

RESEARCH ARTICLE**Haunted Memories in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and *Custody***

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Abstract

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) explores the ramifications of Partition, emphasising the long-lasting trauma and forced displacement and women's voices. In *Custody* (2011) the children Roohi and Arjun, are traumatised emotionally by their parents' fights and arguments about parental responsibility and guardianship. They went through the anguish and suffering of separation from their parents and relatives. *Difficult Daughters* and *Custody*, can be understood and studied through the lens of trauma theory. It underlines the challenges of dealing with various losses, trauma and alienation. Trauma theory forms a framework to analyse *Difficult Daughters* and *Custody*, narratives penned by Kapur. It underscores the long-lasting consequences of anguish, suffering, irrecoverable loss, mental trauma and the ever-haunting memories. The study delves into how the unanswered traumatic experiences resonate in impacting the sense of identity, belongingness and social and personal relationships.

Keywords: Partition trauma, Rootlessness, Alienation, Psychological trauma, Identity.**Introduction**

Haunted memories serve as a profound lens for understanding how the past persists and shapes the present day. A recurring nature characterises the lingering memories, however much one tries to forget or suppress them. The trauma is conceptualised by Cathy Caruth as "an encapsulated experience that is not fully understood at the time of occurrence but resurfaces belatedly through involuntary memories, repetitions and flashbacks" (4). Haunted memories point out the lingering indicators of personal and communal experiences that shape subjectivity as an ongoing process. The

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linear notion of time is challenged by showing how vague experiences from the past resurface in the present, exerting an uninterrupted influence on identity, emotions, and communal life.

The notion of intrusive memory reverberates with the theory of the uncanny, Sigmund Freud, which states that “it arises when something experienced earlier and repressed for long returns into the consciousness in a very disturbing manner” (148). Freud suggests that “suppressed memories do not disappear as a whole; they linger within the unconscious in a nerve-wracking way” (150). The haunted memories manifest through the mechanism of dynamic return, transforming the past into a hauntological force that perturbs the individual. Such memories shape the individual’s emotions and thought process, obscuring the boundaries of remembrance and forgetting. It also distorts the presence and absence.

In literary narratives, the function of the concept of haunted memories is to delve into the triggering of trauma, emotional turmoil and social deprivation. The narratives exemplify the indelible imprint that eludes reclamation and reintegration in personal lives. Manju Kapur, in her narratives, *Difficult Daughters* and *Custody*, highlights the characters’ inability to detach from the emotional trauma of the past and the persisting memories of it. The haunted memories shape the identity and relationships of an individual when repressed desires, familial discord and the strains of relationships resurface. Kapur uses this idea to elucidate the psychological consequences of unresolved experiences. She intricately weaves the influence of the persistent past into the inner selves of her characters rather than as a set of circumstances that can be completely resolved.

Partition Trauma and Rootlessness in *Difficult Daughters*

The repercussions of the Partition in 1947 were mass displacement of millions and widespread violence resulting in the loss of many lives. In *Difficult Daughters*, one can come across this historical debacle being brilliantly depicted by Manju Kapur. The trauma theories of Dominick LaCapra and Cathy Caruth bring out the impact of the historical cataclysms on individuals. The Partition impact is epitomised by the central figure Virmati and her daughter, Ida. The traumatic and forced migration experiences of these women lead to intergenerational transformation.

A comprehensive study of the “belatedness” (Cathy 6) in traumatic experiences, a common term used by trauma theorists, is dealt with in the works of Kapur. This term explains how the impact of trauma or pain appears after a long time of its occurrence. These experiences are described by Judith Herman as “complex trauma” (5) as the result of long-lasting encounters with several stress situations, more than a single incident (397). Virmati had to continue her studies in Lahore as she had been relocated due to the Partition, which had altered many lives. Again, she had been relocated; this was after her marriage. The women experienced feelings of alienation as there were many restrictions laid down by Indian society much earlier than the Partition. Virmati’s only solace was education. The more involved she was in her studies, the more alienated she became from society and family. “Virmati listened, thrilled to be her mother’s confidante, but drawn towards Shakuntala, to one whose responsibilities went beyond a husband and children” (Kapur 17). It can be noted that Virmati’s decision to pursue education was a symbolic movement to resist the male-dominated

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society. This illustrates how education serves as a sanctuary from the hard and inhumane restrictive social customs while echoing the historical trauma. These circumstances give insight into the structural violence where deep-rooted social institutions perpetuate inequality and aggravate the society's exposure to crisis.

