

Childhood Trauma and Familial Dysfunction in Manju Kapur's Select Novels

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Abstract

This paper tries to investigate the psychological consequences of childhood trauma in Manju Kapur's *Home* and *Custody*. The focus of this paper is on the ways in which familial dysfunction influences the emotional development of children. The analysis sheds light on the ways in which neglect, abuse, and inconsistent caring environments limit identity formation, emotional stability, and attachment. It does so by utilizing trauma theories developed by Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman, as well as psychoanalytic perspectives developed by Sigmund Freud and D.W. Winnicott. In *Home*, the sexual assault and repression of Nisha inside a joint family highlights the concealment of female trauma. On the other hand, in *Custody*, Roohi and Arjun are depicted as victims of emotional upheaval in the midst of parental strife and custody battles. This chapter makes use of comparative analysis to investigate the cultural and gender dynamics that exist within Indian families. It argues that the pain depicted in Kapur's work goes beyond the suffering of individuals and represents bigger social failures. The nuanced depiction of childhood trauma that Kapur provides significantly contributes to the advancement of feminist trauma theory as well as postcolonial Indian literature.

Key words: psychological consequences, trauma, gender, emotional development, custody battles, sexual assault, parental strife, feminist trauma theory, postcolonial, Indian literature, identity, stability.

Introduction

Childhood, frequently romanticized as a time of purity and emotional maturation, is universally recognized as a crucial stage in human psychological development. During this period, the child's mind is influenced by familial connections, emotional stability, and socialization within the domestic context. The family ideally serves as

the principal source of security, affection, and support—a sanctuary that fosters the formation of a cohesive identity and the emotional resources required to engage with the external environment. This ideal is not universally maintained. In literary depictions of home life, the family is often portrayed as a locus of emotional suppression, unresolved conflict, and entrenched trauma. In the oeuvre of Indian novelist Manju Kapur, the family transcends its role as a nurturing entity, becoming a crucible whereby identities are repressed, voices are muted, and emotional traumas are inflicted—particularly upon women and children. Her novels *Home* (2006) and *Custody* (2011) provide a detailed examination of how childhood trauma arises not just from explicit acts of abuse but also from the ordinary deficiencies in care, the burdensome influence of tradition, and the fractures within familial bonds.

This research article examines Manju Kapur's depiction of childhood trauma in *Home* and *Custody*, employing trauma theory—specifically the theories of Cathy Caruth and Judith Herman—and psychoanalytic theory as articulated by Sigmund Freud and D. W. Winnicott. The analysis examines childhood trauma as a multifaceted phenomenon, reflecting not just individual psychological experiences but also intricate interactions of familial, social, and cultural dysfunctions. Kapur challenges patriarchal family systems by highlighting the psychological implications and the gendered form of trauma, revealing their failure to foster emotional well-being. Her narratives act as significant interventions in the discourse of trauma, providing insights into how emotional injuries sustained during formative years can influence identity, interpersonal relationships, and psychological well-being throughout life.

Cathy Caruth's seminal contributions to trauma studies contend that trauma cannot be entirely processed or integrated at the time of its manifestation; rather, it resurfaces later, frequently in recurrent, disjointed, and unpleasant manifestations. Caruth says that trauma is not merely a reaction to a significant occurrence but is characterized by its inability to be fully assimilated into consciousness. The delayed and recursive nature of trauma is evident in the characters of *Home* and *Custody*, where the psychological effects of childhood experiences frequently manifest in bodily illnesses, dissociation, and dysfunctional relationships. Expanding on Caruth's viewpoint, Judith Herman, in *Trauma and Recovery*, specifically examines trauma arising from relational betrayal in intimate familial contexts. Herman asserts that trauma experienced in relationships, particularly with caregivers and authority people, erodes the victim's essential capacity for trust and security. It results in enduring emotional problems and challenges in establishing healthy bonds, both of which are common in Kapur's kid characters.

