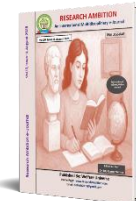




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## Where the Historical Meets the Personal: A Cultural Materialistic Reading of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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### KEYWORDS

Cultural materialism, Partition, Patriarchy, Gender Roles, Personal Identity, Social Expectations, Post-Colonial Literature, Historical Context, Female Autonomy, Subversion and Containment.

### ABSTRACT

This paper offers a cultural materialist reading of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, exploring the intersection of history and personal experience. Through the lives of three generations of women- Ida, Virmati, and Kasturi- the novel narrates the historical upheavals of India's Partition, while offering an intimate portrayal of personal narration and historical reflection, Kapur critiques social conventions and examines the impact of national events on individual lives. This paper aims to demonstrate how Kapur's narrative strategy not only reflects the socio-political conditions of the time but also challenges and critiques traditional gender roles, illustrating the complex dynamics between personal desires and social expectations.

In Britain and the United States, the 1980s and 1990s saw the rise of Robust, philosophically involved historical critique. British 'cultural materialism', as described by Raymond Williams, examines all forms of signification, including literature, within the context of their production. Graham Holderness, British critic defines cultural materialism as 'a politicised form of historiography'. According to Peter Barry, the focus on commitment reflects the impact of Marxist and feminist perspectives, marking a departure from the previously dominant conservative Christian approach in Shakespeare criticism.

It cannot be denied that the subject at a point of time in history is a product of its time and age. Every age or era has experienced anxieties about

socio-political givens of existence. In our case here, as we discussed Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* the subject under study is the female subject i.e., the woman. In all societies since time immemorial woman has been a subject of enquiry. It would not be wrong to say that anxiety regarding woman refuses to settle down and has been omnipresent even during historical upheavals and revolutions.

Instead of emphasizing the concept of 'discourse', Raymond Williams introduced the term 'structure of feeling'. These structures often oppose both the established systems of values and beliefs and the dominant ideologies in a society. Peter Barry commented on this term, "...characteristically found in literature, and they oppose the status quo (177). Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a case

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in point. The novel narrates the history of three women and spans three generations. Though it is a novel written by a woman about women, these women are placed against specific battles which are rather obviously to do with times in which these women have been born respectively. The novel gives a graphic account of the partition of India, while also illustrating pre-partition society. Lahore in particular is shown as a highly cultured liberal city. One cannot help noting a sense of nostalgia in those sections of the novel that talk about Lahore. The narrator of the novel is Ida who narrates the story of her mother Virmati and her grandmother mother Kasturi while she tells her own life story as well. No character in the novel is flat or completely predictable. The Kasturi who lives in the first half of the twentieth century is a typical Indian woman. However, that doesn't stop her from being assertive to the extent of being thoughtful towards her daughter's feelings. A certain degree of ambivalence can be seen here. When it comes to determining the "true nature of Kasturi". Though she is a woman herself and knows the misery of oppression she hounds Virmati with the idea of marriage.

Cultural materialist critics analyse literary texts, often Renaissance plays, to help us "recover their histories", meaning the context of exploitation from which these works arose. Holderness commented on the theory, describing it as an approach that uncovers the historical conditions. The characters in novels often have their secret lives exposed, unlike us, whose inner worlds remain hidden. This exposure provides comfort, making even flawed characters relatable. Novels

offer a sense of understanding and control over humanity, giving us the illusion of insight and power. At the same time, the knowledge novels provide can also police us because their narratives direct our 'thinking', limiting us to the ideas they present. Like propaganda from a ruling political party, these narratives shape and regulate our thoughts, aligning our desires with social reality. Narratives often condition us to accept their teachings without question, guiding our thinking in specific ways. Many novels depict the downfall of youthful dreams, focussing on desires and shaping our understanding of them. As we form our identities through these stories, novels become powerful tools for internalizing societal norms.

