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## **REIMAGINING WOMANHOOD: THE FEMINIST NARRATIVES AND THE SUBVERSION OF TRADITIONAL NORMS IN MANJU KAPUR'S SELECT NOVELS**

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### **Abstract**

India has a rich literary history to have so many women writers such as Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Anita Desai, Gita Mehta, Kamala Das, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Anuradha Roy, Shashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan and many more who has left an enduring imprint on the diverse landscape of Indian literature. Manju Kapur is also one of such pioneering women writers. Born on May 27, 1948, she is an accomplished Indian novelist celebrated for her insightful exploration of the intricacies of contemporary Indian society. Raised in Amritsar, Punjab, Kapur's early life was marked by a passion for literature. She pursued her education at Delhi University, where she completed her Master's in English Literature. Her academic journey laid the foundation for her future literary endeavours. Kapur's literary career took off with the publication of her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998). Her subsequent works, including *A Married Woman*, *Home* and *The Immigrant*, further solidified her reputation as a perceptive chronicler of societal dynamics. Manju Kapur's contributions to literature have been recognised with numerous awards and accolades. *Difficult Daughters* won the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Eurasia region in 1999. Her works continue to be widely studied and appreciated for their literary merit and cultural significance. Beyond her writing, Manju Kapur has also been involved in academia, teaching literature at various educational institutions. Her life and works collectively reflect a profound commitment to exploring the complexities of human relationships against the backdrop of a changing India. The present paper is an attempt to analyse the three novels *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman* and *Home* from feminist perspectives.

### **Keywords**

Manju Kapur, Indian Writing in English, Womanhood, Feminism, Subversion, Traditional Norms, Gender Discrimination, Patriarchy, Marginalisation.

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## **REIMAGINING WOMANHOOD: THE FEMINIST NARRATIVES AND THE SUBVERSION OF TRADITIONAL NORMS IN MANJU KAPUR'S SELECT NOVELS** **PIYUSH KAIN**

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Manju Kapur gained widespread recognition with her debut novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998). The novel, set against the backdrop of the partition of India in 1947, tells the story of a young woman, Virmati, who falls in love with a professor, but societal norms and family expectations threaten to tear them apart. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* deals with the complex web of gender issues and presents a poignant feminist perspective against the backdrop of post-partition India. The novel paints a vivid picture of a society in transition, where age-old traditions clash with the burgeoning aspirations of women. Through the experiences of the protagonist, Virmati, and the women around her, Kapur skilfully navigates the intricacies of gender dynamics, shedding light on the struggles, aspirations, and societal expectations that shape their lives. At the heart of the novel lies the clash between tradition and modernity, a theme intricately tied to gender roles. Virmati's character embodies the evolving role of women in a rapidly changing society. Despite being constrained by the conservative values of her family, Virmati possesses a fervent desire for education and personal fulfilment. Her quest for knowledge is a testament to the latent potential that lies within women, struggling against the confines of societal norms. S. Sujitha and Dr S. Florence

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* is a woman activist's talk not on the grounds that she is a lady expounding on women's issues. But since she tries to comprehend a lady both as a lady and as an individual pressurised by obvious and imperceptible contexts. She displays a look at women's liberation remembering the Indian setting. Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* figures out how to be at the same time both Indian and Universal. (181)

Virmati's relationship with Professor Harish is a central focal point that challenges the established norms of a woman's place in society. It highlights the inherent power imbalances between men and women, particularly in matters of love and desire. The clandestine nature of their affair underscores the secrecy and shame associated with women expressing their desires openly. Kapur paints a vivid portrait of a society that is quick to condemn and suppress female agency, especially when it threatens to defy established norms.

The juxtaposition of Virmati's mother, Shanta, further illuminates the generational shift in women's roles. Shanta represents the archetype of the dutiful wife and mother, who has internalised the societal expectations placed upon her. Her life is defined by self-sacrifice and submission to the demands of her family. Through Shanta's character, Kapur highlights the profound impact of societal conditioning on women's self-perception and aspirations. Manju Kapur also explores the theme of motherhood as a defining aspect of a woman's identity. Virmati's experiences as a mother reflect the challenges and complexities that arise from societal expectations surrounding motherhood. The novel portrays the tension between Virmati's desire for personal fulfilment and her role as a mother, exemplifying the difficult choices that women often face.

