

Anxiety, Identity and Resistance in Karen Horney's Neurotic Theory through Manju Kapur's Protagonist

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ABSTRACT:

This research paper explores the psychic condition of Karen Horney's psychoanalytic theory of neurosis, focusing on Manju Kapur's three vital protagonists named as 'Virmati' from *Difficult Daughter*, 'Nisha' from *Home* and 'Nina' from *The Immigrant*. Karen Horney, being a prominent psychoanalytical feminist, challenged Freudian concept of "repressed sexuality" by proposing that the basic anxiety is caused by disrupting interpersonal relationships particularly in early childhood. She introduced the three major neurotic trends as 'compliance', 'aggression' and 'detachment' each misrepresents the replication of anxiety and insecurity. Manju Kapur, a pioneer contemporary Indian novelist, proudly known for her intimate portrayal of women that manoeuvre the cultural expectations, patriarchal norms and personal trauma. This paper deeply analyzes the protagonist of Kapur's distinct neurotic pattern that reflects their psychological responses towards the gender oppression by patriarchal dominance and societal expectation. The protagonists: Virmati, incorporates the 'Compliance theory' seeking the security through approval and submission; Nisha, manifests the 'Aggressive theory' by asserting autonomy and control in defiance of restrictive norms; while Nina, amalgamate into emotional isolation, epitomize the 'Detached theory'. This study reveals how these women's neuroses are not merely personal tribulation but manifestation of deeper cultural and familial anxieties, positioning them as both victims and quiet resisters within social worlds through the view of psychoanalytic feminism.

Keywords: Anxiety and Compliance, Identity and Aggression, Resistance and Detachment.

INTRODUCTION:

Karen Horney was a one of the first feminist psychoanalysts who made significant contributions to psychology, particularly in the areas of personality theory, neurosis, and feminist psychology. Horney was one of the first theorists to bring sociocultural influences into psychoanalytic theory. She helped establish the American Institute for Psychoanalysis. She remains a central figure in both personality theory and feminist thought in psychology. Her work laid the foundation for feminist psychology, and her various key theories are essential in understanding psychoanalytical feminism that offered a strong critique of Freud's male-centered theories and reshaping psychoanalysis to better represent women's psychology. She redefined the female identity in psychoanalytical conditions without reducing it to male norms. Her

theory opened the door for later feminist psychoanalysts like Nancy Chodorow, Carol Gilligan and Jessica Benjamin.

“There is no evidence that women’s psycho-sexual development is centered around penis envy; rather, it reflects societal inequality” [1].

Horney’s is considered as a non-Freudian means she built upon Sigmund Freud's theories but also revised and criticized them. Her most important theories are critiques of Freud's “Penis Envy”. According to Freud, women feel inferior and “deficient men” because they lack penis. She argued that what Freud called “penis envy” was actually a result of cultural and social inferiority, not biological inferiority. She believed women envy the power and privilege that men have in society but not the physical envy itself. Finally she refined female psychology as shaped by society and gender roles but not anatomy.

“Men may experience envy not of the female body but of the functions and capabilities associated with it”. [1]

In turn, Horney proposed the idea of “womb envy” that men may experience as a psychological envy of women’s ability to bear children and create life. Again she suggested that men compensate for this through achievements in work, dominance, and creativity. This reversed Freud's theory and highlighted that men’s psychology is shaped by gender- related tension.

“Horney’s shift from biology to culture set a new direction for psychoanalytic theory”. [2]

Horney emphasized the importance of culture over biology in shaping personality, especially for women. She believed that traditional gender roles and male-dominated societies create feelings of inadequacy, dependency, and self-doubt in women. These social factors lead to neurotic behaviors, not inherent female weakness. This view shifted the focus from biological determinism to social conditioning that forms the basis of modern feminist psychology.

“Neurosis is born of the conflict between the real self and the unrealistic demands of the idealized self” [1].

Towards the search for identity that is the real self-versus the idealized self in that Women, like men also struggle between the real self which is the true nature and potential and the idealized self is what the society tells them they should be. For women, societal pressures to be perfect is submissive, or self-sacrificing can lead to a false self-image and neurosis. Finally, Horney stated that women’s psychological health depends on breaking free from external ideals, accepting their real and autonomous selves.

“Neurotic needs are exaggerated defenses against anxiety caused by early relationships” [1]. Regarding neurotic needs and female identity, in a patriarchal society, women may develop neurotic coping strategies to survive or feel secure, such as: “Compliant” behavior means moving toward people to gain approval, “Withdrawal” means moving away from people to avoid rejection and “Aggression” means moving against people to gain control. These are not signs of feminine weakness, but adaptive responses to a hostile or limiting environment.

