



Shifting Silhouettes: Modernity and the Unravelling of Tradition in Manju Kapur's *Home*

Dr. K.V. Ramana Chary

Assistant Professor

Telangana University, Nizamabad, TG

Abstract:

Manju Kapur, a prominent voice in postcolonial Indian English fiction, delves deeply into the tensions between tradition and modernity an enduring theme across her works. Central to this conflict are clashing ideologies surrounding societal norms, particularly concerning gender roles and individual agency. Kapur's narratives often center on women caught at pivotal moments of social change, navigating the constraints of patriarchal structures while striving to assert their identities and claim personal freedom. In *Home* (2006), Kapur explores these themes through the character of Nisha, a young woman raised in the conservative joint family of Banwari Lal, a staunch upholder of traditional values. Within this restrictive environment, Nisha's pursuit of education, selfhood, and financial independence marks a quiet rebellion against patriarchal expectations. However, her journey toward autonomy remains incomplete; her romantic aspirations are thwarted by a partner unwilling to commit, reflecting the enduring power of societal norms in shaping women's lives. Through such nuanced portrayals, Kapur compels readers to confront the complexities of gender and tradition, presenting female protagonists who challenge convention in their quest for self-determination. Her fiction becomes a powerful commentary on the ongoing struggle for female agency in a world where modern aspirations often clash with entrenched cultural values. This write-up seeks to examine *Home* as a reference text, highlighting the intersections where the wavelengths of tradition and modernity converge.

Keywords: Postcolonial, society, gender, patriarchy, selfhood

Manju Kapur, through her skillful use of language and vivid characterization, paints an authentic portrait of society, which deeply resonates with her readers. She delves into the realities of life, exploring the essence of the Indian psyche, family-oriented lifestyles, generational divides, and the everyday challenges faced by ordinary individuals. Her narrative style is noted for its revival of the traditional linear storytelling approach, emphasizing social realism over magic realism, making her works both relatable and impactful.

The story begins by introducing the two sisters, Sona and Rupa, whose contrasting lives set the stage for the unfolding events. Sona, the elder sister, is admired for her beauty and marries Yashpal, the elder son of Banwari Lal, thus stepping into the role of the daughter-in-law in the joint family. In contrast, Rupa, considered plain in appearance, marries a junior government officer of lower social standing. The early parts of the novel explore the lives and dynamics of the two sisters, gradually expanding to encompass the broader family dynamics and challenges.

As the narrative progresses, the focus shifts to the entire family, spotlighting the struggles, aspirations, and transformations of its members. Central to the story are the journeys of Sona, Rupa, and Nisha, who navigate societal norms and familial expectations in their quest for individuality. Through its layered characters and realistic portrayal of familial relationships, the novel delves into the complexities of identity, tradition, and change in a patriarchal society.

Nisha, the protagonist of *Home*, embodies the struggles of a middle-class woman caught between the forces of tradition and modernity. Within a patriarchal family structure, she must fight for fundamental rights such as education, self-identity, and the freedom to marry. Despite her aspirations for an independent life, she continually finds herself constrained by societal expectations. The restrictions imposed by her family, particularly her mother, Sona, become overwhelming. As the guardian of traditional values, Sona seeks to instill in Nisha the virtues expected of a young woman, while Nisha, in contrast, yearns to break free from the shackles of age-old customs. Dr. Sulakshna Sharma aptly observes this tension, stating, "*Her female characters are educated and are stuck between modernity and tradition. They challenge the stifling social conventions. They are rebels that go on to prove that they are capable enough to break the patriarchal fetters of conservative society if pressed beyond the limits of their patience.*" (Sharma 1). Kapur's portrayal of Nisha thus reflects the broader struggle of women striving to assert their autonomy in a society deeply rooted in patriarchal traditions.