Kapur's writing skills intertwine personal trauma and historical, social and political catastrophes. The lifestyle followed by Viramati's maternal family is gradually falling out because of rapid industrialisation. Kasturi expresses his intergenerational dissonance thus, "these are not the times I grew up" (78). The protagonist Viramati represents women who are held up in the transitional phase and are striving hard to be independent in such a society where female autonomy is restrained. They are unwilling to accept the conventional roles that constrain their aspirations and hinder their personal growth. Their presence at a time of change causes a lot of emotional pain.

The transgenerational trauma is explicit in the title *Difficult Daughters*. Maria Root's idea of "insidious trauma" (240) can be used here to understand Ida, who finds it difficult to understand her mother's psycho-traumatic experiences, which have been haunting her and not yet resolved. Ida belongs to the post-memory generation, and Kapur says that "left with the remnants of her life to make sense" (312). Doris Laub's ideology of "testimonial listening" (62) depicts Ida's endeavour to trace intergenerational memory and understand the suffering endured by the survivors of Partition.

In *Difficult Daughters*, homes are a place of conflict instead of a place of security. The crowded household in Amritsar curtails the ambitions and goals of Viramati, and she is really frustrated by her domestic circumstances. This echoes the emotional and social uncertainty as a result of the impact of Partition, which led to the loss of their homestead instantaneously. Kapur states that women were those who had experienced homelessness even before the occurrence of Partition, and political cataclysm aggravated their social relocation. The words of Viramati, "I wish I too could do things" (18) embody personal awakening and female empowerment. Education acts as a blessing and a curse. It is so because it makes Viramati free but estranges her from the family and society. Polis Schultz says: "The new woman arises full of confidence, she speaks eloquently, and thinks independently, full of strength. She organises efficiently and directs proudly" (39). New educational opportunities and political transformations disrupt the uncertainty of conventional systems of society and individuals and the sense of identity and belonging.

The impact of religious and communal conflicts was the repercussions of Partition, which inflicted fear, worry and psychological anguish and disturbed family life. Kapur focuses on the religious disturbances affecting social relationships and domestic spaces instead of historical conflicts and challenges. The novel emphasises the internal partition of society and families along with the external partition of the country. The divisions caused by internal and external partition infiltrate profoundly into the shared consciousness.

The way traumatic memories are communicated through silence can be seen in the novel. Viramati is reluctant to share her anguish and sufferings with Ida, her daughter. On the other hand, Professor Harish believes that "the past is better forgotten" illustrates an environment of suppression

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and alienation (Kapur 267). Memory turns out to be a burden and at the same time a necessity. Healing, as stated by trauma theory, requires a complicated compromise between the ability to remember and forget. Ida tries to metamorphose the traumatic memories into understanding and rectification by recreating Virmati's experience.

Women in ancient India had mobility restrictions, and the Partition, accompanied by violence, made it worse and riskier. The modern or rather unconventional practices of Virmati aggravated social vulnerability. Besides, the emergence of communal violence intensified the risk encountered by women who opposed the traditional norms of society. Against this backdrop, women lost their homes, interrelations and sense of identity and belonging. The social and political crisis of Partition intensified the restrictions laid on Indian women. The independent decisions of Virmati led the community to brand her as a transgressor, while the era's social and political turmoil intensified the constraint of women's autonomy. Millions of women had undergone the trauma of displacement and social and emotional alienation. Ida states, "I have inherited her dislocations" (298). This realisation makes her reveal the silence that had wrapped the family, and she makes out the impact of trauma perpetuated intergenerationally.

