

WOMAN, GENEALOGY, HISTORY: DECONSTRUCTIONS OF FAMILY AND NATION IN AMITAV GHOSH'S *THE SHADOW LINES* AND MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT DAUGHTERS*¹

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Abstract: Since the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the recent history of Indian Literature in English has been characterised by a growing interest in rewriting the history of India from an angle diametrically opposed to that of official historiography. Taking as a starting point Foucault's concept of Nietzschean genealogy, which emphasises the value of microhistory and interrogates the function of narrative linearity in historiographic practices, this paper analyses two analogous Indian English novels based on the independence and subsequent partition of the Indian subcontinent: *The Shadow Lines* by Amitav Ghosh and *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur. It mainly focuses on the deconstruction of the nationalist myth, where women and motherhood lay at the centre of the gestation and birth of the new nation.

Keywords: Amitav Ghosh, Manju Kapur, *The Shadow Lines*, *Difficult Daughters*, history, genealogy, women, Indian Literature in English.

Resumen: Desde la publicación de *Midnight's Children* de Salman Rushdie, la historia reciente de la novela india en lengua inglesa se ha visto marcada por un interés creciente en reescribir la historia de la India desde un ángulo diametralmente opuesto al de la historiografía oficial. Partiendo del concepto de la genealogía nietzscheana de Foucault, que enfatiza el valor de la microhistoria y cuestiona la linealidad narrativa de la práctica historiográfica, este estudio analiza dos obras de inquietante paralelismo basadas en la independencia y posterior división del subcontinente indio: *The Shadow Lines* de Amitav Ghosh y *Difficult Daughters* de Manju Kapur. Se centra principalmente en la deconstrucción de los mitos nacionalistas, donde la mujer y la maternidad se convierten en foco de toda una alegoría en torno a la gestación y nacimiento de la nueva nación.

Palabras clave: Amitav Ghosh, Manju Kapur, *The Shadow Lines*, *Difficult Daughters*, historia, genealogía, mujeres, literatura india en lengua inglesa.

In "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History", Foucault explored the relationship between genealogy and history, contending that the Nietzschean concept of genealogy reveals the fallacies of traditional historiography (1977: 140). Genealogy unmasks the futility of the historian's search for origins and denounces the systematic disregard of microhistory, which is sacrificed and silenced with a view to reconstructing the past as a linear and coherent progression of events.

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The genealogical approach to history that Foucault propounds perfectly suits the development of the Indian English novel. If we take a look at its relatively short history, the inescapable truth is that its essence appears to be intensely genealogical, especially from the 1980s onwards. A whole generation of writers, more or less successfully subsumed into the catchy label of “Midnight’s Children” after the worldwide success of Rushdie’s second novel, has set to the task of narrativising India’s recent history while simultaneously –and paradoxically– trying to escape the pervasive shadow of a novel which has more often than not been used in the West as the golden ratio in the corpus of Indian literature in English.³

But defining a genealogy in the history of the Indian English novel does not limit itself to this disputed inheritance, as the label “genealogical” certainly adopts a polysemous nature that affects subject matter and structure as well as its evident growth as a genre. This can be observed through the examination of the subsequent narrativisations of Indian history, which are presided by an interest in lineage and family throughout both their pre- and post-Rushdie development, in ways that are overtly symbolical beyond the text read at face value. This practice extends both in time and language to both English and non-Anglophone narratives from past to present, ranging from the family-feud-based Hindu epic of the *Mahabharata* to *Midnight’s Children* itself.

This narrative approach to history affects –to borrow Bhabha’s words– the construction of nation as narration having in mind the incorporation of the minutest detail of private histories, but it also entails the interrogation of the roles traditionally ascribed to their protagonists as well as the silencing of Other events and voices. Indian history is either narrativised as a family history or both are included in a multi-layered narrative where the two of them converge. And this is where the Foucaultian value of Indian English fictionalisations of history is located. In historiographic metafiction⁴ such as *Midnight’s Children*, the narrator’s declaration of intentions is recurrently thrown into the text:

Family history, of course, has its proper dietary laws. One is supposed to swallow and digest only the permitted parts of it, the halal portions of the past, drained of their redness, their blood. Unfortunately this makes the stories less juicy; so I am about to become the first and only member of my family to flout the laws of halal. Letting no blood escape from the body of the tale, I arrive at the unspeakable part; and, undaunted, press on.

