

Existential Feminism in Selected Novels of Manju Kapur

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Abstract

Indian English literature has undergone a remarkable transformation through the works of women novelists who emphasize female subjectivity, identity, and resistance to patriarchal oppression. Manju Kapur stands out among these authors for her complex depiction of women juggling their wants with societal expectations. Her works depict the existential and psychological challenges faced by women torn between tradition and modernity. This research paper looks at the idea of existential feminism in a few of Manju Kapur's books, specifically *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, and *The Immigrant*. The novel examines how Kapur's female protagonists pursue identity, freedom, uniqueness, and self-realization amid repressive patriarchal systems by drawing on the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre. The study covers themes such as alienation, freedom of choice, marital discontent, sexuality, education, and resistance. The study contends that by challenging gender norms and pursuing genuine existence, Kapur's heroes represent existential feminist awareness. Through her realistic stories, Kapur portrays women as people who are constantly searching for their identity and purpose rather than just as victims.

Keywords: Existential feminism, patriarchy, identity crisis, freedom, alienation

Introduction

Feminist ideas have had a significant impact on Indo-Anglian writers, especially women. Within the confines of a patriarchal culture, existential feminism in Indo-Anglian fiction explores Indian women's quest for individuality, meaning, and identity. It shows female protagonists battling restrictive customs, societal expectations, and internal conflict as they progress from self-denial to self-affirmation. Through culturally grounded but unique viewpoints, authors like Kamala Markandaya and Anita Desai highlight psychological struggle, individualism, and the challenge to conventional norms.

For a very long time, literature has been a potent tool for communicating emotions, sentiments, and worldviews that help change society. Originally a byproduct of colonialism, Indian English literature has now become well-known throughout the world. This literary tradition has been greatly influenced by feminism. Feminist consciousness, which emerged relatively late in India, infiltrated every aspect of Indian English writing and gave voice to the oppressed and voiceless woman. This feminist expression has frequently included feelings of disenchantment, repulsion, and dread. The purpose of this conversation is to shed light on the idea of womanhood as it appears in the English-language writings of well-known Indian authors. Indian English literature consistently presents a picture of changing societal realities.

Indian women now have more opportunity to participate in public life because of the rise of notable Indian writers in English. Literature has become a tool for social change, especially thanks to women writers. The main focus of their works is femininity, which is motivated by sociological and reformist

motivations. Since English colonization in India coexisted with the development of Indian English literature, the language and its philosophical and political settings are inextricably linked. Three influential authors from the early 20th century—Mulk Raj Anand (1905), R. K. Narayan (1906), and Raja Rao (1909)—are frequently referred to as the "greats" of Indian English literature.

The emergence of women writers in Indian English literature has greatly enriched literary discourse by giving voice to women's experiences, identities, struggles, and aspirations, thereby bringing them into the mainstream of literary expression. The emotional, psychological, and social realities of women in patriarchal society have been examined by contemporary Indian women novelists, including Shashi Deshpande, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy, and Manju Kapur. Among them, Manju Kapur is especially renowned for her accurate portrayal of middle-class Indian women battling for autonomy and individuality. Existentialist philosophy and feminist ideas are combined in existential feminism. Existentialism places a strong emphasis on the pursuit of meaning in an absurd and alienating world as well as freedom, choice, and responsibility. Existential feminism emerged prominently through Simone de Beauvoir's seminal work *The Second Sex*, where she famously stated, "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." According to Beauvoir, women are denied the ability to define themselves as independent individuals and are socially conditioned into passive positions. Because Manju Kapur's protagonists are women imprisoned in constrictive social frameworks but acutely aware of their needs and uniqueness, the existential feminist paradigm is extremely pertinent to her novels. They continually negotiate between societal commitments and personal desires. Existential issues like alienation, anxiety, authenticity, freedom, and self-definition are reflected in their journeys. This paper seeks to explore existential feminism in the selected novels of Manju Kapur. It examines the ways in which her female protagonists challenge patriarchal structures, pursue personal autonomy, and strive to construct independent identities. The study further investigates how factors such as education, sexuality, marriage, and interpersonal relationships function as significant mediums through which women negotiate and define their existential conditions.