KAREN HORNEY’S MATURE THEORY OF NEUROSIS :

Karen Horney made a significant contribution to psychological thought by redefining neurosis not as a pathological malfunction, but as a continuous, dynamic process that can emerge throughout a person’s life. Unlike her contemporaries, who linked neurosis strictly to traumatic events or mental disorders, Horney emphasized the individual’s subjective experience, particularly in childhood, as central to the development of neurosis. She argued that parental indifference, even when subtle such as mocking feelings or breaking promises can create basic anxiety and damage a child’s emotional security. Through her

research and analysis, she identified ten neurotic needs, adapted from normal human desires, which can become exaggerated and rigid in neurotic individuals. While any combination of these needs may appear, even a few are sufficient to indicate neurotic tendencies. Horney's theory, which integrates emotional development, interpersonal relations, and personality structure, remains a powerful and underutilized tool in understanding human behavior. Results in ten neurotic needs and they are grouped into her three coping strategies: moving toward people, moving against people and moving away from people. These strategies represent the ways neurotic individuals try to manage their basic anxiety, which often stems from early experiences of insecurity, especially in childhood.

Karen Horney's Ten Neurotic Needs and the Three Strategies:

1. Moving Toward People as Compliant Personality

This strategy involves seeking approval, affection, and a sense of belonging by becoming dependent, submissive, or overly accommodating. The person tries to gain love and acceptance to feel safe. Their neurotic needs are a) need for affection and approval as a constant desire to please others and be liked, b) need for a partner to take control as a dependency on someone else to solve all problems and provide protection, c) need to restrict one's life within narrow boundaries as a desire to remain unnoticed, undemanding, and inconspicuous to avoid rejection. The typical behavior of these strategies are self-effacing, overly compliant, and avoids conflict.

2. Moving Against People as Aggressive Personality

This approach focuses on gaining power, control, and dominance over others. The individual believes safety lies in mastering others or asserting superiority. Their neurotic needs are d) need for power as desire for control over others, often through manipulation or domination, e) Need to exploit others as viewing others as tools for personal gain, f) need for social recognition and prestige as obsession with public image and status, g) need for personal admiration as a craving for flattery and being seen as unique or superior. The typical behavior of these strategies are arrogant, competitive, hostile, and driven by the desire to win or appear superior.

3. Moving Away from People as Detached Personality

This strategy is about emotional withdrawal and self-isolation. The person tries to avoid pain and conflict by cutting off emotional involvement. Their neurotic needs are h) need for self-sufficiency and independence as avoiding help or reliance on others, i) need for perfection and unassailability as aiming to be flawless to avoid criticism or rejection, j) need to live an inconspicuous, detached life as desire to avoid involvement, attention, or intimacy. The typical behavior of these strategies are aloof, reserved, self-isolating and emotionally distant.

Eventually, Karen Horney's neurotic needs help explain how individuals develop maladaptive coping styles in response to deep-seated basic anxiety. Though everyone may show some of these needs occasionally, a neurotic person relies on one dominant trend rigidly, often at the cost of emotional balance and healthy relationships. These concepts are highly applicable in literary character analysis, especially when analyzing the characters like Virumati, Nisha, and Nina in Manju Kapur's novels, who each reflect a different neurotic strategies shaped by their patriarchal and societal conflicts.

MANJU KAPUR'S PROTAGONIST:

Manju Kapur is a critically acclaimed Indian English novelist who explores the inner lives of women navigating patriarchal Indian society. Her works delve deep into the psychological conflicts of female

protagonists who struggle for identity, autonomy, and emotional fulfillment. Though Kapur is not a psychoanalyst by profession, her writing reflects strong psychoanalytic undertones, particularly in the depiction of her characters' internal struggles, suppressed desires, neuroses, and coping mechanisms.

Kapur's narratives align with psychoanalytic feminism, a field that integrates Freudian and post-Freudian theory with feminist thought to understand the psychic development of women in male-dominated societies. This framework helps analyze how internalized oppression, childhood experiences, and family dynamics contribute to the shaping of a woman's self-image and behavior.

Through characters like Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, Nina in *The Immigrant*, and Nisha in *Home*, and others, Kapur exposes the emotional toll of social conformity, especially the impact of gendered expectations on women's psyche. Her protagonists frequently exhibit signs of neurotic anxiety, identity crises, and emotional repression, making her fiction a fertile ground for psychoanalytic literary interpretation.

