



Domesticity And Domination: Power Structures In Manju Kapur's Home

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Abstract: Women continue to face obstacles in nearly every aspect of life, experiencing gender inequality and discrimination both within the household and in the public sphere. In many cultures, they are traditionally confined to domestic identities as daughters, wives, and mothers, and are placed beneath men in the patriarchal order of authority. Their limited representation in social, economic, and political spaces stems from long-standing historical, cultural, and economic conditions that restrict their access to education, financial autonomy, and upward mobility. Patriarchy reinforces the notion that women are naturally suited for caregiving roles, thereby justifying their exclusion from positions of power. Over generations, women have been conditioned to accept these subordinate roles, often due to cultural expectations, fear of social disapproval, and the pressure to uphold family honour over personal aspirations. This internalization is deeply rooted, as women are repeatedly taught to prioritize obedience and familial duty above individual ambition.

Within modern Indian literature, Manju Kapur's Home is notable for its insightful portrayal of women's experiences within traditional family and societal frameworks. The novel centers on Nisha, whose life reflects the tensions of living in a joint family and symbolizes the broader struggle between conventional norms and emerging modern values. Through Nisha's pursuit of autonomy and self-realization, Kapur highlights the complex interplay between personal desire, family obligations, and societal expectations. The novel also exposes several entrenched social problems—caste discrimination, class prejudice, superstitious practices, the denial of education to girls, and child sexual abuse—revealing how these forces further constrain women's lives. This research paper focuses specifically on the challenges women face within patriarchal structures and examine how Kapur's narrative illuminates the broader realities of gender oppression and the challenges women face within patriarchal society, highlighting how family structures and cultural norms marginalize women and restrict their autonomy and sense of self-worth.

Key Words: Gender Inequality, Discrimination, Class Prejudice, Social Disapproval

Introduction

Women continue to be constrained in nearly every sphere of life, facing persistent gender inequality and discrimination within both public and private domains. Across many societies, they are traditionally confined to domestic roles as daughters, wives, and mothers. Within patriarchal structures, women often occupy a secondary position to men in the hierarchy of authority and patronage. Their under-representation stems from historical, cultural, and economic forces that limit women's access to education, financial independence, and social mobility. Patriarchy reinforces the belief that women are inherently suited for nurturing roles, a notion that has long been used to justify their subordination.

Generations of women have been socialized to accept this subordinate status, internalizing cultural norms that prioritize family honour and obedience over personal aspiration. This passive acceptance is deeply rooted in social conditioning and the fear of social rejection. Feminism challenges this silent compliance by questioning patriarchal conventions, advocating gender equality, and raising awareness about issues such as domestic violence, illiteracy, and the denial of women's rights. Feminist movements empower women to assert themselves and resist traditional norms. In India, feminism comprises a series of movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights for women. Indian feminist history is commonly divided into three phases. The first, beginning in the mid-19th century, saw reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar champion women's rights through reforms in education and customs such as widow remarriage and the abolition of Sati. The second phase, from 1915 to independence, witnessed Gandhi's inclusion of women in the national struggle, particularly in the Quit India Movement. The third, post-independence phase has focused on ensuring fair treatment of women within marriage, the workplace, and the political sphere.

Indian English fiction has played a significant role in critiquing patriarchal norms embedded in Indian society. Writers such as Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Nayantara Sahgal foreground feminist concerns in their works, portraying women's struggles with societal expectations, family structures, and traditional gender roles. Contemporary authors like Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, and Jhumpa Lahiri further explore themes of individuality, sexual autonomy, girl-child education, and gender discrimination. Manju Kapur, in particular, exposes various social injustices, including caste-based discrimination, class hierarchies, superstition, the denial of female education, and child sexual abuse.

Objectives and Methodology

Objectives:

1. To examine how social norms, familial expectations, and cultural traditions marginalize women within patriarchal systems.
2. To analyse the ways in which female characters either resist or conform to patriarchal expectations and traditional gender roles.

The study will employ analytical and qualitative methods to examine Manju Kapur's *Home*, using feminist literary theory as the primary framework for understanding women's subordination.

