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## ***Difficult Daughters* :A Feministic Approach to the Partition of India**

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**Abstract:** *Difficult Daughters* (1988) is the very first novel of Manju Kapur which won her the prestigious 1988 Commonwealth Writer's Prize, Eurasia. It is written on the background of the partition of the Indian subcontinent. The novelist has covered a period of nearly 20 years of the Indians fight against the British to free India. The fight then was fought unitedly by the Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. However, it is the locale of the novel, Amritsar, in the then-united Punjab, which witnessed some hidden hatred and enmity of the subconscious of the people. The city of Amritsar which constituted fifty-one percent of Muslims, was dominated by the Hindus and Sikhs. Education, finance, trade and commerce and all other important establishments were in their hands. This made the Muslims angry and jealous towards Hindus and Sikhs. Stray incidents of violence take place here and there and no major incidents of mass violence or massacre take place in these days. People of Amritsar go to Lahore, the Oxford of East, for higher education and so also people from Lahore go to Amritsar for various purposes.

**Keywords:** *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur, feministic approach to partition, India.

It is on this background of the then undivided Punjab that the story of Virmati, the protagonist of the novel is narrated. She is the eldest of her all eleven sisters and brothers: Virmati, Indumati, Gunvati, Hemavati, Vidyavati and Parvati. Of boys: Kailashnath, Gopinath, Krisnanath, Prakashnath, and Hiranath. As the eldest daughter and also the custom of the old days, it is Virmati who has to take care of all her brothers and sisters. Her mother Kasturi is pregnant for the last time when Virmati is hardly seventeen and studying for her F.A. exam. Children in these days were considered as godsend and hence Surajprakash, the father of eleven children does not bother much about his daughter's higher education. He is living in a joint family with his father Lala Diwan Chand, brother Chandra Prakash and his wife Lajwanti and their only daughter Shakuntala gone to Lahore.

It is Shakuntala, an M.Sc. in Chemistry, a woman of revolutionary thinking, goes out of the house and begins to lead her life in Lahore in the company of her friends. She is still unmarried and takes part in



conducting 'political meetings and join rallies'. She once says to Virmati , "these people don't really understand, CViru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life in being independent. Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else."(15) There she and her friends travel, entertain themselves, reading papers, conducting seminars and sometimes even smoking and drinking and so on. The teen -aged Virmati is literally carried away by the way Shakuntala is leading her life.It has an ever -lasting impact on her tender mind. She too strongly desires to be like Shakuntala.The novelist's feministic approach as clearly discernible in the portrayal of the character of Shakuntala and her type.Here is an example of a woman who wants freedom from the male-dominated society and lead an independent life.

At the same time, as luck would have it, there comes the Professor to live in their house as a paying guest. He is married. He is lecturer in English with a scholarly appearance and a teacher of Viru. Virmati and Professor fall in love with each other and Virmati's tragic journey begins. Once she begins her journey towards her married lover, she does not even to establish an immoral and illicit relationship with him. Before getting established illicit relations with him, she succeeds in extracting promise from Harish that he would soon marry her. Possessed by the only desire to possess the girl, the Professor promises her and succeeds in keeping physical relations with her. This is a very daring step on the part of an unmarried girl born and brought up in a highly conservative family, giving way to extra-marital relationships which does not have the sanction of the society. This is a very revolutionary thinking of the protagonist. The novelist, too, does not blame her heroine for it.

All this happens under the pretext of education. Virmati, who finds it difficult to escape her family members, insists on going to Lahore for further education. She goes there only to widen her horizons. She comes in contact with several girls of her age living in hostels and rooms on their own, without any control on them. Once out of the control of the family members, she becomes free. It is here that the Professor traps Virmati by giving her frequent visits. It is, as if he forgets his wife, children and family, and lives with Virmati in Lahore. Once he says to Virmati, "Co-wives are part of our social traditions. If you refuse me, you will be changing nothing. I do not live with her any meaningful way.." (112) He further says, " There is a void in my heart and in my home that you alone can fill." (112) Thus he persuades her



persistently and succeeds in seducing her virgin body in the guest room of one of his friends called Syed Husain. That day they become one with each other and enjoy sexual pleasure. This practice then continues for long. Even after abortion, they do not hesitate to have sex with each other. This extra-marital relationship does not remain a secret. Though a revolutionary woman, she accepts here the fact that the tradition of having co-wives was prevalent in the male -dominated Indian society. Co-wives are given lower status and are marginalised. Virmati accepts this. This acceptance projects her as a moderate feminist.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is thus the story of daughters who are indeed very difficult to understand. There are good number of daughters in the novel right from the first chapter to the last. Some of them are very docile, humble, traditional, and cultured and some of them are exactly opposite to them by being very revolutionary, modern, ultra-modern and even non-hesitant to keep immoral and illicit relations with other men. The stories of these difficult daughters are woven into the form of the novel.

What is important from the point of view of this study is the background on which the stories of the difficult daughters proceed. Right from the first chapter to the last page, there has been a strong undercurrent of politics of the partition of the Indian subcontinent. The daughters as well as other characters are born in pre-independent India. They are, in the beginning, fighting unitedly against the British. Their first aim to drive away the British from India. Like the Congress leaders, leaguers, the *Akalis* and all other political parties, organisations, castes and communities come together and fight against the British. But when the Independence of India comes within sight, all these are disintegrated and are found in their separate camps and compartments. Now they begin their fight for the interests of their castes and communities. The final result is the partition of the Indian subcontinent.

