

**Negotiating Tradition and Modernity: Female Agency in Manju Kapur's
*Home***

1.Mrs.R.Umamageshwari

M.A M.Phil, Research Scholar, Department of English (Aided) Kongunadu Arts and Science College, Coimbatore.

2.Dr.R.Sumathi

Assistant Professor ,Department of English (Aided) Kongunadu Arts and Science College, Coimbatore.

Article Received: 16/06/2026

Article Accepted:18/07/2026

Published Online:19/07/2026

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.07.324

Abstract:

Manju Kapur's *Home* is a subtle exploration of the tensions between tradition and modernity in present-day India, told through the lives of women who strive to survive in patriarchal families. This paper looks at the ways in which gender is feminized, limited and reimagined in the domestic sphere and explores the protagonist's quest for identity, autonomy and self-expression. The house becomes a place of torture and oppression, but also a place where the individual woman finds expression through education, emotional strength and individual choice. The novel does not reject tradition outright, rather it proposes that there is a constant negotiation between tradition and modern aspirations in the process of becoming empowered as a woman. The study attempts to demonstrate that *Home* defies the typical image of Indian womanhood, as it depicts agency as a process that evolves over the time, and thus plays a major role in the current literary debates in India and postcolonial studies.

Keywords: Female Agency, Tradition and Modernity, Feminism, Patriarchy, Gender Identity.

Introduction:

Indian English literature is now a major source for exploring Indian socio-cultural realities in the post colonial context, including the relative position and status of women in traditional social institutions. Women writers of the present day have been instrumental in bringing to light the complexities of gender discrimination, domestic oppression and struggle for identity in the male dominated societies. Manju Kapur is one of these writers with a special place in the realistic depiction of women's life and their constant struggle between the old and the new. Her novels are about ordinary women whose lives embody the larger socio-cultural changes happening in modern day India. Divorcing women from their

passivity and making them extraordinary rebels, Kapur shows them as complex characters, who are discovering their voice little by little, while trying to manoeuvre through expectations of the family and society.

Home (2006) reflects the lives of a middle-class joint family in an urban setting in Delhi, where the domestic sphere serves as an emotional safe and a means of patriarchal control. The title is very symbolic. Traditionally ‘*Home*’ is defined as a place of love, belonging and protection, but Kapur is also making it a place where gender norms are reinforced through family expectations and traditions. The novel explores how women must cope with these paradoxes when they strive for education, economic autonomy, emotional satisfaction and personal dignity, while not abandoning family and cultural connections altogether.

The main protagonist, Nisha, is a character that embodies the dreams of a lot of women in today's India who are trying to cope with their personal wishes and social duties. Her experiences show that the best way to gain agency as a woman is to negotiate, persist and become aware of oneself little by little. Kapur captures agency as a dynamic, as it happens, that unfolds over decisions made daily, emotional strength, and the willingness to challenge social norms. The novel defies the notion of women as only being women because they are married, mothers, housewives.

In Nivedita Menon's view, patriarchy is not abolished, it adapts to changing circumstances in society. The reason why the families in *Home* have a positive attitude towards education, urbanisation and economic development, while still controlling women's behaviour through traditional gender roles is understood by this insight. As a result, modernity does not necessarily lead to gender equality, but women have to continually work out the tensions between competing cultural expectations. Simone de Beauvoir's famous assertion, “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (de Beauvoir 283), implies that femininity is not determined by nature, but rather by social norms and expectations. Judith Butler challenges essentialist understandings of gender by arguing that “gender proves to be performative” (Butler 25) which means that gender identities are continually constructed through repeated social practices.

The novel also helps to move on from the postcolonial feminist discourse which offers a dichotomy of either ‘tradition’ or ‘modernity’. Nor does Kapur sentimentalise Indian customs or idealise the notions of freedom in the West. Rather, she shows how women develop their identities in the spaces where family, culture, education, class and personal desire intersect. Man and woman, then, do not emerge as complete rejection of the cultural values; it is a dialogue, compromise, and resilience.

This paper challenges the image of female agency as a constant process that is defined by constant negotiation between patriarchy and modernity in the context of *Home*. The novel's subtle portrayal of the family, education, marriage, and women's identity development is a strong condemnation of gender disparity and a praise of the ability of women to find their identity. The study utilises feminist theories to explore these themes in the context of how Kapur has reinvented the domestic novel as a powerful discourse on women's quest for autonomy in the modern Indian context.

Patriarchy is one of the prominent themes of Manju Kapur's *Home*, which is set in the traditional joint family of India. The novel is not only about patriarchy as the domination of men, it is about patriarchy as a complex social system that is maintained through cultural values, religious beliefs, family traditions and gendered expectations. The household is the main institution of transmission of the patriarchal ideology from one generation to another. Men assume authority and are expected to make the decisions, women are expected to preserve the family honour, traditions, and subordinate their individual aspirations to the common good.

