

The Subterranean Life: Mother-Daughter and/or the Shadow of the Other

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Abstract: This paper discusses *Sunlight on a Broken Column* by Attia Hosain and *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur and attempts to trace the complex process of the growth of an independent female agency within the close-knit patriarchal framework of the late 19th and early 20th century colonial India. The question of choice, of tell-tale silence, of the need for freedom and communication are raised and addressed within the circuit of the family itself and most often in the presentation of the mother-daughter relationships. These two novels lend themselves to an interesting reading of the mother-daughter relationship vis-à-vis the rising socio-political crescendo of the last years of the British Raj and the Partition of India. Times have changed since, but how much of the outlook? Are we still ready or even willing to hear the voices from the margins? The history of silence consolidated with studied ignorance and negligence is teeming with voices and experiences awaiting an outlet. There had been attempts made and failed, of course. But in them lie the germ of future initiation.

Keywords: silence, patriarchy, partition, women's agency, resistance.

Rights are interests—interests of a particular kind, but interests nonetheless. And whatever the nature of these interests, respecting persons means giving the appropriate weight to their interests of the appropriate sort. People's concern about the respect given them is in part a concern about having their interests respected, so that they can be fulfilled and protected. (Margalit38)

Women's writing has, oftener than not, attempted to locate the questions of rights, interests and honour within the framework of social justice, family protectiveness and interpersonal understanding as available within the norms of society. Women's experience of life, in and out of her 'home', has been problematised by an overarching presence of patriarchal dominance as is her creative endeavour that has always been placed beneath strict male scrutiny. What a woman can or cannot write about, what depth of experience she might delve into, what realisations and recollections she may utter and what not have always remained the chief concern of a society that has fixed its gaze upon all threatening movements on the horizon—from women, from the subaltern, from the outcast and the outnumbered, from the defeated and the derecognized. Naturally enough, the discourse on the Indian nation and nationalism within the patriarchal ideological framework of (post)colonial India has mostly ignored the guiding principle and active agency of women participants therein—of women activists, women authors and the women characters depicted in fiction—who, through a complex

interactive framework attempt to weave into the existing pattern a new perspective altogether. Woman, in the initial phase of India's struggle for freedom, having been envisioned as the mother-goddess emblematic of an oppressed motherland, gradually got transformed into a vulnerable site for communal conflict over power, honour and supremacy in the final years of the British Raj and Partition of India and the phase of decolonisation is marked with her attempts at regaining her position and independence through her claim to power that alone the human society abides by. It is interesting to note that she, having been allotted her role within the existing scheme of the social system in a changing scenario, has conveniently been forgotten as a living, feeling human being who has every right to make her own choice and express her own opinion. Fictional writing by women novelists separated by a gulf of time, temper and cultural ethos such as Attia Hosain and Manju Kapur in their individual representations of history, memory and the individual's dealing with both mark these phases of unfolding consciousness, of trauma and angst, of survival strategies and modes of rejection as Smita Tewari Jassal and Eyal Ben-Ari point out in their discussion on the comparative consequences of civil war and partition at different countries, its far-reaching impact on social minorities and the like:

The diverse understanding of the war in 1948 or the partition in 1947, in turn efface or erase traces of the perspective of lower status groups within each society. The dialogue between memory and community touches on questions of whose memories have been suppressed in shaping the mainstream "national" narrative. For instance, the particular plight of the Bedouin tribes within Israel has been effaced by the strong national narrative of Israeli independence. In postcolonial India, the nationalist discourse aimed at creating a singular narrative, ended up silencing other voices except those with a majoritarian orientation, thus marginalising the Muslims and dalits. (2215)