What happened in August 1945? The Rani of Cooch Naheen died, but that’s not what I’m after, although when she went she had become so sheetly-white that it was difficult to see her against the bed-clothes; having fulfilled her function by bequeathing my story

³ In *The Post-colonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins*, Graham Huggan draws attention to this issue while reflecting on the paradox of a novel that intentionally parodied the “commodified exoticisms” of the East-West novel and has ended up perpetuating them by inspiring many an Indian novelist to follow the same path (1989: 73). This commodification also affects the reader, who is parodied in the novel as the “reader-as-consumer” –and openly addressed as such – through a series of food metaphors presided by the main motif of the “chutnification” of Indian history (72).

⁴ Back in the 1980s Linda Hutcheon coined the term “historiographic metafiction” with reference to novels intensely focused on private histories but which “paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (1988: 5), and explicitly cites *Midnight’s Children* and *Shame* among others. The added value of historiographic metafiction is that, in Hutcheon’s own words, “it can often enact the problematic nature of the relation of writing history to narrativization and, thus, to fictionalization, thereby raising the same questions about the cognitive status of historical knowledge with which current philosophers of history are also grappling” (1988: 92-93).

a silver spittoon, she had the grace to exit quickly... also in 1945, the monsoons did not fail. In the Burmese jungle, Orde Wingate and his Chindits, as well as the army of Subhas Chandra Bose, which was fighting on the Japanese side, were drenched by the returning rains. Satyagraha demonstrators in Jullundur, lying non-violently across railway lines, were soaked to the skin (...). And the cellar –Mumtaz’s Taj Mahal– grew damp, until at last she fell ill (...). On August 6th the illness broke. On the morning of the 9th Mumtaz was well enough to take a little solid food (Rushdie 1981: 64-65).

Right after a metafictional reflection on the object of his recorded recollections, in an aside which sounds more casual than ethically compromising, Saleem goes on to link national and family history through the apparent anecdote of the monsoon season. It is clear that Saleem Sinai is overtly stating the transgressive intentionality of his narrative with a double-fold target. On the one hand, the unreliable narrator flouts the readers’ expectations as much as he breaks the rules of traditional history from a genealogical angle. No search for origins is at issue here, even though the opening measures mention “the business of remaking my life from the point at which it really began” and invoke the Quran’s “*Lord thy Creator, who created Man from clots of blood*” (1981: 4). On the other hand, this genealogical approach is doubly so because it casts the history of a nation inside the mould of a family history and brings them together by entangling a microhistorical episode –that of Saleem’s birth– with the actual birth of India as an independent nation. In any case, whether Rushdie’s vision is either interpreted as seriously based on a critique of historiographic linearity or as the easy object of criticism for its post-modernist narrative technique that makes it marketable to the Western world is not as relevant as the essence behind its Foucaultian perspective of history: in other words, that history can be reworked as a genealogy, not to be valued in terms of its efficacy in the recovery of origins or unchangeable truths, but as a means to seek history “in what we feel is without history –in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts” (Foucault 1977: 139).

This essay is thus focused in this marked interest in the alliances between genealogy and history and the ways in which recent Indian fiction in English has deployed its apparatus with a view to contesting the workings of traditional historiography based on narrative linearity. At the same time, it also aims to explore how some of these novels interrogate the practices of an Indian nationalism that reveals a deep post-independence reliance on West-inspired myths of the nation. For the purpose of focus and detail, this study will deal with two novels that bear striking parallelisms in the ways in which they symbolically address national history as a mirror to family relationships. Such similarities are undeniable in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines*, even though some occasional references will also be made in passing to other contemporary Indian English novels that are relevant to the essay’s central thesis: to show how this fiction, while it definitely transgresses traditional historiography and the narratives and myths of nationalism, also presents flaws in its critique of historiographic discourse, such as the inability to readjust the marginal role reserved to women in India’s political agenda and the lack of a wider social perspective that allows to reinscribe the subaltern as an agent in the alternative histories that these novels offer.

Taking a look at Amitav Ghosh's work so far, it is clear that the family is a central issue in the majority of his novels, while he does not disregard this aspect in his non-fiction either. The author of *The Shadow Lines* has explicitly characterised the Indian and Asiatic collective consciousness as forged in the melting pot of family relationships.⁵ And this is particularly true of his narrative of the friendship bonds between an Indian and a British family against the simultaneous backdrop of Partition and the Second World War, which allows him to transpose his genealogical preoccupations from margin to centre and back again and eventually end up dissolving the two in the same commingling of private and public histories. In the case of Manju Kapur, the family memoir of *Difficult Daughters* is clearly configured around independence and Partition with marginal references to the European scenario so, as will be seen, this global perspective is somewhat lacking.

