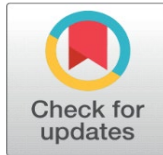
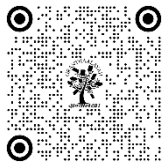


# CULTURAL IDENTITY AND SOCIAL REALITIES: THE STRUGGLES OF WOMEN IN MANJU KAPUR'S 'A MARRIED WOMAN' AND 'HOME'

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines the representation of women in Manju Kapur's novels *A Married Woman* and *Home*, focusing on the challenges they face within the constraints of Indian society. Both novels explore the struggles of female protagonists—Astha and Nisha—who navigate societal expectations, marriage, and personal aspirations while confronting deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. Through a feminist and postcolonial literary lens, the research analyzes how Kapur critiques traditional gender roles, domestic oppression, and the stigma surrounding female agency. The findings reveal recurring themes of marital conflict, identity formation, gendered expectations, and the struggle for autonomy, underscoring the paradox of women's empowerment in contemporary Indian society. Despite moments of rebellion, both protagonists ultimately find themselves bound by cultural expectations, illustrating the persistent societal resistance to female independence. Kapur's narratives serve as a critique of traditional patriarchal structures while simultaneously portraying the complexities of women's lived experiences.

**Keywords:** Manju Kapur, Feminist Literature, Patriarchy, Female Agency

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The portrayal of women in literature has long been shaped by cultural, social, and historical contexts. Across the world, literary works have reflected evolving gender roles, struggles for equality, and the impact of patriarchal structures on women's lives. While the representation of female characters differs from country to country, one common theme persists: the dominance of male-centric narratives. "The depiction of characters, women characters in particular, differs from country to country. However, the portrayal of male dominance over women is a common feature in all these writings, including Indian writing in English" (Sunder, 2015).

The way women's issues are depicted in literature is deeply influenced by the cultural backdrop in which they emerge. For instance, in early American literature, the concerns of white feminists often differed from those of Black feminists, who faced the dual oppression of racial discrimination and gender inequality. Similarly, in India, the discourse on gender rights and equality has evolved in response to the country's unique social and historical conditions. Indian literature reflects these complexities, offering diverse portrayals of women—from traditional roles to narratives of resistance and empowerment.

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When discussing writers who have shaped global feminist discourse, names like Simone de Beauvoir, Mary Wollstonecraft, Toni Morrison, and Virginia Woolf often come to mind. However, in India, literary explorations of women's roles and identities initially emerged through male writers such as Rabindranath Tagore, whose works subtly challenged societal norms. Over time, pioneering female writers like Kamini Roy, Kamala Das, and Nayantara Sahgal brought women's perspectives to the forefront, paving the way for a more authentic and diverse representation of female experiences in Indian literature. And the portrayal of women by all these authors in their works is highly diverse, differing not just from author to author but from novel to novel. This diversity in representation highlights how Indian literature continues to evolve, reflecting shifting gender dynamics and cultural influences.

In recent years, authors like Jhumpa Lahiri, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, Mahasweta Devi and others have contributed to a more nuanced understanding of women's lives in Indian English literature. Among them, Manju Kapur stands out for her compelling portrayals of female protagonists navigating personal and societal challenges. This research explores two of Kapur's works, '*A Married Woman*' and '*Home*', and analyzes how these novels depict women's struggles with identity, agency, and societal expectations in contemporary India. By examining these works, this study aims to shed light on the evolving role of women in Indian literature and the cultural forces shaping their narratives.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The works of Manju Kapur have been extensively analyzed within the framework of gender roles, societal norms, and women's evolving identities. Scholars have examined her novels through various perspectives, including feminist critique, domestic conflicts, marital discourse, and socio-cultural expectations. A comprehensive analysis of such existing research studies was undertaken to explore different dimensions of Kapur's works, and is presented in the following paragraphs.

Subitha (2023) examined the novel, *Home*, as a reflection of social reality, analyzing how Kapur portrays the complexities of family life in contemporary India. In the study, the author discussed how the novel addresses issues such as gender discrimination, the pressure on women to conform to societal norms, and the constraints of marriage. It concluded that Kapur's work serves as a critique of the persistent inequalities faced by women within the domestic sphere.