This majority-obsessed outlook has defeated the cause of not only dalits and religious minorities but also of women, keeping them outside textbooks and the 'official' historical narratives. Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a Broken Column* (1961) and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) are attempts to make us hear the stifled sobs and suppressed anger of the doubly-colonized Indian woman – the mild daughter, the self-effacing wife, the conservative mother or the imposing grandmother apparently accepting but often challenging with alacrity the effective functioning of patriarchy. If *Difficult Daughters* depicts through the eyes of its female narrator waves of changes altering the face of Amritsar and Lahore during the nationalist upheavals of the 1940s, Attia Hosain's novel captures a moment of transition as the richly musical, Arabic-Urdu speaking Nawabi Old Lucknow gradually changes into the English-educated westernized one by the turn of the century. In *Difficult Daughters* Manju Kapur stretches her narrative through three generations of women-grandmother, mother and daughter-in a complex love-hate relationship. Their lives are coloured, thoughts dominated and actions determined by age-old beliefs, superstitions and conventions.

The narrator is Ida, the modern day daughter of Virmati, attempting to resurrect her dead mother through narrative reconstruction of the past and this excavation of memory reaches out to those unexplained chapters of national/family history that links Ida's own 'victimhood' to a mother she never wanted to resemble. Attia Hosain's *Sunlight on a broken Column*, on the other hand, lets the reader have a stealthy look into the protected *zenana* of a highly conservative upper class Muslim family and embodies the pain and nostalgia attached to the passing of the old order: it is a piecing together of the history of a declining generation of ardent patriarchs giving way to the progressive ideology of their children. Hosain, herself hailing from a respectable *talukdar* family of old Lucknow of the early twentieth century depicts with authenticity the growth of an independent-minded young girl Laila flourishing into rebellious youth, resenting at times but not always disregarding the traditions she had learnt to obey, as Anita Desai comments in her introduction to Attia Hosain's novel:

To read her novel and short stories is to become aware of the many and varied threads that go to make up a rich and interesting life as well as the many doubts and struggles and contradictions it contained. They reflect her pride in ancestry and heredity as well as sorrow at the frequency with which they are tarnished by some heedless, unjust or selfish action... They show her keen sense of the two ruling concepts of Indian behaviour *Izzat*/honour, and *Sharam*/dishonour—passionately adhering to the former and reworking in her mind the many forms taken by the latter, not always the traditional ones. (ix-x)

Enforced or natural silence/ineffectuality of speech as a means of communication plagues women characters in both the novels. *Difficult Daughters* is all about failed attempts of communication between mother and daughter—between Kasturi and her daughter Virmati and then again between Virmati and Ida. It is this emotionally isolated life for the daughter from the very beginning that brands her as the incurably difficult offspring of the household. Even on her deathbed Virmati failed to connect to Ida, as earlier she did to her own mother:

When I die, she (Virmati) said to me, I want my body donated. My eyes, my heart, my kidneys, any organ that can be of use. That way, someone will value me after I have gone. | I glared at her, as pain began to gnaw at me. | And, she went on, when I die I want no shor-shaar. I don't want a chauth, I don't want an uthala, I want no one called, no one informed. | Why bother having a funeral at all? I asked. Somebody might actually come. | Why do you deliberately misunderstand me? She countered. (1)

It is the silence of these oppressed women, the victims, either because they are robbed of their voice to speak or are simply ignored or snubbed when they attempted to speak, that has created this intractable gap in communication, the core of silence at the heart of the society and its history. Ida in *Difficult Daughters*, at last, seems to forge a bond between herself and her 'silent, brisk and bad-tempered' mother, now dead, who had left behind her 'female inheritance' in prodding Ida continuously to 'adjust, compromise, adapt':

I play with the idea that she must have refused. That she could have said, I'm my own mistress. I'll relate to you with dignity or not at all. None of this hiding and whispering and keeping my voice down...None of this for me...Perhaps the words were at the back of her mind, teasing her tongue with their shadowy sounds. She looked for an opening but she looked timidly... (236)

