

Between Silence and Expression: Female Psyche in the Fictional World of Manju Kapur

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Abstract

*This paper offers an expanded psychoanalytic–feminist reading of the female psyche in the novels of Manju Kapur, foregrounding the dialectic between silence and expression as a defining feature of women’s subjectivity. Kapur’s fiction stages women’s inner lives as sites of negotiation where desire, repression, guilt, and agency intersect under the pressure of patriarchal norms. By closely analyzing *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, and *The Immigrant*, Custody this study demonstrates how silence operates not merely as social imposition but as an internalized psychological condition that fractures identity. Conversely, expression emerges as a contested, often painful process of articulation that signals resistance and self-formation. The paper argues that Kapur’s protagonists move through phases of repression, fragmentation, and partial articulation toward moments of self-awareness and tentative autonomy. Ultimately, Kapur’s literary universe reveals the complexity of women’s psychological experiences, where voice is hard-won and identity remains fluid, negotiated, and incomplete.*

Keywords: Female psyche, silence, expression, repression, identity, psychoanalysis, feminism, Manju Kapur.

Introduction

Contemporary Indian English fiction has witnessed a marked shift toward the exploration of interiority, particularly in its nuanced portrayal of women’s psychological landscapes. Within this evolving literary paradigm, Manju Kapur’s novels emerge as compelling sites of inquiry, offering more than surface-level social critique. Her narratives delve deeply into the emotional and psychological complexities of women who find themselves constrained by deeply entrenched patriarchal structures. Rather than presenting women merely as victims or rebels, Kapur crafts layered protagonists whose inner lives reflect a constant negotiation between personal desire and societal expectation. The tension between silence and expression becomes a defining axis in her work, structuring both the narrative progression and the gradual unfolding of character consciousness.

Silence in Kapur’s fiction operates on multiple levels, functioning not only as a social imposition but also as an internalized psychological condition. Women in her novels are often conditioned to suppress their desires, emotions, and dissenting voices in order to maintain familial harmony and social propriety. This enforced silence gradually transforms into a form of self-regulation, aligning closely with psychoanalytic notions of repression, where unarticulated desires are pushed into the unconscious. However, silence is not always passive; at times, it becomes a strategic retreat or a subtle form of resistance. In contrast, expression—whether through speech, action, or transgression—is fraught with ambivalence. When women attempt to articulate their inner selves, they often

encounter guilt, anxiety, and social repercussions, revealing that expression does not guarantee liberation but instead opens up new arenas of conflict.

This dynamic interplay between silence and expression forms the crux of Kapur's exploration of the female psyche. Her protagonists are engaged in an ongoing process of identity formation, shaped by unconscious desires, societal pressures, and the longing for self-definition. By drawing on psychoanalytic frameworks such as repression and the unconscious, alongside feminist critiques of patriarchal power structures, Kapur's work illuminates the intricate processes through which women negotiate their subjectivity. The tension between what is felt and what can be expressed ultimately defines the psychological trajectories of her characters, making her fiction a rich terrain for examining the complexities of women's inner lives in contemporary society.

Theoretical Framework: Psychoanalysis and Feminist Interventions

The psychoanalytic framework, particularly the theories developed by Sigmund Freud, offers a compelling lens through which the inner worlds of Manju Kapur's characters can be understood. Central to this framework is the concept of repression, a process by which socially unacceptable desires and emotions are pushed into the unconscious mind. In Kapur's fiction, this repression is not merely individual but deeply conditioned by cultural expectations. The conflict between the id's instinctual impulses and the superego's moral authority becomes especially pronounced in the lives of her female protagonists, whose desires often clash with rigid societal norms. As a result, their suppressed emotions tend to reappear in indirect, conflicted, or self-destructive forms, revealing the psychological costs of sustained repression.

Within this context, patriarchy in Kapur's novels may be interpreted as an externalized form of the superego that enforces discipline and conformity. Over time, these external pressures are internalized, shaping the ego and producing a subjectivity that is marked by constant self-surveillance and regulation. Women characters begin to monitor their own thoughts and behaviors, often perceiving their personal desires as deviant or morally suspect. This internal division creates a fragmented psyche, where the self is split between compliance and resistance. The resulting tension is not only psychological but existential, as women struggle to reconcile their inner impulses with the expectations imposed upon them. Thus, the conflict between silence and expression becomes deeply embedded in their psychic structure.

