

## Women on the Margins: Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

Christopher Rollason, Ph.D. - rollason54@gmail.com

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### I

In *Difficult Daughters*, her first novel, published in 1998<sup>1</sup> and located mostly in the India of the 1940s, Manju Kapur speaks, with great narrative eloquence, of the idea of independence. The book, whose author, born in 1948, lives in Delhi and teaches at Miranda House University College for Women (Delhi University), was awarded the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book (Eurasia Section), and has earned her very substantial success, both commercially and critically, both in her native India and on the world market (among other translations, 2003 saw the appearance of a Spanish-language edition, *Hijas difíciles*, translated by Dora Sales Salvador of the Universidad Jaume I de Castellón).

The search for control over one's destiny, surely the key theme of *Difficult Daughters*, refers to the Independence aspired to and obtained by a nation (despite its cruel division by a fateful Partition), but also to the independence yearned after (and finally not obtained) by a woman and member of that same nation (or of one of its rival communities). Virmati, the heroine, seeks human relations that will allow her to be herself and to exercise the degree of control over her life which, as an educated woman, she knows she deserves. Born in Amritsar in the Punjab in 1940, the daughter of a father of progressive ideas and a traditionalist mother (Kasturi, obliged to give birth to no less than 11 children), she aspires to a freer life than that offered her by those around her. This aspiration is condemned to failure, thanks to the incomprehension she receives from both her own family and that of the man she marries—but also thanks to her own mistakes, for no-one obliged her to marry who became her husband, and she was free not to make the choice she did.

Virmati, like so many other subcontinental women, is asked to accept a typical arranged marriage. She rebels against that destiny, to the lasting shame of her family, above all of her mother. Insisting on her right to be educated, she manages to leave home to study in Lahore. Nonetheless, she falls in love with an Amritsar teacher known as “the Professor,” a married man who first appears in her life as her parents' tenant. After a number of vicissitudes, including a period as a school principal in a small Himalayan state, she finally marries the man she loves (or thinks she loves), and returns to Amritsar to live with him. However, he refuses to leave his first wife, and the consequences for Virmati are harsh indeed: she ends up being marginalised by her own family and despised by her husband's. Virmati's tale is told, from a present-day perspective, by Ida, her only daughter, who seeks to reconstruct her late mother's life-story, against the background of the Independence movement of the 1940s and the subsequent trauma of Partition.

Virmati's case may be seen as representative up to a point, but not absolutely so. It is well-known that women participated forcefully in the social movements that led up to Independence (and, alas, Partition). Dora Sales Salvador, in her note to her Spanish translation of the novel, appositely stresses: "Kapur enfatiza la labor que en aquellos momentos ejercieron muchas mujeres que, al tiempo que reclamaban la igualdad de oportunidades, el acceso paritario a la educación y las posibilidades de una vida más allá de las convenciones, fueron una fuerza visible en la resistencia no violenta ante los británicos" ("Kapur emphasises the efforts made at that time by numerous women who, while demanding equal opportunities, equal access to education and life-opportunities going beyond convention, were a visible force in the non-violent resistance to the British."<sup>2</sup>) The pages of *Difficult Daughters* speak not only of Virmati, but of other "difficult daughters," who succeed better than she did in their parallel struggles for independence in their lives. At the centre of the narrative, we are confronted with a woman who fights but falls by the wayside; but at its edges, as no doubt less representative but still symbolic figures, we encounter—as will be seen below—other women, whose relative success points the way to the future.

## II

The happiest and most attractive period in Virmati's life is, beyond doubt, that which she spends in Nahan, the capital of Sirmaur, the small Himalayan state run by an enlightened maharaja which gives her refuge for a while as the headmistress of a girl's school. Sirmaur existed in reality, and is now part of the federal state of Himachal Pradesh. It is there that she achieves the greatest degree of control over her life: there are rules she has to obey (and breaking them proves her fall), but she is able to teach inside an ordered framework, and her performance wins her a deserved respect. It is true that the single or widowed lady teacher or headmistress is something of a stock figure in modern Indian literature (as in the spinster lecturer Bimala, in Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day* or the grandmother in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow-Lines*), but the particularity of Virmati's destiny, at this stage of her life, is that she has to exercise her responsibilities entirely by herself. In the micro-state to which her destiny leads her, she has no family or close friends. She attains a near-exemplary level of female autonomy. For the first and only time, she has her own place to live, Virginia Woolf's famous "room of one's own": and yet she falls. She believes she needs a man, and she makes the wrong choice, returning to a relationship that had already brought her nothing but suffering. The repeated clandestine visits of the fatal Professor lose Virmati her employers' confidence, and she is obliged to quit her school, house and employment.

