



# POWER POLITICS IN MANJU KAPUR'S *HOME*

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## Abstract:

Women are being held back in almost every part of life, from gender inequality to discrimination at home. They are traditionally constrained to the home as daughters, wives, and mothers in most societies. They often find themselves second only to men in the hierarchy of patronage under a patriarchal structure. This under-representation is due to historical, cultural and economic factors which restrict women's access to education, financial independence and social mobility. The patriarchal system upholds the belief that women are naturally gifted in nurturing roles. Women, frequently, passively accept their subordinate status in patriarchal families due to social conditioning, cultural norms, and a fear of rejection. This acceptance is deeply rooted, because generations of women have been taught to put family honour and obedience above personal ambition.

In modern Indian literature, Manju Kapur's *Home* stands out for its perceptive examination of the roles that women play in conventional family and social structures. The story follows Nisha, a protagonist whose life represents the tensions that arise in a joint family structure and whose path embodies the larger conflict between traditional values and modernity. The novel's theme is woven from the strands of individual fulfillment, familial responsibilities, and personal autonomy in a world where traditional gender roles still influence day-to-day life. Manju Kapur has brought to light a number of social ills, such as discrimination based on caste, classism, superstitious beliefs, the prohibition of female education, child sex abuse, etc. I will pay, in the present research paper, particular attention to the difficulties that women encounter in a patriarchal society.

**Keywords:** Subjugation, social realism, mother-daughter relationship, social expectations

## Introduction:

Women are being held back in almost every part of life, from gender inequality to discrimination at home. They are traditionally constrained to the home as daughters, wives, and mothers in most societies. Women often find themselves second only to men in the hierarchy of patronage under a patriarchal structure. This under-representation is due to historical, cultural and economic factors which restrict women's access to education, financial independence and social mobility. The patriarchal system upholds the belief that women are naturally gifted in nurturing roles. Women frequently passively accept their subordinate status in patriarchal families due to social conditioning, cultural norms, and a fear of rejection. This acceptance is deeply

rooted, because generations of women have been taught to put family honour and obedience above personal ambition.

Feminism opposes this tacit acceptance by challenging patriarchal conventions, promoting gender equality, and increasing public knowledge of women's rights by bringing attention to problems that women encounter, like domestic abuse and illiteracy. Feminist movements enable women to stand up for themselves and question conventional norms. Feminism in India is a set of movements that aim to define, establish and defend equal political, economic and social rights and opportunities for women. India's feminist history can be divided into three phases: the first, beginning in the mid-19th century, when reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar began to speak up for women's rights by introducing reforms to education and customs such as widow remarriage, and the outlawing of Sati, that involved women. A second phase, between 1915 and independence, when Gandhi integrated women into the Quit India Movement and finally, the third phase, post-independence, which has focused on fair treatment of women at home after marriage as well as the work place, and their right to political parity.

Indian English fiction has been an essential medium for critiquing patriarchal systems in Indian culture. Authors like Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, and Nayantara Sehgal's writings prominently featured feminist themes. These writers depicted women's battles with social expectations, family dynamics, and traditional roles. Themes like individuality, sexual autonomy, girl child, education, and gender discrimination are all explored in depth by contemporary Indian English fiction writers like Manju Kapur, Shashi Deshpande, and Jhumpa Lahiri.

Manju Kapur has brought to light a number of social ills, such as discrimination based on caste, classism, superstitious beliefs, the prohibition of female education, child sex abuse, etc. In my paper I will pay particular attention to the difficulties that women encounter in a patriarchal society. I will highlight the ways in which family structures and cultural norms marginalize women and limit their sense of autonomy and value.

### **Objectives:**

1. To examine how social norms, familial expectations, and cultural traditions marginalize women in patriarchal system.
2. To analyse the ways in which female characters either defy or comply with patriarchal expectations and traditional gender roles.

### **Research Methodology**

Analytical and qualitative methods will be the mainstays of the research methodology to examine Manju Kapur's *Home*. Feminist literary theory will be the main framework to examine the subordination.

