

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

Glimpses of Regionalism through the portrayal of Punjabi Culture in *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur

Dr Suchita Marathe

Associate Professor in English

SBMM, Mahal,

Nagpur, India

DOI: 10.53032/tel.2019.4.4.06

Abstract

‘Local color or regional literature is fiction and poetry that focuses on the characters, dialect, customs, topography, and other features particular to a specific region’ Regionalism is a quality in literature that is the product of fidelity to the habits, speech, manners, history, folklore and belief of a particular geographical section. The celebrated exponents of this have been Thomas Hardy who wrote about the Wessex area in England or William Wordsworth in poetry who wrote about the Lake District in England. In tune with this definition, the novel *Difficult Daughter* by Manju Kapur can be called Regional as the writer more or less sticks to one geographical area. Manju Kapur is a North Indian who resides in Delhi. All her novels are set in North India giving a glimpse of North Indian culture. Manju Kapur has set all her novels in the urban and international background: Amritsar, Lahore, Delhi, Ayodhya, Halifax in Canada. There is an unmistakable essence of North Indian culture through the descriptions of place, culture, dress, food, language, traditions, rituals, fasting and prayers. This Paper attempts to highlight the way Manju Kapur has been successful in highlighting the Punjabi Culture in her First Novel *Difficult Daughters* and improve our knowledge of Punjabi culture, Dress cuisine etc. Thus she qualifies as regional writer in English writing about the mannerisms of a particular part in India.

Keywords- Dress, Indianness, Food, Culture, Gossip, Tradition, Dress, Religious Beliefs

Dress is a powerful statement of the culture, tradition and the indicator of the open or close attitude of the society. According to the time period in which the novel is set, the author has described the different dresses and the change with the changing times. Set in the pre-independent era, *Difficult Daughters* shows its women wearing simple saris and salwar Kameez and men wearing starched dhotis. Only the foreign returned professor is shown to wear formal suits on occasions. ‘She turned and saw the Professor’s distinguished looking head, hair brushed back from high forehead, suit immaculate and English, glasses earnest and gleaming...’ (DD-128). Virmati is shown to wear Salwar Kameez, the traditional dress of the Punjabis. Shakuntala is described to wear the fashionable sarees and hairstyles which were in vogue in those days. A writer has to be aware of the dressing style of men and women in the

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

age that they are dealing with and both Manju Kapur and Anita Nair have shown a great sense of research and insight to bring alive the respective time periods. Red is the favourite colour of the married woman from the union provinces in those days. So Ganga, the traditional wife loves to dress in red and wears a large bindi and sindoor as indicators of marital status. On both the occasions the Professor is shown to buy red sarees for Virmati. *Home* is set in the 1980s in a family which is itself in cloth business. So woman are shown to wear rich sarees and salwar suits and later as Nisha joins college she even wears jeans. Rich business families use clothes as status symbols with a lot of gold jewellery to go with it. Every festive occasion, wedding and rituals is associated with the decking up of the ladies. Men belonging to different generations wear dhotis, trousers and shirt and jeans. During the weddings lavish sarees and their intricate embroideries are described. *Married woman* is a tale of the nineties when Indian economy was made open. Astha, the protagonist is shown to wear sarees and salwar suits while the American returned Hemanta wears casual wear and formal suits. Pipee is a New Woman who wears jeans and T-shirts. In *Immigrant*, Manju Kapur has used clothes as a symbol to show the cultural difference and cultural clash. Nina has gathered a rich collection of silks, kanjivarams and patolas. These sarees would have been a treasure to wear had she been married in India but in Canada these fancy and heavy sarees waited and waited for the right occasion. If she dressed in these saris, Ananda complained that she looked like a spectacle and people turned to look at her. As there was no Dhobi down the lane like in India to get her dresses starched and ironed, it was difficult for her to maintain them. Her husband expected her to switch to Western clothes but Nina took a long time to adjust to the cultural difference. It was difficult for her to overcome her love for her silk suits and wear western clothes.

A writer is gifted with tremendous observation and a capability to express and use it with connotations and denotations in his writings. Manju Kapur has woven subtle cultural nuances which lends a sheer Indianness to her writing which delights and binds the reader to the text.

Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* is set in Punjab. Amritsar being a border city adjoining Pakistan, has witnessed the horrors of Partition very closely as every refugee coming from across the border had to go through Amritsar. She has shown how the people of Amritsar rose to the occasion and showered humanity on the terror-struck people pouring into the country. Every day they used to cook langars of Khichdi for the tired and hapless refugees coming in troupes to India as they were left homeless and driven away from their property and livelihood. India is a large country and the staple food of that region depends on the staple crop that is grown and the climate of that region. Therefore the food habits of the people of every region in India are typical with their staple diets and ways of garnishing. In Punjab the staple crop is wheat, mustard and maize. So the people enjoy parathas. As the climate is mostly cool due to the nearness to the Himalayan Ranges there is plenty of milk and milk products like Paneer, cottage cheese, ghee, dahi, lassi are eaten in large quantities.

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelauncher.com

So North Indian food is heavy, rich in ghee and people savor their food with all their heart and can eat in large quantities because of the cold weather. One of the relatives recalls to Ida the nostalgic days of pure and rich food “The milk had a thick layer of malai, yellow not white, like nowadays. And when the food was cooked, ah! the fragrance of ghee!(Kapur4).Ida writes “I had grown on the mythology of pure ghee, milk, butter and lassi and whenever I came to Amritsar, I noticed the fanatical gleam in the eyes of the people as they talked of those legendary items.”(Kapur, 4) Manju Kapur has given a wonderful analogy with food to explain Ida’s situation. “Perhaps, if I could have shared that passion, the barriers of time and space would have melted like pure ghee in the warmth of my palm. But my tastes are different”. (Kapur, 4) The simile is so sensuous that we feel the ghee literally melting on our palms. The narrative of the book chiefly hovers around Amritsar and Lahore. It is sheer pleasure to witness in great detail the nuances of Punjabi culture. The small details of tradition are mentioned so naturally that they create an instant affinity for the author with the Indian readers. During Kasturi’s first pregnancy her mother had come down to help but since it is a custom not to eat anything in the house of the in-laws she had come “with all the dal, rice, flour, ghee and spices, with her own servant boy to buy vegetables to draw her drinking water from the market pump .to help with the household work. Light as air she had passed through with not an anna spent on her, not a grain of wheat or drop of water taken from the house of her son-in-law.”(Kapur, 9)

When as a patriarch, Lala Diwan Chand came visiting his house in Amritsar from his country house in Tarsikka, he was served with choicest savories, “Now he was resting with a glass of milk, while his sister was serving him homemade jalebis, fragrant with saffron, crisp, hot and sweet.”(DD-23) Indians associate rains with hot pakoras. It is an unwritten custom followed in every Indian household throughout India without the distinction of caste or religion. When one morning Virmati “woke to find the verandas washed with blowing winds of rain.”(DD-68) “All the brothers and sisters were getting wet in the rain and Paro came bursting with news, “Pehnji, come. Mati’s making pakoras in the kitchen”! (Kapur, 68) ‘It was ideal weather for pakoras, there could be no two opinions about that’ (Kapur, 68) and asked her sister what kind is being made. Paro answered ‘Oh, the usual. Onion, potato, green chilly, spinach, brinjal and pumpkin’. (DD-68) Virmati imagined the tasty pakoras, “Sweet salty and sharp with the sourness of chutney slathered on their golden crisp shells”. (Kapur, 68)

Manju Kapur is capable of highlighting the finer nuances of culture which wins our hearts. “Nobody mentioned anybody’s good looks for fear of attracting the evil eye and inflating the child’s head, but the good looks were unarguably there.” (Kapur, 24) It is again an unwritten custom in Indian households that a daughter whose marriage is fixed to be held in near future is not allowed to work, so when Virmati offers help for cutting vegetables for Pakoras on a rainy day, Hemavati answered, “Let us do some seva for you for a change.”(Kapur, 69) Then Hemavati continued “It will be auspicious omen if it rains on your

