RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)
www.rjoe.org.in | **Oray's Publications** | ISSN: **2456-2696**
An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal
Impact Factor: *8.576 (SJIF)* | **Vol. 11, Issue 4 (Oct, Nov & Dec;2026)**

Redefining Home: Domestic Space and Women's Selfhood in Manju Kapur's *Home*

1.Nishat Parveen
Riyad, Saudi Arab
2.Prof. Ajay Kumar Sharma
Head, Department of English,Maharaj Singh College, Saharanpur

Paper Received on 02-10-2026, Accepted on 03-11-2026
Published on 0 4 -11-2026; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2026.11.353

Abstract:

Manju Kapur's *Home* explores the lives of women in a family displaced by Partition and resettled in Delhi. The novel raises questions about domestic space and women's search for a sense of self in the family. Although the family regains its economic stability, traditional patriarchal norms continue to govern women's lives. Sona's inability to bear children becomes a subject of social criticism. Her feelings towards Vicky are complicated by the responsibilities she has towards him. Rupa finds a way to contribute through her pickle business, yet her work does not free her from the demands of family life. Nisha's experience takes the question of women's selfhood further. Her education, failed romance, business and troubled marriage influence her search for independence. She continues to value her family ties but also wants to make decisions about her own life. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard's reflections on lived space and Iris Marion Young's feminist account of home, this article examines the place of family relationships in women's experiences of sense of belonging and patriarchal restrictions. In the final scene, Nisha gives her attention to her daughter, suggesting a different view of inheritance and fulfilment. Through the contrasting experiences of Sona, Rupa and Nisha, the article analyses how Kapur redefines home as more than a place of dwelling governed by inherited patriarchal expectations. Home can retain its place in women's lives while its meaning changes as they gain greater freedom to develop their identities and pursue their aspirations.

Keywords: Home, Domestic Space, Selfhood, Patriarchy, Female Identity, Financial independence, Sense of belonging.

Introduction:

Manju Kapur's novel *Home* (2006) depicts the domestic life as a social space shaped by history, family relationships, domestic roles, and personal aspirations. The novel does not present home as an institution rigidly governed by patriarchal authority; rather, it is shown evolving from one generation to another where family members learn to adapt to the changing circumstances and responsibilities. The people with different traits and desires can live together and express their feelings of love, resentment, duty, and ambition in the household, making domestic life a complex space. The characters are not divided into oppressors and victims in the novel. Members of a family do not always think alike, yet they continue to live under the same roof. Their relationships are more complicated; they learn to deal with their differences, which helps them understand each other better and recognise the importance of home in keeping the family together.

Manju Kapur's novel *Home* begins with a poignant description of the trauma of Partition. The story revolves around Banwari Lal's family, which has to leave Lahore and rebuild its life in an unfamiliar environment in Delhi, trying to regain financial stability and a sense of belonging. With the help of his wife's jewellery, Banwari Lal establishes a sari business in Karol Bagh and gradually restores the family's fortunes. He has two sons, Yashpal and Pyare Lal, and a daughter, Sunita, who is married into another family. Her unhappy marriage ends in tragedy, and her son Vicky is brought up by the Banwari Lal family. Yashpal marries Sona, the elder daughter of a family of modest means, while Pyare Lal has an arranged marriage with Sushila. Sona's younger sister, Rupa, is married to Prem Nath, an educated but poorly paid government employee. Both sisters initially face the distress of childlessness. Sona eventually gives birth to a daughter, Nisha, and later a son, Raju, while Sushila has two sons, Ajay and Vijay. Nisha's childhood is marked by Vicky's sexual abuse, following which she is sent to live with Rupa and Prem Nath. Her later experiences of education, love, work and marriage bring further changes in her relationship with the family and her understanding of independence.

Banwari Lal's authority continues to govern the household, and the family's needs are generally given preference over the wishes of its individual members. Although this arrangement helps hold the family together, it also restricts freedom of personal choice. Women, in particular, are expected to live by the roles and duties traditionally assigned to them in a male-dominated society. Gaston Bachelard

observes, "A house that has been experienced is not an inert box. Inhabited space transcends geometrical space" (47). Bachelard's view provides a useful perspective on Banwari Lal's reconstructed household. Its significance lies not simply in providing shelter; it also carries the family's memories, relationships, and sense of belonging.

