

**FEMINISM AND FAMILY DYNAMICS: EXPLORING THE CONFLICT
AND TRANSFORMATION OF GENDER ROLES IN MANJU KAPUR'S
WORKS**

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur is a widely recognised Indian author whose novels deal with the challenges of women's identities, familial connections, and social transformation in modern India. Her works look at the way customary familial structures and cultural standards affect female identities and roles. This paper discusses about the feminist theme in Kapur's work, emphasising upon the way gender roles in the family trigger problems and adjustments. Kapur's characters are always trying to find a balance between their own aspirations and the expectations of society. This is because they are always at contradiction with patriarchal norms and women's desire for independence. This article depicts how women deal, fight back and at times change their responsibilities in both family and social contexts. She talks about the family dynamics in her works that change over time. Kapur's novels give us vital details about women's roles that are changing in modern Indian society and also add to feminist literary discourse by showing women's struggle and growth within their own families.

KEYWORDS: *Familial Connections, Social Expectations, Autonomy, Family Dynamics, Resistance.*

INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur is an Indian author whose novels have earned much of applaud from all over the world. The way she writes has left an immense effect on contemporary Indian English literature, particularly when it deals with issues related to women and social transformation. She was born in India in 1948. Her writings generally explore the intricate connection between the one's own self and societal expectations, emphasising on the lives of middle-class Indian women. Her receptive and realistic depiction of the family life reveals that patriarchal structures still determine women's positions in their own homes and the challenges they encounter when they try to become independent. A Married Woman (2002), Home (2006), The Immigrant (2008), and Difficult Daughters (1998) are just some of Kapur's works that study the disparities in gender, family life, marriage, and the conflict within modernity and older ways of life. Her female protagonists are often faced with cultural expectations which relegate them to established expectations of familial relationships, self-denial and conformity. But Kapur's narratives illustrate the female troubles, resilient behaviour, and reluctant transition as they resist societal norms instead of merely presenting them as passive victims

The patriarchal framework in Indian society, that allows men greater authority by means of traditional norms, becomes apparent in Manju Kapur's fiction as a framework that puts control and stress on women. In many families, men have the responsibility to take on big decisions while women are expected to serve as subservient, reserved, and centred on performing household duties. Women's sense of self, liberty; and desires are restricted by these norms. Despite having often face these obstacles, Kapur's female protagonists undertake sometimes embrace them. Many resist in their own ways—by seeking education, choosing their own partners, or standing up against unfair treatment. Her novels are set in realistic Indian backgrounds, such as the time of partition or within modern middle-class homes, which reveal the social and cultural pressures women deal with every day. By presenting both the struggles and the strength of her characters, Kapur gives a strong message about women's courage and their efforts to break free from patriarchy and find their own path. The main focus of each novel of ManjuKapur is marriage; it acts as a nucleus and all the themes revolve around this theme. She talks of child marriage, extra-marital affairs and divorces in her novels. Each woman is obliged to marry and to reproduce children in her life. Barren women like Sona, Rupa and Ishitain her novels lead a despicable and wretched life.

ManjuKapurin her novel *Difficult Daughters*, presents the story of Virmati, a young woman growing up in pre-independence India, who struggles against the expectations placed on her as a daughter in a traditional Punjabi family. Virmati is expected to follow the usual path of marriage and obedience, but she longs for education, independence, and love on her own terms. Her relationship with a married professor and her decision to go against her family's wishes reflect her desire to resist the rules of patriarchy. The novel shows the emotional cost of this resistance—Virmati faces rejection, loneliness, and guilt—but also highlights her courage in choosing a different life. Susie Orbach comments that she “struggles to prepare her daughter for a life of inequality, the mother tries to hold back a child's desire to be a powerful, self-directed, energetic, productive human being” (Orbach 27). Virmati believes, “One of the benefits of education is that it teaches us to think for ourselves” (102).

