

Ethical Purgation in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*

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Abstract: This paper delves deep into the purgation of emotions through fiction reading and analyzes the deeper impact of necessity of psycho-moral cleansing in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.

Keywords: Psycho-moral cleansing, transgression, patriarchy,

Set in the early part of the twentieth century, Kapur's novel, *Difficult Daughters* chronicles the history of a middle-class Hindu family whose oldest daughter chooses to study beyond the accepted high-school education that even the most reform minded middle-class families deemed quite sufficient for most women at that time. The educational revolution for women was a function of the nationalist movement that envisaged education as empowering for women, in that it would enable them to have a voice at least in the matters of the household, where, until, that time, they did not have one. The paper also examines the ideas of women's education with its rhetoric of monolithic empowerment, and the spaces in which this education was imparted, in the context of the nationalist movement, through Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*. This paper also explores within the framework of the text, issues of female identity as concerns the body and sexuality, and how this ties in with the nationalist movement. Also, there is an examination of the above in the light of the nationalist movement because this disconnect between the drive for women's education and the social displacement that it caused was the most perceptible effect of the move towards an expanded vision of women's education. There was no context provided by these nationalist-educators for the translation of this education into empowerment for the women, in practical terms and every day life. Manju Kapur's first book is heavily populated with women. There is Virmati, the protagonist; Kasturi, her mother; Shakuntala, her cousin and the initial role model; Ganga, the first wife of the man she marries, and Virmati's own daughter, Ida, the narrator. The structure of the book mirrors Virmati's life itself: calm periods in her life are harshly interrupted by the unease caused by the Professor lurking in the background. These abrupt interjections are similar to the switches in narrative, from accounts of the exploration of her mother's past by Ida to the recounting of Virmati's life in third person. While the narrative voices are mostly representative of the women's side of the issue, the book itself is set up as a series of binaries that contradict each other at some point in

the novel as well as in the social fabric that is the background of the novel. There is female education that is deemed necessary, but can mar bourgeois respectability if it oversteps what society has deemed adequate; marriage that is necessary for any woman with an adequate education, but which can be regarded as an obstruction to, and be obstructed by education and sexuality that is necessary within a marriage and for the purpose of ensuring the continuance of the family line, but can be destructive if the woman is unmarried or if the fruits of this sexuality are overabundant.

Virmati, at seventeen, is a beautiful, young woman in high school, engaged to be married, and a well-educated catch by the standards of the time. Her family follows the Arya Samaj model of education, popular during the period, which was in keeping with the models of progress that many middle class families aspired to. Women like Virmati, though betrothed in their early teens, were not married off until a few years later so that they could acquire, in the intervening period, a basic education that would help them balance the household budget and keep track of their children's moral and spiritual development. The marriage would be conducted whenever the male head of the family decided that the education that the girl had received was sufficient. It was also quite true that marriage was always set up as the primary goal of any woman, educated or otherwise. We hear of the history of Virmati family and come to realize that the history of her family is recorded in the pains and tribulations borne by its women. The reader is introduced to Virmati's mother, Kasturi, the education that she received, her betrothal to Suraj Prakash, her travels to her husband's home as his bride, and later, the story of her multiple pregnancies. The history that is attached to every woman in the family is complicated and increases in importance because of the lives of the other women attached to it. In the prominence that Virmati gives to the opinion of other women, Virmati is similar to her mother and all the generations of women before her. To Kasturi, for example, her own fecundity is important to her, in spite of her physical and mental inability to deal with it. Because of the importance that the other women surrounding her—Lajwanti, her sister-in-law, and her grand-aunt attach to it. Virmati's life is a homogenous compact structure that defines not only physical space within the home, but also the abstract space that a woman can occupy in society. Virmati's expectations from life are sculpted from what she has seen in her mother's life, and re-moulded and redefined according to her view of the lives of Shakuntala, her cousin, and Ganga, the wife of the Professor. Thus, Virmati's family, and the story of its women become the active determinants of her future, and also of her indeterminacy of what exactly she wants from life. She learns from her mother's experience that being only a facilitator for future generations would not be fulfilling enough for her: she also understands from Shakuntala that being educated would bring her freedom. What Virmati discounts is the fact that the freedom that her education would ostensibly give her access to would be complicated if she had a husband. Here the personal certainly becomes the political, for the dilemma of having to

choose between a public life, with all the freedom that it would bring in its wake, and the traditional life, with social acceptance and security that a husband signified, was one that many women, at that time, had to face. This is the same space that Shakuntala occupies, and for all her initial self-assuredness, her insecurity reveals itself in her curiosity to know later on about Virmati's personal life and the exact nature of the relationship that she shares with the professor. Shakuntala, like Virmati later on in the novel, is not spared the taunts of the older women in the family about her unmarried status. The Professor's continued insistence on a sexual relationship with Virmati, without the social position accorded to a wife, leads Virmati to an isolated town where she becomes the head mistress of a girls' school. The deciding factor in her decision is the reality of having to undergo an abortion when the Professor is absconding, spending time with his family. The fact of Virmati finishing her BT poses yet another problem for her family—they have to find another socially acceptable place for her. Virmati consents to go to the remote school because she sees no sign of commitment from the Professor. The space that she occupies there is indicative of her position in society. She is the academic head of the school, her house is isolated from the rest of the populace, located high up on a hill. Her education separates her from the others in that place, and there is no sense of companionship. There is not one person she is able to connect to and her life is devoid of human contact.