Literature Review

- **Domesticity and Patriarchy:** Scholars argue that Kapur's *Home* portrays the joint family as a site of patriarchal control, where women's labor sustains male authority.
- **Quest for Identity:** Nisha's struggle for autonomy reflects broader themes in Kapur's oeuvre—women negotiating between tradition and modernity.
- **Comparisons to Jane Austen:** Critics liken Kapur's social observations to Austen's, noting her focus on middle-class domestic life and marriage markets.
- **Socio-political Context:** The novel situates personal struggles within India's changing economic and cultural landscape, reflecting tensions between globalization and tradition.

Home: The narrative is set in Delhi and centres on the Banwari Lal family, who migrated to India after the Partition and established a cloth business in Karol Bagh using the jewellery of Banwari Lal's wife. His sons, Yashpal and Pyare Lal, later join the family enterprise. Pyare Lal agrees to an arranged marriage with Sushila, while Yashpal develops an unexpected attraction to Sona, a young woman from a modest background. At the beginning of the novel, Sona is seventeen when she first meets Yashpal. She travels from Meerut with her mother and sister to attend her uncle's wedding. Her mother hopes her daughters will appear at their best—an expectation rooted in the cultural belief that weddings offer opportunities for marriageable girls to be noticed by prospective grooms or their families. As the narrator explains, "It was necessary for marriageable girls to blossom during such occasions, it being that among the guests a boy, or better still his parent, would cast a glance and hold it steadily upon her person. Then it was hoped subsequent inquiries would yield results" (Home, 3). In business-oriented households where marriages are carefully arranged with parental approval, such spontaneous romantic interest is viewed with unease.

Yashpal's mother grieves bitterly, branding the girl as a bearer of misfortune. According to her, "A bride must bring dowry, belong to a similar social background, and appreciate the essence of togetherness" (Home 4). In contrast, the father, who understands how to maintain familial harmony, consents to his son's marriage. Lala Banwari Lal, a staunch believer in the joint family system, forbids his younger daughter-in-law from cooking upstairs, convinced that "Separate kitchens create a sense of possession, dissatisfaction, emotional distance, and eventually, separation" (Home 13). In traditional Indian joint families, the idea of avoiding separate kitchens reflects cultural values that emphasize unity, cooperation, and shared responsibilities.

Manju Kapur introduces the age-old Indian practice of dowry, simultaneously critiquing how this system traps women in suffocating and unhappy lives when they are unable to provide it. Dowry reduces a woman to an object of transactional worth, reinforcing the belief that her value lies in her financial contribution to marriage. It often overshadows her education, abilities, achievements, or emotional labour within her marital home. Pyare Lal's marriage to Sushila, the daughter of a wealthy man, intensifies Sona's sense of inadequacy as she compares it to her own marriage, which lacked lavish gifts. Banwari Lal's daughter Sunita is married to Murli, an alcoholic with a volatile temperament. She dies at the age of thirty-two, allegedly due to dowry-related issues. Her son Vicky is brought to Delhi to live with the Banwari Lal family. Vicky becomes a point of tension: Banwari Lal, burdened by guilt over Sunita's fate, feels responsible for him, while his sons and their growing families show little willingness to accommodate the boy. Banwari Lal's daughter Sunita is married to Murli, an alcoholic with a volatile temperament. She dies at the age of thirty-two, allegedly due to dowry-related issues. Her son Vicky is brought to Delhi to live with the Banwari Lal family. Vicky becomes a point of tension: Banwari Lal, burdened by guilt over Sunita's fate, feels responsible for him, while his sons and their growing families show little willingness to accommodate the boy. At the same time, Sona remains childless. Although one might expect her to welcome Vicky, she instead resents him and struggles to accept his presence when the elders insist he stay with her. Her inability to conceive for many years deepens her frustration. Meanwhile, Sushila, Pyare Lal's wife, gives birth to two sons—Ajay and Vijay—further intensifying Sona's distress.

Sona's younger sister, Rupa, married to Prem Nath, also suffers from unfulfilled maternal desire, yet her response is entirely different. Rupa maintains her composure and cheerful disposition, channeling her energy into building a successful pickle business. As Kapur notes, "She had not suffered like her sister, nor had she fasted and done penance" (Home 33). Sona, however, blames her misfortune on past karma. In her marital home, a woman's status remains uncertain until she bears a child—preferably a son. Sona's repeated fasting brings no results, leaving her isolated, unheard, and emotionally drained. After Sunita's death, the family travels to Bareilly. Sona tries to console her grieving mother-in-law, urging her to rest, but the older woman retorts sharply: "What do you know of a mother's sorrow? You have no children, no grief; only a husband who fusses over you" (Home 15). Sona's infertility becomes a source of ridicule and humiliation. After ten long years, Sona finally gives birth to a daughter, Nisha—the first granddaughter in the Banwari Lal household. Her arrival brings immense happiness, especially because she is born after a decade of longing. Nisha's birth ends the taunts from Sona's mother-in-law, the relentless fasting, and the religious rituals meant to cure her infertility. In her fervent prayers to Lord Krishna, Sona had pleaded, "Please, I am growing older; bless us with a child, girl or boy, I do not care, but I cannot bear this emptiness" (Home 20).

