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Beyond the Conjugal Threshold: Psychological Alienation and Patriarchal Constraint in Manju Kapur's *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody*

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Abstract

This article examines how marital discontentment produces psychological alienation among women in Manju Kapur's *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008) and *Custody* (2011), and how patriarchal and socio-cultural constraints shape that alienation. Drawing on feminist-existential theory, Melvin Seeman's typology of alienation and Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of the patriarchal bargain, it offers a comparative close reading of five women: Sona, Nisha, Nina, Shagun and Ishita. The study finds that alienation in these novels is structurally produced rather than idiosyncratic, and that its dominant form shifts with the institution in which marriage is embedded: powerlessness and bodily self-estrangement in the joint family of *Home*, social isolation and meaninglessness in the diasporic marriage of *The Immigrant*, and normlessness and a divided maternal self in the legally mediated marriage of *Custody*. Kapur thus maps a widening geography of alienation in which every expansion of women's formal options is shadowed by a new form of estrangement.

Keywords: Manju Kapur; Psychological Alienation; Patriarchy; Marital Discontentment; Diaspora; Feminist Existentialism

Introduction

Marriage in Indian English fiction has rarely been a private matter. It binds two families, transmits property and status, and remains the principal measure of a woman's social worth (Uberoi). Manju Kapur's fiction has made this institution its sustained object of scrutiny, and recent criticism broadly agrees that her novels present marriage less as a site of emotional fulfilment than as a mechanism through which family, community and nation regulate women (Arya; Kalia; Pandey and Kaur). An earlier paper from the present doctoral project argued that, in *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*, marital discontentment becomes the ground on which female subjectivity is reclaimed, and that Kapur represents emancipation as costly, incomplete and continually negotiated. That argument left a question open: what happens inside the woman who stays, who cannot leave, or who leaves and finds that the structures she fled have followed her? This paper addresses that question by turning from the drama of resistance to the quieter and more pervasive experience of psychological alienation.

In Kapur's novels, marital dissatisfaction is closely bound up with alienation, understood here as a condition of emotional isolation, identity crisis and disconnection from oneself and one's surroundings. Critics have observed that Kapur's women endure a suffocating isolation within the marital home, in which individuality is overshadowed by domestic responsibility (Arora), and that this alienation is structural as much as personal (Arya). Yet the existing criticism

tends to name alienation rather than analyse it. Studies of the later novels have concentrated on joint-family politics in *Home* (Gope and Khuraijam; Sharma), cultural dislocation in *The Immigrant* (Devi and Kavitha; Kameswari) and marital breakdown in *Custody* (Dar and Ahluwalia; Meraj). They seldom ask what form alienation takes, how its forms differ across institutional settings, or how precisely patriarchal and socio-cultural constraints convert marital unhappiness into estrangement from the self.

The present paper responds to these gaps through a comparative reading of *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008) and *Custody* (2011). Published in close succession, the three novels carry Kapur's enquiry into three distinct institutional settings: the trading joint family of Karol Bagh, the diasporic nuclear household of Halifax, and the affluent, legally mediated marriage of liberalising Delhi. Read together, they make it possible to test whether the alienation of Kapur's women is merely the private consequence of an unhappy match or a structurally produced condition whose dominant form shifts as the institution around marriage changes. The paper argues for the second reading. It proposes that Kapur maps a widening geography of alienation, from the courtyard to the diaspora to the courtroom, in which each apparent expansion of a woman's options is accompanied by a new form of estrangement.

Review of Literature and Research Gap

Early criticism located Kapur within the broader tradition of Indian feminist writing and emphasised her movement away from the image of the submissive woman towards protagonists who seek autonomy within oppressive systems (Dhand; Periyasamy). Alagiri read the tension between tradition and modernity in Indian English literature as a persistent source of women's frustration, and Kahlon identified the family structure in Kapur's fiction as a locus of power disparity that produces emotional repression and fragmented identity. These studies established marriage as the principal axis of Kapur's critique but treated its psychological consequences largely in passing.

A second body of criticism reads individual novels. *Home* has been examined as a study of joint-family economics and the politics of domestic space (Gope and Khuraijam; Sharma), and Nisha's trajectory has been read as a movement from resistance to qualified self-discovery (Mitra). Pratheeba compares *Home* and *Custody* as narratives of fractured homes and female resistance. *The Immigrant* has attracted attention for its treatment of sexuality and cultural dislocation (Kameswari) and for the way marriage and migration together remake the heroine's selfhood (Devi and Kavitha). *Custody* has been read as a study of marital dissonance (Meraj), of fractured relationships and social realities (Dar and Ahluwalia) and of the pursuit of gender equality amid marital discord (Ramasamy et al.), while Adhikary examines the consequences of Ishita's infertility within Indian patriarchal society. Across the oeuvre, scholars have traced the vulnerability of Kapur's women (Ranjan), the emergence of the "New Woman" (Kalia; Singh) and the contradictory character of female agency (Gope).

