CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur, born in 1948 in Amritsar, is an eminent Indian English writer who has written five novels along with a book of short stories titled *The Necklace and Chocolate* in 2005. Since her novels are set around the time of partition and post independence period, hence the struggle of the women protagonists for individual freedom and autonomy in her novels gets invariably linked up with the larger issue of India’s battle against colonial oppression. It is for this significant interlinking of the personal, social and the political cause that her first novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998), set mostly in Amritsar and Lahore, won substantial applause in India as well as abroad. The novel was adjudged as the best first book in the Eurasian region in the year 1999 and went on to win the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize. Her second novel *A Married Woman* (2002), set in Delhi, explores the constraints rooted in traditional structures and practices of home and marriage in the light of the repressed desires and passions of a middle class married woman. The third one, *Home* (2006), again taking the reader back to Amritsar and subsequent shifting to Delhi, focuses on the complexities and emerging contradictions within joint families and arranged marriages, while the fourth one, *The Immigrant* (2008), set partly in Delhi and partly Canada and short-listed for DSC Prize for South-Asian Literature, explores the question of a woman’s autonomy from the point of view of an immigrant wife. The latest one *Custody* (2011), largely set in Delhi in the mid 90s in the backdrop of the initial surge of foreign investment in India, attempts to explore the stringent traditional ethics which can shatter the hopes and aspirations that home and marriage are sought to provide for. The novel also illuminates how social values, personal character traits and the legal system can all influence the life of a male and a female in different ways.

Bapsi Sidhwa, raised in Lahore and currently residing in Houston, Texas, is an award winning Pakistani novelist and a woman rights activist who has consistently been trying to project issues and problems of the women of Indian subcontinent on to national and international forums. The writer is concerned at the way her country is perceived as “fundamentalist country” by the West and her writings provide significant insights into the richness of liberal human values and relationships that,
like any other country, thrive in Pakistan too, along with conventional customs and practices that need to be revised. In her own words:

I feel if there’s one little thing I could do, it’s to make people realize: We are not worthless because we inhabit a country which is seen by Western eyes as a primitive, fundamentalist country only…I mean, we are a rich mixture of all sorts of forces as well, and our lives are very much worth loving. (Bapsi Sidhwa 1989)

Being herself a firsthand witness to the traumatic partition of 1947, in which millions of Muslims and Hindus were uprooted, and her home city in Lahore having sheltered thousands of victims of rape and violence, Sidhwa’s deep sensitivity to the cause and the related trauma can well be understood. She is the first recipient of the South Asian Excellence Awards for Literature awarded in 2008 in New York and the recipient of the ‘Sitara-i-Imtiaz’, the highest national honour in the arts, in Pakistan. The act of writing, for Sidhwa, has been a way of breaking through many layers of silences, since her childhood was ‘lonely’ and full of ‘lot of silences’. She is regarded by critics as a feminist postcolonial Asian author whose novels provide a unique perspective on Indian and Pakistani history, politics, and culture. Her themes vary from the harsh realities of the pre-independence period to the post independent phenomenon of neo-colonialism in Pakistan. She has tried to write with a dual perspective of the Pakistani as well as the marginalized community of the Parsi culture, dealing with human relationships and betrayals, immigration and cultural hybridism, giving priority to gender concerns in the midst of social and political upheavals.

Manju Kapur and Bapsi Sidhwa belong to the section of writers who made their debut in the 1990’s, producing novels which reveal the true state of Indian and Pakistani society and its treatment of women around the time of partition and subsequent years. The way the women in the novels of both these writers are able to challenge the dominant patriarchal attitudes and practices related to home and marriage, as also the various forms of subordination in the social structures, inspired me to study them deeply since both the writers write about urban middle-class, ‘the stratum of society they know best’ and bring to the fore the intimate connections between individual autonomy and socio-political situation and challenges.
Home and marriage is the broad frame of reference within which a woman’s life is conceived and visualized even today in the changing times and circumstances. A woman’s dignity, existence and pride are still primarily thought to be confined within the domains of home and marriage. The belief that men work outside home as bread-earners and women within its four walls as nurturers, care providers and above all protectors of ‘family values’ and ‘family honour,’ has long governed the psyche of the male dominated society irrespective of caste, class or region. This confinement of a woman to the domestic sphere has been central in reducing her status and identity to a secondary and ‘incomplete’ human being who is considered to be dependent on the male at every stage of her life for her survival and sustenance. Since she is not perceived to exist ‘on her own’ and has been defined and differentiated only ‘with reference to man’ marriage occupies a central place in her life and till this day it has not been possible to provide sanction and respect to the existence of a single and unmarried woman. Simone De Beauvoir rightly points out in her seminal work The Second Sex that, “marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society” (425). Virginia Woolf in her classical work A Room of One’s Own asserts how a woman’s intellectual growth is stunted in the name of her prime responsibilities at the level of home and marriage. The concept and institute of home and marriage has always meant different things for men and women and this ‘difference’ need to be analyzed and deconstructed in the changing circumstances.

The struggles of the twentieth and twenty first century for gender equality, social justice and democratic rights that went hand in hand with the struggle for independence and freedom of various nations including our own country, have proved decisive in resisting and challenging these domestic and social hegemonies and structures of power and control based on exploitation and suppression of the disadvantaged and the marginalized sections. This ongoing resistance and struggle in the realms of the society is aptly being reflected in the writings of women and male progressive writers in the form of various women protagonists endeavoring to redefine their individual and social spaces by challenging the basic premises of home, family and marriage and in the process taking significant strides towards attaining autonomy and selfhood as an independent and complete human being. In the light of this ongoing struggle, it is time that women, as Kalpana R.J puts it, are “given the
freedom within their chosen life patterns and freedom in choosing alternative life patterns” (25).

