

# Reimagining Womanhood: Feminist Perspectives in the Works of Manju Kapur

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the collision of gender relations and the desire to make a mark.

## Abstract

Manju Kapur's novels are probably some of the best contributions to Indian contemporary literature, where her vivid imagination brings out the finest characteristics of women fighting the structural patriarchy of the society she depicts. She embraces marriage, becoming a mother, being sexually autonomous, and finding oneself among other issues in these works. Within this wider socio-cultural context of India concerning women and womanhood, Kapur's heroines are often victims and also mechanisms of social impositions and desires, threading the many complexities and contradictions of being an Indian woman. "In Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*, the protagonist Virmati embodies the struggle of Indian women who, in the face of societal constraints, seek personal autonomy and identity." It seeks a critical analysis of the feminist critique that Kapur's works invoke, with special attention to how she seeks to demolish and ridicule notions and practices of patriarchy. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge on the issues of empowerment of women as it investigates her work regarding the oppressed and marginalized women in society.

**Keywords:** *contemporary, literature, contradictions, feminist, critique, marginalized.*

## 1. Introduction

*Difficult Daughters*<sup>1</sup>, *A Married Woman*, *Home and Custody* are among the most remarkable novels<sup>2</sup> written by Manju Kapur, a distinguished Indian author. Manju Kapur has achieved great success in the literary world. Focused on the life of women, her protagonists are troubled living in a male-dominated world and as a result, have to navigate challenges<sup>3</sup> that patriarchy has set for them. Despite achieving great details certain things remain out of reach. As something else ultimately has to be fooled. Such situations highlight

This paper seeks to mainly examine and interrogate the patriarchal society in the context of Manju Kapur's work. As the two are often intertwined, marriage, education and sexuality, the paper seeks to determine how Manju Kapur's characters. It further assesses the larger sociopolitical and cultural fabric<sup>4</sup> that Manju Kapur's Fiction inhabited, shaped and at other times deconstructed.

In the current sociopolitical<sup>5</sup> situation, this research gives new insights as feminists call for a global battle against gender-based discrimination against women. However, Kapur's work has received some degree of criticism about the representation of these issues while focusing on Feminism and Gender Justice.

## 2. Feminism in India

Over time, the Indian subcontinent has been familiar with the feminist movement in particular cultural, political<sup>6</sup> and economic conditions<sup>7</sup>. Different from Western feminism, which was first an anti-colonial reaction due to industrialization and liberalism processes, Indian feminism has stemmed from the processes of anti-colonialism<sup>8</sup>, caste system and economic exploitation. Indian feminism is illustrious for its vibrancy<sup>9</sup> because it cuts through different phases each with unique undertakings and milestones.

Those who today describe themselves as feminists can be found there across the globe the earliest evidence of feminism in India can be dated to 1800's, with quiet social changes being advocated for by Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, & Jyotirao Phule. They were younger generations, and child marriages as well as Widow-remarriage became their crusade. These efforts were indeed revolutionary, but since they were mostly male crusaders, such

efforts conflated women's rights issues with national development.

The second wave of feminism in India was closely linked with the Janata Itihasa Jan Gan Man. Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and Annie Beasant were some of the important nationalist leaders, for them freedom as well as women's liberation were threadbare concepts. Feminism declined over the post-independence demographic.

### 3. Patriarchy and Views on Women

As a societal structure patriarchy is well established in the Indian context and penetrates every sphere of women's existence<sup>11</sup>. It defines gender roles, enables males' supremacy and ensures the oppression of females through cultural practices, religious beliefs, and legal systems. Women are often regarded as the protectors of family pride and custom and their personalities are closely associated with their being a daughter, wife, or mother. This model of society inhibits their self-determination and makes them more reliant on men.

Manju Kapur's novels bring out quite graphically these socio-patriarchal configurations and the effects they have on the lives of women. This situation creates a devotion to the family where society expects the main character in 'Difficult Daughters' to be completely traditional to the extent of any self-assertion like Virmati who had become a cause of strife within the family when she decided to get educated.

