



Women Resistance Against Patriarchal Dominance In Manju Kapur's Novels

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Abstract: Women's resistance against patriarchal dominance is a central concern in Manju Kapur's novels, where female characters navigate the complexities of societal expectations, familial obligations, and individual desires. This paper examines how Kapur portrays women's struggles for agency, autonomy, and self-empowerment in the face of entrenched patriarchal structures. Focusing on novels such as *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2002), *The Immigrant* (2008), and *Custody* (2011), the study explores the ways in which Kapur's female protagonists challenge the oppressive systems of traditional gender roles, marriage, and societal norms. Through a close reading of key texts, this abstract outlines how Kapur's characters assert their voices and resist subjugation, whether through overt acts of defiance or subtle acts of rebellion. The paper argues that while these women's resistance may be fraught with limitations, it is nonetheless a powerful response to patriarchal control, highlighting the ongoing negotiation between personal freedom and cultural expectations. By depicting both the internal and external struggles faced by women, Kapur contributes to the broader discourse on gender, power, and resistance in contemporary South Asian literature.

Key Words: resistance, patriarchal dominance, societal expectations, familial obligations, struggles.

I. Introduction

Patriarchal dominance refers to a societal structure where men hold primary power and authority, leading to the subordination of women. This concept is deeply embedded in various cultural, social, and literary contexts, reflecting historical inequalities and rigid gender roles. The exploration of patriarchal dominance reveals its implications on women's autonomy and societal roles, as well as the ongoing struggle against these entrenched norms.

"Patriarchal dominance has been a recurring theme in literature, illustrating the societal norms that favor men over women. For instance, Shakespeare's works often depict gender roles that reinforce male authority" (Hiwarkhedka, 2024). "The historical preference for male children and the relegation of women to domestic roles exemplify the systemic nature of patriarchy. In modern society, patriarchal structures continue to manifest through economic, political, and social discrimination against women, such as unequal educational opportunities and domestic violence" (Ade, 2021). "Literature, including plays like Tendulkar's "Silence! The Court Is In the Session," critiques these power dynamics and highlights women's resistance to patriarchal oppression" (Pramanick, 2014).

"While patriarchal dominance is prevalent, some argue against the notion of universal male dominance, citing examples of societies where women hold significant power, challenging the idea that patriarchy is an absolute norm" (Edwards & Kluck, 1980). This perspective encourages a nuanced understanding of gender dynamics across different cultures. Manju Kapur's work, particularly in "Difficult Daughters," vividly illustrates the profound effects of patriarchal society on women's lives, showcasing their struggles for identity and autonomy. Through the experiences of her characters, Kapur critiques the societal norms that confine women to traditional roles, emphasizing their quest for personal fulfillment amidst oppressive structures.

Themes of Patriarchy in Manju Kapur's Work:

Marriage and Women's Roles: In many of her novels, marriage is presented as a tool for perpetuating patriarchal norms, where women are often expected to sacrifice their desires, independence, and well-being for the sake of familial duty and societal approval.



Sexuality and Desire: Kapur's exploration of female sexuality is also deeply intertwined with the notion of patriarchy. In novels like *A Married Woman*, female characters' desires and sexual autonomy are restricted by societal expectations and traditional views on femininity.

Education and Economic Independence: Several of Kapur's protagonists challenge patriarchal norms by seeking education and financial independence. This is evident in *Difficult Daughters*, where Virmati's desire to educate herself is seen as an act of rebellion.

Women's Emotional Lives: Kapur often portrays women's emotional struggles in relation to patriarchal domination, whether through the emotional sacrifices they make in marriage or the isolation they experience in their personal lives.

Struggles against Patriarchy

Virmati's internal conflict is a clear reflection of patriarchal constraints. Her mother and society expect her to prioritize family responsibilities over personal ambition. She battles against the notion of *women's place* being solely in the home and challenges the idea of women as submissive beings. Virmati's decisions to pursue love and education are acts of defiance against the traditional roles prescribed to women. However, the novel also shows the emotional toll of these decisions as Virmati is caught between personal freedom and family loyalty (*Difficult Daughters* 1998).

Character Conflicts: Virmati, the protagonist, grapples with societal expectations and her desire for love, ultimately becoming a second wife, which highlights the humiliation women endure in patriarchal setups (Mohan et al., 2024).