Like Virmati, Sita too is marginalised by the society as the seductress, the alluring beauty with the potential of threatening marriages—another institution that effects patriarchal control. But after Ameer's death, Laila finds in Sita the friend she was in search for, someone to share sorrow with and someone to unburden one's soul to. In *Sunlight on a Broken Column* the same Sita of innumerable admirers, of an unhappy marriage and the star-crossed love affair with Kemal opens up to Laila:

In those days of my silence she used to talk to me of herself as she had never done before. She sensed that I needed to be distracted from the unending, inaudible self-communication that made it impossible for me to talk to others. (296)

Kasturi, Lajwanti, Ganga and Kishori Devi are women shaped in the traditional mould of subservience and acceptance of decisions from above. Kasturi's education, an unprecedented act of progressiveness for her Arya Samaji family is summed up conveniently to maintain the status quo and retain the hierarchy intact: "So the school came about, and Kasturi became the first girl in her family to postpone the arrival of the wedding guests by a tentative assault on learning. Her father, uncle and teacher made sure that this step into modernity was prudent and innocuous. Her head remained modestly bent over her work. No questions, no assertions." (57) This reminds one of Aunt Majida proudly narrating Zahra's accomplishment as a well-groomed piece in the marriage market in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*: "She has read the Quran, she knows her religious duties; she can sew and cook, and at the Muslim School she learned a little English, which is what young men want now" (24). Virmati too, finds herself in a condition where she is trapped and suffocated, realizing with sad recognition that her 'rebellious' marriage to the Professor has not changed her position in society:

They would often go to visit Syed Hussain. In all those furtive visits to the guest room, Virmati had never seen the inside of his house. Now that she was legitimate, she could enjoy its atmosphere of privilege. Everything in it spoke of taste and refinement, the English books, the stack of 78 rpms, Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schumann, Chopin, Tchaikovsky, in faded blue-and-cream dust jackets... Virmati sat on the margin, heard Harish and Syed talk, and marvelled at their flow of words, she who had no words at all. (234)

The difficulty not only of the woman finding her voice but also of it being heard and woven into the fabric of the chequered Indian metanarrative has always troubled feminist researchers and oral historiographers

I realized...how much more difficult must it have been for women to do so. To whom would they have spoken? Who would have listened? I realised too that in my questioning something I had not taken into

account was that in order to be able to 'hear' women's voices I had to begin to pose different questions, to talk in different situations, and to be prepared to do that most important of things: to listen: to their speech, their silences, the half-said things, the nuances. (Butalia 126).

Laila in Attia Hosain's novel is more self-assertive and strong in her opinion and decisions. She goes against her family to ensure her marriage to Ameer, yet is quick enough to discern the cynicism, hatred and class consciousness intermingled with the outspoken assertions of freedom by Ameer and his Left-wing socialist friends. She feels secure in her love for Ameer but possesses the knowledge that this sense of security must derive from her own self and so, after his death as she looks into the mirror in the deserted, dilapidated house her own face stares back in self-acknowledgement:

She was so different from me, that girl whose yesterdays and todays looked always towards her tomorrow, while my tomorrows were always yesterdays. I began to cry without volition and seeing myself crying in this room to which I would never return, knew I was my own prisoner and could release myself. (319)

