

## Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*: Re-narrating Partition and its Trauma

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### Abstract

Partition tarnished Indian history with bloodshed and inhumane acts. Many writers describe Partition in their works elucidating its causes and results. Manju Kapur is one of the Indian writers who deals with the theme of Partition in her novel, *Difficult Daughters*. The novel underlines the pains of Indians who were parted from their lives, loved ones and origins documenting their miseries and trauma of Partition. It underscores communal hatred destroying secular spirit and peaceful coexistence of different communities of India. It is a manifestation of a phase of Indian history where brothers killed one another, a large scale of lives was lost and an unprecedented migration happened. Through a plethora of characters stating their miseries Kapur makes her work cover a wide range of people attempting to reproduce real and original accounts of trauma undergone by Indians during the period. It discusses communalism, its causes and effects on human existence taking and threatening innumerable lives. It re-narrates miseries of Indians who were partitioned for the interest of communities. The paper is a study on the Partition and its effects on Indians who are shattered from their roots and lost their lives. It addresses the woes of Indians bearing the trauma of Partition as reflected in the novel.

**Key Words:** India, History, Partition. Trauma, Communal, Religion.

### Introduction

Indian Literature in English encompasses a wide range of social issues in its preview. It records Indian history blending with Indian ethos bringing in Indianness in its texture. It relates the past incidents of the country from an insider's point of view relocating its originality that provides evidence for its veracity. Indian writers in English revisit Indian history by projecting socio-political and religious issues in their works. Partition, a bloody and heinous incident grasps both domestic and global attention and a number of writers express their opinions and views in this context. Many writers explore the theme of Partition in their fictional works bringing reality in their imaginary world. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* explores the theme of Partition lying in the undercurrent of the plot of the novel. The main theme of the novel is women's emancipation from the shackles of patriarchy. But this theme is developed through the backdrop of Partition. The scenes of Partition run in parallel to the storylines of Virmati, the protagonist of the novel and her life is metaphorically presented with the Partition of India.

### Literature Review

Religion is affiliated to emotion and feeling of a community. It is a system that binds a community. Malory Nye states that "religion is a form of collective consciousness that actively (through rituals) keeps society together" (2008, p. 38). Emile Durkheim, a French sociologist, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, opines that "It was through religion – particularly large-scale ritual ceremonies – that people came together into social groups" (qtd. in *Religion*, Nye, 2008, p. 37). Its expansion is of wide range covering the meaning and identity of one's existence. Its world is believed to be metaphysical and so every issue related to it has greater impact, negative or positive. Pramod Thakur in *History of Religion* observes that "Religion ... is an organized system of beliefs and practices revolving around, or leading to, a transcendent spiritual experience" (2015, p. 2). Taking the advantage of its unreachable and invisible domain, it is sometimes used as a means to manipulate one's life and to gain their personal benefits for it is the question of one's identity and also of survival. As Nye says, "religion not only binds society, it can also create division". (2008, p. 38) in India too dirty politics to break the Indian brotherhood was played on in the name of religion. Partition, an incident that marked some pages of Indian history with bloods of innumerable innocent Indians is an outcome of such exploitation of the British Raj. The British destroyed the integrity of the country shattering the strong bond of brotherhood among Hindus and Muslims into pieces to the extremity that both of them thirst for each other's blood. Partition creating Pakistan uprooted entire communities leaving violence everywhere (Talbot and Singh, 2009). It has not passed into history as it is sensitive (Mansergh, 1966) so remain intact and is unforgettable. "The separatist demand for Pakistan, however, is not merely a survival of old religious feuds; to a large extent it is the expression of a new economic nationalism that has inevitably taken into its hands the immensely powerful weapon of immemorial religious and social differentiation" (Spate, 1948, p.5). "It is an acknowledged truth that the partition of the Indian sub continent was the single most traumatic experience in our recent history" (Chopra, 2010, p. 164). "*Difficult Daughters* is a fine example of a very objective analysis of

partition tragedy” (Sahoo, 2024, p. 25). “Manju Kapur gives a perfectly convincing picture of the life of the Partition period” (Kumar, 2016, p. 188) in this novel.

