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Between Duty and Desire: Female Subjectivity and Partition in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) revisits the Partition of India through the domestic and emotional life of Virmati, a young woman from Amritsar who seeks education and autonomy in a society that treats a daughter's life as family honour. This paper argues that the novel presents Partition not only as a political rupture but as a continuum of gendered constraint, in which nationalist aspiration and patriarchal control operate side by side. Drawing on feminist theory and Partition scholarship, it examines how Virmati's pursuit of education, her relationship with the married Professor Harish, and her eventual position as a second wife expose the limited freedoms available to women within both the family and the nationalist movement. It further considers the novel's framing narration by Ida, Virmati's daughter, as an act of retrieving a silenced maternal history. The paper concludes that Kapur dismantles the idealised image of the "new woman" of the nationalist era by showing the cost of her choices.

Keywords: Partition literature; feminism; patriarchy; female subjectivity; domestic space; nationalism

1. Introduction

Partition literature has long shifted between the public narrative of political division and the private narrative of loss. Official histories of 1947 recount negotiations, boundary commissions and the transfer of power, while fiction and oral testimony record what these events meant inside homes, courtyards and families. Manju Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters* belongs firmly to the second tradition. Published in 1998, the fiftieth anniversary year of Independence, it locates the upheaval of the 1940s within the confined spaces of a Punjabi middle-class household and asks what the nationalist moment offered, and withheld, from the women who lived through it.

The novel follows Virmati, the eldest daughter of a large family in Amritsar, who comes of age in the years leading up to Partition. Educated at a time when schooling for girls was being promoted by reformist families, she is nevertheless expected to marry the suitor chosen for her and to place family reputation above personal ambition. Her refusal of an arranged marriage, her love for a married professor, Harish Chandra, and her later struggle to find a legitimate place in his household form the central movement of the plot. The story is not told directly. It is reconstructed by Virmati's daughter, Ida, who returns to the history of her mother after her death. The title thus carries a double meaning: Virmati is a "difficult" daughter to her own family, and Ida, in turn, is a difficult daughter to her mother's memory.

Critical attention to *Difficult Daughters* has largely centred on its feminist concerns and its treatment of Partition. What remains less examined is the way the novel treats nationalism and patriarchy as parallel systems that make claims on the female body and on female choice. This paper addresses that gap. It argues that Kapur uses Virmati's story to expose the entanglement of nationalist idealism and patriarchal control, and that the "difficulty" named in the title belongs less to the daughters than to the structures that define them as problems.

The argument proceeds in five stages. The paper first reviews existing scholarship on gender and Partition and on Kapur's fiction. It then outlines a theoretical framework drawn from Beauvoir, Showalter, Chatterjee, Butalia, and Menon and Bhasin. The analysis that follows considers four aspects of the novel: the regulation of the daughter within the family, education as a form of resistance and its limits, the politics of the second wife, and Ida's narration as an act of recovery. The conclusion draws these strands together. All references to the novel are to the Faber and Faber edition listed in the Works Cited, and page numbers should be verified against the edition used by the author.

Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* (1998) drew on interviews with survivors to show that violence against women, forced migration, abduction and the pressure to preserve family honour were central, not marginal, to the Partition story. Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's *Borders and Boundaries* (1998), published in the same year as Kapur's novel, examined the recovery of abducted women by the Indian and Pakistani states and argued that women's bodies became symbolic territory over which communities and nations contested their honour.

These works were preceded by an important body of research on women and nationalism. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid's collection *Recasting Women* (1989) investigated how colonial reform, nationalist politics and indigenous patriarchy together shaped the "women's question" in nineteenth- and twentieth-century India. Partha Chatterjee's *The Nation and Its Fragments* (1993) added a widely cited argument: Indian nationalism resolved the women's question by assigning women to the inner, spiritual domain of the home while men negotiated the outer, material world of politics. Taken together, these studies provide the historical ground on which a novel like *Difficult Daughters* can be read.

