THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP IN MANJU
KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*

OLIVIA BĂLĂNESCU

University of Craiova

13 A.I. Cuza Street, Craiova, Romania

eleonoli@yahoo.com

Abstract: *This paper attempts an analysis of Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters from the perspective of mother-daughter relationships. Starting from the assumption that the mother plays a crucial part in socialising children into traditional gender roles, I will focus on family relations and women's quest for identity in an Indian society set against the backdrop of Partition.*

Keywords: *daughter, identity, mother, space.*

Introduction

When approaching Manju Kapur's prose for the first time, the reader is impressed by the transparent, unthreatening titles of her books (*Difficult Daughters*, *Home*, *A Married Woman*, *The Immigrant*), their linear plots and lucid dialogues. At a closer look, one notices that the stillness of her prose conceals an acute understanding of human relationships and a subtle analysis of traditional Indian society. This style of writing makes itself felt from the very beginning. Thus, in her first, much-acclaimed novel *Difficult*

Daughters (1998), Manju Kapur presents a saga of three generations of women – Kasturi (the mother of Virmati), Virmati (the main female protagonist) and Ida (the daughter of Virmati) – who try to find their own space and shape their own identity in the context of various intricate systems of male domination. The arena in which all forces are deployed is the apparently secure space of the home. The narrator of the events is Ida, who tells the story of her mother as she has learnt it from her relatives, the places she has visited and the discoveries she herself has made. As the title suggests, the novel is about daughters and, by implication, about their mothers, and we may thus identify its main theme as the mother-daughter relationship. Mother and daughter extend the feminine consciousness, and we can say, with Jung, that “every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forward into her daughter” (2006:170). In what follows, we shall discuss the symbolic mother-daughter attachment, emphasising the determining role that it plays in the construction of feminine identity and in the female quest for independence and self-discovery.

The “Murder” of the Mother

In *Difficult Daughters*, motherhood is treated both as a female experience and as the psychological root of identity formation. The spectre of motherhood, with its psychological and political implications, echoes the Western literary thinking of the 1970s, in which the bearing and rearing of children are regarded as the chief cause of women’s relegation to the domestic sphere. Motherhood prevents women’s participation in public and political activities, and at the same time renders women totally dependent on a controlling male figure. Moreover, the mother “was attacked for the part

she played in socializing children into traditional gender roles, thus perpetuating the positions of male dominance and female subordination” (Palmer 1989: 96). According to the psychoanalytic perspective on identity formation as formulated by Jacques Lacan, the psychological development of the child is marked by two stages: the Imaginary and the Symbolic. During the Imaginary phase, the infant lives in a state of bliss, as part of the mother, unable to differentiate between self and other, and, most significantly, unable to speak. The child’s movement into subjectivity begins with his/her initiation into language. By participating in society’s main signifying system, in language, the child is inscribed into the Symbolic Order or the Law of the Father. K. K. Ruthven points out that:

The price to be paid for acquiring a speaking position in the Symbolic, and mastery of the pronominal system which multiplies distinctions between self and other, is repression of desire for that lost unity with the mother. (1990:63)

Hence the feminists’ conclusion that culture and civilization rest upon the murder of the mother. The rejection of maternal foundations in the subject’s development leads to a repudiation of the feminine in general.

Manju Kapur’s novel opens with an assertion by Ida which establishes the framework for her journey into the past: “The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother” (2010:1). From the very beginning, the mother is rejected, and the novel symbolically begins with Virmati’s death and cremation. Separation from the mother is seen as a necessary loss, reminding one of the feminist belief that the “murder” of the mother is an obligatory step in the erasure of a myth that privileges the maternal over the feminine (Irigaray 1985:30), a myth that carries all the cultural constraints imposed on women. As Angela Carter pointed out in *The Sadeian Woman*:

“the mother is a horrid warning to her daughter: ‘As I am, so you will be’. Mother seeks to ensure the continuance of her own repression.” (1983:124) Ida’s writing represents a psychoanalytic exercise, a personal catharsis designed to liberate her from her obsession with her mother. She writes in order to stop being haunted by her, as she herself acknowledges at the end of the novel:

This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore. (Kapur 2010:280)

Writing fiction is a process of personal unburdening and the written word brings freedom from the despair of feeling. Ida cannot remember a time when things between her and her mother were right; their relationship was a *difficult* one, and now, after her mother’s death, she feels the need to uncover the older woman’s past in order to understand her and thus to make sense of her own existence in the light of her maternal inheritance. “Without her, I am lost” (Kapur 2010:4), confesses Ida, thus voicing her need to fill an existential gap and come to terms with the memory of her mother. Ida is writing in search of wholeness; for her, writing becomes a conceptual and linguistic act of creation of self.