With this background in mind, we can understand the negative impact of marriage on Astha, the main character in *A Married Woman*, who, on the other hand, is battling marriage and society for her sexual freedom. It underscores the ideology of family which is a belief in societal order and that women must be by the constructed boundaries<sup>12</sup> of society while self-repression is a must to gain respect and care from society.

### 4. Manju Kapur's view on patriarchy and feminism

The life of Manju Kapur's novels has radical feminism as their basis and crucial cultural critique of representative hegemonic ideologies. Her novels straddle the socio-cultural situations of modern-day India wherein women have suffered greatly, but at the same time, they are striving for autonomy and self-determination. Kapur nearly always constructs her narratives around female perspectives and their voice as they seek narratives of rights, dreams, and defiance towards male authority.

Religiosity is also quite another theme that has a focus

for Kapur and that involves marriage. Both engagements are about power and the struggle for that power during the institution of marriage. It is as if Virmati's choices are subversive, or disrupt the commonly held societal norms, which requires her to take risks and stand up against her family's disapproval, societal reproaches, and her emotional distress. As she does so, she engages in a love affair with a married man and later on becomes a professor. Virmati's motivation then is to take that leap against her family, and society's assumptions about how marriage should be a woman's core goal.

Manju Kapur, who is frequently considered a feminist author, uses her complex and intensely sympathetic stories to examine the complex web of patriarchy and how it affects women's lives. Her books provide readers with a prism through which to view the oppressive, controlling, and power structures that govern women's lives in both contemporary and traditional Indian civilizations.

Women are portrayed by Kapur as having hardships, resiliency, and a desire for uniqueness, frequently in the face of strict patriarchal structures that control every part of their lives. Her stories showcase women's attempts to challenge, modify, or redefine social standards while also critically examining how patriarchy upholds gender inequity and reinforces them. According to Kapur, patriarchy is an ingrained system of control that functions through several institutions, including the family, marriage, religion, and education. The main setting in her books for the inculcation and reinforcement of patriarchal beliefs is the family. The joint family structure in *Home* is a perfect example of how patriarchy controls the lives of its members, especially women. The main character, Nisha, must adhere to rigid gender norms and put her family's prestige before her own goals. Because her business success is perceived as a challenge to established gender hierarchies, she encounters opposition to her attempts to define herself. By highlighting its underlying inconsistencies and hypocrisies, Kapur challenges this patriarchal family structure.

Another institution that patriarchy uses to restrict women's lives is marriage, as it is shown in Kapur's novels. Virmati's life in *Difficult Daughters* is influenced by her family's emphasis on following social expectations around marriage. Her family's expectations and her desire for education and independence conflict, creating a never-ending conflict between personal initiative and group pressure.

Kapur exposes how marriage frequently functions as a tool of servitude rather than collaboration, challenging the idea that it is a woman's ultimate destiny. Similar to this, Astha's discontent with her marriage in *A Married Woman* highlights the restrictions placed on women by this establishment.

In the narrative of '*A Married Woman*', which speaks of the challenges<sup>13</sup> women face in every sphere of life,

we can likewise say that marriage and motherhood are consistent in Astha's story, She tries to perform her duties as a wife and a mother but is quite dissatisfied and longs for more than what she had.

## 5. Objective of the Study

This research's primary focus is to take into consideration the feminist approach in practice in Manju Kapur's novels considering how the author dismantles patriarchal ideologies and reshapes gender identity. This study seeks to add to the gender equality and feminist literature discourse further through her focus on what women go through and their ambitions in life as depicted in Kapur's works.

Specific objectives include:

Examination of how women in Kapur's works live when patriarchal structures are present in their lives.

- To study how Kapur's women characters challenge the established norms of society and dominate it.
- To study the importance of education, greater economic independence, and sexual liberation in the feminist criticism of Kapur.
- To explore the relationship between gender and power in the narratives of Kapur across different generations.
- To position the writings of Kapur in the context of Indian feminism and its socio-geographical setting.

The focus of this paper is to highlight and substantiate Kapur's contribution to the field of feminist writing and criticism of patriarchal structures in the context of Indian society.