But the relevant fact is that both of them can be alternatively and complementary read as family and national histories, and the site where they articulate their strategy of historical genealogy is the domestic space. This is salient in two respects, because (i) they recapture the frequent fictional recreation of Indian Partition through the allegory of the divided household⁶ and (ii) they also connect it with the allegorical allusions to femininity, matriarchy and motherhood ascribed to an otherwise markedly patriarchal Hindu nationalism.

In the first place, it is necessary to examine how the household and its traditional connections with domesticity and, consequently, its enunciation as a space of female encapsulation in a gender-ridden world is also reconfigured and enriched with metaphorical allusions to the tragedy of Partition and the Hindu-Muslim breach. The childhood tale of the "upside-down" house (Ghosh 1988: 123) that Th'amma fervently repeats to Mayadebi night after night in *The Shadow Lines* not only points to the family tensions alluded to in the novel but clearly mirrors the increasing polarisation of Hindu and Muslim positions leading to Partition after independence.

Curiously enough, Th'amma is linked to domestic space throughout her life. The only time when she somehow opens herself outdoors is when she starts frequenting Gole Park and casually finds the link to her long lost father's family branch in Dhaka. It is only then that she quits the family home temporarily to cross the border in search of her old uncle Jethamoshai, who lives at peril in the old Dhaka house, the very same house that stands in the novel as a symbolical reference to Partition, which is now inhabited by a family of Muslims who take care of the elderly Hindu judge in return for shelter. After her tragic

⁵ In an interview originally published in *Kunapipi* celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of India's independence, he answers in these terms when asked about his "domestic vision" and the importance he gives to the family as the main thematic nucleus of his fiction: "I do think if you are Indian or Asian, and this is not necessarily to essentialize, that you think in terms of families. Narratives, when they come into my head, come as families" (Silva and Tickell 1997: 175).

⁶ The house as a metaphor for the Hindu-Muslim conflict seems to be pervasive in contemporary Indian fiction. Like the Dhaka house in *The Shadow Lines*, Rohinton Mistry also invokes household symbolism to portray Partition in his novel *Such a Long Journey* (1991), where the dwindling of Khodadad Building in Bombay stands out as a mirror of the ongoing birth of Bangladesh on the other side of the border. In the same way, the pavement artist's decoration of the contiguous wall—depicting a variety of religious icons ranging from the Trimurti to Our Lady of Fatima—and its final destruction bears a pessimistic parallelism with the bleak triumph of mob violence over integrative efforts in the Subcontinent.

failure to bring his uncle “home”, Th’amma will condemn herself to permanent retirement until her fatal illness and subsequent death.

In a similar way, *Difficult Daughters* opens with the building of the Amritsar house, which results in a source of dispute in the family. Virmati is also bound to household encapsulation in ways that blatantly match the political situation beyond its thresholds: she learns of the ravages of the Second World War and their impact on the Indian Independence process in the punishing confinement of the godown to which she is subjected by her family when her illicit relationship is discovered; she is transferred from the marital bed to her mother-in-law’s bedroom during her miscarried pregnancy, in between the riots that plucked out her father’s life. Finally, Virmati achieves reconciliation with her family at the end of the novel, and her mother Kasturi feels the urge to make it up with her daughter “because the need of the hour was to feed the scores of people who passed through their house fleeing from the mobs in Pakistan” (Kapur 1998: 274). The walls are reinforced to resist goonda attacks and the house is barbed wired in a metonymic reference to the outside war field. In a fit of fury, as Harish sends his first wife Ganga and their children to the other side of the border and fully commits to Virmati, she returns to Moti Cottage and forces Ganga’s cupboard open to get rid of every single trace of her presence in the house (1998: 276). The parallel between Partition and Harish and Virmati’s final union through his separation from Ganga cannot be more graphical.

