



**NEGOTIATING HEGEMONY: THE CLASH OF WESTERN AND  
TRADITIONAL INDIAN VALUES IN MANJU KAPUR'S *DIFFICULT  
DAUGHTERS* AND *A MARRIED WOMAN***

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper examines the relationship between the western liberalism against the backdrop of traditional Indian values in the novels of Manju Kapur *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*. Applying the theory of cultural hegemony developed by Antonio Gramsci in combination with postcolonial feminist critique, the paper analyses how the main characters Kapur, Virmati and Astha, question patriarchal institutional structures and internalized values. Virmati's struggle to gain an education and independence in pre-partition Punjab and Astha's quest to understand who she is and what she really wants in a contemporary urban environment illuminate the subtlety of resistance to social expectations. It also serves to highlight the complications inherent in identity construction and the fact that emancipation is negotiation, rather than outright refusal. Placed within a wider socio-political framework, these novels serve as discussions on women, culture and power relations in Indian literature.

**Keywords:** Cultural hegemony, postcolonial feminism, gender identity, tradition vs. modernity, Gramsci.

Manju Kapur, a leading light of modern Indian English literature, explores the intricacies of the woman caught in the midst of tradition and modernity. Born in 1948, Kapur's stories capture the social misgivings that women experience in male dominated society and particularly in

contact with open Western liberal belief systems. Her writings highlight the psychological and emotional struggle Indian women undergo, particularly in the countenance of traditional and widely accepted social values.

While much researchers have addressed the gender and domesticity in Kapur's work, fewer works take the opportunity to explore her critical engagement with cultural hegemony through a significant theoretical intervention. This research paper aims to attend to that gap, applying on Antonio Gramsci's argument from *The Prison Notebooks* regarding cultural hegemony, where dominant groups not only act as a ruling group but are also very much in control of how the subordinate group accepts and/or interacts with that hegemony alongside feminist readings, in order to unpack cultural and ideological tensions to examine *Difficult Daughters* (1998) and *A Married Woman* (2003). These novels provide literary sites where the operation of the intersection of inherited practices and newly fashioned identities unfold in complicating ways that impact the tension between the personal and the political.

Antonio Gramsci's theory of cultural hegemony explains how dominant ideologies survive through the consent of subordinating groups rather than by forced domination. Cultural hegemony operates through institutions such as family, education, and religion to naturalize ideologies that preserve existing power relations. This is important in considering

how the patriarchal values of Indian society are internalized through family, education, and marriage customs. Gramsci expressed that the ruling class maintains its position, not because they dominate through force, but they are able to establish definitions of culture and ideology, presented as 'natural', which have come to be seen as universal to all individuals in society. In *The Right to Be Lazy*, Paul Lafargue argues that oppressed classes, despite having the ruling class's ideology imposed upon them, still develop their own religious, ethical, and political ideas. He believes that the oppressed are close to emancipation when their views on nature and society directly challenge those of the ruling class.

Moreover, Postcolonial feminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak further complicate this discussion by emphasizing the intersection of colonial and patriarchal oppression of the female subject. Mohanty critiques the tendency of Western feminism to homogenize the experiences of Third World women while insisting on the need to foreground the historical and cultural specificity of the experiences of women of the Third World (335). Spivak's notion of the "subaltern" draws attention to the difficulty for marginalized groups to speak in a position

that is often defined for them within the hegemonic discourse (Spivak, 1988).

In *Difficult Daughters*, Virmati represents the conflict between traditional Indian expectations and new Western values. She is a member of a traditional Punjabi family. Her wish for an education and independence ultimately lead her to confrontation and alienation from traditional Indian customs. Her relationship with the married professor Harish further increases her alienation from expectations that were both familial and cultural. The narrator describes, “After five years of this education, it was considered that Kasturi had acquired all that it was ever going to be useful for her to know” (*Difficult Daughter* 5). This early instance of education as an internalized limitation via patriarchal thinking parallels Gramsci's idea that an institution can have a hegemonic ideology disguised as natural order.

Kapur states, “She [Virmati] was no longer willing to sacrifice herself on the altar of family expectations” (*Difficult Daughter* 134). This moment denotes her conscious departure from the normative roles of women, i.e. dutiful daughter and sacrificial wife. This act of dissent comes at a cost of social isolation and emotional collapse. Her struggles affirm the extent to which patriarchal values are internalized

and shaped women's lives and determinants. Her mother Kasturi emphasizes this cultural script: “You are the eldest, Viru, your duty is greater... They thought school and college would strengthen you, not change you” (*Difficult Daughter* 266), reflecting views that hegemony is most effective when sustained by the very groups it subjugates.