The patriarchal authority gives the household its basic order, but it owes its very existence to the women who support it with care, endurance, and daily work. Kapur presents women not as passive followers of tradition but as active participants in family life. Redefining the meaning of home, they fulfil their domestic duties and bear emotional pressures expected of them at home and gradually adapt to their roles. The experiences of Sona, Rupa, and Nisha most clearly show the meaning of home changing across generations. Sona's childlessness reflects the traditional belief that a woman's worth depends on her ability to become a mother. Motherhood is not the only parameter of a woman's worth within the family; women make their contributions in different ways, as Sona's experience illustrates. She lives with the pain of infertility until Nisha is born. Rupa becomes a successful pickle entrepreneur, while Nisha wants to seek financial independence. Their stories present different experiences of women in the family. Nisha wants to earn for herself, yet she does not turn away from her family. She tries to make room for her own ambitions while remaining part of family life. After the family's settlement in Delhi, Nisha gradually begins to develop her own sense of belonging in the family. The home changes as its members accommodate to new surroundings. Women readily take on new responsibilities and seek greater freedom to make their own decisions, but at the same time they continue to value family ties. The novelist presents a household in which old beliefs still influence family life, even as women begin to question some of the expectations placed upon them. Each generation inherits home, reshapes it, and passes it on in a different form.

The idea of home in the novel emerges from displacement rather than permanence. Before turning to the emotional worlds of Sona, Rupa, and Nisha, Kapur traces the arduous task of rebuilding a family uprooted by Partition. Economic recovery forms an important part of this reconstruction. Banwari Lal's move from Lahore to Delhi marks the beginning of a new life for his family. As Kapur describes, "With the seven-year-old son, two-year-old daughter, pregnant wife, and wife's jewellery, they crossed the border. . .First they were sent to a camp in Amritsar, then

Delhi, to finally arrive in Karol Bagh" (4). The family loses its home in Lahore and has to start again in Delhi. Their collective efforts help them rebuild their lives and establish a new home. With his hard work, Banwari Lal becomes a successful businessman in Karol Bagh. This brings stability to the family; prosperity gives security to the household, but it does not truly define it. Family members still depend on one another and share their daily responsibilities. The Banwari Lal household gains significance not because it replaces the house left behind in Lahore, but because it preserves a collective history that enables the family to rebuild its sense of belonging.

The restored household is organised around Banwari Lal's authority, which is exercised less through domination than through the need to preserve unity. Kapur rightly describes, "The two sons had been brought up to consider their interests synonymous with those of the family. The patriarch was keenly aware of any disagreement between them. Neither must feel exploited, but the eldest had to have the final say" (6). Family harmony depends upon subordinating individual ambition to collective welfare. Banwari Lal's authority is not simply a matter of patriarchal dominance; it is also a response to the insecurity caused by displacement. But his authority leaves little room for individual choice, particularly for women whose roles are mostly dictated by family traditions. This emphasis on family unity does not mean that all family members enjoy the same position or responsibilities. Inheriting paternal power and the burden of trade, men get their share of the family business, while women are encouraged to keep their families together through marriage and motherhood. Banwari Lal is of the view that it is men's responsibility to earn a living and carry the family line forward, while women are supposed to look after the household and support the family's continuity. These beliefs influence the expectations placed upon every daughter-in-law who enters the household. Sona's experience as a newly-wedded bride illustrates these expectations. Her marriage to Yashpal is based on mutual affection, yet his family views it with suspicion because she brings neither status nor dowry. Yashpal's mother calls her "a clever, manipulative, dowryless creature" (3) and complains, "Better he had asked all his life than stab us in the back like this" (7). Marriage here is valued less as an emotional bond than as a social and economic alliance. Sona enters the household, therefore, without being fully accepted and must struggle to find her place within it.

Although Yashpal gives Sona affection and comfort, life in his family brings its own difficulties for her. Sona quickly realises that maintaining a peaceful home often requires the suppression of emotions. Kapur describes Sona's dilemma very well, "So between day and night Sona seesawed between love and something more unamiable. Had it been outside the family it would have been called hatred" (11). The home is not a place seen as completely safe, nor is it a place of complete oppression. It is a place of closeness and love. But it also means there will be feelings of resentment, reliance and compromise. As Khair remarks, Kapur is "good at delineating the way in which women connect to and resist other women " (1). She remains bound to the family, yet affection does not prevent her from feeling resentment towards those with whom she lives. The emotional atmosphere in the home is maintained due to the many complex relationships.