Existentialism, especially the writings of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, provides the philosophical foundation for existential feminism. "One is not born courageous; one becomes so through action and choice." According to Sartre, existence comes before essence, which means that people develop their identities via decisions and deeds rather than being born with them. People are destined to be free and accountable for their own existence. Existentialism was incorporated into feminist discourse by Simone de Beauvoir. According to her, women have traditionally been viewed as "the other" in comparison to men. In patriarchal society, women are viewed as inferior to men. Kapur portrays women who are educated and sensitive yet trapped within patriarchal institutions such as marriage, family, religion, and social conventions. Her major novels include: *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant*, *Custody* etc.

The women of Kapur are not helpless victims. They are intelligent, aspirational, and deeply emotional. They frequently struggle to balance social expectations with their own desires, though. Existential conflict results from this tension. Her writing acknowledges the variety of women's lives while criticizing patriarchal systems. She doesn't idealize tradition or romanticize disobedience. Rather, she depicts women's challenges in a realistic manner, highlighting the costs and opportunities of independence. Through education, love, sexuality, financial freedom, and emotional fulfillment,

Kapur's protagonists pursue identity. Their journeys embody existential feminist consciousness because they challenge socially imposed roles and attempt to define themselves independently.

Manju Kapur's first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, is perhaps her best-known piece. The novel tells the tale of Virmati, a young lady battling against patriarchal expectations, during the Indian Partition era. Virmati's quest for knowledge and uniqueness is where her existential struggle starts. Women are expected to marry young and devote themselves to household chores in traditional Punjabi society. Virmati, however, wants to pursue greater education and intellectual fulfillment. The demands of her family clash with her longing for selfhood. Because she is unable to live up to the ideal of submissive female, she feels alienated in her own household. The awareness that one's true aspirations clash with social roles is a sign of existential discomfort, which is reflected in this alienation. Virmati's existential struggle is exacerbated by her friendship with Professor Harish. Despite her personal attachment to him, she ends up in a relationship that is frowned upon by society. She is cut off from her family and society as a result of her decisions. However, she keeps up the relationship since it symbolizes both intellectual and emotional independence.

In the novel, education serves as a form of transcendence. Virmati seeks to assert her identity and break free from patriarchal constraints via education. According to Kapur, education empowers women by allowing them to challenge established norms. In Kapur's novels, scholars have highlighted education as a driver for women's liberation. Virmati's quest for knowledge represents existential freedom, or the effort to identify oneself via deliberate decision-making. Virmati does not find fulfillment in her marriage to Harish, despite her best attempts. Rather, she feels fragmented in identity and emotionally alone. In a patriarchal marriage arrangement governed by Harish's first wife and social norms, she turns into "the Other." The restrictions imposed on women even when they exercise their independence are made clear by Virmati's existential crises. Although her rebellion may not ensure happiness, it is a brave endeavor to pursue authenticity.

In Kapur's novel, *A Married Woman* is arguably the most overt examination of existential feminism. The protagonist of the novel is Astha, a middle-class married lady who struggles with emotional discontent and longs for a life outside of marriage and motherhood. At first, Astha complies with traditional notions of domesticity and marriage. But with time, she comes to understand how meaningless her life is. Her life loses its uniqueness and becomes robotic. Existentialism highlights the need for people to make meaningful decisions. Astha's discontent arises from living in accordance with social norms rather than her own preferences. Her ingenuity and uniqueness are stifled by her marriage. Sartrean existentialism, in which people fight between social roles and real existence, is reflected in Astha's inner strife. An important turning point in Astha's existential journey is her relationship with Pipeelika. She finds emotional closeness and self-expression lacking in her marriage through same-sex desire. Both heteronormative expectations and patriarchal norms are challenged by this partnership. Astha uses her sexuality as a way to take control of her body and feelings. Because she investigates real selfhood and rejects socially imposed labels, her experience represents existential feminism.