The awakening of feminism and psychoanalysis both changed female consciousness and challenged patriarchal norms. As most literature is produced by men, there rises a reliable question that how much men discern the female psyche. In the article "The Psychology of Feminism" Hugh E. Stutfield writes:

The Soul of woman, its Sphinx-like ambiguities and complexities, its manifold contradictions, its sorrows and joys, its vagrant fancies and never-to-be longings, furnish the literary analyst of these days with inexhaustible material . . . Psychology . . . is their never-ending delight; and modern woman, who if we may believe those who claim to know most about her, is a sort of walking enigma, is their chief subject of investigation. Her ego, that mysterious entity of which she is only just becoming conscious, is said to remain a *terra incognita* even to herself; but they are determined to explore its innermost recesses. The pioneers of this formidable undertaking must necessity be women. Man, great, clumsy, comical creature that he is, knows nothing of the inner springs of the modern Eve's complicated nature. (104)

Silence as Social Conditioning and Psychic Repression

Silence as social conditioning and psychic repression is a recurring and unifying motif across the novels of Manju Kapur, where female subjectivity is shaped through a gradual internalization of patriarchal norms. From a psychoanalytic perspective rooted in the ideas of Sigmund Freud, this silence can be understood as a mechanism of repression, wherein socially unacceptable desires are pushed into the unconscious. In *Difficult Daughters*,

Virmati's aspirations for education and emotional autonomy are constantly checked by familial expectations, leading her to internalize silence as a mode of survival. Similarly, in *A Married Woman*, Astha's desires—both creative and emotional—are subdued within the confines of marriage, producing a divided self that oscillates between conformity and suppressed longing. In both narratives, silence is not imposed only externally but becomes a psychic condition, shaping how women perceive their own desires as transgressive.

This pattern deepens in *Home* and *The Immigrant*, where silence is embedded within domestic and diasporic spaces. In *Home*, the joint family structure enforces a culture of muted female presence, where women's labor is essential yet their voices remain unheard. The normalization of such silence results in its internalization, creating characters who lack even the language to articulate their dissatisfaction. Nisha finds it difficult to openly narrate the incident to anybody in the home including her mother. The novelist describes the grim effect of sexual abuse on Nisha: "In the days that followed, Nisha grew silent. For the first time she felt divided from the family she had so unthinkably been part of" (*Home* 59). Right from the beginning of her childhood, she has been oriented about her being clean, so she feels disturbed that she has committed something filthy. She tries to force it out of her thoughts but she cannot do it. It affects her normal routine life. "That evening Nisha could not eat. Her mouth felt dry, her head heavy, her hands clammy" (63). In *The Immigrant*, Nina's experience of migration introduces another layer to this repression: geographical displacement intensifies her emotional isolation, and silence becomes a response to both cultural alienation and marital discontent. Her inability to openly confront issues of intimacy and identity reflects a deeply ingrained habit of suppressing conflict. Across these works, silence evolves into a psychological defence, allowing characters to navigate oppressive environments while simultaneously deepening their inner fragmentation.

In *Custody*, silence takes on a more complex dimension, as it intersects with themes of marital breakdown, motherhood, and social judgment. Here, silence is not only a tool of suppression but also a space of emotional withdrawal, where characters retreat inward to cope with betrayal and instability. Ishita is one of important characters of this novel who is also a victim of societal expectations and patriarchal ideology. She suffers silently the grief of being infertile and as a result she is mistreated and insulted. One finds her psychologically stunted and distorted: "Smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in the sunlit air, smaller than the drops of dew caught between blades of grass in the morning was Ishita as she sat in the gynaecologist's office" (*Custody* 65). Kapur's fiction reveals that silence is not merely a lack of expression but a deeply embedded condition that shapes identity, perpetuates subordination, and underscores the enduring conflict between selfhood and societal expectation.

