International Journal of Enhanced Research in Science, Technology & Engineering
ISSN: 2319-7463, Vol. 7 Issue 1, January-2018, Impact Factor: 4.059

# Scripts of Silence: Caste-Inflected Honour and the Gendered Violence of Marriage in Contemporary Indian Fiction

Mrs. Joan Leela Madtha

Assistant Professor in English Karnatak University's Karnatak Arts College Dharwad

**ABSTRACT**

**This article examines how caste-inflected honour shapes the gendered violence embedded within the institution of marriage in two major works of contemporary Indian fiction: Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters and Anita Nair's Ladies Coupé. Both novels illuminate the ways in which caste, honour, and patriarchal ideology converge to police female desire, regulate marital choices, and perpetuate forms of violence that are often normalized within familial and social structures. Through the narratives of Virmati and Akhila, the article demonstrates how caste operates as a silent yet omnipresent force, rendering women's bodies and decisions sites of intense surveillance. Virmati's transgressive love destabilizes caste-endogamous expectations, exposing the family's obsession with preserving honour through control and shame. In contrast, Akhila's internal struggle reflects the internalized workings of caste respectability, where silence becomes a conditioned mode of survival. By reading these novels through feminist and caste-critical frameworks, the article argues that marriage functions not as a private union but as a disciplinary mechanism reinforcing caste hierarchies and gender subordination. The narratives reveal both the overt and subtle violences—emotional, psychological, and structural—that arise when women challenge or internalize caste-bound scripts of honour. Ultimately, the study highlights how literature exposes the mechanisms of caste patriarchy while offering imaginative spaces for resistance and rearticulation of female agency.**

**Keywords: Caste-inflected honour, Gendered violence, Marriage and patriarchy, Contemporary Indian fiction, Female agency and resistance**

Marriage in the South Asian cultural context cannot be understood merely as a personal commitment between two individuals. Instead, it has historically served as a central mechanism for reproducing caste hierarchies, sustaining patriarchal authority, and protecting the collective honour of the community. Honour, within these frameworks, is profoundly gendered, and marriage becomes the primary arena in which women are taught compliance, modesty, and silence. Women are positioned not only as participants in marriage but as carriers of familial prestige and caste purity. Consequently, when their emotions or aspirations challenge the social norms that bind them, they experience pressure that often takes the form of emotional, psychological, or structural violence. These pressures are so tightly woven into cultural expectations that coercive practices frequently appear indistinguishable from familial duty. Literature offers a crucial site for exposing these forms of gendered violence, revealing how women internalize, negotiate, or quietly resist the systems that govern them. Manju Kapur's Difficult Daughters and Anita Nair's Ladies Coupé provide compelling explorations of the deep intersections between caste-regulated honour and the lived experiences of women within marriage. Both novels portray female protagonists whose identities and life choices are shaped—sometimes overtly, sometimes subtly—by the social scripts into which they are born.

In Kapur's Difficult Daughters, Virmati's life is set against the backdrop of pre-Independence Lahore, where nationalist fervour coexists with rigid caste practices. Her family, though aligned with Arya Samaj ideals and publicly supportive of reforms such as women's education, remains unwavering in its belief that marital decisions must conform to caste boundaries. Her unexpected love for Harish, a married professor, disrupts these expectations and becomes the point at which her family's anxieties surrounding honour surface most intensely. Her mother's constant admonishments and the community's scrutiny reveal how the female body becomes the site upon which caste purity is policed. Virmati is subjected to a range of emotional pressures—shame, surveillance, and moral condemnation—that are framed as expressions of maternal care but function primarily as tools of patriarchal discipline. Her mother's concerns highlight a fear not simply of Virmati's potential suffering but of the social disgrace that might fall upon the family. This fear stems from the caste-based idea that a daughter's behaviour directly influences the moral standing of the household.