She is safe from controversy so long as there are no visible signs of her relationship with the professor. His relentless epistolary pursuit of her culminates in a visit to Nahan, in spite of her insistence that he should not jeopardize her position there. Her pleas fall on deaf ears, and the Professor calls on her, not once but repeatedly. His surreptitious visits serve to hasten her ouster from her position. It is interesting that the Professor, who had always enticed her away from the traditions by holding up the value of a good education, should himself be the vehicle of her dismissal. He also ensures that she loses the respect that she has gained by virtue of her education, the social acceptance that she so desperately craves. Clearly, if the social position is not a direct result of his benevolence, or is something in which he is not an active participant, he makes sure that she does not have it for very long. His attitude is only an extension of his earlier interference in her academic life when he disrupts it. It is not quite a coincidence that his irresponsible behaviour comes at a time when Virmati faces academic pressure. The worst instance of his attitude towards her occurs when she becomes pregnant while studying for her BT finals in Lahore, and he is nowhere to be found. Strangely, he is most concerned about hurting the feelings of his wife Ganga. Virmati's management of the school, which the text sets up as a vehicle of female emancipation, continues within the confines of a stifling society, in that it relieves Virmati of her services as soon as there is any whisper of scandal about her. Thus, it is made clear that the education imparted is for the sole purpose of creating the image of an educated girl, so that her value as a potential wife, in the marriage-

market, increases. If this education is to come from someone who is regarded immoral that would taint the quality of the education and thereby render the idea of educating women itself questionable. The power of their uncontrollable desire for each other is not strong enough for either of them to break established social conventions. Virmati cannot get over her desire for a husband, because that is what every other woman of her class possesses; the Professor is scared of what society might think of him if he married Virmati, when he had at home a wife who was obviously devoted to him in spite of his infidelity. Besides, Ganga is a good home-maker. As far the Professor is concerned, an open demonstration of bigamy is unacceptable: after all, he is a learned man. Taking a lover is acceptable: marrying her, not quite. Virmati's upbringing, on the other hand, will not allow an acceptance of her own independent identity unless it is firmly attached to, and bestowed upon her, by a husband. Her education does not allow for a deeper understanding of social values, nor does it endow her with a voice, or the power of making an active choice. This is quite the reality, considering that the education given itself is heavily coloured by colonial dogma, and by the very virtue of being imparted by the colonizer, does not empower the native receiver to develop a sense of choice, or power. Virmati thinks, during her sojourn as Head Mistress of the Pratibha Kanya Vidyalayn that he, the Professor, 'came to be the spectre that lay between her and her life as Principal, so that she too began to look upon her stay there as a period of waiting rather than the beginning of a career'.¹³ She evaluates herself only in relation to him so that she dissipates into insignificance without his presence. Every stage in her life, before she weds the Professor, is one of continuous transition, an evocative hunting for space and a position that she can call her own. It is also a haunting of space, because while she is desperate for personal identity and position, she is simultaneously unwilling to occupy spaces until they are authorized by him.

There is not much difference between Virmati and her mother, Kasturi. The abrogation of social tradition is abhorrent to both of them. When Kasturi is pregnant with Paro, she wants an abortion because the continued exposure of her ceaseless fertility, and the implication of her sexuality, expose her to public humiliation, especially with her less fecund sister-in-law Lajwanti, lurking in the background, Virmati undergoes an abortion because she is unmarried: the imminent spectre of maternity threatens to overwhelm all social responsibility if she delays too long. This is beyond conception for a woman whose life is shaped by awareness of social conventions, a desire for the respectability that they represent, and the pronounced lack of it in her life. Kasturi rejects her daughter continuously throughout the novel. Her attitude towards her daughter is based on the acceptance of certain patterns that society has deemed that middle-class Hindu women should follow. Virmati has defied society enough to be a non-conformist. While she has not unquestioningly absorbed nationalist rhetoric like Swarnalata does, she is also quite removed from Kasturi, at least enough to prevent her mother from defining her according to the accepted conventions of womanhood.

