

# Partition Trauma, Nostalgia and Rootlessness: A Reading of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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## **Abstract:**

*The violence of the Partition of India in 1947 is comprised not only of physical wounding but of psychological wounding as well. The different tales of memory, nostalgia and trauma remain embroiled not so much in the national discourse as in the subjectivities of individuals who have been directly or indirectly afflicted by the event. A close examination of Indian Partition fiction provides us with an understanding of the anguish and despair of the people who have been victims of the Partition holocaust. Narratives such as Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* call attention to the long drawn and multifaceted effect of this historical event on the psyche of the women of the country. What is significant here is that women's experience - the way they recall the event, the tales of their nostalgia, trauma and agony, provide a new perspective in looking into Partition history. This research article makes an attempt to analyze how far Partition fiction provides us with an understanding of the nature and extent of psychological trauma and sufferings of women who were compelled to adapt themselves in a new place after being uprooted from their homes. The study has been carried out with reference to Manju Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters* in an attempt to highlight the multidimensional aspects of the nostalgia, trauma and sense of rootlessness experienced by the women of the country during the Partition holocaust. The present study is based on a critical analysis and interpretation of Manju Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters* from the perspective of trauma theory. It highlights the issues relating to the multidimensional aspects of the nostalgia, trauma and sense of rootlessness experienced by the women of the country during the Partition holocaust and their representation in the selected novel by Manju Kapur.*

**Keywords:** *Partition, Trauma, Women, Nostalgia, Rootlessness*

The Partition of India in 1947 is not just an incident in the country's political history but it has also directly affected the common people of the nation, bringing about a myriad of suffering to the masses. Partition line had been inscribed between the two newly born countries, India and Pakistan in the name of according people their rightful places where their religion would be safeguarded and all their interests would be protected. The question that pertinently arises is how far the dream of the common people of the nation who endured immense hardships to reach the promised new and pure land had been fulfilled.

Partition narratives very often portray a dismal picture of the state of the people who somehow managed to reach the land of their dreams, leaving behind their homes and states. The different tales of memory, nostalgia and trauma remain embroiled not so much in the national discourse as in the subjectivities of individuals who have been directly or indirectly afflicted by the event. A close examination of Indian Partition fiction provides us with an understanding of the anguish and despair of the people who have been victims of the Partition holocaust.

This research article makes an attempt to analyze how far Partition fiction provides us with an understanding of the nature and extent of psychological trauma and sufferings of women who were compelled to adapt themselves in a new place after being uprooted from their homes. The study has been carried out with reference to Manju Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters* in an attempt to highlight the multidimensional aspects of the nostalgia, trauma and sense of rootlessness experienced by the women of the country during the Partition holocaust.

The present study is based on a critical analysis and interpretation of Manju Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters* from the perspective of trauma theory. It highlights the issues relating to the multidimensional aspects of the nostalgia, trauma and sense of rootlessness experienced by the women of the country during the Partition holocaust and their representation in the selected novel by Manju Kapur. The primary source consulted is Manju Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters*. Besides the primary source, secondary sources have been consulted as well, together with utilization of various library resources and internet materials.

The partition of India is a human tragedy and an epoch making event of far reaching impact on the life of the people of the subcontinent. The violence of the Partition is comprised not only of physical suffering but of psychological wounding as well. Even decades after the historical event, the Partition continues to live on in the minds of the people of the country.

Narratives such as Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* call attention to the long drawn and multifaceted effects of this historical event on the psyche of the women of the country. It is not that the psychological impact of the event on women differs in degree from that on the men of the country, but it definitely differs in terms of dimension. What is significant here is that women's experience - the way they recall the event, the tales of their nostalgia, trauma and agony provide a new perspective in looking into Partition history.