On similar lines, Sultana & Alqazahy (2023) analyzed another novel, *A Married Woman*, as a journey from self-effacement to self-actualization, exploring how the protagonist, *Astha*'s experiences reflect broader struggles for identity and emotional fulfillment. The work highlighted her shift from conventional marital roles to a search for autonomy, surmising that Kapur critiques patriarchal constraints while portraying the realities of women's emotional and sexual liberation.

Molugu (2022) investigated the insecurities and triumphs of female protagonists in several novels of the author, emphasizing how they navigate personal and social challenges to shape their own identities. The researcher argued that Kapur's works depict women's struggles against patriarchal oppression while highlighting their resilience and determination. It concluded that Kapur's fiction offers an insightful exploration of women's evolving roles in Indian society.

Exploring identity construction in Kapur's fiction, Swamy & Shende (2022), studied how female characters navigate societal constraints to establish a sense of self. The work established that Kapur's protagonists often struggle with ideological conflicts, reflecting the broader tensions between personal freedom and cultural expectations and determined that the works deconstruct conventional gender roles, offering alternative narratives of women's empowerment.

Another study by Swetha & Sivasubramaniam (2020) analyzed the portrayal of the female protagonist in *A Married Woman* and highlighted the constraints imposed by patriarchal norms. It described how *Astha*, despite being educated and independent, remains confined by societal expectations, particularly within marriage and motherhood. The analysis emphasized the struggles of women in navigating identity, familial obligations, and the pursuit of personal fulfillment. It inferred that *Astha*'s journey represents the broader reality of women who strive for autonomy while being bound by cultural limitations.

Similarly, Fatima (2020) examined the concept of self in *Home*, focusing on the struggles of the protagonist, *Nisha*, to assert her identity within a patriarchal family structure. Through this work, the researcher argued that *Nisha*'s journey reflects the challenges women face in balancing traditional expectations with personal aspirations. The research concluded that Kapur's portrayal of women underscores the ongoing conflict between conformity and self-determination in Indian society.

Another study that analysed patriarchy in Kapur's novel by Alexander & Madhan (2017) showcased the treatment of her female protagonists' struggle against patriarchal structures while negotiating their identities. The study noted that the narratives reflect the intersection of personal aspirations and familial obligations, portraying women who assert their autonomy despite societal resistance.

Patnaik (2020) also analyzed the conflict between tradition and modernity in *A Married Woman*, illustrating how *Astha* grapples with societal expectations and personal desires. The study discussed how Kapur's narrative reflects the shifting values in contemporary India, where women increasingly seek autonomy while being bound by traditional roles. It concluded that Kapur effectively portrays the psychological and emotional turmoil experienced by women who attempt to break free from convention.

On the other hand, research by Deviga & Varghese (2020) explicated the nuances of family responsibility in *Home*, emphasizing how the novel portrays the impact of patriarchal traditions on women's autonomy. The author highlighted the central role of marriage and familial obligations in shaping female identity, arguing that Kapur's depiction of women's struggles serves as a critique of restrictive social norms. It reaffirmed that *Home* presents a realistic portrayal of middle-class Indian families, exposing the inherent gender biases within the institution of marriage.

In another study on the novel *Home*, Ansari (2020), discussed the predicament of women focusing on how Kapur's female characters struggle to assert their individuality within a rigidly patriarchal society. The study highlighted *Nisha's* attempts to establish her own identity through education and entrepreneurship, despite familial resistance. It concluded that Kapur's portrayal of women's experiences underscores the need for greater gender equality and personal agency.

Raval & Kaushik (2018) analyzed Manju Kapur's novels through the lens of feminist discourse, arguing that her works reflect a unique perspective distinct from Western feminism. The research highlighted how her female protagonists navigate psychological, social, and cultural challenges while attempting to carve out independent identities. This study surmised that Kapur's fiction presents women who resist traditional roles while acknowledging the complexities of their socio-cultural realities.

Hariharasudan & Gnanamony (2017) also conducted a feminist analysis of *A Married Woman*, discussing how Kapur's narrative challenges traditional gender roles and explores themes of self-discovery and emotional independence. The work emphasized the protagonist's transformation as she seeks fulfillment beyond societal expectations, concluding that the novel serves as a powerful commentary on women's agency in a patriarchal society.