During her childhood, Nisha endured a traumatic experience of sexual molestation at the hands of Vicky, her father's sister's son, leaving her deeply distressed. To provide her with a change of environment and emotional respite, she was sent to live with her Rupa Masi, where she received her early education. Despite this temporary relocation, Nisha's mother, Sona, remained steadfast in her commitment to grooming her daughter in the traditions of the Banwari Lal family, insisting that Nisha visit her parental home regularly.

At the age of ten, Nisha was expected to observe a ritual fast for her future husband, a practice deeply rooted in traditional beliefs. Resistant to such customs, she protested, saying, *"Why should I? That's for older women."* (Home, p. 92). Sona, unwavering in her faith in tradition, responded with sarcasm, *"How are you going to get married, madam, if you do not make sacrifices?"* (Home, p. 92). The female members of the household reinforced these expectations, pressuring Nisha to conform to the ritual, highlighting the pervasive influence of patriarchal customs in shaping a woman's role within the family.

As an educated girl, Nisha questions the rationale behind ritual fasts but finds no satisfactory explanation from anyone around her. The following day, upon returning to her aunt's house and discovering that her aunt does not observe the Karva Chauth fast, Nisha seeks to understand the reason. Rupa responds bluntly, *"You think the whole world fasts for their husbands? Really, that sister of hers needed her head examined. There was an age for everything, and when the child should be thinking of studies, she was forcing her to think of husbands."* (Home, p. 95).

However, considering her sister's circumstances, Rupa softens her stance and adds, *"Your mother has to follow the traditions of her family. Besides, your uncle does not believe in fasting. If I don't eat, he won't either."* (Home, p. 95). These contradictory remarks reflect the complexity of tradition and individual choice, echoing Hamlet's assertion: *"For there is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so."* (Hamlet, p. 250). Through this exchange, Kapur highlights the tension between societal expectations and personal autonomy, illustrating how tradition is often upheld not by inherent virtue but by ingrained belief systems.

Sona, as a staunch traditionalist, places little value on a girl's formal education, believing that culinary skills should be her primary accomplishment. In contrast, Prem Nath and Rupa prioritize academic excellence, advocating for Nisha's education. When Nisha returns to her parental home after eleven years, Sona is deeply frustrated by her daughter's lack of culinary expertise. For Sona, cooking is the defining domain of women, and she cannot envision a life beyond it. Her perspective aligns with the Tennysonian belief that if a girl does not master the art of cooking, *"All else is confusion"* for her.

Rupa, however, holds a different view, insisting that Nisha should focus on her studies. Defending her aunt's approach to upbringing, Nisha asserts, *"Masi said there is always time to learn cooking, but only one time to study."* (Home, p. 125). Sona, dismissing this perspective, curtly replies, *"That Masi of yours has ruined your head. What does a girl need with studying? Cooking will be useful for her entire life."* (Home, p. 125).

This ideological clash between tradition and modernity remains unresolved in Kapur's narrative, reflecting its ongoing debate within society. As Dr. Shaleen Kumar Singh aptly observes, *"The conflict of Tradition Versus Modernity is deliberately not settled by Manju Kapur, as this is still a debatable and unanswered question among academics whether who is right and who is wrong in our society. Yet, it is beyond doubt that the one (woman) who raises a voice against odds has to suffer, and the one who surrenders will definitely have to suffer, admitting it as their misfortune."* (Singh, p. 14). Kapur's portrayal underscores the difficult choices women face, where both resistance and submission come with their own forms of suffering.

After completing her school education, Nisha was permitted to enroll at Durga Bai College for higher studies. However, her family viewed this phase not as an opportunity for academic growth but merely as a preparatory period for marriage. During her commute to college, Nisha met Suresh, a young man with whom she soon developed a deep romantic connection. Encouraged by Suresh, she decided to cut her hair in accordance with the latest fashion trends a seemingly minor act of self-expression that triggered significant outrage within her family.

In a patriarchal household, a girl is rarely granted the autonomy to make independent decisions, even regarding her own appearance. Every choice, no matter how personal, requires parental approval. The novelist aptly captures the reaction of Nisha's parents: *"Who gave you permission to cut your hair? Suddenly you have become so independent, you decide things on your own. Where did you find the money, the time, the beauty parlor where did you find all these things?"* (Home, pp. 149–150).