The Burden of Internalized Patriarchy

The burden of internalized patriarchy is a defining feature of the female experience across the novels of Manju Kapur, where social norms are not only imposed from the outside but absorbed into the very fabric of women's consciousness. In her novels such as *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*, protagonists like Virmati and Astha reveal how deeply patriarchal values infiltrate the psyche, shaping desires, choices, and moral judgments. Even when these women attempt to assert independence—through education, creative expression, or emotional relationships—they remain constrained by an internal voice that induces guilt and self-doubt. This internal authority closely resembles the Freudian superego, a moral regulator formed through social conditioning, as theorized by Sigmund Freud. As a result, their struggles are not only against external restrictions but also against an internalized system of control that renders rebellion psychologically fraught and incomplete. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* observes: "There is a unanimous agreement that getting a husband – or on some cases a 'protector' – is for her the most important of undertakings.... She will free herself from the parental home, from

her mother's hold, she will open up her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of a new master" (352).

This burden becomes even more pronounced in *Home, The Immigrant, and Custody*, where women's roles within domestic, diasporic, and fractured familial spaces further reinforce patriarchal conditioning. In *Home*, the joint family system normalizes female subservience to such an extent that women begin to perpetuate the same values upon one another, illustrating how patriarchy sustains itself through internalization. In *The Immigrant*, Nina's struggles with intimacy, identity, and displacement are compounded by her ingrained sense of duty and propriety, which inhibits open confrontation and self-assertion. Similarly, in *Custody*, the emotional turmoil of separation and motherhood reveals how women continue to measure themselves against societal expectations, even in moments of personal crisis. Across all these novels, Kapur underscores that internalized patriarchy is not merely a backdrop but an active psychological force—one that compels women to police themselves, silence their desires, and participate, often unconsciously, in their own subordination.

Fragmentation of Identity and the Divided Self

The fragmentation of identity and the emergence of the divided self-constitute central psychological concerns in the novels of Manju Kapur. Her female protagonists are rarely unified subjects; instead, they inhabit fractured identities shaped by the tension between personal desire and social obligation. Drawing upon psychoanalytic insights, particularly those associated with Sigmund Freud, this division may be understood as a conflict between instinctual drives and internalized moral constraints. In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati's yearning for education and emotional fulfillment is persistently undermined by her sense of duty toward family and tradition, resulting in a self that is split between aspiration and compliance. Similarly, in *A Married Woman*, Astha's identity is divided between her roles as wife and mother and her suppressed creative and emotional desires, producing a constant oscillation between conformity and self-expression.

In *Home*, the joint family structure imposes rigid gender roles that leave little room for individual identity, resulting in women who are defined more by their functions than by their sense of self. This erasure of individuality produces a fragmented subjectivity, where personal desires are either muted or rendered illegible. In *The Immigrant*, Nina's diasporic experience introduces an additional layer of division, as she navigates between cultural identities while also grappling with marital dissatisfaction and bodily anxieties. Her sense of self becomes increasingly unstable, caught between the expectations of tradition and the realities of a new cultural environment, highlighting how displacement can exacerbate psychic disunity.

In *Custody*, fragmentation takes on an even more complex form, as the breakdown of marriage and the struggle over motherhood produce conflicting identities that cannot be easily reconciled. The characters are pulled between competing roles—spouse, parent, individual—each demanding allegiance and emotional investment. This multiplicity leads to a fractured self that is constantly negotiating its own coherence. Ultimately, Kapur's work reveals that the divided self is not merely a personal dilemma but a condition produced by the intersection of psychological conflict and socio-cultural constraint.

Marriage, Sexuality, and the Politics of the Body

Marriage, sexuality, and the politics of the body occupy a central place in the fictional universe of Manju Kapur, where intimate relationships become key sites for the negotiation of power, identity, and autonomy. Across her novels, marriage is rarely depicted as a space of fulfillment; instead, it often functions as a social institution that disciplines women's bodies and regulates their desires. In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati's relationship with the married professor disrupts conventional norms, yet ultimately describes her within a structure that denies her full emotional and social legitimacy. Similarly, in *A Married Woman*, Astha's marriage becomes a site of emotional

and sexual dissatisfaction, prompting her to seek fulfillment outside heteronormative boundaries. Her exploration of same-sex desire challenges patriarchal control over the female body, yet it is fraught with guilt and instability, revealing how deeply social norms shape even acts of transgression.

