

Chapter III

The Myths and Discourse of Matrimony

Marriage is a sanctifying ceremony that lays the basic foundation of a family and the building block of a society. Marriage and family are not only important for the existence and functioning of the society, but also for the sustenance and continuation of the human race. Marriage is an indissoluble institution and a sacred bond that unites a man and a woman to live in harmony. The matrimonial ritual is a social sacrosanct, which is governed by values, rules and regulations, laws, customs, and traditions for the human welfare. The sacrament of marriage plays a major role in the preservation of morals and transmission of culture to the future generations. Marriage is obligatory in the lives of women, who are the repository of cultural norms of the family and society.

Marital inequality persists, though women are ordained with the exclusive right to be an '*Ardhangini*', which emphasises their equality and oneness with their husbands. Himajyoti Doley in the article "Relevance Of Mahatma Gandhi's Ideas on Women Empowerment" quotes the words of M. K. Gandhi as, "...the wife is not the husband's slave but his companion and his help-mate and an equal partner in all joys and sorrows- as free as the husband to choose her own path" (1542). Matrimony becomes an ordeal when women are expected to accept their womanhood by sacrificing and surrendering their own identity, personal interests, emotions, and self-pride. In the patriarchal Indian society, women's identity, dignity, respect, and empowerment are steered by their marital status. Women are left unrecognised for the multi-faceted roles they play in the family and society while the wedlock reduces them to be a self-effacing persona.

Marriage gives men the right to exploit and oppress their female counterparts in the domestic setting. The rigid, strict, and orthodox customs of marriage govern women to be subordinate to their husbands and are expected to be the ‘*Pativrata*’ (following the will of husbands). The status of married women is degraded to be the domestic labourers, perfect homemakers, and child-bearing machines. Rosalind Miles in the book, *Who Cooked the Last Supper: The Women’s History of the World* (1988) writes that, women are expected to excel in the art of “Home Economics and “Domestic Science” which furiously gilds their cage under the barrage of “ideal homes” (11).

Manju Kapur critically explores the institution of marriage which constrains women to lead a dignified and gratified life in her novels, *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant*, *Custody*, and *Brothers*. She depicts the lives of married women in all its complexities and emerging contradictions in the context of growing desire for truthful love, self-fulfillment, recognition, and autonomy. Marriage demands the educated, intelligent, efficient, and employed women protagonists of Manju Kapur to be subservient. The heroines of Manju Kapur namely, Virmati (*Difficult Daughters*), Astha (*A Married Woman*), Nisha (*Home*), Nina (*The Immigrant*), Shagun and Ishita (*Custody*), and Tapti Gaina (*Brothers*), feel trapped in the institution of marriage that curtails the feminine freedom, independence, and self-development. The economic dependence on the patriarchs of the family downgrade the status of the women protagonists to be mere unpaid maids and are expected to endure their roles as a wife and a daughter-in-law unquestioningly. Manju Kapur lays emphasis on the financial independence of women which is essential for them to stand on their own and the viewpoint of the novelist corresponds with the philosophical assumption of Virginia

Woolf, who in the eminent work, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), mentions that, "...a woman must have money and a room of her own..." (6).

The women protagonists, Virmati, Astha, Nisha, Nina, Shagun, Ishita, and Tapti Gaina attempt to earn successful and respectable status in the society when their husbands and marital family members provoke their psyche to feel abandoned and insecure. The concept of family, marriage, and motherhood is deeply ingrained in the minds of Indian women right from their childhood, but the women protagonists are constantly vying for space in the personal and professional arena as they do not wish to be entangled in the social maze of marriage which subjugates and ostracises their potentials within the four walls of the house. They strive hard and struggle to explore beyond the domestic terrain, aiming to be the active participants and rational decision makers on par with men in the familial, social, political and intellectual aspects of life.

Virmati, the protagonist of the novel, *Difficult Daughters*, and the eldest daughter among eleven siblings in the family, finds herself in a dilemma, whether to fulfil her desire to be an educated woman and have her own space, career, and identity or to accept the marriage proposal. Ajaz Ahmad Bhat, Showkat Ahmad Wani and Dr. Alka Gopal in the article, "Search of Identity: A Study of Manju Kapur's novel *"Difficult Daughters"*" quote the words of Vera Alexander, who comments that, "In the juxtaposition of marriage and education, education is either described in terms of a threat, or portrayed as a dead end, reducing accomplished female characters to obedient wifery and dependency rather than enabling them to make a living out of their training" (32). The parents, Kasturi-Suraj Prakash want nothing from Virmati, "...but an agreement to marry", for they want to be relieved of their parental responsibilities after settling their

six daughters in the matrimonial bond (DD 100). The mother, Kasturi pressurises Virmati to get married stating, “Remember you are going to be married next month, if I have to swallow poison to make you do it!” (DD 60).

Virmati stands against the pressures of orthodox principles and the compulsion of her parents towards marriage as she prioritises her education over marriage. Christopher Rollason in the book, *Novels of Manju Kapur: A Feminist Study* (2010), shares his thoughts that “Virmati, like so many other sub continental women, is asked to accept a typical arranged marriage. She rebels against that destiny, to the lasting shame of her family, above all of her mother. Insisting on her right to be educated, she manages to leave home to study in Lahore” (2). Virmati accomplishes her dreams to be independent, both physically and financially, procuring the job as a school principal, soon after her higher education. The tenacious self-assertiveness of Virmati begins to wane when her life is sealed in the name of love by her professor, Harish Chandra.

Harish, engrossed by Virmati’s beauty, talents, potentials, and her intellectual thirst, hides the fact that he is already a married man with two children. He is a manipulator and “... a worldly person caught in his own desires.” (DD 93). He gratifies his male desire by capitalising Virmati’s sentiments and his frailty for physical pleasure induces him to treat her as a commodity. Devika in the article “Disastrous Synthesis of Desire and Duty in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*” remarks that “This man [Harish] of seemingly sublime and sober nature, in verity, turns out to be a sycophant who spoils the life of Virmati to satisfy his thirst for keeping a woman in his awe” (234).