The story takes place in Delhi, where the Banwari Lal family, who arrived in India following the partition, establishes a cloth business in Karol Bagh with the aid of his wife's jewellery. Yashpal and Pyare Lal, Banwari Lal's sons, soon join the family business. Pyare Lal consents to an arranged marriage with Sushila while Yashpal develops an affinity towards the radiant Sona, a young woman hailing from a humble background. At the start of the novel, Sona was just seventeen when she first encountered Yashpal. She had travelled from Meerut with her mother and sister to attend her uncle's wedding. Sona's mother hoped that her daughters would look their best at the event, and the reasoning behind this common desire among mothers of young daughters in India is articulated by the author. 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 the conventionally business-oriented households, where marital unions are meticulously orchestrated with parental approval, the sudden emergence of this sentiment is met with consternation. Yashpal's mother lamented, labelling the girl as a harbinger of evil. "The bride had to bring dowry, come from the same background and understand the value of togetherness." (*Home*.4) However, the father knows how to keep the family together, so he approves of his son's marriage. Lala Banwari Lal, an ardent supporter of joint family structures, does not allow his younger daughter-in-law to cook on the upper floor, knowing that "Separate kitchens result in a sense of ownership, dissatisfaction, emotional division, and ultimately, a parting of ways." (*Home*.13) Within traditional

Indian joint families, the practice of maintaining separate kitchens is often discouraged, reflecting cultural principles that highlight the importance of family unity and shared duties.

The ancient Indian custom of providing a dowry at marriage is introduced here by Manju Kapur. Manju Kapur questions the dowry system in the Indian society, which forces women to lead miserable and suffocating life if they are unable to give dowry. Dowry reduces a woman to object of intrinsic value and perpetuates the notion that a woman's value is based on her financial contribution to a marriage. It frequently eclipses a woman's training, aptitude, accomplishments, or compassionate role in her in-law's household. Pyare Lal's marriage with a rich man's daughter Sushila fills Sona with a sense of inferiority when she thinks of her own marriage which was very poor in gifts. Banwari Lal's daughter Sunita is married to Murlu, an alcoholic and a man of irritable nature. She is killed at the age of 32 supposedly due to want of dowry. Her only son, Vicky is brought to Delhi to stay with the Banwari Lal. Vicky turns into a source of conflict. His grandfather, Banwari Lal, feels bad about what happened to Sunita and is therefore accountable for him, but his sons and their expanding families don't react as much to make room for Vicky. Sona is childless at the same time when Sunita dies, leaving Vicky behind. Although one would think Sona would be overjoyed, she treats the boy with contempt and finds it difficult to accept him when the elders force him upon her. It took Sona a long time to conceive. Sushila, Pyare Lal's wife at this point, is blessed with two sons, Ajay and Vijay. This further augments her restlessness and frustration. Here it is important to mention that Sona's younger sister, Rupa, who is married to Prem Nath too is a victim of thwarted maternal instinct but she takes it in a diametrically opposed attitude. Rupa does not lose her self-composure and gaiety of her spirits. Rupa instead concentrates on financial success in her pickle business. Rupa is described thus; "She had not suffered like her sister, nor had she fasted and done penance." (*Home.33*)