Rebellion and Identity: The narrative explores women's rebellion against traditional norms, as characters seek to assert their identities in a male-dominated society, often facing significant resistance (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023) (Pandey & Kaur, 2023).

Astha's journey is marked by her rebellion against the institution of marriage, which is deeply embedded in patriarchal control. Her husband's expectations of her as a dutiful wife clash with her desires for independence and self-expression. Astha's relationship with a woman symbolizes a break from conventional gender roles and an assertion of her right to define her own identity outside of her husband's control. The novel critiques the oppressive nature of patriarchal structures that dictate women's roles in marriage and society (*A Married Woman*, 2002).

The women in "Home" are all shaped by patriarchal expectations but respond to them in varying ways. The novel delves into the domestic and personal lives of women and the limits they face in their pursuit of autonomy and self-fulfillment. The younger generation of women, like Sona, attempts to challenge traditional gender roles, but even their defiance is constrained by the unyielding structures of family and society. This reflects how patriarchy is often entrenched in familial and domestic setups, limiting women's agency (Home, 2006).

Nisha's experiences as an immigrant expose the clash between her traditional upbringing and the opportunities available in a more liberal society. Patriarchal expectations from her family (especially regarding marriage and behavior) follow her across continents, illustrating how deeply ingrained these norms are. The novel deals with themes of identity, freedom, and the tension between modernity and tradition, with Nisha fighting for her agency in a world where patriarchal dictates often limit her choices (*The Immigrant*, 2008).

Shagun's struggle against patriarchy in *Custody* is evident through her navigation of post-divorce life. As a woman, she faces immense societal pressure and judgment, especially in relation to her children, her sexuality, and her decision to separate from her husband. The novel critiques the harsh double standards women face in a patriarchal society, where men are often forgiven or even celebrated for behaviors women are condemned for. Shagun's fight for custody of her children and her right to live independently is emblematic of the larger struggle for women's rights within the family and society (*Custody*, 2011).

Societal Expectations and Limitations

Cultural Constraints: Kapur's characters are often depicted as silent sufferers, upholding family traditions while yearning for independence, reflecting the broader societal pressures on women (Subitha, 2023).

Negotiation of Roles: The protagonists navigate complex relationships, balancing personal aspirations with societal expectations, illustrating the dualities of conformity and individuality (Pandey & Kaur, 2023).

While Kapur's narratives highlight the oppressive nature of patriarchy, they also suggest a gradual shift towards female empowerment, indicating that despite the challenges, women are beginning to carve out their own identities and spaces within society. Manju Kapur employs



various narrative techniques in her novels to critique patriarchal dominance, particularly through character development, thematic exploration, and socio-cultural critique. Her works, especially "Difficult Daughters" and "Home," illustrate the struggles of women against oppressive societal norms, highlighting their quest for identity and autonomy.

Character Development

Kapur's protagonists, such as Virmati and Nisha, are intricately crafted to reflect the complexities of female identity within patriarchal confines. Virmati's relationship with Professor Harish Chandra exemplifies the conflict between personal desire and societal expectations, showcasing the emotional turmoil women endure (Mohan et.al., 2024)(Nitu, 2018). Nisha's journey in "Home" emphasizes her rebellion against traditional roles, portraying her struggle for self-identity and independence). (Kalia, 2018). Kapur uses symbolism to deepen the portrayal of her characters. In "**A Married Woman**", the relationship between Astha and her lover, a woman named Peeplika, symbolizes freedom and personal expression. As Astha breaks free from the constraints of her marriage, her character becomes a representation of the possibilities available to women seeking to assert their autonomy in a repressive society. Similarly, the immigrant experience in "**The Immigrant**" is not only a literal journey but a metaphor for Nina's inner transformation. Her sense of alienation in the new country mirrors her quest for self-identity and belonging. Manju Kapur's characters are frequently shaped by their family environments and the larger social milieu in which they live. The familial setting is crucial to understanding their growth and struggles. In "**Difficult Daughters**", for example, the protagonist, Virmati, navigates the tension between her traditional family values and her desire for intellectual freedom. This conflict is a central element of her character development.