Manju Kapur’s and Bapsi Sidhwa’s literary works have been analyzed and critiqued at multiple levels by various critics. Reena Mitra in her article “Family and Society as Operative Determinants in Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters” opines that family and society represent a kind of bonding which provides, among many other things, a sense of psychological security. This inward security, when pursued as a passion, often leads to exclusion and a kind of separatism, which in turn, leads to personal and social catastrophe. She asserts that a psyche molded by firmly entrenched social beliefs and shaped by traditional pre-conceived concepts can never be blessed with a truly free way of thinking. It is these very social constraints that are the primary concerns of Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters. Bhagabat Nayak and Aman Lamba have tried to interpret her works in the light of feminist approach through their articles titled “Feminist Approach to Manju Kapur’s Difficult Daughters” and Manju Kapur’s “A Married Woman and the Politics of Neo-Feminism”.

According to Lisa E.J. Lau, Kapur’s Difficult Daughters depicts the life of Virmati who succeeded in getting education and etching out a respectable career despite the constraints related to being a woman. Lau further observes that A Married Woman has a protagonist, who, despite an initially happy arranged marriage and a satisfying sexual life, drifts into a lack of marital and familial contentment and lands herself in lesbianism. Speaking on Kapur’s next novel, Home, Lisa, feels that the protagonist, Nisha, longs for a meaningful career, but is forced into waiting for a marriage. The issue of extra-marital relationship again becomes the area of criticism around her next novel The Immigrant by Lisa and others. Mithu C. Baneerji in his article “Lesbian Passion Forged in a Land of Turmoil”, reveals that A Married Woman is a well-balanced depiction of a country’s inner development—its strengths and its failures. He further finds that the anguish of a woman’s unrest is as complicated as the social and political upheaval going around her. Baneerji opines that Manju Kapur makes use of simple language in depicting the inner subtlety of a woman’s mind and displays a mature understanding of the female psyche. Murli Manohar in his work Indian English Women’s Fiction elaborates upon marriage concerns in Manju Kapur’s novels. He observes that “One of the main problems for educated women is marriage” (xiii). Kapur’s every novel opens with a lively discussion on marriage—the topmost
significant issue in the life of the female protagonist. Manju Verma in *Difficult Daughters* finds marriage between Virmati and Professor Harish as a story of an exploiter and an exploited, a union of un-equals, and a usual tale of male chauvinism and woman’s total submission. Ashok Kumar, in his article “Manju Kapur’s *The Immigrant*: Dilemma of the Second Sex”, feels that in *The Immigrant*, Nina, the protagonist, though reluctant in the beginning, finds her carnal bliss with Anton, her library science class-mate in Halifax and this is how she renounces the institutions of family and marriage. Nina’s dream of a happy married life ends with a sour note and she surges ahead with the hope of establishing herself independently in an alien country. Geetika Vasudeva opines that all the novels by Manju Kapur explore the difficulties of reconciling to the virtue of devotion expected of middle-class Indian women with their aspirations for an independent life and how women negotiate both the inner and outer spaces in their lives. Sunil Deepak asserts that in her novel, *Home*, the world of joint families is no longer the world of large happy make-believe families. It is a world trying to grapple with the complexities of adjusting one’s aspirations and individualities with those of the others inside closed walls of the house.

Thus, various critics have largely dwelt upon the homely aspect of Manju Kapur’s protagonists exploring the difficulties of reconciling of family responsibilities with their individual cravings and ambitions. But the present research aims to go further in that it seeks to study the conflicts and the contradictions inherent in female psyche and inside the confines of home and marriage in the light of the ‘beyond’ which here represents the larger social and political concerns and engagements. The study aims to examine the underlying linkages between the inner and the outer spaces in an attempt to establish how a woman’s struggle for attainment of autonomy inside home and marital domain is inextricably linked with going ‘beyond’ the threshold of home and marriage and establishing meaningful engagement with various social and political concerns. The woman protagonists in the novels of both the writers look beyond marriage and children to give meaning and purpose to their life inside their own country as well as in the form of an immigrant wife.

Bapsi Sidhwa, in one of her interviews points out how in India and Pakistan, an individual is always a part of family or a group, but the situation is different in the West, where it is the individual and not the family which is ‘at the centre.’ Her
novels, she feels, are set “in that part of the world where there is a great deal of sexual repression” (Sidhwa 2000). Reena Mitra opines that Bapsi Sidhwa’s *Cracking India* has a significantly fresh approach to the violence unleashed by the partition in that, it sees this turbulent world through the innocent eyes of an eight year old Parsee girl Lenny, who is polio-stricken and can only sit back and experience the agonies of partition. Various critics like Novy Kapadia, Jaydipsinh Dodiya, R. K. Dhawan, E. Kulke and others have dwelt at length with Sidhwa’s keen awareness of the Parsee life and Parsee women’s peculiar strengths and acute vulnerabilities in relation to the pulls and pressures of home and society.