Freud's psychoanalytic theory, particularly his notion of repression, offers an alternative perspective for interpreting these experiences. Freud contended that traumatic experiences, especially those from childhood, are frequently repressed into the unconscious, where they persistently affect behavior and emotional reactions in symbolic or neurotic manifestations. In *Home*, the protagonist Nisha's childhood trauma remains unarticulated and unexamined; instead, it manifests in physical ailments, including skin rashes and respiratory issues—typical examples of psychosomatic reactions. Freud's theory elucidates how silence and denial regarding trauma can result in psychological disorders and influence an individual's inner world.

D. W. Winnicott enhances the psychoanalytic framework by introducing the ideas of the “good enough mother” and the “holding environment,” which denote the emotional reliability and safety offered by caregivers. Winnicott posits that a lack of continuous, sensitive caring can significantly impair a child's emotional development, leading to anxiety, bewilderment, and challenges in establishing safe attachments. In *Custody*, the protagonists Roohi and Arjun endure the psychological repercussions of being transferred between caretakers throughout a contentious custody dispute. Their emotional needs are perpetually marginalized in favor of adult egos and societal standards. Winnicott's theory clarifies that these children lack a strong emotional base, resulting in psychological disintegration and internalized pain.

Nisha's trauma in *Home* arises not from a violent or spectacular incident, but from the continual emotional neglect and gendered suppression within her extended family. She is subjected to sexual assault by a relative, an act that remains unacknowledged and unaddressed by her caregivers. Nisha is expelled from the household, not out of concern for her welfare, but to safeguard the family's social reputation. The repression of her trauma, along with the lack of supportive people, leads to enduring psychological repercussions that emerge in her maturity. Kapur employs Nisha's experience to underscore how patriarchal systems impose quiet and compliance, particularly on female children, therefore depriving them of agency, validation, and healing. From a feminist trauma viewpoint, Nisha's pain is not solely individual but representative of the systemic obliteration of female suffering within conventional family frameworks.

In contrast, *Custody* presents trauma that is predominantly emotional and relational rather than physical. Arjun and Roohi become instruments in the custody conflict between their parents, Shagun and Raman. Their transitory residences and erratic caregivers foster an environment of emotional instability and insecurity.

Roohi, specifically, has bed-wetting and uncertainty, signifying unresolved trauma expressed physically—a pattern also seen in Nisha's account. Roohi's emotional neglect is exacerbated by her stepmother Ishita's ambivalent caring, influenced by Ishita's personal aspirations and failures. The children's frequent transitions between caregivers and living situations lead to a fragmented sense of identity. Their pain highlights Herman's idea of relational betrayal, wherein the adults expected to provide safety and affection prioritize their own needs, aspirations, and social status. This research study analyzes the two books concurrently to demonstrate how Kapur employs the subject of childhood trauma to attack both joint and nuclear family arrangements. Despite their structural differences, both family types in *Home* and *Custody* lack the emotional support essential for good psychological growth. The child's emotional demands are consistently sacrificed to the family's pursuit of societal order, gender standards, and personal authority, whether through denial, displacement, or manipulation. In these accounts, trauma serves as a critique of both personal and cultural dimensions, highlighting the pervasive influence of patriarchal and institutional systems that sustain emotional damage and silence.

Kapur's work resonates with the fundamental principles of feminist trauma theory, which examines how power structures, especially patriarchy, marginalize and pathologize female suffering. Her depiction of trauma extends beyond individual psychological disintegration, situating it within a broader socio-cultural and political framework. In her storytelling, children and women serve as conduits for revealing the shortcomings of Indian family structures and society. Their anguish epitomizes extensive systemic breakdown, rendering the novels not merely intimate narratives of loss and survival but also potent political critiques.

