

REIMAGINING WOMANHOOD: A STUDY OF FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVES IN MANJU KAPUR'S *THE GALLERY*

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Abstract

Indian Feminism is not simply an emerging trend but it has emerged within the Contemporary Literary Discourse(s) and has gained wider momentum. Many authors have extensively explored and articulated the myriad challenges and concerns pertaining to women's social and personal experiences. *The Gallery* a seminal classic by Manju Kapur, set against the backdrop of Delhi and Nepal over three decades, explores the world of art and (re)imagines womanhood through contrasting lives of her protagonists Minal, her daughter Ellora, domestic worker Maitrye, and her daughter Tashi. The paper **Reimagining Womenhood: A Study of Feministic Perspectives in Manju Kapur's *The Gallery*** aims to dissect how Kapur portrays women, highlighting their struggle, expectations and evolving identities in the contemporary social milieu. It seeks to unpack the complex interplay of gender, class and societal expectations in their lives. This research will also throw light on the societal landscape within Indian societies and try to scrutinize their ins and outs in the context of *The Gallery*.

Keywords: decolonizing, narratives, interpretations, discourse, feministic, reimagining, and womanhood.

Introduction

The emergence of feminism within Indian literature cannot be seen as a fleeting or recent development. Rather, it is deeply embedded in the socio-political and cultural history of India, tracing its roots to the early social and cultural reform movements of the 19th century. The Indian feminist movement initially emerged through the preachings and teachings of the social reformers like Raja Rammohun Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who questioned the age-old patriarchal traditions that defined and restricted women's roles within society. Ashis Nandy candidly avers in this connection,

As Indian literature grew in prominence during the colonial period, women writers like Sarojini Naidu, Kamini Roy, and later, Ismat Chughtai, provided literary voices to express the struggles and oppression faced by women in a patriarchal society. Post-independence Indian feminism, however, was significantly shaped by a shift from the legal and social reforms of earlier movements to more nuanced critiques of gender inequality and cultural hegemony. (Nandy 190)

The feminist literature of the late 20th century emerged in response to the changing socio- economic landscape, which had begun to question the immobile roles that society assigned to women. Writers like Kamala Das, Anita Desai and Shashi Tharoor used their literary works to comment on the various struggles of women, such as forced marriages, domestic violence, and the asphyxia of individual identity under the guise of family and tradition. Indian feminism also grew increasingly intersectional, distinguishing that gender oppression was experienced differently across caste, class, and religious divides, and this is the dimension that can be a significant theme in contemporary Indian literature.

As has been said, "Feminism in Indian literature thus mirrors the changing dynamics of Indian society and provides a platform for women's voices to articulate their resistance, their desires for autonomy, and their struggles against patriarchal oppression" (Iyengar 201). In *The Gallery*, Manju Kapur continues this tradition, portraying the shifting identities of women in contemporary Indian society, and her exploration of womanhood speaks to these very societal tensions. The Novel is set against the backdrop of the political and social upheavals in post-

colonial India, spanning across three decades from the 1970s to the 1990s. It intricately weaves the personal lives of its characters with the larger canvas of socio-political changes (Sethi 36). The story is primarily centered around Minal, a woman caught in the traditional roles of wife and mother, and her daughter, Ellora, whose struggle for personal freedom creates a generational divide. Minal, a middle-class woman, circumnavigates the complexities of family life, marriage, and the art world, while Ellora, a more modern and independent figure, challenges the expectations placed upon her. Alongside them are Maitrye, a domestic worker, and her daughter, Tashi, whose lives further complicate the intersection of gender, class, and societal expectations.

The Gallery takes into account the artistic and cultural aspirations of the protagonists, particularly Minal, whose journey jangles with her identity through her involvement in the world of art (Bose 131). The novel explores themes of female autonomy, generational conflict, the intersection of social class with gender, and the evolving nature of womanhood in a society still deeply entrenched in patriarchal values. Kapur's narrative is not just a personal story of women but also a reflection of the broader societal challenges facing women in contemporary India (Mishra 56).

Reimagining Womanhood in Indian Literature

Indian literature, particularly during the 20th and 21st centuries, has played a crucial role in the reimagining of womanhood. In the years following independence, Indian women writers began to push back against traditional depictions of women as self-sacrificial figures and instead portrayed female characters who embodied complexity, strength, and independence. In particular, Indian fiction began to reveal the ways in which women's personal struggles intersected with larger social and political contexts. The lives of women in these narratives were no longer confined to the domestic realm; instead, they were explored through lenses of sexuality, desire, education, career aspirations, and individual autonomy. Protagonists of Kamala Das's "I" or Desai's Maya demonstrate the internal and external battles women faced with their own identities, particularly in contexts where patriarchal structures were either overt or insidiously present. These depictions were groundbreaking in their portrayal of

women as active agents in the construction of their own destinies, rather than mere passive recipients of societal norms (Mishra 57).