Beginning with the family's displacement during Partition, Kapur broadens the meaning of home beyond the physical dwelling. The Banwari Lal family rebuilds not only a business but an entire social world founded on continuity, discipline, and shared obligation. Yet the same household also reproduces hierarchies that define men and women differently. The joint family is not depicted as a perfect utopia, but Kapur does show that traditional family values still have an impact upon the family. Sona and Rupa respond differently to the traditional values of the family. Both continue to live within these expectations, though their experiences and attitudes are not the same. Unlike the older women, Nisha begins to question the roles expected of her, which shows that family traditions do not influence every woman's decision in the same way.

Banwari Lal rebuilds the household through his business and authority, but its daily life also depends on the women who live in it. Sona and Rupa show what this means for women within a family governed by traditional expectations. The novelist depicts women trying to preserve family relationships while living with values that often restrict their choices. As Nutan Chotai observes, the women in *Home*, "are not the fragile creatures woven by myth but struggle for their family and share in the hardships, contributing to the wellbeing of the family" (128). Sona and Rupa both endure difficulties, but they respond to them differently. Their experiences suggest that women help sustain the family even when their own needs and desires are not fully recognised.

Sona's childlessness becomes a source of resentment and pity among the women in her husband's family. Jai Arjun notes that "For the first ten years of her marriage she is childless, which makes her a subject of resentment and pity (and some gloating) among the other women in the house" (1). For Sona, the absence of children brings not only personal sorrow but also the discomfort of living under the judgement of those around her. Sona's sense of identity is gradually affected by these social expectations. Watching Sushila with her children, she measures her own worth against what she believes she should have given the family, "Pyare Lal's prospective sons lay upon her consciousness like a stone. . . .What had she given them?. . .But no children? How could anyone justify that?" (Kapur 13). The questions reveal how deeply she has been affected by the attitudes of those around her. She is no longer simply facing their judgement; she has begun to question herself in the same terms.
The childlessness, however, is only one part of Sona's experience. Her disappointment does not prevent her from responding to the needs of the family. After Sunita's death, she reluctantly accepts responsibility for Vicky, although the thought of bringing up another woman's child is difficult for her to accept. Her immediate response, "A borrowed child? Ten years old? From another woman's womb?" (22), shows her hesitation. Though Vicky is not her own child, even then Sona takes on the responsibility of caring for him. Sona decides to raise another woman's child to fulfil her responsibilities in a joint family. The author reveals the feelings that Sona struggles to conceal. When Sushila gives birth to a child, Sona feels jealous of the attention Yashpal pays to the baby, "Yashpal was not to know how jealousy raced up and down her veins like sharp-pointed needles when he came home and called for the baby to play with" (14). Sona is nonetheless compassionate, despite her jealously. She has mixed feelings of resentment and disappointment for the family, which she feels difficult to express. Sona symbolises the women who are emotionally burdened and whose lives are governed by duties towards family.

Rupa's experience provides an illuminating contrast. She too remains childless for several years, but her circumstances are different. Supported by her husband Prem Nath and, unlike Sona, not subjected to the hostility of a dominating mother-in-law, she finds another way of asserting her selfhood in the family. Although "Rupa too failed to conceive," she establishes a pickle business with the encouragement of the family. Her husband supports her, while, "her father-in-law helped her paste the labels with a trembling hand," and Yashpal, her brother-in-law and Sona's husband "helped her with his contacts among the shopkeepers of Karol

Bagh" (15–16). Her business allows her to contribute to family life through productive work, rather than having her place in the household depend solely on motherhood. Rupa's enterprise quietly anticipates the wider transformation represented later by Nisha. Iris Marion Young aptly observes, "Women serve, nurture, and maintain so that the bodies and souls of men and children gain confidence and expansive subjectivity to make their mark on the world" (123). Although Rupa's enterprise does not free her entirely from these expectations, it enables her to gain recognition for her skills without neglecting her familial duties. The birth of Nisha changes Sona's life but does not erase the assumptions that have shaped her own experience. Having struggled to gain acceptance, she now prepares her daughter for the same domestic expectations. Personal suffering does not automatically produce resistance; more often, it encourages the preservation of familiar traditions.

