

Hindu - Muslim Identity and Representation of Gendered Partition in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*

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Partition of India has been one of the most 'contested' issues in Indian historiography, social science and imaginative literature. It is notable that the catastrophe of Partition of India is preceded as well as followed by violent confrontation not only on political front but also in the socio-cultural arena. Recent trends of writing show that the subject matter and theme of authors has been the haunting memories of India and Pakistan and the trauma of Partition. In fact, the 'historical' aspect of social reality does not get documented or factually reproduced in literature. History thus 'selected' and 're-enacted' may be less scientific, less sequential, less objective, yet more interpretative in human terms.

Women writers visualize Partition as a continual process where memory serves to keep the wound raw. Thus, the women protagonists continue to experience Partition long after the actual vivisection of the country. But they do not succumb to the Partition trauma; they brave it and learn to live with it, drawing upon their inner strength. Their Partition discourses are accounts of feminine triumph highlighting women's strength, resilience, adaptability and spirit against all odds. They articulate the womanly experiences from the psychological as well as the socio-cultural point of view.

Time and again one can see the Indian women as displaced, alienated figures, ground in the mill of convention, domestic injustice and institutionalized tyranny, the victims of their time, of their society, of their own romantic illusions. Helen Deutsch writes:

They (the women) often participate in violent anonymous protests and join revolutionary movements. Most of the time they are unconsciously protesting against their own fate. By identifying themselves with the socially oppressed or the non-possessing class, they take up a position against their own unsatisfying role. (298)

The twentieth century was a period of tremendous upheaval and change both in social organization and in the philosophical themes which emerged out of it. While Europe saw the consequences of the Industrial Revolution, the Great Depression and the violence of the Second World War, India was to face the struggle for independence and the holocaust that followed in the wake of the partition of the country in 1947. The turbulent days that preceded and followed

the Partition of British India were fraught with political hatred and violence, with passions which had seized people in a communal frenzy.

Colonization, more than being a conquest of another nation, including an appropriation of economic and political interests, is also tantamount to a kind of psychological uprooting and cultural disruption which attempts to prevail upon individual and collective human subjectivity to render it open to the phenomenon of “internal colonialism.” Colonial domination of any nation may thus be considered analogous to a paradigmatic imposition of socio-moral/ cultural/ ideological principles for modulating individual identity.

Manju Kapur seems to be obsessed with the politics pertaining to the Hindu-Muslim conflict and has responded to this issue in the narrative of *Difficult Daughters* (1998) and *A Married Woman* (2002) in a very unique manner. She has incorporated the Arya Samaj Movement, freedom struggle, partition and tabling the Hindu Code Bill in the Parliament in *Difficult Daughters*. The politics of partition is relevant with regard to the theme of Hindu-Muslim feud. She has included the Babri Masjid – Ram Janambhoomi controversy in *A Married Woman* (2002). A comparative study of the depiction of politics in the two novels is essential to understand Kapur’s perspective on Indian politics.

Originally titled *Partition*, *Difficult Daughters* (1998) locates the life of Virmati against the backdrop of political happenings before and after partition. The novelist has covered a long span of time of more than twenty years. The Britishers were the rulers and all Indians – Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs were unitedly fighting against the British. However, it is in the locale of the novel, Amritsar that one could sense the hidden hatred and jealousy for the minorities in the subconscious of the inhabitants. Though the city was constituted fifty-one per cent of Muslims, all important spheres like education, finance, trade and commerce were under the control of the Hindus and the Sikhs. This made the Muslims angry and jealous towards the Hindus and the Sikhs.

The authorial vision recapture with kaleidoscopic alacrity, the conflict between the divisive politics of the British rule vis-à-vis the chaotic efforts of the Indian masses to counteract the separatist intransigence of certain sects in Bengal and Punjab. The seeds of mutual vengeance sprout into sporadic incidents of bombing, poisoning of wells and mass sacrilege galore, with the mutual mistrust among castes and communities reaching its peak. The narrative structure, at this point, merges the consciousness of India with that of Virmati and Ida whose heart-rending rendition of anger and grief articulates in universal terms a humanistic statement against the monstrous manifestation of colonial politics in the form of partition.