This research examines the psychological impact of childhood trauma in *Home* and *Custody*, informed by trauma theory and psychoanalysis. It examines the interplay of parental dysfunction, emotional neglect, and cultural silence in shaping the protagonists' identities and emotional experiences. Kapur's fiction, rooted in psychological realism and feminist analysis, enhances modern Indian English literature by highlighting the enduring effects of childhood trauma and interrogating traditional beliefs related to family, gender, and caregiving. Manju Kapur's fiction has garnered significant academic attention for its incisive examination of the personal and psychological aspects of women's existence in Indian patriarchal culture. Her narratives, frequently focused on female protagonists, interrogate prevailing cultural and familial frameworks, exposing the profound psychological wounds inflicted by gender discrimination, societal norms, and dysfunctional family dynamics. Although

much of the current scholarship has emphasized themes of feminism, marriage, identity, and social norms in Kapur's works, an increasing amount of research is starting to acknowledge the importance of childhood trauma and familial dysfunction as crucial factors in her characters' psychological development and identity formation. This literature study examines the critical discourse of trauma, familial relationships, and psychiatric disturbance in Kapur's novels, with specific emphasis on *Home* (2006) and *Custody* (2011). The analysis utilizes trauma studies, psychoanalytic theory, and feminist literary criticism to contextualize how Kapur's depiction of childhood trauma broadens the discussion on the psychological effects of parental neglect and social repression.

Initial academic studies on Manju Kapur, including those by Meera Syal (2001), Prachi Pandey (2010), and Anita Myles (2013), predominantly examined her works via a feminist realism lens. Critics saw her depiction of educated, urban women grappling for autonomy within the limitations imposed by family and society. *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman* are frequently analyzed for their audacious portrayals of female agency and defiance. As researchers delved into Kapur's later works, including *Home* and *Custody*, a transition emerged towards examining interpersonal trauma, emotional volatility, and the systemic violence perpetuated by conventional family structures. Sangeeta Dasgupta (2015) contends that "Kapur's examination of silence, repression, and emotional fragmentation in *Home* represents a transition from social commentary to psychological realism." Niladri R. Chatterjee (2016) characterized Kapur's work as "disrupting the myth of the benevolent Indian family." Through characters such as Nisha and Roohi, she deconstructs the romanticized concept of both joint and nuclear families as sanctuaries, instead exposing them as arenas of emotional injury, manipulation, and neglect.

Trauma studies, especially within literary criticism, has been influenced by scholars such as Cathy Caruth, Judith Herman, and Dominick LaCapra, who highlight the deferred and fragmented characteristics of traumatized memory and its effects on identity. Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) asserts that trauma transcends linear narration and manifests in recurrent, agonizing forms. Judith Herman's *Trauma and Recovery* (1992) emphasizes that trauma within familial or interpersonal contexts undermines the victim's feeling of safety, self-esteem, and confidence in relationships. Trauma theory, originally centered on terrible historical events such as war and genocide, has evolved to encompass interpersonal trauma, notably childhood abuse and emotional neglect. Critics such as Laura Brown and Bessel van der Kolk

expanded the discourse to acknowledge developmental trauma, when sustained exposure to an emotionally detrimental environment during childhood results in enduring psychological dysfunction. Indian English literature, researchers like Rajul Bhargava (2014) and Pramod K. Nayar (2015) have advocated for the incorporation of trauma theory to comprehend the emotional nuances of postcolonial tales, especially those involving women and children. Nayar (2015) observes that “trauma, particularly domestic or gendered trauma, is frequently inscribed within the silences and fractures of contemporary Indian fiction.”

Psychoanalysis has historically provided essential instruments for literary analysis, especially in comprehending repression, identity development, and emotional turmoil in characters. Sigmund Freud's theories of the unconscious and repression has been extensively utilized in trauma research. His assertion that unprocessed trauma manifests as neuroses is reflected in Kapur's portrayal of Nisha, whose skin rashes and breathlessness symbolize unarticulated suffering. D.W. Winnicott's theories, especially the notions of the "good enough mother" and the "holding environment," offer essential insights into child-caregiver dynamics. Winnicott (1953) contended that emotional attunement and consistency from caregivers are crucial for optimal psychological development. The lack of these elements results in detachment, emotional disarray, and challenges in establishing solid relationships—exactly the problems observed in Roohi's and Nisha's character developments. In Indian literary criticism, psychoanalysis has predominantly concentrated on adult identity and gender roles; however, current research, such as that conducted by Ritu Sharma (2019), has broadened its scope to encompass childhood development. Sharma contends that “the convergence of Indian patriarchy and unacknowledged trauma generates psychological fissures that are imperceptible yet detrimental, particularly for female children.