As regards femininity as an ingredient of the nationalist myth, the coalescence in both novels of the Partition allegory and the motif of the woman in the household makes it impossible to read the references to women and motherhood simply as a co-text to the larger political plot. Rather, the target of this fusion is the discourse of Hindu nationalism, which has been tightly woven with the feminine at the centre of its sustaining allegory but has banished women from nation-building in practical terms or at least has kept them on the margins and inhibited their agency. This discourse is strongly linked with the myth of *Bharat Mata*, Mother India, incarnated as a goddess in the Indian epic of the *Ramayana*, and in many ways perpetuates the language of colonialism in which, as Ania Loomba notes, “female bodies symbolise the conquered land” (1998: 129) and whose allegories “positioned these continents as available for plunder, possession, discovery and conquest” (1998: 128). In the case of Hindu nationalism the allegory works in reverse, positioning women as securers of family cohesion and religious tradition while Indian men gradually embraced Western practices and habits. In this respect, both Ghosh and Kapur tackle nationalism’s enunciation of the female with similarly feeble outcomes, for they prove unsuccessful to relocate women characters to a prominent position in their political remappings and in some cases inadvertently contribute to perpetuate some of its commonplaces.

One of these is matriarchy, the traditional cornerstone of Hindu national conscience. The jocular reference to Ila’s mother as “Queen Victoria” in *The Shadow Lines* and Kasturi’s overwhelming fertility in *Difficult Daughters* occasionally point to this, but if the characters of Th’amma and Virmati are examined with a closer look, the centrality of this motif is confirmed. This is obvious with respect to Th’amma: a widow who, forced by her tragic situation of lone mother, became the household’s breadwinner later in life as a school principal. She lives in frustration for not having accomplished her dreams of joining the armed struggle against Britain and in the back of her mind she still pictures her terrorist

classmate, whom she looks up to as a national hero, being arrested under the accusation of plotting against a British official.⁷ After independence, her hatred is transferred to the Muslim Other, especially after Tridib gets killed in the Dhaka mob, but her participation is limited to material support. Even her ideas about the nation are tinged with family symbolism when she bitterly criticises Ila for wanting to attain British citizenship, a country built on “hundreds of years, years and years of war and bloodshed”, a “family born of the same pool of blood” (Ghosh 1988: 76) that Ila may legally affiliate, but which will never truly admit her as offspring.

As for *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati is also presented to the reader at the outset of the novel as a motherly figure, “attuned to signs of her mother’s pregnancies as Kasturi herself” (Kapur 1998: 6), and almost constantly dedicated to her siblings’ childcare. At the same time, her fertility is metaphorically connected with the ongoing political events and, after an abortion and a miscarriage she is finally able to give birth to Ida, her only child, after independence. Harish and Virmati argue over the latter’s suggestion that their daughter be called Bharati, but finally Harish comes up with a Persian name –neither Hindu nor Muslim– because he does not “wish [their] daughter to be tainted with the birth of [their] country” (1998: 276). This is Kapur’s ironical wink at the fact that –the same as in nationalist myth– Virmati’s life has been symbolically linked to her nation all along the novel, but when she invokes her right to symbolically participate in it her husband’s negative is a bitter sign of her enduring marginality.

Under the main premise that the fictive reconstruction of nation is hardly ever ignorant of gender, Elleke Boehmer deconstructs *Difficult Daughters* precisely as what it is not, pointing to the significant marginality to political issues of a female protagonist whose private struggles through domesticity and academia so blatantly mirror the political tensions that surround her:

By thus probing daughter-family relations, Virmati’s story refracts the divisions between mothers and daughters as correlates for the political partition in the country at large. In this novel daughters’ lives *do* parallel national history, though negatively so. Virmati in her wrangling with tradition and authority reflects the turmoil in the public political world, though she is also positioned, paradoxically, as peripheral to national debates. Daughterhood signals ‘difficulty’ therefore, not only in so far as it denotes rebelliousness, but because daughterhood –traditionally subordinate and dependent– itself represents a difficult or painful position. (2005: 212)

Neither does Virmati tread comfortably on the path of political struggle and academic life, constantly blocked by Harish’s incessant interferences. It is nevertheless remarkable that Kapur deliberately chooses two female figures –Shakuntala and Swarna Lata– involved in non-violent activism against British occupation and who will exert a definite influence on her development as an individual.

⁷ Coincidentally, a student from AS College is also found out to be involved in terrorist groups in *Difficult Daughters*, but in the end he is not expelled “because of communal tension” (Kapur 1998: 49).

