



19-4 Oct - Dec 2025

Published on 14, Oct-Dec 2025

ISSN:2320-4842 (P) 3049-2688 (O)

Survival of Women in Patriarchal Society: A Reading on Manju Kapur's Novels

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Abstract

Women's opposition and survival in patriarchal society is the major themes in Manju Kapur's novels, as female characters traverse the complexity of cultural expectations, familial obligations, and personal needs. The present study investigates Kapur's portrayal of women's battles for agency, autonomy, and self-empowerment in the face of ingrained patriarchal norms. The study mainly focusses the novels as: *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *The Immigrant*, and *Custody* and examines how Kapur's female protagonists fight the restrictive social norms of traditional gender roles, marriage, and other social standards. Based on a close reading of important texts, the study explores how Kapur's characters assert their voices and fight subjugation, whether through overt or covert acts of revolt. The study contends that, while Kapur's women resistance has limitations, it is still a powerful response to patriarchal domination, showing the continual struggle between personal independence and cultural expectations. Kapur adds to the greater discussion of gender, power, and resistance in contemporary literature by presenting women's internal and external battles.

Keywords: survival, patriarchy, societal expectations, familial obligations, struggles.

Introduction

Patriarchy is a kind of cultural order in which men have primary power and authority, resulting in women's subjection. This concept is profoundly ingrained in a variety of cultural, social, and literary contexts, reflecting historical injustices and traditional gender norms. The study investigates into patriarchal supremacy and reveals its ramifications for women's autonomy and societal expectations, as well as the ongoing struggle against these established standards, "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). Similarly, it is commented as, "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).

"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 promotes a more sophisticated understanding of gender dynamics across cultures. Alike, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* graphically depicts the devastating impact of patriarchal society on women's life, highlighting their fights for identity and autonomy. Kapur criticises cultural conven-

tions that constrain women to traditional roles through her characters' experiences, emphasising their search for personal fulfilment in the face of oppressive frameworks. In many of Kapur's novels, marriage is shown as a vehicle for maintaining patriarchal norms, with women frequently required to sacrifice their goals, independence, and well-being in order to fulfil household obligations and gain society approval. On the other side, Kapur's investigation of female sexuality is inextricably linked with the concept of patriarchy. In novels such as *A Married Woman*, female characters' aspirations and sexual autonomy are limited by societal expectations and traditional conceptions of femininity.

Patriarchal Dominance

Several of Kapur's characters defy patriarchal expectations by pursuing education and financial freedom. This is obvious in *Difficult Daughters*, when Virmati's desire to educate herself is interpreted as a kind of disobedience. Kapur frequently depicts women's emotional challenges in relation to patriarchal dominance, whether through emotional sacrifices made in marriage or the solitude they face in their personal life. Virmati's internal turmoil is a striking example of patriarchal restrictions. Her mother and society want her to prioritise family responsibilities over personal goals. She opposes the concept that women's roles are limited to the house and challenges the stereotype of women as submissive beings. Virmati's decisions to pursue love and study are rebellion of the customary responsibilities assigned to women. However, the novel depicts the emotional toll of these decisions, with Virmati torn between personal freedom and familial devotion (*Difficult Daughters* 1998).

Virmati, the protagonist, struggles between the societal expectations and her longing for love, eventually becoming a second wife, highlighting the humiliation women experience in patriarchal setups. (Mohan et. al., 2024). The novel 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). Astha's path is defined by her opposition to the institution of marriage, which is strongly ingrained in patriarchal rule. Her husband's expectations of her as a devoted wife conflict with her yearning for freedom and self-expression. Astha's relationship with a woman is a departure with traditional gender roles and an assertion of her right to define her

own identity independent of her husband's authority. The novel criticises the repressive nature of patriarchal norms that govern women's responsibilities in marriage and society (*A Married Woman* 2002).

Nisha's experiences as an immigrant highlight the contrast between her orthodox background and the chances available in a more liberal country. Patriarchal expectations from her family (particularly those about marriage and behaviour) follow her across continents, demonstrating how deeply ingrained these norms are. The story explores themes of identity, independence, and the conflict between modernity and tradition, with Nisha battling for agency in a culture where patriarchal norms frequently limit her options (*The Immigrant*, 2008).