This exhaustive scrutiny assisted in identifying several themes in Manju Kapur's body of work such as the search for autonomy, the constraints of marriage, and societal stigma around infertility. It underscores the nuanced portrayal of women navigating the intersections of tradition, modernity, and selfhood. Scholars have highlighted how Kapur critiques patriarchal structures while simultaneously portraying the emotional and psychological complexities of her female protagonists, and the struggle for self-identity emerges as recurring motifs in her narratives. The review establishes Kapur as a significant voice in contemporary Indian literature, offering a critical lens through which the evolving roles of women in society can be examined.

### 3. AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The overarching aim of this research is to explore the representation of women in Manju Kapur's novels *A Married Woman* and *Home*, analyzing how her female protagonists navigate societal expectations, marriage, identity, and autonomy.

Specifically, through this work, the researcher wanted to:

- Analyze the portrayal of female protagonists in *A Married Woman* and *Home*, focusing on their struggles for identity, agency, and independence.
- Examine how Manju Kapur critiques traditional gender roles, marriage, and familial expectations in her novels.

### 4. RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative research approach to analyze the representation of women in Indian English literature, focusing on Manju Kapur's novels *A Married Woman* and *Home*. It seeks to critically examine the socio-cultural constraints placed on women in contemporary Indian society and how Kapur's narratives contribute to the discourse on gender roles and self-actualization in Indian English literature. Through an in-depth literary analysis, this study explores the intersection of gender, identity, and agency in the said literary works.

## 5. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research is grounded in feminist literary theory, particularly postcolonial feminism, which critiques the universality of Western feminist discourse and instead focuses on the unique experiences of women in postcolonial societies like India. The study also incorporates gender studies and cultural criticism to examine how social structures influence women's autonomy and self-perception in Kapur's novels.

## 6. METHODOLOGY

The study employs a qualitative and interpretative approach to achieve its objectives, using textual analysis, thematic exploration, and critical interpretation of the selected novels. The thematic analysis aided in identifying key themes in author's works, while the character analysis allowed the examination of female protagonists and their transformations in their socio-cultural context.

By adopting this research design, the study aims to contribute to the discourse on gender and identity in Indian English literature, offering insights into how Manju Kapur portrays the struggles and aspirations of women in a rapidly changing socio-cultural landscape.

## 7. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Manju Kapur's novels *A Married Woman* and *Home* present deeply introspective narratives that explore themes of marriage, gender roles, societal constraints, identity, and self-discovery in contemporary India. Both novels focus on female protagonists—*Astha* and *Nisha*—who struggle to assert their independence while being confined by patriarchal expectations.

*A Married Woman* narrates the story of *Astha*, a middle-class woman who initially conforms to societal norms by entering an arranged marriage but later experiences emotional dissatisfaction and seeks fulfillment beyond traditional roles. Her journey from compliance to self-exploration leads her to political activism and an unconventional romantic relationship with another woman, *Pipeelika*. The novel explores marital discontent, emotional alienation, and the complexities of love and rebellion in a deeply traditional society.

On the other hand, *Home*, centers on *Nisha*, a girl raised in a rigid patriarchal joint family, who faces gender discrimination, emotional neglect, and sexual trauma within her household. Despite these challenges, she pursues financial independence by starting a business but is ultimately expected to conform to societal norms through marriage. The novel highlights family obligations, economic empowerment, and the struggle to find a true sense of "home."

Through these narratives, Kapur critiques the socio-cultural structures that define women's lives, exposing the conflict between tradition and modernity in their pursuit of personal freedom. After carefully examining the two novels, several key concepts and themes were identified that are presented below.

## 8. TRADITIONAL EXPECTATIONS

The experiences of the female lead, *Astha* and *Nisha*, as well as their mothers reflect how Indian women are conditioned from an early age to prioritize marriage and family over personal aspirations. *Astha's* mother insists that her responsibility as a parent ends with *Astha's* marriage, emphasizing the societal pressure placed on women to conform to certain pre-defined roles. Similarly, *Nisha's* mother, Sona, faces relentless criticism for not conceiving a child for ten years, highlighting that the most important expectation from a woman is child bearing and her primary duty is motherhood.