Apart from Th'amma's failure to live up to her reveries as a woman combattant, in *The Shadow Lines* there are other instances of women involved in non-violent resistance, namely Ila and May. But again, their impact is as weak as is their commitment, which in the case of May is mainly motivated by her remorse from Tridib's death rather than by a real preoccupation for global issues. It is also worth noting here that Francesca Halévy, the only female component of the Brick Lane group led by Alan Tresawsen, is also a marginal support to the predominantly male struggle against Nazi occupation in the Second World War, as she is deported to a concentration camp in the Isle of Wight after their flat is bombed. So this marginalisation can be said to affect both sides of the border equally.

This is something that Spivak could not stress enough in her work within the *Subaltern Studies Group*. If it is true that the subaltern is silenced by different structures of power – colonialism, caste-based structures of labour, communalism –, women are doubly enforced to do so with the added difficulty of gender discrimination:

Within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern subject, the track of sexual difference is doubly effected. The question is not of female participation in insurgency, or the ground rules of the sexual division of labor, for both of which there is 'evidence'. It is, rather, that, both as object of colonial historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow... (1995: 28)⁸

Another question at issue is how both novels incorporate colonial culture in their respective reworkings of history. Ghosh's text is more centred in establishing connections between the metropolitan and Indian simultaneous space/time planes to reinforce its underlying ethics of the borderless nation-state. *Difficult Daughters* proves to be more limited in scope –but not necessarily less ambitious in practice– by showing how patriarchal structures inherited from colonialism are used to reinforce the similarly patriarchal nationalist scheme that has been explored so far.

In this sense, *The Shadow Lines*' London and Calcutta are recreated in the novel as the central sites of what Mary Louise Pratt has defined as "contact zone", namely "the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories intersect" (1992: 7). The constant shift in space and time that marks the complex structure of the narrative cannot be merely interpreted as a post-modern exhibition of stylistic dexterity, as it stands at the core of the novel's ethical stance. It is through the complementary views of the narrator's and his uncle Tridib's London that we discover the identification of knowledge with desire. Not in vain, Foucault himself already alerted against a history that neglects "the fact that the world of speech and desires has known invasions, struggles, plunderings, disguises, ploys" (1977: 139), proposing

⁸ Spivak's remark is especially relevant here as Amitav Ghosh himself has maintained more or less close links with the *Subaltern Studies Group* since 1992 with the publication of "The Slave of Ms. H.6" in the seventh volume of the *Subaltern Studies* series, an essay on which his ethnography *In an Antique Land* is based. Besides, Partha Chatterjee, another member of this project, corroborates Spivak's views when she defines the male-based nationalist agenda as a discourse in which "women do not speak" (1989: 632).

instead a genealogy of history that incorporates private experience as the new repository of truth. Tridib is an advocate of this philosophy of research that is inclusive –and even invasive– of the Other:

He said to me once that one could never know anything except through desire, real desire, which was not the same thing as greed or lust; a pure, painful and primitive desire, a longing for everything that was not in oneself, a torment of the flesh, that carried one beyond the limits of one's mind to other times and other places, and even, if one was lucky, to a place where there was no border between oneself and one's image in the mirror. (Ghosh 1988: 29)

Thus, Tridib opens the narrator the doors of a world outside the borders before he actually crosses them, and the key to the contact zone, to these “other times and other places” is the desire for the Other to the point of blurring those borders. This is perhaps the most outstanding quality of Ghosh's novel, for *The Shadow Lines* transcends national boundaries precisely through genealogy, through the family, bridging the national with the global.

On the other hand, *Difficult Daughters* offers a counterpoint through which the riches of the “contact zone” –in this case, a second-hand brand– are contemplated in reverse. Far from the fertile grounds of interchange beyond borders that Ghosh depicts in *The Shadow Lines*, the “didactic relationship” at the center of which Harish and Virmati are positioned in Kapur's novel is depicted in a rather impressionistic fashion. Their relationship is heavily marked from the beginning by their common admiration of foreign, colonial culture but, apart from some isolated episodes related to tea consumption and the “depth and resonance” of a Wordsworth-like epitaph in a Nahan grave, Kapur does not elaborate this issue further. Nevertheless, it does not follow that the meagre depiction of Harish's role as a vehicle of English cultural influences to Virmati's exclusively Indian existence is a minor piece of the novel's mechanism. Defined by Nadia Ahmad as “a collusion of patriarchy with colonialism” (2005: 211), Harish's English literature lessons only serve to reinforce the male-dominant discourse which is already present in the schemes of the Hindu nationalist project. Virmati is educated –much to her family's discontent yet in a tightly controlled way– under the conservative spirit of the *Arya Samaj*,⁹ first in her childhood years in the *Arya Kanya Mahavidyalaya*, and later in the BT college in Lahore.