Virmati, innocent and unaware of the professor’s deceitfulness, is betrayed and falls a prey to his disloyalty and his act of treachery. Her trust on the professor is

shattered into pieces, leaving her emotionally famished for a sense of security and belonging. Manju Kapur expresses the thoughts of Virmati as “She was his for life, whether he ever married her or not. Her body was marked by him, she could never look elsewhere, never entertain another choice” (DD 177). The virtue of Virmati’s allegiance to the professor becomes a major tragic flaw when she bears the brunt of humiliation and disrepute as an unwed pregnant woman. B.R. Aggarwal in the article “Indian English Literature and Crisis in Value System, A study of *Difficult Daughters* by Manju Kapur” observes that, “Virmati is reduced to an object, a body that is conquered and a consciousness that is violated” (245-246). Virmati gets entangled into a whirlpool of agonies, and regrets that her destiny is mutilated while Harish pressurises to abort her pregnancy.

Virmati is haunted by a deep sense of guilt as she comprehends the plight of Harish’s wife, Ganga, an illiterate, who is also tricked and victimised to be a puppet at the hands of her husband, serves as a mere unrecognised domestic servant to Harish and his mother, leading a subdued, miserable life at her marital home. Harish reveals his true face of masculinity, artificing the lives of two women, Virmati and Ganga, who are ardently devoted to him. The patience and fortitude of Virmati and Ganga are brushed aside by Harish, who is neither ready to accept Virmati as his wife nor does he lead a faithful and satisfied life with Ganga. Manju Kapur apprehends that women’s submission to male supremacy disintegrates their identity in the family and society.

Virmati feels sorry for causing havoc in Ganga’s life and experiences a sense of ignominy because of it, but with a heavy heart and left with no other choice, she reluctantly decides to marry Harish with the belief that she could overcome physical and

emotional adversities through the nuptial tie. Manju Kapur states that “The thought of her wedding was always at the back of her mind, splitting her into ...socially unacceptable pieces” (DD 55). Marriage to Virmati means deliverance from the fear of social condemnation, while her decision to marry the professor is reprimanded by her parents because such a marriage is considered to be a bigamy and a punishable offense in the Indian social norms. Virmati becomes an outcast, banished from her family and cursed by the society when she opts to take the road which is least travelled by Indian women of marrying a married man. Kushma Kumari and Dr. T. Narayana in the article “Changing Role of Women in Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters*” quote the words of Binod Mishra, who states that, “However educated or innovative an Indian woman is, her Indian background and psyche cannot feel satisfied unless society approves of her endeavours and her relationship” (23).

Virmati grows impatient when Harish procrastinates to reveal his consent to marry her. She expresses her anxiety – “How long do we have to be secret man and wife, hidden from the eyes of the world? I hate it...” (DD 140). She coerces Harish saying, “Why don’t we get married? You say your family makes no difference. But still you want to continue in this way. Be honest with me. ...I cannot go on waiting” (DD 149-151).

The soaring balloon of Virmati’s imagination to lead a harmonious marital life is dismayed by Harish, who locks her life under domesticity. She is denied of marital privileges, and treated like a refugee; her status remains to be an illegal wife in accordance with the governing norms of the family and society. The marital life of Virmati is full of scars, stress, and despair as it creates irrevocable lines of hostility, pain, and suffering while her identity dissolves like a salt doll. Manju Kapur exposes the

remorseful marital life of Virmati – “As for me, I know... Nobody can escape their karma. May be what is happening to [Virmati] now is part of it...” (DD 92). The birth of Virmati’s daughter, Ida, is unwelcomed and Ganga reckons the new born child to be the rival heir of the family. Virmati succumbs to marital dissonance and suffers as a single-parent to nurture her daughter with love, care, guidance, and support despite the life challenges. Manju Kapur presents the predicaments of Virmati, who becomes a victim, caught in an inevitable marital relationship.

Virmati gains courage to overcome the marital dejection when she realises that female autonomy is essential to get rid of emotional devastation. She alienates herself from the vulnerable circumstances, shifts to the ashram, ‘Shantiniketan’ with her daughter, and decides to stay away from everyone to evade her mental trauma that pose threat to her peace of mind. She “...hugged her bag in her lap and thought, I’ve come, I’m going to be on my own, this is a new beginning” to revive herself from the feeling of exhaustion to survive (DD 112). The educational and intellectual proficiency of Virmati along with financial independence becomes the major thriving force for her survival and an antidote to the fear of insecurity.

Virmati is able to recuperate her hope when she finds the space to work on what brings her joy, motivation, and inspiration, which rekindle her determination to lead a meaningful life. Manju Kapur remarks that “Virmati had never had so much space around her. Maybe this was really what she had fought for all along, space to be. She conceived” (DD 273-274). Virmati engages herself in social activities, freedom struggle movements, and fights for women’s rights in the patriarchal society. She gradually ventures into politics, which is a new forte to explore and learns that involvement in

political front ensures a platform for women to advocate their rights, implement policies for their welfare, and contribute to positive societal change. Manju Kapur opines that “As women’ it is our duty, no, not duty, that word has unpleasant connotations. It is our privilege to give ourselves to the unity of our country...” and women’s political participation is a fundamental prerequisite for gender equality and genuine democracy (DD 145). Mayur Chhikara in the article “Manju Kapur’s *Difficult Daughters* A Saga of Feminist Autonomy and Separate Identity” writes that

The novelist has portrayed her protagonist as a woman caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. The women of India have indeed achieved their success in half a century of Independence, but if there is to be a true female independence, much remains to be done. (189)

From ancient times until today, women are denied the opportunity to enrich their sense of self-hood and decision-making abilities, but Manju Kapur establishes her standpoint that, educational and intellectual competencies have strengthened the path to their progress in the family and contemporary society.