Furthermore, the novel delves into the intricate web of familial relationships, particularly the mother-daughter dynamic. Virmati's relationship with her mother and daughter serves as a microcosm of the larger societal shifts occurring around them. It underscores the evolving expectations and aspirations of women across generations, as well as the enduring threads of tradition that bind them together. Throughout *Difficult Daughters*, Manju Kapur employs a feminist lens to illuminate the multifaceted challenges faced by women in a patriarchal society. Her characters navigate a world that is resistant to change, yet pulsating with the potential for transformation. Through Virmati and the women in her orbit, Kapur challenges societal norms and advocates for the recognition of women's agency and autonomy. The novel stands as a powerful testament to the resilience, strength, and untapped potential of women, even in the face of formidable societal barriers.

Virmati, the protagonist of the novel, is the eldest daughter of a family burdened with numerous responsibilities towards her younger siblings. While her mother, Kasthuri, is occupied with giving birth year after year, it falls upon Virmati to take charge of the family, assuming a maternal role for her younger brothers and sisters. In the midst of this, Virmati finds herself engulfed in familial duties, leaving little room for self-discovery or personal pursuits. Her days are consumed by caring for her family, postponing the traditional expectation of marriage, as she lacks any inclination towards it. Despite her mother's insistence on marriage, Virmati's true passion lies in education, particularly her fervent desire to complete her studies in Fine Arts. Moreover, she yearns for independence – to have her own space, her own freedom, and her own identity.

Shakuntala, Virmati's cousin, stands as a beacon of modernity and a source of inspiration for her. Kapur portrays Shakuntala as a self-assured, independent individual who rejects societal norms regarding marriage and family relations. This sentiment is echoed in Shakuntala's words: "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" (17).

Encouraged by Shakuntala's example, Virmati embraces the fight for freedom and equal rights for women within the patriarchal society. Unfortunately, due to her familial responsibilities, Virmati's academic pursuits suffer, prompting her mother to insist on her marriage. Meanwhile, Virmati becomes entangled in a scandalous affair with Harish, a married neighbor and professor. Guilt weighs heavily on her as she navigates this illicit relationship. Consequently, Virmati begins to see marriage as a societal imperative for a sense of belonging and security. Officially recognised marriage, a public acknowledgment, becomes a crucial step towards establishing her identity and finding stability.

However, the reality of her marriage proves to be far from the solace Virmati had hoped for. While Harish shows concern for her, her new family does not extend the same courtesy. Despite years of hardship and sacrifice for her family, Virmati anticipates warmth and acceptance in her new familial ties. Regrettably, she is met with resistance from Harish's first wife, who restricts her interactions with the family and even denies her access to the kitchen. Virmati struggles to carve out a space for herself within the household, and even faces blame from her mother, Kasthuri, for the ensuing difficulties.

As Virmati reflects on her family's fractured bonds, she experiences profound heartbreak. She grapples with societal perceptions of women, especially those who enter into second marriages. When her family disallows her attendance at her father's funeral, while welcoming her husband with open arms, Virmati acknowledges her error in judgment. She realises that despite her relentless pursuit of freedom and equality, Indian society still grapples with the pervasive influence of patriarchy. The narrative takes a turn when Virmati gives birth to a daughter, whom she names Bharati as a symbol of independence. However, her husband vehemently rejects this choice, stating, "I don't wish our daughter to be tainted with the birth of our country. What birth is this? With so much hatred?" (276). This poignant moment highlights the dissonance between the nation's hard-won independence and the continued struggle for autonomy within Virmati's own household. While India celebrates its freedom from British rule, Virmati fights an uphill battle for her own identity and affirmation within her marriage.