## 6. Review of Literature

Manju Kapur's literature is of particular interest to feminist critics who are understandably drawn to the gender portrayals in her works and environment. Her work has received praise for how well she captures the intricacies of womanhood<sup>14</sup> amidst her society. There is an appreciation for how Kapur has addressed the subjects including but not limited to marriage, motherhood, sexuality and self-empowerment.

An important work on Kapur is a study by Priyamvada Gopal<sup>15</sup> of 'Difficult Daughters' on intergenerational relations within the context of conflict between tradition and modernity in that novel. Gopal sees Virmati's battle against social conventions in Kapur's book as evidence of this change in India, including advancement away from patriarchy.

Meena Shirwadkar's analysis<sup>16</sup> of feminist approaches to Indian literature is another useful pointer, which

helps situate Kapur's writings within the broader spectrum of post-colonial feminist discourse. As noted by Shirwadkar these novels can be said to reconstruct traditions that have silenced women and in the process challenge the male paradigms of the literary tradition.

Also of concern, to critics are Kapur's works involving explorations of sexuality. Feminist critics like Rashmi Bajaj have taken a feminist approach to analyzing feminism.

Manju's novels are cast in the socio-geographical setting of contemporary India and reflect the power dynamics amongst genders which has earned the author critical acclaim in different parts of the world. Her scholarship has also been quite a lot some commentators situate her writing within a wider discourse of feminist literature, postcolonial studies, Indian cultural studies and so forth. This part of the review focuses on the reception of Kapur's works, the perspectives and analysis that problematizes her novels, in and around key areas of literature.

## 7. Reinterpretation

One of the wide-range topics discussed in Kapur's work is women and their exclusion from various spaces through oppressing them on the grounds of patriarchy. Meena Shirwadkar, who wrote widely on feminist consciousness in Indian literature, argues that Kapur is one of those writers who recreates the experiences of women across patriarchal societies. In this light, Shirwadkar further states<sup>17</sup> that the importance of Manju's novels lies in chronicling the limitations placed on women by customs about marriage, the bearing of children and even about sex.

Bajaj also underscores the relevance of women in her novels and studies the Kapur woman in *Indian Woman in Modern Fiction*<sup>18</sup>: A Study of Manju Kapur. She writes about the modern woman as expressed in Bajaj's novels.

By emphasizing the individual experiences of her characters, Kapur highlights the pervasive gender inequality that still influences Indian women's lives. Patriarchal Control in Marriage and the Family Several literary critics have pointed out that Kapur's feminist critique revolves around marriage and family.

Priyamvada Gopal examines how Virmati's family's emphasis on maintaining traditional gender norms shapes her fight for autonomy in her examination of *Difficult Daughters*. According to Gopal, the book criticizes marriage as a patriarchal control mechanism in which women's goals and ambitions are subservient to social norms and family honor. Kapur's examination of Astha's marital discontent in *A Married Woman* has been read as a critique of the constraints placed on women by the roles of mother and wife. According to academics like Swati Pal, Kapur challenges the idea that marriage is a sacred institution by using Astha's

experience to show it as a place of negotiation and conflict. In addition to emphasizing the necessity for personal fulfillment outside of traditional roles, Kapur's nuanced depiction of the emotional and psychological toll that patriarchal demands impose on women is highlighted in Pal's analysis. Scholarly debate has centered on Manju Kapur's handling of female sexuality, with reviewers applauding her fearless and uncompromising approach to a topic that is frequently taboo in Indian literature. Astha and Peeplika's relationship in *A Married Woman* defies patriarchal control over women's bodies and appetites and represents a significant break from conventional conventions.

In her novel "Sexuality and Desire in Contemporary Indian Fiction," critics like Rashmi Sadana contend that Kapur's depiction of same-sex love is revolutionary since it broadens the conversation about female agency and autonomy. In a similar vein, Kapur's portrayal of Shagun's extramarital affair and its fallout in *Custody* has been examined as a critique of the discriminatory attitudes against women's sexuality. Geetanjali Pandey and other academics have emphasized how Kapur reveals the hypocrisy of society, which condemns women severely for expressing their wishes while allowing males to do the same. By tackling these issues, Kapur promotes a more inclusive and sympathetic view of women's experiences while challenging the conventional myths surrounding female sexuality.