R.K Dhawan and Novy Kapadia appreciate the strong measures taken by women in *Cracking India*. They opine that, “it is the ordinary person who “battle wrongs” like Lenny’s Godmother who helps Ayah to escape from Hira Mandi and move to a refugee camp in Amritsar or Lenny’s mother who helps her Hindu neighbors flee from violence –stricken Lahore, not people in the corridors of power” (22). Talking of Feroza in *An American Brat*, they opine that, “she has outgrown the confines and limitations of her secluded, sheltered life in Lahore. She has developed an independent mind and is willing to chalk out her own career, instead of being guided by solicitous advice from parents and elders” (23). Both the critics view the pulls and pressure of the society on Zareen Ginwalla and opine:

> The mother Zareen Ginwalla realizes that she is being as fundamentalist as the orthodox mullahs in Pakistan, by opposing her daughter’s marriage. Still the tradition of community and desire for cultural purity prevail and such insights remain only a flash in Zareen’s mind. (24)

Undoubtedly Bapsi’s protagonists protest and defy what they consider as an assault to their individuality and birthright. The writer is not digging at feminism in its literal sense but her quest through her protagonists is related to autonomy within the broader framework of family, home and society. Eminent critics like R.K. Dhawan and Novy Kapadia in their study, *The Novels of Bapsi Sidhwa*, have sharply criticized such retrogressive forces of the society that restrict a woman’s socio-cultural space. Talking of Zaitoon’s predicament in *The Pakistani Bride*, both these critics assert that Zaitoon rebels at the cruel treatment in the form of merciless beatings and mistrust and realizes that her imagined ideal community is no longer “a region where men were heroic, proud and incorruptible” (21). Zaitoon’s escape from the rigid,
traditional, tribal communities is considered by Fawzia Afzal Khan as a spirit of defiance which “endorses a challenge to the structures of patriarchy” (qtd. in Dhawan and Kapadia, “Entree: The Fiction of Bapsi Sidhwa” 17). Hence, the intense struggle of the woman protagonists in different cultures and communities to challenge the rigid, hierarchical structures and ideologies to assert their freedom and autonomy in the various spheres of life finds a prominent place in the novels of the contemporary women writers.

It is important to examine and situate the ‘beyond’ presented in the novels of the above two writers in the historical and social context of home, marriage and autonomy. The concept of home in the present analysis relates to home as a place, a space, along with the feelings, emotions, practices and dilemmas evident at various moments and in various circumstances. It is also analyzed in the context of house and family responsibilities and gender relations, as a refuge for personal engagements and as a space for gradual journey towards autonomy. It is commonly considered as, “a place where space and time are controlled and structured functionally, economically, aesthetically and morally and where domestic communitarian practices are realized” (Mallet 66). At the same time, the word ‘home’ does not merely refer to the physical aspect of it being a ‘dwelling’ that provides shelter to the individuals related by blood and kinship; it is rather a “multidimensional concept or a multi-layered phenomenon,” (Mallet 68) that caters to an individual’s needs and desires from a multiple perspective of love, caring, sharing, security, human interaction and human relatedness. Home, in literary settings, tends to acquire meaning and significance more as a private and personal space for human interaction rather than a social institution subjected to public scrutiny and surveillance. Home in the literature of the writers in study have been presented as a place where constant strife is presented for its women. It is a place where the women of the house are always trying to find their personal space where they can be themselves. Home is also a place where the protagonists feel stifled in a male dominated scenario but are always looking for ways to understand its dynamics to carve out their personal space. These women fight for what they think is their right and are not bowed down by its strict strictures. In the process they feel humiliated, face rejection and loneliness but it in no way suppress their desires and feelings.
Whereas the public domain is recognized for economic, social and political work leading to associations with people other than kith and kin, the private terrain of home and family is seen as a personal space for the growth of an individual in safe and protected surroundings, simultaneously offering scope for creativity and regeneration. However, such romantic description of home as haven might appear exaggerated when contrasted with the harsh realities of home, particularly in the context of women and children who are subjected to various kinds of discrimination, violence, sexual abuse and denial of choice and agency, especially in matters related to their heart. Home, for women in particular is a constant site of fear, isolation and exploitation and confines them within its boundaries, rather than providing freedom for realizing their true potential.

Feminist writers identify home as an undemocratic place with dominance of masculine values, where authority is vested in males through whom descent and inheritance are traced. Home, in this sense, is a male dominated site of oppression and patriarchal control over women, whose honour is protected through control over woman’s body, mobility agency and choice. Despite a woman’s engagement in untiring domestic chores and a major part of her life and energy being confined to kitchen, she is not the owner of the house and is considered useful only from the point of view of reproductive and domestic labor. Mallet points out, “Despite home being generally considered a feminine, nurturing space created by women themselves, they often lack both authority and a space of their own within this realm” (75). That is why women’s needs and desires occupy a secondary place and often considered insignificant, whereas males enjoy ultimate control and authority.

Seen and analyzed in the Indian context, the concept of home is perhaps as old as the civilization itself, having arisen due to the emotional and social needs of human beings which get established and strengthened in emotional sustenance, social security, inter-dependency and sharing of bonds. Since various members of the family related by blood live together in a close knit manner inside the home, it tends to serve as a medium of moral and spiritual growth and also a place to inculcate values and ethics. It associates with it a feeling of relationship, privacy, warmth, attachment, desire, safety, happiness and freedom. Home, thus, is a place where the concept of family develops first and foremost in the form of a basic unit leading subsequently to the formation of a society, a village, a town, a city, a nation and the world at large.
Home, with its various settlement patterns, be it fixed or various shifting temporary settlements, connotes the notions of belonging, the right to lay claim to a place as one’s own and a secure space that radiates feelings of completeness, ease and protection.