Virmati's eventual marriage to Harish does little to alleviate her sense of confinement. Rather than offering liberation, the marriage reinforces her marginality and positions her within a patriarchal structure that diminishes her worth. As

Harish's second wife, she occupies an ambiguous and often humiliating position. The emotional neglect she experiences, combined with her erasure within the household hierarchy, further illustrates how marriage becomes a continuation of the caste-inflected controls she sought to escape. Her education, once a sign of progress, becomes powerless in the face of entrenched gender and caste norms. Kapur uses Virmati's troubled union to draw attention to how families and communities punish women who defy the norms of caste-sanctioned marriage. Even when a woman asserts agency, her choices may lead her into spaces where structural patriarchal power remains unchallenged.

In contrast, Anita Nair's Ladies Coupé offers a late-twentieth-century setting yet demonstrates how caste-based honour continues to shape women's personal and emotional decisions. Akhila, the protagonist, is a middle-aged Tamil Brahmin woman whose upbringing has instilled in her a deep sense of duty, restraint, and self-denial. Despite becoming her family's primary breadwinner, she is never permitted to exercise personal freedom. Her responsibilities and sacrifices are framed as moral obligations expected of a Brahmin woman, and these expectations forge a form of interior silence within her. Nair portrays Akhila as someone who has learned to suppress her desires and ambitions so completely that she rarely acknowledges them even to herself. This internal quietness is not merely a personality trait; it emerges from the caste-bound ideals of honour that shape her upbringing and her understanding of womanhood.

Akhila's relationship with Hari—a younger man outside her caste—reveals the subtle but powerful influence of caste-inflected honour. Hari offers her emotional intimacy and companionship, but the relationship forces her to confront the deeply internalized norms that have governed her life. Her hesitation is not rooted in lack of affection but in her fear of breaking the unwritten rules of caste propriety. She worries not only about public judgment but about the internal collapse of an identity built around obedience to cultural expectations. Nair's portrayal of Akhila demonstrates a form of violence that operates not through external force but through internalized repression. In Akhila's case, caste ideology exerts its power by shaping her impulses and policing her own behaviour, eliminating the need for external enforcement. This stands in contrast to Virmati's more visible defiance; Akhila becomes her own disciplinarian, a testament to the enduring influence of caste structures even in contemporary contexts.

The narrative structure of Ladies Coupé—where Akhila listens to the varied life stories of other women while on a train journey—serves as a narrative alternative to patriarchal restrictions. Each woman's story illuminates a different facet of marriage and the gendered violence embedded within it. Janaki represents the ideal wife who finds comfort in dependence but remains unaware of how such dependence limits her agency. Margaret Shanti reveals the emotional and psychological abuses she faced within her marriage, showing how patriarchal authority can manifest through everyday acts of control and belittlement. These stories help broaden the novel's critique of caste and honour, revealing that although caste influences how honour is interpreted, the ways women experience gendered oppression vary depending on class, religion, and personal background. Through the collective testimony of these women, Akhila begins to recognize that her silence is not inherent but learned—a strategy imposed upon her by social structures that prioritize obedience over selfhood.

Silence becomes a key theme in both Kapur's and Nair's novels. In Difficult Daughters, Virmati's silence is imposed externally through constant admonishment, shame, and social policing. In Ladies Coupé, Akhila's silence evolves internally, shaped over years of self-denial and the fear of disrupting caste expectations. These differing portrayals demonstrate the evolution of caste patriarchy: overt and coercive in earlier decades, subtle and internalized in more modern times. Silence in both novels is shown not as a passive absence of speech but as an active mechanism that preserves caste honour and maintains women's subordination.

The emotional and psychological pressures described in both novels highlight how caste-regulated marriage inflicts forms of violence that are often subtle and therefore difficult to challenge. These violences manifest as denial of personal autonomy, the expectation of endurance, and the moral burden placed upon women to uphold tradition. In many communities, such expectations are framed as virtues—patience, sacrifice, silence, and loyalty—making it nearly impossible for women to identify them as mechanisms of control. Kapur and Nair expose these pressures by revealing how women slowly absorb the belief that their desires are problematic, disruptive, or even dangerous. The internalization of such beliefs creates a version of selfhood that aligns with caste-prescribed norms, even when those norms limit women's well-being.

