



Understanding the Trauma: Treatment of the Theme of Partition in Manju Kapur's "Difficult Daughters"

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Abstract: *It is rare and uncommon to come across the theme of partition in recently published works of Indian Writing in English. The reason could be the remoteness of this painful and poignant experience in the sense of time and memory too. In this regard, Manju Kapur proves to be a remarkable exception as she, as a writer, in her very first venture itself, enlivens and reawakens that bygone era of political upheavals and social stigmas. The reading of Difficult Daughters leaves the reader in no doubt as to why the work bagged the winners' trophy for Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best First Book. The writer has been aptly eulogized to have succeeded in portraying effectively and efficiently the plight of women and the harmony among different communities; she has also effectively depicted the reservations developing in the minds of people due to the highly unstable and uncontrollable political scenario. She deftly presents the city of Lahore of the time; a contemporary prestigious education hub for the youth and the city of Amritsar that is no different from the present dusty town that it is today. She realistically portrays the economic issues faced by the traders due to impending partition, the emerging tension and distrust amongst the people. The book once more transports us to the era of uncertainty and unrest of the bygone times.*

Keywords: *trauma, struggle, pain, partition, death, tension.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Literature is believed to reflect and register artistically, aesthetically and articulately the ups and downs that societies and peoples pass through. The writers writing in a particular milieu or projecting a specific period from history are endeavouring to record and view the happenings of that era from a perspective that is their own. This is equally true of partition literature too, penned down immediately or decades after the occurrence of that painful event.

The visible scars that the partition left on a nation's body can be seen in the form of new geographical boundaries drawn, but the deeper and more hurting were the ones that are still there in the hearts of those families who passed through and suffered this gamut of experiences first hand. Due to the poignancy of the event, partition has been a recurring theme in Indian writing in English, but with the passage of time, as the memories of this painful experience become hazier, its delineation in literature too has become uncommon. The present-day Indian English writers have generally chosen themes that deal either with more recent and current issues haunting the world around or have preferred to delve into old myths and scriptures and presenting them in a new avatar. A remarkable exception in this regard is Manju Kapur, who in her first venture itself as a writer, enlivens that bygone era of political upheavals and social stigmas.

Manju Kapur is a professor of English at Miranda House in Delhi. Her first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, received the Commonwealth Award for the Eurasian region and was a number one bestseller in India. Her novel, "The Immigrant", was long-listed for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. There are five novels to her credit as a writer and in each of these works she takes up issues related to women and chooses a variety of backdrops ranging from partition movement, Babari masjid demolition to immigration anxiety and judicial system too.

"Difficult Daughters" (1998) goes back in time, has the partition of India as its canvas and discusses the plight of Indian women in that era. The book has been aptly called an 'urgent' and 'important' tale of family, partition and love. The leading woman character of the novel, Virmati, comes before us as a woman torn between her duties as a devoted daughter, her aspiration for education and illicit love leading her to a status of a second wife of the man she adores. These ups and downs of Virmati's life take place in the backdrop of freedom movement and subsequent partition of India and Pakistan.

II. STRUGGLE FOUGHT AT TWO LEVELS

"Difficult Daughters" can be summed up as a story of a freedom struggle, but the struggle being fought here implies two different types of resistances: one of a nation trying to attain independence from the bondages of centuries-old subservience and the other of an individual striving to break-free from age-old conventions of family and society. While we see India fighting for freedom from British rule, Virmati struggles to live life on her own terms. India attains freedom but at the cost of wounds of partition, that could never heal completely. Similarly, Virmati too shows her determination and marries the man she loves,



chooses to go for higher studies and strives to carve a niche for herself, but all this at a loss of a part of herself. Though she frees herself from bondages of conventions; after her marriage with the professor, she finds herself locked into newer ones.

III. TREATMENT OF THE THEME OF TRAUMATIC PARTITION

Manju Kapur presents a thoroughly credible picture of the life of the partition era. The realistic presentation of Amritsar and Lahore of the time comes as a pleasant surprise for the reader. The increasing tension and distrust between the two communities find an authentic expression in the novel. It is easily discernible in a dialogue between Suraj Rai, the father and Kailashnath, the son. A Muslim customer visits their shop for selling off a piece of gold as it may help him survive in these difficult times and Kailashnath, looking at his need and helplessness, strikes a good bargain. Witnessing this Suraj Rai comments:

‘He probably needs more money. Times are hard.’