Similarly, in "**A Married Woman**", the protagonist, Astha, faces the complexities of marriage, sexuality, and self-expression within a deeply patriarchal society. Her journey from a conventional wife to a woman who embraces her individuality reflects the tension between personal freedom and social norms. Kapur's characters often undergo significant psychological development, and this evolution is a central theme in her works. For instance, in "**The Immigrant**", the protagonist, Nina, grapples with the challenges of identity and self-worth as she navigates life as an immigrant in

Canada. The sense of alienation and the struggle to maintain cultural roots while adjusting to a new country force Nina to reassess her beliefs, values, and relationships, highlighting her psychological growth. In "**Custody**", the protagonists, Kapil and Shalini, undergo deep emotional changes due to their crumbling marriage, and the children also experience transformations. Kapur presents how personal loss and trauma can lead to introspection and emotional maturity, particularly in the context of a fragmented family unit.

Kapur's characters are often women who feel confined by the expectations placed upon them by their families and society. However, they also show agency and resistance as they navigate through these constraints. For instance, **Virmati** in "**Difficult Daughters**" breaks traditional norms by pursuing an affair with her professor and later divorcing her husband, a bold decision for a woman in post-independence India. Her choices reflect a desire for intellectual and emotional freedom, and her development throughout the novel is a process of breaking free from the constraints of gender roles.

In "**A Married Woman**", Astha's development as a character is marked by her quest for sexual and emotional freedom. She initially lives a life defined by the roles of wife and mother but gradually comes to embrace a relationship with another woman, symbolizing a defiance of conventional gender expectations. Many of Kapur's characters experience inner turmoil or external conflict that forces them to reevaluate their lives. In "**Custody**", the breakdown of a marriage and the ensuing battle over the custody of the children causes characters to reconsider their priorities, values, and responsibilities. The internal conflict, as well as the resolution (or lack thereof), becomes a means for characters to confront their weaknesses and strengths, thus contributing to their growth. Conflict is also central to the development of "**Nina**" in "**The Immigrant**", where she contends with the challenge of building a new identity in a foreign land. Her character arc involves reconciling her past and present, as well as defining her place in a multicultural environment.

Many of Kapur's characters are morally complex, which makes their development all the more compelling. For example, **Virmati**, despite her apparent rebellion against social conventions, is also portrayed as someone who is torn by guilt and self-doubt. This moral ambiguity adds depth to her character and allows the reader to sympathize with her even as she makes difficult, sometimes controversial, choices.



In "Custody", the characters' moral dilemmas are a key focus, especially as they deal with betrayal, love, and the impact of their decisions on their children. This creates a multi-layered narrative where the characters' growth is not linear, and they often evolve in unexpected ways, leaving the reader to reflect on the complexity of human behavior.

Socio-cultural Critique

Kapur's narratives serve as a reflection of the broader societal norms that perpetuate gender inequality, advocating for women's empowerment and autonomy (Mohan et. al., 2024) (Nitu, 2018). By presenting the trials of her characters, she invites readers to question and challenge entrenched patriarchal structures. While Kapur's narratives powerfully critique patriarchal dominance, some may argue that her focus on individual struggles can inadvertently reinforce the notion that personal agency is the sole solution to systemic oppression, potentially overshadowing the need for collective societal change.

Manju Kapur's female characters in her novel "Difficult Daughters" exhibit a complex interplay of resistance and conformity to patriarchal norms. Through their narratives, Kapur explores the struggles women face in a male-dominated society, highlighting both their vulnerabilities and their agency. The following sections detail how these characters navigate societal expectations.

Conformity to Patriarchal Norms

Marriage and Sacrifice: Virmati, the protagonist, conforms to societal expectations by marrying Professor Harish Chandra, despite the humiliation it brings her. This reflects the pressure women face to adhere to traditional roles (Mohan et. al., 2024). **Social Expectations:** Characters often internalize societal norms, leading to a sense of duty that prioritizes family over personal aspirations (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023). **Cultural Pressures:** Despite their resistance, many characters succumb to societal pressures, often prioritizing familial obligations over personal desires (Sanap, 2024)(Brahmbhatt, 2023). **Internalized Norms:** The characters frequently navigate their identities within the confines of patriarchal expectations, reflecting the complexities of their situations (Pandey & Kaur, 2023).