Both men and women have been affected and traumatized by the Partition holocaust and realities but the violation of women's sexuality distinctly connects the mind and the body in a most obvious manner. Nowhere is this link between the physical and psychological trauma so apparent than in the experiences of the female victims of the Partition riots. Therefore, the female experience of the violence, and their dislocation and trauma presents a new dimension to the event. The women who were tarnished in the hands of the men of rival communities, if not dead, faced social deaths i.e. were not accepted back by their own family members. Many of them were compelled to stay at rehabilitation camps, many perished, some were sold off, while some others found their ways to brothels or if fortunate enough, got married to their abductors and settled in a new country, severing all ties with their natal families.

Both the distress of women who had been sexually dishonoured and of those who managed to escape it by migrating to the other country is related to physical trauma. While the former group faced sexual violation, the latter group was physically ripped off from their homes and their birth places. This article examines Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* to understand the nature of the trauma of the women during India's Partition, associated with the reality when one's home and roots are destroyed and intruded upon. In a broader sense, it can be said that the Partition holocaust witnessed the breaking down of many women's personal worlds.

Narratives such as Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* show that the agony and distress associated with migration remain permanently imprinted in the psyche of the people. The scar remains fresh and memory interminable, even years after the eventuality. In the novel, the character Swarnalata's utterance summarizes the distress of an entire generation witnessing the destruction of the hopes they

had nurtured for their free nation. As Ida asks Swarnalata if she had also left Lahore after Partition, the mental suffering of the older woman becomes quite evident:

Her voice fluttered and trembled over the division that had ploughed furrows of blood through her generation ... Nothing was going to make us forsake it...We had always coexisted. Why not now? (Kapur 124)

Ida narrates how Swarnalata, who has always been a strong believer of the integrity of the diverse communities of her country, had to flee from Lahore once communal tension broke up as a result of the Partition:

When they received the worried, secret warning from a Muslim friend they too hastily departed ... As it was they were hanging on by a long emotional thread that needed but one direct threat to snap. (Kapur 124)

Initially, Swarnalata and her associates could not believe that they had to leave their beloved city where they had spent their youth, carried out processions, conducted rallies and held conferences in support of national integrity in the face of British imperialism. Swarnalata's disbelief becomes a metaphor for the sheer absurdity of the act of partitioning one country on the basis of religion. Alok Bhalla writes in connection with this tragedy when millions of such people had to take the decision of leaving their homes almost overnight and also comments on the futility of religious fastidiousness as the basis of dividing a country and its people:

A majority of the migrants were ordinary Hindus, Muslims, or Sikhs who were more concerned with the problems of survival in their daily lives than with their religious identities ... Many who crossed the newly marked borders, even those who had supported the various demands of separate countries, did not want to leave the places that they had come to regard as their zameen, their piece of ground, their home. (Bhalla 4)

Like thousands of people during the time of Partition, Swarnalata's family also left behind all their properties and belongings with the hope of coming back, once the abnormal situation would get over. They were sure that it was just a passing phase, absurd and temporary. Swarnalata's recollection of her plight helps the readers to understand how an entire generation of the nation became mendicants overnight and what hardships they had to face to rebuild their lives in an entirely alien and new surrounding. But what is emphasized by most of the narrators of the partition story is that even if these uprooted people, through immense struggle, could regain establishment and material comfort, they could not escape the sense of loss and pain throughout their lives. After the interview with Swarnalata, Ida reflects:

Swarnalata's nostalgia is so strong that I felt it too. We live in the long shadow of those times. We live in the long shadow of those times, I thought as I sit before her, my pen my votive offering to her age and history. (Kapur 125)

The expression of this sense of nostalgia acquires different manifestations in different persons. While Swarnalata is expressive about her experiences during the Partition days, her friend Virmati chooses to remain completely silent on this subject. Ida comments on her mother's unwillingness to talk about the past, "No use thinking about the past', had been my mother's axiom, blanketing everything in oblivion." (Kapur 125)

There are several references to this reluctance to speak about that time by many survivors of the holocaust in Urvashi Butalia's book. She writes:

One of the commonest responses I encountered when I began work was people's (initial) reluctance to speak. What, they asked me, is the use of remembering, of excavating memories we have put behind us? (Butalia 10-11)

However, this reluctance to remember the past does not necessarily quell the people's sense of suffering and nostalgia associated with the eventuality. For instance, Virmati's silence did not repress her trauma. It communicates her pain not only for the loss of her homeland but also for the loss of her conviction in the Utopia she believed she could build with the person she loved.

