

Lamenting a Lost Cultural Imaginary: Lahore and Amritsar in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*

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It is a truism that cities are not just brick and mortar but also imagined places whose contours are consolidated discursively in the popular imagination through representations in literature, art and culture. The lines between the real and the imagined city are blurry, shifting, and slippery. This is especially so in the case of cities such as Lahore and Amritsar that once existed in close intimacy with one another in pre-Partition India but now might as well be worlds apart given the vagaries of the delicate relationship between India and Pakistan and the daunting logistics of visa and immigration procedures. Lahore and Amritsar, barely thirty miles apart, were once important trading posts on the historic Grand Trunk Road and together constituted the thriving commercial and cultural center of a multi-lingual and varied Punjabi culture. However, severed by the seismic Partition of India in 1947, Lahore and Amritsar became desolate border cities at the peripheries of the new nation-states of India and Pakistan, their border status confirmed daily in the theatrical sunset flag ceremony performed at Wagah, a small border town on the outskirts of these cities.¹ The multicultural spirit of both Lahore and Amritsar embodied in a composite Punjabi culture has been ruptured by Partition. The large-scale exodus of minorities, Muslim and non-Muslim (Hindus and Sikhs), from Amritsar and Lahore respectively, has inevitably worked to limit these cities' secular credentials.² Both cities, once cosmopolitan crossroads of trade and culture, have become provincialized by the parochial agendas of state policy; their syncretic culture steadily eroded by a narrow identitarian policy that imposes the use of either Urdu/Punjabi language in civil and cultural life.³ But it is not Lahoris alone who speak of loss and longing for an undivided Punjab, and especially for their special bond with Amritsar. Literary texts like Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) capture the intense longing for Lahore that Punjabis uprooted from it in post-independent India feel.

Published in 1998, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the best first book, and has justly been celebrated as a masterpiece of contemporary Anglophone writing from India. Set against the backdrop of the impending Partition of India, the novel follows the lives of three generations of women and probes with empathetic subtlety the questionable life choices of its protagonist,

Virmati, who is seduced by her married Professor of English, Harish Chandra, into a bigamous relationship that ultimately leaves her bitter and unhappy. Literary critics have applauded *Difficult Daughters* as a complex multi-layered feminist text that explores the difficult relationships between mothers and daughters, and the quest for female autonomy against the stultifying structures of patriarchal culture.⁴ While most scholarship on *Difficult Daughters* has focused on themes of gender, history, and trauma within the dual contexts of patriarchy and colonialism, what has been overlooked is the remarkable detail and nuance with which Kapur renders the psycho-geography of the Punjab anchored by the twin cities of Amritsar and Lahore that once constituted the heart of a vibrant syncretic Punjabi cultural identity. (I should clarify that the use of “Punjab” here refers to an older regional and cultural formation, to the united Punjab province in pre-partition India).⁵ Although nominally about Partition, *Difficult Daughters* is saturated with a profound sense of nostalgia for lost homelands, and the angst of fragmented cultural identities.

In performing this reading of *Difficult Daughters* I am attempting to shift attention away from the current, and more readily available, analyses of gender and sexuality in Partition studies as typified most notably in the work of Urvashi Butalia (2000), Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon (1998), Jill Didur (2006), and Kavita Daiya (2011), among others, to focus on a little analyzed aspect of the human dimension of Partition studies, the yearning for lost spiritual homelands expressed first as a visceral loss of the sights and sounds of places that are constitutive of subjectivity. In his introduction to *The Partitions of Memory: The After-life of the Division of the Nation* (2001) Suvir Kaul argues that “if one powerful meaning of Partition is the cleavage of the subcontinent another is represented by the desire, expressed in story, in poem, and in conversation to cleave to near utopian memories of undivided mohallas, communities, and indeed nations” (26). But in *Difficult Daughters* the memories are not utopian alone; rather, Lahore emerges as the core of a Punjabi identity whose loss is not just a festering psychic wound but also a loss of enormous cultural capital and cache. More importantly, what the novel laments is the devastating loss of the vital traffic of culture and commerce, of the circulation of goods, people, and ideas between the two cities that was the lifeblood of a thriving Punjab. Near, and yet so far, because of the arbitrary nature of border lines drawn up overnight as it were in the Partition, the Lahore and Amritsar of yore appear to be frozen in time, and are sketched with an intensely nostalgic eye that contrasts them unfavorably with their culturally impoverished, if more, populous, contemporary versions.

The Partition brought an end to the Lahore that is remembered in *Difficult Daughters* but it is not history alone that drives the text but also the politics of space, which shapes subjects and social relations. The spatial turn in literary and cultural studies, especially as theorized variously by Michel Foucault, Henri Lefebvre, and Edward Soja, most notably, has been of pivotal importance to postcolonial studies, which in

its study of colonial cartography and borders and border making, has made productive use of spatial binaries like center and margin, core and periphery, the global South and the North, and of terms like “contact zones” in its analysis of the incongruences of power between colonizers and the colonized.

Arguing that the scope and critical significance of the spatial dimension of our lives is as important as the social and historical dimensions which have traditionally been privileged in the social sciences, Foucault in his groundbreaking essay, “On Other spaces” (1986), asks why space should be regarded as dead and time valorized as dynamic, dialectical, and creative. Space, Foucault argues, is not inert, but relational:

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites that are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. (23)