*Difficult Daughters* is a fine example of a very objective analysis of the partition tragedy. The story of the novel goes on two parallel levels. One is the story of Virmati and her illicit extra-marital relationship with an already-married man, Harish. It is the story of a girl who has to suffer a lot for the sin she commits. Her illegal and immoral relationship with Harish makes her part of the entire society. She is equally humiliated and insulted by her mother-in-law and the first wife of Harish. Harish goes in the bad books of



his and her relatives. Though at the end of the novel they reconcile with the situation of the partition on the national level, they have to undergo a lot of trials and tribulations.

The partition plays very vital role in the lives of the residents of Punjab. The novelist touches upon almost all political aspects of partition. The people of Punjab who are in the beginning a fine example of unity and brotherhood and who think their first duty is to drive away the British, are soon disintegrated partly due to their selfish motives and partly due to the poison of communalism spread by their leaders. The best example in the novel is that of Swarna Lata and Ashrafi. They are very good and close friends of each other and take active part in all political activities, marches and meetings. But as soon as she comes in contact with her Muslim friends, she is totally changed. The reason for her change is, as Swarna Lata puts in her words : " In this case it must have been religious identity , may be Muslim fear and insecurity. They must have told her she would be disloyal to the Muslim cause. I did not want to stand against Ashrafi, but my group said we had to win this election if it was the last thing we did. So you see, ultimately I too put something before friendship." (123) The same old friends of Swarna Lata later on joins the youth wing of Muslim League. She is said to be the most 'apolitical ' person, converting into a highly spirited activist of the Muslim League.

Like all other partition novels, in *Difficult Daughters* too we have some nationalist Muslims who want to fight against the British. They are, however, in a very small number and their sane and wise words were not taken into consideration by the majority. They have suffered a lot. The head of a Muslim, Hindu and Sikh Coalition Ministry, Maliks Sir, Hayat Khan, Tiwary is the best ambassador of the Hindu-Muslim unity. The Muslim League attacks him so furiously for a full year that finally he must submit his resignation. The attempt at coalition rule is thus discouraged by the MLAs of the Muslim League. The example of Ashrafi also falls in the same category. She has to submit to the pressure of her community. Dr Khan Sahib, Dr Syed Hossain, Abdul Gaffar Khan, Khyzar Hyed Khan and several other Muslims oppose the very idea of the partition but in vain. This point is also brought to light by the novelist in only two pages.

Like *Azadi and Train to Pakistan*, there are no heroic characters in *Difficult Daughters*. The difficult daughter, Virmati, though the central character in the novel, is not more than any ordinary woman.



Her revolutionary nature is the only characteristic that is worth praising. Virmati is the eldest daughter of the eleven children of Kasturi. She does the work of looking after all her brothers and sisters and also taking care of her mother who is always in ill health due to eleven deliveries. She is a very hard-working and efficient girl who is very keen about her study. She does her F.A., B.A., and B.T. and even after her marriage, she goes to Govt. college Lahore to do her M.A. in Philosophy. She thus studies more than any other girl in her family.

Such a hard-working, revolutionary girl, however, gets her character tarnished by her falling in love with her married professor. As discussed earlier, she falls in love and undergoes an abortion in Lahore. Even after the abortion, she does not stop her sexual encounter with the professor. This leads her to the status of a very vulgar woman. Finally, she forces the professor to marry her and begins to live with him along with his first wife, a son, a daughter and a mother-in-law. There too she is always humiliated and insulted by all. She is not allowed to enter her mother's house due to her behaviour. In spite of this she lives there as her husband cares for her much.

The partition of the country plays a significant role in the life of Virmati and the first wife of her husband goes away from them forever. Virmati is now happy to live with her husband. She is also brought in the company of her mother, sisters and brothers as the partition tragedy threatens their very lives. The journey of Virmati thus ends on a note of reconciliation with her family members and brothers.

There is a host of other women characters in the novel. Virmati's five sisters, her aunt, her mother-in-law, several of her friends in Lahore and many other women representing their respective class. Some of them are very traditional, husband-fearing and orthodox types while a few of them are highly progressive types. The latter type of character is found in a city like Lahore. Shakuntala, Swarnalata, Ashrafi, and a few others participate in political activities and do not mind keeping relations with men. They are in the city for higher education. In addition to this, they are seen actively engaged in politics. There are out-and-out realistic characters which can be found in any city of India.

There are several male characters like Virmati's father, grandfather, her brothers, friends, and her husband Harish. All of them come from the real, day-to-day life of India. They are businessmen, servant educationists and political activists. The character of Harish is, however, of some importance. He is a



professor of English whose wisdom cannot be challenged. He is well-read and foreign returned. When he begins to teach, he is a married person. In spite of being a married fellow, he is attracted towards the tender girl Virmati. It is he who is possessed by the strong desire to keep physical relations with the girl who is his student. Finally, he succeeds in seducing Virmati in Lahore. This marks the beginning of the moral degradation of the professor. The only good thing he does is that he marries Virmati and gives her the status of his wife. As a good father, he also takes care of his son and daughter born of his first wife, Ganga. He thus emerges as a very ordinary character who can be found everywhere. In his behaviour, in his letters and meetings with Virmati, the only thing he craves for the virgin body of the girl.

*Difficult Daughters* is thus a very recent novel on the theme of partition. It has also a strong theme of man-woman relationships in general and extra-marital relationships in particular. The extramarital relationship of Harish and Virmati is portrayed on a strong political background of the partition of India. Yet, there is also a lot of difference between the earlier novels on the background of partition and the novels written after fifty years after the partition of India. In the latter, everything is told in a very controlled and balanced manner. The novelists insist little on the monotonous and melodramatic descriptions of the violence and bloodshed. They have on the contrary, given more importance to probe the human psychology to bring out the complexities of their inner-workings. In this sense, the novel under discussion, with its good plot and story can be considered as one of the good novels of the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

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