Home, in the context of Diaspora literature and experience, can also mean one’s country, the birth place. The significance of the locations of homes as significant ‘signifiers of social stratification' is aptly described by an eminent critic, Vibha Chauhan, who writes:

> Homes within communities have the potential of becoming crystallized symbols of social status. The location, design and settlement patterns of homes in here within themselves the physical, emotional and social relations of the inmates. In fact, homes and housing patterns become one of the most visually unambiguous signifiers of social stratification (242-43).

If home is believed to provide social security and comfort, the same can be a site of conflicts, jealousy and power struggles, oppression and suppression of an individual, particularly women and girl children, who do not have an independent identity of their own and are brought up under male power and control. As Shaghufta Parween opines:

> Home also carries with it images of confinement, of closed restrictive spaces, of vigilantly scrutinized crippling domains that tenaciously grip individual sovereignty and the freedom of movement to the outside world. (144)

Under such conditions, home can become a place of oppression and repression which can restrict the growth and wholesome development of an individual and can cause intense pain and suppression of desires and capabilities.

Sociologists like Vina Mazumdar and Meera Kosambi understand families to be social entities and institutions that perform vital functions for their members and societies which include growth and socialization of children; support and sustenance for frail and elderly family members; fulfillment of the emotional needs of family members and providing human resource for the growth of the economy. Hence, description of the family as social entity is recognition of the fact that they are socially created and defined and hence tend to vary across cultures; while referring to them as institutions serves to mean that they embody a set of interrelated roles and socio-economic responsibilities, apart from the private and the personal.
Adjustment and compromise is the essence of any home, where family interests come first and personal concerns tend to acquire a secondary place. This is particularly true for a woman, whose very survival depends upon her complete subjection and selfless service to domesticity. Each step and decision taken by a woman within the domestic terrain is expected to be guided by duty, tradition and religious beliefs inherited through centuries. Home is supposed to be a place where, what matters most for a woman, is to marry and produce children. A single woman, or a married woman without a child, is still considered vulnerable and has little respect in the family or in the society at large.

The concept of home, based as it is, on hierarchy and male centered power and control, there is hardly any space left for a woman to voice her individual opinion and exercise autonomy in any field. Even personal decisions related to her growth and education, marriage and children are taken by male members, resulting in undue pressures and endless suppression of her desires. Preference for the male child and aversion for the girls often results in undernourishment, denial of adequate opportunities and social space for the girl child along with child abuse and child marriage, compounded with evils like dowry and female feticide. A woman gains status in the marital family only when she fulfills her prime 'obligation' of producing the male heir to the family; in the absence of which she is considered a liability, fit to be constantly rebuked and berated or even fit to be divorced, as it happens in case of Ishita in Manju Kapur’s Custody. As Chahaun puts it:

The relation of gender, caste and class that frame the home enter it like invisible spirits and condition the psychological, emotional and social expectations as well as responses of the inhabitants. (243)

Under such circumstances, women are almost always in doubt about their real place and status within 'home.' Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Martin rightly assert that a woman is in a state of constant tension as to ‘being home and not being home’ in such a situation:

The tension between two specific modalities: being home and not being home. ‘Being home’ refers to the place where one lives within familiar, safe, protected boundaries; ‘not being home’ is a matter of realizing that home was an illusion of coherence and safety based on the exclusion of specific histories.
of oppression and resistance, the repression of differences even within oneself.

This century old subjugated condition of a woman within domestic terrain and her constant endeavor to transcend this boundary with a desire to exercise her autonomy and attain adequate space of her own motivated me to analyze, ‘home’, ‘marriage’ and ‘beyond’ as my area of research in the works of Indian and Pakistani writers—Manju Kapur and Bapsi Sidhwa respectively. Women writers of the Indian subcontinent have consistently been trying to deconstruct the image of women generally presented by the male writers as either being an angel of the house or a monster. Both these images tend to serve the main purpose of trying to control the female subject of male authored texts and hence the emergence and growth of women’s writings can be seen and understood as an act of resistance against the stereotypical representation of women and their issues. The defiance of patriarchal norms, expectations, stereotypes and images in the works of women writers clearly indicates and establishes the autonomous nature of their work. By resisting and challenging the hegemonic nature and structure of various social and cultural institutions, women are trying to deconstruct the image of domesticity and subjugation that has been thrust upon them. The woman characters presented in the novels of the writers under study are no longer confined to homes and personal life and make fervent attempts to enter various socio-political spaces in a strong bid to assert their individuality as well as social responsibility. Rather than taking reclusion in self-pity; they engage themselves in constant struggles at various levels even in the midst of most trying situations which often entail terrible loneliness and sufferings. Their self awareness and consciousness in the whole process of struggle and transcendence helps them realize their potential and self-worth and they are ultimately able to raise the level of consciousness among the wider segments of the society as well.

The image of 'home' as presented by the writers under discussion consists generally of the gradually disintegrating make-believe happy world of joint family structures, with various family members, particularly women, trying hard to come up with the complexities and contradictions related to family’s expectations vis-à-vis their own individual spaces and aspirations. The atmosphere of home in joint family generally happens to provide mutual support system and there are efforts to adjust one’s
aspirations and dreams according to prevailing conditions but at the same time, there is tension and rivalry when self-interests of different members begin to clash with the other. There is simultaneous display of petty jealousies, unarticulated complaints and simmering frustrations in Indian home-settings. At the same time, the age old foundations of patriarch run joint family system with men working out and women within home are often shown crumbling under the impact of contemporary value system where the wives, daughters and sisters are no longer contented with merely enabling the mission of the male members. They do not meekly accept the defined roles and are determined to strike their own path whether it is in the field of education, marriage, business or children. Women are depicted as not only desiring space inside homes for their own selves but are equally ready to handle the responsibilities of the parents and relatives related to maternal side. Astha, the protagonist of A Married Woman, is keen to keep her mother in her own marital house and does not support her mother’s decision to take shelter in an ashram. So is the case with Nina, Shagun and Putli in different novels. In the later novels of the two writers, joint family structure is depicted as getting reduced in the modern times to nuclear families consisting of husband, wife and children. With the exclusion and elimination of many of the relations, who earlier constituted an essential part of the home and family, the value codes and norms earlier attached to home and family are also being revised and re-defined. In a nuclear family, one has to grapple with difficulties all alone or with very less support from other extended family members because of the geographical distances. This shift in values has been depicted by both the authors in their works.