Rather than being a static, or monolithic entity, Foucault conceptualizes space as a dynamic, heterogeneous force that plays a critical constitutive role in shaping subjectivities and self. The work of Marxist philosopher and sociologist Henri Lefebvre, Foucault’s compatriot, further complicates our understanding of space as socially constructed. In *The Social Production of Space* (1974) Lefebvre analyzes the different modes of the production of space and analyzes each historical mode as a trialectic between everyday practices and perceptions, representations or theories of space, and the spatial imaginary of the time. Edward Soja, postmodern geographer, urban planner, and cultural theorist, in turn, builds on the insights of Foucault and Lefebvre arguing against the “powerful historicism (that) has privileged time over space, critical-historical over critical-geographical thought for the last 150 years” (Borch 113). Instead, Soja argues that if we add the critical dimension of the socio-spatial to the traditional dialectic of the socio-temporal and the socio-historical, we arrive at a “third space”—a space that is simultaneously real and imaginary in which our biographies get played out, in which social relations develop and change and in which history is made (113). The insights of Foucault, Lefebvre, and Soja about the complex dynamics of the fundamental relation of space in human life inform my reading of *Difficult Daughters*. They help illuminate the forlorn narratological consciousness of the text, one that is insistently spatial in perspective, obsessively mapping the far-flung corners of the once expansive province of Punjab that has now been rent apart by Partition. Its principal cities, Lahore and Amritsar, are now like amputated halves of a once flourishing holistic cultural and geographical imaginary. Irrevocably enmeshed in one another—geographically, historically, and culturally—Lahore and

Amritsar emerge in the text, in Foucault's words, as distinctive yet complementary locales that are "irreducible to one another" (23). Although *Difficult Daughters* locates Amritsar and Lahore as the economic and cultural hub of an undivided Punjab, it is not only these twin cities that are celebrated through a delineation of their distinctive neighborhoods and famous monuments; the narrative is also replete with nostalgic references to other towns and cities that outline the sweeping reaches of an undivided Punjab. These places map out the contours of Punjab, providing a topographical snapshot of a region, even as the towns are associated with major and minor events in the lives of the characters, and of the region's layered history itself, creating a distinctive sense of place that is intensely affect laden. Place names—Jammu, Sultanpur, Dalhousie, Pathankot, Jullunder, Ambala, Ferozepur, Kasoor, Madhopur, the Upper Doab, and Haripur—map the conflicted lives of Kasturi, Virmati, Ida, and their extended family across the length and breadth of a once mighty province, "our golden land. Our Sonar Punjab" (238). Thus, we hear of Sultanpur in West Punjab from which Kasturi, Virmati's mother hails; the Jammu Jail from where a special dhurrie has been ordered for her wedding trousseau; Dalhousie where she convalesces after the birth of her eighth child; Pathankot, the train station from which her husband, Suraj Prakash, has to take a tonga to Dalhousie to visit Kasturi; and Kangri, where he attended an Arya Samajist gurukul/school. Other places are mapped through Virmati's travels: she shuttles between Lahore and Amritsar for the most part, but also lives for a time in Sirmaur, a progressive princely state where she serves as the Principal of a school for girls; Jullunder and Lahore where she contemplates moving if the Professor will not marry her; and Ambala, the nearest train station from Nahan, where her school is situated. Rawalpindi, Peshawar, and Haripur, other landmark cities of the Punjab, are cited as places that witnessed especially horrific incidents of Partition violence. In this way, the mapping of the region is also a telling of its varied history, as much as it is an unspooling of the complicated skeins of the lives of the characters who people the novel.

Difficult Daughters does not only animate the psycho-biography of the characters through the places they have visited or inhabited, but also engages in other kinds of spatial mapping to gesture to Punjab's history under British colonial rule. Among the neighborhoods and public gardens of Lahore and Amritsar that are recorded in the narrative is Jallianwala Bagh, which cathects a whole history of colonial brutality.⁶ In a text that is replete with references to the excesses of the colonial regime, the very mention of "Jallianwala Bagh" is enough to gesture to its bloody history. The cold-blooded massacre of hundreds of innocent people, including women and children, who were gathered in the small enclosed public park to celebrate the festival of Baisakhi on April 13, 1919, shocked the nation and unmasked the brutal face of British colonialism. *Difficult Daughters* connects this painful history of colonial oppression of the people to the disciplining of the very landscape of the Punjab through an ambitious

public works project of canal irrigation: “in the 1880s they started building canals, twisting the five rivers into courses that would change the demography of the area as well as the dry color of the earth” (71). Although the canals make Punjab prosperous, the metaphor of the “twisting” of the five rivers underscores the willfulness of colonial power which established the canal system of irrigation for its own strategic purposes of control.

Beyond colonial critique, the detailed survey of the extensive irrigation system of canals and the rivers that feed it such the Kasoor branch lower canal which flows past the village of Tarsikka where Lala Diwan Chand, Virmati’s grandfather, has bought a mill, or the Upper Doab Bari branch at Madhopur Head, gives the reader the lay of the land. These references produce a strong mimetic effect, producing verisimilitude through tactile, visual, and auditory elements. One vignette that capitalizes on all these diverse elements of spatial mapping while at the same time capturing the nuances of class relations, social conventions, and gendered familial affect in exquisite detail is the scene where Virmati attempts to drown herself in a fit of despair (76-86). Cornered by her circumstances where she is being forced into an arranged marriage she does not care for and infatuated with the Professor who is a married man, Virmati is at a loss as to what she should do. Her attempts to forestall the marriage by telling her family of her desire to study further have fallen on deaf ears, and pressured by the family on one side, and the Professor who wants her to resist, on the other, Virmati decides to commit suicide by jumping into the flooded canal at Tarsikka, her family’s country home. The narrative details the “swift muddy waters” of the canal, Virmati’s “burning sense of shame” at the contours of her body revealed by her wet clothes to the two men who rescue her, the imperious gaze of Lala Diwan Chand that holds the men hostage in a wordless social compact that expects them to remain silent about the incident, all serve to locate this incident within a very specific psycho-socio-spatial configuration. The narrative moves skillfully between the interior mindscape of Virmati to the exterior contours of the landscape, the specificities of current flows in the Tarsikka canal, all mapped within the textured subtleties of gendered convention and class privilege that set the rescue in motion and ensure that the incident does not become a scandal that can besmirch the family’s good name.