Novels not only critique society by revealing the emptiness of worldly success, the corruption within, and the failure to meet noble aspirations but also highlight the struggles of the oppressed. They expose the hollow promises, like the idea that partition was a solution, while contrasting it with the harsh reality of lives lost, women oppressed, and homes displaced. For instance, in the novel, Virmati's father dies during a riot, illustrating how the violence of Partition led to tragic losses as the author gives a description of how Suraj Prakash died, "he leaned over into the nearby gutter to vomit, when he was hit on the back of the head" (237). And the displacement of countless lives, as reflected in the accounts of various characters, like the account of Gopinath, "we travelled on trains....after that we lived with fear...the British left us with a final stab in the back. We didn't want freedom, if this what it meant. But we were forced to accept Partition and suffering along with

Independence...” (268). Parvati’s husband talked about the displacement in his account of the partition, “Thousands and thousands came to Amritsar. Overnight we had become a border city, .... There were four refugee camps...most of them left as soon as they found a place to go. Moving further into the new India.” (271). Swarna in her account of Partition talks about the crimes and the oppression of women that took place during partition, “...we never expected it-it would pass after they got what they wanted- what was the point of murdering, looting, raping,...refugees came...told stories about killings, the abductions- those screaming girls- they spared no one...the forced conversion- people dying of hunger...” (271).

The concept of subversion and containment in literature revolves around the dual role texts can play in society. On one hand, literature often appears to challenge or critique prevailing religious and political ideologies, presenting ideas that may seem radical or transformative. However, the same literature can also function to manage or contain these potentially disruptive energies within the boundaries of acceptable discourse. In the novel, when Ida complains about her mother saying, “My mother tightened her reins on me as I grew older, she said it was for my own good...I am looking for escapes’ routes”, (279) it’s the reflection on her mother, Virmati encapsulates the themes of subversion and containment within the context of literature. Ida’s words reveal the struggle between her desire for autonomy and societal expectations imposed upon her, particularly by her mother. Here, Virmati is representing the traditional norms,

seeks to contain Ida within these societal confines, urging her to conform for her “own good”. Thus, the texts can reinforce prevailing social norms and expectations, especially those regarding gender roles. However, Ida’s narrative also embodies subversion. Her acknowledgement of her “disastrous marriage and her mother’s disapproval post-divorce highlights the constraints imposed by these societal expectations. Ida’s constant search for “escape routes” symbolizes her resistance against these constraints. This resistance is further emphasized by her feeling of marginalization, as she sees herself as “hovering like a pencil notation on the margins of society” (279). Her narrative, therefore, subverts the traditional ideals of womanhood that her mother embodies, questioning the validity and relevance of these norms in the modern world. In essence, Ida’s reflections illustrate how literature can simultaneously serve to contain and reinforce societal norms while also providing a platform for subversion, challenging these very norms. This duality is central to understanding the complex role that texts like *Difficult Daughters* play in both mirroring and critiquing the society from which they emerge.

In this framework, a central question emerges: to what extent does a literary work provide a truly radical critique of the ideologies of its time? This inquiry examines whether the text genuinely disrupts and questions the status quo, challenging readers to rethink and possibly change their perspectives and beliefs. A radical critique would involve not just fundamental changes in societal structures, power dynamics, or cultural norms. Virmati, in the novel, embodies the paradox of

seeking freedom while being constrained by traditional norms. Her pursuit of education and her decision to marry for love reflect her desire to break free from societal expectation. Yet, despite these rebellious acts, Virmati ultimately imposes the same traditional fears and anxieties on her daughter, Ida worrying, “What will happen to you after I am gone?” (279), were one of her key concerns. This cyclical imposition of norms illustrates the containment aspect how even those who challenge societal expectations can unconsciously perpetuate them.

Conversely, the notion of containment suggests that even when literature appears subversive, it might still operate within a controlled space, allowing for dissents while preventing it from leading to real-world action or change. This can happen in various ways, such as by framing radical ideas in a manner that neutralizes their impact or by presenting them in a fictional context that distances them from reality. Manju Kapur, through Ida’s narrative, highlights the complex outcome of Virmati’s life choices. After Virmati’s death, Ida is technically free from her mother’s control, but this freedom leaves her isolated and lonely, illustrating that breaking away from tradition can lead to a different kind of confinement emotional and social alienation. This tension between subversion and containment reveals the deeply entrenched nature of societal norms and the personal costs of challenging them. In this view, literature’s subversive elements might be co-opted by the dominant culture to serve as a safety valve, releasing societal tensions without addressing the underlying causes. In the final lines of the novel,

Ida’s declaration to her deceased mother, “This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore”, (280) reflects a poignant moment of subversion and containment. This statement symbolizes Ida’s ultimate act of breaking free from her mother’s lingering influence. Throughout, the novel, Virmati’s life choices, driven by her own desires for freedom, ironically contain and constraint Ida, who feels trapped by her mother’s expectations and unfulfilled dreams. Ida wants to sever the emotional ties that have confined her identity, yet she cannot fully escape the internalized pressures and memories that shape her existence. This duality captures the complex interplay between liberation and the inescapable influence of deeply rooted familial and societal expectations.

