

**Marital Discontentment and Female Subjectivity in Manju Kapur's
Difficult Daughters and *A Married Woman*: A Feminist Literary Analysis**

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Abstract:

This paper examines how marital discontentment becomes the ground on which female subjectivity is reclaimed in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (1998) and *A Married Woman* (2002). The study is prompted by a gap in existing criticism, which tends to read Kapur's heroines through a binary of victimhood and rebellion and pays little attention to how marriage, as a lived spatial and temporal structure, shapes the self. Drawing on post-structuralist feminist theory, Butler's notion of gender performativity and feminist spatial theory, the paper undertakes a comparative textual analysis of Virmati and Astha. It argues that the home functions as an apparatus of patriarchal regulation that disciplines women through physical thresholds and the cyclical rhythms of domestic duty, and that both protagonists turn this enclosure into a site of negotiation. Virmati's resistance is largely inward and intellectual, rooted in education and a fraught pursuit of love in pre-Partition Punjab; Astha's moves outward, through art, desire and political activism in post-Babri Masjid India. Read together, the novels trace a continuum from private disillusionment to public assertion, showing that Kapur represents emancipation as costly, incomplete and continually negotiated rather than as a single act of rebellion.

Keywords: Manju Kapur; Female Subjectivity; Marital Discontentment; Domestic Space; Feminist Literary Criticism

Introduction and Research Scope

This study examines how marital disillusionment shapes the reclamation of female subjectivity in the domestic worlds of Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* (Kapur, 1998) and *A Married Woman* (Kapur, 2002). Existing scholarship has tended to treat women's struggle

for autonomy as a solitary contest waged against patriarchy in the abstract; comparatively little attention has been paid to how the institution of marriage itself, as a lived and material structure, either catalyses or forecloses the articulation of individual desire (Kishore, 2024; Sharma & Sharma, 2025). Reading the two novels side by side brings into focus the negotiation between the pull of social conformity and an emerging drive toward personal fulfilment (Pandey & Kaur, 2023), and shows how Virmati's and Astha's pursuit of identity is repeatedly compromised by the expectations of middle-class marriage (Catherin & Sobana, 2025).

This tension extends to the paradox of empowerment itself: even as Kapur's protagonists resist prescribed gender roles, the structures around them continue to constrain their agency (Arya, 2024). The emotional dissonance running through both marriages suggests that the marital space is experienced as at once a site of entrapment and, unexpectedly, of transformation (Hangal, 2026; Jat & Singh, 2025). Rather than reading these narratives through a simple binary of victimhood and resistance, this paper treats the domestic sphere as an ambivalent locus that houses both psychological repression and the beginnings of feminist self-realisation (Meena & Ramya, 2025; Sanap, 2024). Both novels expose a shared conflict between the wish for romantic autonomy and the institutional demands of Indian family life (Sathiyarajan, 2024), and tracing each heroine's evolving consciousness reveals how she negotiates the line between cultural duty and the need for recognition (Prashad, 2025; Sangeetha & Savio, 2019).

Against this backdrop, Kapur's "New Woman" appears less as a figure of straightforward rebellion than as a structural critique of the silence that patriarchal institutions impose on women (Nagababu & Rao, 2026; Olivia, 2026). The right to intimacy and personal agency, framed this way, becomes a foundational commitment of feminist writing in contemporary India rather than a peripheral concern (Ara & Zargar, 2026a; Rathore, 2019). The performance of the "goddess-like" ideal of the dutiful wife operates as an instrument of control that complicates each protagonist's movement from silent endurance toward self-assertion (Hadole, 2022; Kalia, 2024), and the rejection of a stereotypical domesticity becomes a precondition for authentic self-actualisation (Menon & Thakur, 2025; Sweetline & Senthamarai, 2020).