### Objectives

- 1) To retrace Indian history especially the Partition through Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*
- 2) To assess the causes and aftermaths of this bloodshed in the novel
- 3) To evaluate the concept of nationalism and secularism in the novel
- 4) To elucidate author’s observation in the novels

### Methodology

- 1) The study is based on the content of the text concerned.
- 2) Theoretically, it incorporates ideologies of nationalism and secularism in its context.
- 3) It also encompasses the critical views and ideas from different critics.

### Result

Kapur delineates the scenes of Partition of India, its causes and aftermaths highlighting the divided lives of innocent civilians in this novel. Freedom Struggle is a major concern of this novel. Through its backdrop the novelist draws other issues in the novel. The study finds out that innumerable lives were lost due to communal hatred triggered by communal attitudes and the novelist urges to eliminate communal hatred and uphold communal harmony.

#### Causes:

Kapur underpins the root cause of Partition in this novel through the critical observation of Swarna Lata, Virmati’s roommate at Lahore. Swarna Lata exhibits the vital role of Indian women in the Freedom Struggle. Through her bold character Kapur highlights the active participation of women in Indian freedom movement. It is through her voices Kapur manifests the root cause of partition in Indian subcontinent: “Time and again I said that the Muslim League and the Congress should come together, that we were one, that it was the British we should fight, and not each other. I was not alone. Plenty in the college thought like I did” (p. 133-134). Swarna narrates how religious differences between her and her best friend Ashrafi creates chasm between them. These college friends become the victims of political demands and so bear the pain of partition before the actual Partition begins. They have to subside their individual feelings and emotion and play their assumed role to their respective communities accordingly to fulfil their expectations. Thus, the best friends contest against each other at the college election for the interest of their community. Swarna explains the reason of the rising gap between her and Ashrafi in the following lines: “So many things are deeper than friendship. In this case it must have been religious identity, maybe Muslim fear and insecurity. They must have told her she would be disloyal to the Muslim cause. I didn’t 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” (p. 134).

So, Swarna prioritizes her responsibilities to her individual feelings. She is chosen to represent her community where she has to fight against her best friend and so does for Ashrafi too. There is no room for consideration for individual wishes. Both of them have to follow the dictate as it is the question of identity, dignity and existence. So, Ashrafi who is “the most apolitical person” as Swarna refers to, joins the youth wing of the Muslim League. This game play through religion creates abysses between religiously different two individuals and so does between two different communities. People also have to fight for the interest of communities willingly or unwillingly as it is through religious identity one claim social identity. Here it is quite relevant to bring in Nye’s quote on the two functions of religion that is: “it made people get together, and so was a form of social glue that created social solidarity. And, second, it gave people a way of understanding and seeing society, since it was religious identities that people came to have social identities” (2008, p. 38). If we look back at the histories of human world there are various evidences of playing politics on the pretext of these social identities. For identities give meaning to existence and life, people fight against one another for the sake of identity. Such a clash only causes bloody crimes bringing pains and sorrows to innocent people. Swarna’s account of the bloody scenes of Partition to Ida in the novel is one of the outcomes of communal riot: “When they received the worried, secret warning from a Muslim friend they too hastily departed. They had seen too much arson, looting, and people drunk with the lust of killing to feel exceptions. As it was, they were hanging on by a long emotional thread that needed but one direct threat the snap” (p. 136).

#### Bloodshed:

Kapur documents the accounts of the bloodshed of Partition by presenting the statements from different characters in her novel. Partition brings bloodshed and cruelties and it is described in following words: “People die- roasted, quartered, chopped, mutilated, turning, turning, 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). Kailashnath poignantly gives accounts of Partition in following words:

They looted and burnt, drank our blood, destroyed our peace, and put the fire of revenge in our guts. They had always hated us, tried to poison the well once. We learnt to make bombs with rags soaked in kerosene, and gunpowder in bottles. We closed our shop and took all our jewellery home. Some of it belonged to Muslims, who never claimed it. We were lucky, there was nothing in the shop when they burned it. My wife’s family had a cloth shop; they locked it and prayed to God, but in those days God wasn’t listening. When they found it reduced to dust and rubble, they left and came to Delhi. (p. 267)