When Ida starts enquiring about Virmati, her aunts and uncles remember their large family, which consisted of 11 children, of whom Virmati was the eldest. Their mother, Kasturi, “blessed” with so many offspring, found childbirth not a victory but a sign and a reminder of women’s entrapment in the human limit of their own bodies. For Kasturi, a room of one’s own is a place to have a baby. God may have favoured her, as her in-laws keep telling her, but all she feels is an extreme tiredness that

brings her to the verge of serious illness. Pregnant for the eleventh time, she feels that she will die if she has one more child:

By the time Virmati was sixteen, Kasturi could bear childbirth no more. For the eleventh time it had started, the heaviness in her belly, morning and evening nausea, bile in her throat while eating, hair falling out in clumps, giddiness when she got up suddenly. How trapped could nature make a woman? She turned to God, so bountiful with his gifts, and prayed ferociously for the miracle of a miscarriage. Her sandhya started and ended with this plea, that somehow she should drop the child she was carrying and never conceive again. (Kapur 2010:7)

Grossly swollen, heavy and unbalanced, Kasturi's body displays an overwhelming human misery that works to demystify cultural ideas about motherhood as a source of continuous bliss. One hears much about the beauty of a woman with child, but Kapur, by depicting this grotesque image of Kasturi's curved back, falling-out hair and bleeding teeth, attempts to debunk these old myths regarding motherhood.

Being the eldest daughter, Virmati becomes a second mother for her ten siblings, who look to her for every little thing. Consequently, at a tender age, the girl is so exposed to all the hardships of bearing and rearing children, to all the work involved in running a house, that she herself becomes as tired and harassed as her mother. Yet Virmati yearns for her mother's attention and is possessive about each moment spent with her:

At times Virmati yearned for affection, for some sign that she was special. However, when she put her head next to the youngest baby, feeding in the mother's arms, Kasturi would get irritated and push her away: 'Have you seen to their food – milk – clothes – studies?' (Kapur 2010:6)

After the birth of her eleventh child, Kasturi feels so sick that the doctor recommends that she should move away from the unhealthy bazaar of her home and benefit from the fresh air of the mountains. The family rent a house in Dalhousie and Kasturi moves to this hill station with her eldest and youngest daughters. It is here that Virmati meets her cousin, Shakuntala, a “new” woman who plants the seeds of personal aspiration in Virmati. Shakuntala is the black sheep of her family because she refuses to marry and chooses instead to become a teacher in Lahore. She explains to her bewildered cousin “how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are, fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else.” (Kapur 2010: 16) For the first time Virmati realises that it is possible to be something other than a wife and decides to take seriously the process of learning, since higher education is the only way to be on one’s own. She needs to study in order to avoid the fate of her mother, forever trapped by housekeeping and the rearing of children.

Virmati comes from a tradition-soaked family in Amritsar, where the marriage of a daughter is considered a “sacred duty – or sacred burden” (Kapur 2010: 152). Marriage appears as the only possible destiny for women, who are trained in how to keep house from the time they can walk. They are taught to respect tradition and to believe themselves to be doomed if they fail to marry. In Kapur’s novel, tradition reinforces the patriarchal relations at work in a male-dominated society. Tradition is built on communication and relationships, which are maintained by using women as objects of exchange through the institution of marriage (Lévi-Strauss 1977: 24). Starting from Lévi-Strauss’s theory, Judith Butler argues that the bride-as-gift “functions as a relational term between groups of men; she does not

have an identity, and neither does she exchange one identity for another. She *reflects* masculine identity precisely through being the site of its absence” (1989:39). In other words, the bride is just a link between different “patriarchal clans”, a link which serves to reinforce men’s bonds with each other.