The idealized concept of the Indian family—be it nuclear or joint—is often glorified in common discourse. Authors such as Kamala Das, Anita Desai, and Manju Kapur have criticized this ideal by revealing the emotional estrangement, inflexible hierarchies, and gender-based oppression that characterize several household institutions. Jasbir Jain (2010) asserts that "the family in Indian literature frequently manifests as a contentious arena where tradition and personal desires conflict, resulting in psychological rifts." Kapur depicts the joint family in *Home* as an oppressive entity characterized by silence, compliance, and honor. Researchers such as Charu Dogra Rawat (2017) note that Nisha's maltreatment and ensuing suppression exemplify a broader societal trend of safeguarding patriarchy to the detriment of

female welfare. The act of expelling her symbolizes the expendability of female voices, particularly when they challenge the patriarchal status quo. In *Custody*, familial dysfunction is examined via the legal and emotional struggle for child custody. Research conducted by Tapan Basu (2016) and Anusha Shankar (2020) highlights that post-divorce custody disputes in literature frequently prioritize parental conflicts, hence neglecting the emotional needs of children. In Kapur's tale, the children serve as symbolic pawns in adult conflicts, resulting in a loss of emotional stability and trust.

Feminist trauma theorists contend that trauma must be contextualized within patriarchal frameworks. Laura Brown (1995) attacks conventional trauma psychology for neglecting the impact of systemic gender inequality on emotional distress. Feminist trauma theory emphasizes the necessity of recognizing the social and political settings of trauma. In the Indian setting, where childhood and femininity are profoundly gendered, the trauma of girls like Nisha is twice silenced—first by their age and second by their gender. Anu Aneja (2014) contends that “the girl child in Indian fiction is frequently rendered invisible unless she adheres to familial and cultural expectations.” In *Home*, Kapur used Nisha's quiet and emotional detachment as representations of internalized repression, reflecting Brown's claim that trauma is frequently concealed to adhere to patriarchal standards. Roohi's trauma in *Custody*, though less apparent, is equally gendered. Ishita's conditional care and Roohi's ensuing rejection illustrate the valuation of girls based on biological and social utility—specifically, as surrogates for unsuccessful motherhood or as emotional supports in adult redemption narratives.

The scholarship on Manju Kapur's works indicates a growing focus on the psychological aspects of her characters, especially about women's inner turmoil and societal oppression. The issue of childhood trauma and familial dysfunction, particularly as a formative influence on identity, remains little examined in academic discourse. This research utilizes trauma theory, psychoanalysis, and feminist literary criticism to address the gap by analyzing *Home* and *Custody* as narratives of emotional disruption and psychological disintegration. Kapur attacks not only individual trauma but also the broader patriarchal and familial structures that sustain emotional suffering and silence. Her fiction amplifies the voices of impacted children and young women, acting as both a reflection and a critique of the cultural conventions that obscure such pain. This literature review outlines the essential framework for the research, emphasizing the contributions of existing scholarship and the opportunities for further

investigation into the psychological effects of childhood trauma within dysfunctional family environments in Manju Kapur's novels.

In both *Home* and *Custody*, childhood trauma is not caused by any brutality or violence but by the mundane, persistent failures of care that are rooted within the frameworks of patriarchal and social norms of Indian society. In the plot of *Home*, the story's protagonist experienced sexual abuse within her extended family during her late childhood, which caused her to become silent and repress her feelings. It also had a significant impact on her mental health. This trauma was shaped by both her personal experience and society, as her family was more concerned about their reputation in society than her emotional needs and security. Here, Freud's idea of repression proves to be relevant: Nisha's trauma remains buried and manifests as health issues, isolation, and an inability to form close emotional bonds. Also, Winnicott's theory of the "good enough mother" suggests the necessity of the responsibility of caregivers to give consistent emotional support. This illuminates how Nisha's isolation and insecurity rooted from the absence of nurturing parental figures. Alternatively, she is raised in a joint family where the family is mostly concerned about their social image instead of emotional needs. This joint family system also focuses largely on the gendered roles among the family members. The fact that she struggles with love, security, and identity in adulthood is the result of her unresolved childhood trauma of abuse and neglect from the caregivers.