The Gallery, too, presents a detailed reimagining of womanhood, wherein the women characters—Minal, Ellora, Maitrye, and Tashi—are not mere symbols of suffering or submission but rather active participants in conveying their positions in society. Kapur's portrayal of these women highlights the shifting dynamics of womanhood, where each of the protagonists grapples with issues such as personal autonomy, career aspirations, and the challenge of balancing tradition with modernity. Minal, in particular, emerges as a character who seeks to transcend the role of the ideal, self-sacrificing wife and mother, instead pursuing a personal and artistic identity that is both empowering and complex.

In *The Gallery*, Kapur's portrayal of women from different social strata offers a rich canvas for understanding the intersections of gender and class. Minal, coming from a middle-class family, faces struggles related to societal expectations about marriage, family, and her role as a wife and mother. Her journey toward self-expression through art is tempered by the responsibilities of her social class and familial expectations. On the other hand, Ellora, her daughter represents a younger generation, with greater access to education and career opportunities, but she too faces the complex reality of balancing independence with societal constraints (Sethi 39).

Maitrye, the domestic worker, and her daughter Tashi present an entirely different perspective, one shaped by their lower socio-economic status. Maitrye's experience highlights the vulnerability of women in the lower classes, where gender roles are not just socially but economically constrained. Tashi, however, demonstrates a generational shift, where despite her lower social position, she is exposed to different opportunities for social mobility. Through these characters, *The Gallery* critically examines how women's struggles are shaped not only by gender but also by their social and economic positions within the larger caste and class structures of Indian society.

Kapur's depiction of these intersections makes *The Gallery* an exemplary text for analyzing the complex and multidimensional nature of feminist discourse in India. The

novel highlights that “feminist struggles are not uniform and that womanhood itself is a multifaceted construct shaped by a range of social, cultural, and economic forces” (Singh 109). By presenting characters who come from different backgrounds, Kapur challenges the reductive notion of a single, unified experience of womanhood, advocating instead for a more inclusive and intersectional feminist perspective that acknowledges the diverse realities of women in contemporary India. Through this approach, *The Gallery* contributes significantly to the evolving feminist discourse, urging a rethinking of how womanhood is constructed and experienced in India.

The Art of Womanhood in *The Gallery*

In *The Gallery*, art is not merely a backdrop or a passive element but serves as a pivotal force in shaping the identities and lives of the characters, particularly the female protagonists. Throughout the novel, art emerges as a reflection of societal values, personal desires, and, most importantly, the exploration of one's inner self. As a cultural artifact, art both reflects and challenges the conventions of society. The art gallery, where many key events of the novel unfold, symbolizes a space of possibility, a realm where the rules of the outside world are suspended, and characters have the chance to engage with their own desires, identities, and aspirations.

The novel's setting within the context of the art world serves to illustrate the intersection of personal and societal identity. For women like Minal, art becomes an outlet for self-expression, offering a means to navigate and resist the pressures of domesticity, marriage, and traditional roles. It is also a site of rebellion against the limitations imposed by her social class and gender, allowing Minal to reframe her own identity outside the parameters of traditional womanhood. Art in *The Gallery* functions not just as an aesthetic pursuit but as a form of resistance, a space for women to negotiate their roles in a society that insists on defining them in narrow and confining ways.

At the heart of *The Gallery* is Minal, whose journey is profoundly shaped by her involvement in the world of art. Minal's life is marked by the tension between the traditional roles expected of her and her desire for personal expression and independence. She begins as a conventional woman, confined by the expectations of

marriage and motherhood, yet her exposure to the art world allows her to embark on a transformative journey of self-discovery. Initially, Minal's identity is deeply tied to her roles as a wife and mother. She is expected to fulfill the duties that come with these roles, and her desires for personal fulfillment are sidelined by her familial obligations.

However, as she immerses herself in the art world, Minal begins to experience a shift in her self-perception (Bose 129). Art offers her a means of reclaiming her voice and her agency in a world that has historically relegated women to the margins. The gallery, with its paintings and sculptures, serves as a space where Minal's inner desires and suppressed emotions come to the surface, giving her the opportunity to question the restrictions placed upon her as a woman. Through her interaction with art, Minal begins to challenge the narratives of femininity and womanhood that have been imposed upon her.