Manju Kapur is keen to initiate new strategies to transform the subjugation of women and eradicate domestic violence in the family. She exposes the hindrances of women in the marital homes and their patience to cope with the tantrums of their husbands. In the novel, *A Married Woman*, Astha, the protagonist, marries Hemant, a well-educated man, dreams to live a happy married life within the secure and loving family environment, and tirelessly balances her servitude in the role of a wife and daughter-in-law. The husband-wife relationship starts to lose its proximity and sinks in

oblivion when Hemant demands a male heir. Hemant expresses his discontentment when the daughter, Anuradha is born and reveals his expectations to his wife – “...we will have a son, and if we don't we needn't stop at two... I was so pleased Anu was a girl. But that doesn't mean we should not try for a boy...” (AMW 61), but Astha is totally against the gender bias which prevails in Indian families. The conventions of the patriarchal decree state that the birth of an offspring is celebrated when the family's first-born child happens to be a baby boy. Manju Kapur portrays the harsh realities of Indian patriarchal thinking as the cultural preference for a male heir reduces the status of Astha to be a child-bearing machine. Astha gives birth to her son, Himanshu and she “... was officially declared the mother of a son. Her status rose...” (AMW 69).

Astha renders her constant physical and emotional support to her husband, Hemant, who is busy in crafting his entrepreneurial venture. Hemant is overtly preoccupied to achieve economic and materialistic success for preserving his megalomaniacal path to power. Astha tells her husband that “Money isn't everything darling. Look, you have your family, me, our parents”, but he lends no ears to the opinions of his caring wife (AMW 50). The accumulation of material resources makes Hemant selfish and he fails to recognise or appreciate the sacrifices of Astha, who had walked on a thorny path to see her husband succeed as a businessman. He becomes a dictator in formulating his opinions, takes pleasure in disgracing his wife, and turns to be an unsympathetic husband. The husband-wife relationship begins to sour day by day and “Astha's desire receded. She felt cold, dreary and distanced from him. She had been waiting for him all day, thinking of their being together, but nothing of this was reciprocated. He was a criminal, destroying her anticipation, ruining her

happiness” (AMW 50). Astha becomes restless and sensitive to withstand the act of repression by her husband. She is a victim of her husband’s male chauvinism and the patriarchal power structure which torment her individuality.

Astha is frustrated and gets acquainted with disappointment to live an unrecognised life when the growing distance from her husband arouses a sense of isolation, dreariness, guilt, negativity, and despondency that affect her psyche. She symbolises the plight of Indian married women, who are caught between their desire for love, and their obligation towards family life. Sudharshan Sharma in the article “Manju Kapur’s Nowhere Women” remarks that, “Astha cannot make up her mind. She is unable to tear herself apart from her husband and children... Torn between the two choices she becomes a true symbol of a nowhere woman” (50). Astha is forced to look for the meaning of life outside the domestic province when she feels agonised in the marital relationship.

Astha procures the job as a school teacher to shed her loneliness, marital dissatisfaction, and anguish and her career “...represented security, not perhaps money, but of her own life, of a place where she could be herself” (AMW 149). She articulates the significance of women’s career and their financial independence which not only help them to gain respect and feel secured even after being abandoned by their husbands, but also become the back-bone to their sustenance and survival. She withstands the familial pressures all by herself without the support from her husband or family members and fulfils the role of both, the father and the mother to her children. Manju Kapur remarks that “Astha was now virtually a single mother...between her marriage and the birth of her

children, she too had changed from being a woman who only wanted love, to a woman who valued independence” (AMW 71-72).

Astha engages herself in exploring her majestic artistic skills like writing poetry and painting, which give her a sense of relief. She knits her life with silence, embraces the gentle breeze of isolation, and devotes her time to sculpt her identity as a writer. She enters into a different private world when art becomes a refuge that gives her the freedom of individual choice and expression. She starts processing her thoughts, takes stock of things, pulls the strings, achieves what she can, and satiates with it. She is appreciated and recognised by “The Street Theatre Group” for her artistic talents which awaken her social and political spirit. She emerges as a social activist despite the refrain from her family members. She participates in political rallies to fight against communal disparity and the societal injustices against women that exist in the patriarchal society. Manju Kapur suggests that social empowerment of women opens the door of golden vistas to explore new opportunities to transform their dismal lives in the Indian familial background.

The triumph of Astha does not last long when Hemant feels that his male-ego is assessed. Hemant, who wants to withhold his male-power, disapproves the multiple roles of Astha to be a working woman, artist, and a social activist. He wants to hold the power over money, finance, and career, which are the sole domains of men in the Indian society. Gender differences in financial inclusion have far-reaching effects on women’s quality of life and autonomy as they are at risk of financial fragility and poverty, especially in times of crisis. Hemant threatens to diminish his wife’s mental stability; he criticises and persuades Astha to quit her job with the intention to regress her life under domesticity

and suppress his wife's individual growth and development. He tries to restrict the position of Astha to be a naïve subaltern woman, who grapples with marginality and oppression. Astha is infuriated of her husband's masculine authority, protests against the domestic exploitation to discard the dependency syndrome of women, and desires to lead an individualistic life.

Astha is unwilling to compromise her desires and aspirations to be an independent woman. She gives importance to her inner urge and strongly decides not to give up her feminine strength that offered her with comfort, fulfillment, satisfaction, and solace. Betty Friedan in the book, *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) admits that the problem of women is not only of physical relationships, but also the identity crisis and claims that, "For woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment, autonomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization is as important as sexual need, with serious consequences when it is thwarted" (448). Manju Kapur depicts the tireless efforts of Astha, who carves her career identity and overcomes her husband's tortures which threatened to trample her physical and emotional stability. The characterisation of Astha presents the dilemma of Indian married women in the patriarchal framework and comprehends the tension that arises to resolve the problems faced by them in the domestic and social spheres to assert their individual selves.

The women protagonists of Manju Kapur sympathise with the primal essence of family bond and societal predicaments. Nisha, the protagonist of the novel, *Home*, lives in the suffocating atmosphere of the traditional constraints which instil the belief that a woman is supposed to find satisfaction in the performance of her duties as a daughter, sister, wife, daughter-in-law, and a mother. Nisha, who aspires to live an independent life

beyond the domestic and familial limits, finds it ambiguous to balance the multifaceted role of a woman in the family. She wishes to establish her identity to be an entrepreneur like her father and brothers, for she hails from an orthodox merchant family of the Banwarilals. Her dream to be a successful business woman is not encouraged by the elders in the Banwarilal family, but she strongly voices her desires to set her goals, be competent, and create her identity equal to that of men in the patriarchal family and society.

