

The use of Political and Social Setting and its repercussions on Virmati in ManjuKapur's Difficult Daughters.

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For writing a novel a setting is important. It is one of the important elements of fiction. It refers to the time and place of the story. A setting can be historic, contemporary, or futuristic. The setting also includes the historical period, political climate, and social conditions in which the story takes place. The writer creates a setting for several reasons. First, the writer must decide whether the setting is an integral part of the story or just a backdrop. Once the writer determines the role of setting in the story, he/she must create a setting that is believable in the mind of the reader. Otherwise the reader won't suspend disbelief. Even though the story is fictional, it must be plausible. This paper endeavors to study the role of political and social setting by ManjuKapur and its implications on the various characters in the novel The Difficult Daughters by Manu Kapur.

Key Words-political setting, social scenario, freedom struggle, partition.

A good writer knows how to craft a fictional story that is believable. Creating a realistic setting is one way the writer can make the story believable in the mind of the reader. To convince the reader, the fiction writer can include realistic details about time and place. The place might not actually exist, but the writer convinces the reader it does. The writer can also include actual facts about a real place, such as the name of a city, street name, or landmark. Another way the fiction writer can create a realistic setting is to place the story within an actual social/political/historical context. Most stories can only take place under certain social, political, or historical condition. For instance, a historical novel takes place during a specific time in history. In Nineteen-Eighty four, George Orwell creates a story in which the main character exists within a totalitarian society. Without this political context, this story would not exist. The writer's goal is to place the story in a particular context. The fiction writer can also use setting to create a mood or atmosphere for the story. Mood is the underlying feeling of the story.

ManjuKapur is a realist. Even though the story revolves around the main woman protagonist, it runs parallel with some political drama at the background. The story is the microcosm of the high political drama on the national arena.

Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* is colonial chronologically as it deals with the pre-independence era of British Raj and its repercussions on Indian society. The story of India's struggle to emancipate itself from foreign rule runs parallel with the protagonist Virmati's struggle to get education and emancipate herself from the clutches of patriarchy and tradition. Virmati is shown to live in Lahore for her BT diploma in the times when not only the Indian males but the women who hitherto had been far away from national issues were getting involved in the freedom struggle. The description of the Lahore's Student's conference is superb. The heavy downpour at the time of the Student Women's Conference is symbolic of the difficult path women had to tread to come out and assert themselves. The conversation amongst the girls also gives a glimpse about the situation of woman in those times and their slow awakening. The girl students discussed as they gathered for the Women's conference in spite of the heavy rain 'All the rain in the world could not have kept me away' (DD-141). Another girl commented "My poor parents rue the day they sent me to Lahore to study." (DD-142) ManjuKapur has shown how the first generation of woman who got the opportunity to take higher education responded enthusiastically and bravely to Gandhiji's call to participate in the freedom struggle. But she has shown Virmati with a different inclination which makes her feel alienated within the crowd. "These larger spaces were not for her. She felt an imposter sitting in the hall." (DD-144) ManjuKapur has been able to present the crisis in the women's mind with different inclinations newly exposed to new ideas and forums. But Virmati felt guilty when she observed these thinking girls of her own generation. She asked herself "Am I free?" thought Virmati, I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organizing, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent in love." (DD-142). Swarnalata, her friend talked about the Defence of India Act, "an act that forces one to realize the very divergent interpretations attached to the word 'country' under which many freedom fighters were imprisoned". She emphasized the need to bring all the masses into the struggle. While speaking on the role women played in the freedom struggle. Swarnalata stressed "As women it is our duty, no, that word has unpleasant connotations It is our privilege to give ourselves to the unity of our country...." (DD-145). One of the speakers Begum Saba Malik while speaking in the woman's conference, Lahore

opined that the traditional view of women was changing as girls continued the freedom struggle.

ManjuKapur weaves the story with the turbulent times during the pre-independence era. "It is in 1943, and the strain of being the colony of a warring nation shows. There are shortages and cost of living is rising."(DD-234) During this period the prices soared; there was severe rationing. "For a mighty empire fighting for survival, battlefronts proliferate till even the counter of an Amritsari Halwai is included."(DD-234)

ManjuKapur presents that the Indian society in the struggle for independence was going through a churning period where "Identities, loyalties, futures and nations were becoming a matter of choice rather than tradition."(DD-235). ManjuKapur has given the true picture of how the divisive policies of British worked towards inciting the people of a particular religion to demand for a separate nation through Swarnalata's story of her college elections. Ashrafi, Swarnalata's friend was deliberately incited by the British Principal to stand against her friend Swarnalata in the college elections. Swarnalata observed, "For the first time our college was divided along communal lines."(DD-134) After the elections Swarnalata's relations were permanently soured with her friend which made her conclude philosophically. "We were pawns to forces beyond us. I did learn a valuable lesson, though. I now know better than to presume on the permanence of any relationship."(DD-134). The communal seeds of rift planted in the young generation tore the heart of the country. "The word Pakistan appears more and more in newspapers."(DD-249). The topics for the few educated elite people are enlisted by ManjuKapur to create the background to the moving narrative.