Simone de Beauvoir's observation resonates deeply here: "Woman—though a free and autonomous being—finds herself in a world where men force her into the position of the Other" (*The Second Sex* 167). The emotional burden of involuntary childlessness often results in grief, depression, anxiety, diminished self-worth, identity struggles, strained relationships, and social alienation. By finally becoming a mother, Sona attains the role most expected of her within marriage. Although she does not bear a son, the family appears content and satisfied. "It is wonderful to have a girl in the house" (Home 36). Nisha's striking beauty reassures her parents about her future prospects. To console Sona's in-laws, her sister Rupa remarks, "And now the womb has opened... a baby brother will come soon" (Home 36). Sona firmly believes that her duties as a wife and daughter-in-law will be fulfilled only when she produces a son. Eventually, she gives birth to a boy, Raju, whose arrival is celebrated far more enthusiastically than that of her first child. Her mother-in-law proclaims, "Now I can die in peace" (Home 41). In traditional Indian households, the birth of a child is marked by rituals of welcome and blessing, yet these ceremonies are typically far more elaborate for boys than for girls.

Gender discrimination remains one of the most entrenched problems within traditional Indian social structures. Gender roles are closely tied to the behaviours and expectations imposed on individuals based on biological sex. From the moment a child is born, families and society begin shaping them according to these norms. Boys are encouraged to be bold and assertive, while girls are expected to remain modest, quiet, and confined to domestic spaces. Kate Millett argues that the family is the primary institution where women's subordination is taught and reinforced. She asserts, "Patriarchy, replete with its male-dominated family, with its power structure that subordinates women, is the chief institution perpetuating the oppression of women" (*Sexual Politics* 3). Gender discrimination remains one of the most entrenched problems within traditional Indian social structures. Gender roles are closely tied to the behaviours and expectations imposed on individuals based on biological sex. From the moment a child is born, families and society begin shaping them according to these norms. Boys are encouraged to be bold and assertive, while girls are expected to remain modest, quiet, and confined to domestic spaces. Kate Millett argues that the family is the primary institution where women's subordination is taught and reinforced. She asserts, "Patriarchy, replete with its male-dominated family, with its power structure that subordinates women, is the chief institution perpetuating the oppression of women" (*Sexual Politics* 3). Nisha experiences this discrimination early in life when she is forbidden from playing outside with her brothers. In many traditional families, girls are discouraged from spending time outdoors, especially before marriage, due to deep-rooted cultural beliefs that associate fair skin with beauty and higher social standing. This preference for lighter complexions, particularly in arranged marriages, leads families to fear that sun exposure might darken a girl's skin and reduce her chances of securing a favourable match.

Even as a child, Nisha resists these restrictions. She questions the logic behind rules that limit her freedom of movement. Manju Kapur strongly critiques such gender-based constraints through Nisha's experiences. A telling example appears in a conversation between Sona and Nisha. When Nisha repeatedly asks to go to the park, her mother responds curtly, "You can't." Nisha persists: "Why? Why can't I?" Sona replies, "It is better for girls to remain inside... You will get black and dirty... You want to look like a kali bhainsi?" (Home 51). She continues, "How can you be like me if you get dirty and black playing in the sun? Who will want to marry you?" (Home 52). Nisha refuses to accept these commands unquestioningly. When she finally ventures out to play with her cousin Vicky, she becomes a victim of sexual abuse—an experience that leaves her emotionally scarred, causing nightmares and distress. "Why did you let me sleep? I had bad dreams... But she could not say what they were" (Home 62). Unable to articulate her trauma, Nisha suffers silently. Her aunt Rupa senses that something in the household is troubling the child. Although Rupa and her husband, Prem Nath, attempt to raise concerns about Vicky with Nisha's father, the family dismisses the issue, insisting that Vicky is a cherished boy.