Kailashnath is quick to respond to this large-heartedness of his father;

‘Let him go to Jinnah, then!’ (235)

Suraj Rai’s thoughts that follow, lend an insight into the minds of millions of those Hindus and Muslims who were caught into these treacherous fields of hatred in place of harmony. The writer puts it in a very stirring manner:

‘...nothing was the same. Identities, loyalties, futures and nations were becoming a matter of choice rather than tradition.’ (235)

There are numerous references reawakening the bygone times of freedom movement and partition- processions by varied communities, speeches of political and non-political leaders, rationing and quota system, communal disturbances and sufferings of the people. The writer even depicts the victimisation of Virmati’s father Suraj Prakash in one such riot situation who dies on the spot.

Manju Kapur’s handling of the situations, setting and characters of that remote but unforgettable era seems highly realistic and convincing. The reader is transported and introduced to that age of our nation’s history which has never lost its appeal due to the incurable wounds it left on the hearts and minds of an entire nation. The writer’s matter-of-fact delineation of the incidents, though imaginary, is very gripping and persuasive. The rendering of the social, academic and commercial life of Amritsar and Lahore of pre-independence era provide the readers with true-to-life glimpses of the times. By referring to minute details of common, everyday things like ‘the tonga strike’, the writer succeeds in lending credibility to her descriptions. It would be interesting at this juncture, to note the way the principal of the training college in Lahore is introduced in the novel:

“They met the principal in white khadi with a greying bun. She spun her charkha daily, was a staunch supporter of the struggle for swarajya, Gandhi, female education, and everything being bettered.” (114)

The movement for freedom takes an even uglier turn when it becomes clear that partition of India into two different entities is imminent. Referring to the killings in Calcutta, Virmati contemplates painfully:

“The drops of blood in the distance come nearer and nearer. Only now it is not drops, but floods.” (263)

The joy and celebrations of attaining independence are cloaked in the cries of the victims of the massacres; the smile of a free nation was marred by the sobs of the sufferers. The catastrophic events of partition have been expressed through these heart-rending and moving words in the novel:

“People die – roasted, quartered, chopped, mutilated, turning, turning, and meat on a spit – are raped and converted in rampages gone mad, and leave a legacy of thousands of tales of sorrow, thousands more episodes shrouded in silence.” (263)

Ida, Virmati’s daughter, in an effort to understand her mother, is going through old newspapers; the bloodshed and lawlessness shake her very being, the burden of those thousands of lives lost become impossible for her to bear. Even going through the headlines of newspapers of the times have shuddered and shocked her to such an extent that she comments:

“History makes me insecure. I am glad I am not an historian.” (267)

The novel also brings forth the shattering of the belief of many Hindus and Muslims, who have lived side by side in harmony for centuries, for whom it is beyond their intellect that people can be misled to such an extent that they will forget all those years of peaceful and pleasant togetherness and give way to brutality and run amok. The madness of the masses has swept every single individual into its power and even man’s innate integrity can no longer be trusted. Those who trusted, turned out to be fools and lost their lives and others too were no better off. They lived to witness men giving way to their animal instincts, to experience life at its ugliest. The pages tell us:



“And those cries:

Allah – o – Akbar

Har, Har Mahadev

Bole So Nihal

Those cries became the cries of battle rather than religion.” (270)

Virmati is deeply moved by the plight of people affected by these sad events and decides to be of help to them in any way she can. She donates all the unused clothes keeping only a few for the family. Her family too does not remain untouched by this calamity; her mother sends for her to come and stay with them so that both the families can keep a vigil on the trouble-makers. The only positive outcome of the partition for Virmati is that it reunites her with her mother and other family members. The novel ends with the birth of a new nation and the birth of Virmati and Harish’s daughter. Virmati wishes to name her ‘Bharati’ to commemorate the birth of India, but Harish’s reaction to this is hysterical, as he says:

“What birth is this? With so much hatred? We haven’t been born. We have moved back into the dark ages.”(276)

These words also echo the voices of all those people lying on both sides of the new boundaries drawn.

IV. CONCLUSION

All of Manju Kapur’s novels have been women-centric, but it is interesting to note that while dealing with the issue of partition in “Difficult Daughters”, she can be seen treating the trauma from a neutral ground and presents a very realistic and matter-of-fact picture of the times without taking any of the sides and without becoming melodramatic about the subject which has always been a very tough task for any writer writing on partition. The writer has been able to alienate herself and also could heighten the effect by delineating these events through the medium of newspaper headlines and letters and notes written by various characters that are being read by Ida, Virmati’s daughter. This lends a kind of levelled plain from which the writer views and presents these heart-rending events.

Summing up the discussion, it must be pointed out that partition has left such deep scars that even decades of redress and remedy provided by politicians, society, religion or judicial system have also not been able to heal. People were left with no other option but to accept their fate as there was no one else to blame but themselves and no plausible solution in sight as the end of the last chapter of the book suggests:

“The deed was done, they would just have to go on living.” (277)

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