Home is also a site of violence against women and sexual abuse because of their lesser status and cultural values associated with a woman's 'silence.' As expressed by Pinky Virani, “the political, societal, cultural and religious attitudes which serve to underestimate the child, specially the female child, create a climate in which abuse can thrive” (xxvii). Further, the “difficulties in the language of sexuality, knowledge levels, social conditioning and social responses compound the problem for a child” (Vijaylakshmi 25). In matters of finance, it is again the male child who is considered fit to handle this responsibility and women often depend upon the males for their survival and sustenance. However, there is a gradual change in the economic matters with women’s large scale education facilitating their entry into various spheres of
earning and livelihood. As asserted by G.D Barche, “Until the sixties and seventies man alone was looked upon as bread winner and woman was confined only to household. In the modern era, woman too has become a direct money earner” (129). O.P Dwivedi, while throwing light on the changing reality of status of women, opines:

The role of women has undergone a significant alteration in this era of post-colonialism, as now they have much more control on their bodies and freedom in terms of decision-making. (31)

All these complexities related to home as well as the attempts to go beyond these obstacles by various women protagonists find elaborate mention in the novels of the two writers selected for study. A constant conflict related to individual’s dreams and aspirations versus social norms and outlook is reflected. There is a strong urge in the woman protagonists to be recognized and loved as an individual rather than as daughters and mothers. These women want to explore her passions of flesh as well and yearn to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. It is this craving for individual and social spaces that make them pitted against conservative thoughts and practices. Women are considered primarily as ‘carriers’ of male ‘seeds’ and any resistance to this is strongly opposed by orthodox society. An educated and aware woman rebels against various manifestations of gender discrimination and questions the duality of ethical and moral standards adopted by the family and social structures. Nidhi Vats opines:

We make society and society makes us. Society is above individual. It nourishes us, loves us, scolds us and punishes us. But the problem starts with the double standard approach of the society. (55)

A woman adopts various modes of resistance in personal as well as public life to fight such discriminations. As Ameeta Wattal sums it up that the novels by Indian feminist writers as such, “speak of women of action who believe in fighting, having unlimited confidence in the power of human intelligence who believe in and a will to achieve order, happiness, health and wisdom. In inculcating within the spirit of those they meet courage, optimism and unstated delight in their existence” (18).

A contemporary woman is no longer isolated from the current social and political developments in the country and wishes to participate fully in the ongoing actions, debates and discourses. It is significant for her to use her intelligence and
achievements to exercise her rights as a citizen, which in turn equip her with self-worth and self-confidence. While negotiating her inner and outer spaces, she tries, what Virginia Woolf calls it, to ‘redefine’ her relationship to reality, “independently of prior definition by man” (qtd.in Habib, 680).

Marriage, in Indian tradition and culture, is considered to be a ‘sacred institution’ and since life partners are believed to be decided in heaven, any kind of defiance of ‘heavenly’ authority is seen with utmost resentment and repudiation of family’s honour. What is more important in case of woman is that her whole existence, meaning and relatedness, revolves around the issue of marriage and as such, marriage is considered to be central and defining factor in her life. Virmati’s mother, Kasturi in Difficult Daughters, tries very hard to instill in her that all her education is not going to lead her anywhere because a girl’s success lay in finding her own home after marriage, since, “A woman without her own home and family is a woman without moorings”( Kapur 111). This sums up the traditional feeling and opinion in case of a woman, where her ‘success,’ settlement, happiness and fulfillment is seen to be related with her marriage alone, and a wife is supposed to surrender unconditionally to the whims and desires of the husband. As Jyoti Singh observes:

In the Indian culture, marriage is a sacred institution where the wife is the half of man, Ardhangini, but ironically submits completely to the husband for he is Patiparmeshwar, an earthly substitute for God around whom her whole being revolves. (2)

Shashi Deshpande in That Long Silence (1988) presents this ‘truth’ of marital bond in the following words, “Two bullocks yoked together…it is more comfortable for them to move in the same direction. To go in different directions would be painful; and what animal would voluntarily choose pain?” (12). A woman in marriage is supposed to adjust herself to the requirement of family’s needs through constant compromise and silent sacrifice. Since she is primarily confined to home, her potential and dreams largely remain submerged in the drab and unproductive chores within the boundaries of homes and she is denied adequate opportunities for social and political participation.

Hence it is significant for a married woman to be able to relate to some specific cause and purpose in her life which goes beyond the humdrum of daily chores within home;
a cause that can give her social recognition and self-satisfaction. Various writings by Indian English women clearly depict a wife craving for ‘something more’ than just marriage and children; something that can add value to her life and can help her to address the feeling of hollowness inside her heart. It is power rather than love that defines and operates a man-woman relationship in marriage and a husband becomes your owner.