This confinement is not merely social. It is reinforced through the physical organisation of the domestic interior, which operates as an apparatus of disciplinary control: thresholds, inner rooms and shared spaces regulate movement and interaction, so that patriarchal authority is sustained through spatial arrangement as much as through cultural mandate (Kumar, 2026b). For Kapur's protagonists, the home therefore functions as both a cage and a laboratory for forging an independent identity (Pratheeba, 2025). While criticism has devoted considerable attention to the victimhood–rebellion binary (Meena & Ramya, 2025; Sanap, 2024), little work has examined how architectural and temporal confinement

mediates the inner processes of feminine subjectivity. Shifting the focus to the politicised geography of the home, this study argues that the reclamation of the self in these novels requires an active contestation of the physical and symbolic environments that enforce patriarchal silence.

Research Context and Purpose

The analysis further argues that the domestic sphere operates not only as a physical site of regulation but as a temporal apparatus, in which the pacing of household rituals and the cyclical nature of gendered labour synchronise women's lives with patriarchal timelines. By investigating how Virmati and Astha confront this temporal confinement, the study shows that the New Woman's pursuit of autonomy is also an effort to reclaim personal time from the rhythms of traditional duty (Toshniwal, 2025). The project thereby addresses a critical gap regarding how spatial and temporal transgressions act as catalysts for psychological liberation (Vijayashanthi et al., 2023).

To this end, the study adopts a comparative framework that sets Virmati's historical navigation of domestic thresholds beside Astha's contemporary struggle against the invisible boundaries of middle-class life. In both cases the home, as a physical and temporal structure, is continually renegotiated as women contest the internalised roles that threaten their individuality (Gope & Khuraijam, 2019). The study aligns itself with postcolonial feminist enquiries into the psychological landscapes of Indian women, in which protagonists must traverse confined domestic spaces to pursue self-realisation (Kasish, 2025), and it examines how such assertions of subjectivity navigate the impediments of the postcolonial nation-state (Chakraborty & Adhikari, 2020). Table 1 summarises the comparative framework.

Table 1. Comparative Analysis of Spatial and Temporal Constraints in *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*

Feature	<i>Difficult Daughters</i>	<i>A Married Woman</i>
Primary setting	Pre-Partition Punjab	Contemporary urban India
Spatial confinement	Physical thresholds of ancestral homes	Invisible boundaries of domestic interiors
Temporal constraints	Rigid, historical lineage obligations	Cyclical rituals of routine middle-class life
Mode of subversion	Contesting physical thresholds	Transgressing established temporal rhythms

Despite their distinct historical settings, both protagonists must navigate structured domestic environments to assert their autonomy. Read through a postcolonial feminist lens, the female body and the private household emerge as sites where the power relations of nation, religion and patriarchal hierarchy are negotiated, and where private spaces can be turned into arenas

of resistance (Ghissing, 2025; Mondal, 2026). The study therefore treats Kapur's narratives not as portrayals of passive suffering but as accounts of women who cultivate a resistive consciousness and gradually transform the private sphere into a contested site of identity formation (Krishnapriya et al., 2021; Roy, 2019).

Feminist Theoretical Framework

The study adopts a post-structuralist feminist lens, drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's insight that gender identity is a culturally constructed process rather than a biological certainty (Lata, 2024). Judith Butler's account of gender performativity allows an investigation of how Virmati and Astha contest normative expectations through repeated acts of resistance and inner realignment (Shah et al., 2026). The analysis also draws on feminist spatial theory, which treats the domestic environment not as a static backdrop but as a gendered landscape that women must negotiate to secure autonomy (Patil & Steven, 2025). From this perspective the home is a paradoxical structure: its constraints provide the very proximity in which women can strategise their defiance (Taj et al., 2024), and the division of domestic space mirrors a household's broader power hierarchy (Lau, 2006). The performative construction of gender thus functions as a mechanism of both entrapment and liberation, as individuals reconstruct their subjectivity through signification and subversion (Ahmad et al., 2025; Anand, 2022).

