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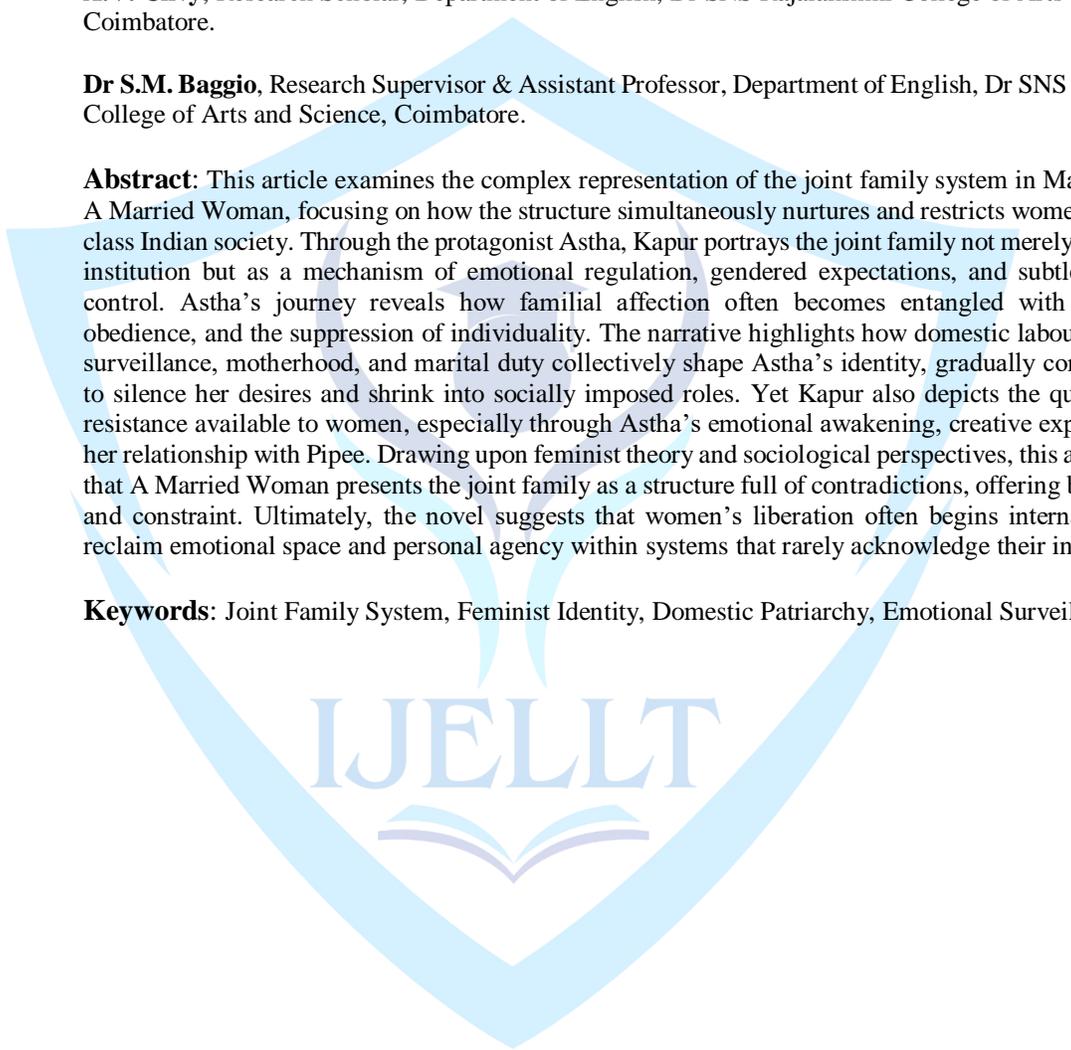
**Rewriting Domestic Boundaries: The Joint Family System and Women's Inner Selfhood in Manju Kapur's  
A Married Woman**

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**Abstract:** This article examines the complex representation of the joint family system in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*, focusing on how the structure simultaneously nurtures and restricts women in middle-class Indian society. Through the protagonist Astha, Kapur portrays the joint family not merely as a cultural institution but as a mechanism of emotional regulation, gendered expectations, and subtle patriarchal control. Astha's journey reveals how familial affection often becomes entangled with conformity, obedience, and the suppression of individuality. The narrative highlights how domestic labour, emotional surveillance, motherhood, and marital duty collectively shape Astha's identity, gradually compelling her to silence her desires and shrink into socially imposed roles. Yet Kapur also depicts the quiet forms of resistance available to women, especially through Astha's emotional awakening, creative expression, and her relationship with Pipee. Drawing upon feminist theory and sociological perspectives, this article argues that *A Married Woman* presents the joint family as a structure full of contradictions, offering both stability and constraint. Ultimately, the novel suggests that women's liberation often begins internally, as they reclaim emotional space and personal agency within systems that rarely acknowledge their individuality.