Criticism of Kapur's novel has generally followed two lines. The first reads it as a woman-centred Partition narrative, valuing its attention to the private sphere over the public events of 1947. The second places it within the tradition of Indian women's writing in English, noting its concern with education, marriage, and

the mother-daughter bond, and its resemblance to other novels by women that revisit nationalism through domestic life. Both approaches have established that the novel gives women a voice in a history dominated by male actors. Fewer studies, however, treat Virmati's choices as a sustained critique of nationalist modernity itself, or consider how Ida's framing narration complicates the idea of a recoverable female history.

The present paper builds on these insights while pursuing a narrower question: how does the novel dramatise the cooperation, rather than the opposition, of nationalist and patriarchal authority? By reading the domestic plot alongside the historical plot, it argues that Virmati's difficulties are not accidents of one family but the product of a wider system, and that Kapur's narrative method makes this system visible

The paper draws on a feminist framework that treats gender as a social construction and the family and the nation as institutions that produce it. Simone de Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman (Beauvoir 267) underlies much of this thinking. It suggests that femininity is assembled through upbringing, expectation and constraint, and it allows a reader to see Virmati's family training in obedience, domestic labour and sacrifice as a process of making rather than a natural condition.

Elaine Showalter's account of women's literary history offers a second lens. In *A Literature of Their Own*, she describes a progression from a "feminine" phase of imitating dominant male norms, to a "feminist" phase of protest, to a "female" phase of self-discovery. *Difficult Daughters* does not fit neatly into any one stage. It records protest, but it also turns toward self-discovery through Ida's act of reconstructing her mother's life. Virginia Woolf's argument in *A Room of One's Own* that a woman needs economic independence and private space in order to create is relevant here as well, because Virmati's struggle for education and for a room of her own repeatedly meets domestic and social obstacles.

Partha Chatterjee's distinction between the inner and outer domains of the nation provides the political dimension. According to Chatterjee, nationalist thought located the nation's spiritual essence in the home and

in the figure of the woman, so that women could be educated and even visible in public life only to the extent that they preserved this essence. This helps explain why Virmati's education is both welcomed and policed. It also shows why nationalism could support reformist schooling for girls while leaving the authority of fathers and husbands largely intact.

The Partition-specific analysis relies on Butalia and on Menon and Bhasin. Both argue that women's experience of 1947 cannot be separated from the discourse of honour, and that the nation, the community and the family all claimed rights over women's bodies. Gayatri Spivak's question about whether the subaltern can speak adds a note of caution (Spivak 271-313). It reminds the reader that retrieving a woman's story, as Ida attempts to do, always involves mediation, selection and silence. Together these frameworks make it possible to read the novel as a study of how gender is made, regulated and narrated across the private and public spheres.

Family, Honour and the Regulation of the Daughter

The novel opens Virmati's story inside a household organised around reproduction and duty. As the eldest of many children, she is expected to help her mother, Kasturi, with the work of raising her siblings, and the narrative makes clear that her time and labour belong to the family long before she has any claim on them for herself .Kasturi herself is a figure of exhausted endurance, shaped by repeated pregnancies and by a life in which her own wishes were never at issue. The mother becomes the first example of what Virmati is being trained to become, and the daughter's early dread of repeating this life explains much of what follows.

What gives this domestic regime its force is the language of honour. A daughter's conduct is treated as a measure of the family's standing, so that her movements, friendships and education are subject to continuous scrutiny. When Virmati declines the match arranged for her, the objection is not simply that she is disobedient but that she endangers the reputation of the house hold. This is the logic Menon and Bhasin identify in

their study of Partition: women are made to carry the collective honour of the family and the community, and any assertion of independence is read as a threat to that honour (Menon and Bhasin). Kapur sets this logic in motion well before the riots of 1947, which suggests that the violence of Partition did not create the regulation of women's bodies but intensified a system already in place.

The family's response to Virmati's resistance is also revealing. Rather than meeting it with open confrontation alone, her relatives use emotional pressure, guilt and the threat of social disgrace. Her sense of obligation to her mother and to her younger siblings becomes a form of control that is harder to oppose than outright prohibition. In Beauvoir's terms, Virmati is made to internalise the role assigned to her, so that the constraint operates from inside as well as outside. The novel therefore presents patriarchy less as the rule of individual fathers than as a web of expectations in which women, including mothers and aunts, also take part.

