

SEARCH FOR FREEDOM OF A NATION AND OF WOMAN IN MANJU KAPUR'S DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS

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Abstract :

Difficult Daughters is the story of a young woman torn between the desire for education and the lure of illicit love. The story is set around the times of Partition and written with absorbing intelligence and sympathy. Manju Kapur's first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, published in 1998 and located in the India of the 1940s portrays with great narrative eloquence about the idea of independence. The key theme of control over one's destiny refers to the independence obtained by a nation and independence yearned by a woman from so called tradition and culture. *Virmati* displays a strong attempt to break the bonds of mindless convention as she attempts to challenge the hierarchy of power relations by evolving a condition of freedom in her thoughts, actions and relationships in the early phase of her life. Freedom, as a means of self-governance for the Indian nation, has not ensued into a state of self-determination for the Indian woman who has still got to fight the effects of marginalization and constriction, be it *Virmati* of *Difficult Daughter* or a woman living in modern India.

Introduction :

Difficult Daughters is the story of a young woman torn between the desire for education and the lure of illicit love. The story is set around the times of Partition and written with absorbing intelligence and sympathy. Manju Kapur's first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, published in 1998 and located in the India of the 1940s portrays with great narrative eloquence about the idea of independence. The key theme of control over one's destiny refers to the independence obtained by a nation and independence yearned by a woman from so called tradition and culture. The notion of 'double colonization' of women wherein they were colonized both by patriarchal and imperial ideologies. The role of women has undergone a significant alteration in this era of post colonialist and achieved much control on their bodies and mind, particularly in terms of decision making. Manju Kapur had initially named her first novel "Partition" but changed it to *Difficult Daughters*. National fantasies play upon the connections between women, land or nations. Women served as a central signifier of the nationalist imaginary. In the nationalist imagination a new female figure was formulated. She epitomized the Victorian ideals of domestic virtue, patient and long suffering. She was also self-confident, self-reliant and the real guardian of the nation's spiritual essence. This self-affirming image had a popular appeal that seized the literary imagination for decades to come.

Background :



In Manju Kapur's "Difficult Daughters" (1998) the national movement is used as a background, to show women's role and participation in freedom movement. Women in the national imaginary were placed on a high pedestal but in reality, as we know pedestals are extremely precarious places. In the newly homogenized Indian tradition, women were set up as emblems of it but unfortunately their difficulties and discriminations were ignored. Kapur's writings have autobiographical elements that traces the destiny of its female protagonist through the trajectory of a nation's history, presenting a postcolonial critique of imperialism through the collective experience of the struggle in the Indian nation, as and how it is refracted through the saga of individual women's lives. The writer attempts a meaningful exposure of everything that is in the nature of questionable traditions, ideologies, class structures and ideals in the Indian society.

The main character of the novel, Virmati, is a young woman born in Amritsar into an austere and high-minded household, falls in love with a neighbour, the Professor-a man who is already married. The Professor eventually marries Virmati, and keeps her in his home (alongside his furious first wife) and helps her towards further studies in Lahore is small consolation to her scandalized family or even to Virmati, who finds that the battle for her own independence has created irrevocable lines of partition and pain around her.

Search for Identity :

The name of the female protagonist Virmati that means courage explores the question of women's identity and subjectivity in context of the cultural and political formulation of a nation-in process, through one's tempestuous life history. The novel may be considered as a kind of aborted attempt of its female protagonist Virmati, much like the nation that she belongs to, to make a transition from the state of strife and oppression to that of freedom and fulfilment. She emblemizes the process of emerging nationalism by self-individuation or the process of separating one's self from the trappings of 'the other' self which is subjugated by colonial and cultural politics.

The fictional relocation of a Nation in the throes of its colonial experience and nationalistic struggle is traced in the novel through the rugged trajectory of women's lives amidst the cultural and political processes of anti-colonialism which go into shaping our history and our future. History, in the hands of woman writers, becomes an instrument for emancipating human imagination from the constrictions of 'colonialism', both in its aspects of cultural determinism and political domination which oppresses, exploits and marginalizes the face of human dignity. Kapur deals with the powerful theme of love and loneliness, faith and betrayal, sexuality and self-assertion, against the sweeping backdrop of the worldwide conflict between the colonizer and the colonized. The inner conflict and rebellious dissent informing the characterization of Virmati are grounded in the personal anguish and denunciation of the forces of 'colonialism', whether political, cultural, economic or otherwise. The multi-faceted configuration of our history and geography and the geology of our national space that is emblemized by the women figure.

Virmati displays a strong attempt to break the bonds of mindless convention as she attempts to challenge the hierarchy of power relations by evolving a condition of freedom in

her thoughts, actions and relationships in the early phase of her life. She displays a fearless tenacity in fighting a sense of alienation and longing for security, accruing into a disdainful rebellion against oppressive modes of kinship with socio-moral determinism. Virmati has a frenzied sense of identity through self-determination which remains reduced to a state of suppressed rage over her own idleness and her mother's constant preoccupation with family obligations. "How trapped could nature make a woman", surmises the inner voice, brooding over the regretful prospect of women's relegation to a sphere of meaningless inertia? The real business of life, at least for women, is not the arena of their nation's struggle for Independence but that of marriage and motherhood. The first influence on the life of Virmati is her cousin Shakuntala whom she admired for her broad – mindedness and liberal thought. Virmati's restless yearning for the fulfillment of her aspirations, personal and professional, her refusal to marry a boy of her parent's choice, the clandestine blossoming of her love for a married man and her failure to achieve distinction in studies leads to the brink of a failed suicide attempt. Virmati feels like "a jailbird on parole" when she is at college, away from the confines of her home and yet, bound by the chains of obeisance to conventions, which instil in her a vegetative inertia. The 'battleground' of Virmati's sensibility is invaded with an element of guilt and frustration wherewith she confesses her helplessness in coping up with the ferment of a 'freedom struggle' within and without her psychic response to life. As the world around her gets embroiled in the national freedom struggle, it unravels in her a personal desire to liberate her suppressed longing for fulfilment in love.

