

Saga of the Partition, Silenced History and Trauma through Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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Abstract

From the shadows of upheaval, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* unfolds a story stitched with loss. Not just borders split but lives bent under forced journeys across uncertain terrain. Through Virmati, then Ida, then others, time folds into itself showing how pain travels bloodlines. Home becomes a word without weight when entire families drift on trains full of silence. What burned beneath wasn't property alone but names erased before they could be spoken loudly. Women carried histories no one wrote down, yet those stories shaped what came next. Violence didn't knock - it slipped inside meals, glances, arranged silences at dinner tables. Their bodies became ground fought over while their voices faded behind walls built by custom. Identity frayed like old cloth torn between hands too tired to mend. Memory lingers not in dates but in gestures passed quietly from mother to daughter. Some truths remain unspoken simply because there's never enough light left after dark.

Keywords: Partition, trauma, hidden history, violence, identity

Introduction

Partition of India in 1947 created a deep impression on the mind and heart of people not only socially, culturally and emotionally but psychologically as well. People were displaced from their homes and had to migrate to other country; they became rootless and restless. The partition saga was laden with chaos and trauma for all but specifically women were the first and foremost victim of any kind of violence regardless of caste, creed, religion and ethnicity. The novel *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur can be seen through the prism of Partition holocaust and the state of mankind which revealed brutal and callous attitude towards women individually and collectively during the Partition. "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 regard as their zameen, their piece of ground, their home". (Bhalla 4). In Greek, trauma means "wound" and Freud considered trauma as an injury inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. Trauma has the capacity to breach time, self and the world which can be transferred to future generations as well which is exhibited in *Difficult Daughters* through the saga of the three generations of women.

Main Part

One morning in 1947, lines drawn on a map shifted entire lifetimes. Not merely politics at play - whole worlds cracked open. Fifteen million souls moved, pushed by fear, pulled by hope. Borders became barriers overnight. Journeys unfolded under smoke and screams. Villages emptied like breath leaving a body. What looked safe yesterday turned dangerous before sunset. Blood stained trains arriving empty-handed. Memories stayed behind, buried in dust. Homes lost meant more than walls gone. Work vanished along with identity. Faces never seen again haunted doorways. Grief settled into bones, quiet and heavy. No warning could prepare hearts for such rupture. A single year reshaped generations without asking. Sudden waves of chaos tore through streets where neighbours once shared meals. Homes burned while trains arrived carrying silence instead of people. Across Punjab and Bengal, fields meant for harvest sat empty as borders split villages like cracks in dried earth. Markets that thrived on exchange fell quiet when roads led into new countries overnight. In Delhi, whispers followed every stranger - eyes searching for familiar faces lost in the rush. Mothers held children close during long walks across dusty plains under skies without names. Some woke to languages they barely understood in places called home but felt nothing like it. Scars stayed behind even after wounds healed, carried in stories never fully told at dinner tables. Laughter faded where temples, mosques, and gurdwaras stood closer than ever - but trust did not. Years passed yet certain songs brought tears to elders staring beyond horizons. Still today, years on, how people remember Partition shapes relations between India and Pakistan. Because of old tensions, politics in both nations often echo past splits. What happened back then still colour laws and leadership choices now. Levi and Benedetti said:

But what shall we say about the silence of the civilized world, about the silence of culture, and our own silence in front of our children...It is not due simply to weariness...It is shame...They insolently constructed their realm with the tools of hatred, violence and lies.
(67-69)

Kasturi isn't where the hurt stops. Years later, Virmati's daughter speaks - her voice threading through time, holding what was passed down without warning. Not just grief, but gaps: things never explained, only felt. A childhood built on whispers leaves marks that look like confusion, feel like loneliness. She pieces together moments not to fix the past, but to recognize herself in it. What she uncovers reshapes how she sees silence - not absence, but presence stretched thin across years. The search for answers becomes less about blame, more about belonging somewhere real.