Nisha draws the inspiration from her aunt, Rupa, a business woman, who boosts her confidence to be independent. The motivation from the aunt assists Nisha to leap to greater heights in the business forum. Rupa renders help and extends moral support to launch the business enterprise named, “Nisha’s Creations”. She tutors Nisha on financial acumen, management abilities, organisational skills, and counsels to be precautionary in order to confront the challenges that exist in the ecosystem of entrepreneurship. Nisha surpasses the pronounced cultural and gender prejudices that exist in the network system of entrepreneurship and upsurges her status to be a tough business competitor to her father and brothers. Manju Kapur tries to emphasise that women’s resilience to succeed and emancipate take place only when they are courageous enough to uncover their potentials to mark their footprints in the history of patriarchy.

The spirit and determination of Nisha to be an independent woman coerced her to reach the milestone of establishing her business venture, but she too like any other Indian woman, is forced by her parents and family to get married. A woman is destined to marry or else she becomes an object of pity, sympathy, and secret speculation in the family and society, while Nisha objects to confine herself to the ideals of Indian marriage and

womanhood. She dismisses the patriarchal belief that marriage should be the sole factor to govern a woman's life. Her preference to experiment with her own life to be financially independent, is considered to be one of the root causes of her delayed marriage. The anxiety over the marriage of a girl child, which runs high in Indian families, suffocates the Banwarilal's family, who believe that arranged marriages ensure safety, security, and well-being of a woman.

The agitation over Nisha's marriage is worsened when she finds herself in the grip of a skin disease, which is an added disappointment to her marriage prospects besides the astrological and religious beliefs. Marriage is a solemnised occasion in the Indian society where astrology, an ancient science, plays a major role in match-making. The parents are disheartened of their daughter's horoscope that pronounces Nisha to be a '*Manglik*', which is an unfavourable sign for marriage, creating constant problems not just in marriage proposals, but also in the marital life.

The superstitious beliefs stigmatise Nisha, who is persuaded to offer prayers and undertake penance to join hands with a suitable match. Nisha is compelled to observe '*Karva Chauth*' fast, a traditional Hindu ritual, to develop the habit of sacrifice, which is practiced by married women and young girls of marriageable age, who pray for the longevity of their husbands and future grooms, respectively. The rituals and myths are entrenched in the minds of Indian women, who are taught right from their childhood, to be selfless and devoted to their husbands in order to lead a happy married life. Nisha is tortured in the name of rites and customs, but she revolts to accept the primitive ideas which traumatises her mental and physical strength. Her emotional distress or happiness

is not considered or given a second thought by her parents, who get her married to Arvind, a widower and a '*Manglik*', to accomplish their parental responsibilities.

Nisha feels annoyed when she is pressurised to give birth to a baby boy within a year of marriage. She is dissatisfied to know that her husband's family requires a child-producing machine to give birth to a male heir, who will carry forward their familial and entrepreneurial fortune. She attains motherhood as expected by the marital family and gives birth to fraternal twin children, "One girl, one boy. Her duty was over – God had been kind..." (*Home* 335). After the birth of her children, the role of Nisha turns to be a mere care-taker and her life becomes unexciting, while her routine revolves around the family and other domestic needs. Her status and role as an entrepreneur remain invisible due to marital and family obligations.

Nisha develops a strong resolution, not to give up her business empire, for she is confident that she would be able to skilfully deal with the ambiguities of combining both, the familial and professional roles. She revolutionises the patriarchal norms that traditionally favour and revere men in the professional environment while her business venture offers the physical, emotional, and financial liberty. She envisions to pave way for a progressive society that would be healthier, safer, and unbiased in the professional environment. Manju Kapur appreciates the will power of Nisha to be a self-made woman regardless of the multiple roles she plays in the familial and societal environment. She accentuates that, women should not compromise with their familial roles, but they have to be courageous in transforming their state of subjugation with constant perseverance to pursue their ambitions and occupational endowments by empowering themselves in the family and the patriarchal society.

Manju Kapur poignantly portrays the demeanour of women as brave and courageous when they break the shackles of prejudice in the novel, *The Immigrant*. The protagonist, Nina, a professor, quits her job to marry Ananda, an Indian immigrant and a dentist by profession. Marriage means migration of women from their natal homes to their marital homes while the marriage of Nina compels her to relocate to Canada as an immigrant and she "...joined legions of women who crossed the seas to marry men in unseen lands" (*The Immigrant* 78). Prasanth. P.S. in the article, "The Female Diaspora: Marriage as A Metaphor of Migration" remarks that

In contrast to the mobility of men, of course, the function of woman is to be stable in the conventional sense. At the same time, there exists some practice of forced mobility or better call it forced migration in all patriarchal societies. Forced or not, marriage is such a system of migration in Indian context...A woman after marriage is forced to believe that she has been transformed permanently from her actual home to the new one. Just similar to the experience of a migrated individual, she faces the question of homelessness... (571)

Nina, a newcomer, feels hurt, edgy, and embarrassed as her torments escalate at the immigration clearance counter when she is interrogated – "How did you meet your husband? How often had you met your husband before you married?" and assessed of her color, creed, race, and culture as part of the protocol (*The Immigrant* 106). Ananda's apology for the unpleasant humiliations during immigration do not erase the insults from her mind. John Mc'Leod in the book, *Beginning Postcolonialism* (2011) comments that "Migrants tend to arrive in new places with baggage: both in the physical sense of

possessions or belongings, but also the less tangible matter of beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values. This can have consequences for the ways in which others may or may not make migrants feel ‘at home’ or arrival in a new place” (211-12).