Throughout this novel, Kapur sensitively shows how patriarchy can be exerted in everyday household routines, without any obvious force. Household chores, child rearing, day to day life, conventions on social behavior is reinforcing gender hierarchy. Women enter into the role of upholding these traditions as they themselves have been socialized into their values. Thus, oppression in *Home* is often at a more subtle level as duty, affection, sacrifice, or cultural obligation than as overt violence.

Sylvia Walby, who defines patriarchy as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 20). Her definition is a good one to describe the social organisation shown in *Home*, in which power is predominantly held by the males, and women are still very tied to the domestic sphere. The novel shows that the power of the male is not only in the hands of the man, but also involves institutions such as family, marriage, inheritance and social norms.

Self-awareness and agency in *Home* is one of the most important ways in which women become educated. Rather than being equated with academic success, Kapur's learning is also a pathway to challenging patriarchal norms and to envisioning possibilities for the future.

Education has a pivotal role in Manju Kapur's *Home* as a force that can disrupt the status quo and give women the opportunity to think about other ways to live their lives than those they are accustomed to. Instead of the traditional view that women's education is simply a tool to make them better marriage prospects, Kapur sees education as a tool of intellectual awakening, self-confidence and identity formation. The novel illustrates how education can

help women negotiate social expectations and how they become more individualistic over time by the character of Nisha. While education alone does not challenge the structures of patriarchy, it does give the tools, skills and confidence for women to question gender inequality.

Traditionally, Indian society has considered women's education as subordinate to a woman's role in the family. The general attitude of the families is to give education to girls only up to a certain level which they think would improve their social status and marriage opportunities. This contradiction is the theme of *Home* as it shows a family who love learning but keep expecting women to give their utmost to household duties and family honour over personal ambition. Education is thus a space of conflict between modern expectations and traditional expectations. Kapur shows how education has progressed for women but patriarchal values are still at play when it comes to how women can make use of their education and skills.

The character of Nisha embodies this struggle between education and patriarchy. Her learning experiences expand her mind and stimulate independent thinking. When she exposes herself to learning, she becomes self-confident and doubts the constrictive gender expectations. Whereas earlier generations of women were convinced that their only life was domestic service, Nisha starts to see education to fulfilment and economic independence. The intellectual development of her reflects the progressive process of changing from conformity to negotiation with family expectations.

It is evident from Nisha's educational experiences that she has developed a growing intellectual independence. Kapur writes, "If anything happens in the girl's later life, she is not completely dependent" (*Home* 140). Educational experiences enrich her knowledge and awareness of the world and make her think critically about family expectations. While not entirely free from patriarchy, education gives her confidence to make decisions for herself.

Paulo Freire emphasizes the emancipatory potential of education when he states, "Education does not change the world. Education changes people. People change the world" (Freire 34). This quote aptly sums up the role of education in Kapur's novel. Education as the practice of freedom also allows us to challenge reality, as bell hooks writes: Bell hooks describes education as "the practice of freedom" (hooks 4). In *Home*, education is a tool that enables the women to start challenging the norms they have received since birth and to still be emotionally attached to their families. It is through intellectual awakening and critical consciousness that one can be a woman empowered, says Kapur, rather than formal education. Knowledge is an integral part of identity development and resistance.

Marriage is a central component in *Home*, representing a stability within society and a control by the father. In the 'traditional family' the role of marriage is considered a woman's

chief calling, sometimes more important than her individual goals and aspirations. Marriage is a pivotal element in Manju Kapur's *Home*, both as a cultural construct that continues social traditions and as a tool for passing on the values of the society's patriarchy. Nisha confidently declares, "If I am going to marry him I should be able to say what I like" (*Home* 300). Historically marriage has been seen as a culmination of a woman's life in Indian society and it represented her social respectability, family honour and economic security. By presenting marriage as a social construct rather than just a personal bond, Kapur challenges this conventional view, which is influenced by power dynamics, gender norms, and cultural norms. Nisha and other female characters illustrate the novel's themes of the tensions between domesticity and female agency through their experiences when they marry. The novel explores the tensions between domesticity and female agency through the experiences of Nisha and other female characters when they marry.

In the joint family shown in *Home*, women are supposed to play the role of an ideal daughter, an ideal wife, an ideal daughter-in-law, and an ideal mother. They are not judged by their accomplishments, achievements or intelligence, but by their role as a peacekeeper in the household. Domestic chores, like cooking, childcare, caregiving, and maintaining family traditions become gendered duties that constitute a feminine identity. Domestic labour is thus normalized as an extension of womanhood rather than a socially constructed expectation. These duties are often limiting women's access to education, employment, and autonomy in decision making, as Kapur shows.