Virmati's experiences underscore how women who break endogamous rules encounter judgment not only from society at large but from within their own families. Her education, which might have been a source of empowerment, becomes another terrain of conflict when it distances her from the domestic ideal. The more she studies, the more her family perceives her as deviating from the expectations of a marriageable woman. Her repeated attempts to carve out a space for herself are met with heightened surveillance, suggesting that female autonomy is treated with suspicion in a system where caste honour is dependent on women's conformity. Even after her marriage, she remains entangled in a domestic order that refuses to acknowledge her agency. Harish's emotional withdrawal and the wife's resentment reinforce her marginality, illustrating how marriage can transform into an invisible arena of psychological hostility.

In Ladies Coupé, Nair demonstrates that the pressures of caste-inflected honour have not lessened significantly in contemporary India, even though they often operate through transformed mediums. Akhila's life is shaped by demands that are embedded within familial expectations rather than overt coercion. Her mother's insistence on propriety, her siblings' dependence on her, and the cultural expectations associated with Brahmin womanhood all contribute to a prolonged period of self-suppression. Akhila internalizes the unspoken rule that her needs must remain secondary to the well-being and honour of her family. This dynamic reveals a form of violence that is difficult to name because it is framed as duty. Her unmarried status becomes a point of anxiety not because she is incomplete without a husband, but because it unsettles the social script designed for her caste.

The stories told by the women in the ladies' compartment serve to widen Akhila's understanding of the narrowness of her own life. Their narratives reveal how honour operates differently across contexts yet consistently reinforces patriarchal norms. Janaki's deeply conditioned belief in dependence, though comforting to her, reveals how social structures valorize women who relinquish agency. In contrast, Margaret Shanti's account of her marriage exposes the psychological cruelty that can be masked by the façade of domestic respectability. She describes her husband's subtle methods of control, demonstrating that emotional degradation often passes unnoticed because it lacks visible markers. These stories collectively reveal that silence, whether externally imposed or internally cultivated, becomes an instrument for maintaining patriarchal order across caste and class divides.

The juxtaposition of Virmati's and Akhila's experiences reveals how caste-inflected honour evolves while maintaining its essential purpose. In Virmati's case, the mechanisms of control are explicit and rooted in public shame. Her desires are policed through community gossip, parental reprimand, and the visible threat of dishonour. Akhila's experience is shaped by introspective control; she polices her own behaviour because she has internalized the cultural scripts assigned to her. This shift signifies that caste patriarchy adapts its methods over time, becoming more covert yet no less restrictive. Whether through external pressure or internalized expectations, women remain subject to norms that prioritize caste stability over individual freedom.

Both novels also emphasize the role of female networks in disrupting these oppressive norms. In Difficult Daughters, Swarna Lata acts as a counter-example to Virmati's socially sanctioned path. She represents a version of womanhood that is politically active, intellectually ambitious, and unwilling to be confined by conservative expectations. Her friendship awakens in Virmati a desire for independence, even though Virmati struggles to fully embody it. Similarly, in Ladies Coupé, the women's collective presence becomes a catalyst for Akhila, who begins to question the inevitability of her own silence. These networks highlight the potential for solidarity among women to dismantle the ideological structures that bind them. They also suggest that alternative models of womanhood exist, even when they are marginalized or silenced by dominant cultural narratives.