In many conservative families, sexual abuse by a relative is often denied or ignored due to fear, shame, and societal pressure. Acknowledging such abuse means confronting the painful reality that the perpetrator is someone within the family—someone whose exposure could shatter the family's honour and trust. As a result, families frequently prioritise their social image over the well-being of the child. To protect Nisha, she is eventually sent to live with Rupa, where she finds comfort and security. Her uncle, Prem Nath, supports her education, spending time teaching her and sharing stories. Historically, patriarchal norms granted women only limited access to literacy, and higher education remained largely out of reach. A daughter's education was often seen merely as a way to improve her marriage prospects rather than a path to independence or employment. This is evident in Sona's life: she abandons her studies when a marriage

proposal arrives from the Banwari Lal family, while her sister Rupa completes her Bachelor's degree without interruption.

The Banwari Lal family upholds the belief that a girl should derive fulfillment from her roles as mother, daughter, sister, and daughter-in-law, viewing the domestic sphere as the natural and rightful domain of women. Any aspiration that extends beyond household responsibilities is considered inappropriate, rendering a girl's education a secondary concern. Simone de Beauvoir, in her ground-breaking feminist text, asserts, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (*The Second Sex* 283). This statement encapsulates her argument that gender is not an inherent attribute but a socially constructed identity. Women, she argues, are fashioned into "the Other" within patriarchal structures, which have historically oppressed, objectified, and subordinated them. Although Nisha's education initially flourished under the care of her aunt, her uncle Premnath adopted a patriarchal approach when making decisions about her schooling, considering factors such as distance and gender. He believed that a girls' school would ensure a traditional upbringing by limiting interaction with boys. Once enrolled, Nisha excelled academically, demonstrating her intellectual promise. However, at sixteen, she was summoned home to care for her ailing grandmother. Upon her return, her mother, Sona, began instructing her in the duties expected of a future wife. For Sona, education held little value for a girl from a merchant family; marriage and motherhood were the ultimate goals. The traditional mother desires her daughter to mirror her own life, prioritizing domestic skills over academic achievement. Shocked by Nisha's lack of culinary ability, Sona asks, "How will you manage in your future home?" (*Home* 125). Nisha responds, "Masi said there is always time to learn cooking, but one time to study," defending both herself and her upbringing (*Home* 25).

Despite the challenges she faced at home, Nisha completed her Humanities board exams with a respectable seventy percent. During this period, her brother married, and the family began preparing for Nisha's marriage as well. Sona, aware that Nisha is a mangalik, worries about finding a suitable partner. She insists that Nisha observe fasts for her future husband, but Nisha—guided by modern sensibilities—rejects such customs and is unwilling to endure a day without food and water as her mother does. She feels pressured to observe Karva Chauth despite her reluctance. Sona struggles to understand her daughter and frequently obstructs her happiness, often more forcefully than the male members of the family. In frustration, she laments, "This girl will be our death... What face will I show upstairs?" (*Home* 198).

Nisha's worldview has been shaped by her Masi's progressive outlook. Her time with her uncle Prem Nath and her aunt Rupa—who runs a pickle business—deeply influences her. Nisha admires Rupa and aspires to emulate her independence. Rupa recognizes the transformative power of education and encourages Nisha to preserve her individuality.

Patriarchy's influence becomes even more pronounced when intertwined with caste. The intersection of gender and caste creates formidable barriers, particularly for women. In caste-bound societies, patriarchal norms impose strict limitations on women's choices, especially in matters of love and marriage, in order to preserve caste purity and family honour. Women are treated as custodians of community identity, resulting in severe restrictions on their autonomy. Determined to carve out a life different from her mother's, Nisha enrolls in Durga Bai College to pursue an English Honors degree. There, she develops feelings for Suresh Kumar, an engineering student. However, caste norms obstruct their relationship. When her family discovers the romance, they confine her to the house, deeming Suresh—who belongs to a lower caste—unfit for her. Nisha defends him, declaring, "Who cares about castes these days? What you really want is to sell me in the market" (*Home* 99). She suffers silently, unable to confide in her mother, and longs for Suresh to openly challenge societal expectations. Yet he remains passive, and Nisha struggles to suppress her emotions. Her family advises her that marriage will secure her future comfort, insisting, "Once you get married you can feel hot and cold as you like... Marriage into a family will enable you and your children to live comfortably for the rest of your life" (*Home* 200). Her misfortunes continue when her first marriage proposal collapses due to rumours about her past with Suresh. Sona bitterly reproaches her: "Are you satisfied, Madam? This is what your roaming around has done... Are you pleased with our humiliation?" (*Home* 221).

