

Independence at the Cost of Partition: A Reflection on Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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ABSTRACT

The flourishing of Indian novels in English after Independence has witnessed the recurrence of the theme of partition in various forms. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* revisits the partition scenario from the vantage point of a contemporary mindset. It focuses on the intellectual and emotional dilemma of Virmati, the protagonist in the politics of partition and post-partition days. She aspires to taste the "wine of independence" and pursues higher education to shoulder responsibilities other than those of her husband and children. Trampling the patriarchal threshold of the conservative joint family she passionately falls in love with her already married neighbour, Professor Harish only to realize that she craves to be a down-to-earth housewife looking after the mundane needs of her husband. Her pre-marriage abortion and her post-marriage miscarriage coupled with her rejection by her family and her failure to enjoy freedom and self-fulfilment even after attaining higher education and marrying a man of her own choice are set against the backdrop of the country's struggle for freedom from British colonizers and the subsequent partition leaving behind the trail of unprecedented violence and communal fury. This paper attempts to explore the theme of independence at the heavy cost of partition which gets reflected very subtly in the parallel stories of India's struggle for freedom and Virmati's battle for independence. Both achieve independence at the cost of losing a part of themselves.

KEYWORDS

Independence; Partition; Manju Kapur; *Difficult Daughters*.

Introduction

Even decades after independence the theme of our freedom movement, the atrocities of British colonizers and the ultimate partition of the country keep recurring in novel after novel. Writers go back again and again to this significant movement to understand the history of our nation from different perspectives as the partition of the country resulted in an insensate communal fury that caught the whole generation in the crossfire of

religious bigotry, intolerance, and sectarianism.

Partition Novel

Originally titled *Partition* Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* locates the life of Virmati against the backdrop of political happenings before and after partition. As such, there is a tendency to categorize it as a partition novel, a category that calls to one's mind a whole cluster of partition novels that do not necessarily reflect upon the violence or communal conflict of the partition but instead focus on the impact

of dislocation in both positive and negative terms on gender issues, on the role education, religion, political scenario as well as the whole issue of female identity.

The story of Virmati is narrated against the background of the contemporary political scenario in Europe and India. The plot brings to light the country's entire picture- huge demonstration at Jallianwala Bagh, a national movement of spinning wheel run by Gandhiji, Nehru visiting Amritsar on Scout Mela, arrest of congress leaders for being part of Satyagraha Movement, Indian soldiers being sent to sacrifice themselves for British rulers during World War II, students pouring in jails, the black-marketing, hoardings and profiteering, atrocities of Britishers on Hindu Mahasabha Silver Jubilee celebrators, firing on innocent mob and release of tear-gas to disperse protestors, communal riots with Muslims attacking gurudwaras and temples, and Hindus retaliating, the court-martial of INA at Red Fort with Nehru as the lawyer for the defence, lootings, raping, murders, torching of houses and shops, the blood-thirsty mobs, the forced conversions--"ordinary events assuming ugly communal hue"(*Difficult Daughters* 262)--all making the novel a realistic historical document.

Contemporary Relevance

The 1947 Indian Partition lingers as a pivotal moment in the modern world, not so much for its political significance in the emergence of the sovereignties of India and Pakistan, but for its lasting impression of monstrosity and horrific emotional duress. From the killings, rapes, kidnappings, lootings, and banditry the South Asian populace continues to suffer from psychological wounds, etched by Partition. Seema Malik rightly observes, "The trauma of Partition and its aftermath have lingered in the collective memory and have affected the present" (Malik 12).

Manju Kapur belongs to the category of the novelists who revisit the partition scenario from the vantage point of a contemporary mindset. At a larger societal level, Kapur uses the novel to criticize the politics of partition and post-partition events, especially contemporary Indian issues. The fire of division in Indian society on the lines of caste, creed, and religion prevails even today and sometimes engulfs the lives of hundreds in one go.

Freedom versus Division

Difficult Daughters, Kapur's debut novel focuses on the intellectual and emotional dilemma faced by an educated daughter of a conservative joint family of Pre-Independence Amritsar in the context of the prevailing socio-political situation. Reena Mitra rightly observes:

With the tumultuous years of the World War II as a distant background and the period of the struggle for Independence culminating in the partition of India as an immediate setting for human drama enacted, the novel offers a realistic portrayal of women of three successive generations with Virmati, the difficult daughter of the second generation, holding centre-stage (Mitra 73).