Women as Victims

Shagun's struggle against patriarchy in custody is clear as she navigates post divorce life. As a woman, she is subjected to a great deal of societal pressure and judgement, particularly on her children, sexuality, and desire to leave her husband. The story criticises the harsh double standards women endure in a patriarchal culture, where males are frequently forgiven or even applauded for behaviours that women are punished for. Shagun's fight for custody of her children and the freedom to live freely is symbolic of the greater struggle for women's rights in the family and society (*Custody* 2011). Kapur's characters are frequently shown as quiet victims who preserve family traditions while wishing for independence, reflecting greater cultural limitations on women (Subitha, 2023). The characters negotiate complex relationships while balancing personal objectives with society expectations, demonstrating the dichotomy of conformity and originality (Pandey & Kaur, 2023).

While Kapur's novels emphasise patriarchy's oppressive nature, they also reflect a progressive change towards female empowerment, implying that, despite the hurdles, women are beginning to carve out their own identities and spaces within society. Manju Kapur's novels attack patriarchal dominance using a variety of storytelling approaches, including character development, thematic inquiry, and socio-cultural critique. Her pieces, particularly "Difficult Daughters" and "Home," depict women's struggles against repressive cultural conventions, emphasising their need for identity and autonomy.

The development Kapur's protagonists, such

as Virmati and Nisha, are expertly designed to capture the nuances of female identity within patriarchal frameworks. Virmati's relationship with Professor Harish Chandra shows the struggle between personal desire and cultural norms, highlighting the inner pain that women experience. (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 employs symbolism to enhance the depiction of her characters. The connection between Astha and her lover, a woman named Peeplika, in *A Married Woman* represents independence and personal expression. Astha's character evolves as she breaks away from the limitations of her marriage, becoming a symbol of the opportunities accessible to women striving to establish their autonomy in an oppressive culture. Similarly, the immigrant experience in *The Immigrant* is both a real journey and a metaphor for Nina's inner development. Her feelings of alienation in the new country reflect her search for self-identity and belonging.

Manju Kapur's characters are frequently influenced by their familial backgrounds and the greater social context in which they live. The family environment is critical to understanding their development and challenges. In *Difficult Daughters*, for example, the protagonist, Virmati, must balance traditional family beliefs with her quest for intellectual freedom. This conflict is a key part of her character development.

Similarly, in *A Married Woman*, the protagonist, Astha, must navigate the intricacies of marriage, sexuality, and self-expression in a deeply patriarchal environment. Her transformation from a traditional wife to a woman who values her independence exemplifies the conflict between personal freedom and social norms. Kapur's characters frequently endure major psychological development, and this progression is a recurring motif in her work. For example, in *The Immigrant*, Nina, the protagonist, struggles with issues of identity and self-worth as she navigates life as an immigrant in Canada. Nina's sense of alienation and effort to maintain cultural roots while adjusting to a new country cause her to reconsider her beliefs, values, and relationships, emphasising her psychological development.

In *Custody*, the characters, Kapil and Shalini, go through profound emotional adjustments as a result of their failing marriage, as do their children. Kapur demonstrates how personal

loss and tragedy can result in introspection and emotional maturity, particularly in the context of a fractured family unit. Kapur's female protagonists are frequently women who feel limited by the expectations imposed on them by their families and society. However, they demonstrate agency and resistance as they manage these limits. For example, Virmati in *Difficult Daughters* defies customary conventions by having an affair with her professor and eventually divorcing her husband, a risky move for a woman in post-independence India. Her decisions indicate a yearning for intellectual and emotional freedom, and her journey through the novel is one of breaking free from gender stereotypes.

Astha's character development in *A Married Woman* is shaped by her desire for sexual and emotional freedom. She begins her life as a wife and mother, but eventually embraces a relationship with another woman, symbolising a defiance of traditional gender ideals. Many of Kapur's characters face inner struggle or external conflict, forcing them to reconsider their life. The dissolution of a marriage and the subsequent battle over child custody in *Custody* causes characters to reevaluate their priorities, values, and obligations. The internal struggle, as well as its resolution (or lack thereof), allows characters to confront their flaws and strengths, so contributing to their development. Conflict is also fundamental to the development of "Nina" in *The Immigrant*, as she faces the struggle of establishing a new identity in a foreign nation. Her character journey entails reconciling her past and present, as well as establishing her place in a multicultural setting.