Marriage is presented by Kapur as a multifaceted phenomenon which provides emotional support and solidifies gender inequality. Women's identities can be closely linked to the roles as wife, daughter-in-law and mother. Women are often restricted in their opportunities for self-development in their *Home* contexts but manage to find places for themselves to be autonomous in that restriction. Well, Virginia Woolf said, "A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (Woolf 4). Woolf's insight goes beyond literature and applies to the need for women to be economically independent and have personal space to fulfil their potential. While Kapur is not shy of the notion of the family, she challenges its basis as a patriarchal system and calls attention to the need for more equality in family dynamics. Resistance in *Home* may look more like a normal choice of behavior than rebellion. The use of silence, negotiation, education and emotional resilience becomes important means of exercising agency for women.

Modernity and development of female identity is one of the major concerns in Manju Kapur's *Home*. In the novel modernity is not just represented as technical progress or as the urbanization of the city, but as a change in social values, in education, in economic activity and in personal hopes. In the portrayal of women, Kapur captures those who live in a cross-cultural society, the traditional cultural expectations that co-exist with the modern opportunities. Thus, female identity becomes a process that is continually negotiated between

past and present notions of autonomy and selfhood, as well as tradition and traditionality. Her mother's emotional response reflects the deep anxiety associated with family honour and social reputation. She laments, "This girl will be our death. My child, born after ten years, tortures me like this. Thank god your grandfather is not alive. What face will I show upstairs? Vijay gets his wife from Fancy Furnishing while my daughter goes to the street for hers" (*Home* 198). This reveals that the family's primary concern is not Nisha's happiness.

Modernization has helped make women's lives different in post-independence India as women have got better access to education, employment and public participation. These changes have not, however, totally eradicated the patriarchal system. Rather, in today's institutions, traditional gender expectations sometimes remain alongside, which causes women to face contradiction. This socio-cultural reality is reflected in *Home* which portrays educated women whose marriage and family honour and domestic responsibilities are still constrained. The society seems modern at the surface but under the surface there are deep-rooted patriarchal values that are still controlling women's choices, Kapur says.

Nisha is the character who represents this dichotomy between tradition and modernity. Her intelligence gives her hopes of creating a meaningful contribution in society and having an independent voice. Her aspirations as an entrepreneur represent a shift from the traditional roles of women who are expected to stay *Home*. But, her independence is continually negotiated in the context of family responsibilities. In lieu of rejecting her cultural heritage, Nisha tries to balance her own needs and desires with those of her family, a balancing act that reflects the multifaceted nature of identity in modern India.

Modernity brings new possibilities with new conflicts of individual aspirations and collective traditions. Women's sense of identity and independence is shaped by economic development, urbanisation and shifting educational opportunities. Kapur describes the nature of identity as malleable instead of immutable. The females in the story constantly develop, and must juggle their family responsibilities, with their own ambitions. They are not only not completely rejecting the traditional way of living, but also not uncritically taking up the Western modernity. Rather, they choose to embody the values of modernity which are acceptable in their cultural context.

Anthony Giddens argues that "Self-identity is not a distinctive trait... it is the self as reflexively understood by the person" (Giddens 53). His idea is that Kapur's female characters create their own identities by reflecting constantly, and "by personal experience. In the same way Stuart Hall emphasizes that "Identity is a matter of 'becoming' as well as of being" (Hall 225). This view is captured in the changing identities that are presented in *Home*, as women slowly change into a new person yet are still linked to the family and the culture. In *Home*, tradition and modernity are not opposites, but instead, women's lives (and their meaning) are negotiated continuously. Kapur refuses to opt for binary thinking and instead

offers a relational, contextual and dynamic picture of female agency. At the heart of the novel lies the idea of creating meaningful empowerment through the balancing of one's personal aspirations and cultural responsibilities. Although it's not a matter of rebellion, female agency is demonstrated in education, economic involvement, emotional strength, and independent decision making. The hybridity of this concept is useful to understand Kapur's women who live in a culture that has both traditional and modern ideals. Throughout the story, however, Kapur identifies his own voice, even as conditions may be limiting for women. Despite the limitations of patriarchy, Kapur's story shows how slowly women find their voice.

The overall idea of the novel is that empowerment of women is a process that is negotiated and not fought. Everyday acts of courage, resilience and self-realization are the ways that women's agency is developed. In *Home*, Manju Kapur's work explores the intricate state of tradition, modernity and agency for women in the present-day Indian society. The novel depicts the family as a protective institution and a space of patriarchal control, while depicting how women work out their autonomy and self-expression within a cultural context. Education, marriage, and family responsibilities, and identity formation are important axes on which female agency is built and reconfigured.

Home can be interpreted as a critique of gender inequality, and a celebration of women's resilience, from feminist perspectives presented by Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler, Sylvia Walby, bell hooks, Virginia Woolf and others. Through empowerment, Kapur shows, tradition need not be rejected but rather reinterpreted to provide room for dignity, equality and selfhood. Thus, *Home* continues to be a significant addition to Indian feminist literature, showing that agency of the women is an ongoing negotiation of the traditional and the modern.