Manju Kapur consistently portrays two archetypes of women: those existing in domestic situations and those in external environments. The inference drawn is that women navigate a delicate balance between work and life. A Married Woman emerges as unconventional, yet aligning with textual cultural trends. The protagonist, Astha, dwells in both conventional and contemporary societal contexts. Rooted in deep-seated customs, traditional systems, Indianness, and equality, she embodies a complex duality. Manju Kapur writes how the girls are marginalised in the society and they are considered a burden:

The girl is blossoming now. When the fruit is ripe it must be picked. Later she might get into the wrong company and we will be left wringing our hands, if she marries at this age, she will have no problem adjusting. We too are not so young that we can afford to wait. (20)

Astha, a married woman, is depicted as an idol of sacrifice and adjustment, endearing her to her family but diminishing her own status. Raised in a conventional environment, she blossoms into womanhood. However, societal attitudes persist, emphasizing the urgency of her marriage and the need to avoid potential negative influences. The narrative captures the societal mindset concerning girls, prioritizing marriage over career development. Astha's journey unfolds from a conventional upbringing to marriage, reflecting societal norms that often overshadow personal aspirations. Her union with Rohan brings forth not only love but also physical needs. Although educated, Astha struggles to assert her decisions, continually seeking support.

Kapur's skilful portrayal of Astha, an exhausted woman navigating societal expectations, elevates her among great writers. Astha, influenced by her mother, grapples with discriminatory customs, laden with duties but lacking respect for her ideas. R. Dinesh and Dr K. Shibila write about this novel:

In her novel, *Home* she explores how the women struggle for their identity. She shows how her female characters are suffering. Through the character of Nisha, she explores



the manner in which Indian girls are moulded to suit the needs of a patriarchal society. It shows the protagonist Nisha's domestic disharmony and her struggle to survive in her own family. (263)

Astha's husband, Hemant, typifies the conventional husband, expecting her to entertain him after a day's work. Hemant uses Astha at night only for his entertainment, and Astha also tries to please her husband. Astha's dreams of an ideal husband are badly shattered. The narrative explores the clash between Astha's dreams and the harsh reality of societal expectations. On the other side, Hemant knew the reality, "I had responsibilities to my parents. I am the only son, and I wanted someone who would fit in with our family life. American women are too demanding. Their men have catered to all their whims and fancies" (40). Hemant, conforming to traditional views, views Astha as an ideal partner due to her willingness to fulfill familial duties. Her mother's aspirations for a male heir further reinforce stereotypical gender roles. Her Husband says to her, "You seem to forget that your place as a decent family woman is in the home, and not on the streets" (172).

Astha's mother-in-law mirrors societal expectations, conducting rituals to ensure a male heir during Astha's second pregnancy. Astha grapples with societal norms, realizing that fulfilling familial responsibilities erodes her identity. Her husband treats her as a commodity, seeking solace in other relationships, leaving Astha emotionally shattered. As Astha seeks recognition and liberation, Hemant dismisses her aspirations, confining her to conventional family roles. His neglect and insults prompt Astha to explore avenues for personal growth. A visit to Ayodhya becomes a catalyst for her emancipation, connecting her with Pipeelika, a liberated soul, a Brahmin widowed girl, who challenges societal norms.

Pipeelika's education at Shiksha Kendra, emphasizing harmony with nature and the holistic development of body and mind, contrasts with societal expectations, "It is considered as a school which emphasised harmony with nature, respect for every form of life, and the all-round development of body and mind" (119). Astha's encounter with Pipeelika signifies her journey toward self-discovery and liberation.

Pipeelika, a career-oriented woman affiliated with the NGO Ujala, crosses paths with Astha, a homemaker longing for companionship. Their bond is cut short as Pipeelika pursues a Ph.D. in the USA after her husband's death. Astha, prioritizing family, stays behind. The narrative unfolds Astha's growth into a mature, stronger woman, accepting her life's challenges. Kapur's portrayal of Astha reflects emotional coherence and exposes feminist themes, depicting a woman finding her voice within domestic confines.

Manju Kapur's novel *Home* (2006) narrates many themes related to women. There are three or four main female characters in this novel. Rupa, the younger sister, is portrayed in contrast to Sona, with a darker complexion and a plain appearance. Married to a junior government officer, Premnath Agarwal, Rupa represents a divergent path for women, not facing the same traditional pressures as Sona. Her character signifies a more modern, independent outlook, providing crucial support to her sister Nisha during challenging times. Rupa's role underscores the evolving roles of women in contemporary Indian society, emphasizing education, careers, and the freedom to make life choices.