Cultural Constraints: Despite their struggles, many characters remain bound by traditional roles, illustrating the pervasive nature of patriarchal norms (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023). **Internalized Expectations:** Some female characters exhibit compliance with societal expectations,

reflecting the deep-rooted nature of gender roles in Indian culture (Mahalakshmmma, 2015). While Kapur's female characters often resist patriarchal constraints, their journeys also highlight the enduring influence of traditional gender roles, suggesting a complex interplay between rebellion and conformity in their lives. Manju Kapur's female characters in "Difficult Daughters" significantly challenge traditional gender roles within Indian society by navigating and resisting patriarchal constraints. Through their struggles, Kapur illustrates the complexities of female identity and the quest for autonomy, ultimately advocating for women's empowerment.

While Kapur's narratives illuminate the struggles against patriarchal constraints, they also reveal the pervasive influence of societal norms that can limit women's autonomy, suggesting a nuanced portrayal of female identity in contemporary literature.

Resistance against Patriarchal Structures

Quest for Identity: Virmati's journey illustrates a struggle for self-identity amidst societal constraints, showcasing her desire to assert her individuality (Pandey & Kaur, 2023). **Challenging Norms:** Kapur's characters often confront male dominance, voicing their dissent against traditional roles and seeking autonomy, which signifies a form of resistance (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023) (Brahmbhatt, 2023). While Kapur's characters often grapple with patriarchal constraints, their journeys also reflect a growing awareness and challenge to these norms, suggesting a nuanced portrayal of women's experiences in a patriarchal society. This duality emphasizes the ongoing struggle for women's empowerment and identity in contemporary discourse.

In Manju Kapur's fictions, female characters play a crucial role in both subverting and reinforcing patriarchal structures. Through their journeys, these characters navigate societal expectations while striving for personal autonomy, reflecting the complexities of gender roles in a male-dominated society. This duality is evident in their struggles against traditional norms and their quest for identity.

Resistance to Norms: Characters like Nisha in Home challenge the expectations of being mere wives and mothers, seeking individuality and self-identity (Kalia, 2018). **Assertion of Rights:** In Difficult Daughters, women confront male chauvinism, asserting their rights and desires against societal constraints (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023).

Complex Relationships: The protagonists negotiate familial and societal pressures, often pushing against



normative boundaries to carve out their own spaces (Pandey & Kaur, 2023)(Sanap, 2024). Kapur's protagonists actively resist male dominance, asserting their rights and challenging societal norms (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023). The portrayal of women as fighters against taboos and conventions emphasizes their agency and desire for self-determination (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023). Virmati, the protagonist, grapples with societal expectations while pursuing her education and love, ultimately becoming a second wife, which highlights the conflict between personal desires and societal norms (Mohan & -, 2024).

Context of Patriarchy (Difficult Daughters, 1998): The novel, set during the Partition of India, portrays the societal expectations placed on women to conform to traditional roles of obedience and domesticity.

Resistance: The protagonist, **Virmati**, resists her family's expectations by pursuing education and engaging in a relationship with a married professor. This challenges the cultural norms of chastity and arranged marriages. Her decision to study in Lahore and her struggle to assert her individuality showcase her fight against societal constraints, even though it leads to emotional turmoil.

Context of Patriarchy (*A Married Woman*, 2002): The novel delves into the life of **Astha**, a middle-class woman trapped in the roles of a dutiful wife and mother in a conservative society.

Resistance: Astha resists her unfulfilling marriage by engaging in an extramarital affair with a woman, **Peeplika**. This lesbian relationship is a profound act of rebellion against heteronormative and patriarchal expectations. Her participation in political activism also symbolizes her yearning for a voice and identity beyond the confines of her domestic life.

Context of Patriarchy (*Home*, 2006): The novel explores the rigid, patriarchal mindset of a traditional Indian joint family.

Resistance: The female characters, particularly **Nisha**, face oppression and discrimination, being expected to prioritize family honor over personal aspirations. Nisha defies these expectations by pursuing education, starting her own business, and ultimately deciding to marry for love, challenging societal norms that dictate a woman's worth lies in arranged marriages and childbearing.

Context of Patriarchy (*The Immigrant*, 2008): This novel examines the life of **Nina**, an Indian woman who marries and migrates to Canada, where she faces the double burden of patriarchy and cultural alienation.

Resistance: Nina's struggle to adapt to a new cultural environment becomes a metaphor for her

fight against traditional gender roles. Her decision to leave her unfaithful husband reflects her assertion of agency and refusal to tolerate subjugation.