The gradual transformation of home finds its fullest expression in Nisha. Sona and Rupa's lives are largely governed by traditional domestic norms imposed on women but Nisha questions the conservative assumptions about woman's place in the family. Her resistance is neither dramatic nor confrontational. It unfolds through everyday negotiations in which education, work, love, marriage, and motherhood are brought into a new relationship with domestic life. Home consequently ceases to be a space where women merely perform prescribed roles; it becomes one they actively reshape. The contradictions of this domestic order emerge early in Nisha's childhood. After Banwari Lal's death, Sona expects her daughter to master household responsibilities rather than pursue education. As Shilpi Rishi Shrivastava observes, Nisha is startled to realise that "her mother's idea of a daughter was one who helped her every time anybody ate," while Sona repeatedly insists, "What does a girl need with studying? Cooking will be useful to her entire life" (188). The remark reflects the belief that a girl's future rests upon domestic competence rather than intellectual development. Home, thus, becomes a place where gendered expectations are quietly transmitted from one generation to the next.

Kapur never presents Nisha as someone who rejects tradition outright. Declared manglik, she grows up seeing rituals, fasts and astrological prescriptions that dictate women's lives in the household. These norms define her upbringing but do not obliterate her personality. Nisha learns to uphold the traditional values, while carefully asserting her own aspirations. Tradition remains part of her life, but it no longer determines it completely.

The same balance appears in her relationship with Suresh. The novel does not treat romantic love as an escape from domestic restrictions. When the relationship ends, Nisha is forced to accept that she "had to adjust to the idea of another man in his place" (Kapur 217). The separation disappoints her, but it does not bring her aspirations to an end. She turns her attention to building such a life in which she can depend on herself rather than on a romantic relationship.

The novel reaches its fullest expression through Nisha, whose life redefines home without abandoning it. Education, work, marriage, and motherhood gradually become important parts of her life, and she tries to accommodate her personal ambitions alongside her responsibilities towards her family. Her decision to establish her own business allows her to earn independently and "be responsible for wealth herself" (286), challenging the traditional belief that business and inheritance belong mainly to men. Her business venture does not weaken her family ties; rather, it allows her to pursue a livelihood of her own while remaining part of the family. In Nisha's experience, a woman's independence needs not come at the cost of her relationships. Her success also redefines the home itself. Banwari Lal's belief that business belongs to men while women should remain at home begins to weaken. Yashpal supports his daughter's enterprise and even seeks a husband who will allow her to continue working after marriage. Nisha's success, thus, brings a change in the family's attitude towards women's work and their place in the household. Marriage does not interrupt this process; it reshapes it. After marrying Arvind, Nisha soon discovers that domestic life demands emotional reciprocity as much as social adjustment. Frustrated by her husband's excessive attachment to his mother, she asks, "Why did he have to marry if he was to treat his wife to indifferent looks?" (328). Her complaint concerns the lack of affection and companionship in her marriage. She expects Arvind to recognise her needs rather than treat her as a wife in name only.

The novel's closing scene brings this evolving domestic vision to its fullest expression. Surrounded by relatives after the birth of her twins, Nisha notices that while the family celebrates the grandson as the family's future male heir, her own attention rests upon her daughter. Kapur writes: "The more robust girl lay balanced on her mother's knees. . .Nisha clutched her daughter tightly to her breast. . .Surrounding her were friends, relatives, husband, babies. All mine, she thought, all mine" (336). The repeated phrase does not express possession in a

material sense; it affirms belonging, fulfilment, and a selfhood achieved without abandoning family relationships. Iris Marion Young's understanding of home as a space continually produced through lived relationships finds its clearest expression here. Nisha remains daughter, wife, mother, and entrepreneur without allowing any one role to subsume the others. Home finally becomes a space where these identities coexist rather than compete.

The critical analysis of *Home* demonstrates that home means more than a physical house or the patriarchal authority exercised in the family. After Partition, Banwari Lal settles in Delhi and tries to give his family a stable life. The home provides security and a sense of belonging, but these come with expectations that restrict women's freedom of choice. Despite changes in the family's circumstances, traditional gender roles continue to influence domestic relationships and women's lives. Sona, Rupa and Nisha do not experience family expectations alike. Sona's inability to bear a child leaves her vulnerable to a society that judges women by motherhood. Rupa, however, contributes through her pickle business, extending her role beyond household duties. Nisha's education and work bring her closer to a life in which she can make decisions for herself without severing her ties with the family.

Kapur effectively explores how home can offer women emotional security while also placing limits on their lives. Family ties remain important, but women's wishes may receive little attention when traditional values take precedence. Nisha's experience suggests that family life need not remain bound by these traditions. Women can pursue their aspirations and develop a stronger sense of themselves without giving up their family ties. *Home*, thus, points towards a family in which traditions can change and women have greater freedom to decide how they wish to live.

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