1. Application of "Moving Toward People" on :

Based on Karen Horney's Theory: "Moving toward People" in *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, opines: "The individual who moves toward people has a compulsive need for affection and approval, and an exaggerated need for a partner to take over their life". This behavior stems from basic anxiety, usually rooted in childhood experiences of insecurity or rejection. Such individuals seek safety by pleasing others, avoiding conflict, and becoming overly dependent.

Virmati represents the conflicted modern woman, torn between her individual aspirations and familial duty. Her neurotic tendencies such as indecisiveness, dependence on male validation, and anxiety over approval reflect Karen Horney's concept of "moving toward people".

"She did not want to be like her mother, tied down to domesticity and a cycle of pregnancies. Yet she feared the consequences of rebellion".[3]

Virmati's childhood experience of feeling unwanted and misunderstood as being the eldest of eleven children, feeds into her basic anxiety and need for love. Her relationship with the professor is less about love and more about seeking emotional validation to fill her internal void. While examining how Virmati displays neurotic behaviors such as dependency, compliance, and a need for approval, which Horney described as central to the "compliant personality" type.

a. Need for Approval and Affection

She is raised in a traditional Punjabi household where her identity and value are defined through obedience and compliance, especially to patriarchal norms. Her emotional dependence on societal approval and family expectations reflects Horney's theory such as, "She wanted nothing more than to be a good daughter, a good wife, a good mother. Anything else was a luxury".[3] This quote reveals's internalization of social expectations. Her self-worth is tied to how well she fulfills others' roles, not her own desires as a classic compliant pattern described by Horney.

b. Fear of Rejection and Conflict

Virmati avoids asserting her independence or challenging her parents' authority. She fears disapproval and conflict, which makes her overly submissive and self-sacrificing. "She hated disappointing her mother. Even when she wanted to scream, she swallowed it like a bitter pill".[3] This self-suppression to avoid disapproval aligns with Horney's idea that neurotic individuals who "move toward people" suppress their own needs to gain approval and prevent abandonment.

c. Dependence on Romantic Attachment

Virumati becomes emotionally dependent on her professor, Harish. Despite knowing the relationship is

socially unacceptable, she clings to him for emotional fulfillment, showing desperation for love and validation. “Without him, she felt lost as though the world had lost meaning”. [3] Such dependence reflects Horney’s idea of needing “a partner to take over one’s life,” revealing emotional insecurity and identity loss without attachment.

According to Karen Horney’s “moving toward people” theory, it offers a compelling lens to understand character. Her behavior is shaped not just by cultural patriarchy, but also by a neurotic personality structure rooted in anxiety, fear of rejection, and a compulsive need for approval. This psychological lens deepens the reading of *Difficult Daughters* by revealing how internalized gender norms and emotional dependency limit women’s autonomy.

2. Application of “Moving Against People” on Nisha :

Karen Horney describes the theory of “moving against people” as a neurotic strategy rooted in basic anxiety, in which individuals cope with insecurity by seeking power, control, and superiority over others. Horney states that “Neurotic individuals who move against people see life as a competitive struggle. They attempt to achieve security by dominating others and refusing to show vulnerability”. Such people are often: assertive to the point of aggression, competitive or rebellious, emotionally detached to protect themselves.

In *Home*, Nisha is raised in a traditional, patriarchal business family that suppresses female autonomy. In response, she develops a strong-willed, ambitious, and rebellious personality that fits Horney’s “moving against people” theory. Nisha displays a psychological shift from compliance to aggression. Initially suppressed and confined, Nisha gradually asserts her identity through entrepreneurship. She aligns with Horney’s concept of “moving against people” seeking independence, status, and control. “I want to do something that is mine... Not borrowed, not given, mine”. [4] Nisha’s trauma from childhood abuse and her failure in romantic relationships result in repressed emotions, which she channels into her work. Her emotional isolation from her family, and her refusal to settle for an arranged marriage, signify an assertive reclamation of self.

a. Assertion of Power Against Patriarchal Norms:

Nisha resents the restrictions imposed by her conservative family and refuses to be passive. Her drive to assert independence, particularly through education and work, shows her need to gain control in a male-dominated environment. “She was not going to spend her life behind purdah, like her aunts. She would make her own future” [4]. Nisha’s need to control her destiny reflects Horney’s view that “moving against people” personalities seek power and autonomy to avoid feelings of helplessness.

b. Emotional Detachment and Suppression of Vulnerability:

Nisha suppresses emotional vulnerabilities, especially after her traumatic experience of sexual abuse and later, heartbreak. Rather than dwell in pain, she focuses on external achievements as a defense mechanism Horney identifies. “She buried herself in her business, telling herself she needed no one”. This detachment is a classic neurotic defense of protecting the self from emotional pain by rejecting dependency and intimacy.

c. Need for Superiority through Economic Empowerment:

Denied traditional feminine roles (marriage and motherhood), Nisha finds purpose in running a successful boutique business. She channels her frustration into success, seeking validation through achievement and control, not relationships. “If she couldn’t be a wife or mother, she would be a woman with a purpose, earning, achieving”. According to Horney, this reflects the neurotic ambition to dominate the world around her when the self feels devalued.