No doubt, *Difficult Daughters* is the story of India's freedom struggle with political events before and during World War II in contemporary Europe serving as a distant background. While India fights for freedom from the British Raj, Virmati fights for the freedom to live life on her terms. She wants to decide for herself what to study and where to marry and when.

Born in a patriarchal Panjabi joint family Virmati experiences enlightenment and empowerment through education and feels equipped to challenge confidently the traditional framework of society and

family and steers her way through the familial and social oppression and discrimination to enjoy a new consciousness of her worth and place and space in society. From her earliest days when she is weighed down by the charge of looking after her younger siblings born out of her mother's incessant pregnancies, Virmati has been taught that woman is for the hearth and not for a job outside the house. Coming under the influence of her cousin, Shakuntala, who pursues higher studies in Lahore and swayed by a passion for the already married Professor Harish, Virmati longs to taste the "wine of freedom" and lead a life of her own and shoulder responsibilities other than those of a husband and children. She rejects pre-arranged marriage with Inderjeet, a canal engineer, and attempts suicide to defy the dictates of a conservative joint family. But she realizes the hopelessness of her relationship with Professor when she learns that his wife Ganga is pregnant and she undergoes the feeling of being deceived and trapped.

Resenting Professor for that she says "you can do what you like so long as you go on saying you love" (107) she promptly leaves for Lahore for advanced studies. There she refuses "to be a rubber doll for others to move as they willed" (92) and takes control of the situation, avoiding Professor's repeated pleas to meet him. But unfortunately, she eventually succumbs to his requests to grant him clandestine meetings which make her pregnant. As the Professor keeps on deferring the marriage, she repents losing her virginity, gets the child secretly aborted, and wants to indulge in meaningful activities like those of the freedom movement but the Professor discourages her from such independent blossoming. She feels: "They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is being wasted in love" (142).

Later, when he marries her at a friend's instance, he does not give the status due to her. She craves a wife's space and status due to her being in the presence of Professor's first wife Ganga and his two children from her. Later on, she again goes to Lahore to study Philosophy which she doesn't like only her husband's will. Throughout their relationship, Professor's attitude toward her is demeaning and patronizing. As a second wife, she has to fight social ostracism and familial rejection outside the house and compete for the household responsibilities and conjugal bed with Ganga, the Professor's first wife, inside it.

Ironically enough, even after availing of higher education despite social constraints, Virmati is desperate to be a down-to-earth housewife looking after the mundane needs of her husband. Having dared to cross one patriarchal threshold she is caught into another where her free spirit is curbed and all she does is "adjust compromise and adapt." Her dreams of independence and self-fulfilment remain half-realized when she fails to create a space for herself for which she has been striving all along.

In the whole process of struggle for freedom, she loses a part of herself when she undergoes abortion before marriage and miscarriage after it. She is torn into two halves, one of which is on the side she is fighting against. The ties with her family are snapped and she faces partition within herself. She undergoes agony when she is cursed by her mother on the occasion of her father's death. She stealthily enters her parents' house from the backyard for the fear of rejection by the family and relatives. The family, which in the Indian system is a source of strength, support, and solace, finds Virmati a difficult daughter and disowns her and Virmati feels the pain as she admits to the Professor that it is the family which protects us if things go wrong. On the contrary, her mother flings abuses at her

for casting a slur on the family by her misdeeds: "You have destroyed our family, you badmash! You have blackened our faces everywhere! For this, I gave you birth?" (221).

Even her stay in Lahore while pursuing her post-graduation after marriage fills in her ideas of loneliness, futility, and division:

Virmati's life in Lahore was isolated. She was married to a husband, a co-wife and two stepchildren. She had one abortion and one miscarriage. These barriers divided her from her fellows (251).

Professor's Double Standards

The British government's double standards and hypocrisy towards Indians before and during World War II come to light in the Professor's letter to Virmati who is imprisoned in her home;

Churchill talks about defending everything sacred to man, freedom and democracy, all the ideals that are blatantly disregarded here every day. Ha! The left hand refuses to know what the right is doing" (91).