Nina reveals her angst – “I am the wrong color, I come from the wrong place. See me in this airport, of all the passengers the only one not allowed to sail through immigration, made to feel like an illegal alien” (*The Immigrant* 107). She feels abnormal in the western society when, “She notices the many glances cast at her bangles, the bridal ones that enabled every Indian in the nooks and crannies of the globe to identify her as newlywed” (*The Immigrant* 105). The hope and confidence of Nina to live a delighted marital life in the foreign land fade; her first impression after landing in Canada leaves an indelible mark due to the loss of respect, dignity, and rupture of feelings.

Nina, who adheres to Indianness, feels uncomfortable to inculcate the dogmas of the host culture. She finds it difficult to choose or interrogate the cultural displacement which creates problems of adjustment in terms of food, dressing, physical appearance, religion, tradition, culture, and interpersonal relationships. She realises that “Marriage is a question of adjustment”, but she is unable to give up her strict vegetarian food habits to non-vegetarian diet and change the Indian dressing style and attire from saree and salwars to pants and shirts; she also refuses to rechristen her name like her husband, who modifies his name from ‘Ananda’ to ‘Andy’ (*The Immigrant* 74). Manju Kapur writes in the novel that “Nina is too conservative whereas Ananda is liberal. One can say, “He was a true westerner, she true India” (*The Immigrant* 295). Nina remains possessive about the Indian cultural values and trends, struggles to encompass her identity, encounters

conflicting situations and subjectivities in the unfamiliar social sphere, and comprehends the clash between the two cultures – Indian and Western.

Nina is ridiculed and isolated by her husband for being Indian in her habits. Ananda, instead of being an anchor and protector to his wife, pressurises Nina to give up her nativity to get accustomed to the “...do-it-yourself culture” and the ethos of the western land (*The Immigrant* 60). She takes a long time to sacrifice her habit, style, and self-perception while process of adapting to her marital relationship and Canada steadily become painful, resulting in emotional distress and fragmentation of her identity. Manju Kapur in her words describes the psyche of Nina, who is “...heading towards fresh territories a different set of circumstances, a floating resident of the Western world”. Nina does not complain, but reconciles the fact of the immigrant life (*The Immigrant* 330).

Nina is disappointed of her husband’s negligence and his lack of empathy to understand her emotional yearning. Ananda constantly insists his wife saying “When in Rome do what Romans do”, but fails to render his help and moral support to evade her sense of dislocation, homelessness, dejection, and insecurity (*The Immigrant* 133). The husband-wife relationship starts to deteriorate when Ananda abandons his wife to suffer in loneliness and keeps himself engaged in his professional endeavours to achieve financial prosperity. Manju Kapur comments that, “With the gap of time the distance between India and Canada widens the distance between the couple... There is a huge gulf between the two, in their thoughts and approaches to life” (*The Immigrant* 298).

The solitary state of Nina is intensified when she becomes nostalgic by reminiscing her life of physical and financial freedom in India. She laments that “I miss home – I miss a job – I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your

wife?” (*The Immigrant* 233). Nina, who had not known the meaning of loneliness until she came to Canada, “... cries, feels homesick, ... often forlorn” (*The Immigrant* 122), envisages herself to be a caged bird, entrapped in the marital bond. The life of Nina becomes an exile – “The immigrant who comes here as a wife has a more difficult time...At present all she is, is a wife, and a wife is all alone for many, many hours...the house and its conveniences can no longer completely charm or compensate. Then she realises she is an immigrant for life” (*The Immigrant* 121-122).

Nina tries to overcome her sense of estrangement through the attainment of motherhood and thinks that she could assimilate her belongingness to the foreign land because “If she had a baby, the next twenty years would be taken care of. Her interest in Canada would grow, her child’s home after all” (*The Immigrant* 160). Manju Kapur comments that “All her [Nina] expectations of marriage and her future had been bound up in motherhood” (*The Immigrant* 215), but the aspiration of Nina to be a mother remains unfulfilled due to her sterility. Nina grows restless due to “Helplessness, loss of control and a lack of confidence in her fertility. That was a sterile woman’s profile” while the obligation of child birth, rests on both, the husband and the wife (*The Immigrant* 165).

Nina suggests to undertake medical treatment to solve the discredit of infertility, but to Ananda, her decision seems to be an early diagnostic process and he feels that it is stupid to get pregnant soon after the marriage. Ananda opines that “...[We] have not been married that long, what is the hurry?” (*The Immigrant* 161). The cost of the expense for the treatment is an added entreaty as it involves significant financial, physical, and psychological commitments of the married couple. Ananda asks his wife – “Are we ready for all that? I still haven’t recovered from the expense of the

wedding” (*The Immigrant* 171). He shatters the hope of his wife to attain motherhood when he feels that Nina meant to insinuate an inadequacy of his masculinity. The mental state of Nina fills with melancholy when the alternate option of child adoption is also denied by Ananda.

The life of Nina becomes pathetic as she remains ignorant of the devious persona of Ananda, who thrashes the cardinal principle of marital life when he goes against the Indian tradition of ‘One Man – One Woman’ policy, developing an extra-marital affair, which breaks the marital loyalty. Extra-marital affairs are not unconventional in the western culture, but it ramifies the healthy man-woman relationship and ruins the uprightness of the sacred matrimonial bond in the Indian cultural context. Nina is subjected to physical, psychological, and domestic exploitation, but she has never failed in her duty as a loyal and virtuous wife. Her joy, cheer, enthusiasm, and pride in marrying an NRI disappear.

Nina becomes a sensitive woman, who needed the time to be conscious of the stark reality of her situation. The physical and emotional torments of Nina go unnoticed as Ananda deceives his wife through emotional infidelity. Love, mutual understanding, and faith are essential for a harmonious marital relationship, but the decline in the foundation of trust has a negative impact on the conjugal relationship of Nina and Ananda. The suppressed emotions of Nina erupt like a volcano and she grieves that the act of Ananda has ruptured the sanctity of their marriage. Nina finds that her mother’s belief – “In the end patience and love achieve their own rewards. A woman’s duty is to understand this” does not align with her life experiences (*The Immigrant* 130).