**Economic Independence and Education as Instruments for Empowerment** In her works, Kapur frequently discusses economic freedom and education, which reflects her conviction that these topics can revolutionize women's empowerment. Critics of *Home* have frequently used Nisha's transformation from an obedient daughter to a prosperous businesswoman as an illustration of how education and financial autonomy can empower women to defy patriarchal expectations. But Kapur also depicts the difficulties and opposition women encounter when they want to establish their independence.

In her work "Negotiating Independence: The Challenges of Empowerment in Manju Kapur's Fiction," scholars such as Charu Sinha draw attention to the social reaction that frequently follows women's empowerment, as demonstrated by Nisha's estrangement from her family. Kapur's sophisticated grasp of the difficulties of empowerment in a patriarchal society is shown in this contradiction. **Patriarchy's Intergenerational Dynamics** Because it deepens her critique of patriarchy, Kapur's examination of intergenerational interactions has attracted a lot of scholarly attention.

The divergent experiences<sup>19</sup> of Virmati and her mother Kasturi in *Difficult Daughters* highlight how patriarchal oppression endures throughout generations. Uma Chakravarti and other critics have pointed out how

Kapur highlights both the continuity and the shift in cultural attitudes regarding women through these intergenerational interactions. The way Ishita's relationship with her adopted child is shown in *Custody* challenges the conventional focus on biological links and represents a more progressive view of motherhood. Kapur's ability to rethink familial connections in ways that put love and care above social norms and provide a more compassionate and inclusive viewpoint has been hailed by academics like Shashi Deshpande. The *Feminist Critique of Kapur's Intersectionality* Manju Kapur's novels are renowned for their intersectional feminist critique, which examines how women's experiences are shaped by the intersections of gender, class, caste, and religion.

There have also been comparisons made to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, especially given their similar emphasis on family ties and the effects of social conventions on women's lives. Although both authors criticize patriarchal systems, critics have pointed out that Kapur's stories are more grounded in the day-to-day experiences of middle-class urban India, providing an alternative viewpoint on feminist resistance.

## 8. Research Methodology

This study answers the objectives through a qualitative approach with a specific focus on the textual analysis of Manju Kapoor's novels as representative of patriarchal society and a woman's perspective towards it and its criticism. It involves a close reading of some of the major works of Kapur, namely: *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, and *Custody*. It also seeks to investigate how Kapur through her novels attempts to artistically transgress the locus of normative behavioral practices about gender identity.

The methodology consists of the following steps:

- **Textual Analysis:** Each book is read critically to find major themes that relate to ideas such as patriarchy and feminism. The extent to which marriage, motherhood, sexuality and economic independence are depicted is also assessed to develop a comprehensive analysis.
- **Contextual Analysis:** The novels are set in present-day India and therefore Indian society and practices are examined and critiqued within which the novels are relevant.
- **Theoretical Framework:** The analysis of the literature will be based on feminist theories, particularly those applicable to the context of Indian women. Such scholars as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Uma Chakravarti amongst others help to understand how Kapur criticizes patriarchy.
- **Comparative Analysis:** The focus of the study will also be the lives of women depicted in



various novels in a bid to show the dominant features of women in various works.

- **Analysis of Key Texts Difficult Daughters**  
The first novel by Manju Kapur is *Difficult Daughters* and this touches upon the issue of a woman's quest for a space of her own within the traditionalism of a patriarchal family. The book has developed between the beginning of the novel which is the period in which India has not yet gained freedom and revolves around a young girl called Virmati, who has fallen in love with her married professor but also has her family duties to be fulfilled.

The novel is in a way a condemnation of how patriarchal forces decide what is a woman's role and how they should approach marriage. Virmati's need to be educated and self-sufficient is not easily achieved, as her family places her dreams in disgrace and that means she has to uphold the family honor and its traditions. Simultaneously the novel also criticizes the feminist politics of that period, which mostly rendered women as collateral and nullifying. Virmati's struggle for freedom is void of functional sociopolitical struggles thus moving her to a state of abandonment<sup>22</sup>. This focus on both masculine and exclusionary feminist perspectives or policies enhances the layout and purpose of the novel as one that critiques the power relations between men and women in greater society.