Amritsar and Lahore do not merely function as setting in *Difficult Daughters* but come to play an integral role in the narrative as characters in their own right, shifting between the abstract and topographical, the discursive and quotidian. Both are delineated in great factual detail, their location mapped with cartographic specificity, and within a larger network of towns in Punjab, and big cities outside Punjab like Kanpur and Calcutta, establishing at once the horizontal spatiality of India in the social imaginary of Punjabis while underscoring the regional coherence of Punjab within that larger imaginary. Thus, for instance, three generations of women, Kasturi, Virmati, and Ida, mother, daughter, and grand-

daughter respectively, can trace their connection to Sultanpur, Kasturi's natal home in West Punjab, and while Sultanpur is not as prosperous or large a city like Amritsar, it too is imbricated in the story of female rebellion and the hegemony of colonial power. Kasturi's early schooling in a mission school leads the impressionable young girl to start praying to Christ much to the aggravation of her mother, who nips this sign of apostasy in her daughter by withdrawing her from school and threatening to marry her off. In this way, the text's cartography of rural Punjab, its naming of other towns and places is a discursive strategy to plot not just the biographies of its characters but also the history of a region and a nation.

Furthermore, Lahore and Amritsar also come to serve a synoptic function in the text as representative sites of Partition violence. The two cities become "hellish" places, sites of egregious communal violence that wracked the region in the days preceding Partition: "The killings started.... Burning, burning, Amritsar was burning. Every night, for days, and days, the sky was red, we could smell the smoke all the time. I could see them come with lathis, I could see them come with swords" (269). Meanwhile, in Lahore, religious war cries of "Allah--o—Akbar/Har Har Mahdev/ Bole So Nihal," belonging to the Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh communities respectively, presage the "inevitable" of the looting, rapes, and killings that follow (270). A host of characters, Virmati's siblings, Swarna Lata, Shakuntala, Kanhaiya Lal, the Professor's student who used to act as carrier of letters, reminisce in disbelief about the bloodthirsty madness that took over individual communities in the two cities during Partition. The terror strikes home when Virmati's father, Suraj Prakash succumbs to a fatal blow on his head during one such episode of mob violence in Amritsar, an innocent victim representing the thousands killed during the Partition.

The two cities come to function in Soja's terms, as a "thirdspace: "a fully lived space, a simultaneously real-and-imagined, actual-and-virtual locus of structured individuality and collective experience and agency" (2000, 11).⁷ Soja helps us think about regions and the complex multi-layering of different cities, distinguishing cities of fact from cities of feeling. My discussion of the representations of Lahore and Amritsar is also informed by Carlo Rotella's *October Cities: The Redevelopment of Urban Literature* (1998). Examining a whole range of American urban literature and the cities it draws inspiration from, Rotella argues: "Cities of feeling are shaped by the flow of language, images, and ideas whereas cities of fact are shaped by the flow of capital, materials, and people" (3). This articulation by Rotella captures accurately the difference between the representations of Lahore and Amritsar as perceived by Ida in the present. While both the Amritsar and Lahore of Virmati's time, before Partition, are presented as complex living cities, with all the problems of growing metropolises, labor strikes, political demonstrations, inflation, and the like, in short, as cities of fact "shaped by the flow of capital, material, and goods" as defined by Rotella, separation from Lahore causes it to be

frozen in time, into becoming a “city of feeling.” Lahore acquires a haloed imaginary existence that resists even a material encounter with it in person, as in Ida’s case when she visits it in the present day. Lahore emerges as a “city of feeling” rather than a “city of fact,” even though it is delineated in some detail in *Difficult Daughters*—its geographical and cultural topography mapped out lovingly through references to monuments, gardens and neighborhoods, among other landmarks in the text.

A dynamic and relational notion of space helps to draw our attention to the multiple roles of space in literary texts beyond geographical background and topographical setting. In this context Mikhail Bakhtin’s model of the “idyllic chronotope” provides a conceptual framework for thinking of Lahore as a place of belonging which remains magically unchanged by social and political upheaval. Lahore embodies a nostalgic, idealized place where time and space merge into a utopian space, at least in Ida’s imagination when she visits Lahore. Ida can only see the grandeur of Lahore’s monuments and people, temporarily forgetting the reality of hostile Indo-Pak relations. Her idealization of Lahore is in sharp contrast to her distasteful perception of contemporary Amritsar:

The lichi and mango orchards are now all gone. The Urban Land Ceiling Act has transformed the huge garden into little suburban plots. The fields where gajjar-mooli grew have been replaced by ugly concrete houses. They have little gardens and tall hedges to keep out prying eyes. The hand pump situated at a corner of the old, yellowing house now hangs dry and useless with rust gathering around the handle. Everything has changed, become smaller, uglier, more developed. (48)

Although the Amritsar of Virmati’s time had been presented as a claustrophobic city of closed spaces and intimate “mohallas” or neighborhoods, Ida chooses to remember the open spaces of the family home in Tarsikka, on the outskirts of Amritsar with its fields of carrots and radish -- “gajar-mooli”—to contrast with the small plots of suburban Amritsar in postcolonial India in which large landholdings, like the one held by Virmati’s family, have been disbanded by the Urban Land Ceiling Act. Troubled by civil and political unrest, Amritsar is now a lesser city. Thus, Lahore, as the favored, though lost, city of imagination retains its idyllic halo in the text, Amritsar which Ida can visit and where her relatives still live, is represented as gritty and dirty, a city that has ceased to be a spiritual or cultural home in contemporary India. Here, Ida’s relatives live insecure and anxious lives amidst the increasingly vitiated public sphere, troubled by civic and political unrest, nostalgic for Lahore. Given the forced separation from Lahore because of Partition, and the political turmoil of the present day that has made Amritsar unsafe, Lahore comes to occupy a compensatory idyllic space in their imagination. It is no wonder, then, that in visiting Lahore to fill in the gaps in her mother’s life, to see firsthand the city her mother spent so much time in, Ida sees only the city of monuments, not the pollution, dirt, and urban squalor that characterize the sprawling metropolis.