It is not surprising, therefore, that of all her polished female relatives and acquaintances Laila is drawn to Nandi, the uneducated servant girl – angry, helpless, foul-mouthed but prompt to help and reciprocate love. And the brick and mortar structure of the sprawling 'Ashiana' – the home of Laila's childhood – remains a constant presence in her consciousness 'where I had found refuge in the love of my aunt Abida and Hakim Bua, where I had developed through conflict with Zahra and Aunt Saira, where I had learned comradeship through Asad and Kemal and tested my beliefs in arguments with Saleem and Zahid, where my will had been disciplined by my grandfather and Uncle Hamid and been freed by my dreams and love for Ameer.' (272) The house — as it changes from the huge and gloomy receptacle of relatives and dependents of Baba Jaan's time to the elegantly furnished, anglicized home of Uncle Hamid and Aunt Saira to the dusty, deserted wreck converted to evacuee property — becomes a metaphor for the disintegration and decay marking the fate of the erstwhile aristocratic *taluqdars* in post-independence India. Like Partition, it seems inevitable, yet cannot be accepted as memory and nostalgic feelings intervene. It is interesting to note how the devastating experience of the Partition of India by the middle of the century with its tremendous levelling impact across the class-caste-religion hierarchy of an orthodox Indian society helped in raising some of those voices that had remained unheard over the ages and through the colonial phase itself. Suffering and loss brought together the poor and the rich, the high and the low, the cultured and the rustic, the political activist and the simple housewife. And in an unforeseen manner it provided the scope to the underprivileged to open up, the 'other' to challenge, to ask questions and seek for their answers beyond the restricted domain of a limited existence. And the women, too — Shakuntala, Swarna Lata, Nita and Laila begin their search for a language of their own as Meena Alexander mentions:

If to be female is already to be Other to the dominant languages of the

world, to the canonical rigours of the great classical literature of Arabic or Sanskrit or Tamil, then to be female and face conditions of violent upheaval – whether in an actual war zone or in communal riots – is to force the fragmentation both of the dominant patriarchal mould and of the marginality of female existence. The explosive possibility, then, of female expressivity become multifarious. (Cooke and Rustomji-Kerns xv)

The question of loyalty/allegiance both at the personal as well as the social/national levels remains unresolved as it once again brings to the fore the power-based hierarchy of a society thriving on controlling the choice of the women—the silent 'other' to the eloquent self of patriarchy. So in Hosain's novel the puzzled Laila asks – “Dutiful to whom? To what? To what I believe is true? Or those I am asked to obey?” (252) Virmati and Ida in Kapur's novel are emotionally frustrated over questions of conscious choice and objective decisions which after all, they find are beyond their reach:

Virmati briefly wondered how much actual choosing had gone into her relationship with the Professor. Swarna exercised such options in everything. Choosing a 'friend' who understood her need to be independent, choosing her political leanings, choosing to stand for senior studentship despite the unpleasantness about Ashrafi, choosing to stay in Lahore though her parents wanted her to come home and get married. How could she explain her own actions? (139)

The freedom of an individual depends on the freedom of choice the person is allowed, “the ability to choose membership” (Kristeva 16) by the family, community and the institutions of the society. Women have long been denied that right of choice as the mores of conduct embedded in the institutionalized patriarchal order of the society have placed the burden of the family/community 'honour' on their subjugated shoulders. The experience of displacement and migration, destitution and relocation following Partition brought unfathomable misery on men and women alike but, in the longer run, made some of the female voices heard – against the government policies regarding the recovery and rehabilitation of abducted women, the choice of their homeland, the nationality of their children and the like. Referring to the discussion on the rehabilitation of female Partition victims in Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin's “Recovery, Rupture, Resistance: Indian State and Abduction of Women during Partition” (1993) Andrew J. Major notes in his article (1995) on the suffering of women on both sides of the Indian border as a consequence of Partition:

Since the two governments were committed to restoring all abducted women to their 'rightful' (communally-defined) homeland, recovery work thus sometimes involved breaking up happy families and relationships. On the Indian side this in turn produced a sharp difference of opinion among women social workers, in particular between Rameshwari Nehru (who saw forcible recovery as state-sponsored re-abduction) and Mridula Sarabhai (who believed that the Indian state had a moral duty to recover every single abducted woman). (68)