Sona grapples with numerous challenges in her married life, enduring torment from her mother-in-law despite being part of an affluent family. Adopting a devout lifestyle, Sona reflects on her circumstances, pondering if past karma or deficient prayers contribute to her suffering. Her struggles for identity intensify due to societal expectations, particularly around motherhood. Sona prays fervently for a child, expressing her desperation and indifference to

the child's gender. She copes with societal pressure, where infertility becomes a stigma, often leading to blame on the bride's family.

Nisha Sharma, another prominent character in Manju Kapur's *Home*, is intricately developed, navigating a complex journey to find her place in the world. She confronts gender discrimination within her own family, experiencing distress when her mother makes hurtful comments.

Nisha set a wail 'I want to go too'.

'You can't,' said her mother shortly.

'Why? Why can't I?'

'It is better for girls to remain inside.'

'Why?'

'You will get black and dirty...Don't go out in the sun you will get even darker.' (51).

Nisha grapples with a profound sense of displacement in both her natal and marital homes, struggling to reconcile her identity as a modern Indian woman. Born and raised in Lahore, India, the Partition forces her family's migration to Delhi, leaving Nisha feeling like she belongs nowhere. An incident of sexual abuse by Sunitha's son Vicky exacerbates her trauma, leading to depression and sleepless nights. Sent to Rupa's family, Nisha finds comfort, education, and inspiration. However, societal norms deprive her of education, sinking her into depression. On Rupa's insistence, she pursues a B.A. Hons in English Literature, encountering love with Suresh, a student from Khalsa Engineering College. This love challenges familial norms and class distinctions.

Nisha's resistance to moral compromises showcases her intelligence and prudence. However, societal disapproval forces her to abandon her love, causing emotional distress. Shattered, she succumbs to family pressure, agreeing to an arranged marriage that further isolates her. Struggling with eczema, her body becomes unattractive, intensifying her disconnection from the family. Nisha sinks into depression because she starts thinking herself as a caged-bird. Her mother says:

This girl will be our death. My child, born after ten years, tortures me like this. Thank god your grandfather is not live. What face will I show upstairs? Vijay gets his wife from Fancy Furnishing while my daughter goes to the street for hers. (198)

Despite being a graduate, Nisha faces obstacles in securing employment after marriage. Trapped in domestic responsibilities, she longs for financial independence and individual identity. Her plea to work in the family shop reflects her desire to prove her capabilities. Despite her multifaceted struggles, Nisha embodies resilience and determination, inspiring readers to pursue their true paths. Shagufta Parween writes about this novel:

*Home*, thus, invites a critical rethinking about the nature and existence of home. The lived reality of the characters cracks the myth of home being a safe site for living in every circumstance, by all its denizens, and at all times. The sanctity of home, the novel further elucidates is contaminated by the very inmates who are supposed to guard and protect it. (145)

In Manju Kapur's novels *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, and *Home*, she intricately weaves narratives that traverse the intricate landscapes of women's lives in India. Kapur masterfully captures the essence of societal expectations, cultural norms, and the internal struggles of her female protagonists. Through the characters of Astha, Virmati, and Nisha, Kapur offers readers a profound exploration of the challenges and triumphs experienced by women in different periods of Indian history. Each novel stands as a testament to Kapur's

ability to delve into the complexities of female characters, providing a rich tapestry of stories that resonate with the diverse and evolving roles of women in Indian society. Kapur's work serves not only as literature but as a mirror reflecting the multifaceted nature of women's experiences, making her novels enduring contributions to the literary exploration of gender, tradition, and individuality in the Indian context. R. Subathra and Dr. D. Dhanalakshmi write about Manju Kapur's women characters:

It is Kapur who depicts women of a home not merely as unspeaking dolls, but as the industrious ones who never feeble to work from dawn to dusk. Moreover, they are so intact in keeping the secrecy of the family which is the thing that lies at the heart of every family. Home opens doors for any who desires to gain insight into Indian culture. (567)

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