When Ida visits Lahore, she gives form to her imaginings but does not see or report on postcolonial Lahore, an industrial city experiencing problems of urban blight and expansion. The city she evokes is not the heterogeneous Lahore of contemporary times, but an elite enclave of colonial structures, institutions of higher learning, galleries and bookshops, rather than a place of hierarchy and multiplicity. Ida in visiting Lahore sees not the modern-day city but its imperial version. She mistakes an earlier class and ideological dominance of the urban space as a description of the present betraying her own privileged class perspective. For example, the novel focuses on Ida's visit to Government College, Lahore, "the Oxford of the East" (5), her mother's alma mater. The city she visits is "leafy, cool, and beautiful," the students all dressed in maroon blazers testifying to their privileged access to an elite institution steeped in a colonial heritage (138). There is no mention of the grit and noise of Lahore as the second largest city in Pakistan, a busy industrial and manufacturing center, nor as are inevitable, the economic divides of a large metropolis. Understandably, the narrative impetus is nostalgia driven, to map times and places past, but nevertheless, Ida's idealizing gaze fixes Lahore into an ahistorical continuum that transcends the class and gender inequalities of a living city.

Lahore: The Lettered City

In positing Amritsar and Lahore as synergistic parts of a cultural whole that embody the collective history of Punjab, *Difficult Daughters* illuminates the confluence of city, written culture, and political power that underlines Angel Rama's main premise of the "lettered city" in *The Lettered City* (1996). Although Rama's argument centers on the emergence of the colonial city in Latin America, his insights about ordered space and the rule of the lettered elite help illumine the ways in which the British remodeled Lahore as a colonial city in the nineteenth century. Beyond the plethora of educational institutions that flourish in Lahore, the urban landmarks that Virmati breathlessly details on her way to her college hostel when she and Kasturi first arrive in the city, "the Mall, Chief's college, Nedou's Hotel, the Botanical gardens, Lawrence gardens, the Gymkhana Club, Queen Victoria's massive statue with its delicate canopy of carved flowers, the Assembly, the GPO (General Post Office), the majestic looking courts that looked like palaces" all signify the "monumental" presence and diffusion of British colonial power in Lahore (112).⁸ However, the energy and liveliness of the old city of Lahore, the imposing mosque of Wazir Khan, and the bazars of Anarkali which gesture to its millennial history, supplement the structure and order seen in this British quarter of Lahore. They signify the stubborn resilience of a city that has evolved over time, adapting to new power structures and making them its own. Besides the saree shops of Anarkali and Bhalla's

shoe shop, *Difficult Daughters* also notes Bhojwani's bookshop, from which Harish orders books for his college in Amritsar. The famed Bhojwani's, "the biggest and oldest bookshop in Lahore," evokes Lahore's vibrant print culture and its long history as a literary, cultural, and educational center of Punjab (127). The intense nostalgia for Lahore that animates the text, then, speaks to its evocative power in the Punjabi imagination. Lahore, the united Punjab's former capital had long been its cultural capital under both the Mughals and Maharaja Ranjit Singh: "*Jine Lahore nahi dekhyā, woh janmīā nahi* (those who have not seen Lahore, have not lived)," proclaimed popular lore at the time. With Lahore as its capital, Punjab's rich multilingual and multi-religious culture had flourished in poetry, art, music, and literature in Punjabi, Urdu, and Hindi. Weaving seamlessly between diverse religious communities and class affiliations, people of every religious calling, rich and poor alike, patronized the cultural gatherings and shrines of the "City of Gardens."⁹

The melancholic yearning that animates Faiz Ahmad Faiz's celebrated paean to Lahore "*Ae Roshniyonka Shahar/City of Lights*" is akin to the "Punjabi Hindu hunger" with which Ida, Virmati's daughter, views the city, on a visit to present-day Lahore in Pakistan.¹⁰ Ida visits Lahore after Virmati's death in an effort to come to a better understanding of her mother after a lifetime of a difficult mother-daughter relationship. A grown woman who is now divorced after an unhappy marriage, Ida's attempt to retrace Virmati's life, is also an attempt to find herself. However, as the novel makes clear, Lahore (and Amritsar) comes to acquire an emotional valence that extends beyond personal to a wider communitarian resonance. Ida yearns to go to "Lahore, the center of Punjab, its heart and soul, and how much else besides" in a quest to understand her mother's history and to reconnect with her through the places she had inhabited (137). Although Ida's engagement with Lahore derives from her grief at her mother's death, once there, the beauty of the city enraptures her. She "wander[s] around with lust and longing. [Her] eyes glassy with desire," feverishly taking photographs to freeze and create a store of images that merge the real and imagined cities forever (138). Visiting Lahore Ida finds she is "in love with everything there" (137). She looks longingly at the city and its people (all "good looking") with a "Punjabi Hindu hunger in (her) eyes—a hunger for a region that [she] had scarcely thought about" but which clearly has a powerful resonance for her (138). The affective vocabulary of "lust and longing" that the narrative uses is expressive of a deep-seated connection rooted in place where Lahore still serves as an important locus of Punjabi identity in post-independence India, even some fifty years after Partition. Ida's quest to reconstruct her mother's life reveals the over-determined importance of Lahore not just in her mother's psychobiography but also in the imaginative geography of Punjabis figured in her mother's siblings and friends who continue to grieve the loss of Lahore: "What did we care if it went to India or Pakistan, Lahore was our city" (135). Eschewing nation and state, the novel imagines the city (Lahore), and a region (Punjab) as

home—a place of belonging, which bestows identity, rootedness, and community.

Lahore comes to acquire a metonymic position within the narrative. As much as it is celebrated as the fabled city, and its loss lamented, also lamented is the historical accident that ruptured the once expansive province of Punjab, and especially its conjoined historic cities, Lahore and Amritsar. Although much of the narrative in *Difficult Daughters* centers on pre-Partition India, the Partition itself comes to function as a critical backdrop and evocative trope. The violence and heartbreak that accompanied the division of a nation is figured more particularly in the separation of two hitherto interconnected cities and the partition of families.