Seeking these answers within and outside her own self, Laila realizes how the process becomes all the more painful and complicated when female members of the family attempt to make their own choices. Sita chooses duty to her family as her priority and sacrifices her love for a Muslim boy at its altar; but this same Sita comes to stay with Laila after Ameer's death and escorts her to safety during the riots. Perhaps it is possible for the poor menials like Nandi, unfettered by tradition and family heritage to snatch away moments of happiness and be satisfied with their small acts of revenge and betrayal. Even Aunt Abida, the mother figure in *Sunlight on a Broken Column*, denies herself in consenting to marry into an unequal family, just to obey her elders. Zahra, always ready to fit in, transfers her loyalties to Pakistan, her country by adoption and denies 'the country of her birth with the zeal of a convert'. Laila, who opted to stay back in India with her child even after Ameer's death, cannot share Zahra's intolerant attitude when the latter accuses Laila: "You refuse to see the injustice and prejudice that are destroying your Muslim culture and your language." Laila's own experience teaches her otherwise:

"Where were you, Zahra, when I sat up through the nights, watching village after village set on fire, each day nearer and nearer? Sleeping in a comfortable house, guarded by policemen, and sentries? Do you know who saved me and my child? Sita... And Ranjit, who came from his village, because he had heard what was happening in the foothills and was afraid for us... What were you doing then? Getting your picture in the papers, distributing sweets to orphans whose fathers had been murdered and mothers raped." (304)

It brings to mind the little Laila who cried and entreated the elders to send Nandi's mother to hospital and was scoffed for her idea of a woman being treated by male doctors or sided with the Muslim girl who committed suicide after being abandoned both by her Hindu lover and her own family. It shows the necessity of understanding even among close friends and not prejudiced views against the 'other', be it the Hindus and Sikhs or the women. Prejudice is met with prejudice, hatred with hatred. The symbolism inherent in the binary opposition of silence and eloquence, free choice and social/psychological determinism, the darkness of harsh reality and the mellow fruitfulness of memory brings home with surprising subtlety the essentially vague and interchangeable roles of the oppressor and the oppressed. Virmati, herself once a victim, teaches her daughter to make compromises as Aunt Abida asks Laila to do. The narrative in both the novels is fraught with thwarted possibilities, unfulfilled dreams and suppressed aspirations which, had they found their way to fulfillment, might have changed the course of national development altogether. The active politics of the pre-independence India that Virmati and Laila could not join but Swarna Lata and Asad could, the higher study at Lahore and then at Santiniketan or the much-coveted job as a teacher that Virmati could not pursue, the burden of sorrow and national distress at Partition that these women could do little to relieve, the ancestral Ashiana that Laila came to visit for the last time before it turned into evacuee property, the scattering of the extended family on both sides of the newly-etched border that could never be

brought together, the memory of those fond friends – some living but others dead, form that deep core of significance that lies too deep for common everyday understanding as Ania loomba points out. In order to understand the impact of the various kinds of neocolonial aggression of the postcolonial phase it is imperative that we go back and revisit history:

The women's movement, the struggles against communalism, and for survival and land, deny an easy polarization of 'theory' and 'practice' or the assumption that what I earlier called the Fanonian tightrope remains the major postcolonial preoccupation. They are some of the spaces where many men and women have to intervene in structures worked through by colonialism, as well as earlier and later histories of domination. Such intervention is difficult and at the moment often ineffective. It is also limited to relatively small sections of people, but is significant because it has to reclaim some earlier histories—such as those of secularism, or women's struggles, while contesting revisionism or nostalgia... (188-89)

The resistance thus takes a concrete shape in the last wishes of Virmati, in the defiance of Nandi and Laila and, of course, in the calm support of Asad. And the mother-daughter dialectic continues as Ida, Virmati's daughter, herself a childless divorcee, finds her solace in the reconstructed memory of her mother; and Shahla, Laila's daughter grows up untrammelled by prejudice and unchecked by fear. The tide of 'othering' that has long kept them out of the mainstream at social and emotional levels now turns around and they set out to re-write the past of their families and of the nation anew. They are no longer cowed down by the 'authoritative' version of history patronized by patriarchy but rely upon their own understanding of it which no longer imprisons but emancipates the soul from guilt, prejudice and hatred.

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