Nina, a victim of her circumstances, wages a psychological war to overpower the disturbed mind to reconcile with the tensions of her fractured life and identity. She contours herself anew with a set of rules to be independent and regards it to be the guide for her existence. She wishes to enhance her physical, mental, and emotional stability to “...give legitimacy to her own feelings” (*The Immigrant* 216). The chaotic circumstances of immigrant life make Nina realise her vivacity “...to have the courage of an explorer to step out of the mindset most immigrants mouldered in”, to get rid of the futility of depending on her husband (*The Immigrant* 329). Nina, with a determination, that “I need to find my feet in this country” to march ahead in life, transforms her life by finding alternate means through education and her doctoral degree in library science fetches her a career as a librarian to be economically stable (*The Immigrant* 213).

Nina sets out on a journey of self-discovery to resuscitate her feminine identity and regain her emotional strength. She ascertains contacts to socialise, and builds new relationships to prove her ability to refabricate the ways of her life. She joins an ‘all women’s group’ under the leadership of Beth and engages herself in social activities to improve the suppressed status of women and ensure them with better-living conditions. Her acquaintance with Beth and her association with the members of the feminist group revive her hope and entuses her to help women in vitalising their potential and fight for female rights. She makes her life meaningful and pleasurable with a zeal to enrich her credentials, competence, and social prestige. The success story of Nina stands the test of time while the natural corollary lies in the fact that the host land and its culture have an impact on the lives of immigrant women. Manju Kapur exemplifies the deliberation of

Nina to conceive a new identity, move beyond the fixed definitions of social constraints, and embellish her physical and mental strength.

Manju Kapur, in the novel, *Custody*, represents the fervent psyche of the two women protagonists, Shagun and Ishita, who have travelled from the patriarchal past to their current state of empowerment in the age of rapid progress. They epitomise the modern Indian women to discern the true meaning of feminine strength and figure out new identities by reconstructing the traditional and cultural tenets. They confront misery and shame due to familial conflicts, but to overcome the despondent mindset, they wish to cultivate their passion and pursue a career of their choice. In their perseverance to map the path of self-reliance, Shagun and Ishita give preference to establish their career identities rather than to fulfil the social expectations.

Shagun, a dutiful wife and an affectionate mother, gratifies the demands of her husband, Raman, builds an enthusiastic relationship with her children Arjun-Roohi, and prioritises their needs and wellness over her own desires and ambitions. She accomplishes her role to be a companion and confidante to Raman, for she believes that her husband is her protector, anchor, and the upholder of her life. She is anxious about her children's well-being and offers a congenial environment for their growth and development. Her motherly nurturance, support, and guidance help the children to inculcate moral values and ideals to lead a disciplined life.

Shagun single-handedly manages to run the domestic chores and never compromises with her familial responsibilities or the role of a mother, but wishes to opt for a change from her mundane routine. Shagun, an educated woman, wants to keep her intellectual thirst alive by pursuing a career to attain financial stability. Her husband,

Raman does not try to understand the intellectual outlook of Shagun instead he wants to confine her life within the four walls of the house where the prime and sole duties of his wife should be sitting before the hearth, cooking and serving hot food for the family, and awaiting the husband's return. Raman's rejection to accept Shagun as a working woman leads to incompatibility in their relationship and it turns out to be a bitter battle in the court. Shagun is penalised for her desire to pursue a career and endures an unfortunate destiny when her marital bond culminates in divorce and she gets separated from her daughter.

Shagun hankers to move forward in life to fulfil her quest for passion in the professional arena. She chooses to explore the domain of mass media which she presumes to be a highly profitable job for her financial stability. Her choice of profession provides her with a platform to foreshadow the true emotions, trauma, and untold desolations of women that go unnoticed in the patriarchal social structure. Shagun ardently builds her career, establishes her individuality, and achieves financial independence.

Shagun withstands the pressures and challenges in the journey of her marriage and motherhood while Ishita succumbs to social ostracism for childlessness. The social stigma on infertility demeans the life of Ishita, who is cursed when "...there was no sign of pregnancy [even after two years of marriage] ... and Producing grandchildren was a moral obligation" in the Indian families (*Custody* 52). Ishita has to prove her fecundity as a woman, which is a major prerequisite for a prosperous marital life as her existence, recognition, and identity are associated with procreation. Ishita makes all possible efforts to fulfil the expectation of her marital life and undergoes painful, agonising, mind-

numbing, and expensive treatment of in vitro fertilisation (IVF) as well as observes fasts, performs pujas, and goes on pilgrimages to attain motherhood. She whispers to her embryo – “Prayers, prayers, more prayers. Please stay, please grow. You are my only chance of happiness. So many people to love you, just come into the world. I beg you”, but her efforts end in vain (*Custody* 64).

Suryakanta fails to be an empathetic husband paying no attention to Ishita’s emotional lamentations when she feels dejected by her infertility. Ishita is perpetually stigmatised, labelled to be barren, and is subjected to the catastrophic taunting, verbal and emotional harassment of her mother-in-law: “Did we take a dowry, did we? We are too simple for worldly types such as you. You must have known you couldn’t have a child. You will never get a paisa from us. How long do you think you can go on eating our salt? There are ways to deal with shameless women like you” (*Custody* 70). Ishita contemplates that “Had there been something wrong with SK [Suryakanta], they would have moved heaven and earth to get a son’s defect corrected. In an ideal world, the same resources would have been put at the disposal of a daughter-in-law. But this was not an ideal world” (*Custody* 65-66).

Ishita becomes the centre of criticism, hostility, and humiliation for no fault of hers and feels “...degraded, a non-person, certainly a non-woman... Smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in the sunlit air, smaller than drops of dew caught between blades of grass in the morning...” (*Custody* 62, 68-69). Suryakanta easily withdraws his physical, emotional, and mental ties with Ishita for her barrenness. He forgets the promises he had made at the time of marriage before the sacred *Agni*, the God of Fire, that he would upkeep his marital vows to protect, support, rescue, and stand

by his wife. Ishita encounters marital friction for childlessness and her marital relationship with Suryakanta becomes nullified.