In *Custody*, Arjun and Roohi, the plot's children, are suffering due to the fight over *Custody* after their parents' regrettable divorce. Therefore, the children's experiences are the main reason that the consequences and fallout of family conflict are observed. Even though the trauma in this case is psychological rather than physical, it results into emotional instability, broken attachments, and objectification by adults. This is where Herman's idea of relational trauma comes into play; we witness how the adults who are supposed to be caring for children instead use them as pawns in power struggles, ruining their sense of self-identity and trust in relationships. Winnicott's view of family as a "holding environment" is evidently violated as Roohi, who is subjected to different environments, juggling between mother, father, and stepmother, is struggling with inconsistency in emotional support. Later this inconsistency results in confusion, attachment issues, and distress.

The paper aims to demonstrate how Manju Kapur uses childhood trauma as both a personal tragedy and a socio-cultural critique by contrasting these two accounts. Her perceptive portrayal of dysfunctional families draws attention to the inadequacies of traditional Indian family structures in promoting emotional health,

particularly for girls and kids. Kapur's stories demonstrate how trauma, especially when it happens in childhood, has a significant effect on a person's identity as an adult, relationships with others, and ability to build emotional resilience. In addition, this chapter will examine *Home* and *Custody* separately, using trauma and psychoanalytic theories to analyze how Kapur depicts the enduring psychological impacts of childhood trauma in familial settings. The chapter ends with a comparison of the two novels and a consideration of the psychological and cultural structures that sustain this kind of trauma in modern-day India.

Conclusion

Both *Home* and *Custody* portray trauma as something often unspoken, revealing itself through behavior rather than dialogue. Nisha's silence and Roohi's regression are not merely personality traits but signs of internalized trauma. Where Nisha withdraws into solitude and later channels her pain into entrepreneurship and journaling, Roohi is not yet old enough to process her trauma cognitively, making her reactions more physical and behavioral. Kapur illustrates how trauma manifests differently across age and context but always retains emotional resonance. Though *Home* centers on a joint family and *Custody* on nuclear families in transition, both novels portray familial environments as emotionally unstable. In each case, adults fail to prioritize the emotional needs of the child, placing societal reputation, marital conflict, or personal fulfillment above caregiving responsibilities. The absence of emotional harmony, as theorized by Winnicott, is central to both narratives. Whether in the tightly controlled, reputation-bound joint household or the competitive *Custody* battles of modern nuclear families, Kapur critiques the failure of Indian families to nurture emotional development. Both novels serve as cultural critiques, using trauma as a lens to examine the failure of traditional Indian familial ideologies. Kapur does not depict trauma as an isolated psychological event but as an outcome of deeply embedded social structures such as patriarchy, gender norms, and the prioritization of social status over emotional wellbeing. By centering the narrative on children's and women's experiences, she amplifies feminist trauma theory, which recognizes how power structures exploit and silence vulnerable members. Trauma, in this context, is not just personal suffering but a mirror to societal dysfunction.

In both *Home* and *Custody*, Manju Kapur skillfully explores how trauma stemming from familial dysfunction leaves long-lasting psychological scars. Drawing on trauma theory and psychoanalytic frameworks, the chapter has examined how characters experience and express emotional pain in the absence of stable caregiving and social support. Whether through sexual abuse and repression (*Home*) or emotional instability and displacement (*Custody*), Kapur's narratives reveal how

trauma, especially during formative years, disrupts identity formation, attachment, and emotional expression. The analysis demonstrates that such trauma is not only a personal issue but deeply entwined with social, cultural, parental structures and the devaluation of children's emotional needs.

Kapur's portrayal of trauma is thus both intimate and political. Her novels challenge the idealized image of the Indian family and urge readers to recognize the psychological consequences of emotional neglect and societal silence. Ultimately, by weaving trauma into her character's life journeys, Kapur contributes meaningfully to trauma literature, feminist literary criticism, and Indian English fiction, making her work an essential study for understanding the intersection of psychology, gender, and culture.

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