Gopinath further retells the horrific situation: “A few days after the Assembly was dissolved, I had to go to the station. I will never forget the sight of that train. I threw up on the platform. It was taken straight to the shed to be washed. There was blood everywhere, dried and crusted, still oozing from the doorways, arms and legs hanging out, windows smashed” (268). The sight is unbearable to witness and it lasts forever. Violence stricken Amritsar was burning with red sky and smoke spreading wildness everywhere. “Wild with enthusiastic welcomes for those who made it to safety, wild with grief for the loss of a sister city that was steeped in blood. The Mussulmans chopped our people’s heads off, raped our women, cut off their breasts, all of which they claimed was in retaliation for what the Hindus were doing to them” (p. 270). As a consequence, many had to leave their hometown and shift to some safe places. Swarna Lata and her family too experienced and they had to leave their house. She shares that sorrow in the following lines: “So she and her husband fled, planning their return once the absurd trouble was over. Like thousands of others, abandoning their land, houses, furniture, carpets, linen, dishes, jewellery, pets, cars, books, gardens. Those things were never forgotten and around them crystallized an aura that borrowed its luster from tears that were too inadequate to shed. Too much had been lost, too many people had died” (p. 136).

#### **Trauma:**

Partition marks incurable trauma for being uprooted one from one’s root and dignity. “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” (p. 268). Swarna Lata expresses that:

How many really understood what was happening? It took us all by surprise – we never expected it – it would pass after they got what they wanted – what was the point of murdering, looting, raping, after the goal had been achieved? When the refugees came, they told stories about the killings, the abductions – those screaming girls – they spared no one, not even ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-olds – the forced conversions – people dying of hunger – boiling leaves – scraping the bark off trees – one roti in a day if they were lucky – this city felt its heart about to break – and there was nobody who could come and who was not welcome. Such moments happen but occasionally in history – when our hearts move out in love and tenderness for those who suffer, and whose suffering we ourselves have so narrowly escaped. Occasionally in history – and it is just as well it is only occasionally – the price one pays for a mass synthesis of generous spirits is too great. (p. 272)

Kanhiya Lal shares his trauma: “I’m a doctor and I had never seen so much blood. It was horrible. I will never forget it as long as I live” (p. 268). He continues, “My parents, brothers, uncles and aunts, most of my cousins, left Amritsar in ’47. After what we had seen, there was no question of staying in that hellish place, where people killed each other like hooligans” (p. 268-269). Gopinath reveals that after witnessing the horrible sight of the station he and his relatives face traumatic phase: “It does no good to remember, no good to think of those things, we had to get on with our lives. If we thought too much we would go mad, as our uncle did after he fled Sultanpur. He couldn’t forget what he had lost, could never find anything to do that he considered an adequate substitute for his old life, and he slowly sank into senility and uselessness” (p. 268).

#### **Generosity and Cooperation:**

While the country is burning and exchanging people in borders there are also some people who work for humanitarian cause and common goal. Helping hands are extended to the needy persons in safeguarding their lives. “Everybody’s house functioned as an ashram, with beddings laid on the floor while the angans were converted into langars. To feed whoever came, whoever was there” (p. 270). “We were all together in those days. The whole city was an open house. There was a great spirit of generosity. They gave with open hearts” (p. 270). “They offered money, food, clothes, transport, shelter, time and care. The sorrow and the calamity was stifled in activity, in our sympathy for those who came, having lost everything, in the gratitude we felt for having survived” (p. 270). Some also attempted to dissuade other from escalating the situation. Parvati’s husband is one among them trying to suppress the atrocities: “Some stayed, desperate for news of those who had been left behind or lost in the march. They wanted to go back and look for them. And, if they were unsuccessful, they wanted to kill. Kill anybody who was not their own. The age, the sex, nothing mattered. Those, of

course, we did our best to dissuade, as we did our best to suppress the stories of atrocities that insidiously burnt themselves into us” (271). Kailashnath being a doctor works with his professional ethics and irrespective of differences in religion: “We treated all the sick and wounded, and no questions asked. Everybody knew that and respected it” (p. 269). His ideologies for humanity is further confirmed in the statement that “We tried to save as many of them as we could. To tell the truth, we were closer to our Muslim friends than we are to our fellow Hindus at present. These people have no culture” (p. 269).