Stray incidents of arsoning and violence take place everywhere but no major incidents take place. People from Lahore go to Amritsar for various purposes and from Amritsar to Lahore mainly for higher education, as Lahore was considered as the Oxford of the East. The regional culture of Amritsar and Lahore can be felt in some of the specific actions performed by the characters. Nowadays the journey from Amritsar to Lahore takes about 15 hours. What is

significant is the fact that ever since the Partition the land which separates the two cities is mined with history.

The background of a Second World War, communalism and partition have been utilized to recognize the potential of colonial women who had joined with their male counterparts in social regeneration and were unwilling to accept the rigid social code that was imposed upon them. Virmati's desire for establishing social identity is "a value charged, almost a charismatic turn, with its secured achievement regarded as equivalent to personal salvation" (qtd. in Agarwal 240). The theme of national politics is presented more in the episodes of Swarna Lata. She has started giving her support to the nationalist movement against the British during her under-graduation in her college, Lahore College for Women. When she joins RBSL College, Lahore, her participation in the movement becomes deeper. The conflict arising out of the demand for partition is reflected in the feud in the friendship between Swarna and Ashrafi. They were close friends when they were doing English Honours together in Lahore College for Women, though they were Hindu and Muslim respectively.

The real partition appears in the novel in Chapter XXV. Manju Kapur has given full treatment of the description of the partition tragedy. According to her, by May 1944, the situation worsens to the level that the word 'Partition' frequently appears in the newspapers and everyday discussion. For instance, what the novelist writes: "In Lahore, two educated gentlemen refuse to continue eating the food they had ordered or even pay for it, when they discover the bearer as well as the caterer, are Muslims" (*DD* 249). 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 people of an entire nation, subverting the wholeness of Virmati's womanhood into fragments of alienation. Ania Loomba associates the positionality versus individuality of the so-called third world woman as a cross-cultural 'sign' of socio-economic/racial/political implications across countries and continents, "Women on both sides of the colonial divide demarcate both the innermost sanctums of race, culture and nation, as well as the porous frontiers through which these are penetrated" (147).

Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002) is set in Delhi against the backdrop of communal unrest centered on the controversial Ram Janambhoomi – Babri Masjid. Kapur introduces the theme of controversy through a muslim character Aijaz Akhtar Khan. He is the founder of The Street Theatre Group. He holds number of workshops for students and public to create awareness about communal harmony. Astha senses the long arm of history being 'twisted and refracted.' But Astha is carried away by the good work done by Aijaz Khan and even agrees to write a script for a play on Babri Masjid – Ram Janambhoomi controversy.

Astha believes that the Hindu religion "is wide, is deep, capable of endless interpretation. Anybody can get anything they want from it, ritual, stories, thoughts that sustain" (*MW* 85). Astha and her daughter Anuradha try to gather data from the library on whether there is a temple on the site called the birth place of Lord Ram and Babur has ordered the destruction of the temple and he had built a mosque on the same site. Astha stares at the picture of the Babri

Masjid. She speculates why there is so much bloodshed, hate and passion for ownership, these words evoked, bathed each stone with a corrosive mixture, slashing through the surface so that it is no longer an old mosque and fighting over this issue for two centuries. “It was a temple, a birthplace, a monument to past glory, anything but a disused nesting place for bats. Despite all this it had endured for over four hundred years” (MW 108).

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The novel takes the reader to the year 1989, and bricks are being collected for the Ram Mandir – worshipped and escorted out of towns, wrapped in silk and saffron, on their way to Ayodhya. If communal disturbances occur in the wake of these processions, that is not the fault of the bricks, but the fault of the narrow-mindedness of minority communities, who couldn’t bear to feel that their domination in this country is over. It is in this atmosphere Aijaz and The Street Theatre Group travel to Rajpur, fifty kilometers outside Delhi to put up a play. Three days later, Aijaz Khan and his troupe are burnt alive in their van.

