

REVIEW

## Chasing Chimeras

Two impressive debuts focusing on women's search for space

MINI KAPOOR

Difficult Daughters  
By Manju Kapur  
Penguin India  
Rs:250;Pages:262

EARLY on in *Toad in My Garden*, its feisty narrator Megha declares apropos of nothing immediately pertinent: "Strength, I want to say, is a matter of lacking options, the reasonable certainty that if you fall apart, there will be nobody to pick up the pieces. So you put all you've got into never falling apart." This is an enervating endeavour that unites the strikingly

bold protagonists of both novels at hand as they soldier on in search of space, throughout chased by the binding narrow concerns of daily life.

A space Manju Kapur's heroine Virmati never finds, a space her daughter Ida, the narrator, painstakingly accords her after her death. "The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother," begins Ida, sneering at Virmati's desire that her eyes, kidney, heart be donated, that there be no mourning. But while the body has been consigned to the flames, organs intact, Ida knows mourning is inevitable, no matter how bitter, grudging, guilt-laden. Ever the aloof, yet highly strung, storyteller, she is drawn into retracing her mother's life, the cities and circumstances that rendered an exuberant and wide-eyed beloved of 10 younger siblings a brisk and bad-tempered mother of one. The result is a deceptively quotidian tale about joint family life in pre-Partition Amritsar and Lahore.

As young Virmati soaks in visions of another life, another way, thanks to the new Arya Samaji emphasis on learning, she falls under the spell of a boarder next door, an Oxford-returned professor seeking intellectual companionship his docile, homely wife can't offer. Here on tragedy is etched into the contours of Virmati's life, for the professor, for all his romantic declarations and patronising encouragement, keeps nudging her out of traditional crevices only to helplessly bury his face in his hands when she tumbles over and loses direction.

So, when Virmati attempts suicide, he flops over, leaving the rescue to others. When she gives in to his pleadings that she break off an engagement to a "decent boy", he pens byronic missives omitting to mention that his wife is pregnant. When she is packed off by her family to Lahore for higher education, he follows, engaging her in furtive rendezvous and severing her from the heady liberalism sweeping the city. When she finds herself a house with a garden and an accompanying principalship in a princely hill state, he breezes in, shattering her world with scandal.

And Virmati, weary of the infinitude of new beginnings the professor leads her to, starts folding in on herself, trading all her castles in the air for a marriage complete with ivory wedding bangles. And, by extension, for bickering with his first wife, for a petty marking out of territory, for selective amnesia as she smothers and denies her daughter the very freedom she once craved.

But *Difficult Daughters*, though at times infuriatingly emotionless, is more than a mere family saga; it is an allegory for the sad souring of a nation's idealism, for the simmering legacy of what had seemed a practical partition, for the lessons learnt only to be forgotten the next day. But long after the book is read, what haunts is a forever palpable, never recounted sidebar. What is it that compels Ida to conclude with the angry entreaty: "This book weaves a connection between my mother and me, each word a brick in a mansion I made with my head and my heart. Now live in it, Mama, and leave me be. Do not haunt me anymore."

If a leaden realism weighs down *Difficult Daughters*, Ruchira Mukerjee has a tough time reining in her swirling enthusiasms and meandering threads. Set in the laid-back Allahabad of the sixties and seventies, *Toad in My Garden* weaves together two parallel narratives chronicling the empowerment of a middle-aged woman trapped in a brutal marriage and the maturing of a quiet but highly excitable young woman. In the main, though, it is about Megha's growing up—her lonely childhood, her initiation into the world of books and ideas, her traumatic evolution into womanhood after a passionate infatuation (with, guess what, a married man again) gone hopelessly awry, her enduring quest for selfhood.

Uncannily, here too the catalyst who shakes these women out of a listless inertia is a lodger, an Oxford-returned professor. But there the similarity ends; Ashwin is a veritable Pollyanna, earnestly brimming over with

blueprints for a socio-political revolution, fomenting minor upheavals with his infectious talk of feminism and charming agony aunt avatars. And, of course, in a Mills & Boonish twist, forcing Megha to venture out of her secure "quietly satisfying life of reading... of keeping a diary in which I told with numerous divagations and parentheses the truth about myself." Unlike Virmati, however, Megha has a fair measure of her world: sure, hers remains to the end a lonely road, but she has constructed her own mansion to repair to. A mansion built with ideas, hopes, adorned with an irrepressible zest for life's many hues. Indeed, for all the dark foreshadowing ("I learnt only in later years of the pain, the scarring pain, that had to accompany the pursuit of loveliness. And the toll it took in imperceptible ways upon what was a tenuous sanity."), this is a buoyant, witty tale bursting with the whys and thrills that accompany widening horizons. And for all the cliches of the storyline, the author successfully takes up a daunting challenge: to secure Megha's faith in a nonchalantly tossed statement, "I cannot accept that life has at any moment the right to be dull."

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