Feminist Literary Criticism

Feminist literary criticism has long examined women's experience within patriarchal frameworks and challenged the marginalisation of women's narratives (Selvam, 2025). Recent scholarship on Indian English fiction moves beyond static images of domestic entrapment, emphasising interiority and moral negotiation over overt ideological protest and reading identity as a fluid construct shaped by inner reflection and social engagement (Ingale, 2023; Rathinasamy, 2025). The Indian English novel increasingly serves as a medium of social critique that articulates the intersection of personal desire and structural expectation (Lakshmi, 2023). Kapur's fiction exemplifies this shift: her protagonists move past the archetypes of the submissive wife and martyred mother toward the position of active agents (Olivia, 2026; Ramasamy et al., 2024). Within this tradition, marital discordance can be identified as the primary catalyst through which Kapur's heroines move from enforced domesticity to self-defined defiance (Subramaniam & Gayathiri, 2014).

Subjectivity and Identity

Female subjectivity is understood here not as a fixed essence but as a dynamic process of identity formation negotiated between patriarchal constraint and personal aspiration (Pandey & Kaur, 2023). It manifests as an inner negotiation between repressed emotional needs and the dictates of the domestic sphere, often producing an existential crisis when desire clashes with duty (Devi, 2025). Virmati's pursuit of academic and emotional independence and Astha's navigation of marital disillusionment both show how personal rebellion unsettles the social identities imposed on women (Jat & Singh, 2025; Zia et al., 2023). Kapur presents education as a principal vehicle of this awakening; yet the intellectual autonomy it produces renders familial expectations untenable and frequently intensifies the

heroine's alienation when gender hierarchies remain unchanged (A. Mishra, 2026; Nagababu & Rao, 2026). Kapur's heroines thus embody the New Woman who negotiates the competing pulls of tradition and modernisation (Sharma & Chauhan, 2023; Singh, 2025), transforming the domestic space from a site of enforced passivity into one where a nascent autonomy can be exercised (Jayajothilakshmi et al., 2023).

Marriage as a Patriarchal Institution

Marriage is conceptualised here not merely as a social contract but as a mechanism of patriarchal regulation that institutionalises women's subordination within the family (Meena & Ramya, 2025). The wife is expected to embody goddess-like virtues, an ideal that strips her of independent personhood (Kalia, 2024; Menon & Thakur, 2025), while kinship structures that privilege male agency demand conformity at the expense of feminine identity (Brahmbhatt, 2023). The home becomes an "architecture of control" that monitors and limits a woman's mobility, desire and speech (Kumar, 2026b). Within this structure the "good" wife is conditioned to act as a *pativrata*, subordinating her life to her husband's welfare and the continuity of his lineage (Ghosh, 2021), while her unpaid domestic labour treats her as a functional utility rather than a self-governing person (Begam & Fathima, 2025). Compliance becomes a precondition of marital harmony, and deviation may be met with coercion and violence (Satyen et al., 2024). Silence is thereby enforced to sustain the appearance of domestic stability, shielding the household's foundations from critique (Pratheeba, 2025; Sathiyarajan, 2024).

Manju Kapur's Literary Context

Kapur's fiction occupies a significant place in contemporary Indian writing for its sustained interrogation of gendered constraint and the evolving subjectivity of the middle-class woman (Dar & Ahluwalia, 2025; Solanki, 2019). *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* are notable for the way they bind the instability of their heroines' private lives to traumatic national events, Partition in the first and communal violence in the second, so that the home becomes a microcosm of national upheaval (Hangal, 2026; Nagababu & Rao, 2026). Their selection is justified by their shared portrayal of women caught between conflicting spheres of duty who articulate a quest for self-fulfilment that challenges patriarchal ownership (Bhavatharini & Albert, 2020; Sanap, 2024). Kapur does not, however, present liberation as triumph: the path to autonomy is marked by psychological turmoil, social ostracism and painful moral negotiation (Kashyap & Richa, 2025; Sasikala, 2018). Figure 1 outlines the conceptual framework of the study.