She has also inhabited spaces unknown to Kasturi. Virmati has been an educated single woman, the other woman in her relationship with the Professor, and has also undergone the trauma of having to abort her first pregnancy, which she faced alone, and without the security of being married. In the social schema of the time, Virmati is a dynamic element, pre-empting the collapse of a delicate family structure cantered around the position of the female as wife and mother and not much more than that. What Virmati and her mother do not realize is that they have occupied similar spaces, and are closer in experience than they would care to accept. The only private space that they both know is one of shame. Kasturi has to cry in her dark, slippery bathroom, hoping for release from the pressures of yet another child. There is shame, and secrecy, associated with the act of rejecting her fertility. Virmati, too, has occupied a similar space. She has to go to a doctor in secret, and get her abortion done, an act of secrecy to deny her illegitimate relationship.

Virmati's marriage to the Professor does not change the spaces that she occupies. She loses her position in her own house because she has crossed the figurative boundaries of social propriety that her parents expect her to conform to. In the Professor's house, there is no space for Virmati. Virmati is the new addition who claims the meagre space available. This includes not only the little physical space in his house, but also the Professor himself, a man who is shared in different ways by many women—Ganga, his mother, his sister and his daughter. Virmati is ultimately consigned to the dressing room, which is a larger version of a storage closet, and the Professor with her. He has brought shame in the form of another woman to the family, and now he must cohabit with her in that same space. Virmati is condemned to occupy this space for a very long time. She tries to rebuild her ties with her family, and her initial hesitant trial is a disaster. All the spaces available to her now, are the stealthy, back-alley ones. It is ironic that Harish, the Professor, is treated with the respect due to a son-in-law of the family, while Virmati remains the outcaste. It is also interesting that the narrative turns to the history of Virmati's family only after she begins to insist on gaining an education far beyond the socially accepted paradigms of the time.

In Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* has central character Ammu, the daughter of Pappachi and Mammachi. As a child she sees the beating of Mammachi with a flower vase by her father Pappachi. She witnesses the animal side of her father when he destroys the pair of shoes she brings for herself. Also, she is denied education because her father is against the education of girls. She finally meets her future husband at Calcutta in a marriage ceremony. The boy has come to attend the wedding. He works as an assistant manager at a tea estate. Ammu marries him but finally finds out that her husband is an alcoholic. At one juncture he is ready to sell Ammu to his boss, Hollick, to save his job. In a mood of madness and despair, she hits her husband with a book and leaves the place with her twins - Rahel and Estha. She returns to her parents' house in Ayemenem. To add salt to her wounds, Ammu finds that she and her children are not accepted by her family members. She loses control of herself when her father supports Ammu's husband saying that an Englishman cannot

behave like this. Ammu is disturbed to see her small children being humiliated by other family members. Ammu's brother Chacko goes to Oxford for higher studies but Ammu is denied education even in India. Ammu's transgression of marriage is not accepted by her family, but Chacko's marriage to an English lady Margaret is condoned. He has a daughter named Sophie Mol. Chacko comes back to India and lays claim over the whole property at Ayemenem. Ammu is denied any share in the property. Thus the male domination is clearly visible. Left alone, Ammu is finally tortured by old spinster Baby Kochamma on the ground that after getting married she has no right to stay in her parents' home. To make things worse, she is a divorced lady now. Ammu spends her time on the bank of the river, going for midnight swims. She falls in love with an untouchable, Velutha. The relationship is soon found out by Ammu's father resulting into her confinement. Velutha is beaten to death in the police station after he is charged with the murder of Sophie Mol who actually dies from natural drowning. The twins, Estha and Rahel, are persuaded by Baby Kochamma to give false evidence against Velutha so that he can be charged for the death of Sophie Mol. They lead a miserable life in the Ayemenem house. Estha becomes withdrawn because of his submissive nature. Rahel shows her frustration by colliding against other girls, decorating a cow dung cake with fresh flowers and by burning the hair bun of her house mistress. Neglected by the family and society she grows into a rebellious girl. Ammu finally succumbs to harsh reality of life and dies at a young age where she would have enjoyed the marital bliss. The selected texts challenge gender stereotypes through constructions of transgressive female figures who flout societal norms. The fascination for such characters in women's fiction marks an insistence on dismantling the abstract category. Transgressive figures are strategies for imagining resistance, but in most instances, these texts place such resistance within complex contexts that make it impossible to read them as a simple valorization of the oppressed. The textual rhetoric in the works of Manju Kapur and Arundhati Roy, for example, forces upon the reader a recognition that freedom and autonomy are relative, if not illusory terms, because they are grounded in a paradoxical link with responsibility. Several texts offer examples of women who leave the community or family in search of freedom, only to return, though with renewed insights. Other female characters leave conventional frameworks behind, but reconnect eventually with alternative collectivities. Characters who become irredeemably isolated from their community are generally granted a negative ending, as in the death of Ammu. Thus, realizing the sufferings of characters like Ammu and Virmati, readers come across a cleansing effect finding the characters in novels as escapegoats, where negative emotions are removed and healthy feelings are restored. Finally, making the readers much relieved and calm at the end.

References:

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