



RECREATING MEMORY THROUGH NARRATIVE STRATEGIES: A STUDY OF MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

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Abstract

Narratology and Memory—two aspects of contemporary fiction writing—intersect in Manju Kapur's debut novel *Difficult Daughters*. The plot revolves around young Ida's search for her mother's identity by recreating the memories that are older than herself. The narration follows Ida's physical journeys as well as into her mother Virmati's mindscape. The figure of Ida's grandmother Kasthuri also appears in the background. In this maze of three generations, Kapur weaves memory into narration. The narration is in fragments, moves back and forth in time depicting the confusion in the mind of the persona as she recreates the past. The tense relationship between Hindus and Muslims as the partition happens followed by violence and bloodshed forms the backdrop of the narration suggesting how partition inside a family could also lead to agony and trauma, drawing lines that could never be revoked. This paper attempts to explore the adept use of narrative strategies alongside the protagonist's pursuit of memory. It also brings out the multiple modes of narration and the author's propensity in story-telling.

Keywords

Manju Kapur, Narrative Techniques, Memory, Points of View, Generational Shift, Mindscape, Fragmentation



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"The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother" (1).

This is not only the opening line of the novel *Difficult Daughters*, but also the central focal point around which all things happen in the text. For the record, the novel was the debut work of Manju Kapur and this book went a long way in establishing Kapur as one of the most important literary figures of contemporary Indian writing in English. Both the writer and her debut work shot into prominence when *Difficult Daughters* received the Commonwealth Writers Prize from the Eurasian region in 1999, after its publication in the year 1998. Manju Kapur went on to write five more novels: *A Married Woman* in 2003, *Home* in 2006, *The Immigrant* in 2008, *Custody* in 2011 and *Brothers* in 2016. *The Immigrant* was on the shortlist for the DSC Prize for South Asian Literature. Born in 1948, Manju Kapur Dalmia studied and received an MA from Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada before returning to the University of Delhi for her M.Phil. She later joined her alma mater, Miranda House, where she worked as a professor of English. Her novels have been adapted to television.

The novel *Difficult Daughters* is told in alternating voices, the narration switching between the first person voice of Ida and the third person omniscient narrator who brings back stories from the past. The novel begins in medias res with the funeral pyre of Virmati, the mother of Ida, in the backdrop. After the funeral, the daughter Ida tries to reconstruct the life of her mother. Ida is

convinced that the mother she knew—silent, brisk, and bad tempered—was someone completely different from the woman she really was.

In order to get a better understanding of the life of her late mother, Ida travels to Amritsar, a place associated with the life of Virmati. Without her mother, Ida is lost. She looks for ways to connect with her mother as she could not remember a time—right between them. Ida starts the first step towards reconstructing her mother's life by showing curiosity about her mother's relatives. She starts digging deep into their past and is determined to find more about her mother, "the way she was before I knew her... I dig and dig until they reveal reluctantly . . ." (4). The search reaches a crucial point at the end of the first chapter which concludes with Ida declaring "my relatives gave me one view of my mother. I want another" (5).

The narration moves back in time for the second chapter, which focuses on Kasturi, Virmati's mother and Ida's grandmother. Told in the omniscient third person narration, the chapters that follow trace the life of Virmati who struggles through her childhood and adolescence, taking care of the seemingly never ending line of siblings. After a series of chapters on Virmati's growing up, the novel suddenly jumps to a chapter where Ida encounters her uncle Kailashnath, trying to visit the college where her father taught. Ida realises the haunting presence of her mother as she explains: "The rawness I feel after my mother's death doesn't allow me to anything that is not in some way connected to her. Ever since coming to Amritsar, I have been restless, pacing the old house. I wish bricks could speak. This must have been where Virmati slept; this must have been where she studied. . ." (44).

She concludes the chapter affirmatively by saying, "my history had started here in this classroom. Here it was that my parents must have looked at each other significantly, doomed love in their eyes" (49) and her search for connections continues.

The narration jumps to another extreme after these reminiscences where a slice of personal history is being told in the form of two letters. The next chapter goes further back in chronological history to tell the story of Kasturi, the grandmother, who in her days was seen as a rebel. Kasturi gets educated and gets married late, that too to a groom who comes seeking her hand as a prized possession, thus becoming the first girl to make her mark in many aspects of life till then considered out of bounds and unimaginable to young women of her age.

The narration then abruptly switches over to tell Virmati's affair with her professor, a married man, and goes on to sketch the ebbs and flows of the affair culminating in her shifting to Lahore in search of a new life through education. This period is marked by the rising tension of India's independence and the painful memories of partition which hold themselves as a thick backdrop that almost side-lines the foreground.

Ida's search takes her to Lahore and with an enthusiastic tone, she declares, "I wander around full of lust and longing—my eye glassy with desire for the bestshot to imprint on my film" (126). But the tone soon turns melancholic as the narrator is not able to make much headway into her investigations and the entire

process of documenting material is described as a historical necessity: "I drink all the details. 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" (127).

The backdrop of the independence struggle and the resultant partition become more significant as the foreground also seem to echo similar sentiments. Virmati's struggles are compared with the intensity of the freedom struggle. Virmati asks herself several questions for which she does not seem to have proper answers: "'Am I free,' thought Virmati, 'I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organising, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent being in love. Wasting it'" (131). The narration then leads to the much trodden path of feminine inescapabilities of unapproved love, the illicit life, and the unwanted ills of pregnancy and the act of abortion.

The journey of Ida's search leads her to discover the purple patch of her mother's life when she was honoured and respected as a Principal in the princely state of Sirmaur before life takes her away in its own stride. A description of Ida's grandmother Kasturi's bridal journey to her new home is sandwiched between memoirs of her daughter Virmati's troubled life.

The final chapter of the novel is a compilation of statements made by many people, ranging from ordinary onlookers at the tragedies of partition unfolding before their eyes to the lofty ideals of the new country that woke into freedom at midnight as evinced by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. These statements are preceded by a snapshot view of the communal clashes following the divisive elections to the Punjab Assembly. The chapter ends with the birth of Ida—a girl who could not be named according to family or social traditions because her father, Professor Harish, believed that it was "a blank beginning".

The Epilogue plays a crucial part in justifying the title. It explains why the narrator Ida can claim her right to be in the lineage of difficult daughters though her life is not expressed in detail. Ida herself gives a touchy finish to the narration, justifying her attempt to write a book on the not-so-rosy life of her dead mother Virmati: "I felt the excitement of discovery, the pleasure of fitting narratives into an discernible inheritance. This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in my mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me any more" (280).

As Dora Sales Salvador notes, "In *Difficult Daughters* we do not listen to Virmati's voice. She could not speak out, being certainly situated at the juncture of two oppressions: colonialism and patriarchy. What we have is her daughter's reconstruction and representation" (127).

On narrative style, Christopher Rollason marks the novel to be simultaneously "Indian and universal and at the same time a great achievement" (Rollason, 177). Through appropriate uses of narrative strategies like the constantly altering points of view, multiple modes of description, and shifts of time, Manu Kapur has not only told the stories of rebel women of three generations, but also the story of a nation in transition and progress.

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