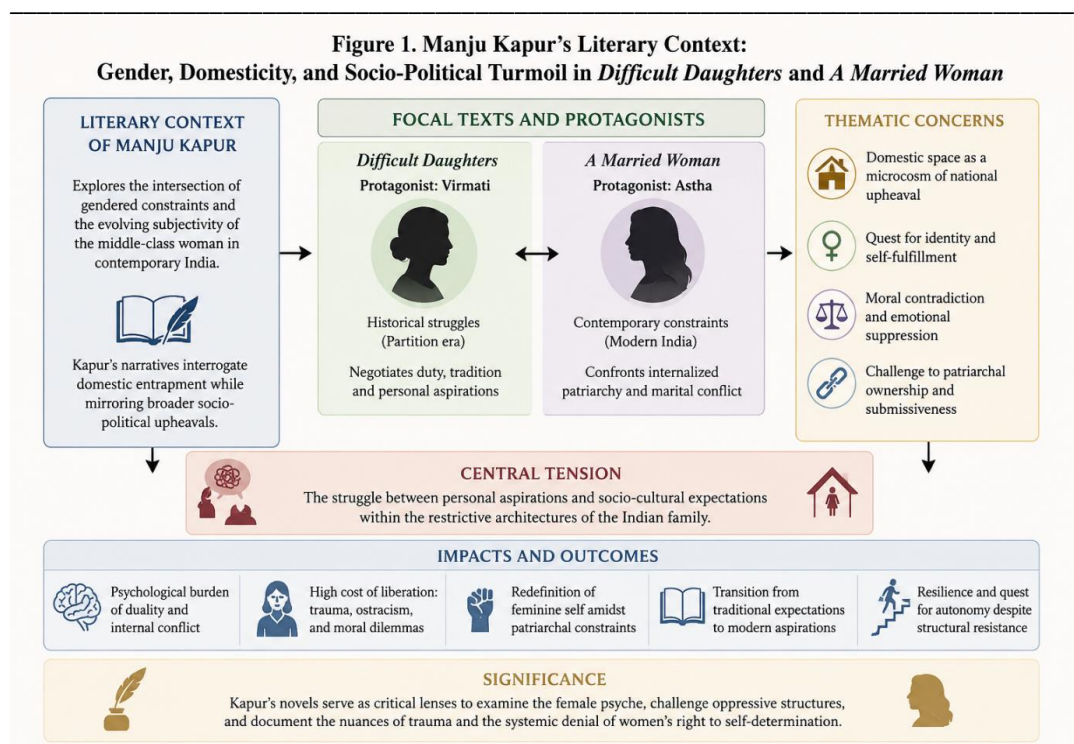


Figure 1. Conceptual framework of the comparative study, showing the literary context, thematic concerns, central tension and outcomes associated with female agency and patriarchal resistance in Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*.

Biographical Background

Born in Amritsar and long a teacher of English at Miranda House, Delhi, Kapur brings an informed sociological eye to her portrayal of the middle-class family (Karunakaran et al., 2020; Padma, 2019). Her perspective is rooted in the cultural shifts of post-independence India, and her heroines bridge inherited tradition and the intellectual demands of contemporary womanhood. Rather than offering a simple choice between conservative domesticity and radical liberation, Kapur maps the ambiguous spaces where these forces intersect, highlighting the psychological cost of negotiating autonomy within entrenched familial expectations (Patnaik, 2020).

Position within Indian English Fiction

Alongside contemporaries such as Shashi Deshpande, Kapur contributes to a tradition of literary resistance that dismantles the archetype of the submissive female martyr (Kishore, 2024). Where Anita Desai and Arundhati Roy also interrogate patriarchal structures, Kapur scrutinises with particular care the intersection of domesticity, class and the shifting economic realities of modern India (Mudi, 2025). The two novels studied here represent distinct phases of this struggle: *Difficult Daughters* excavates the pre-independence

roots of a woman's search for identity (Sharma & Sharma, 2025), while *A Married Woman* addresses the precariousness of female autonomy in the volatile climate of a secular nation under strain (Namchoom, 2023).