Manju Kapur portrays the universal phenomenon of women's oppression in marriage – “No matter where you lived, what your circumstances, women always suffered” (*Custody* 122). She projects the reality of women as they are on the receiving end of social blame for infertility and unceasingly undergoes health hazards that have profound effects on their physical, psychological, and social well-being. She suggests that Suryakanta and Ishita could have made their marital relationship cordial and content with a mutual decision to adopt a child or lead a happy life to love and support each other. She proposes to convey the message that the strong foundation of understanding between the husband and wife must never be allowed to be shaken by an unintended unpleasant condition like infertility.

Ishita decides to end the hard phase of life to escape from explicit cynicism and resolves to establish her identity. She attempts to pave a new path to lead an exemplary life of autonomy by investing her time and energy to focus on her self-interests. She acquires a job as a counsellor and a teacher, spends quality time at an NGO where she serves orphaned children, which helps to rejuvenate her inner strength. She fortifies her motherhood and ensures a better standard of living for the children, who visualise her as their mother figure with respect and appreciation for her motherly qualities.

The life of Ishita alters with vicissitudes of change when Raman, a divorcee, proposes to marry her when he finds it difficult to single-handedly foster his daughter, Roohi. It is an opportunity for Ishita to prove her motherly virtues, annihilate the mortification of childlessness by nurturing Roohi, and ascertain feminine esteem in the

society that places her in a vulnerable position. Both, Ishita and Roohi, discover their ray of hope in the newly established family and they build healthy parent-child relationship. The progressive state of Ishita redefines the social views on Indian womanhood.

Womanhood is undeniably an experience dictated by the societal institution of patriarchy where women struggle to assert their choices and opinions. The identity of Manju Kapur's protagonists revolves around the perception of women as child-bearers. Gender differences in the birth of a child continue to exist in the patriarchal society where preference is marked for male children and the Indian social norms consider a family to be incomplete without the birth of a male heir. In the novel, *Brothers*, Tapti Gaina, the wife of Mangal Singh and the youngest daughter-in-law of the Gaina family, is treated as a child-bearing machine when the birth of her two daughters remains unwelcomed by her husband and his family members.

Mangal Singh expresses that the birth of his girl babies "...made him feel awkward...and... embarrassed..." and questions that "...how could daughters take on the responsibility of a business, or carry on the Gaina name?" (*Brothers* 260, 268). He aspires for a son stating, "For now, though it is his son who will make his toil worthwhile, his son who will work beside him, who will stretch the fruits of his endeavour into the future, and give his struggle a meaning and continuity" (*Brothers* 268). He insists that it is, "...my right" to have a male heir, who would inherit the family business and the bloodline (*Brothers* 269).

Tapti questions herself – "What was she, a machine that would go on producing children until he got a son? At twenty-four she felt there was nothing left of her youth, so swallowed up by babies..." (*Brothers* 268). She dreads that "...it was physically

impossible for her to have more children” and cites that “I don’t think I can go through this again, she murmured. It will kill me...Two daughters are enough...” (*Brothers* 266, 268, 273), but Mangal Singh constantly pesters Tapti to fulfil his expectations of procreating a male heir. Mangal Singh focuses on what works best for him, discards the likes and dislikes of Tapti, ignoring her health condition and post-partum depression. He persuades his wife stating, “Never mind...there is always a next time...My mother had to try many times before she gave birth to a boy that lived”, but Tapti strongly objects saying, “...I am sorry” (*Brothers* 266, 272) with an opposition to the preferential treatment of children based on gender bias that prevails in the Gaina family.

Mangal Singh, who expects his wife to obey his words unquestioningly, is unable to accept Tapti’s refusal for the third pregnancy. He claims that his masculine self-conceit is disrespected when Tapti stands against his demands and unveils his male chauvinism by opting to shed his fatherly and familial responsibilities. Tapti is left alone as a single parent to cater to her daughters’ needs and stumbles to confront the humiliation by her husband and the dictating Gaina family members. Her life becomes miserable as “Nothing in her marriage was as she had expected. The ache, the dissatisfaction, the yearning..., it stretched through days, months, threatening to gobble up years as well” (*Brothers* 275).

Tapti desperately wants to put an end to marital authoritarianism and cognises that “She needed space to distance herself from Mangal’s desires. Like an oyster reacting to a grain of sand, she vowed to establish a professional life, become someone who could not even remotely be construed as a stay-at-home breeder of male children” (*Brothers* 266). She progresses ahead to discover a life of change with futuristic thinking that “...the idea

of an independent job that came with an attached house began to look like the essence of practical wisdom” (*Brothers* 270). She strives hard to clear the civil services examination and procures a government job as a probation officer in the department of rural development. She triumphs in her efforts to withstand the familial and socio-cultural pressures to maintain a respectable feminine status.

The novels of Manju Kapur unfold the unacceptable uncertainties of matrimony in the present modern society. Manju Kapur represents that marriage and family dominate the lives of the women protagonists, Virmati, Astha, Nisha, Nina, Shagun, Ishita, and Tapti Gaina. The existence of the women protagonists in the institution of marriage goes unidentified as their husbands treat them to be domestic maids. The women protagonists undergo the agony of domestic violence and reside under the fetters of marital enslavement, which is the unsaid, default protocol in the Indian families. They are criticised and judged for no fault of theirs; they experience marital friction in different contexts – Virmati and Astha encounter marital incompatibility as their relationship with their husbands remain superficial; the status of Nisha is reduced to be reproducing machine by her husband; Nina, despite her alienation as an immigrant, suffers in her marital relationship due to infertility and the extra-marital affair of her husband; Shagun’s husband refuses to accept his wife as a working woman while Ishita’s husband deserts her for childlessness; Tapti Gaina is abandoned by her husband when she objects to give birth to a male heir.

Justice Sikri in the speech titled, “Reproductive Rights In Indian Courts: Celebrating Progress, Identifying Challenges And Discussing The Way Forward” (2017) states that “Reproductive right, which of course... a human right, is based on...human

dignity. When we talk of reproductive rights in India, there again the choice is of the husband in the family or what the elders say...when there should be a child, whether that child should be male or female...” (*PTI The Economic Times*). The husbands of the women protagonists are stubborn in their desire for a male heir, and they exert pressure on their wives to undergo multiple pregnancies. Marital adjustments become unfeasible as the male-counterparts pay no heed to the physical and emotional difficulties, health conditions, and the plight of women when they stake their lives to give birth to a child. The women protagonists of Manju Kapur suffer due to their husband’s patriarchal dictatorship, demands, and expectations.