Kapur depicts sexuality as a search for existential and emotional satisfaction rather than just physical desire. Astha is able to recover her uniqueness and autonomy because to her relationship with Pipeelika. Astha's passion for painting is a representation of her artistic nature. Existential

transcendence is achieved through artistic expression. She makes an effort to recover uniqueness and create significance through art. Astha is still caught between her societal obligations and her personal freedom, though. The intricacy of women's existential challenges in Indian society is reflected in her incapacity to fully give up household responsibilities. "The women in Manju Kapur's fiction seek identity and freedom in a male-dominated social order."

The novel ultimately portrays existential freedom as incomplete and difficult but nonetheless necessary for authentic living. Home looks at how women's identities are affected by the patriarchal structure of the traditional Indian joint family. The title itself is ironic as "home," which is typically thought of as a place where women are protected, turns into a place of oppression and imprisonment. In the novel, women are supposed to give up their uniqueness in order to maintain household harmony and family honor. Nisha, the main character, battles existential turmoil as she tries to balance her goals with those of her family. She faces patriarchal constraints while pursuing her goals of education, freedom, and emotional fulfillment. The novel illustrates how women's existential freedom is frequently denied in intimate settings. Relationships—wife, mother, daughter—become more important to women than their identities. Nisha's existential dilemma is exacerbated by her emotional loneliness and childhood trauma. She feels cut off from both other people and herself. Existential detachment is reflected in her incapacity to speak honestly. Women's experiences, especially those related to trauma and sexuality, are silenced by patriarchal structures. The family system mostly ignores Nisha's pain. Existential sadness is strengthened by this invisibility. Nisha's aspirations to become independent are reflected in her entrepreneurial endeavors. Being financially independent turns as a way to rebel against patriarchal reliance. Because dependency restricts women's options, existential feminism highlights the significance of economic freedom. Nisha pursues self-definition outside of household responsibilities through business and employment. But her freedom is nonetheless limited by social norms. In a patriarchal society, women's independence is still contingent, as Kapur realistically illustrates. The Immigrant examines existential alienation in relation to sexuality, marriage, and migration. The main character, Nina, marries Amanda and moves to Canada. Instead of finding fulfillment through marriage and migration, she feels alone and alienated. Due to her cultural displacement, migration exacerbates Nina's existential crises. She feels cut off from both Western culture and Indian customs. She starts to lose her individuality. Existentialism frequently emphasizes rootlessness and alienation. These issues are reflected in Nina's experience as an immigrant. She deals with marital discontent and finds it difficult to make sense of new situations. The patriarchal assumptions surrounding female sexuality are made clear by Nina's marriage.

Her physical and mental discontent highlights the unfair realities of heterosexual marriage. According to Kapur, sexuality is essential to one's identity and sense of fulfillment. Existential consciousness is reflected in Nina's increasing knowledge of her desires. She starts challenging the social conventions that define women mostly in terms of marriage. Nina eventually gains self-assurance and independence. Her exposure to Western culture fosters independence and self-discovery. According to the novel, women must face loneliness, fear, and uncertainty in order to achieve existential liberation. Nina's transformation serves as an example of the difficult but essential journey of self-discovery. A recurrent theme in Kapur's novels is identity struggle. Her main characters find it difficult to define themselves outside of patriarchal roles. Women are supposed to put family responsibilities ahead of

their own ambitions. As a result, they suffer from fragmentation and existential discomfort. The quest for authenticity and self-discovery are central to their journeys. In Kapur's work, marriage frequently serves as a patriarchal institution that limits women's autonomy. For the sake of domestic stability, women are supposed to give up their individuality. Marriage often leads to emotional isolation and discontent even though it provides security and respectability. Kapur acknowledges women's emotional reliance on relationships while criticizing conventional marital systems. Women who are educated are better able to challenge patriarchal conventions and pursue independence. "Kapur's women protagonists struggle constantly between tradition and selfhood." In Kapur's novels, educated women grow aware of injustice and strive for individuality. Education is essential for women's empowerment and identity creation, according to scholarly debates of Kapur's literature. Kapur depicts female sexuality honestly and truthfully. Her female protagonists question conventional ideas of feminine submission and purity in their pursuit of emotional and physical pleasure.