Most of Kapu's characters are ethically complex, making their progression all the more interesting. For example, Virmati, despite her apparent defiance of social rules, is portrayed as someone tormented between remorse and self-doubt. This moral uncertainty deepens her character and helps the reader to sympathise with her even as she makes tough, even unpopular, decisions. The moral quandaries of the characters in *Custody* are central, particularly as they cope with betrayal, love, and the consequences of their decisions on their children. This results in a multi-layered tale in which the characters' development is not linear and they frequently evolve in unexpected ways, prompting the reader to ponder on the complexities of human behaviour.

By promoting women's empowerment and autonomy, Kapur's stories reflect larger cul-

tural norms that uphold gender inequity (Mohan et al., 2024). She challenges readers to think critically and question long-standing patriarchal norms by sharing the struggles of her characters. Some contend that Kapur's emphasis on individual hardships may unintentionally encourage the idea that human agency is the only way to overcome systematic oppression, thereby overshadowing the need for collective societal change, even as her narratives effectively attack patriarchal authority.

The female characters in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* display a nuanced interaction between defiance and patriarchal compliance. Through their personal accounts, Kapur examines the challenges that women encounter in a culture that is dominated by men, emphasising both their agency and their weaknesses. How these characters deal with social expectations is explained in the parts that follow. 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). The women characters often internalize societal norms, leading to a sense of duty that prioritizes family over personal aspirations (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023). Despite their resistance, many characters succumb to societal pressures, often prioritizing familial obligations over personal desires (Sanap, 2024).

Discussion

Many women characters continue to be constrained by traditional roles in spite of their battles, demonstrating how ubiquitous patriarchal norms are (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023). Expectations that are internalised: Given how deeply ingrained gender roles are in Indian culture, certain female characters demonstrate adherence to social norms (Mahalakshmmma, 2015). Although Kapur's female characters frequently defy patriarchal expectations, their experiences also show how persistently old gender norms have an impact on them, indicating a complicated interaction between defiance and conformity. By overcoming patriarchal restrictions, Manju Kapur's female characters in *Difficult Daughters* profoundly question conventional gender norms in Indian society. Through their hardships, Kapur demonstrates the intricacies of female identity and the pursuit of independence, ultimately promoting the empowerment of women.

Although Kapur's stories shed light on the

fight against patriarchal restrictions, they also highlight the widespread impact of social conventions that might restrict women's freedom, pointing to a complex representation of female identity in modern literature. Virmati's journey demonstrates her desire to exhibit her individuality and shows her struggle for self-identity in the face of social restraints (Pandey & Kaur, 2023). Challenging Norms: An act of resistance, Kapur's characters frequently challenge male control by speaking out against traditional roles and pursuing autonomy (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023). Although Kapur's characters frequently struggle with patriarchal conventions, their experiences also show an increasing awareness of and resistance to these expectations, indicating a complex representation of women's lives in a patriarchal society. In today's conversation, this dichotomy highlights the continuous fight for women's identity and empowerment.

Female characters are essential to Manju Kapur's writing because they simultaneously challenge and uphold patriarchal systems. These characters illustrate the complexity of gender roles in a male-dominated culture by navigating social expectations while pursuing personal autonomy. Their conflicts with conventional conventions and their search for identity are clear examples of this dualism. 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).

The protagonists negotiate familial and societal pressures, often pushing against normative boundaries to carve out their own spaces (Pandey & Kaur, 2023). Kapur's protagonists actively resist male dominance, asserting their rights and challenging societal norms (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023). Women's agency and desire for self-determination are emphasised by their representation as warriors against taboos and norms (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023). The contradiction between individual aspirations and social standards is highlighted by the protagonist, Virmati, as she struggles with them while pursuing her education and love, eventually becoming a second bride (Mohan & -, 2024).

The demands of society places on women to fulfil conventional responsibilities of domesticity and obedience are shown in the story, which is set during India's Partition. Virmati,

the main character, defies her family's expectations by going to school and dating a married professor. Chastity and planned weddings are cultural norms that are challenged by this. Even if it causes emotional distress, her choice to study in Lahore and her battle to express her uniqueness demonstrate her resistance to social norms. By having an extramarital romance with a woman named Peeplika, Astha rebels against her unhappy marriage. This lesbian partnership is a significant act of defiance against patriarchal and heteronormative norms. Her desire for a voice and identity outside of her home life is also symbolised by her involvement in political activism. The patriarchal context (Home, 2006), The strict, patriarchal mentality of a traditional Indian joint family is examined in the novel.