A Lament for the “fabled city:” Lahore in Amritsar’s Imaginary

Although the spatial contiguity between the twin cities of Lahore and Amritsar structures the narrative and drives home their cataclysmic separation after Partition, the contrast between them also focalizes the fissures within Virmati’s subjectivity catalyzed by the contradictions of gender and modernity. By locating its characters within the very specific Hindu Punjabi milieu of Arya Samajist¹¹ trading families whose identity is defined by the sister cities of Amritsar and Lahore, *Difficult Daughters* recreates in rich detail a very particular culture and class while gesturing at the same time to the larger palimpsestic history of Lahore dating back to antiquity. Repeatedly referred to as the “fabled city” in the text, Lahore with its bustling bazaars, many institutions of higher learning, its imposing monuments and architecture, and its famed gardens, is presented as a cosmopolitan literary city, the cultural heart of Punjab, in contrast to the more bucolic Amritsar, cloistered with the weight of custom and tradition. Lahore and Amritsar function as corollaries to each other in the narrative, constituting the contrary poles of Virmati’s subjectivity caught between the pull of education and self-fashioning, on the one hand, and of duty and family obligations on the other. In Amritsar, Virmati lives in a cloistered joint family, which although progressive enough in educating its daughters, expects her to fulfill the traditional gendered role of a dutiful daughter. As the eldest child and a girl, Virmati takes on the role of looking after her many younger siblings while also helping her mother with household chores. Virmati’s inchoate desire to pursue higher studies and lead an independent life of the mind is considered selfish. Instead, a suitable match is found for her and she is expected to settle down into a comfortable arranged marriage. Thus it is that Lahore comes to embody freedom from the claustrophobia of domesticity and gendered expectations, while Amritsar, in contrast, represents the pressure of patriarchal constraints, of training in the female arts of cooking, cleaning, and childrearing. Lahore is where Shakuntala, Virmati’s unmarried cousin,

lives an enviable life of the mind, attending seminars and conferences, earning her own living as a science researcher. After spending a few days in her company, Virmati comes to understand why Shakuntala never visits home: she prefers her independent life spent amidst “the glamorous lights of metropolitan Lahore” in contrast to Amritsar which represents only “endless prospective bridegrooms. Their money and family histories” (18).

Lahore is presented as an expansive city, a happening place where rallies, political meetings, strikes, and demonstrations take place. It is a cosmopolitan city with urban problems of food adulteration, rickshaw strikes, and a high cost of living index, “the most expensive in the whole of Punjab” (129). Amritsar, meanwhile, is a provincial city structured by trading and business associations. Here Virmati’s grandfather, father, and uncle, are members of a grain merchant’s guild and a jeweler’s association. While Lahore is modern with broad streets and sanitation systems, the old city of Amritsar where Virmati lives in her early childhood has narrow gullies and open drains. Lahore may represent escape but it is also frightening to Virmati, lacking the intimacy and warmth of family connections. Her roommate Swarnlata is a fiercely independent woman and Virmati finds she does not share Swarnlata’s passion for activism. While their original home in the old city was small, lacking modern conveniences, Virmati’s family eventually moves to a bungalow with modern amenities in Tarsikka, on the outskirts of Amritsar. The house may be bigger now, and Lala Diwan Chand’s daughters-in-law have their own space, but they miss the intimacy of joint family life, even though it was irksome at times. It is through such textured spatial mapping that *Difficult Daughters* shows Amritsar and Lahore as cities in flux, being reshaped by colonial modernity and larger historical forces, just as much Lala Diwan Chand’s family is being reshaped by the changing times.

The narrative shuttles between the two metropolises that come to embody two diametrically opposed possibilities of female being in the novel. Lahore comes to be a mixed blessing for Virmati, a safe haven to which she is exiled by her parents to pursue her dreams of higher education and independence when she refuses to enter into an arranged marriage; yet all too soon it becomes a transgressive space of entrapment. Pursued by Harish who follows her to Lahore, Virmati ends up with an unwanted pregnancy. Later in the narrative, once she marries Harish and moves back to Amritsar, Virmati finds herself in Lahore again at Harish’s urging. Again, ostensibly, she is sent to Lahore to pursue an M.A. in philosophy, yet it is a convenient solution to ease the nightmarish domestic situation of co-wives living under one roof. Virmati does have fleeting moments of happiness and independence in Lahore; she learns enough to question the pronouncements of Harish, but is too socialized by gender roles and her circumstances to assert her independence.

“This used to be our golden land. Our Sonar Punjab” (238)

Although Lahore and Amritsar have been individually studied, there are few studies juxtaposing them to explore their contribution to a composite Punjabi culture. Arguably, perhaps more than any other people in the subcontinent, the Punjabis have a distinctive sense of regional identity defined by Punjab as the land of the five rivers which transcends religious lines of Muslim, Sikh or Hindu identity. This strong sense of place animates its literature as well. In *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (2010) Farina Mir examines such staples of the popular imagination in Punjab as the *qissas*/stories of Heer Ranjha, Sassi Punnu, and Sohini-Mahiwal, among others to argue that the resilience of this popular genre is in large part a result of an ecumenical place-centered poetics of belonging in the region. In referring to a popular folk and literary form of Punjabi literature in which a sense of place is fundamental to the narrative, I am attempting to locate Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* within a distinctive Punjabi sensibility but also using space as an interpretive lens to explore the intense longing for place, which animates this novel. My reading has been informed by a geocritical approach which focuses on spatial representations in literary texts to parse the play of memory, time, and place which give *Difficult Daughters* its haunting power. The text presents the wrenching loss of the fabled city of Lahore and the division of Punjab between India and Pakistan during Partition as just one of a series of deathblows that have led to the slow demise of a once glorious Punjab which had its heyday in the illustrious rule of Ranjit Singh but is now “smaller, uglier” beset by bombings, curfews, and communal tension (48).