Context of Patriarchy (*Custody*, 2011): This novel critiques the patriarchal legal and familial systems in the context of marital breakdown and child custody battles.

Resistance: The female characters, **Shagun** and **Ishita**, navigate the expectations imposed upon them. Shagun leaves her marriage to assert her independence, even though it leads to societal backlash. Ishita, a divorced woman, resists the stigma of infertility and rejection by pursuing a meaningful life, refusing to be defined by societal norms.

The narrative showcases women's vulnerability in abusive relationships, emphasizing the need for autonomy and self-determination (Mohan et.al., 2024) (Pandey & Kaur, 2023). The protagonist Virmati grapples with societal expectations while pursuing her education and love, ultimately challenging traditional marriage norms by becoming a second wife (43, Mohan et .al., 2024). Characters in "Difficult Daughters" seek personal fulfillment and identity, often pushing against the constraints imposed by family and society (Pandey & Kaur, 2023) (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023). Kapur's characters articulate their discontent with male dominance, striving to assert their rights and challenge conventional roles (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023).

Exploration of Identity

Characters like Virmati confront societal expectations, seeking personal fulfillment despite familial pressures (Mohan et.al, 2024)(Pandey & Kaur, 2023). The narrative highlights the duality of their existence, where they grapple with traditional roles while aspiring for independence (Pandey & Kaur, 2023). Kapur's characters negotiate their identities in a male-dominated world, often confronting ingrained gender norms while striving for personal fulfillment (Pandey & Kaur, 2023). The portrayal of women seeking their own space reflects a rebellion against traditional roles, as they assert their rights and challenge male dominance (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023).

Role in Nationalism

The characters also embody a broader narrative of women's involvement in nationalism, positioning them as equals to men and leaders in social movements. This representation not only critiques traditional gender roles but also redefines women's contributions to society and the nation



(Namchoom, 2023). Conversely, while Kapur's characters strive for autonomy, the societal structures they inhabit often impose significant limitations, reflecting the ongoing struggle for gender equality in contemporary India.

Manju Kapur's female characters in "Difficult Daughters" significantly challenge traditional gender roles within Indian society by navigating and resisting patriarchal constraints. Through their struggles, Kapur illustrates the complexities of female identity and the quest for autonomy, ultimately advocating for women's empowerment. The novel also positions women as active participants in the nationalist movement, thereby redefining their roles beyond domesticity and aligning them with broader societal contributions (Namchoom, 2023). While Kapur's characters embody resistance against patriarchal structures, it is essential to recognize that many women in contemporary Indian society still face significant challenges in asserting their identities and rights, indicating that the struggle for gender equality remains ongoing.

Manju Kapur's female characters in her novels, particularly in "Difficult Daughters," exhibit a complex interplay of resistance and conformity to patriarchal norms. Through their narratives, Kapur explores the struggles women face within a male-dominated society, highlighting both their vulnerabilities and their agency.

II. Conclusions

In conclusion, the exploration of women's resistance against patriarchal dominance in Manju Kapur's novels reveals a profound critique of societal structures and gender dynamics. Kapur's narratives consistently foreground the struggles of women who challenge and negotiate the oppressive forces of patriarchy, whether in the context of family, marriage, or broader societal expectations. Her protagonists, though often constrained by cultural norms, exhibit resilience through subtle forms of resistance—ranging from emotional rebellion to overt acts of defiance.

Through novels like *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, and *The Immigrant*, Kapur delves into the personal and political dimensions of female resistance. She highlights the complexities of these women's identities, revealing that their struggles are not merely against patriarchal systems but also against the limitations imposed by tradition, religion, and family loyalty. The nuanced portrayals of her characters suggest that resistance is not always about rebellion, but rather about reclaiming agency within a restrictive framework. Furthermore,

Kapur's works illustrate the intricate relationship between individual desires and collective societal norms, showing that the path to empowerment is often fraught with contradiction and compromise. While the women in her novels may not always achieve complete liberation, their efforts and acts of resistance signal a broader transformation of gender relations, where the very act of challenging patriarchy becomes a form of empowerment in itself.

In sum, Manju Kapur's portrayal of women's resistance underscores a critical examination of patriarchal power, while offering a hopeful perspective on the potential for change. Her novels serve as a reminder of the power of women's voices and their capacity to reshape their destinies, even in the face of overwhelming societal constraints.

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