As depicted in various literary works, marriage for a man gets reduced to mere sexual fulfillment whereas for a woman there has to be something ‘more’ between a husband and a wife. She needs love, sharing, togetherness, respect and dignity in her relationship with the husband. Astha, the protagonist of *A Married Woman*, poses a relevant question related to marriage; “Why couldn’t she have a say in how some of their money was being spent? (Kapur, *A Married Woman* 165). A woman strives for a safe, warm and respectful place where she can express herself, be herself and relate to things and people in a meaningful way, but Indian families and husbands do not normally prefer a woman who desires independence and who is socially or politically inclined. Yet this is what a marriage should mean—adequate inner and outer space for each partner to be able to grow and develop in one’s own way and both being able to share the ‘yoke’ of responsibilities related to family and children so as to change the power equations in human relationships in favor of a more justified world. The novels of the writers under study tend to depict this struggle of a married woman to define and re-vision her own self in an attempt to gain autonomy in the domain of home and marriage.

The word ‘autonomy’ comes from the Greek roots, where auto means ‘self’ and nomos signifies ‘custom’ or ‘law’. This reflects the political sense of the word denoting a group’s right to self-government or self-rule. Kant described the protection of autonomy at the political level as encapsulated in the principle that, “each person had the right to any action that can coexist with the freedom of every other person in accordance with universal law” (387). Seen in this sense, an individual seeking autonomy would like to make decisions independently from an authority figure. Autonomy, thus, can be considered as an individual’s capacity for self-determination or self-governance and involves control and choice over one’s life and actions. The roots of autonomy as self-determination can be found in the idea of self-mastery in ancient Greek philosophy. Greek philosophers, Plato and Aristotle, associate the ideal
for humanity with self-sufficiency and a lack of dependency on others. For Aristotle, self-sufficiency is an essential ingredient of happiness and involves lack of dependence upon external conditions for happiness. The best human is one who is ruled by reason, and is not dependent upon others for attaining happiness. The concept of autonomy itself continued to develop in the modern period with the decrease of religious authority and the increase of political liberty and emphasis on individual reason. Rousseau’s idea of moral liberty, as mastery over oneself, is connected with civil liberty and the ability to participate in legislation.

Moral autonomy, usually traced back to Kant, is the capacity to deliberate and to give oneself the moral law, rather than merely heeding the injunctions of others. Personal autonomy is the capacity to decide and pursue a particular course of action in one’s life, often regardless of any defined moral content. Philosophers of autonomy have striven to express the compatibility of the social aspects of human action within their conceptions of self-determination, arguing that there need not necessarily be an antagonism between social and relational ties, and one’s ability to decide one’s own course of action. Ethical autonomy concerns a person’s desires in the quest for a good life, in the context of the individual values, commitments, relationships, and communities. Legal autonomy is the right not to be forced into a particular set of values and commitments, whereas social autonomy concerns whether an agent has the means to be an equal member of one’s community. Attending to social autonomy helps to demonstrate the responsibility of members of the community to consider each other’s needs, and to evaluate political and social structures in terms of whether they serve to promote the interests of all its members.

John Stuart Mill, in his seminal work, *On Liberty* (1956), similarly defends the rights of individuals to pursue their own personal goals, and emphasizes the need for sovereignty over one’s body and mind. Mill writes:

> The only part of the conduct of anyone for which he is amenable to society is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns him, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign. (13)

Autonomy, for Thomas Hill, means that principles will not simply be accepted because of tradition or authority, but can be challenged through reason.
The above mentioned aspects of autonomy have been made use of by the feminist writers as well, who keenly desire a radical change in the status and conditions of women all over the world. Feminism’s key political and theoretical stance is that the inequalities that exist between men and women are not natural but socially created by men to retain power and control. Religion, family, education, media, knowledge systems are all social and cultural ‘structures’ that enable the perpetual reinforcement of this inequality. The efforts by the feminists for equal status of woman in society that started early in 19th and 20th century have gone a long way in helping women to move towards autonomy in a gradual manner. The feminist belief in equality has helped her to look at herself as an individual rather than seeing herself in relational terms with men as daughters, wives and mothers. Various social and cultural movements in the direction of women’s emancipation have created space for women’s education and meaningful social engagements, besides making them aware of the needs of her body and the dynamics of sexuality. This understanding has also helped her to look at her body not as something ‘impure’ but as a means to satisfy her sexual urges and not be guilty about it.

The fight for liberation from the social strictures has helped woman to understand that economic independence is a pre-requisite for autonomy and that in being economically independent, she is contributing to the economy not only of the home but of the country at large. The efforts of the feminist activism have helped a woman to understand the social construction of gender roles, question them in her daily interactions and look at her worth in society from a different perspective. She has understood that while sexual difference is real and unalterable, it cannot form ground for injustice and inequality and that she has as much right to choose and act for herself as any other individual. Thus, a woman’s choice and autonomy, is, in a very integral manner, related to social transformation in favor of the deprived and the marginalized.

The question of autonomy has constantly found depiction in the writings of Indian women novelists. Nayantara Sahgal focuses mainly on the question of identity crisis for women and wants them to rebel against the ‘tyranny’ of culture and tradition which impedes women’s progress. She believes that women’s writings, through the depiction of women’s ‘lone, remote struggles’ would prove useful in women’s quest for independent ‘identity and emancipation’. Shashi Deshpande primarily focuses on the issues in the context of emerging middle class women in modern Indian society. Her female
characters are close to real life and she exposes their emotional turmoil, anxiety and confusion, along with their passionate desire to resist and challenge various myths and stereotypes related to women. From the traditional roles of daughters, wives and mothers, Deshpande’s protagonists make frantic efforts to emerge as individuals in their own right through the process of self-realization. Her novels are concerned with an exploration into female psyche torn between age-old traditions and modern thought and consciousness. Her middle class women protagonists wage a relentless battle to find a voice and adequate social space through rejection of outdated customs and rituals which is an indication of their gradual movement towards autonomy.