Sona feels terrible and believes that her past Karma may be to blame. A marriage without children is a major disappointment and eventually causes major problems. A wife's status in her husband's family is unstable and uncertain until she has a child. She can only feel safe after a male child is born. Sona tries to keep fast, but it doesn't help. Sona leads a depressing life because she has no one with whom to confide her problems. She is completely disregarded and her grievances are silenced. After learning of Sunita's passing, the family departs for Bareilly. Sona attempts to comfort her while her mother-in-law who is in mourning. "Sleep now, Maji, sleep, you'll make yourself sick if you cry like this, and it won't bring her back". "You believe it's possible?" the old woman spits out willfully. What can you possibly know about a mother's emotions? You don't have any children or sorrows; all you have is a husband who dances about you." (*Home.15*) Sona's infertility causes her to be ridiculed and denigrated by everyone. After a long wait of ten years, Sona has a daughter, Nisha. Nisha was the first granddaughter in the Banwari Lal family, and her arrival brought immense joy to her relatives, especially since she was born to her parents after a decade of marriage. The birth of Nisha brought an end to the harsh comments from her mother-in-law, the incessant fasting she had to endure, and the various religious practices intended to resolve her infertility. In her heartfelt prayers to Lord Krishna, she beseeches, "...please, I am growing older; bless us with a child, be it a girl or a boy, I do not care, but I cannot withstand the emptiness within me" (*Home.20*). As Beauvoir comments, "the situation of woman is that she – a free autonomous being like all creatures nevertheless finds herself in a world where men compel her to assume the status of the other." (*The Second Sex. 167*) The psychological impact of involuntary childlessness can lead to feelings of grief, loss, depression, anxiety, reduced self-esteem, a sense of failure, struggles with identity, relationship difficulties, and social isolation. Sona had finally achieved the primary role expected of her as a married woman—Motherhood. This role is often seen as one of the most meaningful, fulfilling, rewarding, and joyous experiences a woman can have. Although she did not give birth to a son, the family seems to be happy and satisfied. "It is wonderful to have a girl in the house." (*Home.36*) Nisha's remarkable beauty eases her parents' worries about her future. To comfort Sona's in-laws, her sister Rupa commented: "And now the womb has opened", continued Rupa, "a baby brother will come soon." (*Home.36*) Sona is convinced that her obligations will only be satisfied once she gives birth to a son. Soon Sona delivers a baby boy, Raju who is welcomed more than the first child. Her mother-in-law declared, "Now I can die in peace." (*Home.41*) The birth of an infant is celebrated with rites of welcome and blessing, typically much elaborate for a boy than for a girl.

Gender discrimination is the major problems of the Indian traditional systems. Gender is closely related to the roles and behaviour assigned to women and men based on their sexual differences. Families and society begin the process of gendering with the birth of a child. Boys are encouraged to be tough and outgoing but girls are encouraged to be homebound and shy. Kate Millet argues that the family is a fundamental institution where the subjugation of women is both taught and enforced. She writes, “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 is restricted from playing outside with her brothers due to gender discrimination within her family. In numerous traditional households, girls are frequently advised against playing outdoors in the sunlight, particularly prior to marriage. This is largely due to entrenched cultural and societal beliefs that equate fair skin with beauty and elevated social status. Such attitudes arise from a historical preference for lighter complexions in the realm of arranged marriages. Families often worry that sun exposure may darken a girl's skin, which could diminish her chances of securing a desirable match. Nisha does not take the restrictions placed upon her lightly, even from a young age. She challenges the reasoning behind limitations that infringe upon her fundamental right to move freely. Manju Kapur sharply critiques the gender discrimination faced by Nisha at various stages of her life. A notable example of this is illustrated in a dialogue between Sona and Nisha. When Nisha is repeatedly denied access to the park, her response is as follows, “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... You want to look like a kali bhainsi (*Home*.51). “Now how can you be like me if you get dirty and black playing in the sun?” continued the mother. “Who will want to marry you?” (*Home*.52) Nisha questions and refuses to blindly follow the commands of her mother. And when she does go out to play with her cousin Vicky, she is subjected to sexual abuse, which deeply affects her mental and emotional well-being, leading her to scream in her sleep. Why did you let me sleep? I had bad dreams...But she could not say what they were” (*Home*.62) Unable to confide in anyone, Nisha suffers in silence. Rupa, her aunt, believes that something in their home is disturbing Nisha's innocent mind. Rupa and her husband, Prem Nath, try to bring up the issue of Vicky with Nisha's father, but the family dismisses their concerns, saying that Vicky is a beloved child. Within many conservative families, there is a tendency to deny or fail to recognize instances of sexual abuse against a girl child by family members, because of fear, shame, and societal pressures. Accepting this reality involves confronting both the trauma and the uncomfortable truth that the abuser is someone intimately connected to the family, such as a father, brother, uncle, or cousin, which can undermine the essential trust and honour that bind the family together. Consequently, many families prioritize their social reputation over the welfare of the child. To resolve this troubling situation, Nisha is sent to stay with Rupa's family, where she feels at ease. Her uncle, Prem Nath, assists her with her studies and spends quality time sharing stories and teaching her.