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

wedding''. (Kapur, 69) Lala Diwan Chand's mill house in Tarsikka was another place where all the children indulged in fun and frolic with food as an inseparable form of enjoyment. "The boys would raid the garden for litchis, Loquat and mangoes" (Kapur, 72) and after everybody had had their fill, "the boys would go to the halwai for pakoras". (Kapur, 72) As Virmati approached the canal to end her life, to avoid marrying Inderjit, she thought of the wonderful things she had till now associated with this canal "Virmati had times out of number cooled herself in this canal, sat on its banks to eat pakoras, to bite into hot roasted corn smeared with lemon and spicy masala, to munch peanuts and see the shells swirling about in the water in the water, to suck mangoes and see the seeds and skin sink." (Kapur, 75)

In one of the letters written to Virmati the Professor mentions the practice of burning the effigies of Ravana, Meghnath and Kumbhakarna on Dassehra. It is a tradition and parents take their children to see the 'Fataka show' which follows. Professor adds 'Ferozpur an effigy of Hitler was also included amongst the demon trio, but Amritsar is obviously more traditional.'"(DD-94) Every daughter-in-law has to be moulded in the ways of her husband's household. Therefore the marriages took place at a very young age so that the girls can be conditioned to the ways of the household easily. Ganga had married the Professor quite early. It was literally Kishoridevi, her mother-in law who had brought her up and taught the customs of their household. So the Professor also tries to tell Virmati that how it is difficult for him to convince his mother about his love for her 'She has brought Ganga up, whereas you would be a stranger to her and the family ways.'"(Kapur94)

The Punjabis invariably have a quadrangular space in the middle of the house which is called 'angan' where all the family congregates. The women sit on charpoys and clean rice or cut vegetables along with gossip about other women. "Evening time, many of the family were sitting out in the angan, on the string beds pulled from the eating room where they were kept stacked." (DD-118) To keep the gossip alive, Lajwanti purposely mentioned the wife of the Professor in front of Virmati while they were sitting in the angan. "Arre," she remarked to her sister –in law, "Whatever happened to that woman? Has there been any news from her?" "Which woman" asked Kasturi, sifting through the dal, checking for dirt and small stones?"(Kapur, 160) Food is used as a wonderful medium to convey the cultural nuances. When Virmati became pregnant, Manju Kapur doesn't forget to portray the Indian reality that whatever the relation the mother-in law shares with her daughter-in-law, she takes care of her during these days as she carries the heir of the family in her womb.

"Kishoridevi meanwhile changed. Without saying anything, she substituted Virmati's morning cup of tea with a glass of hot milk, with either almonds or honey added to it. Then almost every day there was a milk sweet with the evening meal, kheer, rubri, rasgulla, shrikhand, rasmalai- things that Kishoridevi especially made." (DD-242)

Manju Kapur has herself lived in a joint Marwari family. She is in the know of the workings of the Joint Family closely and she has utilized this knowledge with great aplomb. In the end it is shown that all the brothers of Virmati are still living in their ancestral house

The Creative Launcher

An International, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

www.thecreativelaucher.com

even though each have made their separate kitchen. The idea of collective culture against individualism is constantly followed in the novel. Indian culture always talks of sharing and living together. Thus after Virmati's death, Ida is orphaned but her relatives assure her "You must come and visit us often, Ida, very often." (Kapur, 2) The relatives welcome Ida wholeheartedly but still cannot digest Ida's divorced status. Manju Kapur has caught this insistence on conformity in Indian culture and any aberration, a lifelong repentance. Ida writes "I know my relatives feel sorry for me. I am without husband, child or parents. I can see the ancient wheels of my divorce still grinding and clanking in their heads". (Kapur4)

Thus we see Manju Kapur intertwining nuances of Punjabi Culture and Indianness in her story telling which makes her narrative more affable.

References

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

<https://www.google.com/search?q=what+is+regionalism+in+literature&oq=what+is+regionalism+in+Literature&aqs=chrome.0.012.11469j0j8&sourceid=chrome&ie=UTF-8>

Gunjan. "Difficult Daughters, A Married Woman and Home of Manju Kapur: A Saga of New Indian Women." *Emergence of New Woman Indian Writing in English*. Ed. Qamar Talat. Adhyayan Publishers & Distributors, 2012. 91-116.

Kapur Manju *Difficult Daughters*. Faber & Faber, 2009.