This detail matters for the paper's central argument. If the family were the only site of regulation, Virmati's flight toward education and the wider world would read as simple liberation. Kapur complicates that reading by showing that the world she enters has its own rules, and that the nationalist and reformist spaces open to her carry demands of their own.

Education as Resistance and Its Limits

Education is the novel's most hopeful promise and its most ambiguous one. For Virmati, study in Lahore represents a route out of the destiny prepared for her at home. The college offers her companionship with other young women, exposure to political ideas, and a vocabulary in which independence is a legitimate aim. Her friendship with Swarnalata, a politically committed fellow student, and the presence of her cousin Shakuntala, a woman who has shaped a life of her own through study and work, show Virmati that alternatives to marriage exist. In Woolf's terms, education begins to supply the intellectual space that a woman needs in order to imagine a self beyond domestic duty.

Yet the novel is careful not to present education as an unqualified liberation. The same reformist ideology that encourages girls' schooling does so within limits, valuing educated women as better wives, mothers and moral guardians of the household. This corresponds to Chatterjee's analysis of the nationalist settlement: women may enter the public sphere of the classroom provided they remain the keepers of the inner domain. Virmati's schooling, then, is permitted because it can be absorbed into family and nation, and it becomes dangerous only when it begins to produce a will that cannot be absorbed.

Kapur also shows how the demands of political life place their own pressure on women. The nationalist mood of the period gives young women a sense of participation in a great collective cause, and Virmati is surrounded by talk of sacrifice, duty and the country's future. However, it is the male actors in the novel who set the terms of this participation, and the women's role is more often to support, to organise and to serve. The rhetoric of national liberation does not extend automatically to the liberation of the woman at home. This disjunction recalls the argument of Sangari and Vaid that nationalist reform reconfigured patriarchy rather than ending it.

Virmati's own relationship to this contradiction is not simple. She wants independence, but she also wants love and recognition, and these desires lead her into a situation that undermines the very autonomy she has sought. This makes her a figure of real complexity rather than a model feminist heroine. Her education gives her the means to resist, yet it does not shield her from the emotional dependencies that the society she lives in has produced. Kapur thereby refuses the easy narrative in which learning alone secures freedom, and she points instead to the structural conditions that determine how far a woman's choices can travel.

Virmati's relationship with Harish Chandra is the pivot on which the novel turns. Harish is an educated, culturally confident man who represents the intellectual life that Virmati admires, and the relationship begins as a meeting of minds. Its complication lies in the fact that he is already married to Ganga, a woman who has been shaped by a very different world and who lacks the education that Virmati has acquired. The love that

develops between Virmati and Harish therefore places two women on opposing sides of a situation that neither has made.

The novel resists the temptation to cast either woman as villain. Ganga is presented as a figure of dignity and sorrow, her position protected by custom but emptied of affection, while Virmati is shown to be both agent and victim in her own choices. Their rivalry, to the extent that it exists, is produced by a system that offers women security only through marriage and gives them no other vocabulary for their worth. This is where the figure of the second wife becomes theoretically productive. She is simultaneously a transgressor, because she enters another woman's marriage, and a casualty, because she is made to depend on a man whose own commitments remain divided.

Harish's conduct also deserves scrutiny. He speaks the language of modern, companionate love and sees himself as emancipated from the constraints of his family, yet his actions repeatedly leave Virmati to bear the social and emotional cost of their relationship. He remains attached to his family's approval and to his own professional standing, and the consequences of the affair fall far more heavily on her than on him. The pattern exposes the gap between progressive rhetoric and everyday practice that Chatterjee's nationalist "new man" and "new woman" conceal. A man may endorse women's freedom in principle while relying, in practice, on women's endurance.