Despite her rebellion, Virmati remains trapped by patriarchal norms, while Harish’s love, though genuine, is more about his status with an idealized partner than true commitment to Virmati as a person. Kapur subtly highlights the irony in the flawed foundation of their relation. Virmati’s relationship with Harish not only isolates her but also fails to compensate for her numerous sacrifices. Harish, though passionate, is too self-centred to relinquish any personal comfort and is oblivious to the damage his demands have caused her. Over time, he becomes a patronizing husband, lecturing Virmati rather than truly supporting her. Therefore, the dialect of subversion and containment in literature explores the balance between challenging and maintaining societal

norms. It questions whether literary works serve as a catalyst for change or as mechanisms for managing dissent, ultimately reflecting on the complex relationship between art and society in the struggle for ideological dominance.

Theorists often explore the role and the function of stories, which can be categorized as ‘narrative display texts. This category encompasses both literary narratives, like novels and the short stories, and the everyday stories that people share with each other. The reason these stories are shared and circulated is because they are considered ‘tellable’ or ‘worth it’. Storytellers are perpetually trying to pre-empt the potential question from their audience. “So what?” This underlying challenge forces them to ensure their stories are engaging and meaningful. But what makes a story ‘worth it’? Essentially, stories serve several important functions in human communications and culture. They entertain, educate, preserve cultural norms and provides a means for individuals to connect with one another. Stories entertain by captivating the audience’s imagination and emotion, often through relatable characters, compelling plots, and vivid settings. Similarly in the novel Kapur skilfully weaves together the personal narratives of characters like Virmati, Kasturi, and Ida, using their experiences to reflect broader historical and cultural realities. The novel does not just tell a story but engages with the concept of cultural materialism, where literature is seen as a product and reflection of its historical context, deeply intertwined with the social, political and economic conditions of its time. As a matter of the personality of Swarna “Kapur emphasizes the

efforts made at that time by numerous women who, while demanding equal opportunities, equal access to education and life-opportunities going beyond conventions, were a visible force in the non-violent resistance to the British”, according to Dora Sales Salvador’s preface to her novel’s Spanish translation. Virmati’s journey embodies India’s struggle between tradition and modernity, highlighting personal and societal conflicts during Partition. Whereas, Kasturi embodies traditional values, resisting change and to Virmati’s desires for education and independence, highlighting generational tensions and cultural resistance amid the social political upheaval of Partition. On the other hand, Ida bridges past and present, critically examining her mother’s life, Partition’s impact, and how history shapes personal and collective identities. Her narrative is not just a recollection but an analysis of the impact of history on personal identity. By focusing on the personal, Kapur is able to explore the cultural materialism of the time how economic, social, and political conditions of the era shaped individual lives and cultural practices. Through these narratives, Kapur also critiques the dominant cultural narratives of the time, exposing the limitations and biases of traditional histories that often overlook the experiences of women and other marginalized groups. This emphasizes the importance of culture in their historical and material contexts. The novel illustrates how individual lives are inextricably linked to larger historical forces, and how personal narratives can serve as a means of understanding and critiquing cultural and historical realities. By doing so, Kapur engages the audience in a deeper reflection on the



impact of history on personal and collective identities, making *Difficult Daughters* work in the context of cultural materialism. Educationally, through narratives, people learn about history, science, ethics, and social norms. Education is imparted through the narrator in the novel about the Partition as the author enlightens us from time to time in the novel, “By March it is clear that no coalition or single-party rule is possible in the Punjab. The Punjab Assembly is prorogued.... Massive killings start on a province-wide scale” (266). Whereas Indumati commented on the condition of women during Partition, “...raped our women, cut off their breasts, all of which they claimed was in retaliation...” (270)