The narrative perspective is proudly parochial, taking for granted that to visit Punjab is to fall in love with it, as does the Professor, even though he has returned from England: “Did Harish Chandra ever think he would fall in love with the Punjab? Had this been predicted, he would have laughed ...” (36). This note of pride, however, exists side by side, with the pain of the traumatic experience of Partition. The trauma of the bloodbath that was Partition is intensified by the heartache occasioned by the division of Punjab, and especially the loss of Lahore, the “seat of Raja Ranjit Singh” to Pakistan (268). The narrative characterizes the collective psyche of those who suffered the upheaval of Partition in Punjab as unique and distinctive: “People living outside the Punjab can have no idea,” says a character, thereby reinforcing kinship located in a specific regional and cultural identity (268). Further, in harking repeatedly back to the Sikh empire of Ranjit Singh, the text locates its annexation by the British in 1849 as the originary moment in the slow erasure of a once proud syncretic Punjabi ethos that is now besieged by communal tensions and violence in post-independent India. Directing our attention to Punjab’s colonial history, the omniscient narrator notes that “[i]n 1849 the British formally annexed Punjab completing a process that had begun with the

death of Ranjit Singh in 1839” (71). Punjab was one of the last regions of the Indian subcontinent to come under British colonial rule, and in invoking Ranjit Singh, the text gestures to the proud history of the Sikh empire consolidated by him.¹²

Amritsar may be the spiritual center of Punjab, but Lahore, as Ranjit Singh’s capital, was emblematic of the political might of the Sikh empire. Known as the “Lion of Punjab,” Ranjit Singh was the first Indian to turn the tide of invasions that had characterized Punjab’s history through millennia of being ravaged by a succession of invaders from the North.¹³ The reign of Ranjit Singh (1802-1839) becomes a nostalgic marker and comes to acquire an almost mythological value in *Difficult Daughters* symbolizing the glory days of the Punjab when it was a mighty power. Surrounded by hostile powers and united for the first time in its tumultuous history into a distinct state, an inclusive and vibrant Punjabi cultural identity comprising Sufi, Sikh, and Hindu influences flourished under the patronage of enlightened secular state policies of Ranjit Singh.

Arguably, then, in evoking this glorious era of Punjabi history and the lingering historical resentment against British duplicity in taking over Punjab after the death of Ranjit Singh, *Difficult Daughters* traces a genealogy of grievance that connects the annexation of Punjab in 1849 to contemporary unrest in post-independence India. I argue that the novel attributes the melancholia arising from the slow decline of a composite Punjabi culture variously to the bloody division of the Punjab between India and Pakistan during the Partition in 1947, and its further fragmentation into the states of Haryana, and Himachal Pradesh, and Chandigarh in post-independence India, and the rise of a violent ethno-nationalism that afflicted the state in the 1980s as Sikh subnationalists demanded Khalistan. Although the Khalistan movement is not mentioned directly in the text, it is nevertheless present on the margins of the text through references to the violence and curfew that make these anxious times for Kailashnath and others of his generation living in Amritsar. Both Ida and Kailashnath directly invoke the current unrest and bloodshed as a legacy of the Partition: “the same thing is happening on a smaller scale even now” (268).

For instance, the two-day curfew that curtails Ida’s movements whilst on a visit to Amritsar to reconstruct her mother’s life hints at the political unrest in Punjab.¹⁴ Although the novel does not mention the Sikh separatist movement per se, nor the cataclysmic events that followed the storming of the Golden Temple in June 1984, I argue that these events nevertheless form the subtext of the narrative and power its intense nostalgia for “our golden land. Sonar Punjab”(279). *Difficult Daughters* presents the Punjab before Partition as a haven of peace where people of all religious denominations lived in harmony together. Now, we hear of the curfew in Amritsar when Ida visits her mother’s natal city to reconnect with her mother’s siblings. Her uncle, Kailashnath Mama, laments that while Amritsar may be a “small city,” it is “big with bombings and killings”(49). The “bombings and killings” as well as the curfew that

Kailashnath complains about gesture to the climate of political unrest in Punjab. The violence that gripped the Punjab in the 1980s hovers as the unsaid at the margins of the text. The “zealousness of the security guards” at AS College where her father taught is evidence of the tenor of the times (49). The walls of the college are now covered in barbed wires as a security measure against “fanatic(s)” (49). The Principal relates an anecdote symptomatic of the times where a student who was trying to plant a bomb in the laboratory could not be dismissed “because of communal tension” and to add insult to injury, was instead “sent away with a degree” (49). This anecdote subtly contrasts the idealism of a pre-independence era of political activism with the self-aggrandizing politics of contemporary discontents.

Although the narrator identifies herself as “Hindu-Punjabi,” *Difficult Daughters* can be seen as part of a corpus of recent books such as Navtej Singh Sarna’s *The Exile* (2008), and Anita Rau Badami’s *Can You Hear the Nightbird Call?* (2006) that articulate a deep sense of grievance and melancholy at the series of bloody events of the twentieth century which have impacted the Punjab by tracing their genesis to the fall of the Sikh empire of Ranjit Singh. While the intense nostalgia for Lahore in *Difficult Daughters* is fueled by tricks of memory that cast the past in a utopian mold, it can be argued that the melancholic longing is driven by the catastrophic fallout of the violent events of the 1980s. These recent events intensify the sense of cultural vulnerability and disenfranchisement felt by the Punjabis, and the Sikhs in particular. For the narrator and other characters, the contemporary unrest and violence is symptomatic of the general civil and political turmoil in the country, and embodies the failure of the nationalist project, and of the arbitrary division of the country on religious lines. As Swarna Lata, Virmati’s fiery roommate in Lahore, now old and a refugee living in Amritsar states bitterly, “Lahore was our city, our home. Whether it went to India or Pakistan was irrelevant” (135). Swarna Lata, who as a young college student in Lahore was passionately involved in the freedom movement, now bemoans the artificial division of a subcontinent and a region. More pertinently, her heartfelt articulation of a regional identity, or even more specifically, an identity located in a city, indicts the Partition of the subcontinent and the creation of nation-states on religious lines.