Through Virmati's story, Kapur shows the conflict between personal freedom and family duty, and how women who challenge traditional roles are often seen as "difficult" or disobedient. Set during the time of India's struggle for independence, the novel also suggests that true freedom must include the freedom of women to make their own choices. Virmatiwants to study and make her own choices in a society that expects her to be an obedient daughter and housewife. She reveals her aversion to traditional gender roles by determining to have relationships with someone who is already married instead of choosing to get into a marriage under pressure. However Virmati's journey is marked with pain and suffering, chaos, and feeling isolated, it also shows her boldness in continuing to live as she regards appropriate. Her encounter becomes a symbol for the clash between accepted conventions and one's own personal objectives. She was brought up in a typical Punjabi family in which familial relationships and marriage are considered above and beyond rather than education. Virmati, however, desires for self-reliance after being impacted by her cousin Shakuntala's independent approach to life. Shakuntala says, “These people don't really understand, Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent” (17). Virmati's searching for freedom is triggered by this incident. Her pursuit for higher education converts as a way of challenging the expectations of patriarchy. Despite familial opposition, she comments, “Identities, loyalties, futures and nations were becoming a matter of choice rather than tradition” (237). Virmati's defiance challenges the societal expectation that a woman's destiny is confined to domestic roles. The novel highlights

that it is difficult for women to find freedom in a society that values family honour more than individual choice. Manju Kapur portrays Virmati's intense struggle between her personal ambitions and her family's strict expectations. She grows up in a conservative Punjabi household where "the right thing for a girl was to marry well and be obedient" (14). Despite this, Virmati is drawn toward education and a love considered taboo, causing a deep rift within her family. Her rebellion against these norms is evident when she declares, "I had to fight for my life, for my love, even if it meant breaking the family bonds" (245). Virmati comments thus:

"A woman should be aware, self-controlled, and strong willed, self reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense." (Difficult Daughters 12)

Virmati represents the spirit of the Indian independence movement. She challenges traditional norms and defies societal expectations, disrupting the conventional moral framework of Indian society. When she told her mother that she wanted to go to Lahore for higher education, Kasturi reprimanded her daughter, saying: "When I was your age, girls only left their house when they married. And beyond a certain age" (111). She urged her to settle down in life and get married, "a woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings" (111). Virmati emerges as the real difficult daughter of the modern times. She becomes the cause of her agonising plight. She loses everything; her name and reputation in her longing to assert her individuality. She liberates herself but she has to pay the heavy price for this ambition. She expresses her passion to enjoy liberty thus to her cousin Shakuntala: "I want to be like you, Pehnji. I wish I too could do things. But I am not clever" (17-18). Shakuntala inspires her to shatter all the factors inhibiting her growth and emancipation and for change and transformation. She is motivated to reject her marginalised status in the society. She argues thus:

"Times are changing, and women are moving out of the house, so why not you? These people don't really understand Viru, how much satisfaction there can be in leading your own life, in being independent. Here we are fighting for the freedom of the nation, but women are still supposed to marry, and nothing else." (Difficult Daughters 17)

Virmati is also inspired by her roommate Swarna who teaches her the new values of modernity and sexuality. "She stared at Swarna. What a girl! Her opinions seemed to come from inside herself, her thoughts, ideas and feelings blended without any horrible sense of dislocation" (135). Like, Virmati follows the code of amorality of Shakuntala and Swarnalatha in her quest for identity, survival, and emancipation. Virmati emerges as a resolute and an aggressive liberal woman after the influence of Swarna. They teach her the value of higher education in life to gain freedom from the destructive patriarchal society. She could get real emancipation and freedom only through her higher education. She is the product of modernism, consumerism and liberalism. She breaks all the patriarchal shackles and left for Lahore to pursue her own independent life. Through Virmati's story, Kapur shows that family can be a force of control but also that feminist resistance begins when women assert their right to self-determination.

In *A Married Woman*, the main character, Astha, is a well-educated wife and mother living in modern Delhi. Although she seems to have a perfect life, she feels unhappy and trapped in her marriage. Astha starts questioning her role as a wife and mother and eventually finds emotional and physical comfort in a relationship with a woman named Pipeelika. This bold choice becomes a form of silent protest against the expectations of her family and society. Simone de Beauvoir in her famous book *The Second Sex* contends thus:

“Since patriarchal times women have in general been forced to occupy a secondary place in the world in relation to men, a position comparable in many respects with that of racial memories in spite of the fact women constitute numerically at least half of the human race, and further that the secondary standing is not imposed of necessity by natural feminine characteristics but rather by strong environmental forces of educational and social tradition under the purposeful control of men.” (Beauvoir 9)