Her involvement with art serves as an avenue for Minal's feminist awakening, as she recognizes that her identity is not solely defined by her roles within the family. Art provides her with a lens through which she can explore the complexities of her emotions, desires, and aspirations. This artistic expression becomes her form of resistance against the oppressive forces that seek to define her in terms of motherhood and domesticity alone. Through her journey, Minal learns to embrace her own autonomy, asserting her right to explore her identity beyond the confines of traditional womanhood (Bose 130).

In this sense, Minal's journey is emblematic of the broader feminist struggle for autonomy and self-expression. Her engagement with art allows her to reclaim a sense of ownership over her own identity, to define herself on her own terms rather than according to the expectations of society. Her artistic awakening mirrors the larger feminist challenge to the cultural norms that suppress women's desires for self-realization and independence (Sethi 34).

Ellora's Struggles and Search for Autonomy

In contrast to Minal, Ellora represents the younger generation, one that is more aware of the possibilities of self-determination but still constrained by societal norms. As Minal's daughter, Ellora inherits her mother's struggles but also faces her own unique set of challenges. She is an

ambitious woman, eager to carve out a space for herself in the world that is not defined by the traditional roles of wife and mother. However, Ellora's quest for autonomy is fraught with tension as she confronts the generational divide in feminist perspectives.

For Ellora, the ideal of freedom and independence that her mother seeks is complicated by the realities of modern society. While Minal's struggles are rooted in the cultural and familial expectations of an older generation, Ellora's battles are shaped by the evolving dynamics of gender and social expectations in post-independence India. Ellora is caught between the desire to assert her individuality and the pressure to conform to societal norms that demand that she fulfill the traditional roles of womanhood. She is also confronted with the limitations of modernity—her access to education and career opportunities does not automatically guarantee the freedom to shape her own life without constraints (Bose 131).

Ellora's struggles also highlight the generational differences in feminist perspectives. While Minal's journey is largely one of resistance against traditional norms, Ellora's journey is about compromise(s). She does not necessarily reject the idea of marriage or motherhood, but she seeks to define these roles in her own terms. She challenges the roles imposed upon her by society, but her resistance is more subtle than her mother's. Her search for autonomy is characterized by a desire to balance personal independence with the expectations of family and tradition (Sethi 37).

In Ellora's character, the complexity of the feminist struggle is noticed as it plays out across generations. While Minal's feminist awakening is rooted in the pursuit of personal expression through art, Ellora's struggle is one of carving out a space for herself in a world that continues to impose limitations based on gender. Her character illustrates the ongoing evolution of feminist thought in India, where women seek autonomy not just in rejecting patriarchal constraints but in negotiating the spaces between tradition and modernity (Chatterjee 96).

Ellora's journey, thus, is emblematic of the shifting nature of feminism in post-colonial India. Her challenge is not just about resisting oppressive gender norms but about asserting her right to define her own identity within the

frameworks of family, tradition, and modernity. Through her character, Kapur explores the evolving discourse of feminism, where the struggles of one generation provide the foundation for the desires and actions of the next.

In *The Gallery*, the role of art in the journey of womanhood is profound. Through Minal's artistic awakening and Ellora's search for autonomy, Kapur, through the novel, reimagines the possibilities for women to reclaim their identities and expresses their desires beyond the traditional gender roles. The art gallery, as a metaphorical and literal space, becomes a site of resistance and transformation where women can challenge the restrictive norms imposed upon them. 'By exploring the generational divides in feminist perspectives, Kapur also highlights the evolving nature of womanhood in Indian society, where each generation builds upon the struggles and victories of the previous one' (Singh 87).

Minal: The Struggle for Autonomy and Personal Growth

Minal, the central character of *The Gallery*, represents the complex journey of a woman caught between the pressures of tradition and her desires for self-actualization. As a young woman, Minal is deeply entrenched in the outmoded roles expected of her—wife, mother, and daughter. She initially embraces these roles, viewing them as her primary source of identity. However, her journey is one of gradual awakening, as she begins to question the limitations that these societal expectations impose upon her. This struggle for autonomy and personal growth is the driving force of Minal's character arc throughout the novel.