The patriarchal myth conceives matrimony as the site for women’s oppression, emotional and economic insecurity, violence, exploitation, subjugation, and intellectual development. Rosalind Miles in the book, *Who Cooked the Last Supper: The Women’s History of the World* (1989) comments that “...marriage itself was in general the enemy of any woman’s intellectual development” (133). Simon de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949) opines that “Marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to women by society” where both the husband and the wife wage endless strife – male-chauvinism versus female rights (444). Christine Delphy in the work, *Towards a Materialist Feminism* (1979) argues that marriage is a labour contract in which women are subjected to oppression and domestic exploitation. Women compromise greatly not only with their desires and temperament, but also with their origin, belongings, and emotions. Restrictions are imposed in the name of family welfare, social prestige, taboos, and superstitious beliefs, which deter the path to success of the women protagonists.

The life choices of Virmati, Astha, Nisha, Nina, Shagun, Ishita, and Tapti Gaina are predetermined by the presence of male dominance in the family. The key roles of men as fathers, brothers, and husbands in directing the lives of their daughters, sisters, and wives, respectively, have adverse effects on the growth and development of the women protagonists. The women protagonists are habituated to abide by the masculine commands as their choice of education, pursuance of a career, and financial prerequisites, are decided by the patriarchs – fathers, brothers, and husbands. Manju Kapur, in her novels, represents the intersection of power between parents and husbands in the lives of women. The parents choose the life partners for their daughters and the husbands replace the parental dictates with spousal exigencies.

The women protagonists are destined to be puppets in the hands of their husbands, who fail to comprehend the significance of rendering moral support to their wives. From time immemorial to the present times, women have led a life of servitude as unpaid domestic servants, unquestioningly oblige to the demands of their husbands and marital family members, as there is no escape for a woman from the mundane familial duties. The familial commitments of catering to the needs of children and elderly family members, child-bearing/rearing roles, and maintaining the order of the household as humble managers are shouldered by the women protagonists while the role of their husbands is limited just to being the breadwinners. The husbands exaggerate to designate themselves to be the ‘busy men on earth’ always running behind monetary profits and materialistic lifestyles.

The women protagonists of Manju Kapur find it arduous to communicate with their male counterparts, who do not spend quality time with their wives, instead there is

an absence of friendly acquaintance and a lack of mutual understanding in the husband-wife relationship. Virmati, Astha, Nisha, Nina, Shagun, Ishita, and Tapti Gaina, stand as pillars of strength for their male counterparts, children, and family members, anticipating nothing in return from their husbands, who fail to reciprocate a kind gesture to appreciate their efforts in fulfilling the familial requirements, domestic errands, and womanly duties. The male-chauvinistic husbands refrain from expressing their love and warmth towards their wives, who work untiringly round the clock to maintain a holistic familial environment. The women protagonists are disappointed when their sacrifices and dedication in the domestic sphere go unrecognised. Their pursuit of happiness and aspirations are torn between their marital obligations and societal expectations. Susan Moller Okin in the book, *Justice, gender and the family* (1989), writes that "...marriage has...greater impact on the lives and life choices of women than on those of men" (142).

Men simply walk out of the marriage without legal formalities, but it is women, who have to live in extremely dire conditions socially and financially. Manju Kapur represents the wretched image and positioning of the women, who are separated from their husbands and it is challenging for them to unravel their state of destitution. Women have to grapple with indignity and humiliation, both, in their marital and natal families. The marital home does not support women after the husbands abandon their wives and the natal home ignores the daughters as they are traditionally considered '*paraya dhan*' – belonging to the husband's family after marriage.

Women are often left at the mercy of their husbands to meet their financial needs or they have to fend for themselves if their marital relationships terminate. The husbands imprison and marginalise their wives in terms of financial matters and money

management. Virmati, Astha, Nisha, Nina, Shagun, Ishita, and Tapti Gaina are left penniless after spousal desertion and at immense risk of the financial crisis and exploitation by other men in the patriarchal world. The capabilities of the women protagonists, Virmati, Astha, Nisha, Nina, Shagun, Ishita, and Tapti Gaina are underestimated by their husbands, who devalue their competencies as equal participants in professional endeavours.

Manju Kapur through her women protagonists combats to achieve parity with men not only in the domestic setting, but also in the professional field as the right to equality is never exercised in the patriarchal society. The number of women in workforce has increased in contemporary society, but female financial freedom remains under the bars of patriarchal constraints. Working women lose control of financial management as they quit jobs due to familial pressures and matrimonial discourse. The working women protagonists, unlike their predecessors, do not want to be mere pawns, puppets, and child-bearing machines in the hands of their husbands and family members. They wish to delegitimise the culture of silence to awaken the feminine sensibility, overcome the emotional trauma of being caged within patriarchal constraints and find a way to lead a financially independent life.

Financial freedom is critical for women as it makes them feel secure and respected in the familial and the social terrain. The archaic ideas of Indian society exclude the feminine gender from the financial domain, but the women protagonists of Manju Kapur wish to explore different fields of the profession that suit their quest for a passionate job to eradicate the dependency syndrome of women to maintain an economic and emotional balance for their survival. Financial security becomes the major milestone

to be achieved by the women protagonists for a promising future for themselves and also for their children. In the modern era of globalisation and liberalisation, with the spread of education and with easy access to professional opportunities, there has been a development of a sense of realisation in women to achieve independence and financial freedom. The educated women protagonists, Virmati, Astha, Nisha, Nina, Shagun, Ishita, and Tapti Gaina with an indomitable spirit, attempt to project the self-acquired feminine power as they lay emphasis on the psychological, social, cultural, and familial quest for identity to revolutionise the marital strategies that subjugate their personal and financial welfare.