Parental Alienation, Identity Crisis, and Trauma in *Custody*

Custody, a novel by Manju Kapur, depicts the challenges faced by the two children stemming from the conjugal conflict resulting from their parents' separation. The novel, set in the socio-cultural framework of 1990's, it analyses how family conflict and fragmentation affected both the psychological and emotional children's wellbeing. Divorce leads to an existential dilemma that influences the identity of the children. The novel illustrates the anguish, suffering, identity crisis, and emotional and psychological consequences on Arjun and Roohi, the young protagonists.

The heart of Kapur's *Custody* is the fracturing of family relationships and ending up in divorce. Here, one parent turns the child against another parent. Shagun, the mother of Arjun and Roohi, deserts her husband for being in a romantic relationship with Ashok Khanna, a business tycoon. The children are the victims when both parents try to establish their moral superiority over them. Arjun is more attached to his mother and is greatly influenced by her affluent and elite lifestyle. Roohi, a little child, is the pawn in the custody battle. She is the one who faces the legal proceedings. Both parents are trying their level best to secure the children's trust, and fractured family bonds result in depriving the children of parental affection and security (Mishra 112).

The fiction illustrates how the emotional chaos and confusion that originated from disrupted family relationships shape the children's developmental process. Various studies on this topic say that the children of disrupted families undergo emotional suffering as they find it difficult to trust and to endure anxiety and uncertainty (Kelly and Johnson 252). The anger and aggressiveness are the result of repressed trauma. When he is separated from his father, the feeling of insecurity, lack of emotional support and solitude creeps in. His enrolment in a boarding school emblemizes the advantages of social privilege and the emotional separation. On the other hand, Roohi expresses her emotional distancing by being silent, perplexed and totally uncomfortable. She remains an observer

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and voiceless throughout the battle of custody, as the adults were the ones who decided the matters. By accentuating the child's frame of mind, Kapur reveals the inclination to view children as a matter of legal subjects while completely ignoring the emotional reality (Tripathi 84).

The trauma in children, suggests Kapur, is not a result of dramatic expressions but appears through subtle behavioural changes. Arjun, a teenage boy, finds it difficult to adjust to the parents' breakup, and it leads to frustration, low performance in the academic field and distancing from his family. Roohi becomes attached to the parent who has custody because she wants emotional security and stability. In the novel, it can be seen that the traumatic experiences of children make them adapt to the disruptions in the family because they want to survive. Bernet asserts that these adjustments often strengthen the feelings of insecurity and helplessness gradually rather than solving their distress (Bernet 17). The often-changing custody arrangements intensify the sense of desertion and infidelity, pushing them into the depths of emotional unsettlement and uncertainty about their spaces.

The formation of identity is emphasised in the novel. The identity of a child originates from the personal experiences it has faced. In the case of separated parents, the identity of a child is fractured and challenged because of the disputes in the family. Arjun finds it difficult to get accustomed to the ethical and moral values of the family because of his father's conservatism and his mother's modernity. Besides, Arjun's identity crisis is intensified by his parents' estrangement. Roohi, being very young, was unable to understand the tension and anxiety that was going on in the family. Winnicott's theory of the "holding environment" (592) is the feeling of being safe, cared for and emotionally secure, usually created by a parent which is clearly negated here as Roohi is often shifted from one environment to another, from grandmother's place to father's home and later to mother's place.

The challenges about identity originating from the alienation of parents will follow the children from childhood to the period of adolescence. The parents, both of them, experience great changes when they don the cloak of caregivers. The change that has come over Raman, a gentle, soft man once, has become a determined father to get the custody of his daughter. Raman had a desire to pay for the betrayal of Shagun, and his parenthood was built on the foundation of emotional suffering and legal conflict. Shagun prioritised her personal feelings and desires more than her children's well-being. It can be seen here how the parents' behaviour not only breaks the children's identity but the family as a whole. Nitonde asserts that "it is these marriages; it is the children who suffer mostly for no fault of theirs" (108).

