The clash between the mother and daughter creates situations of disagreement and difference. Even then at times, Virmati yearns for affection. When she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away. "Have you seen to their food-milk-clothes-studies? You are the eldest. If you do not see to things, who will?"(6). Virmati understands that it is futile to expect love from her mother. "Why did she need to look for gestures when she knew how indispensable she was to her mother and the whole family?" (6-7). She has to revolt against her mother and her only means of escape is education.

It is this lack of understanding with her mother that ultimately compels her to fall in love with a married Professor. Her desire for education also persuades her towards the Professor. Virmati's interest in studies attracts the Professor towards her and the other cause is Virmati's beauty. "The Professor drank in the symbolism of her posture greedily. It moved him so deeply that he remembered it in all its detail... The professor's desire to possess had extended to her heart and mind" (46-47).

These lines show the greed in the Professor to possess Virmati. He is attracted by Virmati's flower like structure. Freud discusses women as "sex objects to men". Men, he suggests split women "symbolically and erotically into, mothers and sisters, on the one hand and prostitutes on the other" (Web 16 Oct 2016). Probably the thought of marriage is never in Harish's mind. Even after marrying Virmati, he does not leave Ganga. Freud's theory needs no further justification. It is to be noted that for centuries, female body is perceived as an object to be possessed by man. Seemanthini Niranjana says, "The body is the site of a range of institutional and regulatory discourses. The body becomes the very medium through which femininity is constituted" (Niranjana 109-110).

Similarly, Virmati is understood only as a physical body by the Professor. Whenever the two meet, it is with sex that the Professor starts and silences all the questions and worries of Virmati about her future. The Professor seems contented with Virmati as his girlfriend and Ganga as his wife. It is Virmati who raises the question of marriage every time. "Man can think of himself without woman. She cannot think of herself without man. And she is simply what man decrees... she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex...absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not with reference to her, she is the incidental the inessential as opposed to essential"(Beauvoir 16).

It is only Virmati's beauty and intellectual character, Harish is interested in. Although Virmati wants her progress through studies,

even her heart knows that her ultimate goal is to be married. She keeps on waiting for Harish as if only Harish can decide her fate. “She follows wherever his work calls him and determines their place of residence. She breaks more or less decisively with her post, becoming attached to her husband’s universe; she gives him her person, virginity and a rigorous fidelity being required. She loses some of the rights legally belonging to the unmarried woman” (Beauvoir 449).

Kapur projects her protagonists as strong characters but they are also silent sufferers. Relatively prolonged intervals of silence can be observed in the central characters like Virmati, Kasturi and Ganga.

Ida is different from Kasturi and Virmati. Kapur presents her as strong-willed, confident and self-reliant. She detests the norms of society and is able to get a divorce from her husband. She establishes herself as an independent woman and revolts against her mother. The opening line of the novel reveals her anguish. “The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother” (1). This strong woman, however is not able to raise her voice against her husband when he forces her to abort their child. Adrienne Rich states, “No free woman...would ‘choose’ abortion and if she did, it would be to inflict a kind of penance on herself” (Rich 268). This shows that Ida is another victim of a male oriented society. Her divorce is her silent resistance against her husband.

Ganga is another silent sufferer who is simply a wife, a caretaker and a mother. She is self-sacrificing and well accomplished in household works, but fails to earn her husband’s love and attention. Her acceptance of Virmati as her husband’s second wife presents her silent agony. She never raises her voice and soliloquizes her feelings against Virmati. “May the new bride slip in the blood, and break her head in the kitchen from where she had served him so long” (210). She has never taken any decision on her own and has always abided by the decision of her husband. After all the sacrifices she made, what she gets is loneliness.

Kapur’s heroines are strong because in order to do whatever they want to, they challenge the norms established in a patriarchal male-dominating society which accepts a male with all his faults and is ready to chide a female every time. It is surely a herculean task. In comparison to the Professor, Virmati shows remarkable strength in character. It is she who changes places, takes decisions and avoids the Professor at times. Harish’s act needs no explanation as he is not considered at fault by anyone. Virmati’s rebellion against her mother’s expectations may not be for Harish alone. Harish is simply a medium of

her access to a different world. Her marriage with Harish is a result of the confusion. After marriage, she once again finds herself without an identity, now that she does not even have a room of her own. Discarded and dejected in Harish's home, she is trapped once more within limitations. It is only when she returns to Lahore, that she regains life but this is again not digested by Harish. Through persistent gnawing he tortures Virmati emotionally. Harish is a representation of a true hypocritical male who outwardly appears to promote Virmati's education but inwardly fears the change education might bring in Virmati's attitude.

However, his persona does not deter Virmati from taking decisions for herself. She seldom comes to Amritsar and if she comes, it is on the request of Harish. He may be feeling that instead of being married to Harish, Virmati seems to be wavering from the predefined life of a married woman. It is surprising that the turmoil going on inside Virmati cannot be seen by him. Like any other woman, Virmati tries to adjust but in the process she has to go through many ups and downs. Though achieving higher education is her greatest passion, yet most of the time she is unable to fare well in her exams; and the reason is always her preoccupation in other worries. As a young girl, she has to spend much of her time in taking care of her siblings. She goes to Lahore with an aim in life but is disturbed by the Professor time and again. She is unable to do well in exams at Lahore again because of her pregnancy. So, it is Virmati who suffers alone. Even then praiseworthy is her determination that she takes her papers even after going through the painful experience of abortion. In spite of challenges, she never quits the path of education; she continues with her dream of acquiring higher education. Unlike Shakuntala and Swarnalata, she never voices her thoughts loudly. Quietly she tolerates as much as she can, she never answers back with shouts or shrieks. She is full of patience except once or twice when she is not able to face circumstances and takes out her frustration on Harish. After the death of her father and grandfather she resorts to complete silence. She becomes a stone with no expressions on her face. Harish sends her to Lahore for studies and she goes away leaving the home behind for which she had struggled for five long years. She appears as a woman of determination, much more determined than confused and coward. The final determination of Virmati accords her the status, she has been yearning for. She emerges as a strong and educated lady and by her zeal for education; she earns a name of her own.

In the generation of Kasturi, woman's role was confined to child bearing and kitchen work, the generation of Virmati took same bold