Lahore and Amritsar Now

Like most Partition fiction, *Difficult Daughters* too is imbued with a melancholic nostalgia for places and times past, but the novel does more than articulate a numb sense of loss and longing; it lovingly maps the topography of Punjab in a performative mode, constructing a spatial archive that is both mimetic and discursive. The sister cities of Lahore and Amritsar, both imagined and real, are presented in topographic detail, as

setting and characters, that both shape, and mirror the conflict between modernity and gender in the evolution of its female protagonist. Situated thirty miles apart, Lahore and Amritsar have experienced dramatically different fates since the Partition of India traumatically severed them apart in 1947. Long an imperial city, the capital of successive empires from the Ghaznavids, the Mughals, and then the Sikhs, Lahore was refashioned as a modern colonial city by the British and flourished as a “mecca for Punjabis” in a symbiotic relationship with Amritsar in colonial India (*Difficult Daughters* 137; Glover 2008). While Lahore has continued to flourish as the provincial capital of Punjab in Pakistan, Amritsar has dwindled into a second-tier city, its importance overshadowed by the declaration of Chandigarh, the swanking new capital designed by Corbusier as the capital city of a now much truncated Punjab in post-independence India.¹⁵ The desecration of the “Darbar Sahib” (as the novel reverently refers to the Golden Temple),¹⁶ the spiritual heart of Amritsar, in operation Bluestar in 1984 when it was stormed by Indian Army tanks marked the nadir of its slow decline.¹⁷ Since the division of the subcontinent, the differing trajectories of Lahore and Amritsar thus bear testimony not only to the violence of Partition but also the continuing assault on Punjabi identity as Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Chandigarh, once all parts of Punjab were carved out and given individual status as states.¹⁸ In this context, the striking nostalgia for Lahore and its symbiotic relationship with Amritsar, comes to function as a compensatory mechanism, becoming a lament for a vibrant Punjabi culture that was ruptured irreparably by Partition.

Notes

1. Richard McGill Murphy calls the spectacular flag lowering exercise a choreographed “theater of difference where antagonisms are reinforced daily” (186).

2. This is most evident, for instance, in Lahore’s ambiguous relationship with its multi-communal past as seen in the contradictory narratives surrounding the celebration of Basant. Traditionally Basant, a North Indian Hindustani festival marking the advent of Spring, was celebrated with special fervor in Amritsar, Kasur, and Lahore in the Punjab. Young men and boys would fly kites and engage in kite jousts (painch-larai) while women wore yellow hued clothes to mirror the gay yellow of the mustard fields. In recent years lavish “Basant parties” have become all the rage in Lahore according to Richard McGill Murphy, who performs an intriguing, and all too telling analysis of the changing historiography of Basant in Lahore. Murphy argues that Basant has transformed from being a demotic festival celebrated by people of all faiths and classes to being recast in the form of “Basant parties” organized by the Urdu-speaking elite for the elite, nostalgic for a distant Punjabi

ethnic past in “a manufactured performance of tradition” (202). While Basant had its roots in a syncretic Hindustani or North Indian culture, it is being re-spun as having Islamic origins in contemporary Pakistan, its pluralistic roots flattened into a simple contrast of nations. In Amritsar meanwhile many public notices and street names are in Punjabi reinforcing the state language, and pointing to the controversial organization of postcolonial India on the basis of linguistic collectivities.

3. In “Bringing Punjabiya Back” Schona Jolly argues that while Punjab accounts for 55% of Pakistan’s population the heavy use and encouragement of Urdu has led inevitably to the decline of Punjabi. Punjabi presses have shrunk to an abysmal level although there is a movement to revive it through song and music. Rabbi Shergill and Salman Ahmad of the band “Junoon” celebrate Punjabi culture and celebrate its Sufi roots by reviving the poetry of Waris Shah and Bulleh Shah. In a riveting Q&A session at the panel on “The Literary City in South Asian Literature” at the South Asia Conference in Madison Veena Oldenburg narrated a poignant story of the departure of the Hindu and Sikh populace from Lahore experienced as a wrenching loss of “raunaq/vibrancy” by old timers. In this context of the mutual longing of the inhabitants of Amritsar and Lahore, see also Amir Maten’s “The Lost Soul of Lahore and Amritsar,” where he quotes celebrated Pakistani Urdu writer Abdul Hameed, “Amritsar is my lost Jerusalem and I am its wailing wall.”

4. See Rollason; Ahmad; Kaur; and Kabir for analysis that focuses on issues of gender and modernity.

5. Fed by five rivers, Jhelum, Chenab, Ravi, Beas, Sutlej and the Sindhu/Indus, Punjab’s expansive boundaries extended to Attock and the Khyber pass in the Northwest, the Sutlej river in the east, Tibet and Kashmir in the North, and the Thar desert in the South. Rawalpindi, Multan, Lahore, Jullunder, and Delhi constituted the metropolitan centers of the five contiguous divisions of Punjab under British rule.

6. Jallianwala Bagh functions as a synecdoche of the callous massacre of over 400 people at this small, enclosed public park by General Dyer and his troops on April 13, 1919. The peaceful gathering of people included women and children who were also at the park on the occasion of Baisakhi, a harvest festival celebrated in Punjab. Winston Churchill himself called it “a monstrous event, an event which stands out in singular and sinister isolation” (Bose and Lyons 199). The Jallianwala Bagh massacre was a catalytic incident in turning the tide of public opinion against British colonial rule in India and spurred the anti-colonial nationalist movement in India.

7. It would be pertinent to mention that although “place” and “space” seem to be interchangeable terms, they are highly contested terms and the

shifting complex of meanings associated with these two terms points to the changing trends in the field of human geography itself between abstract and geometric conceptions of the two terms to phenomenological and sociological analyses. For a fuller discussion, see Agnew, 316-330.