Virmati found her studies to be her passport to independence, not just her passport to sleeping with the Professor. She made up her mind to solve her problems on her own. She was worthy of independence.

As she struggles against the vitality of her jouissance, the uninhibited splurge of her desire for a sexual relationship with Harish, so does she realize the unbridgeable distancing of her energy from the fray of her nation's freedom struggle, "Am I free", thought Virmati "I came here to be free but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent being in love. Wasting it" (131). Virmati feels in awe of women like Mohini Dutta and Swarnalata whose pro-active participation in strikes and rallies as a part of Gandhiji's 'satyagraha' movement highlight the progression of women's movement from the domestic hearth to the arena of a nation's freedom struggle. Virmati induces herself to wake up from the "stale dream" of her strength and self-respect through the avenue of education and professional competence. "She was worthy of independence"(150), and the Nation, into an interchangeable pattern of identity-formation. Virmati's marriage to Harish transports her to "the tradition of weeping brides" (187). As Virmati reels under the pressure of her own family who consider her as dead, her country is plunged into a battlefield where "identities, loyalties and futures and nations were becoming a matter of choice rather than tradition" (217). Virmati's ostracization at the hands for her father's death, combined with her miscarriage, returns her to Lahore for "the civilizing influence" of higher education exposes her to the state of nationalistic fervour, as well as communal disharmony prevalent in India in the mid-40s.

Identity of a Nation and a Woman :



The desperate need for making one's separate identity of a country called Pakistan in the midst of India's impersonated involvement in the Second World War for a cause to their native interests coincides with Virmati's increasing estrangement from her husband's family, especially his first wife Ganga. Virmati's sense of self-esteem and honour is as seriously jeopardized as that of her nation. Virmati's disenchantment with her role as a domestic parasite incites her to emulate Kiran, a woman actively involved in the activities of the Indian National Army. As the lines of partition are drawn on the map of undivided India, borders between the two 'nations' assumes the repercussions of psychological alienation and physical dislocation, as millions of refugees uprooted from their home and hearth try to relocate spaces of affiliations and belonging, their sensibility besieged by a sense of betrayal, both in relation to the integrity of their nation and to the ideal of nationalism. Virmati always felt alienated in the Professor's home along with his first wife though the Professor considered her as his intellectual partner. In 1944, the communal rift widens. Virmati's life in Lahore was isolated. She read, she studied, and she spent time in the quiet hush of the library. Freedom at the cost partition of India and freedom for Virmati come at the cost of giving away all of Ganga's belongings in charity.

At the end of the novel, Kapur leaves the reader at the threshold of a freedom that has come at the cost of segregation of sects, severance of ties and the prospect of a stunted growth. Partition, in such terms, is rendered as a kind of division that is more than the mere demarcation of boundaries. It acquires the dimensions of a severe disruption, both in the ties of individual affection and human bondage, dislocating the peoples of an entire nation, subverting the wholeness of Virmati's womanhood into fragments of alienation. It is in the midst of India's partition that a daughter is born to Virmati---she is the progeny and the price that the Indian nation had to pay for reclaiming its autonomy and identity. Harish's refusal to name her 'Bharti', a synonym for India's heritage and glory, spells out the authorial disillusionment with the face of violence and fanaticism assumed by the Indian nation in the wake of its emancipation from colonial rule. "This is madness, freedom. And I never wish to be reminded of it" (256), laments Harish, who feels compelled with the birth of his daughter, Ida, the need to augur "a new slate, a blank beginning" (256) in the chapter of India's (re)birth as an independent country".

Conclusion :

Freedom, as a means of self-governance for the Indian nation, has not ensued into a state of self-determination for the Indian woman who has still got to fight the effects of marginalization and constriction, be it Virmati of Difficult Daughter or a woman living in modern India. She is the one who has gone through the gestation of pain and trauma, of elation and upliftment, in giving birth to a Nation, where a kind of new-Colonial might take its roots and prevail still in the nature of mindless convention, gender exploitation, communalism, terrorism and sectarianism which partitions the bondage of humanity. It goes without saying that women, in universal terms, share with the colonized races an experience of the politics of oppression and repression, marginalized and to the extent that they pursue an ideological warfare against forms of Imperialistic domination and cultural neo-Colonialism.

In a way, Kapur makes use of gender as a means for articulating an oppositional discourse or, as a kind of counter narrative written with the intent of forwarding the process of

“nationalistic recuperation, identity reconstruction and nation formation”(179). Nationalism, in this instance, becomes denotative of a process of self-realization, both for the Woman and the Nation as autonomous entities or the part of “an imagined community” (Anderson), which requires ties of mutual recognition and inclusiveness. Kapur makes an innovative use of the art of biographical fiction to forward the notion that any socio-cultural and historical account of the freedom struggle and decolonization of a nation has to be detached from the pseudo-patriotic and sentimentalist associations in order to ground its relevance to the real issues concerning the distribution of power and agency, of self-definition and autonomy.

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