What haunts the narrator grows deeper because women's lives vanish without trace in public memory. Hidden behind layers of silence and disgrace, Virmati's story waits to be found. To reach it, she must move slowly through what was buried on purpose. In uncovering those truths, pain surfaces - her mother's isolation, rejection, the cost of defiance. Facing these pieces stirs something raw inside her: old wounds tied to being left behind, not belonging. Slowly, threads connect between one woman's past and generations shaped by similar hushes. Pain repeats until someone dares speak into the quiet. Through her search, the granddaughter brings light to how women endured partition's brutality - reshaping old narratives. Her journey uncovers pain buried by time, giving shape to stories once whispered or lost. Where history stayed silent, she finds depth in lives reduced to footnotes. These women were neither just harmed nor defiant, but layered beings caught in chaos. Their wish was never grand: simply to be noticed as real people, not symbols. What they faced wasn't rare; it was erased. Being heard meant resisting silence woven into records. Complexity lived in their choices, ignored for decades. Now, fragments return - not whole, yet present. A novel like *Difficult Daughters* doesn't just show riots or border chaos - it uncovers

a harsh truth buried in Partition memories: women taken, assaulted, made to change faith against their will. Though set in private lives, the struggles of its characters echo what countless others lived through at the time. Instead of background figures caught in violence, they stood directly in its path - chosen because hatred found them easiest to wound and control. Their bodies became ground where revenge and pride clashed, not by accident but design.

She tells of broken systems, ones built on power and silence, yet shows women who move through them with quiet will. Though shaped by loss, these lives push back, reaching toward choices once denied. What looks like helplessness holds sparks of defiance, small acts that build when seen together. Politics here wears a human face, messy and raw, tied tightly to who survives and how. National dreams promised safety, but left many behind, especially those already unseen. Boundaries drawn on maps tore families apart, turning neighbours into threats overnight. History speaks of progress, though blood stains much of it. Women carry both burden and voice, their pain part of larger forces they did not choose. The story refuses clean endings, staying instead with discomfort, asking questions without answers. Personal struggles echo public failures, linking inner worlds to outer chaos. Still felt today, its reach stretched across countless lives, dragging sorrow, uprooting families, freezing arguments in time. Not just an event but a wound that lingers, the Partition teaches how fast group hatred and rushed choices can break a nation apart.

From morning routines to midnight fears, life shifted without warning. Though politicians carved maps with confidence, villagers stared at roads they never planned to walk. Homes once filled with laughter stood empty, left behind in silence. Not everyone saw faith as a banner to march under - many simply prayed and carried on. When governments spoke of new nations, families packed what they could hold. Belonging dissolved not with speeches, but with dust-covered feet on broken paths. Some woke up strangers in lands they thought were theirs. Leaders traded visions of unity, yet millions lost even familiar skies. What mattered most changed fast - safety grew louder than slogans. Overnight, neighbours vanished, replaced by uncertainty and long trains heading nowhere clear. Upheaval didn't only shift locations - it unravelled lives built around distinct tongues, traditions, and shared pasts. More than soil changed hands - what shifted was meaning itself: heritage, connection, who you knew yourself to be. Stripped of home wasn't simply losing walls or fields - it cracked open foundation, safety, the idea of I. For women, standing between worlds, recognition vanished - they hovered, untethered, unsure where they fit. As Menon and Bhasin wrote during border crossings, faith labels mattered less than inner anchoring - belonging shaped their pain. Retrieval missions swept through, pulling young ones back - not by religion, but by bloodlines - to mothers, fathers, kin whose names still echoed in childhood voices. They further added:

Though the question of religion was dominant, yet it was also the question of citizenship. There was a certain insecurity involved in a case they stayed back. A Hindu or Muslim woman would feel insecure if she got left behind in a country where the other community was dominant and where none from her own family or community remained or her entire social structure had been destroyed. She did not come there of her own accord but was brought there forcibly. These women would have no future nor feel secure. (88)

Bhalla spoke of many crores moving across fresh boundaries, showing how vast the upheaval really was. Though some backed dividing Hindu and Muslim communities into separate nations, countless others did not want such a split yet still got caught in its wake. Lives changed overnight when families left behind villages where roots run deep. Children born years later inherited stories soaked in loss and sudden flight.

Those forced out often had no voice during decisions that tore their worlds apart. Worst hit were the ones never asked at all. Offices made political choices without thinking how regular lives would shift because of them. Most history books stay quiet about what those people endured, their words lost, their pain ignored. Yet stories passed through speech, private writings, and novels kept their humanity alive. Manju Kapur pulls such wounds into her tale - slow grief, silent fears shaped by Partition's reach. What lingers is memory of a time when belonging mattered more than lines drawn in anger across maps. A story built on real events shows how out of touch politics can be with everyday lives. Behind each number from the Partition hides a human experience - full of grief, longing, change. People caught in it often simply wished to stay where they belonged, tied to soil that shaped them.