Unlike *The Shadow Lines*, desire looms in *Difficult Daughters* charged with all its erotic connotations. Desire in the novel is far from knowledge when it does not directly block Virmati's path to self-achievement away from her family. One could even go so far as to suggest that when Harish and Virmati's relationship is not didactic, it is overtly sexual, as Virmati's academic progress is repeatedly jeopardised by Harish sexual requirements, up to the point of drawing her to abortion in the midst of her BT exams; and she is even

⁹ The *Arya Samaj* or “Society of the Nobles” was a Hindu Reform Movement founded in 1875 which draws its main ideals from the Vedic scriptures, and it is based in the principles of renunciation and chastity. Even though it condemned child marriage and the segregation of women as well as promoting their education, it also forbid them the access to the study of holy texts in its original stages, thus exerting a controlled kind of female emancipation that was later to pervade the Hindu nationalist movement.

sent by Harish to Lahore on a senior scholarship after marriage “to improve her” after the appalling grief of her father’s death and a later miscarriage.

Despite these opposed enunciations of desire, the exploitation of the feminine body is a common issue in Ghosh and Kapur’s fiction. Ila and Virmati’s quest for freedom from the patriarchal moulds of tradition cast upon them eventually proves an erratic one, for both of them get caught in the very same net of allocated female roles that they were trying to evade.

Ila’s childhood, marked by a high-class brand of cosmopolitanism, draws her towards the exotic reification of her sexuality in her married life. Having been brought up in multiple settings does not bring her nearer to the “contact zone” that the narrator eagerly sets to explore in London. Her idea of travelling reveals more of a tourist than a cosmopolitan, even though she is determined to leave India just for the sake of enjoying the freedom and independence that she is denied by her culture. Ironically, she is to discover later that her decision has her doubly trapped as a female exotic. Much to her chagrin, the freedom she achieves is paid at the costly price of her body’s exoticisation: Nick becomes Ila’s passport to her long-dreamt cosmopolitan London; but his desire for her, as for the Martiniquan, Indonesian, and the rest of women he philanders, is described as “his way of travelling”, as a sort of erotic re-enactment of his own frustrated cosmopolitanism.

Shameem Black has commented upon Ila’s difficult stand between her two apparently irreconcilable identities as a good Indian daughter –what Th’amma wants her to be– and her cosmopolitanism learnt from her childhood boarding school experience. Her tragedy is not succeeding in either of them, cast away from her parents’ riches and cuckolded by her husband, her political aspirations merely reduced to the label of “upper-class Asian Marxist” that her activist flatmates stick on her: “In both Indian and English spaces, Ila finds herself constrained by expectations about what an ideal female subject should be and she frequently fails to live up to the ideals of both her Indian and her European communities” (Black 2006 :58).

This also connects with Virmati’s failure –if only partial– in both the public and private spheres of her life, being criticised by her in-laws, and deeply hated by Ganga, her husband’s first wife, who bears a permanent grudge against her after a brief and shallow friendship that only serves to open Virmati the doors to her household, and ultimately her own husband. It is not overtly clear whether young Virmati’s resistance to her arranged marriage is sincerely fostered by her insatiable hunger for knowledge, given the fact that the additional burden of her prospective role as a wife would not allow her to pursue her studies without hindrance.¹⁰

The marginality of the female voice is also reduplicated in the novels’ respective structures. This can be detected in several degrees if we examine ethical and aesthetic aspects simultaneously. On the one hand, *The Shadow Lines* aesthetically challenges the stasis of

¹⁰ Arranged marriages and female education hold ambivalent qualities turning curse into blessing and vice versa. In Anita Desai’s *Fasting, Feasting*, Anamika’s Oxford scholarship was “one of the qualifications they were able to offer when they started searching for a husband for her” (2000: 69), even though her parents never allowed her to pursue her studies overseas. Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* also comes to mind, when Baby Kochamma, having jeopardised the Ipe family’s Syrian Christian reputation after her conversion to Roman Catholicism for the love of Father Mulligan, is sent to the University of Rochester in America for the sole reason that “since she couldn’t have a husband, there was no harm in her having an education” (1997: 26).

official history with its choric structure of frame narration by incorporating multiple voices, with a rich female representation. In *Difficult Daughters*, the narration is in the third person for the most part. But in neither of them can the reader sense a real empowerment of the female figures that contribute to the narrators' voice.