Anita Desai’s novels also depict women’s struggle for emancipation and autonomy in patriarchal society and culture. She gives voice and space to her women in her novels to articulate their experiences. Her women rebel against unjustifiable ideologies which require them to become self-sacrificial victims, like the mythical Sita, Savitri and Shakuntala but complete liberation from the male dominated ideology and practices is still a distant dream for them. Namita Gokhale’s women protagonists too, are depicted in search of their respectable place in the family and society and do not hesitate to raise their voice against the age-old traditions and customs which are repressive in nature. These women refuse to be dictated by male counterparts and their radical consciousness leads them towards the realization of their autonomous selves. Kamla Markanday, in her novels, presents her women characters in relation to the historical, cultural, political and sociological environment of changing India, with emphasis on the fact that the political freedom has very limited meaning without the freedom to women. Female characters in Chitra Banerjee Devakaruni find themselves entangled between old and new world values and question the nature of their lives and their roles as mothers, wives, daughters and professionals. This awareness leads them to rethink about their own lives as women which instills in them the confidence and strength to strive for change. Bharti Mukherjee in her novels depicts the theme of self versus society and focuses on the self discovery of woman characters. She raises questions against such social evils as child marriage and widowhood. Her women ultimately emerge as independent beings who believe in chasing their own dreams. Shobha De depicts the lives of the women from urban higher social strata who protest against the image of woman as an auxillary to man and enjoy sexual freedom.
The novels of Manju Kapur and Bapsi Sidhwa present autonomy in the light of a continuum, with dependence at one end and autonomy at the other. Part of the challenge for arriving at autonomy for the women protagonists involves a desire to be independent, while maintaining connectedness with family and society. This results in some major conflicts and contradictions in the hearts and minds of the protagonists as well as at the outer levels of the society. Conflict with the traditional ways of living and thinking is a major aspect related to autonomy in both the writers. Manju Kapur depicts this conflict between tradition and modernity through mother-daughter relationship where mothers of various protagonists in Kapur’s works have been brought up to believe that the marital home is the rightful place for a girl and all other aspects of life including education and employment are subsidiary to the primary fact of marriage. The daughters, on the other hand are depicted as striving for autonomy with respect to education, love and marriage. They attempt to break through the sufferings that the traditional society offers and struggle hard for their individual worth to be realized, as does Ida, who opts out of unsuccessful marriage to stay single and does not like to be ‘simple’ like her mother Virmati. Virmati is in conflict with her mother Kasturi on matters of education and marriage. Love is a stimulant for her and Virmati’s romance brings with it indignity, anger, frustration and suffering. She has to face rejection first at the hands of her mother and later her daughter Ida.

Likewise Astha in A Married Woman refuses to follow the ritual of praying before the images of gods and her choice of forming lesbian relationship is in conflict with the traditional notion of marriage and its gratification. Nisha’s mother Sona, in Home faces conflict with the family for many years on account of her barrenness but gets all attention and care when she is able to conceive. Nisha faces discrimination and gets less attention as compared to her younger brother Raju. There is conflict between Sona and Nisha when Sona fails to comprehend her daughter’s ambition to study. Nisha fights against the notion of her mother who considers her a mere helper in the kitchen and revolts by her unwillingness to participate in all worships. She resents her mother’s idea that she has to learn the art of service and domesticity and that she should observe Karva Chauth fast for availing herself a good husband. When Nisha is in love with Suresh, a low-caste boy, she is in conflict with herself whether to choose between an “outsider and her family, modernity and custom, independence and community” (Kapur, Home 149). Nina in The Immigrant is always under the
compulsion to marry because of her mother’s wish to see her settled. Shagun, the protagonist of *Custody* refuses to listen to her mother’s advice of not dismantling her family’s peace for the love of another man Ashok Khanna.

The protagonists in Manju Kapur’s novels are caught in constant dichotomy between the personal needs and the institutional and social obligations and responsibilities. Protagonist Virmati is always in a dilemma to fulfill her duty as a daughter or go for her professed love for Professor Harish. She is aware that loving a married man would bring slur upon her grandfather’s reputation in the society, yet her heart burns for him. She wants to become like Swarna and participate in the independence struggle, but ends up becoming a slave to her longings. Likewise, Astha in *A Married Woman*, inspired by the social commitment of Pipeelika and Reshana, wishes to contribute as much as possible for the cause of communal harmony, but is limited by her duties and obligation for the family and children. Nisha in *Home*, suffers from a strong sense of loss when she had to transfer her business in clothes to her sister-in-law Pooja on account of her being caught up in bringing forth and rearing children. Nina, in *The Immigrant* is a confident and much revered teacher in a reputed college in Delhi before marriage, but she has to listen to her mother who strongly desired to see her settled in life. Nina agrees to bind knots with the NRI match Ananda because she had a familial and social duty to fulfill.

Women in the world of novels are confronted with patriarchal mechanisms of supervision and control in every sphere of life including their own body and sexuality and hence seek to dismantle the structures of power so as to have more control on their lives. Going through a series of compromises, adjustments and sacrifices, they are able to realise by the end of their journey that the ideal of Indian womanhood is a trap that restrains the full flowering of their potential. They crave for more space in their marital home as is the case of Astha in *A Married Woman*, who is eager to invite her widowed mother to stay with her. Kapur depicts how daughters are trained to devalue themselves and thus, consciously or unconsciously, become responsible for “passing the tradition from woman to woman” (Kapur, *A Married Woman* 114).