People in the story carry scars like badges, shaped by pain yet moving forward without fanfare. Imagine ground splitting after long stillness - sudden, silent, irreversible. That break changes everything: how neighbours see each other, who gets what, which songs are sung at night. Lines drawn on maps become deeper than soil, cutting through memory and custom just as much as roads or rivers. Borders made then weren't just ink - they carried weight, echoed disputes, shifted power while pretending to settle it.

What happened during Partition shaped each character in ways hard to forget. Though years pass, old wounds still surface in quiet moments. One life leads into another through shared grief and unspoken loss. Memories linger like dust on forgotten letters. A grandmother's silence speaks louder than words ever could. Her daughter carries questions never asked. The granddaughter stumbles upon truths buried long ago. Three women, three lifetimes, one endless echo. A girl named Kasturi opens the book, her world shifting hard when partition tears through everything. Her daughter comes next, stepping into a life tangled with what was left behind after borders changed overnight. Then there's the granddaughter - her battles shaped by echoes from before she was born. Each woman carries forward something unseen yet heavy, stitched through time like thread pulled too tight. What lingers is how one event can ripple so far down a family line. A story unfolds, painting lives tangled in old memories while chasing who they truly are after everything changed overnight. Voices from long ago hum quietly as folks look for someone - anyone - to point the way ahead. Though divided long back, Punjab carries those cuts like unhealed wounds, its yearning for wholeness never fading. That pain, sharp and raw at the break, remains unmatched even now. What governments settled on paper did little to mend what each person lost inside.

What sticks is how silence speaks louder than words. A daughter's choice becomes a mirror held up to society. Lives bend under rules made long ago. Through Virmati, then her mother, then others before them, patterns emerge without being named. One generation inherits what another could not say aloud. Pain travels quietly across time, shaped by borders drawn overnight and expectations worn like second skin. Moments of rebellion feel small until they aren't. Women carry weight not because they must, but because no one else will look. History isn't just dates - it lives inside bodies. What gets passed down isn't always love. Some wounds stay hidden beneath routine.

Through tangled lives of women pressed by old rules and their own decisions, *Difficult Daughters* traces pain passed like an heirloom. Emotion hums beneath every page, as Kapur reveals how quiet suffering, hidden disgrace, yet stubborn defiance carve who these women become. Tradition leaves marks - deep ones and so does fighting back; the book holds both truths without blinking. Virmati fights not with shouts but stillness, carving space for herself where only duty was expected before. Trapped by what her traditional Punjabi household demanded, she carried wounds no one saw. From wanting to learn and choose her path came friction - her mother held fast to fixed notions of how women should serve their kin. Caught between breaking free and still longing for her family's warmth, she lived inside a split mind.

Quiet damage built up there, unseen but deep, born whenever someone else steers your life for you. Things grew heavier once affection bloomed for a teacher already bound to another partner. Stepping into that bond brought distance, cold shoulders, being shut out like a name erased from memory. Virmati finds herself caught - first by society's rigid rules, then by choices shaped by longing. Her hunger for affection, approval, and escape quietly steers her path. People turn away, leaving silence where connection should be. Emptiness grows inside, feeding the weight already pressing on her. Hurt piles up, not just from outside, but from within too.

Overlying Virmati's personal struggles is the national trauma of the Partition. While not the central event of the plot, Partition serves as a powerful backdrop that parallels the chaos in Virmati's personal life. As families are torn between conflicting identities and desires, the violence and displacement brought on by Partition symbolize the larger disintegration of stability and belonging both in the public and private spheres. Through Virmati's journey, Manju Kapur sheds light on the deep scars left by both personal choices and collective history. The novel can be viewed as the ode to the resilience of females who despite being silenced and marginalized, find a meaning and identity in the world that tends to deny them both.