Retrospectively, the Nahan period appears as the one utopian moment in Virmati's unfortunate life. This sensation of a distant utopia is reinforced if the 21st-century reader recalls that these are circumstances from a past epoch which could not be repeated today, for better or for worse: the maharajas are a thing of the past. The more than 500 princely states of pre-Independence and pre-Partition India varied enormously in size, from the huge domain of the Nizam of Hyderabad to miniscule territories like Sirmaur. Kapur's text declares: "Nahan, clean and prosperous, was ruled by an enlightened royal couple" (182). It may be that not all the maharajas were as retrograde as is often thought, and that not all should be seen as like, say, the cynical and exploitative Nawab of Bahawalpur who is so fiercely condemned by V.S. Naipaul in the Pakistan section of his 1998 travelogue *Beyond Belief*. All in all, what Virmati finds in Nahan is a certain lifestyle—employment in an

isolated but well-ordered mini-state, capable of providing her with some degree of psychological and mental refuge—which would not be on offer to her equivalent today.

She did, however, still have another option open. There is an opening that she glimpses, but which finally eludes her. There was another place she could have gone to: Shantiniketan, the destination that she evoked with her employers to avoid open scandal, but which also represented a real possibility for Virmati. Shantiniketan: a key location of modern Indian spirituality, the place in Bengal (today in West Bengal) where, thanks to the best offices of Rabindranath Tagore, education and enlightenment prevailed under the auspices of the great poet's liberal philosophy; the seat of Viswa-Bharati, the foundation (first school, later university) established by Tagore himself, where women were accepted as a matter of principle as participants in the educational process. Had Virmati completed the journey she never finished, she could have remade her life there: she could have met new people, maintained her independence, at the very least found new opportunities. Unfortunately, she has to change train in Delhi, and the long waiting-time opens up a trap that she falls into: she contacts an acquaintance in the capital, who is also a friend of the fateful Professor. The glimpse of a spiritual awakening, of a renewed autonomy, fades into the distance.

### III

Virmati's married life with the Professor in Amritsar turns out to be a disaster. She wilts under the implacable and hostile gaze of Ganga, her husband's first wife, with whom she has to live. She loses all sense of identity: the continuation of her education (she studies for a higher degree in philosophy, but without enthusiasm) feeds no more dreams of independence. In the end, her individual history disappears and becomes all but irrelevant, swallowed up in the greater and more resonant collective tragedy of Partition. Yet, despite all this, Virmati has in her life's path encountered other women, who like her aspired to a different life, and who succeeded better than she did.

These women are Shakuntala, her cousin; and Swarna Lata, her roommate in Lahore. Both are representatives of a certain female type that recurs in Indian literature: the emancipated woman militant. As we have seen above, no-one should forget the many women who took part in the struggle for Independence and the Gandhian movement: a notable literary testimony to them is *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao's novel of 1938 in which he tells that story through the prism of a female narrative voice. In post-Independence literature, one may mention such characters as Daisy, the militant of *The Painter of Signs* by R.K. Narayan who prefers to remain single, or Malati Trivedi, the progressive activist of *A Suitable Boy* by Vikram Seth, who first appears in that book as, curiously, also the roommate of the female protagonist, Lata; here too, the convergence of names between Seth's Lata and Kapur's Swarna Lata may be another detail pointing to a possible intertextuality. The name Shakuntala, too, has its intertextual connotations: the Indian reader will think immediately of the eponymous heroine of *The Recognition of Shakuntala*, the play by Kalidasa, the great classical Sanskrit dramatist—the young girl who, abandoned by her husband the king, finally obtains recognition of her rights and proper treatment.

In Virmati's extended family, her cousin Shakuntala appears from the beginning as the exemplar of the “modern” or “liberated” women. She studies, teaches, and takes part in the political-Gandhian movement: even after marriage, she keeps a firm grip on her

autonomy and her freedom of action and thought. Shakuntala thus becomes a pole of attraction for Virmati: “Virmati listened, ... drawn towards Shakuntala, to one whose responsibilities went beyond a husband and children.” (17) Nor is she an entirely atypical or isolated figure: she shares her “liberated” lifestyle with a group of friends, whose activities she explains to her cousin: “We travel, entertain ourselves in the evenings, follow each other’s work, read papers, attend seminars. One of them is even going abroad for higher studies” (17).<sup>3</sup> Later, in Swarna Lata, Virmati encounters a woman who leads a similar lifestyle; her friend, an ultra-committed activist, takes her to a meeting of the Punjab Women’s Student Conference where she shines as an orator: “Heavy applause broke out as Swarna finished speaking.” (145) Swarna continues her political activity post-marriage, expressing herself on the matter to Virmati as follows: “We have plenty of married women working with us. I’m married, aren’t I?” (252). One may draw a parallel between the careers of Shakuntala and Swarna, although here a qualification needs to be made: on the one and only occasion when the two meet, they do not get on—a small narrative irony which points up Kapur’s ability to avoid both reductionism and sentimentalism. In the end, the path of political activism does not attract Virmati, as she herself recognises “I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, being politically active, while my time is spent being in love.” (142) She chooses—it cannot be said for her own good—the road that leads to the Professor: a road not taken by Swarna, with whom she finally feels obliged to break off relations: “And Swarna dropped out of her life” (252).<sup>4</sup>