A third and more recent strand foregrounds the psychological. Arya identifies emotional alienation as a defining trait of Kapur's women; Nagababu and Rao connect it to education, which widens the gap between aspiration and lived reality; Mishra describes a feminist disillusionment in which empowerment and alienation advance together; and Sharma and Kumar propose that gendered spaces structurally produce women's isolation. Related scholarship on Indian women's fiction has explored repression and identity crisis (Devi), silence and female subjectivity (Kasish; Rizvi; Yadav and Rohitashwani) and the domestic interior as an architecture of control (Kumar, "Women, Domestic Space"; Lau).

Four gaps emerge from this review. First, alienation is frequently invoked but rarely analysed through an explicit framework that distinguishes its forms. Second, marital discontentment and alienation are usually treated as separate themes rather than as causally linked. Third, comparative studies that read Kapur's post-2005 novels together remain scarce. Fourth, the specific patriarchal and socio-cultural mechanisms that produce alienation, such as fertility surveillance, caste endogamy, migration and the law, have not been systematically mapped. The present study addresses each of these gaps.

Objectives and Research Questions

The paper corresponds to the second and third objectives of the doctoral project on marital discontentment and psychological alienation in Kapur's fiction:

1. To investigate the psychological alienation of women characters in relation to marital relationships in *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody*.
2. To examine the role of patriarchy and socio-cultural constraints in shaping women's marital experiences and their alienation in these novels.

The analysis is guided by two working propositions drawn from the project's hypotheses. The first (P1) holds that the psychological alienation of Kapur's female characters is a consequence of prolonged marital and familial dissatisfaction rather than an innate disposition. The second (P2) holds that the conflict between traditional expectation and modern aspiration, mediated by patriarchal institutions, intensifies both dissatisfaction and alienation. Three research questions follow: What forms does alienation take in each novel (RQ1)? Which patriarchal and socio-cultural mechanisms produce those forms (RQ2)? How does the dominant form of alienation change as the institutional setting of marriage changes (RQ3)?

Theoretical Framework

Alienation as a Feminist-Existential Category

The study begins from Simone de Beauvoir's account of woman as the Other, a subject who is denied the freedom to define herself through projects that open onto the future and is confined instead to immanence, the repetitive, maintaining labour that reproduces life without transforming it (de Beauvoir). For de Beauvoir, marriage is the institution that most completely fixes woman in immanence, since it converts her existence into a function of the household. Betty Friedan's "problem that has no name" describes the affective residue of this arrangement: a diffuse dissatisfaction that the woman cannot articulate because the culture provides no language in which a comfortable wife could be unhappy. Together these accounts give alienation an existential meaning, namely the gap between the self as a project and the self as a function.

To analyse this gap with greater precision, the study draws on Seeman's influential typology, which distinguishes five meanings of alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation and self-estrangement. Although Seeman wrote as a sociologist, his typology offers literary analysis a useful grid because it separates experiences that criticism tends to collapse into a single word. Rahel Jaeggi's reconstruction of the concept supplements it: alienation is a "relation of relationlessness", a disturbed appropriation of oneself and one's world in which a person lives a life that does not feel like her own. R. D. Laing's account of the divided self, split between a compliant outer self and a withdrawn inner self, further illuminates women who perform the role of the dutiful wife while

remaining inwardly absent from it. Table 1 sets out how these dimensions are operationalised for the present reading.