Sexuality becomes a significant part of existential freedom because it allows women to retake control over their bodies and desires. Both existential philosophy and Kapur's literature revolve around alienation. In families, marriages, and society, her protagonists frequently experience emotional isolation. Their incapacity to express their true selves inside constrictive societal institutions is the root of their loneliness. Kapur's protagonists fight patriarchal tyranny in a number of ways, despite their limits. They seek self-expression, careers, emotional connections, and education. Even while their uprising may not always be successful, it symbolizes existential bravery and the refusal to be silent. Kapur's novels clearly reflect the impact of Simone de Beauvoir's existential feminist concepts. Beauvoir argued that patriarchy constructs women as dependent and secondary beings. By pursuing uniqueness and independence, Kapur's heroes contest this "Otherness." But their experiences also highlight how hard it is to break free from patriarchal training. Like Beauvoir, Kapur highlights how women are socially conditioned to play subservient roles. Her novel illustrates how gender norms limit women's autonomy and personal growth. Kapur also recognizes the agency of women. Instead of being helpless victims, her characters are intelligent people who make an effort to control their own lives in spite of social pressures. The sociocultural framework of Indian patriarchy is necessary to comprehend Manju Kapur's works. Indian culture has historically placed a strong emphasis on female obedience, marriage, motherhood, and family honor.

Women who defy these expectations frequently experience emotional and social rejection. Kapur depicts these pressures in a realistic manner. The transitional character of contemporary Indian society is also reflected in her writings. Globalization, urbanization, education, and shifting gender norms give women new opportunities while also creating tension and worry. The majority of Kapur's protagonists are from middle-class metropolitan settings where traditional and modern ideals clash. Their existential troubles are exacerbated by this cultural contradiction. Manju Kapur is largely acknowledged by critics as a significant feminist voice in Indian English literature. Her novels are commended for accurately capturing the emotional and psychological realities of women. Her exploration of identity crisis, alienation, freedom, and resistance has been emphasized in studies. Critical studies on *A Married Woman* extensively emphasize the influence of Sartrean existentialism and the female protagonist's search for authentic selfhood and meaningful existence within a patriarchal social framework. Critics further argue that Manju Kapur adopts a restrained and realistic feminist perspective, portraying women's resistance through subtle acts of self-awareness, emotional assertion, and personal choice rather than through radical rebellion. She does not present women as

completely free from social norms. Rather, she portrays freedom as limited, challenging, and frequently unpleasant. She sets herself apart from more idealized feminist narratives with her realistic portrayal of women's problems. She recognizes that women's ties with marriage, family, and tradition are emotionally complex.

Manju Kapur's novels offer a thorough examination of existential feminism in modern Indian society. Her female heroes fight against patriarchal oppression in their quest for self-determination, identity, and purpose in life. Kapur explores issues of alienation, independence, sexuality, education, and resistance via characters like Virmati, Astha, Nisha, and Nina. As they try to balance their own desires with social standards, these women face existential challenges. The essential ideas of existential feminism expressed by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir are reflected in Kapur's fiction. Her protagonists reject passive acquiescence and make deliberate decisions in an effort to develop true identities. However, their experiences expose the emotional and social consequences of liberty in patriarchal countries. The analysis shows that existential feminism in Kapur's novels is firmly grounded in actual female experiences rather than just being theoretical. Her writings acknowledge the richness of women's experiences in transitional Indian society while criticizing conventional gender norms. In the end, Manju Kapur's novels support women's humanity, uniqueness, and autonomy. By depicting women as existential people involved in the ongoing fight for freedom and identity rather than as stereotypes, they make a substantial contribution to feminist literary discourse.

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