The children, Arjun and Roohi, are the victims of parental discord. This highlights the adaptability of children of broken homes. It can also be understood that the struggles these kids face in balancing their identities come from being in different home environments. To quote the words of Hashemi, "much research over many years found that children who experience the divorce of their parents...are at higher risk for an extensive variety of negative outcomes" (Hashemi 2). Arjun shows his antagonism towards Ishita, and emotionally manipulating Roohi conveys his anguish and confusion. Roohi is in two minds between her own mother and stepmother. This exhibits emotional

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and psychological distress. The dysfunctional family framework's repercussions on the children's sense of identity and mental and emotional growth have a long-lasting effect.

A Comparison of Shared Trauma and Identity

The novels *Difficult Daughters* and *Custody* of Manju Kapur depict similarities in some aspects, like exploring trauma, the identity crisis, the problems of rootlessness and long-lasting repercussions of memory collectively and individually. The concept of trauma is illustrated in these novels as an incessant psychological situation that moulds the human identity through the continuous process of shaping and reshaping. The protagonist in the *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati, is affected by the trauma of Partition, and she is dead set against patriarchal norms, whereas in *Custody*, the trauma arises from the breaking of a family and parent alienation. Despite the contrasting milieus, the novels bring out the fact that the individuals are shackled by their lasting psychological grip of past experiences.

Both novels share the same theme of identity crisis. The quest for independence by Virmati triggered a psychological anguish and a divided identity within the framework of a conservative society. Shagun's search for individualisation beyond conjugal milieu and Raman's deconstructed parental hegemony reflect similar instability of identity in a modern setting, mirroring the fluid and fragile nature of identity in a late capitalist framework, as seen in *Custody*. Roohi and Arjun in *Custody* and Ida in *Difficult Daughters*, who are also victims of the emotional trauma of what their parents experience. The experiences of rootlessness, which is the nucleus of existence is reflected in these novels. The rootlessness in the *Difficulty* arises from the historical event of Partition, whereas in *Custody* it is from the familial distortion and separation. The characters in these novels are crafted in such a manner by Kapur as those who are unable to relocate a sense of belonging within the society, within themselves or in their families.

There is a lot of difference in the nature, origin and narrative creation of trauma and displacement. As mentioned earlier, the *Difficult Daughters* is etched in the historical background of Partition. Here, the socio-political aspects distort the identities and societies, or rather, it is a public sphere. The character of the protagonist is shaped by the events of history and an individual's inability to accept the existing situation. The *Custody* depicts the trauma in a private sphere, that is, in a nuclear family and those connected with it. The trauma arises from the break-up of the family, parental separation and the issues of custody. Gender also plays a role here. The son is accepted by the mother, and the daughter by her father.

The identity crisis in the *Difficult Daughters* is the product of patriarchal conservatism and the old social practises. The contemporary ideology of individualism and the transformations in the family are highlighted in *Custody*. In the *Difficult Daughters*, a daughter takes the responsibility to rebuild her mother's broken history, while in *Custody* one can find multiple perspectives, a sense of messy conflicts in a broken family.

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The novels *Difficult Daughters* and *Custody* explore emotional and psychological trauma, issues of memory and loss of identity. Through the protagonist Virmati, Kapur brings out the repercussions of violence and the impact that displacement trauma has on intergenerational family dynamics. The interwoven connection between personal anguish and suffering and the shared history is described in this novel. In *Custody*, the emotional trauma, fragmented homes and loss of identity suffered by children are emphasised through the divorce of parents. These novels highlight memory becoming a battlefield for moulding the identity of cross-generational families. Kapur draws attention to trauma caused either by the Partition of the country or the marital discord leaves a vestige of haunting and disturbing memories and obstructs and complicates the healing within the families.

These novels echo the issues of the current day, like dislocation, family estrangement and identity crisis. Kapur draws a word picture that trauma is not confined to the walls of a historical event or an individual's trauma, but it flows incessantly through the memory. These sculpt the self, and it has its impact on future generations. The trauma distorts resolution and shapes the identity of an individual and shared identities. The essence of Kapur's selected novels can be related to the present-day situations, such as migration, social conflicts and the transforming framework of families leading to the psychological and emotional trauma. In both novels, memory is presented as a fluid that depicts the unsolved trauma, fragmenting the collective and individual identities.

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