As in several novels written on the background of this turbulent time where the story of a young protagonist is narrated, in *Difficult Daughters* too, the narrative provides us with two parallel trajectories that demand to be read against each other. The happenings of the public sphere collide with the happenings of the protagonist's personal life. The nation's freedom struggle reaches its pinnacle as the protagonist's struggle for personal emancipation eventually etches the line of partition between her and her family members. Virmati's refusal to recollect the past conveys her mixed feeling for the time and space within which she had strived to find an independent life of her own and subsequently lost her innocence and girlhood.

Trauma theorists often emphasize how the survivors of holocaust remain silent about their trauma that subsequently gets expressed through the second generation. Virmati's silence instead of repressing the memory, underlines it. This could be the reason why her daughter Ida is driven to uncover the past. She makes a visit to the place where her parents met for the first time, the Government College of Lahore. This can be read as an interesting case of what in trauma theory is known as the "conspiracy of silence". It is the behavior of a group of people that by unspoken consensus, does not mention, discuss, or acknowledge a given subject. Diane Harvey in her treatise on how the Jewish Holocaust has a deep impact on the children of the survivors, discusses the manner in which children growing up with an undercurrent of bereavement and mourning unwittingly inherits the trauma of their predecessors. She writes:

During their childhood, children of Holocaust survivors or second generation survivors, as they have come to be known, have been the unwitting recipients of their parents' trauma. Survivor parents have unconsciously transmitted onto their children much of their own traumas, as well as investing them with all their memories and hopes.

(Harvey 23)

Harvey's hypothesis finds a literary substantiation in Kapur's narrative. The novel opens with Ida's comment, 'The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother.' This is further emphasized by the title of the novel, *Difficult Daughters*. Ida counters with Virmati in every possible occasion and tries to mould herself in an exactly opposite manner than that of her mother. Yet, Virmati's suppressed nostalgia and rootlessness are inherited by her daughter. The narration describing Ida's exhilaration on visiting Lahore reinforces this point:

Going to Lahore is not easy. It takes me two months. The queues in the visa section are long, the atmosphere between the two countries as usual hostile... until I thumbed through the pages of people's memories, and saw my questions as a bookmark in their leaves. (Kapur 126)

The use of words like 'possessively' and 'hunger' explain that Ida, who was otherwise born and brought up in post-partition India, nurses this intense love and passion for the land of their ancestors. As Ida goes to visit the Lahore Government College, the place where her parents met each other, her intense sense of satisfaction seems to stem from her finding of her roots:

And the Oxford of the East. I saw Government College Lahore, first from the road ... I take photographs of every turn in the staircase, the corridors, the classrooms, outer and inner aspects, knowing I may never be able to come again. (Kapur 126)

Kapur's narrative highlights how the memory, nostalgia and feeling of rootlessness get transmitted through different generations.

From the above discussion on trauma of women resulting from an acute sense of nostalgia and rootlessness arising from one's loss of homeland, it can be concluded that there has been an intense psychological turmoil for the women of the subcontinent as they had been affected by the Partition of India. Narratives like Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* quite effectively bring out not only the wide range of the partition trauma but also the gendered nature of it. The trauma of women in Partition thus acquires multiple dimensions as they were not only physically assaulted but also simultaneously denied kinship structure and were shorn off their basic identity. The process involves according to Antjie Krog's contention, denial of the very self as the body becomes "the site of torture and severe trauma". It also incorporates what in Jenny Edkins' words "a betrayal of trust", as the family disowned the victimized women. The fiction written on this historical period thus helps the reader to understand the wide range of psychological trauma of the women victims of the Partition.

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