The role that the woman plays in the consolidation of relations between clans is crucial in Indian society, where marriages are mostly arranged. Once her FA exams are over, much pressure is put on Virmati to marry the man chosen by her parents, a canal engineer from a respectable family. She must waste no time in doing so, because Indumati, her younger sister, is waiting her turn to marry. However, Virmati’s marriage has to be postponed because the fiancé’s father dies and there needs to be a mourning period. The girl takes advantage of the situation and urges her parents to let her study for a BA at Arya Sabha College. By this time, the unexpected has happened and Virmati has fallen in love with a neighbour, Professor Harish Chandra, an Indian with a British degree who has come to Amritsar together with his mother, wife and child to teach at Arya Sabha College. The Professor is much attracted by his student’s “offering eyes” and his desire to possess her soon extends to Virmati’s heart and mind. Married to an illiterate woman, Ganga, with whom he cannot have any intellectual exchange of ideas, Harish appreciates the rare gift of knowledge in a woman and would be very glad to have the company of an educated wife.

At this point, it is interesting to observe that from now on Virmati has no real choice regarding the course of events. But for the Professor’s intrusion in her life, she would probably have stopped studying and married in accordance with her family’s wishes. At this point, however, she rejects her fiancé and demands the right to go on studying, because the Professor,

although a married man, insists that she should break off her engagement. On the surface of things, her discourse places her in a position of power from where she can voice her desires like a truly independent woman, but in fact this discourse is not her creation, but the Professor's. She does not feel any of the strength that independence and self-assertion should bring; instead she feels guilty, fraudulent, a deceiver of everyone's expectations.

Virmati's refusal to marry comes as a shock to her parents, who blame it all on the girl's studies. Kasturi too "knew the value of education, it had got her her husband, and had filled her hours with the pleasure of reading" (Kapur 2010:60), but at no point had she questioned the patriarchal assumption that her happiness lay in marriage. She used to gratify her passion for reading at night, while during the day she would learn all the necessary things that a girl had to know in order to make a good wife. The proper education for a woman is in the home, where any mother ensures her daughter's happiness by teaching her how to please her future in-laws:

How?

Let me count the ways.

With all the breads she could make, puris with spicy gram inside, luchis big as plates, kulchas, white and long, tandoori rotis, layers of flaky flour, paranthas, crisp and stuffed. With morrabas, never soggy, and dripping juicy sweet... With thread spun, with cloth woven, with durries, small stitched carpets, and phulkaris, with pyjama kurtas, shirts, and salwar kameezes. (Kapur 2010:62-63)

Without realising it, Kasturi becomes the voice of patriarchy when she fiercely orders her daughter to conform to her parents' wishes: "Remember you are going to be married next month, if I have to swallow poison to make you do it!" (Kapur 2010:60) Torn between the irreconcilable demands of her family and the Professor, Virmati feels split into "two

socially unacceptable pieces” (Kapur 2010:55). She lacks a sense of stable identity, she lacks the strength to openly assert what she wants, and consequently, unable to resolve her domestic situation, she tries to commit suicide by drowning herself. At this stage, death appears to be the only means of defence that could prevent her from “cracking”. In the event, she is saved by two men who see her heading for the canal, and her survival unleashes the family’s terrible judgement, since her illicit love affair with the Professor has meanwhile been discovered: “United, the family talked. United, they raged and grieved, united they questioned.” (Kapur 2010:86) The only argument Virmati can bring in her defence is her desire to study rather than to marry, a statement which sounds weak and unconvincing even to herself. Eventually, the *difficult daughter* is locked in a room and arrangements are made for Indu to marry Virmati’s fiancé.

Away from Home, Away from the Centre

Virmati’s confinement to the narrow, restrictive space of a room echoes an older feminist preoccupation with spatiality as a powerful tool in shaping and maintaining gender identities and relations. Apart from gender inscriptions, space implies the reality of physical borders, of margins, and, since space is a social construct, the borders become ideological, constrictive barriers, or, as Lefebvre puts it “the ultimate foundation of social space is *prohibition*” (2002:35). At the same time, borders may be read as distance from the centre, thus highlighting the “inferiority” of peripheral existence, as well as the tension of living on the threshold. In Kapur’s novel, Virmati finds herself on the margins of society after she has refused to marry. She is a disgrace to her own family, to the heart of which she will never again have access. Yet it is this very marginality which gives

her the freedom she so much yearns for, since from now on she has nothing else to lose. Let down by the Professor, who is expecting a second child by Ganga, Virmati decides to go to study in Lahore in order to become a teacher. It is only away from home, i.e. the centre, that she can seek her true independence. This time her parents do not oppose her decision and Virmati goes to a college in Lahore, accompanied by her bitter mother, who repeats her old reproaches over and over again: “A woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings”, or “God has put you on earth to punish me” (Kapur 2010:111).