Stories provide enjoyment, a concept Aristotle explains through their mimicry of life and inherent rhythm. The structured way narratives unfold, especially when they include unexpected turns, such as a twist of fate or role reversals, offers intrinsic pleasure. This novel’s rhythm is shaped by the interplay of personal and historical events, particularly during the tumultuous period of partition. The unexpected twists in Virmati’s life, such as her unorthodox pursuit of education and love, create a compelling narrative that engages readers on multiple levels. Many stories are designed with this primary aim: to entertain audiences by presenting novel twists on well-known scenarios. The role reversals and conflicts, like Virmati’s struggle against traditional norms, and her ultimate submission to certain aspects of societal expectations, reflects the broader social upheaval of the time. These elements give the story its depth, as the characters’ personal journeys are

intertwined with the larger historical narrative of India’s transition from colonialism to independence. The pleasure derived from reading *Difficult Daughters* comes not only from the unfolding of Virmati’s life but also from the way the novel captures the essence of an era, making the personal political and vice versa. The unexpected turns in Virmati’s life, as well as the broader societal shifts, resonates with the reader, providing a rich narrative experience that mirrors the unpredictable nature of real life. This pleasure comes from recognizing patterns and seeing them play out in engaging ways. Jonathan Dollimore commented on cultural materialism, who views culture as inseparable from its material conditions, treating literature as part of the wider social and political process that both reflects and shapes the power dynamics of its time. Thus, the novel reflects the socio-political conditions of its time specifically, the Partition of India and its aftermath. The novel also illustrates how the oppressive structures of society like family expectations, societal norms. Virmati’s life is not only a personal journey but also a reflection of the larger forces at play in her society, mirroring Dollimore’s view.

The pleasure derived from narratives is intimately connected to desire. Stories often revolve around desires what happens to them and how they unfold but it is the inherent curiosity, the ‘epistemophilia’ or desire to know, that propels narratives forward. We are driven to uncover secrets, to find out how stories end, and to seek the truth. Virmati’s quest for personal freedom amid Partition brings isolation and stigma, mirroring the nation’s struggle during dramatic change. Virmati,

burdened by family duties, dreams of education as an escape. However, her family's focus on marriage or 'settlement' clashes with her ambitions, disrupted by the professor's arrival. Virmati, pressured by an impending arranged marriage, attempts suicide and her secret affair with a married Oxford returned married professor is exposed. Her younger sister Indumati marries Virmati's former fiancé and she moves to Lahore, where she endures an abortion and dismissal from her teaching position. However, theorists delve deeper into the relationship between desire, storytelling, and knowledge. They question whether the knowledge provided by narratives is itself a product of desire. After Harish marries Virmati, her torment persists. Back in Amritsar, she endures family rejection and isolation, especially from Ganga, Harish's first wife. As partition grips the nation, familial hostilities fade. Like Harish perspectives about Virmati taking over the kitchen is significant viz it can be negative and positive when he remarks, "Poor thing, you have me, let her (Ganga) have the kitchen...so much is happening these days...why don't you work as a volunteer..." (230) so Virmati replied, "Anything to get me out of the how" and Harish replies, "No, anything to make you happy" (230) this shows the perspective of Harish it can be interpreted in many ways. Theorists explore how narrative knowledge may be driven by desire. This exploration examines how the act of storytelling is not just about presenting events but is also about fulfilling the audience's innate yearning to know more.

Stories serve multiple purposes beyond mere entertainment, as theorists have pointed out. They

educate us about the world, revealing how it functions and offering insights into perspectives and motives that might otherwise be obscure. Ida, deeply involved in her mother's story, blends personal involvement with research, abandoning scientific objectivity when she says, "History makes me insecure. I am glad I am not a historian" (267). This narrative technique educates readers, offering intimate insights into historical events by connecting them with personal emotions and experiences, fostering deeper understanding. Ida's position as a researcher of her mother Virmati's past is unique and deeply personal, allowing the narrative to blend historical events with intimate, emotional experiences. This narrative technique is crucial in educating readers about personal impact of historical events, like Partition, on individual lives. Through narrative techniques such as focalization, which allow us to see the world from different vantage points, stories help us understand experiences and emotions that are not our own. Ida's narrative technique serves as a powerful tool for educating readers about the intersection of history and personal experience. This ability to shift perspectives is particularly valuable in fostering empathy and comprehension of others' actions and motivations.