Table 1. Operationalisation of the Dimensions of Alienation for the Present Analysis (adapted from Seeman)

Dimension	Working definition	Textual indicators in Kapur's novels
Powerlessness	The expectation that one's own conduct cannot determine the outcomes that matter in one's life	Status fixed by fertility, dowry or the decisions of elders; marriage arranged or forbidden by others
Meaninglessness	Loss of a coherent sense of purpose or of the intelligibility of one's life	Empty days of housework; abandoned careers; a sense that life is happening elsewhere
Normlessness	Breakdown or conflict of the norms that should guide conduct; approved means no longer secure valued goals	Contradictory codes of desire, fidelity and motherhood; relationships outside marriage
Social isolation	Detachment from the relationships and values of one's milieu	Absence of confidantes; geographical displacement; stigma of divorce or childlessness
Self-estrangement	Experiencing oneself and one's activity as alien, as a means rather than an end	Somatic illness; performing the dutiful wife while inwardly absent; a self split between roles

Patriarchy, the Indian Family and the Patriarchal Bargain

If alienation names the inner experience, its causes must be sought in institutions. Deniz Kandiyoti's concept of the "patriarchal bargain" is especially productive here. In what she terms classic patriarchy, which includes the patrilocal joint family of South Asia, a young bride's subordination is compensated by the prospect of authority as a mother-in-law, an outcome that depends on bearing sons. The bargain explains both women's suffering and their complicity: women who have paid its price often become its most vigilant enforcers. Patricia Uberoi's work on kinship and marriage situates the Indian family as an institution that organises property, status and reproduction, while feminist spatial criticism shows how the household's physical organisation regulates women's movement, speech and desire (Kumar, "Women, Domestic Space"; Lau). Chandra Talpade Mohanty's caution against the homogenised figure of the "Third World woman" is also observed: the analysis attends to the differences of class, caste, location and generation that distinguish Kapur's women from one another, consistent with feminist methodological debates on situated reading (Kannabiran and Swaminathan).

Figure 1 brings these strands together in the conceptual model that guides the analysis. Structural constraints generate marital discontentment; prolonged discontentment produces alienation across Seeman's five dimensions; and women's responses, whether withdrawal, bargaining, creative labour, transgression or exit, feed back into the structure, either reproducing it through compliance or provoking fresh sanctions through defiance. The

tension between traditional expectation and modern aspiration operates throughout as a mediating condition.

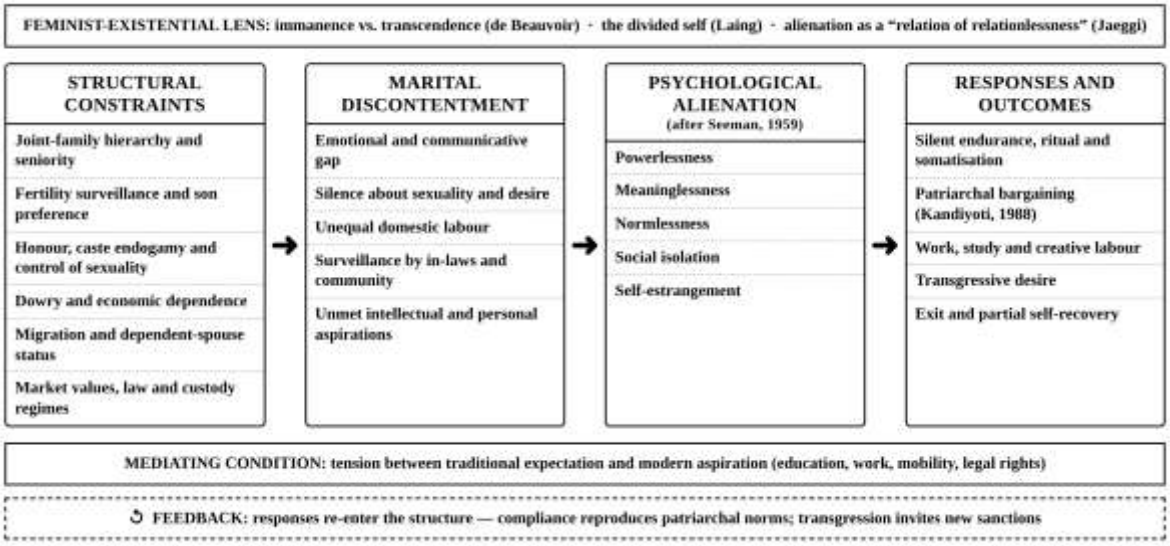


Fig. 1. Conceptual model of the study, linking structural constraints, marital discontentment, the five dimensions of psychological alienation and women's responses in Manju Kapur's *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody*.

Methodology

The study employs a qualitative and interpretive methodology based on close reading, critical interpretation and comparative analysis. Because the research is literary, it does not use empirical data or statistical tools; its evidence is textual, and its claims are supported by the primary texts and by secondary scholarship (Kannabiran and Swaminathan). The primary texts are *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008) and *Custody* (2011). Five women are treated as focal characters: Sona and Nisha in *Home*, Nina in *The Immigrant*, and Shagun and Ishita in *Custody*. Secondary figures such as Sunita and Rupa in *Home* serve as counterpoints that clarify the range of positions available to women within each setting. Table 2 summarises the texts and focal characters.