Representing the older generation's expectations of traditional roles, Kasturi, Virmati's mother, is fully committed to their oppressive mandate of compliance and obedience. Her tenacity is ideologically driven by Gramscian champions - the hegemony to uphold the values of those they oppress. “Kasturi and the complex mother-daughter relationship at the heart of the narrative challenge conventional notions of motherhood... shaped by individual choice, cultural shifts, and the struggle between personal desires and societal expectations.” (Sharma 78)

This tension between generations is further brought out by Ida, Virmati's daughter, who said, “My mother tightened her reins on me as I grew older, she said it was for my own good. As a result, I am constantly looking for escape routes” (*Difficult Daughter* 279). The novel's generational narrative arc, including Kasturi, Virmati, and Ida, depicts the

cyclical nature of patriarchy. Kapur shows that each generation faces similar struggles, highlighting the hegemony of the culture in the society.

Astha, the protagonist of *A Married Woman*, symbolizes different facet of the clash between traditional and modernity. As a married woman with two children, Astha fulfills society's role externally while contending with inner turmoil. Her relationship with Pipeelika, who is the agent of Astha's sexual rebellion in the form of a same-sex couple, goes beyond sexual rebellion and questions the institutional structures of marriage and gender. Kapur writes, "Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear. One slip might find her alone, vulnerable and unprotected" (*A Married Woman* 5). This quote illustrates the consent based on fear, which has been ingrained in women via social conditioning, and aligns deeply with the idea of hegemonic control through cultural normalization.

Astha reminisces, "It was her duty to be a good wife, a good mother, and keep the house in order. No one asked what she wanted" (*A Married Woman* 88). This expresses a certain kind of gendered self-erasure in patriarchal institutions. Her path towards self-awareness demonstrates the psychological toll of accepting (and

internalizing) dominant narratives of culture. The novel critiques the notion of "hegemonic femininity" - wherein women are confined to specific roles, and conduct themselves accordingly. This limitation is emphasized again when her husband remarks, "You are always reading... It fills your head with unnecessary ideas" (*A Married Woman* 54), showcasing the suppression of intellectual autonomy.

The narrative of Astha reveals Messerschmidt's (2016) notion of "oppositional femininity," in which women resist the categorization of expected identity in order to discern their own. "Astha highlights the challenge of modern women clamouring for freedom from male expectations... and deconstructs traditional patriarchal constructs to pick up their voices against repression and sex-subjugation." (Hariharasudan 6135) Through her artistic and political engagements, Astha provides a form of resistance by allowing her identity to be understood as something other than a domestic being. Although Astha's journey appears, to an extent, complete, and she experiences moments of clarity, there is a categorical incompleteness (through her rebelliousness) and equivocation that suggests the dominance of cultural hegemony.

Kapur does not contrast Western and Indian values in binary opposition but rather examines them as part of a complicated spectrum of choices and compromises. Her characters are not archetypes, they are living entities negotiating their way through a complex cultural space. This is consistent with Gramsci's suggestion that hegemony is never totalising, nor uncontested.

Both novels illustrate women resisting patriarchy, albeit in different situations. Virmati pursues an education and Astha is struggling to explore her sexuality, defying and negating the conventional expectations of a woman's role. Their struggles demonstrate that freedom is not always about overcoming constraints and win, but rather making room for other identities and truths. Kapur's protagonists are to be examined against the cultural hegemony that sculpts their blurred identities.

Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* reveal the complexities of cultural hybridity that arises in a society living within and reckoning with its colonial past, while simultaneously inhabiting a globalized present. This project has drawn on Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony and feminist literary theory to demonstrate various ways in which the female

protagonists resist and are complicit in the ideological structures which mediate their existence, and significantly adds to the broader conversation about gender, culture, and power in Indian literature while emphasizing the importance of Gramsci's theory in contemporary feminist critiques.

In nuanced representations of women like Virmati and Astha, Kapur shows that identity formation for Indian women is a complex process of struggle, contradiction, and resilience. Her characters indicate not only personal identities, but a social transformation as well. Her novels encourage readers to think about tradition, the promise of modernity, and the ongoing work of negotiating a sense of belonging in both.

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