The politics of the body is further explored in *Home* and *The Immigrant*, where women's bodily experiences are closely tied to expectations of reproduction, sexual propriety, and domestic duty. In *Home*, the female body is largely confined to its reproductive and laboring functions within the joint family, leaving little space for personal agency or desire. Women's sexuality is silenced, regulated, and often rendered invisible, reinforcing their subordinate position. In *The Immigrant*, however, sexuality emerges as a more explicit terrain of conflict, particularly through Nina's struggles with sexual compatibility, bodily anxiety, and emotional intimacy. Her experiences highlight the psychological impact of unfulfilled desire and the pressure to conform to normative expectations of marriage and femininity, especially within a diasporic context. The body, in these narratives, becomes a contested site where personal needs and cultural prescriptions collide.

In *Custody*, the intersections of marriage, sexuality, and the body are further complicated by themes of infidelity, separation, and maternal identity. The breakdown of marital relationships exposes the fragility of socially sanctioned bonds and reveals the emotional and bodily toll of betrayal. Shagun's act of sexual violation, in *Custody*, celebrates female sexual self-assertion embodied in a new feminist assumption that woman is a desiring subject with an intense longing for sexual expression, satisfaction and fulfilment: "She sank down next to him; she knew she would have a happiness she never had before. If she were to die tomorrow it would be as a fulfilled woman" (113). Kapur presents marriage and sexuality as deeply political domains, where the female body is both a site of oppression and a potential locus of resistance, even as that resistance remains fraught with contradiction and constraint.

Towards Healing: Self-Realization and Partial Liberation

The movement toward healing in the novels of Manju Kapur is neither linear nor absolute, but marked by moments of self-realization that gesture toward partial liberation. Her female protagonists gradually develop an awareness of the forces that shape and constrain their lives, recognizing the internalized nature of their oppression. This awakening often emerges through emotional crises—failed relationships, dissatisfaction within marriage, or the strain of unfulfilled desires—which compel them to confront their fragmented selves. Drawing on psychoanalytic insights associated with Sigmund Freud, such moments can be seen as the surfacing of repressed desires into conscious awareness. In *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*, for instance, Virmati and Astha achieve a degree of introspection that allows them to question the legitimacy of the roles imposed upon them, even if they cannot fully escape them. Healing, in this sense, begins with the articulation—however tentative—of one's inner conflicts.

However, Kapur resists presenting liberation as complete or easily attainable. In *Home*, *The Immigrant*, and *Custody*, the process of self-realization leads to incremental shifts rather than radical transformation. Girija Uggirangi writes how Nisha achieves healing through marriage in her *Women in the Novels of Manju Kapur* when she says: "Nisha does not want to trap her entire life into home. As a businesswoman, Nisha worked successfully for last two years. It brings to her sense of achievement in life helping her to create her own identity, her own voice; and her own place in the society and in home. This sense of self-reliance is a spark in the new woman in Indian society" (197). Characters like Nina or the women negotiating fractured domestic spaces begin to assert their needs, yet remain entangled within social and emotional structures that limit their autonomy. Feminist perspectives, particularly those articulated by Simone de Beauvoir, help illuminate this condition of "becoming," where freedom is always in process rather than fully achieved. Thus, healing in Kapur's fiction is best understood

as a fragile and on-going negotiation—a movement from silence toward expression, from repression toward awareness, and from total subjugation toward partial, hard-won agency.

Conclusion

The novels of Manju Kapur offer a profound exploration of the female psyche within the constraints of patriarchal society. Through a sustained engagement with themes such as silence, repression, internalized patriarchy, and the fragmentation of identity, her fiction reveals the intricate ways in which social structures shape inner lives. Drawing implicitly on psychoanalytic frameworks associated with Sigmund Freud, Kapur portrays her women characters as subjects caught in a constant negotiation between desire and duty, expression and suppression. Their struggles are not merely external but deeply internalized, producing divided selves that grapple with guilt, anxiety, and a persistent sense of incompleteness. By foregrounding these psychological tensions, Kapur moves beyond conventional social realism to present a layered understanding of women's lived experiences. At the same time, her work remains deeply aligned with feminist concerns, echoing the insights of thinkers like Simone de Beauvoir in its portrayal of woman as a subject shaped by structures of power and inequality. Yet, Kapur resists simplistic resolutions; her narratives do not culminate in absolute liberation but instead highlight the possibility of partial healing and evolving self-awareness. Ultimately, Kapur's literary universe affirms that the movement from silence to expression, from repression to recognition, constitutes a significant—if partial—step toward reclaiming agency and redefining the self within a complex and often resistant world.

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