Historically, patriarchy allowed women only limited access to literacy, while higher education remained largely inaccessible to them. The education of a daughter was often viewed as a means to enhance her prospects for marriage rather than as a pathway to employment. In this context, Sona withdrew from her education upon receiving a marriage proposal from the Banwari Lal family, whereas her sister Rupa completed her Bachelor's degree without interruption. The Banwari Lal family holds the belief that a girl should find fulfillment in her roles as a mother, daughter, sister, and daughter-in-law, viewing the home as a woman's primary sphere of influence. They consider aspirations beyond domestic life to be unnatural, and thus regard a girl's education as a secondary priority. Simone de Beauvoir in her ground breaking feminist work famously states, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman.” (*The Second Sex*.283) This phrase encapsulates her argument that gender is not an innate quality but a socially constructed identity. Women are constructed into “the Other” in a patriarchal society. She explores how women have historically been oppressed, objectified, and subordinated. Although Nisha's education initially progressed well at her aunt's residence, her uncle Premnath took a patriarchal stance when it came to her schooling, weighing various factors such as distance and gender. He believed that a girls' school would provide a traditional upbringing, minimizing exposure to boys. Once Nisha enrolled in school, she excelled in her studies, revealing her academic talent. However, at the age of sixteen, she was called back home to take care of her grandmother. Upon her return, her mother, Sona, began instructing her on how to be a good wife. Sona viewed education for a girl from a merchant family as unnecessary, believing her ultimate goal should be marriage and motherhood. The traditional mother desires her daughter to emulate her, prioritizing domestic skills over academic pursuits. Sona was taken aback to find that Nisha's cooking abilities were lacking. “How will you manage in your future home?” (*Home*.125). Nisha

quickly reacts, “Masi said there is always time to learn cooking, but one time to study. Nisha tried defending herself, her aunt, and her up-bringing” (*Home.25*). Despite facing numerous challenges at home, Nisha successfully completed her board exams in Humanities with a commendable score of seventy percent. During her academic journey, her brother got married, and now it is Nisha's turn to follow suit. Sona is aware that Nisha is a mangalik, making it difficult to find a suitable mangalik partner for her. Nisha's mother insists that she observe fasts for her future husband. However, Nisha, who holds modern views, does not subscribe to traditional customs and is unwilling to spend an entire day without food and water as her mother does. She feels compelled to observe Karva Chauth for her future spouse. Sona struggles to understand her daughter, Nisha, and often opposes her happiness and desires. This resistance is more pronounced from Nisha's mother than from the male family members. Sona says, “This girl will be our death. My child born after ten years, tortures me like this. Thanks God your grandfather is not alive. What face will I show upstairs?” (*Home.198*). Nisha has been shaped by her Masi's modern perspective on life. Her time spent with her uncle, Prem Nath, and aunt, Rupa, who runs a pickle business, has influenced her mindset. Nisha views her aunt as a role model and aspires to emulate her lifestyle. Rupa recognizes the significance of education in a person's life and strives to help Nisha maintain her individuality.

The influence of patriarchy on love within caste systems is significant, as it merges two oppressive social frameworks—gender and caste—resulting in considerable obstacles for individuals, especially women. In societies structured by caste, patriarchal values impose stringent restrictions on women's choices, including their partners, in order to maintain caste integrity and family honour. Women are often viewed as the guardians of community identity, leading to severe limitations on their freedom in matters of love and marriage. Nisha aspires to lead a life distinct from her mother. She looks up to her aunt. She enrolls in Durga Bai College to pursue an English Honors degree. During her time at college, she develops feelings for Suresh Kumar, an engineering student; however, societal norms and obstacles prevent their union. Upon discovering her romantic involvement, Nisha's family confines her to the house, as Suresh belongs to a lower caste and is deemed unworthy of marrying her. In response, Nisha stands up for Suresh and asserts, “Who cares about castes these days? What you really want is to sell me in the market.” (*Home.99*) Nisha endures her pain quietly. Unable to confide her personal struggles to her mother, she yearns for Suresh to openly express his unwavering love and challenge societal norms and authority. However, Suresh remains unresponsive. Despite her efforts to manage her grief, she cannot erase her feelings for him. The family advises her, “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*). Nisha's misfortune continues and the first proposal fails because of her past involvement with Suresh. The failure makes her mother grudge: “Are you satisfied Madam? She demanded. This is what your roaming around has done. This is the way people talk. Are you pleased with our humiliation?” (*Home.221*).