Minal's evolution from a conventional woman to a self-asserting individual is catalyzed by her involvement with the art world. Minal discovers a space, through art, where she can express her innermost desires and explore a version of herself that is not solely defined by society. As a mother and wife, she is initially confined by the expectations of familial duty, but her exposure to the art gallery, where she can observe the works of other artists, provides her with a means to reimagine her identity. 'The gallery' becomes a space where Minal begins to confront her long-held beliefs and desires, challenging the notion that women must sacrifice their individuality for the sake of family (Bose 132).

Minal's resistance to societal pressures is multifaceted. She resists the expectation that she remains in a marriage that offers little personal fulfillment and challenges the conventional notion of womanhood that prioritizes motherhood and self-sacrifice over personal growth. Her journey toward self-discovery is not without internal conflict, as Minal faces guilt and doubt over her decisions to pursue a path outside of traditional domesticity. Yet, despite these pressures, she asserts her right to redefine herself and, through her artistic endeavors, demonstrates that a woman's identity is not solely shaped by the roles imposed upon her by society. Minal's evolution is emblematic of the broader feminist struggle for autonomy in a patriarchal society that often seeks to define women by their relationships to others rather than by their individual selves.

Ellora, Minal's daughter, represents the younger generation's struggle to carve out an independent identity in a world that continues to place women within certain rigid frameworks. As a modern woman, Ellora has greater access to education and career opportunities, yet she still faces significant challenges in asserting her independence. Her desire for freedom and personal growth is evident, but she is caught between the modern ideals of self-determination and the traditional expectations of her family and society. Ellora's challenge is not necessarily a rejection of tradition but a negotiation with it. While Minal's journey is one of breaking free from the constraints of tradition, Ellora seeks a more balanced approach, one that allows her to maintain her ties to family and culture while also pursuing her own desires and ambitions (Chatterjee 92). The generational divide between Minal and Ellora illustrates the shifting nature of feminist perspectives in India, as each generation grapples with the evolving social landscape.

Ellora's struggle with her identity is framed by her desire for autonomy. She yearns to be seen as more than just a daughter, wife, or mother, but rather as an individual capable of making her own decisions and pursuing her own dreams. However, the weight of societal expectations often clouds her ability to fully embrace her independence. She faces pressure to conform to the idealized image of womanhood, which includes marriage, motherhood, and devotion to family (Bose 134).

In many ways, Ellora's journey reflects the tension that modern women experience in reconciling their personal aspirations with the cultural expectations that continue to be imposed upon them. Ellora's search for identity is also complicated by her engagement with contemporary feminism, which presents new challenges and opportunities. While she is empowered by the opportunities that modernity offers, she is still aware of the constraints that tradition places on her autonomy. The conflict between modernity and tradition becomes a central theme in Ellora's narrative, as she navigates the fine line between asserting her independence and fulfilling her obligations to her family.

The (Re)imagination of Feminism in *The Gallery*

Manju Kapur's *The Gallery* offers a detailed exploration of feminism through the transformative journeys of its female characters, each of whom navigates the complexities of identity formation in a patriarchal society. The novel portrays the evolution of womanhood as a dynamic process, one that is shaped by both personal desires and external societal pressures. For the women in *The Gallery*, the process of self-discovery is closely tied to their search for autonomy, as they seek to forge identities that transcend the roles traditionally assigned to them by society (Chatterjee 91).

Minal's identity formation, for example, is a testament to the power of self-expression as a means of empowerment. Initially bound by the expectations of her role as a wife and mother, Minal begins to reimagine her identity through her exposure to art. Art becomes a vehicle for Minal to express desires and emotions that have long been suppressed, and it offers her the opportunity to transcend the limitations of her domestic existence. Through her engagement with the art gallery, Minal's identity evolves from a traditional figure to one who asserts her individuality and creative potential (Bose 135). Her journey mirrors the feminist ideal of self-actualization—breaking free from prescribed roles to define one's identity on one's own terms.

Ellora, on the other hand, is more exposed to the influences of modernity and feminist ideals but finds herself confronted by the tensions that arise when these ideals clash with the traditions of her family and culture. As

Ellora attempts to carve out a space for herself, her journey reflects the ongoing process of identity formation in contemporary India, where young women are tasked with navigating the complexities of tradition and modernity, often having to make compromises along the way. Through Ellora, Kapur interrogates the challenges of reconciling feminist ideals with the expectations placed on women by family, class, and culture.