**Keywords:** Joint Family System, Feminist Identity, Domestic Patriarchy, Emotional Surveillance.



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Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* stands as one of the most emotionally layered feminist novels in contemporary Indian English fiction, and its exploration of the joint family system reveals the subtle and pervasive ways in which tradition governs the lives of women. What makes the novel especially compelling is Kapur's refusal to romanticize domestic structures that are often celebrated in Indian cultural narratives. Instead, she offers a deeply introspective journey of a married woman who enters a joint household with hope, only to discover that the emotional, psychological, and ideological expectations embedded within this structure slowly erode her sense of individuality. Through the protagonist Astha, Kapur provides an unflinching look at how the joint family system, rather than being a benign cultural arrangement, becomes a mechanism of gendered control, emotional surveillance, and patriarchal conditioning. The Penguin India edition captures this tension with clarity, embedding Astha's inner conflicts within the subtle everyday routines and interactions of middle-class Delhi domesticity. Her life becomes a mirror to countless Indian women whose identities have been shaped, constrained, or overshadowed by the collective demands of extended families.

Astha's entry into her husband Hemant's joint family home marks a major transition, not only geographically or socially but existentially. The moment Kapur writes that Astha "knew her life was no longer her own, it had merged into the rhythm of a larger family" (p. 42), she frames Astha's marriage as a form of absorption rather than a partnership. The joint family becomes a living organism into which she must fit, adjust, and reshape herself. Her mother-in-law serves as the household's governing authority, directing the flow of domestic life with a commanding presence. Kapur notes that "her mother-in-law's voice carried through every room, asserting the rules of the house" (p. 47). This image establishes the house itself as an extension of patriarchal ideology, a spatial representation of inherited norms where elders dictate moral standards and younger women carry the burden of maintaining them. Sociologist A. M. Shah's (1998) description of the Indian joint family as a system of emotional regulation comes alive in these scenes, where Astha's early days revolve around performing the expected roles of the obedient new bride.

The pressure of these expectations becomes evident as Astha finds herself constantly attending to the needs of the household. Kapur captures her exhaustion when she writes, “Astha found herself running from room to room, trying to meet everyone’s needs, as if her own needs had ceased to exist” (p. 52). This captures not just physical labour but the emotional work that Arlie Hochschild (1983) describes as emotion management, the unacknowledged feminine duty to smooth relationships, maintain harmony, and absorb emotional tensions. Astha’s domestic routine becomes a cycle of service punctuated by the subtle policing of her behaviour. Hemant, though not overtly oppressive, reinforces the same traditional ideology. When he tells her that “painting was fine as a hobby, but her real duty was to the family” (p. 61), he encapsulates the patriarchal belief that a woman’s aspirations are meaningful only as long as they do not interfere with her domestic obligations. Simone de Beauvoir’s argument that patriarchal societies confine women to the sphere of immanence, denying them the freedom to transcend domestic roles, becomes painfully relevant here.

Her pregnancies further entangle her in the joint family’s expectations. While childbirth might offer an avenue for personal joy or agency, Kapur shows how the elders appropriate Astha’s pregnancy as a collective event belonging to the family. Astha feels increasingly sidelined. “The baby was everyone’s concern, yet Astha often felt it was hardly hers” (p. 78). This dynamic aligns with Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s (1991) argument that women in many postcolonial societies are viewed as bearers of lineage rather than autonomous individuals. The joint family becomes a shared authority over Astha’s body, decisions, and even emotions.

As days pass, the joint family system begins functioning like a moral surveillance network. Kapur states, “Nothing Astha did escaped the silent scrutiny of the household” (p. 58). Astha internalizes this scrutiny and begins policing her own actions. Foucault’s concept of self-surveillance becomes highly applicable here, as Astha limits her thoughts, expressions, and desires to maintain peace. This repeated suppression leads to an emotional shrinking that Kapur captures vividly. “Astha felt herself shrinking, becoming the version of a woman others needed her to be” (p. 105). The woman she once was begins to fade under layers of duty and obedience.

Critics Sangari and Vaid (1989) have pointed out that Indian women often experience this erosion of individuality in extended families, where conformity is celebrated and autonomy is viewed with suspicion.

Astha's desire for creative and emotional space is reflected through her search for literal space. Kapur describes her painting at night, "hoping no one would call her, hoping the silence would last" (p. 117). Her room is never fully her own. Her time is never fully her own. Even her earnings, symbolic of independence, are absorbed into family expenses. "Whatever Astha earned was treated as a contribution to household expenses, not as her own" (p. 159). This reflects Marilyn Waring's argument that women's labour, whether paid or unpaid, is often appropriated into patriarchal structures.