The theme of resistance, though presented differently in the two novels, remains central. Virmati's rebellion takes the form of an overt challenge to caste-endogamous norms, and though it leads her into a complex and emotionally demanding marriage, it marks a refusal to accept predetermined social roles. Her marriage does not provide liberation, yet her refusal to conform represents an assertion of agency in a world that denies women choice. In contrast, Akhila's resistance emerges in incremental ways. Her decision to travel alone—an act seemingly ordinary—symbolizes a profound break from the social norms that have defined her life. Through the act of listening to other women's experiences, she begins to see that her desires need not be subordinate to the expectations of caste or family. The possibility of choosing her own future, whether with or without Hari, becomes her first step toward self-determination.
Both texts demonstrate that caste and honour are not simply external structures imposed upon women but are internalized to the point that they shape identity itself. Marriage becomes the primary institution through which these ideologies are enacted, reinforcing the idea that women are responsible for upholding social reputation. Whether through explicit coercion or internalized discipline, women are expected to prioritize the honour of their community above their own needs. Yet both Virmati and Akhila, in their distinct ways, illustrate the potential for women to challenge or reframe these narratives. Resistance may not always be dramatic, nor does it always lead to immediate freedom, but it signals an awakening that disrupts the seamless continuity of patriarchal norms.

Ultimately, Difficult Daughters and Ladies Coupé reveal the enduring power of caste-inflected honour in shaping women's experiences of marriage in India. Despite differences in setting, time period, and character background, both novels demonstrate that the logic of honour continues to determine women's roles, desires, and possibilities. The violence that arises from these expectations—though often subtle—is deeply embedded in cultural norms, making it difficult to challenge. Through nuanced portrayals of women's struggles, Kapur and Nair illuminate the ongoing need to interrogate the cultural scripts that define gender roles. Their narratives demonstrate that while caste and patriarchy remain entrenched, the voices and resistances of women carry the potential to disrupt and reshape these inherited structures.

A striking dimension of both Difficult Daughters and Ladies Coupé is the way they reveal that caste-inflected honour is not a static ideology but a living structure that continually reinvents itself through new cultural forms. This adaptability allows caste norms to survive even in periods marked by social reform, educational progress, or urban transformation.

In Kapur's portrayal of pre-Independence Punjab, honour is tied to public reputation and the regulation of women's movements within the household. In Nair's late-twentieth-century South India, honour becomes internalized as a moral compass that women carry within themselves. What remains constant is that women are positioned as the bearers of communal dignity, and their personal decisions are interpreted as reflections of caste identity.

The persistence of these norms becomes especially visible in the characters' emotional landscapes. Virmati's internal conflict reveals the psychological strain produced by the impossible task of reconciling personal desire with collective expectation. Even when she chooses to follow her heart, her life is shaped by lingering guilt, a feeling that she has somehow failed her family and violated the roles assigned to her by caste and gender. Her story demonstrates how deeply caste logic infiltrates emotion, making self-blame seem natural even when the structures themselves are unjust.
Akhila's emotional world is similarly shaped by inherited expectations, though her conflict takes the form of suppressed longing rather than overt rebellion. She has been trained to believe that independence is acceptable only when exercised for the benefit of others, not for personal fulfillment. This belief restricts her capacity to imagine a life defined by her own needs. Her conversations with the women in the coupé gradually chip away at this conditioning, revealing the possibility of selfhood outside the confines of Brahmin respectability. Yet the process is slow and fraught with uncertainty, illustrating how deeply caste-inflected honour can influence even the most intimate dimensions of identity.

The symbolic settings of the two novels reinforce these thematic concerns. Lahore, depicted in Difficult Daughters, is a city brimming with intellectual and political activity, yet domestic spaces remain tightly guarded, especially for women. Virmati's limited access to public life underscores how social reform rarely penetrated familial structures. In contrast, the train compartment in Ladies Coupé functions as a liminal space—a temporary world detached from societal scrutiny. Within this mobile refuge, women feel free to articulate their suppressed experiences, turning the coupé into a microcosm of female solidarity. The spatial contrast between confinement and movement visually encapsulates the novels' exploration of silence and resistance.

Despite these differing contexts, both novels converge on the idea that storytelling becomes a crucial tool for challenging the logic of caste and honour. Virmati's life, reconstructed by Ida in the frame narrative, gains new meaning when told from the perspective of a daughter seeking to understand her mother's struggles. Ida's retelling itself is an act of reclaiming a silenced history. In Ladies Coupé, the act of sharing stories enables Akhila to question the inevitability of her own silence. As each woman narrates her life, she interrupts the cultural script imposed upon her and asserts a version of herself that defies reductive categorization. Storytelling, therefore, becomes a counter-practice to honour: a means of making visible the experiences that honour culture attempts to suppress.