Trauma echoes through time in ways that shape lives without warning. Kasturi, mother of Virmati, carries silence like weight passed down unseen. Her daughter, telling the story, inherits more than memory - she breathes its aftermath. Social rules twist into quiet violence when choices are never really choices at all. Lives bend under pressure from old wounds left unspoken. What happened before becomes what happens now, especially for women whose pain goes unnamed. Kasturi's struggles reflect how tradition can trap just as much as protect. Bound by ideas of duty and honour, she moves within limits drawn long ago. Grandmother and granddaughter share more than blood - they carry forward shadows shaped by Punjab's rigid expectations. Because history repeats where questions go unanswered, one generation's burden slips easily into the next. One morning at a time, raising eleven kids fills most of Kasturi's days, along with keeping up how people see their name. Trouble stirs once her daughter Virmati refuses to follow the usual path. Chasing schoolbooks and entangled with a teacher already married - choices like that pull sharp stares toward home. Pain cuts deep, shame spreads wide, both landing hard on Kasturi's back. But echoes linger past one lifetime. Later, from years ahead, Virmati's own child speaks, carrying quiet weight from what came before - questions never answered, wounds passed down without words. Growing up among fractured stories, gaps in memory, and inherited pain, the granddaughter carries a quiet kind of hurt - one shaped by partial truths and distant emotions. What she seeks, without always naming it, is not just facts but presence: a way to feel her mother breathing through time. This reaching back, piece by fragile piece, turns into something bigger than curiosity - like taking hold when everything tried to slip away. Through her voice, Kapur lets forgotten women speak, those pushed aside in records and recollections, whose days cracked under politics and private sorrow alike. Not maps or speeches define Partition most deeply, rather how it split hearts inside homes, especially female ones. That talk pulled at threads long knotted - showing ties stretched between women and faith groups, states old and new, kin near and gone; lines blurred between born bonds and chosen loyalties; spaces filled with tension between wives and husbands, daughters and soil they once called home. The saga of Partition is not just about national boundaries or political leaders it is about the deep, emotional fractures it caused in ordinary lives, particularly those of women. The entire discussion unravelled the "tangled skin of relationship between women, religious communities and the state, both within and across the two new nations; between women and their families. 'real' and 'acquired'; between women and their men, women and their country."(Menon and Bhasin 19-20)

A silence hangs around what happened back then, carried now through Ida's quiet questions. Though time passed, the ache remains raw in voices like Swarnalata's, once rooted in Lahore before everything cracked apart. Because borders shifted overnight, trust shattered just as fast - faith in neighbours turning fragile, thin. She speaks haltingly, almost surprised still, how belonging could be ripped so easily from daily life. Not force alone moved people, but fear seeded deep during those months of chaos and fire. "Her voice fluttered and trembled over the division...Nothing was going to make us forsake it. We had always coexisted...?" (Kapur 124) Her memories stumble over words like home and neighbour, meanings twisted beyond recognition. Even decades later, confusion colours her tone: how did peace vanish between families eating across courtyards? Religion became a blade others wielded; she never saw it coming while living side by side. What stayed behind wasn't property only - the real loss whispered louder than names or streets. Then came flight, sudden departure without goodbyes folded properly into goodbye. Now retelling makes her breath uneven, caught somewhere between 1947 and today. What stays is the sting of trust broken, when hope for togetherness crumbled into riots and bloodshed. History tears more than borders - it splits beliefs wide open, leaving behind invisible wounds passed like heirlooms. Walking through her mother's childhood streets, Ida stumbles on pain buried deep within memory's cracks. Kapur shows this weight early, showing how Ida speaks of one wish: never to live what her mother lived. Grief doesn't always cry out - sometimes it sits quiet, hides in half-told stories, seeps through without words. A weight remains, even without living through it - this inherited echo colouring who they become, how they connect, what they recall. Flowing silently forward, one sorrow feeds another across time, shaping lives untouched by the original wound; Marianne Hirsch named this deep ripple post memory.

Conclusion

Out of nowhere, borders split lives when India divided, shaking people deeply especially women. Not only did they lose homes, but their sense of belonging got torn apart, unlike men whose pain tied mostly to land and power slipping away. Characters like Virmati and Swarnalata carry echoes of journeys marked by force, hushed cries, and years pressed underweight. Once, one country held many threads of life together; now, that break still bleeds slow beneath the surface. Their voices? They mirror countless others - shaped by sorrow, made silent, brushed aside though scarred just as deep. In Ida's voice, shaped by what goes unsaid, echoes drift up - quiet sorrows holding stories fractured by Partition. Moments linger where speech fails, yet meaning arrives slantwise. Through gaps in talk, history seeps: violence folded into family bone. Each silence carries weight older than words. Women before her bore wounds they never named; she channels their breathless aftermath. Pages unfold less as plot, more like layers brushed back slowly. What surfaces isn't told straight - it slips through gestures, habits grown thick over time. This tale doesn't shout its purpose. It waits until you notice pain humming beneath routine.

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