Virmati's eventual marriage to Harish is therefore not a triumph but a compromise. She secures a recognised place only after a long period of ambiguity and exclusion, and even then she enters a household in which she remains an outsider to its first wife and to a family that has never fully accepted her. The domestic space that was meant to represent fulfilment becomes another site of negotiation. Kapur writes this outcome with restraint, allowing the reader to see that Virmati has won the right to be a wife but has lost much of the independence that first drew her toward a different life.

This placement matters for the novel's historical meaning. The years in which Virmati's personal story unfolds are the years in which the subcontinent is being divided, and the novel invites a parallel between the two. Just as the country is partitioned by political decisions made by others, Virmati's life is shaped by decisions in which her own voice carries limited weight. The partition of land and the partition of the household are not identical events, but they share a structure in which women are the ones asked to absorb the cost.

Ida's Narration: Reclaiming the Maternal Story

The novel's frame is as important as its plot. Ida, Virmati's daughter, introduces the narrative by confessing that she had wanted above all not to resemble her mother, and she goes on to piece together her mother's life from memory, family accounts and the residue of what Virmati left behind. Her opening gesture establishes the book's central relationship. The mother is both the figure from whom the daughter has tried to escape and the figure whose history she cannot stop investigating.

Ida's position is not that of a neutral historian. She belongs to a later generation that has benefited from the choices her mother made and that now stands in judgement of them. Her narration moves between sympathy and reproach, and the reader senses her struggle to reconcile the mother she knew with the young woman whose story she is reconstructing. This ambivalence is itself a form of feminist inquiry, since it asks what each generation of women owes to the one before and how the burdens of the past are transmitted. The title's phrase "difficult daughters" thus applies to Ida as much as to Virmati: she is difficult in her unwillingness to accept inherited roles and in her refusal to idealise her mother.

Ida's project is also a response to the silences that Butalia and others identify in the Partition archive. Women's experiences were routinely omitted from official history or reported through male voices, and Ida's reconstruction is an attempt to fill that gap through a daughter's imaginative labour. At the same time, the novel is honest about the limits of this effort. Ida works with fragments, and her account depends on what others

chose to tell her. Spivak's question about the possibility of speaking for another is relevant here, because Ida's narrative necessarily mediates her mother's voice and cannot recover it whole.

The mother-daughter structure also allows Kapur to set a pattern of repetition and difference across generations. Virmati rebels against Kasturi, Ida against Virmati, and each rebellion is shaped by the conditions of its moment. What changes is the vocabulary available for describing a woman's life and the range of options open to her. What does not change entirely is the pressure of family expectation and the cost of departing from it. By closing the novel on Ida's reflections, Kapur suggests that the work of understanding the maternal past is unfinished, and that the task of telling it falls to the daughters who inherit it.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *Difficult Daughters* presents Partition as part of a longer history of gendered constraint, in which the claims of nationalism and the claims of patriarchy frequently converge. Through Virmati's story, Kapur shows that a woman's body, her education and her choice of a partner are treated as matters of collective concern, whether the collective in question is the family, the community or the nation. The analysis of Virmati's family life demonstrated how honour regulates the daughter before any public crisis arrives. The discussion of education showed how reformist and nationalist ideals open some doors while closing others. The reading of Virmati's relationship with Harish and Ganga revealed the second wife as both a transgressor and a casualty of a system that offers women few secure positions. Finally, Ida's narration framed the entire story as an act of retrieval that is necessarily partial and ambivalent.

The novel's contribution lies in its refusal of easy conclusions. Virmati is neither a martyr nor a model. She is a woman of intelligence and desire who makes consequential choices within a narrow field of options and pays for them. By declining to celebrate her as a triumphant "new woman" of the nationalist era, Kapur exposes the limits of the reform narrative and invites readers to ask whose freedom it was meant to secure.

The title, then, repays close attention. The daughters are "difficult" only from the standpoint of the structures that expect their compliance. From the standpoint of the daughters themselves, and of Ida who writes them into memory, the difficulty lies in the structures. Further research might compare *Difficult Daughters* with other Partition narratives by women, or examine its reception in relation to the wider boom in Indian women's fiction in English at the end of the twentieth century. Either direction would extend the present argument that private life is a legitimate and necessary archive of public history.

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