Marital Discontentment in *Difficult Daughters*

In *Difficult Daughters*, marriage is depicted as a source of profound disillusionment in which the protagonist's romantic and intellectual ideals are stifled by the conjugal bond (Patil, 2022). Narrated by Virmati's daughter Ida, who reconstructs her mother's life after her death, the novel traces how Virmati's yearning for education and companionship collides with a family that measures a daughter's worth by a timely marriage (Kapur, 1998). Her intellectual aspirations remain unfulfilled within a domestic order that prioritises tradition over growth, rendering her union a site of emotional alienation (Chhikara, 2010; Patil & Ingale, 2021). This inner discord drives her rejection of familial scripts and forces a contentious negotiation between private self-realisation and the moral codes of her community (Nitu, 2018). Her education fosters an independent consciousness that clashes with the boundaries of a conservative society, leaving her suspended between ambition and prescribed roles (Arun & Mohan, 2019; Catherin & Sobana, 2025).

Kapur frames this conflict through a gallery of contrasting women. Virmati's mother, Kasturi, embodies the dutiful wife worn down by repeated childbearing and household labour, and she reads her daughter's desire for study as a threat to family honour. Her cousin Shakuntala, educated and working in Lahore, offers a first glimpse of a life beyond marriage, while her friend Swarna Lata combines study with political commitment (Kapur, 1998). Against these models Virmati's choices appear neither wholly conformist nor fully emancipated (Faruqi, 2025). The spatial politics of the household are rendered literally: after she refuses an arranged match, she is confined to the family godown, an episode that makes visible the architecture of control through which the family disciplines a disobedient daughter (Kumar, 2026b; Mahajan, 2013).

Virmati's Marital Struggle

Virmati's marital experience is compounded by the degradation of her intellectual identity. As the second wife of Harish, the Professor, who remains married to Ganga, she enters a household in which her position is socially precarious and her academic ambitions are subordinated to the restrictive routines of domestic life (Kapur, 1998; Hooda, 2020). Her pursuit of knowledge is recast as defiance of her subordinate status rather than a legitimate aspiration (Chhikara, 2010). The relationship with Harish exposes this tension: the man who first encouraged her intellect ultimately confines her, and it is in her earlier role as principal of a school in Nahan that she glimpses an identity rooted in economic and intellectual independence (Jayajothilakshmi et al., 2023; Menon & Thakur, 2025). Table 2 compares the marital trajectories of the two protagonists.

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Marital Experience, Identity Formation and Feminist Agency in *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*

Theme of marital experience	Virmati's trajectory	Astha's trajectory	Core feminist implication
Initial expectation	Intellectual and romantic partnership (Chhikara, 2010)	Emotional depth and intellectual intimacy (Catherin & Sobana, 2025)	Disillusionment with the idealised conjugal bond (Patil, 2022)
Domestic reality	Suppression of academic identity (Hooda, 2020)	Emotional alienation; structural stagnation (Thavaseelan, 2023)	Friction between individual aspiration and social duty (Hangal, 2026)
Primary agent of change	Education and vocational pursuit (Menon & Thakur, 2025)	Art, activism and intimacy outside marriage (Prashad, 2025)	Reclamation of identity through self-definition (Pandey & Kaur, 2023)
Outcome	Conflict-ridden autonomy (Hangal, 2026)	Assertion of individual agency (Swetha & Sivasubramaniam, 2020)	Transition from regulated object to subject (Hadole, 2022)