Table 2. Primary Texts and Focal Characters

Novel	Setting	Focal women	Marital situation
***Home* (2006)**	Joint trading family, Karol Bagh, Delhi	Sona; Nisha	Sona: years of childlessness in a son-centred joint family. Nisha: forbidden love across caste, delayed and arranged marriage. Counterpoints: Sunita, Rupa
***The Immigrant* (2008)**	Delhi and Halifax, Canada	Nina	Arranged marriage to a dentist settled in Canada; migration as a dependent spouse; separation from her widowed mother

Novel	Setting	Focal women	Marital situation
***Custody* (2011)**	Affluent, liberalising Delhi	Shagun; Ishita	Shagun: affair, divorce and custody battle. Ishita: divorced for infertility, later stepmother to Roohi

The analysis proceeded in four stages. First, each novel was read closely to identify episodes of marital and familial conflict and of psychological distress. Second, the relevant passages were grouped under the five dimensions of alienation (Table 1) and under categories of constraint, namely family structure, reproduction, sexuality and honour, economy, and space and mobility. Third, the grouped material was interpreted through the feminist-existential framework outlined above. Fourth, the findings were synthesised comparatively across the three novels. To make comparative patterns visible, each dimension of alienation was assigned an interpretive salience rating (low, moderate or high) for each focal character, according to how centrally that dimension structures the character's narrative arc. These ratings, presented in Figure 2, are heuristic summaries of the close reading, not quantitative measurements.

Home: The Joint Family and the Alienated Body

Home is set in the household of Banwari Lal, a cloth merchant of Karol Bagh whose family lives above and around the shop that sustains it. Kapur presents the joint family as an economic unit in which home and business share a single logic of accumulation and continuity (Gope and Khuraijam; Sharma). Women's value is reckoned in the same currency: the dowry they bring, the sons they bear and the service they render. The house is, in a literal sense, an architecture of control (Kumar, "Women, Domestic Space"). Rooms are allotted by seniority and fertility, the kitchen is the women's assigned domain, and movement beyond the threshold requires permission. Within this structure, alienation is inscribed above all on the female body.

Sona: Childlessness and the Powerlessness of the Wife

Sona enters the family through a marriage of choice rather than a carefully negotiated alliance, and she brings little dowry. For years she does not conceive, while her sister-in-law Sushila, whose marriage brought the family material advantage, bears sons in quick succession. Sona's position in the household deteriorates accordingly: she is subjected to the mother-in-law's reproaches and seeks remedy in fasts, prayers and rituals. Her experience corresponds closely to Seeman's powerlessness, since her standing depends on a bodily outcome she cannot control. In Kandiyoti's terms, she has been admitted to the household but not yet to the bargain, which only a son can secure. Her suffering is not caused by any failure of affection in her husband; it is produced by a family structure that measures a wife by her reproductive yield, a pattern that persists across Kapur's fiction (Adhikary; Begam and Fathima).

The structural character of this alienation is confirmed by what follows. When Sona gives birth to Nisha and later to a son, Raju, her status changes immediately, although she herself has not changed. Kapur does not present this as a happy resolution. Having secured her place through motherhood, Sona becomes a guardian of the family's honour and is notably harsh in policing her daughter's conduct. The woman who was once marginalised by the system now

reproduces it, illustrating Kandiyoti's observation that the patriarchal bargain turns its former victims into its custodians.

Sunita and Rupa: The Limits and Margins of the Bargain

Two minor figures mark the outer limits of the household's logic. Banwari Lal's daughter Sunita is married into a family that mistreats her over dowry, and her death, which her natal family chooses not to examine closely, exposes the extreme consequence of the system: once given away, a daughter largely ceases to be her natal family's responsibility. The silence surrounding her death is itself a form of social violence, consistent with research that links patriarchal beliefs to the normalisation of domestic abuse in Indian families (Satyen et al.). At the other margin stands Sona's sister Rupa, who is childless and lives with her husband in modest rented rooms, where she runs a small pickle business. Rupa is pitied for her childlessness, yet her nuclear household offers a companionship and a measure of autonomy unavailable in the joint family. Kapur thus suggests that the alienation of the wife is tied less to childlessness as such than to the institution that converts childlessness into disgrace.

