

PARTITION REVISITED: A STUDY OF MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

Kusum Nandal

Assistant Professor (Guest Faculty),
Dept. of English and Foreign Languages,
Maharshi Dayanand University, Rohtak

ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) recipient of the Commonwealth Writer's Prize, is a portrayal of the three women characters who represent an allegory of the three stages of the Indian freedom movement. Set at the backdrop of turbulent years of the World War II, and the Partition of India in 1947, Kapur truly presents women of three generations. Kasturi is portrayed at the backdrop of the pre-independence period when India's freedom is curbed and controlled by a foreign power. In the same light, Kasturi is pictured in her own subjugated life where her independence is repressed by the forces of patriarchy. At the background of the independence period where India is struggling and revolting against the foreign power, Virmati's character is sketched. Virmati rebels and fights against that society which refuses to acknowledge her unconventionality. The post-independence period is reflected through the portrait of Ida. Ida establishes her independent status as a divorced woman, whose alienation from all the conventions still leaves her unfulfilled and unsatisfied. Thus, the propelling notion remains that, disillusionment faced by these three women in the three stages remains intense and poignant. Manju Kapur figures Partition as a central and essential trope. Her novels are based and squarely located within the subject of the partition of the subcontinent.

Keywords: Identity, Freedom, Partition, Colonialism.

Introduction

In pre-Partition Punjab, the novel focuses on the story of Virmati, a young woman who rebels against the forces of patriarchy and suffer for her transgressions. Historically, the book projects the period when the country is revolting against colonialism and cultural ends. Virmati's resistance to the arranged marriage and her independent decision to be the Professor's second wife can be interpreted as her refusal to the colonization of her 'being.' Though her struggle does not contextualize the national politics, it pertains to her individual and personal contentions. But irrespective of this, the impact of the national movement at the historical level cannot be sidelined. The national or any kind of revolutionary movements seek to encompass participation

from women and subalterns, including them at the main stream action. This situation is subjected to the younger generation of women in the novel, like Virmati, Shakuntala and Swarna Lata.

The Inquilab Zindabad was sung.... The song was so moving. The students' flag representing freedom, peace and progress, was unfurled...and it was clear most of the girls identified with it. (Kapur 142)

This also draws that the various movements coined during the freedom struggle emphasizes Gandhi's efforts to make women come out from their limited sphere and to align themselves with a mass movement. However, women's role in the anti- colonial nationalist struggle helped them to create their identity through small resistance acts rather than being part of larger forms of liberation movements. The 'New Women' represented by – Virmati, Shakuntala and Swarna Lata-- are stimulated by the freedom struggle and they feel gratified in leading their independent lives personified by the nationalist movement.

Most families look upon the marriage of a daughter as a sacred duty or sacred burden. We are lucky we're living in times when women can do something else. Even in Europe women gain more respect during wartime. And here we have that war, and our satyagraha as well. (Kapur 152)

Virmati's story, told in the third person, is framed by a first person narration in the present tense. Ida, Virmati's daughter, is the speaking 'I' through which Manju Kapur provides an interesting fictional point of view on the past from the present. *Difficult Daughters* is the novel where the age of Partition is explored by a narrator who does so not by retrieving her own memories, but by collating documents and oral testimonies. As Dora Sales Salvador writes in the preface to her Spanish translation of the novel, "in *Difficult Daughters* we do not listen to Virmati's voice. She could not speak out, being certainly situated at the junction of two oppressions: colonialism and patriarchy. What we have is her daughter's reconstruction and representation" (qtd. in Bruschi 235). Ida is not a historian, however she inevitably stumbles on history while digging into her mother's story and discovers that history compounds Virmati's story and that both inform her life. Ida, a difficult daughter like her mother, divorced, childless, apparently more emancipated than Virmati and nonetheless "engulfed in melancholy, depression, despair" (Kapur 279), feels the need to re-compose her heritage at her mother's death; the detachment enables her to start a journey that takes her two generations back (her mother's and grandmother's) and to build a tale, never told by Virmati herself, essential to give a sense to her life and define her identity. Unlike a scholar, she is deeply involved in the subject of her 'study.' This is why she almost tiptoes into her mother's story, conscious as she is of intruding into the most inner rooms of her private life. Approximately in the middle of the novel, after a conversation with her mother's old friend about Virmati's first pregnancy and abortion (of which only Swarna knew) she reflects: "The shroud of secrecy my mother carried all her life now protected her in death, as I drew back from violating her with my knowledge" (156).

Talking to her aunts and uncles, to her mother's friends and acquaintances and collecting their tales about the national turmoil which accompanied the Independence and the Partition of the country, builds up diachronic connections between past and present and synchronic ones between Ida and the people she interviews; the emotional response to their testimonies throws new light on her relatives or creates new ties.

The adoption of Ida as the consciousness that puts together and reworks different memories to compose a story-- her picture of the past-- inevitably shapes the narrative structure of the novel. A narrating daughter comes to terms with herself by finding the roots of her unique

and distinct identity in a narrated mother and discovering, in the process, how blurred the boundaries between past and present, public and private are.

Ida, as the author's alter ego, removes that veil of silence and re-appropriates her personal story which takes shape within a larger, collective one that still informs the present. In search of her own identity, Ida realizes she cannot define it by merely negating the maternal figure; she remembers her rebellion against her mother's demand for obedience and compliance, but growing up she wonders what the essence of the “self she had to please” (Kapur 279) actually is. To find an answer she digs up Virmati's past and discovers that her own self is the product not only of her mother, but also of the time she lived in.

Thus employing Ida as a narrative device, Manju Kapur interweaves private and public histories and provides a contemporary perspective on the period of Partition. Bringing to the surface and communicating in written form the voices of those years together with Ida's confused and partial memories has the healing power of making the present more comprehensible in the light of the past.

Works Cited

- Bruschi, Isabella. *Partition in Fiction: Gendered perspective*. New Delhi: Atlantic Pubs., 2010. Print.
- Kapur, Manju. *Difficult Daughters*. New Delhi: Penguin India, 1998. Print.