In Virmati’s time, Lahore was the most revered place on earth for all Punjabis and the place where bright students with high aspirations went to study. And this young woman loves being there and studying there. This cosmopolitan metropolis offers her, for the first time, the promise of independence, but it all remains no more than a promise because the Professor follows her and her state of inner confusion returns. Although she objects to being limited to the roles culturally assigned to women, Virmati still presents a contradiction, for she cries “freedom” while yet hugging the chains of the symbolic order to her when she seeks happiness in a man. She does not realise the futility of this attempt, the impossibility of achieving wholeness through romantic love. The Professor periodically comes from Amritsar to visit her and arranges secret meetings in the house of Syed Husain, a friend of his. Their love is soon consummated, although Virmati feels uneasy when she thinks of her family and of his existing wife and children. Away from home, Virmati discovers her sexuality, but this new awareness of her femininity is fraught with anxiety and a feeling of guilt. For Virmati it is only the institution of marriage that can “legitimise” her immoral and sinful sexual drives. Therefore she insists that Harish should

marry her – “Marry me and make it clear to everybody” (Kapur 2010 125) – but he postpones their wedding, being himself helplessly caught in the patriarchal system of power relations constructed by his family. For him, Virmati is a precious love object whom he does not feel the need to bring home.

Virmati begins to realise her foolishness in believing that the myth of romantic love and union with one single man is the key to happiness and wholeness. In loving Harish, she annihilates her own self by denying those aspects of her femininity and those ideas which do not resonate with his masculine desires. Virmati’s new-found awareness is strengthened by her encounter with Swarna Lata, her roommate. Like Shakuntala, Swarna is a “new” woman to whom Virmati looks up in admiration. She has come to Lahore to study for an MA and has become politically active, fighting for women’s rights, slogan shouting, speechmaking and so on. Seeing Swarna so involved in other people’s lives and waiting for no man, Virmati starts to doubt her own freedom:

Am I free, thought Virmati. I came here to be free, but I am not like these women. They are using their minds, organising, participating in conferences, politically active, while my time is spent being in love. Wasting it. Well, not wasting time, no, of course not, but then how come I never have a moment for anything else? Swarna does. And she has a ‘friend’, who lives in the city. Thank God Hari lives in Amritsar. Otherwise I would be completely engulfed. But isn’t that what I want? What’ll happen when we marry? (Kapur 2010: 142)

Sadly enough, the only time when Virmati thinks of herself as an independent woman is when she has an abortion: “Yes, she was independent. Her body had gone through knives and abortion, what could happen to her now that she could not bear?” (Kapur 2010:175) Yet she

chooses to take this measure not out of a conviction that motherhood is a social setback for women, but out of the shame that a baby would bring on her as an unmarried woman. While the Professor is away with his family, Viru goes through the physical and psychological ordeal of the abortion alone, attended only by Swarna, who has arranged the operation. One generation later, Ida will also have an abortion when her husband – a successful, respected academic just like the Professor – insists that she do so. Mother and daughter thus share the same secret experience, but with different outcomes: whereas Ida's abortion leads to a divorce, Virmati's only strengthens her bond with the Professor: "She was his for life, whether he ever married her or not. Her body was marked by him, she could never look elsewhere, never entertain another choice." (Kapur 2010:177)

Faced with the prospect of losing Virmati, the Professor finally decides to bring home a second wife. Manju Kapur presents the journeys of both mother and daughter to their new homes, both brides with fear in their hearts. Virmati is sure that her parents will never forgive her and that the process of rejection is now completed. Her mother literally beats her and throws her out of the house for the shame she has brought to their family. She is rejected just as completely by Harish's family: his mother, Ganga, and the children treat her with open hostility, regarding her as a shameless Punjabi witch who has stolen Harish. Shame becomes the epitome of her entire existence. In the train on the way to her new house, Virmati can still dream of a blissful marriage which will finally bring a recognisable pattern to her life. At the end of her first day as a married woman the illusion has already evaporated and she confesses to her equally unhappy husband: "I should never have married you... and it's too late now. I've never seen it so clearly. It's not fair." (Kapur 2010:212)

After her marriage, Virmati starts thinking differently about space, divides it up in her mind, makes clear what is hers and what is not. She and Harish are only allowed a dressing-room, the rest of the house being occupied by Ganga and her children. "If Virmati had the bed, Ganga was going to have the house" (Kapur 2010:230), and the first wife protects her space fiercely. Virmati is never allowed into the kitchen and is the last person to have access to the bathroom. This division of space, so unlike the fluid areas of her maternal home, reflects Virmati's split consciousness.