Nisha: Silenced Trauma, Caste and the Estranged Body

Nisha's alienation begins long before marriage. As a child she is sexually abused by her cousin Vicky, Sunita's son, whom the family has taken into the household. The family's response is to remove the child rather than confront the abuser: Nisha is sent to live with Rupa. The violation is never openly acknowledged within the family; it is managed through silence, which protects the household's reputation at the cost of the girl's inner coherence (Kasish; Mitra). In Laing's terms, Nisha learns early to separate an outward self that complies from an inward self that withdraws, a split that shapes her later relationships.

In college Nisha falls in love with Suresh, a young man from a lower caste, and the family forbids the match in order to preserve caste endogamy and its standing in the community. Soon afterwards she develops a severe skin disease, and astrological judgement that she is *manglik* further complicates her prospects of marriage. Kapur makes the body the place where the family's refusal is recorded. Nisha's own skin becomes alien to her, an instance of self-estrangement in its most literal form, and de Beauvoir's observation that woman experiences her body as an object for others is given concrete shape: in the marriage market, Nisha is treated as damaged goods.

A counter-movement appears when Nisha establishes her own business, Nisha's Creations, designing and selling women's suits. Work restores meaning to her life, gives her an income and allows her to experience herself as the author of a project rather than as a problem to be solved. In de Beauvoir's terms, she glimpses transcendence. Yet Kapur declines to let this become a story of liberation. Nisha's eventual marriage to Arvind and the birth of twins return her to domestic duty, and the business she built passes to her brother's wife, Pooja. The novel ends with Nisha absorbed into the home. Her alienation is not resolved so much as domesticated: its symptoms recede as the self that suffered them is relinquished (Mitra; Pratheeba).

Read as a whole, *Home* presents alienation chiefly as powerlessness and bodily self-estrangement, produced through three intersecting mechanisms: surveillance of fertility (Sona), control of sexuality and caste (Nisha) and violence that the family declines to name (Sunita).

The Immigrant: Diaspora as Double Exile

The Immigrant relocates Kapur's enquiry from the joint family to the diasporic nuclear household. Nina, a lecturer in English at Miranda House who lives with her widowed mother in Delhi, is approaching thirty when the novel opens and is acutely aware of the stigma that attaches to the unmarried woman. Her arranged marriage to Ananda, an Indian dentist settled in Halifax, appears to offer escape from both spinsterhood and the narrowing life of a single woman of modest means. The marriage is presented, in effect, as a rescue. Its price, however, is the surrender of Nina's profession, her mother's companionship and the intellectual identity she has built. Avtar Brah's concept of diaspora space is useful here: migration does not leave gender relations behind but reorganises them, often in ways that intensify a woman's dependence.

Isolation and Meaninglessness in Halifax

Nina enters Canada as a dependent spouse, so that her legal existence in the new country is defined through her husband. In Halifax she has no job, no friends and no recognised social role; Ananda spends his days at his practice, and the long winters confine her to a house she did not choose. Her experience matches Seeman's social isolation and meaninglessness with unusual exactness. The household tasks that were meant to fill her days cannot give them purpose, and the qualifications that defined her in Delhi count for little in Canada. Friedan's "problem that has no name" reappears here in diasporic form. The affluent suburban home, which was supposed to mark the success of the marriage, becomes the setting of a loneliness Nina cannot explain even to herself (Devi and Kavitha; Kameswari).

Silence, Sexuality and the Divided Couple

The marriage is further estranged by a silence surrounding sexuality. Ananda has a sexual difficulty that he conceals from his wife and seeks to treat in secret, while Nina's own dissatisfaction has no legitimate language in which it could be voiced. Kapur's treatment is notably even-handed. Ananda, too, is deformed by norms of masculinity that make his difficulty shameful, but the costs of the silence fall unequally. When the couple fails to conceive, it is Nina who first bears the burden of medical investigation, as though the presumption that childlessness is a woman's failing had crossed the ocean with her (cf. Adhikary). The right to intimacy, which Rathore identifies as an expression of feminism in Kapur's writing, appears here as the right that the diasporic marriage most conspicuously denies.

Nina's attempts to recover herself take two forms. She enrols in a course in library studies, which restores a measure of intellectual purpose, and she enters into a relationship with a fellow student, Anton. Kapur does not present the affair as liberation. It brings guilt and the unsettling experience of being desired as an exotic other, and it ends without offering Nina a place to belong. In Seeman's terms, it marks a movement into normlessness, a condition in which the codes that once regulated her conduct no longer apply and no new codes have replaced them. The death of Nina's mother removes her last anchor in India, and her return for the funeral confirms that she has become a stranger there as well. She is, in the fullest sense, doubly exiled.