Astha's emotional awakening through Pipee becomes one of the most powerful forms of inner rebellion. With Pipee, she experiences a world where the constant expectations fall away. "With Pipee, she felt seen, not as someone's wife or mother, but as herself" (p. 175). This self-recognition becomes a lifeline in a life where she has been forced into silence. Nair (2004) argues that Kapur often creates emotional counter-spaces where women rediscover themselves. Astha's emotional refuge in Pipee represents such a counter-space.

However, Kapur does not portray Astha's emotional transformation as a simple or straightforward process. Her awakening increases the friction within the household, even though she rarely confronts anyone directly. Hemant senses changes in her behaviour but fails to understand their emotional depth. Kapur notes, "Hemant wondered why Astha was so distant, but he dismissed it as one of her moods" (p. 190). Instead of trying to understand Astha's discomfort or her desire for personal space, Hemant reduces her emotional shifts to irrational mood swings. This reflects what feminist critic Sharma (2012) describes as the structural blindness of patriarchal societies, where women's emotional needs are consistently minimized or misunderstood.

Astha's interactions with her children also become complicated. Though she loves them deeply, the joint family's authority often overshadows her maternal autonomy. Kapur writes, "Even the children, Astha realized, belonged to the family before they belonged to her" (p. 123).

This observation reveals the emotional complexities of motherhood within the joint family structure. Sociologist Patricia Uberoi (2006) argues that in traditional Indian families, children serve as carriers of lineage, and their upbringing becomes a shared responsibility that often sidelines the mother's agency. Astha experiences this firsthand, feeling both connected to and disconnected from her children.

As Astha begins to question these familial patterns, she becomes more introspective. Her internal reflections become powerful moments of resistance. Kapur writes, "She wondered when she had stopped belonging to herself" (p. 212). This marks a significant turning point. Astha begins realizing that the emotional sacrifices she once considered part of her duty have gradually chipped away at her sense of self. She becomes more observant of the patterns around her, the subtle inequalities she once ignored, and the expectations that have shaped her adult life.

Astha slowly starts creating small pockets of freedom within her routine. These pockets are not grand acts of rebellion but deliberate emotional choices. Kapur highlights one such moment when she writes, "Astha no longer rushed to explain herself, she simply let her silence speak" (p. 245). Silence becomes her new language, a refusal to justify every action and emotion. Gayatri Spivak (1988) emphasizes that subaltern women often resist through nuanced gestures rather than overt revolt. Astha's silence is active, not passive.

Yet the risks associated with emotional autonomy remain high. The joint family system rests heavily on ideas of honour and obedience, making any deviation appear selfish. Kapur illustrates this tension clearly: "In this house, peace was valued more than truth" (p. 141). This line captures the emotional climate in which Astha must operate. bell hooks (1984) notes that patriarchy asks women to maintain emotional peace at the cost of their own honesty, and Kapur's narrative demonstrates this lived reality.

Astha's involvement in the theatre movement adds another dimension to her growing independence. It exposes her to political ideas and creative energy. Kapur describes this awakening gently, writing, "Outside the house, Astha felt the stirrings of a freedom she had forgotten belonged to her" (p. 231).

This feeling is transformative. Banerjee (2010) notes that Kapur often depicts women finding liberation in public or creative spaces, which allow them to imagine identities beyond domestic roles.

Astha's emotional world becomes increasingly divided. The affection she receives at home feels conditional, while the acceptance she receives from Pipee feels liberating. Kapur narrates this contrast beautifully when she writes, "Astha saw herself as if from a distance, a woman shaped by others' expectations, her own voice faint in the background" (p. 266). This moment of self-realization reveals the cumulative impact of years of emotional compromise. It marks the beginning of her internal emancipation.

Astha's final transformation is rooted in emotional clarity rather than outward rebellion. She begins to understand that familial love, though comforting, is capable of limiting personal growth. She realizes that the joint family system, with all its stability and affection, also demands a loss of self. Kapur closes Astha's journey with immense subtlety. The family remains intact, the routine continues, and Astha continues to fulfil her responsibilities. But her inner world is no longer defined by the expectations of others. Kapur captures this independence when she writes, "She could not change the house she lived in, but she could change the space she made within herself" (p. 279). This is one of the most powerful assertions of selfhood in the novel. Her liberation becomes internal, emotional, and deeply personal.

Kapur's portrayal of the joint family system in *A Married Woman* reveals a structure filled with contradictions. It offers love but demands conformity. It provides stability but restricts individuality. It celebrates unity but suppresses truth. Through Astha, Kapur shows how these contradictions shape a woman's emotional world and often lead to invisible suffering. Yet she also shows the resilience of women who carve out small spaces of freedom within restrictive environments. Astha's journey is not one of escape but evolution. It is a story of gradual awakening, reclaiming identity, and learning to live with honesty within a system that discourages it.

Kapur ultimately affirms that liberation for women in traditional households begins with the courage to recognize and protect their inner voice. Astha's quiet internal revolution becomes a testament to the emotional strength of women who seek meaning, autonomy, and dignity within the walls of prescribed domestic structures.

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