"Other friends of Harish would drop by in the evening. They would discuss the war, the prices, the fate of Hitler, the allied invasions, the turning of the economy into war-based efforts for the British. Then they would drift to topics nearer home, the fines the hoarders and adulterers were having to pay in the market place, the shortages of paper they were facing, the hilarious advice by the government that they should use pencils instead of ink and spend endless time rubbing out what they had written so they could use paper again"(DD-228)

Women were given property rights in the newly introduced Hindu Code Bill. The social impact of changes effected in certain laws during those times are also recorded. "The males felt the family structure will be threatened, because sisters and wives will be seen as rivals, instead of dependents who have to be nurtured and protected."(DD-252)

ManjuKapur has emotionally depicted the pain of partition. A nation was divided into two. The happiness of achieving freedom was lost when hordes of people were butchered as they suddenly became unwanted in their native land on religious grounds and refugees in the land they travelled to for safety. Even though the central theme of the novel is not the narration of history but the author has brought alive the pain of partition through the character's reaction to the greatest catastrophe which did not just have a physical impact but the impact of the incidents were psychologically etched on the minds of the people and the horrors were carried forward to the succeeding generations through family tales, literature and films.

New Historicism as an approach to literary criticism and theory arose in the 1990s. Scholars of Renaissance literature particularly associate it with the work of Stephen Greenblatt. New Historicist scholars begin their analysis of literary texts by attempting to look at what other texts -- both literary and non-literary -- a public could access at the time of writing, and what the author of the original text might have read.²

Applying critical theory of New Historicism, we feel that ManjuKapur being from Punjab which shared a border with the newly carved Pakistan must have seen these horrors as a child and heard these tales of human degradation through elders.

In one of the interviews when she was asked about her writings she said that she is influenced by no one in particular even though she has read much. Only the first novel *Difficult Daughters* is a bit autobiographical as some of the incidents and settings have been taken by her from her mother's life. She said that she did a lot of research which included reading issues of ten years of the newspaper Tribune. She visited the historical places detailed in the novel personally and even interviewed people who had experienced those times.³

Thus we feel that ManjuKapur felt the confidence to start with the historical setting of the freedom struggle of India because she could get many first hand details from her mother from whose life the story is inspired. The result of those turbulent times were women like Virmati's mother who have inspired this story. ManjuKapur has shared the pain with us through Swarnalata. As Virmati's friend, Swarnalata recalls for Ida the unforgettable days of partition she comments--"The people who were dislocated due to partition; the sense of loss made permanent home in their hearts. Those things were never forgotten and around them crystallized an aura that borrowed its luster from tears that were too adequate to shed. Too much had been lost, too many people had died." (DD-136) Swarnalata who tries to remember those days of painful partition is filled with nostalgia. She says--

“Such moments happen but occasionally in history when our hearts move out in love and tenderness for those who suffer and whose suffering we ourselves have so narrowly escaped. Occasionally in history-and it is just as well it is only occasionally-the price one pays for a mass synthesis of generous spirits is too great.” We see that the succeeding generations are thoroughly affected to hear the unbelievable horrors of the partition..Ida writes “Swarnalata’s nostalgia is so strong that I feel it too.We live in the long shadow of those times.”(DD-137)

While recalling the inhuman times of the partition, Gopinath, Virmati’s brother tells Ida--

“We all travelled on those trains. It could have been me, anybody I knew. After that we lived with fear. We were afraid to go out, even when the curfew was lifted. We were prisoners in our own homes.”Gopinath philosophizes, “But ultimately the fault was ours. If we were stupid, greedy and uncivilized enough to allow religion to be used in this way, why blame them? (DD-268)

ManjuKapur has tried to join and universalize this problem by drawing a parallel with the present times. Gopinath continues –

“The same thing is happening on a smaller scale even now, when there are no British around People blame them for this legacy. But for how long can you keep doing that? There is always the past to contend within one way or another, hidden or openly, one’s own or one’s countries. Births and deaths are messy, ragged affairs” (DD-268)

The political turmoil influences the social setting of the novel. The story traces a clear parallel with Virmati and newly carved Indian nation. Indian freedom was achieved with a lot of fervour and hope from the stronghold of the British supremacy. But tragically the nation fell from one autocratic power into another power of bureaucracy and its murky politics. One power replaced another power but the condition of the people remained same.It rings true what George Orwell conveys in *Animal Farm* that freedom can be achieved through revolution but then the leaders who had started the revolution to remove injustice assume power after the revolution and also start behaving in the same autocratic way. The Indians had struggled, sacrificed to bring the distant dream of freedom into reality. But the dawn of freedom saw their own people engaged in a heinous race of capitalizing on their role in the process of freedom. Their dream of ‘real’ freedom was not realized. In the same way, Virmati sacrificed a lot to acquire emancipation from patriarchy and its tentacles. But after she had rebelled to disobey her family, she had fallen prey to another male domination of the English Professor. But in her blind love for the hypocritically affable Professor she didn’t realize that, she was just exchanging one kind of domination with another. When she realized it was too late. Thus, her story becomes tragic when her dream of ‘emancipation’ crashes before the dominant issues of marriage and social stigmas.

Conclusion-Man is not an isolated soul. We are strongly influenced by the political and social scenario in which we live. The same is portrayed by ManjuKapur and we see that Virmati has a parallel story of emancipation along with the struggle for India's independence. The role played by women in India's freedom struggle inspires her but her love story with the Professor overshadows her growth of patriotic fervour.

1) KapurManju: Difficult Daughters, Penguin India, 1998; Faber and Faber, 1998, ISBN 978-0-571-19289-2\

2)http://www.wordiq.com/definition/New_Historicism.

3) [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=interview of ManjuKapur with GeetaSahai](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=interview%20of%20ManjuKapur%20with%20GeetaSahai)

4) Rendezvous with Manju Kapur, 4 sept 2007, pub in Contemporary Fiction, An anthology of Women Writers, ed by Vandana Pathak, Urmila Dabir, Shubha Mishra Sarup and Sons, New

5) <http://public.wsu.edu/~campbelld/amlit/lcolor.html>

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