In traditional patriarchal societies, physical imperfections such as scars or rashes on a young girl's body are often perceived as flaws that can severely hinder her marriage prospects. A girl with noticeable marks frequently elicits pity and indifference from society, which views her as less desirable in the marriage market. This unjust perception diminishes her worth, and her family may endure societal pressure or stigma, leading others to question her suitability as a match. Consequently, the girl may find herself compelled to make significant compromises in her life, such as marrying someone significantly older, divorced, or in a less advantageous financial or social situation. Such unions are often regarded as settlements rather than partnerships of equals. Within her family, she may face marginalization or subtle neglect, as her perceived imperfections affect the family's honour and social standing. Nisha, burdened by a profound sense of guilt, manifests her inner turmoil through a skin condition known as eczema, which causes her skin to become itchy, inflamed, and prone to oozing and bleeding. Considerable time and money are invested in various treatments, not to alleviate Nisha's suffering, but to restore her beauty and enhance her chances of marriage. Interestingly, the youngest daughter-in-law of the household is accepted despite having an unsightly scar on her face, not out of generosity from Banwari Lal, but because she brings a substantial dowry and valuable connections that could expand the family business. Feeling isolated at home, Nisha grapples with her loneliness, fearing it may drive her to madness. She yearns to work in the family shop alongside her brothers. She implores her father, “If only you could take me with you Papaji,” she continues, “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*) This illustrates her deep-

seated desire for autonomy and self-identity. She views herself as equal to her brothers. At her request, her father permits her to enroll in a nearby play school. However, Nisha quickly becomes disillusioned with the children there and resigns from her position. This serves as another instance of a woman's subservience. Nisha is forced to conform to a profession that she did not choose for herself, as working in a shop is not regarded as a respectable occupation for women. Defying societal norms, Nisha, with her father's support, establishes her own business—a boutique called Nisha Creations. For the first time, she experiences a sense of pride, feeling that her father trusts her as he would do to his son. She borrows money from him to launch her venture, promising to repay every cent. She employs a tailor on a monthly salary and sources materials for suits from her father's shop. Nisha receives substantial orders and becomes a successful and recognized business woman in the Karol Bagh market. Within a year, she repays half of her loan to her father. She supervises her workers closely and, in her absence, arranges for her mother, Sona, to oversee them. Meanwhile, her marriage is arranged with Arvind, a widower. She sacrifices her ambitions for the sake of her family's traditions and her mother's wishes. Her sister-in-law, Pooja, takes over her business. Nisha's husband fails to comprehend her dreams and aspirations, leading to the conclusion that marriage confines a woman's freedom. Within a month of their marriage, she becomes pregnant. During her pregnancy, she wishes to visit her shop, but her mother-in-law and husband disapprove of her desire to go out during this time. Ultimately, Nisha gives birth to twins—a daughter and a son—fulfilling the expectations associated with her marriage.

### Conclusion

It can be concluded that Manju Kapur's *Home* highlights the repressive nature of patriarchy. The younger generation exhibits some potential to liberate themselves from restrictive traditions; however, the longstanding values of the family continue to exert a significant influence on their lives. For example, Nisha achieves a degree of independence by launching her own business, yet her eventual choice to marry indicates a concession to societal expectations. The narrative also underscores the deeply ingrained pressures on women to prioritize marriage, family, and care giving over their own ambitions. Nisha's decision to remain at home during her delivery and to transfer her business responsibilities to her sister-in-law illustrates that, although women may find ways to navigate their roles within traditional structures, the complete eradication of these roles remains an elusive objective.

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