Ironically the Professor is doing the same in his relationship with Virmati. Whereas he wants to fulfil all the duties towards his family and relatives and defers marriage to Virmati whereas he asks Virmati to be bold enough to break her arranged marriage and listen to the call of her soul to be free, independent, decisive, and progressive. Even after his marriage to Virmati, he is not loyal to her as his seductive interest in his wife continues. When Virmati refuses to come home from Lahore during summer vacations he decides to teach her a lesson and makes physical advances toward his first wife, Ganga.

When communal riots flare up in Amritsar Harish's family plans to shift to their ancestral home, Kanpur but he is slightly anxious about Virmati's protesting

against the idea. However, he feels comforted as he knows, "she might protest, but ultimately, she had to do as he said... He looked at Ganga... she was so convenient, he wished she attracted him more" (265). So ultimately, we get to know that the Professor, despite his outwardly progressive thinking induced by his foreign education also prefers a docile, obedient, and submissive wife just like any other conservative Indian male would do. He has been talking about women's education and freedom to allure Virmati but in his heart of hearts, he wants to keep his hold upon Virmati's life tightened. It is slightly discomforting to spare the professor for his double standards and dual attitude. And Virmati's falling for him all the time makes her stand in sharp contrast to Swaran Lata, her roommate, who understands the meaning of freedom in a better way.

Virmati and India: Parallel Stories

It is interesting to note that Virmati's struggle for freedom from the patriarchal and conservative familial and social structure is reinforced by the history of India's struggle for Independence and the subsequent partition leaving behind a trail of indescribable communal violence and unprecedented bloodshed, which gets so vividly portrayed in the reminiscences of all other characters after Virmati's death.

Indian's struggle for freedom culminates in the country's partition and she loses half of its soul at the cost of hundreds of thousands of innocent lives, lost in the inextinguishable fire of communal hatred. India's hollow victory is mirrored in the ultimate course Virmati's life takes. In all this, the Professor (fond of everything English) wields considerable influence, although catalytically, just as the British did in the tragedy of the country's partition. Dr. Usha Sharma rightly observes: "Professor is portrayed as a person who leaves his heart in

England and returns for the sake of fear of sin" (Sharma 93).

Like the country, free from the shackles of the British Empire, torn and bleeding, Virmati too seems to be torn between her private life and her social existence as a member of a family, community, or society.

The responsibility of the Britishers for partition is accurately recalled by Virmati's brother, Kailash Nath while talking to Ida, Virmati's daughter:

The British left us with a final stab in the back. We didn't want freedom if this is what it meant. But we were forced to accept partition and suffering along with independence as a package deal (268).

Like India Virmati also gets agony, pain, and suffering from freedom as a package deal. And one cannot overlook Professor's responsibility for it.

To her shock, she finds that the battle for her independence has created irrevocable lines of partition and pain around her. She might have started on a quest for true love, independence, and a sense of self, but when almost there, she realizes that things are not always as they appear to be.

Conclusion

In a crux, it is a story of a freedom struggle. It is Virmati's fight against her family traditions; against the age-old orthodox syndromes fixated with sub-continent women and against the society that so naturally expects her to follow the

path of a sacrificing "ideal woman." And, along with this, a similar plot progresses in the backdrop, that of India's struggle for independence. And like in the end, both achieve independence but only at the cost of losing a part of themselves.

In Virmati's struggle for independence we see a woman who is conscious, introspective, educated, and wants to carve a life for herself and be her mistress but ultimately ends up being divided within--one part of her self-dying to live a dignified, decisive and action-oriented life and the other realizing the underlying need to be emotionally and intellectually dependent on a superior force, that is, Professor Harish. She suffers from what Chaman Nahal calls, "dependence syndrome" (Nahal 17), which is the tendency to fall back on someone in times of crisis.

She ends up being a loser whose acts alienate her from her own family. Besides, she fails to achieve self-fulfilment in her life and even gets rejected by her daughter Ida who does not regard even her last wishes after her death. Her passion to taste the 'wine of freedom' leaves her divided sans self-control, strong willpower, and confidence. Badly confined in her self-centred desires and ruined by wrong choices, Virmati perhaps longs for a spiritual fulfilment after her death when she tells 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 that I have gone" (1).

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