These questions reflect the deeply entrenched authoritarian mindset of a patriarchal family, where a girl is often treated as a mere puppet, expected to conform to societal expectations rather than exercise personal agency. Through Nisha's experience, Kapur critiques the rigid control imposed on women, highlighting the struggle for autonomy within traditional family structures. As Nisha and Suresh's love affair deepens, they ultimately decide to marry. However, as the saying goes, *"The course of true love never did run smooth,"* and their union faces significant social and religious obstacles. Socially, Suresh belongs to the Paswan caste, considered lower in the social hierarchy than the Banwari Lal family, making their match unacceptable in the eyes of Nisha's parents. Additionally, a religious barrier further complicates their relationship Nisha is a Manglik, and according to traditional astrological beliefs, a Manglik girl can only marry a Manglik boy.

Despite these challenges, the couple resolves to seek approval from Nisha's parents, with Suresh taking the initiative. He visits Nisha's father at his shop and expresses his desire to marry her. Upon returning home, Yashpal sarcastically congratulates his daughter on finding her life partner, while Nisha's brother, Raju, reacts with fury, exclaiming, *"Has she been seeing a boy? I will break his legs."* (Home, p. 175). Sona, equally distraught, laments, *"This girl will be our death."* (Home, p. 175). In a desperate attempt to justify her love, Nisha reminds her parents of their own love marriage, but her plea is swiftly dismissed due to caste and social considerations. Her parents firmly advise her, *"Nisha, dear daughter, leave all thoughts of this dirty low-caste man. What can he give you compared to what we can arrange for you?"* (Home, p. 199). Ultimately, due to her family's unwavering opposition and Suresh's indifferent attitude, Nisha is compelled to marry a widower chosen by her parents.

Dr. Shalini Srivastava aptly observes this recurring theme in Kapur's works, stating, "*Her female protagonists are strong women with indomitable wills. They follow tradition yet are modern in their outlook. In their struggle to search and discover their real selves, they at times adjust, succumb, and follow, while at other times they strive to move on their own path, take independent decisions, and shape their lives as they see fit, emerging as modern women.*" (Srivastava, pp. 107–108). Kapur's narrative thus underscores the complex interplay between tradition and modernity, illustrating the difficult choices women must navigate in their pursuit of autonomy.

Another significant conflict between tradition and modernity arises from Nisha's aspiration to start her own business. After the painful end of her love affair with Suresh, she finds herself deeply unsettled and seeks a sense of purpose. In an earnest plea to her father, she requests the opportunity to engage in business as a way to overcome her loneliness. However, this unconventional desire sparks outrage among the women in her family, who uphold traditional values more rigidly than the men.

Nisha's mother, Sona, vehemently opposes the idea, arguing, "*She is going to get married, why waste time and money in all this?*" (Home, p. 289). Sushila Chachi, the wife of Pyare Lal, is equally critical, questioning the propriety of allowing Nisha to pursue business: "*Why was Nisha being allowed to do business? If tomorrow her daughter-in-law upped and said they wanted to do the same, what face would she have to refuse? And what about the money? Would what she earned be her own, or go back to the family, as in the case of the sons?*" (Home, p. 289). This resistance stems from the deeply ingrained belief that unmarried women rarely venture into business, as trade has traditionally been considered a male domain. However, when Nisha is finally given the opportunity to establish her own enterprise, she successfully manages her affairs, ultimately dismantling the myth of male superiority in business.

In essence, the conflict between tradition and modernity remains a perennial social issue, leaving individuals to choose between conformity and progress. Manju Kapur's female protagonists consistently lean toward modernity, challenging oppressive social conventions and making courageous efforts to break free from them. Through their struggles, Kapur highlights the resilience of women who defy societal expectations in pursuit of autonomy and self-fulfillment.

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