## Discussion

The novel manifests the bitter truth of India during Partition. It manifests the harsh cruelties, inhumane acts and shame in the name of religion where men killed one another, women were raped, houses were burned down, assets were demolished. D. Graham Pole in *India in Transition* states:

The existence of separate electorates and the presence of an alien Government, in whose power it is to bestow boons and privileges, have undoubtedly encouraged communal claims and exploitation of sectional differences. It is a mistake, therefore, to attach undue significance to the communal question. If the harmonious co-operation of the minority communities in the working of the new constitution is to be secured, it is necessary that their claims should be met as far as possible. But the real solution of the communal question will only be found when the communities – majority and minority – learn to identify their interests with the interests of India as a whole. This approach to the question, it is encouraging to note, already exists among the younger generation in India. (1984, p. 229).

This communal attitude bred hatred among brothers mitigating humanity and ethical values, killing people in the name of religion. The peaceful coexistence of multiethnic and multicultural Indians was destroyed in the name of religion and the unified India was shattered by the parted interests of the communities. Partition marks indelibly its pang on innumerable Indians filled with disintegration of hopes, humiliation and pessimism. Butalia aptly highlights this despairing situation in the following words:

For many of us, who were first and second generation children after partition, the event lives on in our minds, not so much through historical records as through tales that are told and retold, particularly in north Indian families, of the horror and brutality of the time, of friends and relatives who continue to live across the border and of visits to ancestral homes, much of this creating a yearning for a – largely mythical – harmonious past where Hindus and Sikhs and Muslims lived happily together. This ideal is something that we continue to hold on to in the face of an increasingly communal present. (1994, p.33)

Kapur stresses this feeling in the following words: “But ultimately, the fault was ours. If we were stupid, greedy and uncivilized enough to allow religion to be used in this way, why blame them? The same thing is happening on a smaller scale even now, when there are no British around. People blame them for this legacy, but how long can you keep doing that? There is always the past to contend with, in one way or another, hidden or openly, one’s own or one’s country. Births and deaths are messy, ragged affairs” (268).

Partition uprooted many from their origins subverting their identity and forcing them to migrate to new environment reestablishing new identity with unavoidable compromises and compulsory acceptance. “We estimate the impact of the 1947 Indian subcontinent partition, one of the largest and most rapid population exchanges in human history” (Bharadwaj, et al., 2009, p. 1). Butalia further stresses the exchange of people during partition in the words: “The political partition of India caused one of the great human convulsions of history. Never before or since have so many people exchanged their homes and countries so quickly. In the space of a few months, about twelve million people moved between the new, truncated India and the two wings, East and West, of the newly created Pakistan” (2017, p.1). Kapur through the words of Swarna Lata highlights this situation of Partition compelling her and her family to leave Amritsar which is their birthplace in the novel: “We had to ... had to ... though we hadn’t believed – never believed – things would come to such a pass. Lahore was our city – our home. Whether it went to India or Pakistan was irrelevant, we didn’t care. Nothing was going to make us forsake it, Leaders of both sides claimed – again and again – minorities would be safe. They said to quit would feed communalism. We assumed that ourselves. We had always co-existed. Why not now?” (135-36)

In retrospect, Kapur unravels the realities of the independence India got after losing innumerable lives thereby going back to dark ages of ignorance where people acted irrationally through the comments of Virmati: “What birth is this? With so much hatred? We haven’t been born. We have moved back into the dark ages. Fighting, killing over religion. Religion of all things. Even the educated. This is madness, not freedom” (276). Thus, Kapur in the novel illustrates various aspects of Partition of India recording the woes of civilians who were torn apart due to religious biasness. Religion which aims to foster the meaning of their live brings deaths and plight only. This ironic manifestation despairs them creating doubts to their existence and situating them in this aggrieved condition. The communal feelings instigate hatred among brothers shattering the bond of integrity and turning everything into dust.

## Conclusion

Kapur dissects the issues of Partition in this novel documenting grief of innumerable Indians in her fictional world. The novel is a representation of the inhumane, lawless and terrible situations where people turn into hooligans thirsting only blood in the name of religion. It recounts the shameful act of shedding bloods everywhere and killing people on religious differences. The author demonstrates the misuse of religious affiliation and attachment misinterpreting its values for political gain discrediting human values. Through her multifaceted fictional characters, she retells multilayered realities of India during Partition. By making her characters stating their experience of the period she introspects the reason for occurrence of Partition of India and provides us a platform to reexamine communal enactments.

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