Astha embodies the conflict between societal expectations and personal fulfillment. Living a seemingly content life as a wife and mother, she experiences an internal void. Her involvement with Pipeelika, a woman engaged in political activism, leads Astha to question her prescribed roles. Reflecting on her life, she realizes, “She had learnt to compromise, to keep everyone happy. But somewhere, something had been lost” (231). Astha's journey illustrates the silent struggles of women who conform outwardly while grappling with inner dissatisfaction. The novel shows that even educated, middle-class women can feel suffocated by patriarchy and how personal desire can become a way to resist traditional roles. She embodies the silent conflict between societal expectations and inner desires. While she outwardly conforms to the roles of a wife and mother, she reflects that “she had learnt to compromise, to keep everyone happy. But somewhere, something had been lost” (231). This loss signals the suppression of her own identity under family pressures. She feels humiliated and this leads to terrible stress and frustration of Astha who is broken in body and in spirit. Betty Friedan observed in her book *The Feminine Mystic* thus:

“For woman, as for man, the need for self- fulfillment-the autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-realization –is as important as the sexual need.” (Friedan 282)

In her early life, she is considered as the burden on her parents but soon she thinks of love and imagines the presence of a young boy who would hold her in his arms. She imagines a handsome young man who would love her and she would enjoy the sexual pleasures with her. In her teenage, she falls in love with Rohan. She thought of him day and night and enjoys the sensation of love and sex in her imagination. Soon she gets lost in the world of Rohan and enjoys sexual pleasures with him. But this love relationship with Rohan finished within a month as Rohan left India and moved to Oxford for higher studies. Then entered Hemant in her life and she married him to settle down. Astha is neglected by Hemant who is busy all the time in his corporate world. She feels lonely and rejected; she feels segregated. Hemant had given the verdict representing his rigid patriarchy thus, “As my wife, you think it proper to run around, abandoning home, leaving the children to servants” (188). Astha comes in contact with Pipeelika; the widow of Aijaz. She feels great love and sympathy for Pipeelika and a powerful love bond between them begin.

Astha was neglected by her husband Hemant and she had felt lonely and depressed. Pipeelika is also feeling alienated from her society and is forced to live alone after the death of her husband. ManjuKapur depicts the lesbian love to express the impact of western culture on Indian women. Astha and Pipeelika emerge as new women of ManjuKapur who are rebellious and deviant in their behaviour breaking the traditions of patriarchy. Being lonely and frustrated, she comes in contact with Aijaz who is a social activist. He appreciates her and gives her proper respect. He helps her to come out of her claustrophobic existence. When Astha forms a relationship with Pipeelika, she begins to realize that “her life had been shaped by others’ needs” rather than her own (205). Ashok Kumar has commented thus on the deviant behaviour of women of ManjuKapur:

“A lesbian is the wrath of all women compared to the point of exploding. Often emergence at an early age, she acts in consonance with her inner constraint to be a more complete and free human being than her society-may be then, but certainly later-cares to allow her. When these demands and behaviours are not fulfilled, she finds herself at odds with not only others around her but also with herself over time.” (Kumar 165)

Astha's new relationship becomes a challenge for Hemant and her family. Astha and Pipeelika both love together and a deep emotional bonding develops between them. Astha's marriage is on the verge of disintegration but soon Pipeelika leaves India to pursue her study abroad and the link of love is broken. Astha has to come back home to her family. Kapur explores various issues emerging out of social disorder in the nation. She depicts the status of Indian women who are regarded as the holy cow. The novel is the heartrending story of an Indian woman trapped in the bog of patriarchy and is bound to suffer the alienation, depression, and restlessness. ManjuKapur has depicted their anxiety, discomfort, defiance and discontentment. They suffer because of their troubled relationships. And they suffer from negativity and in desperation are bound to find the new world of lesbian love to overcome the depression of life. Restlessness inspires them to enjoy absolute liberty to break the chains of patriarchy. Kapur here highlights the quiet awakening of feminist consciousness within the confines of family duties.

Manju Kapur's in her novel Home (2006) deals with the problem of marriage and interplay of human relations while living in the family. The title of the novel is symbolic of typical patriarchal living of the Indian married women in their homes. Kapur focuses on the life of Nisha, a girl growing up in a traditional joint family in Delhi. She is bright and independent, but she is constantly reminded that her main duty is to marry and take care of her home. When her love affair is rejected by her family, she turns to work and starts her own business. This act becomes her way of resisting the idea that a woman's only role is to be a wife and mother. Nishanavigates the constraints of a traditional joint family in Delhi. Expected to adhere to societal norms, Nisha's aspirations are often dismissed. When her love affair is thwarted by her family, she channels her energy into establishing a business. Her father remarks, “A girl's ultimate destiny was marriage, and everything else was temporary” (120). Nisha's entrepreneurial pursuit becomes an act of defiance, challenging the notion that a woman's identity is solely defined by marriage. Her determination to create a space for herself outside traditional expectations underscores the theme of resistance.