At all events, it may be said that Virmati’s frustrated life is, as it were, framed—as if in a triptych—by those two other, much more successful lives: those of Shakuntala and Swarna Lata, both emblematic of the educated, politicised and emancipated woman.<sup>5</sup> In other words, the psychological annihilation of Virmati, at the hands of her own family and her husband’s, should not be read as a fatality. What happens to Virmati is no doubt the most representative destiny of the Indian woman (even if educated), quantitatively or statistically, but Kapur’s novel shows that other paths also exist, while further stressing that choices are by no means simple or either-or. There are types of female negotiation that work, and others that do not: but nothing is predetermined. In this context, we may quote the perceptive comments of Dora Sales Salvador: “En esta novela lo destacable es que la disyunción entre el peso de la tradición adscrita al género, por una parte, y los deseos de independencia y autoafirmación, por otra, no se plantea como una mera dicotomía de opciones vitales. No es blanco o negro, en ningún caso. Hay toda una gama de complejos grises emocionales entre estas dos alternativas.” (“In this novel, one needs to stress that the disjunction between the weight of gender-determined tradition, on the one hand, and the yearning for independence and self-affirmation, on the other, does not appear as a simple dichotomy of life-choices. In no case are things black and white. There is a whole range of complex emotional shades of grey between the two alternatives.”)<sup>6</sup> One may here invoke, from a comparative viewpoint, another novel by an Indian woman writer, Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*, which appeared in 1999, shortly after *Difficult Daughters*. Here, if Uma, the female protagonist of the novel’s Indian part, is unable to get out of the dull mediocrity of her existence as an unmarried daughter—and if the fate of her cousin Anamika, who could have gone to study at Oxford but ends up a victim of the epidemic of bride-burning, is even worse—Uma’s sister Aruna appears by contrast as the representative of a different type of Indian woman, the “socialite” who succeeds in imposing her personality by the skilful pulling of social strings. It may be concluded that, however sadly typical the experiences of Virmati, these also exist paths that lead, with positive effect, to less typical destinations where demands are raised and recognised.

## IV

*Difficult Daughters* is not a pure third-person narrative. Virmati's story is told mostly in the third person (with some recourse to the epistolary mode), but is framed by the first-person narration of a search. The search is that of Virmati's daughter, Ida, as she seeks to reconstitute her mother's history. Ida, an educated woman, divorced and childless, apparently leads a freer life than her mother's in external terms; yet inside her she feels, even if not quite so acutely, some of the same anxieties as had plagued her mother: "No matter how I might rationalize otherwise, I feel my existence as a single woman reverberate desolately [...]" (3). It is clear from the book's pages that Ida, the narrator through whose voice Kapur speaks, has achieved more than her mother (and much more than her grandmother): and that this is so even through the simple creative fact of "writing down" her own family history. To quote Dora Sales Salvador again (this time in English): "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."<sup>7</sup> There is, then, a qualitative leap between the life-histories of (narrated) mother and (narrating) daughter. In addition, as another of Kapur's commentators, Gur Pyari Jandial, correctly points out, it would be a mistake to devalue Virmati's struggle because she failed, for what mattered was to have made the attempt: "What is necessary is to break the patriarchal mould, and for Virmati to have tried to do that in the forties was a great achievement."<sup>8</sup>

The women of India have indeed achieved their successes in half a century of Independence; but if true female independence is to be a reality, much still remains to be done. The fight for autonomy remains an unfinished combat; and it was from that perspective that, in her second novel, *A Married Woman*, published five years later in 2002, that Manju Kapur, this time from an eminently contemporary viewpoint, was to return to the narration of women's issues, deploying an approach that, as in *Difficult Daughters*, manages to be, simultaneously, both Indian and universal. And that, too, is "a great achievement."

## Notes

1. Page references in this essay are to Manju Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* (London: Faber and Faber, 1999).
2. Sales Salvador, Translator's Note, 356.
3. The figure of the woman who goes abroad for further study recurs in Manju Kapur's second novel, *A Married Woman* (2002).
4. The path of militancy recurs, once again in a context of meetings and speeches, in *A Married Woman*, where it fuses, albeit for a brief time and in a context that cannot be called socially orthodox, with the option of "being in love": Kapur's second novel presents among its themes, notably, a narrative of full-blown love (physical and emotional) between two women, against the backdrop of the "events of Ayodhya" and Hindu-Muslim conflict.
5. In this sense, both prefigure the impressive Pipee Trivedi, the social militant and lesbian lover of the female protagonist of the following novel.
6. Sales Salvador, Translator's Note, 358.
7. Sales Salvador, "The Memory of Desire," 126.
8. Gur Pyari Jandial, "Evolving a Feminist Tradition," 126.

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