Deprived of a house and hence of any sense of stable ground, Virmati grows passive, silent and withdrawn, her state being worsened by the deaths of her father and grandfather and a miscarriage. At this point, her husband decides to send her back to Lahore to do an MA in philosophy in the hope that Virmati will return to her old self. Although she hates philosophy, Virmati accepts the Professor's offer, since studying represents, once again, her only means of escape. While Ganga wonders "what woman would want to exchange a home for a classroom" (Kapur 2010:248), Virmati is secretly relieved when she leaves for Lahore, where she will remain for two years, from 1944 to 1946. These were the years when political unrest started in Punjab, forcing people "to accept Partition and suffering along with Independence" (Kapur 2010:268). The killing started, and the birth of the new nation was to be a very bloody one. Kapur presents the horrors of Partition through the various accounts given by her characters, witnesses to incredible scenes of bloodshed, looting, rape and arson. The fragmented world mirrors Virmati's equally fragmented consciousness. The social and political disintegration described becomes an extension of Virmati's own ego on the verge of dissolution.

In the midst of this social and political turmoil, Harish sends his mother and Ganga, along with the children, to his home town, fearing for their safety. He stays in the empty house in Amritsar to wait for his second wife to return. Virmati can finally start her life as a housewife in a space that from now on will belong only to her, since Ganga never returns. Virmati sweeps out of the house all the things that had belonged to Ganga, symbolically clearing the place for herself. Possessing her own house, she is now gradually finding a sense of stable identity: "Virmati had never had so much space around her. Maybe this was really what she had fought for all along, space to be. She conceived." (Kapur 2010:274) A baby girl is born, and her birth coincides with the birth of the country.

After Independence, Harish is offered the principalship of one of the new colleges of Delhi University and the couple move to Delhi. The end of the novel is narrated in the first person by Ida, who recalls her mother as a strict woman with whom she had a difficult relationship. Without realising it, Virmati has taken Kasturi's place, demanding her daughter obey and please her family. The consequences are by now familiar: Ida grows up with a fragmented individuality and tries, just like her mother, "to bridge the contradictions in her life by marrying a man who was also an academic" (Kapur 2010:279). After her divorce, Ida is left husbandless and childless, doomed, just like her mother, to live on the margins of society.

Conclusion

The conclusion we reach after reading Kapur's novel is that Virmati's struggle for independence did not transform her into a "new", free woman, even though she managed to marry the man she loved. The heroine's anticlimactic achievement appears as the logical consequence of

her initial goal. Since her life revolved around a male figure, Virmati remained enslaved to the patriarchal myth of matrimonial union and romantic fulfilment, which promises women an illusory wholeness. What emerged out of her marriage was a sense of emotional emptiness, silent disappointments and self-deception. She was a woman who had the courage to defy her own family for many years, but was unable to do the same with her husband. Ida likes to believe that her mother, constantly humiliated by her husband's family, "must have refused. That she could have said, I'm my own mistress. I will relate to you with dignity or not at all." (Kapur 2010: 255) The words must have been at the back of her mind, but by then, Virmati had already become trapped in the patriarchal network of power which regulates women's behaviour in society and ensured that "her voice remained soft when she spoke" (Kapur 2010:256). By then, she herself had become a patriarchal figure, thus symbolically replacing the mother whom she had fought, yet painfully loved, all her life.

References:

- Butler, Judith. 1989. *Gender Trouble. Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Carter, Angela. 1983. *The Sadeian Woman. An Exercise in Cultural History*. London: Virago.
- Irigaray, Luce. 1985. *This Sex Which Is Not One*. Trans. C. Porter and C. Burke. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Jung, Carl Gustav. 2006 (1982). *Aspects of the Feminine*. Trans. R. F. C. Hull. London & New York: Routledge.
- Kapur, Manju. 2010. *Difficult Daughters*. London: Faber and Faber Ltd.
- Lefebvre, Henri. 2002. *The Production of Space*. Trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.

- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1977. *Structural Anthropology*. Vol. 2. Trans. M. Layton, London: Allen Lane.
- Palmer, Paulina. 1989. *Contemporary Women's Fiction: Narrative Practice and Feminist Theory*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Ruthven, K. K. 1990. *Feminist Literary Studies: An Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.