Conflicting Desires and Duty

The tension between personal inclination and the demands of lineage creates a recurring motif of sacrifice, in which women are expected to subsume their aspirations within the architecture of ancestral duty (Kumar, 2024). Prioritising personal fulfilment is framed as a betrayal of familial sanctity (Mitra, 2024), and the conflict between moral obligation and individual agency demands a painful confrontation with expectations that treat female self-assertion as a disruption of domestic harmony (Meena & Ramya, 2025). This suppression reflects a cultural conditioning that views feminine silence and obedience as the cornerstones of communal stability (Yadav & Rohitashwani, 2026). Yet internalisation is repeatedly destabilised by an emergent feminist consciousness, which leads these women to perceive their confinement as a site of political and personal struggle (Lata, 2024) and to decouple their humanity from the expectations of the household (Hadole, 2022).

Female Subjectivity in A Married Woman

In *A Married Woman*, Astha's evolving consciousness is mapped through her deepening dissatisfaction with the emotional landscape of her marriage to Hemant, an outwardly conventional union in which her role is defined by duty to husband, children and in-laws (Kapur, 2002; Thavaseelan, 2023). Her painting and her involvement with a street-

theatre group led by the activist Aijaz Khan open a space beyond the household, and her pursuit of emotional fulfilment becomes a critique of the structural stagnation of domestic life (Kasish, 2025; Sultana & Alquzahy, 2023). After Aijaz is killed in communal violence, Astha's relationship with his widow, Pipeelika, offers a queer perspective that unsettles the heteronormative structures that had relegated her to emotional passivity (Pati & Dash, 2025; Viji & Jaisre, 2023). Kapur uses this exploration of desire to assert the female body as a primary site of contest against patriarchal control and to present the right to intimacy as an expression of feminist selfhood (Rathore, 2019; Saharan & Beniwal, 2012).

The temporal dimension of Astha's confinement is especially pronounced. Her days are organised around her children's schedules, her husband's business and the expectations of her in-laws, so that time itself becomes a resource she must seek permission to use (Kapur, 2002). Painting, writing and activism therefore matter not only as forms of expression but as acts of reclaiming hours from the cycle of domestic duty (Patnaik, 2020). Hemant's indulgent but proprietorial attitude, which treats her interests as hobbies to be accommodated only so long as they do not disturb the household, illustrates how a seemingly modern marriage can reproduce traditional hierarchies (Sathiyarajan, 2024; Sharma, 2023).

Astha's Journey toward Selfhood

Astha's path to autonomy is marked by a gradual awakening in which agency is pursued through creative expression and through the reclamation of her right to emotional fulfilment (Nagababu & Rao, 2026). She comes to recognise that her long discontent stems from the structural denial of her intellectual and erotic needs (Bhattacharya, 2024), and her shifting perspective challenges the assumption that women must remain passive recipients of domestic norms (Olivia, 2026). Kapur's narrative thus presents feminine subjectivity not as a static condition but as an ongoing negotiation against the structures that regulate female identity (Brahmbhatt, 2023). By externalising previously internalised conflicts, Astha bridges personal desire and wider social change, although the novel's ending, in which she remains within her marriage, underlines how partial and negotiated that change is (Swetha & Sivasubramaniam, 2020).

Political and Personal Emancipation

Astha's feminist awakening is closely linked to her political engagement, as she translates personal grievance into a critique of communal violence in the period surrounding the demolition of the Babri Masjid (Kapur, 2002; Yadav, 2021). By participating in public protest, she collapses the boundary between domestic and public life, using activism as a vehicle for asserting autonomy (Ara & Zargar, 2026b). This involvement shifts her from the isolated struggle of marital dissatisfaction toward a collective consciousness (Voxidillayevna, 2025), and moves her beyond the requirement of being a "good wife" whose existence is defined by silence and sacrifice. Such engagement reflects the wider way in which political participation reshapes domestic experience, allowing women to reject the binary between private duty and public responsibility (Misra, 2022; Sarkar, 2026). In voicing dissent in public, Astha enacts the feminist principle that the personal is political, transforming a private struggle into an act of collective resistance (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Political and Personal Emancipation in A Married Woman



Figure 2. Conceptual model of Astha's journey from domestic confinement to public emancipation in *A Married Woman*, showing the stages of feminist awakening, political engagement and reclaimed agency.