The novelists E.M Forster noted that novels offer the potential for perfect knowledge of others, something we rarely achieve in real life. In novels, characters are fully accessible to us; their inner thoughts and secret lives are laid bare. Like Ida's exploration into Virmati's life including intimate details like her first pregnancy and abortion, secret known only to Swarna. This merging of personal

and historical narratives invites the reader to engage with history. The depiction of history becomes more than just recounting of events; it becomes a deeply personal experience that resonates with the reader on an emotional level. Through *Virmati*, Kapur challenges marriage and highlights female sexuality. *Virmati*'s self-awareness battles emotional and physical desires. Ironically, *Partition*, symbolizing separation, reunites her with her mother and provides her a home after Ganga's departure. This contrasts sharply with our everyday interactions, where much of what others think and feel remains hidden. This transparency in fiction provides a unique form of solace. *Ida*, as the author's alter ego, reclaims her personal story within a larger collective history. In seeking her identity, she realizes it is shaped not just by rejecting her mother but also by understanding *Virmati*'s past and in seeking her mother's identity *Ida* realizes that her own identity is shaped by both her mother and the time *Virmati* lived in, beyond mere rebellion. After delving into her mother's past, *Ida* realizes that her mother is far more complex and closer to her than the "simple girl" dazzled by a man from "another world" as described by her aunt Parvati. Therefore novels offer a safe space to explore complex themes and moral dilemmas, allowing us to reflect on our values and beliefs without the immediate consequences of real-life decisions.

Narratives, particularly novels, shape our understanding of desires and social realities. In the Western literary tradition, novels often depict how youthful dreams are inevitably constrained by societal norms, showing how aspirations are

tempered and desires realigned to fit within the boundaries of social expectations. Despite *Virmati* and *Ida*'s challenges to patriarchal norms, their struggles ultimately highlight the difficulties of breaking free, revealing how deeply traditions entrenched can determine their rebellion and autonomy. Since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, novels have increasingly suggested that our true identity is found not through public achievements but in love and personal relationships. However, even as they encourage us to believe in the concept of "being in love", they simultaneously challenge and demystify that very idea. In the novel similarly, *Virmati* challenges patriarchal norms by pursuing education and an unconventional marriage. However, her resulting isolation and unhappiness demystify the idea of liberation, showing that breaking free from tradition can lead to further entrapment. In doing so, novels both reinforce and critique the social construct surrounding love and desire, reflecting the complexities of human emotions and relationships.

Novels play a crucial role in shaping our identities by encouraging us to internalize social norms through the characters and situations we identify with the values, behaviours, and societal expectations presented in these stories, which can deeply influence who we become. However, narratives also serve as a form of social critique. As in the novel, *Kasturi*, a traditional woman, accepts her "fate" without question, focusing solely on her wifely duties and arranging marriages for her daughters. *Virmati*, however, envisions a bigger life for herself, seeing education as a path to rebellion against tradition. So, when *Virmati*'s



dismissal from school took place her next step to Shantiniketan broke her, “her sense of hope begging to feel stale” (198). They have the power to reveal the emptiness of material success, the corruption embedded in society, and the ways in which the world falls short of fulfilling our highest ideals. Through their portrayal of the struggles and suffering of the oppressed, novels invite readers to empathize with these experiences and recognize the injustice in certain social conditions. Likewise, Virmati’s struggle against oppressive patriarchal norms and her emotional turmoil invite readers to empathize with her plight. Set against the backdrop of India’s Partition, the novel highlights the social injustices faced by women, empathizing the broader systemic inequalities and the personal costs of resisting them. Virmati’s grandfather Lala Lal Chand’s decision to divide the property highlights the ruptures within the family, symbolizing the larger fractures in Indian society during Partition. The division, meant to resolve conflicts, ironically begins a series of separation, mirroring Virmati’s

own alienation as a “difficult daughter” narrator remark that what was intended as a “final solution”, “what he thought was a final solution, however, turned out to be the beginning of a long chains of partitions” (27). This familial fragmentation reflects the emptiness and fragility of joint families and societal ties in the face of external and internal pressures. And this way, while novels reinforce social norms, they simultaneously question and critique them, offering a complex and often contradictory exploration of the human experience.

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