## A Married Woman

In *A Married Woman*, Kapur<sup>23</sup> goes a level deeper into the knots of marriage and women's fantasies. Astha as a character is a middle-class, respectable housewife and mother who does what society expects a woman to do, yet, feels somewhat incomplete within her. Her relationship with a widow and a feminist, Peeplika, is her rebellion against the traditions of gender roles around her and towards sexual oppression.

The novel sees marriage as an institution of bonding that is created and sustained<sup>24</sup> by men wherein women do not exist as individuals but as wives and mothers irrespective of their identities. Astha's life journey is the life journey many women wish to lead only to be scorned by society's denizens who are constantly busy body judging others.

## Home

The author portrays<sup>25</sup> home as a contemporary nineteenth-century context, a social structure where the family is seen as a collectivistic unit and does not operate within contemporary gender dynamics. Then character Nisha, lived in a place where men did not let women work judiciously. But the problem is that Nisha also has to deal with her family ostracizing her. This dichotomy illustrates the struggle with patriarchal

structures, where sometimes the effort of empowerment breeds the most backlash. The text criticizes how society is always quick to undermine what women accomplish and goes on to emphasize the increasing importance of validation for women.

## Custody

In *Custody*, Kapur analyzes<sup>26</sup> how divorce and custody of children affect the woman's life. The novel follows Shagun whose story is one of nearly every woman who has left her husband for another and Ishita, a divorcee who wants to have children, so she decides to adopt. Women are judged all the time by the men of society, and Kapur uses these characters to emphasize the double standards of the 'patriarchy' where it is acceptable for men to have numerous children, but not women.

There are various other aspects that the novel depicts such as how women tend to suffer in family courts ever since they leave their house and enter a marital home. For instance, there is quite a bit of research<sup>27</sup> that indicates women are easier to exploit in a family defender's home and even children often possess biases in favor of their father. The struggle and the inner belief that Shagun and Ishita have do not disappoint, for she can present an alternate reality wherein women are not shunned.

## 9. Conclusion

Manju Kapur's novels have the potential to strike a chord with every woman who has ever become a victim of the male chauvinistic society. Her style is delicate and sincere, and the depiction of her women characters is free from modernistic ghettoization. Decentered by marriage, motherhood, sexuality and the use of money which invariably creates new windows, societal norms and roles, particularly gender roles are exposed and reformed through her narratives.

Kapur's contribution to literature in India cannot be overstated, as she deals with the issues that are endemic to such a nasty patriarchal society. She situates them in the realities of Indian society including customs of gender, class, caste and religion which are interrelated and therefore portray women's lives in a totality.

Simultaneously, Kapur's novels also deal with issues of self, self-determination and self-empowerment that go beyond the context they are set in. Her work<sup>28</sup> tackles feminist issues as well as pays tribute to women who constantly fight against patriarchal norms. Focusing on those who speak the least, Kapur deals with the critical

issues of feminism and gender-based violence which makes her a prominent figure in literature in the twenty-first century.

Manju Kapur's novels are a rich addition to the literature that seeks to highlight the voice of women in a society marked by male dominance. Her writings<sup>29</sup>

focus on women's lived reality for they weave together their sufferings, hopes, and even joys. In analyzing cultural practices and critiquing institutions that constrain women, Kapur acknowledges the oppression of patriarchy and celebrates the women who fight against it and overcome these barriers. Her storytelling compels us to reconsider the interplay of masculinity and femininity and makes us question the existing power dynamics<sup>30</sup> in a society.

Kapur also gives a marriage a treatment of a central theme of her works, close attention to detail in that regard adds cultural depth to her work. She believes that marriage, which a woman is often told to aspire to, only serves an oppressive purpose. A Married Woman revolves around Astha's tragic dreams of self-fulfillment; Home reflects Nisha's struggles<sup>31</sup> as she juggles together the roles of a devoted wife, a caring daughter-in-law, and a dutiful mother; and in Difficult Daughters, Virmati's plans are crushed as she is married off. From her perspective, the customary control of women<sup>32</sup> through marriage is curtailed. She envisions marriage differently and advocates for changes within the structure of marriage<sup>33</sup>.

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