Nisha grows up in a joint family that strictly enforces gender roles, where “a girl's ultimate destiny was marriage, and everything else was temporary” (93). Though raised with love, Nisha is repeatedly reminded that her life should revolve around marriage and serving the family. When her romantic relationship is rejected, she channels her energy into establishing her own business, signaling her refusal to be limited by traditional expectations: “Nisha's decision to start her own business was her way of saying she did not want to be confined” (157). The character of Nisha is a case study of trauma. She is always in turmoil as she suffers from the failures of love; life and sex. She tries to escape from the terrors of life but the haunting past puts pressure on her wounded psyche. ManjuKapur depicts her trauma thus:

“The forlorn misery that was Nisha's burden increased with every step made in the direction of her brother's marriage. Had her parents not been so determined to reject Suresh, she could have been reveling in attention as the groom's only real sister, instead of feeling a source of apology and justification. She wished she could disappear into some hole till the wedding was over.” (Home 249)

Kapur defines through Nisha's story the gradual transformation of gender roles within family structures in Indian society. The novel shows that Indian families often place strict limits on daughters while giving freedom to sons, and a woman's attempt to build a life outside of marriage is seen as rebellion.

Manju Kapur's novel *Custody* (2011) again depicts the plight and harrowing experience of women trapped in the bog of Indian patriarchy. The plot of the novel is set in thriving middle class colonies of Delhi and Manju Kapur explores the challenges of marriage; divorce and the uncertainty of life. In modern India, the narrative focusses on two separate households fighting for custody of their children and splitting up. A major controversy occurs due to Shagun, the female prota, displacing her husband for a different partner. The society strongly disapproves of her for departing from the standard definition of a "good wife." But Ishita, a woman who is incapable to become pregnant, also finds herself turned down by her spouse's parents. Cultural conventions that define women's worth with being able to be a loving mom or partner. Their circumstances reveal the psychological pain triggered on by masculinity in addition to the determination needed for an attempt for a sense of identity and fulfillment. Kapur analyses the complicated dynamics of modern relationships and the condemnation that women who depart from typical roles experience from society as a whole. Shagun has faced public reproach for choosing to depart from her husband for another man. Her mother admonishes her, "You are so idealistic. You don't think about the long term. What about the society? What about your children?" (79). In the same way, Ishita, who experienced divorce because of her inability to have children, encounters rejection from the community. The negative effects of interrogating male-dominated customs are witnessed by both of them. Their stories suggest how women frequently define themselves by their responsibilities as wives and moms in society and how challenging it is to stake out their own sense of self. *Custody* presents a stark look at the judgments women face when they defy social norms within family contexts. Shagun, who leaves her husband for another man, confronts the harsh reality that "a woman who leaves her marriage is immediately judged unfit, no matter the reason" (78). Similarly, Ishita experiences rejection from her in-laws because "without children, Ishita was considered less than a woman" (134). Both characters challenge the narrow definitions of womanhood imposed by family and society, illustrating the ongoing resistance and redefinition of gender roles. Manju Kapur has depicted the truncated life of her women characters that destroy their family in the quest of love and sex. It is the story of love, sex, liberty and divorces and of the disintegration of family. The plot is social and at the same time it is a crusade against divorces; true to the universal angst of modern marriage.

In the novel *Brothers* (2016), Manju Kapur explores the dynamics of a family of Tapti Gaina and the plot is packed with the elements of betrayal, treachery, murder, struggle for independence, and ambition. It is the touching story of two men; Tapti's husband and his brother. Two brothers struggle to fulfil their ambition; treachery, and heartache within the dynamics of family. Both the brothers are engaged in their power struggle and their mutual conflicts. Dhamini Ratnam reviews the novel *Brothers* and observed thus:

"The title of the book may well be *Brothers* but make no mistake, this book is about a woman, and it is the lives of women, especially the unnamed ones who serve as silent, veiled foils to their husbands and sons, that remain with you long after you have finished reading." (Dhamini 1)

Kapur has portrayed the women characters of Mithari, Gulabi and Guddo who are silent sufferers in the novel but the active role is taken by Tapti Gaina who is the main heroine of the novel.