In spite of their variety, there exist some remote coincidences between Ghosh's prose and Kapur's, such as the brief shift to the epistolary mode that both novels display at different moments. An essential difference in technique is noticeable in this respect: unlike chapter fourteen of *Difficult Daughters*, which stands on its own as some sort of epistolary episode with an exchange of correspondence between Harish and Virmati and a silencing of both omniscient third person and Ida's first-person narration, Tridib's "pornographic" letter to May is skilfully integrated within the story as yet another voice subordinated to the main frame first-person narrator.

Dora Sales has pointed out to this fundamental difference in the text by Manju Kapur: "In *Difficult Daughters* we do not listen to Virmati's voice. She could not speak out, being certainly situated at the juncture of two oppressions: colonialism and patriarchy. What we have is her daughter's reconstruction and representation" (2004: 119). A similar conclusion can be drawn from *The Shadow Lines* and how female voices can be heard but do not factually enter the narrator's conscience. Even though both Th'amma and Ila are participants in the chorus enunciated by the frame narrator, they are also left at the margins by him as unsatisfactory options in the final configuration of his ethics of knowledge as desire, ultimately inherited by Tridib. Nonetheless, it is May that reveals to him the "final redemptive mystery" of Tridib's death to the unnamed narrator, thus showing the imperative need that female voices also transcend the borders and join the "contact zone" where margins and centre collide.

So, in the end, female agency beyond mere symbolic representation is –though timid– not absent in all cases. In relation to this, Christopher Rollason rightly prevents readers from reducing *Difficult Daughters* to a biased story of feminist failure in the light of the three main female figures (Virmati, Shakuntala, Swarna Lata) who are at the centre of the novel's *chiaroscuro*:

The psychological annihilation of Virmati, at the hands of her own family and her husband's, should not be read as a fatality. What happens to Virmati is no doubt the most representative destiny of the Indian woman (even if educated), quantitatively or statistically, but Kapur's novel shows that other paths also exist, while further stressing that choices are by no means simple or either-or. There are types of female negotiation that work, and others that do not: but nothing is predetermined. (2004: 184)

Whether Virmati's destiny is really representative of Indian women from all social strata is nonetheless doubtful. And in this sense *Difficult Daughters* shares with many other stories from Indian women novelists a narrow focus on gender issues which is laid at the expense of a qualitative lack of perspective in social matters that could have enriched it immensely had they been contemplated. Had Kapur chosen to focus on a broader social sphere, her fictional endeavours would have resulted in a considerably more fruitful exploration of the education/gender/social-class polynomial. In fact, there is the open question of whether a

better integration of gender and social issues in this kind of texts would ease the path for a convincing portrayal of a higher female commitment; but, as Tabish Khair has noted, this is never effected because political and national matters are tabooed in Babu female environments (2001: 189-190).

In the same way, *The Shadow Lines* is almost exclusively concentrated on the middle-/upper-class universe of the protagonist family, with only a marginal reference to the derelict Calcutta shanties that the narrator describes as “that landscape that lent the note of hysteria to my mother’s voice (...) when she told me that if I didn’t study I would end up *there*, that the only weapon people like us had was our brains and if we didn’t use them like claws to cling to what we’d got, that was where we’d end up, marooned in that landscape” (Ghosh 1988: 131). Apart from this marginal reference to India’s abysmal social inequalities, nothing else is elaborated in the story apart from a superficially philanthropic drive to remedy this situation that is always orchestrated from the outside, from the metropolis, through May’s efforts in charity organisations and Ila’s failing attempts at socialist reform from her East End apartment. As Vinita Chandra declares in her exploration of history and nationalism in *The Shadow Lines*:

While Ghosh is very consciously writing from a middle-class, educated, metropolitan, privileged background, he is unable to represent any other class position in the novel. Ghosh presents different versions of freedom and its importance in the construction of identity through almost all the major characters in the novel (...); but all these versions emanate from the same privileged class position. (2003: 73)

Be as it may, both Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* and Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* succeed in enriching the tradition of the Partition novel by combining and reworking preoccupations of other subgenres such as East-West encounter fiction and the family saga. It is for these innovative qualities that they are to be considered as highly valuable, in so far as they definitely contribute to smooth the road to future narrativisations of history with a more integrative social perspective. Surely these *Midnight’s Children* have come a long way.

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