Resistance: Because they are expected to put family honour ahead of their own goals, the female characters-Nisha in particular-face discrimination and oppression. By going to school, launching her own company, and ultimately choosing to marry for love, Nisha challenges social standards that imply a woman's value is determined by arranged marriages and having children. *The Immigrant* explores the life of Nina, an Indian woman who marries and moves to Canada, where she must deal with both cultural alienation and patriarchy. Resistance: Nina's battle against established gender norms is symbolised by her inability to adjust to a new cultural setting. She demonstrated her autonomy and refused to accept oppression by leaving her unfaithful husband. Shagun and Ishita, the female protagonists, negotiate the demands placed on them. Despite the criticism from society, Shagun decides to leave her marriage in order to express her independence. Ishita, a divorced lady, chooses to have a meaningful life and defies social conventions in order to combat the stigma of infertility and rejection.

The novel 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 fulfilment 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 domi-

nance, striving to assert their rights and challenge conventional roles (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023).

Virmati and other characters defy social norms and pursue personal fulfilment in spite of familial pressures (Mohan et al., 2024; Pandey & Kaur, 2023). As they struggle with traditional responsibilities and strive for independence, the story emphasises the dichotomy of their lives (Pandey & Kaur, 2023). While pursuing personal fulfilment, Kapur's protagonists frequently challenge established gender stereotypes as they navigate their identities in a world dominated by men (Pandey & Kaur, 2023). As they express their rights and oppose male dominance, women are portrayed as rebelling against traditional roles and demanding their own space (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023).

As leaders of social movements and equals to men, the characters also represent a larger story of women's participation in nationalism. In addition to challenging conventional gender norms, this portrayal reinterprets the contributions that women make to the country and society (Namchoom, 2023). On the other hand, although Kapur's characters aspire to independence, the social systems they live in frequently place severe restrictions on them, mirroring the continuous fight for gender equality in modern-day India. By overcoming patriarchal restrictions, Manju Kapur's female characters in *Difficult Daughters* profoundly question conventional gender norms in Indian society. Through their hardships, Kapur demonstrates the intricacies of female identity and the pursuit of independence, ultimately promoting the empowerment of women. In order to redefine women's responsibilities beyond domesticity and match them with wider societal contributions, the novel also presents them as active members of the nationalist struggle (Namchoom, 2023). The fight for gender equality is still ongoing, as seen by the fact that many women in modern Indian society still struggle greatly to assert their identities and rights, even if Kapur's characters represent resistance against patriarchal norms.

The female characters in Manju Kapur's novels, especially *Difficult Daughters*, display a nuanced interaction between defiance and patriarchal compliance. Through their stories, Kapur examines the difficulties women encounter in a culture that is controlled by men, emphasising both their autonomy and their weaknesses. In conclusion, Manju Kapur's books offer a deep analysis of gender dynam-

ics and societal institutions through their examination of women's resistance against patriarchal authority. Whether in the setting of marriage, family, or wider social expectations, Kapur's stories constantly highlight the hardships of women who oppose and navigate the repressive powers of patriarchy. Her heroes demonstrate resilience through subtly expressed forms of resistance, ranging from emotional rebellion to overt acts of defiance, despite frequently being bound by conventional standards.

Conclusion

Manju Kapur explores the political and psychological facets of female resistance in her novels; *The Immigrant*, *A Married Woman*, and *Difficult Daughters*. She draws attention to the complexity of the women's identities, showing that they fight not just against patriarchal structures but also against the constraints placed on them by custom, religion, and familial relationships. Her women characters nuanced depictions imply that resistance is more often about regaining agency inside a constrictive framework than it is about outright rebellion. Additionally, Kapur's writings highlight the complex interrelationship between personal preferences and cultural standards, demonstrating that the road to empowerment is frequently paved with conflict 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. Also, Manju Kapur's depiction of women's resistance highlights a critical analysis of patriarchal dominance while providing an optimistic outlook on the possibility of change. Her books serve as a reminder of the strength of women's voices and their ability to change their own lives despite severe social pressures.

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