By the end of the novel Nina leaves the marriage and sets out alone. Kapur frames this departure not as triumph but as the acceptance of solitude as the price of self-possession. *The Immigrant* thus shifts the dominant register of alienation from the bodily powerlessness of *Home* to social isolation and meaninglessness, compounded by a growing normlessness, and

it shows that the nuclear, apparently modern household does not abolish patriarchal constraint but relocates it.

Custody: Law, Motherhood and the Divided Self

Custody is set in the Delhi of economic liberalisation. Raman is a rising executive at a multinational soft-drinks company referred to as "the Brand", and his wife Shagun is admired chiefly for her beauty; they have two children, Arjun and Roohi. On the surface the marriage is a success. It is affluent and nuclear, and it is free of the overt surveillance of the joint family. Modernity appears to have removed the obstacles that defined *Home*. Kapur's achievement in this novel is to show patriarchy reorganised rather than dissolved, as the market and the law take over functions once performed by the elders of the family (Dar and Ahluwalia; Ramasamy et al.).

Shagun: Beauty, Desire and Maternal Guilt

Shagun married young, and her identity has been formed around being looked at. Beauty is her capital and her constraint. When she enters into an affair with Ashok Khanna, Raman's superior at the Brand, she claims for herself a desire that her marriage had never acknowledged. The affair leads to the end of the marriage and to a protracted struggle over the children. Shagun's alienation is best described as normlessness combined with a divided maternal self. The codes of the liberal metropolis tolerate desire in private, yet the moment that desire becomes public, Shagun is judged above all as a mother who has failed. In the custody battle the children become instruments of the parents' conflict, and Shagun's self is split between the life she has chosen and the motherhood the court and society hold against her (Meraj; Pratheeba). Her eventual move abroad with Ashok secures her desire but deepens her estrangement from the daughter she leaves behind, a cost Kapur refuses to minimise.

Ishita: Infertility, Divorce and the Stigmatised Self

Kapur sets Shagun beside Ishita, whose story mirrors hers in reverse. Ishita is divorced by her husband, Suryakant, when she fails to conceive, and she returns to her parents' home carrying the stigma of a divorced and childless woman (Adhikary). Her alienation combines powerlessness, social isolation and self-estrangement: she internalises the verdict of deficiency that her in-laws have passed on her. A first recovery comes through social work with an organisation that teaches children in a poor neighbourhood, which offers her a purpose outside the conjugal frame. Her later marriage to Raman makes her stepmother to Roohi and grants her the motherhood she had been denied. Yet this motherhood is legally and emotionally contingent. It is borrowed from another woman's loss and remains exposed to the outcome of the custody proceedings. Ishita's fulfilment is therefore shadowed by anxiety, an alienation from a role she possesses but does not securely own.

The Law as a New Patriarchal Arbiter

By pairing Shagun and Ishita, Kapur shows that one woman who leaves motherhood for desire and another who gains motherhood after being cast out for infertility are judged by the same yardstick: the extent to which they fulfil the role of mother within a marriage. The legal process converts family conflict into adversarial narratives in which each parent's moral fitness is placed on trial. The modern institution of the court does not abolish the patriarchal evaluation of women; it rationalises and formalises it. The children, Roohi in particular, inherit the alienation of the adults, which suggests that its effects reach across generations. In *Custody*, accordingly, the dominant forms of alienation are normlessness and a self-estrangement centred on motherhood.

Comparative Discussion

Constraints that Produce Alienation

Read together, the three novels show that the mechanisms producing alienation change form across settings while their underlying logic remains constant. Table 3 maps these mechanisms. In *Home*, constraint is exercised directly by the joint family through control of reproduction, sexuality, caste and space. In *The Immigrant*, the extended family recedes, but its functions are taken over by geographical distance, legal dependence and a silence about sexuality that the couple imports from home. In *Custody*, the nuclear family appears free, yet the market, which values Shagun's beauty and Raman's corporate standing, and the law, which judges both women as mothers, assume the regulatory role once held by the elders. Across the three novels, the patriarchal evaluation of women as wives and mothers persists even as its institutional vehicle changes (Harisha and Sri; Sharma and Kumar).