## 9. MARRIAGE, CONFLICT AND CONFORMITY

Both novels depict marriage as a paradoxical institution – one that offers security but restricts a woman's autonomy and agency. *Astha's* husband, *Hemant*, appears progressive on the surface but ultimately expects her to fulfill traditional domestic roles as defined by society and deep-seated patriarchy. As she becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her marriage, she turns to political activism and an intimate relationship with *Pipee*, seeking a sense of purpose and self-worth.

In *Home*, Nisha, despite her business acumen and professional success, is expected to give up her independence for marriage. Her journey reveals how economic empowerment does not always translate to social liberation, as patriarchal values continue to dictate a woman's ultimate role in society.

## 10. GENDERED EXPECTATIONS

In *A Married Woman*, Astha's continuous struggles illustrate the emotional and physical burden placed on married women in Indian society, as she single-handedly raises her children while her husband remains emotionally distant. Her increasing exhaustion due to the demands placed on her leads to a sense of suffocation, akin to being an unpaid servant trapped in domesticity.

Similarly, in *Home*, Nisha experiences the limitations of a joint family system, which is still common place in India, where women have little control over their life choices. Even as she builds her business, she is discouraged by family members, reinforcing the idea that a woman's success is secondary to her role as a wife and mother.

## 11. SEARCH FOR IDENTITY

The protagonists in both the novels, rebel against their prescribed roles in different ways. Astha finds an alternative identity through activism and her relationship with Pipee, though it remains fraught with emotional complexities and power imbalances. Nisha, on the other hand, rebels through economic independence, establishing her own business as an act of self-reliance. However, both women eventually conform to societal expectations, suggesting that personal freedom and agency is still difficult to sustain in a patriarchal society like India.

## 12. SOCIETAL STIGMA

In *Home*, Kapur addresses a key societal stigma of infertility, showing how Sona is devalued for her inability to conceive for a prolonged period. Also, through the narrative of Nisha's childhood trauma, resulting from sexual abuse by her cousin Vicky, Kapur addresses the disruption and low sense of security that such experiences may cause for women. Rather than confronting the abuser, the family chooses to ignore the issue, reflecting the culture of silence and complicity surrounding gender-based violence.

## 13. PATRIARCHAL CONTROL

A crucial theme underscored in both novels is the working of patriarchal structures in Indian society and how they limit women's agency, whether through family expectations, societal norms, or cultural pressures. In *Home*, Banwari Lal's belief in the virtues of a joint family system leads to rigid gender roles that suppress female autonomy. Similarly, in *A Married Woman*, Astha's every major decision—marriage, career, motherhood, and even her activism—is shaped by the influence of her family and societal norms.

## 14. CONCLUSION

The analysis of Manju Kapur's novels *A Married Woman* and *Home*, offers insights into the lives of Indian women grappling with cultural expectations and personal desires. Both the works highlight the paradoxes of empowerment, where women seek personal fulfillment but remain tethered to societal constraints. Through richly drawn characters and compelling narratives, Kapur critiques the rigid gender roles and hegemony that define traditional Indian society. Astha's journey in *A Married Woman*, illustrates how emotional neglect and confining gender boundaries can push women towards rebellion, even though she faces a completely new forms of oppression in her pursuit of independence. she faces new forms of oppression. Nisha's story in *Home*, on the other hand, highlights the reality, that financial success does not always equate to social freedom and independence, as she ultimately conforms to traditional marital expectations.

Kapur's narratives reveal that while women may challenge patriarchy, deeply ingrained cultural norms continue to dictate their fates. Even as the protagonists strive for autonomy, their stories suggest that true liberation remains elusive in a society where marriage, motherhood, and obedience are still the primary markers of a woman's worth. Her works underscore the need for greater acceptance of women's agency and individuality while reflecting on the broader cultural shifts occurring in contemporary India.

Through these novels, Kapur not only critiques the patriarchal structures that confine women but also forces readers to question whether real change is possible in a world that continues to view women through the lens of duty and sacrifice.



## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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