Aspiration for independence leads to conflict and contradictions at multiple levels since a woman’s craving for autonomous life is often misunderstood as lack of responsibility and duty towards family and children. Yet, the struggle persists which brings with it pain and suffering, loneliness and estrangement. The inner conflict arises due to the clash of consciousness of tradition with the craving for modernity.
Ida, the third generation woman in *Difficult Daughters*, who has taken a leap from the times of her grandmother Kasturi, undergoes this inner conflict and says, “No matter how I might rationalize otherwise. I feel my existence as a single woman reverberates desolately” (Kapur, *Difficult Daughters* 3).

For an immigrant, there is the conflict of balancing between the two cultures, the country she leaves behind and the country she adopts, as is the case with Nina and Feroza. The cultural shock gives an opportunity for redefining one’s life objectives by learning new lessons and obtaining new perspectives. Nina, the protagonist of *The Immigrant* feels the cultural shock immediately after landing in Canada, where she was harassed by immigrant officers. She feels lonely in a country and home which abounded in plenty and severely misses her home in India where she had never felt the need to belong as she does in Canada. Dissatisfied in marital relationship with Ananda, she gradually moves forward to ‘find her feet’ in terms of equipping herself for a job in Canada and also assimilates Canadian values. Likewise, Feroza, the protagonist of *An American Brat*, opts for a short term education course in America but finds opportunity there for full growth of her potential. She decides never to return to Pakistan and resolves to find her own path, independent of the institution of family and religion.

Bapsi Sidhwa too depicts various conflicts that her women characters undergo in the process of exercising their autonomy. In *The Crow Eaters*, Jerbanoo, Putli’s mother, articulates her hostility for any kind of subordination by Faredoon and refuses to submit to the notions of feminine decency and decorum prescribed by patriarchy. In *The Pakistani Bride*, Zaitoon is soon in conflict with her imagined notions of tribal bravery and strength and challenges the absolute notions of righteousness along with the double standards that patriarchy imposes. Miriam rebels against the treatment of women as commodities. The novel articulates the silent pain and loneliness which women have to undergo in their strife towards autonomy. Ayah’s story in *Cracking India* shows how assault on female body has been a traditionally accepted method of settling scores by the enemy.

Women protagonists in both the writers believe that religion, like many other things, is a personal choice and it cannot be forced upon them through family or religious establishments. Astha, Nisha, Nina, Shagun in Manju Kapur’s novels do not believe in religious practices like keeping fasts or attending religious ceremonies. Sidhwa, in *An American Brat*, raises many questions regarding the conservative beliefs and
practices of religion in relation to women. She very clearly shows the subjugation of women inherent in religious practices and strikes at the rigid religious sanctions and attitudes towards the inter-community marriage. Zareen Ginwalla, Feroza’s mother, is seen in conflict with these sanctions when the issue of Feroza’s marriage with David Press, a person of Jewish religion, comes up. As in Manju Kapur, here too, there is conflict to strike a balance between tradition and modernity, dependence and freedom. In the novel Water, the widows are forced to live in confinement in widow-ashram and rot as faceless members of the society with no choice but to leave marital or parental homes after the death of their husbands even though many such marriages had not achieved consummation owing to child marriage and the disparity in the age of couple. The novelist strikes at the hideous aspect of Hindu religious beliefs in the pre-partition era. Chuyia, the protagonist and a child widow, questions the rigidity of religious codes for women and is curious to know why there are no male widows and why women alone are subjected to this regime. The novel shows how the internalization of patriarchal beliefs and value system, many a times, makes a section of women vulnerable to the outdated religious beliefs and practices.

It is with respect to the above conflicts and contradictions that the concept of autonomy shall be discussed and analyzed in order to explore the endeavours of the women protagonists in the direction of realizing their personal autonomy which, for women, is closely linked with their active participation in the social and political spheres. They need to cross the threshold to prove their worth outside homes and strive for their rightful place in society. The women characters in both the writers are convinced that individual autonomy cannot be attained at personal level without linking it to the social and political roots of inequality and discrimination which need to be analyzed and questioned at multiple levels while adopting multiple tools and strategies of resistance.

Further, a re-visioning of female autonomy requires a redefining of the perceptions related to women’s body and control over her sexuality. A woman’s body, under no circumstances, can be made a site of contest to settle personal scores, to seek vengeance or to protect the false notions of honour related to family or community. The community codes related to control over woman’s sexuality need to be revised and a woman’s claim over her desires and her choice to exercise her sexual preferences must be recognized. Besides, it is essential for a woman to enter and lay full claim to all kinds of social and public avenues for her to be able to lead an
autonomous life. To regain the centrality of autonomous existence of women, the power equations and accepted norms of inequality and discrimination within and outside the home and family, have to be interrogated, reanalyzed and reinterpreted in the context of changing circumstances. The values and codes of predominant groups that favor and perpetuate hierarchy must first be unmasked as instruments of subservience and control and be replaced by human and democratic values which are all inclusive and all encompassing. A woman’s autonomy is necessarily linked with reversal of power equations in favor of the under-privileged and cannot be visualized separately from the autonomy of all disadvantaged and marginalized sections, irrespective of caste, community or gender. A decisive battle needs to be waged at the level of mindset too since a real change can only come about when the outer struggle against structural and gender disparity is necessarily accompanied with a radical transformation of individual and collective consciousness.
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