Table 3. Patriarchal and Socio-cultural Constraints across the Three Novels

Mechanism	***Home***	***The Immigrant***	***Custody***
Family structure	Patrilocal joint family; authority of elders and the shop	Nuclear diasporic household; kin replaced by distance	Nuclear urban household; courts and lawyers as arbiters
Reproduction	Son preference; childless wife reproached (Sona)	Childlessness investigated through the wife first	Infertility as a ground for divorce (Ishita)
Sexuality and honour	Caste-endogamous control of a daughter's love; silenced abuse (Nisha)	Female desire unspeakable; male difficulty concealed	Wife's desire judged as maternal unfitness (Shagun)
Economy	Dowry; women's labour absorbed into the family enterprise	Loss of salaried work; financial dependence on husband	Corporate affluence; beauty as social capital
Space and mobility	Thresholds, kitchen and permission to leave the house	Suburban isolation; legal status as sponsored spouse	Separate homes; transnational move; the courtroom
Dominant alienation	Powerlessness; bodily self-estrangement	Social isolation; meaninglessness	Normlessness; divided maternal self

Shifting Forms of Alienation

Figure 2 summarises the interpretive salience of each dimension of alienation for the five focal characters. Three patterns stand out. First, self-estrangement is the one dimension that is moderate or high for every character, which suggests that the experience of living a life that is not one's own is the common core of alienation in Kapur's fiction. Second, powerlessness is most salient where the joint family or its stigma remains decisive (Sona, Nisha and Ishita). Third, meaninglessness peaks in Nina's diasporic marriage, where social isolation is also high, a condition she shares only with the stigmatised Ishita, while normlessness peaks in

Shagun's metropolitan marriage, where competing codes of desire and duty collide most sharply.

Dimension of alienation	Sona *Home*	Nisha *Home*	Nina *The Immigrant*	Shagun *Custody*	Ishita *Custody*
Powerlessness	High	High	Moderate	Moderate	High
Meaninglessness	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate
Normlessness	Low	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low
Social isolation	Moderate	Moderate	High	Moderate	High
Self-estrangement	Moderate	High	High	High	High

Interpretive salience ratings derived from close reading; they are heuristic summaries, not quantitative measures.

Fig. 2. Interpretive salience of the five dimensions of alienation for the focal characters of *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody*.

These patterns support a broader argument about the trajectory of Kapur's fiction, represented in Figure 3. As her women move from the courtyard of the joint family to the diasporic suburb and then to the courtroom of the liberalised city, their formal options widen: they acquire education, mobility, income and legal rights. Yet each expansion is accompanied by a new form of estrangement, because the patriarchal evaluation of women as wives and mothers travels with them. Alienation is therefore not overcome by modernity but redistributed by it. This reading is consistent with Nagababu and Rao's observation that education widens the gap between aspiration and reality, and with Mishra's account of empowerment and alienation advancing together.

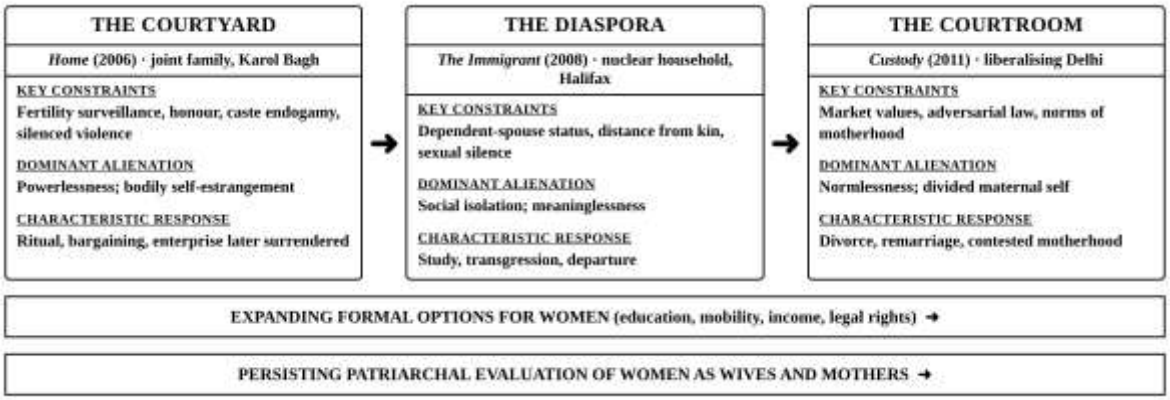


Fig. 3. The widening geography of alienation in Kapur's fiction: from the courtyard of the joint family to the diaspora and the courtroom.