Hindu Samaj Andolan has made efforts to motivate the youth to demolish Babri Masjid and construct the Ram Temple at that site. Astha prepares to go to the anniversary of the massacre of The Street Theatre Group. The narrative depicts the Hindu Organizations act mobilizing strength to construct a temple for Ram in Ayodhya. It is insisted that a temple needs to be constructed on the sacred soil of Ram’s birthplace which is burdened by a mosque for many years. A date for the construction of the temple is scheduled. They also make some demands thus: “Give us three places in India, that it all we want. Ayodhya, Varanasi, and Mathura where the Muslim invader built mosques on our sacred sites” (MW 185).

Hemant explains to Astha that the struggle of the Hindus to construct a temple for Ram at the site of dispute in Ayodhya is not a new political event. It is the seventy-seventh attempt in the history to restore Ram Janambhoomi which is regarded as the heritage of the Hindus. He also

provides the data that as many as 300,000 people have sacrificed their precious lives in the 400 years for the restoration of Ram Janambhoomi. He also accuses those who oppose the move as pseudo-secularists and upholds the move of the Hindus to construct a temple for Ram in Ayodhya. Astha makes a trip to Ayodhya to study the communal situation there. Astha is among the academics on a platform in front of a mike in Ayodhya. She speaks at a rally about the need for a female response to such violence, a need to consider the effects of violence on women. Towards the end of the novel, the author depicts the demolition of Babri Masjid and its impact outside in details. Astha reads the Headlines: “A NATION’S SHAME: BABRI MASJID DEMOLISHED” (291).

The impact of the demolition of the Babri masjid is presented in the subsequent part of the narrative. It is reported that nationwide 1,801 people were murdered in communal clashes in the next two months. 226 places in 17 states and 1190.18 lakh people are affected by curfew. In Pakistan 240 temples are targeted by mobs. In Bangladesh attempts are made to destroy 305 temples, 1,300 houses and 270 shops belonging to Hindus. In the United Kingdom 18 temples and cultural centres are damaged. In Afghanistan 4 temples are attacked. Over the next two months major riots break out in Bombay. 41 areas are affected and 31 per cent of the deaths are caused by the police. Three days later the United Left Front organized a march to protest the demolition of the masjid.

Anita Nair comments: “The key to the plot is the Babri Masjid episode. If one is looking for a metaphor, here it is. A nation falling apart because of differences that can’t be bridged. A family falling apart because of differences that can’t be bridged” (qtd. in Balakrishnan 110). 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 the woman writer, becomes an instrument for emancipating human imagination from the conflictual constrictions of ‘colonialism,’ both in its aspect of cultural determinism and political domination which oppresses, exploits and marginalizes the face of human dignity. As per the assertion of Edward Said, “Resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism is an alternative way of conceiving human history” (260).

Through Astha, Kapur offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization and control mechanism by her inner potential as an individual and her desire to attain fulfillment. Astha struggles for the togetherness of the family as a unit. Neither as a flag waver nor as a patriot, she is fully aware that venality, brutality and hypocrisy are imprinted on the leaden soul of every fanatic Indian. Kapur presents varied perspectives on the controversy of the beginning itself. Yet her support seems to be for the secularism by way of opposing the idea of demolishing the Masjid in the disputed site. It is noticeable in the arguments of Astha who is the alter ego of Kapur. Kapur resonates with her feminine assertion, hatred for violence, blood, death and ill feeling in the name of God and religion, and her feminine assertions remain untouched by history, politics and human interpretations. Kapur has confined to women with zeal, enthusiasm and seems to suggest that a married woman’s work is not as a housekeeper and child bearer but to shoulder responsibilities beyond the family.

In a way, Kapur makes use of gender as a trope for articulating an oppositional discourse or, in terms of Benita Parry's view, 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 46), which requires ties of mutual recognition and inclusiveness.

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