8. Using the example of colonial Latin America as a historical formation, Rama argues that “Latin American cities have ever been the creation of the human mind. The ideal of the city as the embodiment of social order corresponded to a moment in the development of western civilization as a whole but it is only the lands of a new continent afforded a propitious place for the dream of the ordered city to become a reality” (1). Bypassing the old walled city, the British gradually occupied old monuments and buildings to suit their needs and started new construction projects as their needs grew; the British section of Lahore that Virmati lists reflects Western rationality and pragmatism.

9. Lahore has always been the cultural heart of the Punjab region, its economic, political, and educational hub. Graced by beautiful monuments, mosques, and gardens built by successive empires from the Ghaznavids, the Mughals, the Sikhs, and the British that made it their capital, it has also been much celebrated by writers, poets, and artists across the ages. See Sidhwa ed., *City of Sin and Splendor: Writings on Lahore* for an informative and engrossing collection of articles and reminiscences of Lahore.

10. Of the large number of notable literary personalities who made up the thriving literary scene of Amritsar and Lahore, perhaps none is more famous than Faiz Ahmed Faiz (1911-1984). A pre-eminent poet of the Indian sub-continent, and of the Punjab in particular, Faiz wrote in both Punjabi and Urdu. Faiz’s celebrated paean to Lahore “*Ae Roshniyon ka Shahar*”/“*City of Lights*” written in 1952 when he was jailed in Sialkot by Pakistani authorities on suspicions of his involvement in seditious activities, captures the terrible loss of Lahore that festers as a psychic wound for many Punjabis:

On each patch of green, from one shade to the next,
the noon is erasing itself by wiping out all color,
becoming pale, desolation everywhere,
the poison of exile painted on the walls.
In the distance,
there are terrible sorrows, like tides:
they draw back, swell, become full, subside.
They've turned the horizon to mist.
And behind that mist is the city of lights,
my city of many lights.
How will I return to you, my city,
where is the road to your lights?

Written in jail, these lines express Faiz's desolation at being forcibly separated from his beloved city of Lahore. Hidden behind the mists of memory and sorrow, the lights of Lahore summon his spirit and sustain him in solitude. While Faiz composed the majority of his poetic works in Lahore, he began his literary career in Amritsar at the Muhammedan Anglo-Oriental College. Faiz is but one example of a host of prominent cultural and literary figures with connections to Lahore and Amritsar that once constituted a composite Punjabi culture rooted in the syncretic Sufi tradition of poets like the 12th century Baba Farid, Waris Shah, Bulleh Shah, and the gurbani of Nanak. More contemporary literary and cultural figures of Lahore include Allama Iqbal, the national poet of Pakistan, Sadat Hasan Manto, Amrita Shergill, Amrita Pritam, and Bade Ghulam Ali Khan among others. Khushwant Singh, Ved Mehta, Krishen Khanna, Bapsi Sidhwa, Sara Suleri, and Mohsin Hamid. Bhai Vir Singh, Lala Dhani Ram Chatrik, founder of the Punjabi Press, Kartar Singh Duggal, Mulk Raj Anand, and Bhisham Sahani are among other notable writers who have Lahore Amritsar connections and who have immortalized these cities in their work.

11. The Arya Samaj was a reformist Hindu revival movement started by Dayanand Saraswati in 1875 which preached against idol worship, child marriage, untouchability, and the caste system. It was a progressive movement that advocated for equality for girls and for a "simple living, high thinking" life based on the spiritual lessons of ancient Hindu scriptures, the Vedas. It found a large following in Punjab, especially among the urban business middle classes. For more information, see, Ejaz.

12. For a fascinating account of Ranjit Singh and the glory days of the Punjab, see Singh and Rai.

13. In a short span of forty years Ranjit Singh consolidated an extensive Punjabi empire through a shrewd policy of conquest and conciliation, and built a fearsome modernized army that included Sikh, Muslim and Hindu soldiers. Blind in one eye and short of stature, Ranjit Singh was, nevertheless, an enormously charismatic ruler, a patron of the arts whose court was legendary for its magnificence.

14. See Tatla for an incisive analysis of the "Punjab problem."

15. See Talbot's *Divided Cities* for an authoritative account of the differing trajectories of the two cities after Partition. For a more personal and reflective account, see Alter's *Amritsar to Lahore*.

16. The use of this local term rather than the Anglicized moniker, "Golden Temple," marks the narrative perspective of an insider, and reflects the text's reverence toward the Sikh temple, a holy place for all

Punjabis, not just Sikhs. It also speaks of the syncretic sensibility of the Punjab molded by a common Islamic, Hindu, and Sikh cultural heritage. See Schona Jolly's article for a wistful summary of the hankering after a fast disappearing cultural construct.

17. The Golden Temple was stormed by Indian Army tanks under orders from Indira Gandhi to flush out Sikh extremists/separatists campaigning for a Sikh homeland "Khalistan" in June 1984 and several sacred buildings, including the Akal Takht, the home of Sikh temporal authority were destroyed. The sacrilegious storming of the golden temple and the death of several hundred innocent Sikh devotees in the exchange of fire that ensued between the armed Sikh separatists led by Jarnail Singh Bhindranwala and the Indian Army triggered a series of cataclysmic events leading to the assassination of Indira Gandhi by her Sikh bodyguards and the subsequent retaliatory anti-Sikh pogrom of November 1984 in which thousands of Sikhs were killed. Although these events are not referenced in the novel, they function as a ponderous subtext to the novel's intense nostalgia for pre-partition Punjab when violence and sectarian divisions did not ravage it. See Tatla (1999) for an excellent analysis of events of 1984 and Sikh subnationalism.

18. In 1966, the state of Punjab in India was carved into three on linguistic principles with Himachal Pradesh and Haryana constituted of the Hindi-speaking people. The new city of Chandigarh, designed by Le Corbusier was declared the common capital of Haryana and Punjab, while Shimla was declared the capital of Himachal Pradesh. See Gandhi for more details.

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