Revisiting the Working Propositions

The analysis broadly supports the first proposition, that alienation results from prolonged marital and familial dissatisfaction rather than from innate disposition. In each case alienation deepens as dissatisfaction is prolonged, and it changes form only when the marital or familial structure itself changes, as when Sona bears a son, Nina leaves Halifax or Ishita remarries. Nisha's case, however, requires a refinement: her alienation begins in childhood, within the

natal family, well before marriage. Marriage is therefore better understood as the culmination of a lifelong regulation of women's bodies and desires than as its sole origin.

The second proposition, that the conflict between tradition and modern aspiration intensifies alienation, is also supported. The women whose aspirations have been widened by education or work, namely Nisha, Nina and Ishita, experience their constraints most acutely, because they can imagine lives that the structures around them forbid. Modern aspiration does not cause alienation, but it makes the gap between the self as a project and the self as a function both visible and painful (Alagiri; Periyasamy).

Responses: Withdrawal, Bargaining and Flight

Kapur's women are not merely passive sufferers of alienation. Table 4 shows that their responses fall into recognisable patterns: silent endurance and ritual (Sona), enterprise followed by surrender (Nisha), study, transgression and departure (Nina), desire pursued at the cost of motherhood (Shagun), and social service followed by remarriage (Ishita). None of these responses abolishes alienation. Those who bargain with patriarchy, like Sona, secure status by becoming its agents; those who withdraw, like Nisha, find that their symptoms recede only as their projects are surrendered; and those who leave, like Nina and Shagun, gain self-possession at the cost of solitude or a divided motherhood. This finding complements the earlier paper from this project, which traced how Virmati and Astha convert marital discontent into self-assertion. Read alongside it, the present analysis shows that alienation is the inward face of that same struggle. It is the psychological price of a resistance that is always partial and always negotiated.

Table 4. Comparative Synthesis of Alienation, Response and Outcome

Character	Chief source of discontent	Dominant dimensions	Response	Narrative outcome
Sona	Childlessness in a son-centred joint family	Powerlessness; social isolation	Ritual, fasting and endurance; later bargains through motherhood	Status secured; becomes an enforcer of family honour
Nisha	Silenced trauma; forbidden love across caste; illness	Self-estrangement; powerlessness	Enterprise (Nisha's Creations); negotiated marriage	Business surrendered on marriage; alienation domesticated
Nina	Emotional and sexual void in a migrant marriage	Social isolation; meaninglessness; self-estrangement	Study, an extramarital relationship, return to India	Leaves the marriage; solitary self-possession
Shagun	Early marriage defined by beauty; absence of intimacy	Normlessness; self-estrangement	Affair, divorce and emigration	Desire attained at the cost of a contested motherhood

Character	Chief source of discontent	Dominant dimensions	Response	Narrative outcome
Ishita	Divorce for infertility; social stigma	Powerlessness; social isolation; self-estrangement	Social work; remarriage	Motherhood gained but legally and emotionally contingent

Conclusion

This paper has examined psychological alienation and its patriarchal causes in Manju Kapur's *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody*. Using Seeman's typology within a feminist-existential framework, it has shown that alienation in these novels is neither a single condition nor a private misfortune. It is a structurally produced experience whose dominant form shifts with the institution in which marriage is embedded: powerlessness and bodily self-estrangement in the joint family of *Home*, social isolation and meaninglessness in the diasporic marriage of *The Immigrant*, and normlessness and a divided maternal self in the legally mediated marriage of *Custody*. Across these settings the patriarchal evaluation of women as wives and mothers persists, carried by different institutions: elders, distance, the market and the law. Kapur thus maps a widening geography of alienation in which each expansion of a woman's formal options is shadowed by a new form of estrangement. She also refuses the consolations of redemptive closure, in keeping with an ethic of refusal that unsettles conventional endings in Indian women's fiction (Kumar, "Feminist Refusal").

The study makes three contributions. Methodologically, it demonstrates the value of a differentiated framework for analysing alienation in literary texts, moving criticism beyond the undifferentiated use of the term. Thematically, it establishes a causal link between marital discontentment and alienation while showing that the family's regulation of women begins before marriage. Comparatively, it reads Kapur's post-2005 novels as a sequence that tracks the reorganisation, rather than the decline, of patriarchy in contemporary India. The study is limited by its interpretive character and by its focus on three novels; the salience ratings are heuristic summaries of the reading rather than measurements. Future research could extend the framework to Kapur's *Brothers* (2016), test it comparatively against the fiction of Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair, and bring it into dialogue with psychoanalytic and postcolonial approaches. Such research could further clarify how Indian women's writing represents the inner cost of living within, and against, the institution of marriage.

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