In traditional patriarchal societies, physical imperfections such as scars or rashes are often viewed as serious impediments to a girl's marriage prospects. A girl with visible marks is pitied and considered less desirable, diminishing her perceived worth. Families may face social scrutiny, and the girl may be pressured into

compromising matches—often with older, divorced, or socially disadvantaged men. Such marriages are treated as settlements rather than equal partnerships. Within the family, she may experience subtle neglect, as her imperfections are seen as tarnishing the family's honour. Nisha internalizes her guilt so deeply that it manifests physically as eczema, causing her skin to itch, inflame, and bleed. The family invests significant time and money in treatments—not to ease her suffering, but to restore her appearance and improve her marriage prospects. Ironically, the youngest daughter-in-law is accepted despite a prominent facial scar, not out of compassion, but because she brings a substantial dowry and influential connections beneficial to the family business. Feeling increasingly isolated, Nisha fears that loneliness may drive her to madness. She longs to work in the family shop alongside her brothers and pleads with her father, “If only you could take me with you, Papaji... I have seen girls working in shops. Why should it be Ajay, Vijay, and Raju? There must be something I too can do” (Home 267). Her plea reflects her deep desire for autonomy and self-worth. Although her father allows her to join a nearby play school, she soon becomes disillusioned and resigns. This episode reflects yet another example of a woman's subordination. Nisha is compelled to accept a profession she never chose, as working in a shop is deemed unsuitable for women. Challenging these social expectations, she establishes her own boutique—Nisha Creations—with her father's encouragement. For the first time, she feels genuine pride, sensing that her father places the same trust in her that he would in a son. She borrows money from him to start the business, vowing to repay every rupee. She hires a tailor on a monthly wage and procures materials for suits from her father's store. Nisha soon receives large orders and becomes a successful and well-known entrepreneur in the Karol Bagh market. Within a year, she repays half of her loan. She manages her workers diligently and, in her absence, arranges for her mother, Sona, to supervise them.

However, her marriage is arranged with Arvind, a widower, and she relinquishes her aspirations to uphold family traditions and fulfill her mother's expectations. Her sister-in-law, Pooja, assumes control of the boutique. Nisha's husband fails to understand her ambitions, reinforcing the idea that marriage restricts a woman's freedom. Within a month of their wedding, she becomes pregnant. Although she wishes to visit her shop during her pregnancy, both her husband and mother-in-law oppose her stepping out. Eventually, she gives birth to twins—a girl and a boy—thus fulfilling the familial expectations tied to her marriage.

Conclusion

Manju Kapur's *Home* exposes the oppressive nature of patriarchal structures. While the younger generation shows some inclination toward breaking free from restrictive customs, the deeply rooted values of the family continue to shape their lives. Nisha's entrepreneurial success demonstrates a momentary assertion of independence, yet her decision to marry reflects her submission to societal norms. The narrative highlights the persistent pressure on women to prioritize marriage, domestic responsibilities, and care-giving over personal aspirations. Nisha's choice to stay home during childbirth and hand over her business to her sister-in-law reveals that, although women may negotiate their roles within traditional frameworks, completely dismantling these expectations remains a distant goal. In nutshell, Manju Kapur's *Home* offers a nuanced critique of patriarchal domesticity while celebrating women's resilience. The novel demonstrates how domestic spaces are deeply entangled with socio-political structures, making its themes relevant beyond literary study.

Relevance of the Study

- Illuminates the intersection of gender and domesticity in Indian society.
- Contributes to feminist literary criticism and postcolonial discourse.
- Provides insights into cultural continuity and transformation, useful for sociology and gender studies.

Future Scope

- Comparative studies with Kapur's other novels (The Immigrant, Difficult Daughters) to trace evolving representations of women's agency.
- Interdisciplinary research linking literary analysis with sociological fieldwork on contemporary Indian households.
- Global comparisons with diasporic literature to understand domesticity across cultural contexts.
- Policy-oriented discussions connecting literary insights to debates on women's rights, family law, and education in India.

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