Comparative Feminist Analysis

The comparative reading reveals distinct patterns of resistance. Virmati challenges the domestic enclosure through education and an illicit love in the late colonial period, whereas Astha dismantles the boundary between private motherhood and a volatile public arena (Sanap, 2024). Kapur's heroines thus adapt their strategies of rebellion to the sociopolitical constraints of their historical moments: Virmati's struggle is primarily inward, centred on the education of the self as an escape from familial bondage, while Astha's takes the form of an outward rejection of communal and social mandates (Toshniwal, 2025). Together they map a continuum of emancipation in which the quiet reclamation of self in the earlier novel prepares the ground for the more overt critique of the later one (Hadole, 2022; Olivia, 2026). The frame narrative of *Difficult Daughters* already gestures toward this continuum: Ida, a divorced and childless woman who narrates her mother's story, inherits both the freedoms Virmati won and the costs she paid, suggesting that each generation's emancipation remains unfinished (Kashyap & Richa, 2025).

Convergent Themes across Both Texts

Both novels employ marital discontent as the central catalyst for identity formation, showing how the frustration of domestic expectations forces a departure from traditional gender roles (Catherin & Sobana, 2025). In each, marital unhappiness is not merely a plot device but an ideological rupture that exposes the inadequacy of traditional marriage as a vessel for female self-realisation (Hangal, 2026). The silencing of these women within marriage becomes a productive paradox: the suppression intended to maintain domestic order becomes the catalyst for their redefinition of subjectivity (Rizvi, 2025), and the identity crises they endure become the means by which they challenge entrenched stigma and gendered expectations (Sivakumar & Saleem, 2025).

Divergent Expressions of Female Agency

Virmati's agency is a tentative, individual quest for intellectual autonomy within the limits of a traditional household; Astha's is realised through an active and often disruptive engagement with communal politics that rejects the primacy of domestic duty. This progression mirrors the broader transformation of Indian society and marks a shift in how literary narratives represent the female subject, from a solitary struggle for validation toward a more collective assertion of political and personal rights (Faruqi, 2025; Nagababu & Rao, 2026). While domestic confinement remains the initial site of struggle in both novels, the later expansion into political activism reflects a movement toward claiming autonomy in both private and public spheres (Sharma & Thakur, 2024).

Conclusion

Kapur's portrayals of Virmati and Astha affirm female subjectivity as a counter-narrative to patriarchal nationalism, transforming the domestic sphere from a site of confinement into one of contested self-definition (Boehmer, 2017; Chakraborty & Adhikari, 2020). This study has shown that marital discontentment in both novels operates as more than personal unhappiness: it exposes the home as a spatial and temporal apparatus of control, and it becomes the ground on which each heroine begins to reclaim her selfhood. Virmati's inward, education-driven resistance and Astha's outward, politically engaged resistance together describe a continuum of feminist agency shaped by historical context, yet in neither case does Kapur offer an easy resolution. By resisting the pull toward reconciliation or redemptive closure, her fiction aligns with an ethic of refusal that unsettles conventional endings in Indian women's writing (Kumar, 2026a).

The study contributes to feminist literary criticism by reading Kapur's novels as interrogations of the structural foundations of patriarchal suppression rather than as depictions of family conflict alone (Devi & Kavitha, 2026). Future research could extend this framework by examining how caste, class and regional identity refract feminine consciousness in South Asian fiction (Mudi, 2025; Raut, 2025), by reading Kapur alongside fourth-wave feminist and digital-age narratives (Limbachiya, 2025; Rayappa & Archana, 2026), and by exploring queer subjectivities that challenge the heteronormative assumptions of traditional Indian literary criticism (Walz, 2025).

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