The novels also suggest that the burden of honour is not equally distributed among all women. Caste location significantly shapes how honour is interpreted and enforced. While both protagonists belong to upper-caste Hindu communities, which gives them certain privileges, it also subjects them to stricter norms of purity and propriety. Their journeys reveal how caste simultaneously grants status and imposes constraints, exposing the contradictory nature of caste patriarchy. Honour operates with particular severity in upper-caste spaces because lineage preservation and reputation are tightly bound to caste purity. Kapur and Nair reveal how these expectations produce environments in which silence and conformity are valorized and transgression is unthinkable.

Yet, crucially, neither text ends in defeat. Though Virmati's life remains fraught with ambivalence, the very act of narrating her story through Ida offers a space for symbolic restitution. The acknowledgement of Virmati's struggles breaks the generational cycle of silence that often shrouds women's experiences. Similarly, Akhila's decision to chart her own course—whether she ultimately chooses companionship or solitude—signifies an important shift from conformity to agency. Her journey is not framed as a triumphant escape but as an ongoing process of self-discovery, one that begins when she recognizes her right to desire.

Together, these narratives illuminate the ongoing necessity of interrogating marriage as a social institution shaped by caste-inflected honour. They show that the violence embedded in marriage does not always take the form of overt cruelty; rather, it often appears as moral instruction, familial concern, or communal expectation. This subtler violence is more difficult to challenge precisely because it is normalized within cultural discourse. By presenting women who quietly yet persistently resist the roles assigned to them, Kapur and Nair suggest that rupture is possible even when structures appear immovable.

Ultimately, Difficult Daughters and Ladies Coupé demonstrate that caste and honour are not relics of the past but active forces that continue to shape the contours of women's lives in India. Through their nuanced portrayals of female subjectivity, these novels challenge the notion that marriage is a natural or inevitable destiny for women. Instead, they reveal it as a culturally constructed space where caste and gender intersect to produce both constraint and the possibility of resistance. In highlighting the emotional, psychological, and structural dimensions of these experiences, Kapur and Nair contribute to a broader feminist discourse that calls for the re-evaluation of the cultural narratives governing

womanhood. Their work reminds us that silence itself is a form of violence, and that breaking it—whether softly or defiantly—is the first step toward transforming the worlds women inherit.

WORKS CITED

Primary Texts

[1]. Kapur, Manju. Difficult Daughters. Penguin Books, 1998.
[2]. Nair, Anita. Ladies Coupé. Penguin Books India, 2001.
[3]. Secondary Sources
[4]. Chakravarti, Uma. Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens. Stree, 2003.
[5]. Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question." Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History, edited by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, Rutgers UP, 1990, pp. 233–53.
[6]. Dube, Leela. "On the Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India." Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 23, no. 18, 1988, pp. WS11–19.
[7]. Guru, Gopal. "Dalit Women Talk Differently." Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 30, no. 41/42, 1995, pp. 2548–50.
[8]. Kannabiran, Kalpana, and Vasanth Kannabiran. De-Eroticizing Assault: Essays on Modesty, Honour and Power. Stree, 2000.
[9]. Rege, Sharmila. Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios. Zubaan, 2006.
[10]. Sangari, Kumkum, and Sudesh Vaid, editors. Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History. Rutgers UP, 1990.
[11]. Still, Clarinda. Dalit Women: Honour, Violence, and Caste Power in Rural India. Oxford UP, 2014.
[12]. Thapan, Meenakshi, editor. Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity. Oxford UP, 1997.
[13]. Uberoi, Patricia. "The Family in India: Beyond the Nuclear Versus Joint Debate." Occasional Papers in Sociology and Social Anthropology, Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1993.