In the end, Nisha's character in Home can be effectively analyzed through Horney's lens of "moving against people." Her aggressive self-reliance, emotional detachment, and ambitious drive are not just personal traits they are psychological responses to basic anxiety caused by societal repression. Horney's theory reveals that beneath Nisha's strength lies a deep struggle for self-worth and identity in a world that denies her both.

3. Application of "Moving Away from People" on Nina:

In *The Neurotic Personality of Our Time*, Karen Horney describes "moving away from people" as a neurotic defense mechanism. People who adopt this orientation withdraw emotionally, preferring detachment, isolation, and independence to cope with deep-rooted anxiety, conflict, or disappointment. "In withdrawing, a person tries to solve the problem of basic anxiety by becoming self-sufficient, secretive, and emotionally distant".[5] The core traits of this strategies are: Strong desire for privacy, emotional withdrawal from relationships, self-sufficiency over emotional connection, avoidance of conflict through detachment.

In *The Immigrant*, Nina is a 30-something English professor from India who migrates to Canada after marrying Ananda. Though outwardly composed, she gradually withdraws emotionally from her marriage, her social life, and even her cultural identity, exhibiting a classic "moving away" neurotic pattern.

Nina embodies "moving away from people", reflecting detachment and emotional withdrawal. Her psychological conflict emerges from her cross-cultural displacement and an unsatisfying marriage to a Canadian-Indian man. She experiences alienation, not only from society but also from her body and emotional self. "She had thought marriage would anchor her. Instead, she felt adrift in a foreign land with a foreign man".[5] Nina's gradual emotional disconnection and desire for intellectual fulfillment show a struggle with identity and autonomy in a setting that exacerbates her isolation. Her search for meaning outside her marriage, such as her brief affair, underscores the neurotic need for self-sufficiency and emotional survival.

a. Emotional Withdrawal from Ananda from her husband:

As their marriage becomes emotionally and sexually unfulfilling, Nina stops trying to connect. Instead of confronting or engaging with Ananda, she becomes emotionally distant, choosing silence and isolation. "She began to feel that her silence was more eloquent than words. If she could not get what she wanted, she would do without".[5] Nina retreats into herself. Rather than assert her needs, she chooses emotional withdrawal, aligning with Horney's view that neurotic detachment is a coping mechanism to avoid pain and conflict.

b. Search for Solitude and Independence:

Nina values self-sufficiency over intimacy. Her growing desire to be on her own, to have personal space, and to build a life independent of Ananda reflects Horney's idea of moving away to avoid vulnerability. "She no longer expected much from him. Her future lay in creating something for herself, by herself".[5] Nina's yearning for independence is not just empowerment but it's self-isolation to escape emotional disappointment and cultural dislocation.

c. Alienation in a Foreign Culture:

Despite being an immigrant, Nina does not integrate into Canadian society, nor does she remain emotionally attached to India. She exists in a liminal state, emotionally distant from both worlds, an existential withdrawal. "She was tired of being between places, between people, and between lives".[5] Nina's isolation is both internal and external. Horney would see this as a neurotic detachment and she protects herself by emotionally disconnecting from both relationships and cultural identity.

Karen Horney's theory of "moving away from people" offers a powerful framework to understand Nina's emotional and psychological journey in *The Immigrant*. Nina's withdrawal from her marriage, her cultural context, and even herself is not simply passive sadness; it's a neurotic response to unresolved anxiety and disappointment. Horney's theory deepens our reading of *The Immigrant*, showing how personal disconnection can reflect deeper psychological defenses against a hostile or unfulfilling world.

CONCLUSION:

Manju Kapur's literary universe is populated by women who are not merely victims of social norms but psychologically complex individuals. Her narratives reflect the psychoanalytic dimensions of female subjectivity, highlighting how childhood experiences, cultural expectations, and emotional deprivation mold the inner lives of women. Applying Karen Horney's neurosis theory to Kapur's protagonists reveals how their behaviors are not irrational, but rather survival mechanisms in emotionally repressive environments. Through her sensitive portrayal of women's psychological landscapes, Manju Kapur emerges as a powerful voice in Indian feminist literature, engaging deeply with the psyche, anxiety, and resistance of women in transition.

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