There has been a feeling of jealousy between Himmat Singh and Mangal. Tapti is worried about Himmat's heinous murder by her husband Mangal and her daughters are also under stress to know about the murder. The news of the murder of CM is reported in the newspapers and is telecasted in all the TV channels. Mangal is lodged in Tihar Jail. The sorrow and traumatic plight of women is linked with the political changes and death of men in politics. Tapti's plight is depicted thus:

"Tapti looks at their tears, thinks of her own bouts of crying and wonders how she is ever going to be a support to her children. Yes, he had no right to do this to them. At sixteen and eighteen, her girls are on the threshold of life, a threshold now marked by malevolent and blood." (Brothers 10)

Tapti suffers from agony as she is punished for her sexual liberty and liberty like other women of her novels. Each woman in ManjuKapur is given the liberty to enjoy sexual freedom but each of them suffers from psychological ailments such as trauma, depression and loss of self.

Manju Kapur's novels portray the multifaceted struggles of women confronting patriarchal structures in Indian society. Through characters like Virmati, Astha, Nisha, Shagun, and Ishita, Kapur illustrates the various forms of resistance women employ to assert their autonomy. Through these novels, she vividly depicts the tensions between feminism and family dynamics in Indian society. According to Kapur's statement in an interview with The Times of India, "Social expectations and familial pressures significantly shape women's identities and their narratives, a central theme in my stories." (Kapur, The Times of India 4). Her female characters experience deep conflicts as they try to break free from traditional gender roles assigned by family expectations. Despite being a part of privileged families, their identity as a woman remains confined within traditionally assigned gender roles, much like those articulated by Tennyson during the Victorian era:

"Man for the field and woman for the hearth

Man is for the sword and for the needle she

Man with the head and woman with the heart

Man to command and woman to obey;

All else confusion." (427-431)

Whether it is Virmati's fight for love and education, Astha's emotional awakening, Nisha's entrepreneurial independence, or Shagun and Ishita's resistance to societal judgment, Kapur shows the evolving transformation of gender roles and the growing feminist consciousness within family spaces.

In Kapur's novels, interactions among women within several generations exhibit complex structures shaped by male dominance, convention, and shifting ambitions. The disagreement between the conventional norms of female responsibility and the upcoming generation's ambition for education and independent thought is brought to light in *Difficult Daughters* through the struggle between Virmati and her mom, Kasturi.

A relentless sentimental disconnect between future generations is made apparent by Virmati's daughter's effort at comprehending how her mother lived and her choices. Similar to this, Sona, Rupa, and Nisha's lives in *Home* display how the various several generations respond to gender stereotypes in a combined family and domestic imprisonment. Nisha's quest for autonomy and

expressing oneself reflects a gradual shift in female identity, while elderly women generally approve societal expectations. Interactions between women of different generations can frequently be defined by anxiety misunderstanding, and unstated sentiments, as Kapur highlights throughout her novels. These interactions also show how the cultural fabric has altered and how women's roles in Indian society are gradually transforming.

Each woman of ManjuKapur is restless and dissatisfied with her existence. Each character is in turmoil as she longs to break the fetters of patriarchy, male hegemony, and sexuality. She is educated and wants to lead an independent life. She is anxious to enjoy her own identity in the society. They live in a stifling environment oppressed by the stale and dead customs of society. They soon emerge as the deviant and in order to break the fetters they embark on a new journey to explore love, life and sexuality. In all her novels, the transformation of gender roles is portrayed as deeply influenced by social class. According to Janet Richards in her book *Women Writer's Talking*:

“The essence of Feminism has a strong fundamental case intended to mean only that there are excellent reasons for thinking that woman suffer from systematic social injustice because of their sex; the proposition is to be regarded as constituting feminism.” (Richards 3)

Women from upper- and middle-class backgrounds, such as Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* and Nisha in *Home*, are shown to challenge traditional expectations through education, economic independence, or migration. However, their efforts often come with emotional and social costs, revealing the persistent grip of patriarchy. In contrast, lower-class women in her novels, often depicted as domestic workers or marginalized figures, remain confined to rigid gender roles with little scope for change. Kapur focuses that class determines access to opportunities and the ability to resist gender norms, offering a wonderful exploration of women's identity in contemporary Indian society.

To sum up, Manju Kapur's works provide a deep study of women's lives in modern-day India. Kapur shows the inner and outer challenges that women face as they try to balance their own hopes and goals with traditional expectations in books like *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *The Immigrant*, and *Home*. Her stories often highlight the limitations of patriarchal systems, showing women who struggle to fit in and those who resist, often sacrificing their sense of self and mental health. In both pre-colonial and post-colonial settings, Kapur explores women's loss and identity struggles. Her portrayal of the "New Woman" reflects changing social and cultural dynamics in India, while her characters represent the broader conflicts between personal identity and societal norms.

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