In contrast, Maitrye and Tashi represent the experiences of women from a lower socio-economic background. While their personal transformations are not as pronounced as those of Minal or Ellora, their stories nonetheless reflect the struggle for identity in a world that marginalizes them based on both gender and class. Their experiences highlight the intersectionality of feminist identity, where the search for self-definition is complicated by the constraints of class and economic status. For Maitrye, identity formation is a constant negotiation between personal desire and economic necessity, while for Tashi, it is shaped by her awareness of the limited opportunities available to her due to her class position. In terms of feminist ideals, *The Gallery* both challenges and conforms to the traditional notions of womanhood. On the one hand, the novel champions the idea that women should have the freedom to define themselves and pursue their desires, as evidenced in Minal's journey of self-discovery. On the other hand, it also acknowledges the complex realities women face in a patriarchal society that imposes rigid boundaries on their roles (Chatterjee 81).

The Reimagining of Womanhood through Female Agency

A key theme in *The Gallery* is the role of women's agency in the reimagining of womanhood. The female characters in the novel do not passively accept the roles imposed upon them; instead, they actively resist, negotiate, and redefine these roles in their pursuit of autonomy and self-expression. Through their struggles, Kapur highlights the importance of female agency in breaking free from societal norms and challenging the traditional structures that seek to limit women's possibilities. Minal's journey is emblematic of the way in which women can use their agency to subvert patriarchal constraints. Her involvement with art serves as a catalyst for her personal transformation, allowing her to

envision a life that is not defined solely by her responsibilities as a wife and mother. In pursuing her artistic passions, Minal rejects the notion that a woman's primary role is to be a caretaker, instead asserting that women have the right to pursue their own desires and ambitions. Her agency in the novel is not just about seeking personal fulfillment but about redefining what it means to be a woman in a patriarchal society. Minal's story suggests that the reimagining of womanhood is not only about personal growth but also about the ability to reshape societal expectations and create a new narrative for women (Bose 138).

Ellora's search for autonomy also reflects the importance of female agency in the process of reimagining womanhood. While her journey is more conflicted than Minal's, as she struggles to reconcile modern feminist ideals with familial and social expectations, Ellora still embodies the idea that women can actively shape their lives, even when faced with significant barriers. Her decision to challenge her family's expectations and assert her independence, particularly in terms of career and relationships, demonstrates the power of agency in reshaping her identity and creating a future that aligns with her own desires.

Maitrye and Tashi, though from a lower socio-economic class, also exhibit agency in their lives, albeit in different ways. Maitrye, for instance, may not have the luxury of artistic expression or personal freedom, but her determination to provide a better future for her daughter Tashi is an act of agency in itself. Tashi, on the other hand, represents the younger generation's desire to transcend the limitations of class and gender. Despite the oppressive circumstances in which they live, both women assert their agency by striving for something more than the roles prescribed to them by society (Bose 139). In this way, Kapur's novel suggests that female agency is not always about dramatic, overt resistance but can also be found in the small, everyday decisions that women make to carve out their own lives.

Summing Up

In *The Gallery*, Manju Kapur provides a compelling exploration of feminism through the lives of her female protagonists. The novel goes into the complex

intersections of gender, class, and societal expectations, while also interrogating traditional narratives of womanhood. Kapur's portrayal of womanhood in *The Gallery* offers a rich narration of feminist themes, from the reimagining of female identity to the active resistance against patriarchal structures. The characters' journeys of self-discovery, autonomy, and personal growth reflect the multifaceted nature of feminism in contemporary Indian society.

The central feminist themes explored in *The Gallery* include the struggle for identity formation, the importance of female agency, and the challenge of subverting patriarchal norms. Minal, Ellora, Maitrye, and Tashi each represent different facets of womanhood, from the middle-class pursuit of self-expression to the working-class struggle for basic autonomy. The novel critiques the rigid roles imposed on women while highlighting the importance of individual agency in breaking free from societal constraints (Bose 141). Kapur's feminist discourse also critiques the intersectionality of gender and class, illustrating how the experiences of women are shaped not only by their gender but also by their socio-economic position.

Through the journeys of her female characters, Kapur reshapes feminist discourse by demonstrating the diversity of feminist struggles across different social strata. While characters like Minal and Ellora experience personal liberation through art and education, women like Maitrye and Tashi continue to resist and negotiate their positions within oppressive societal structures. This dual narrative shows that feminist liberation is not a one-size-fits-all endeavor but a nuanced process that is deeply influenced by class, family, and personal aspirations. By addressing the full spectrum of these experiences, Kapur challenges traditional conceptions of feminism and opens up new avenues for understanding womanhood in postcolonial India (Chatterjee 89).

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