From Earning to Economic Agency: Paid Work, Financial Autonomy, And Patriarchal Negotiation in Manju Kapur's *Home* and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*

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***Abstract*—Women's participation in paid employment and entrepreneurial activity is frequently associated with financial independence and social empowerment. However, earning an income does not necessarily guarantee control over financial resources, decision-making authority, or freedom from patriarchal expectations. This article examines the relationship between paid work, economic agency, and patriarchal negotiation in Manju Kapur's *Home* (2006) and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* (2001). Drawing on feminist political economy, Naila Kabeer's framework of resources, agency, and achievements, and Nancy Fraser's analysis of social reproduction, the study compares Nisha's pickle-making enterprise in *Home* with Akhila's salaried employment and breadwinner responsibilities in *Ladies Coupe*. Through qualitative comparative textual analysis, it investigates the relationship between income generation, access to resources, family obligations, and women's capacity to make meaningful choices. The article argues that economic agency must be distinguished from economic participation: entrepreneurship and salaried employment may create opportunities for autonomy while remaining constrained by gendered family structures. By comparing two different forms of economic participation, the study develops a framework for analysing the conditions under which women's work expands, limits, or complicates their independence. It also considers existing feminist criticism to identify the specific contribution and limitations of this comparative approach.**

***Index Terms*—Indian English fiction, feminism, paid work, economic agency, financial autonomy, patriarchy, feminist political economy, social reproduction.**

I. INTRODUCTION

Feminism in Indian English literature has consistently examined the relationship between women's identity, patriarchal institutions, and social expectations. Marriage, family responsibility, domestic labour, and the regulation of women's choices frequently shape the experiences of female characters. In this context, paid employment and entrepreneurial activity may offer women opportunities to establish identities beyond conventional domestic roles. Nevertheless, the relationship between economic participation and emancipation is neither straightforward nor uniform.

A woman may earn a salary, manage a business, or contribute substantially to household expenses without possessing equivalent authority over financial decisions or personal choices. Her economic contribution may even become an additional obligation if domestic responsibilities remain disproportionately assigned to her. Consequently, economic independence should not be understood exclusively as the ability to generate income. It also involves access to resources, control over their use, the capacity to make meaningful decisions, and the freedom to negotiate social expectations.

Manju Kapur's *Home* (2006) and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* (2001) provide different literary contexts for investigating this problem. In *Home*, Nisha's pickle-making enterprise becomes an important expression of her productive aspirations within a traditional family structure. In *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila works as an income-tax clerk and supports her family after her father's death. Her economic contribution gives her a degree of financial responsibility without automatically securing the freedom to organise her life according to her own preferences.

The contrast between these characters provides a productive basis for comparative analysis. Nisha's entrepreneurial activity and Akhila's salaried employment represent different relationships between work, family, and autonomy. The comparison

therefore moves beyond the general proposition that employment empowers women and asks how the form and social conditions of economic participation influence their agency.

The central argument of this article is that earning and economic agency are related but distinct. Although paid work may expand women's opportunities, its emancipatory potential depends on their control over resources, the distribution of domestic responsibilities, and their ability to negotiate patriarchal relationships.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND RESEARCH GAP

Feminist criticism of Indian English fiction has examined women's subordination, identity formation, marital relationships, and resistance to patriarchal expectations. Manju Kapur's *Home* has attracted particular attention because of its representation of a traditional business family and the tensions between family continuity and individual aspirations.

Kumaran and Alexander's "Features of Feminism and Individual Liberation in Manju Kapur's Home" examines questions of feminism, self-reliance, identity, and individual independence. Their study establishes an existing critical context for discussing women's autonomy in Kapur's novel. Consequently, an article that merely argues that Nisha seeks independence or challenges conventional expectations would offer limited differentiation from previous criticism.

The scholarship on *Ladies Coupe* also presents significant overlap with the proposed research. Gunja Patni's study of female self-discovery examines women's independence and the relationship between economic liberty and gender stereotypes. More directly, Pujarinee Mitra's 2023 article, "Malignant Care: Affects and Labor in Anita Nair's Ladies Coupé," investigates gendered care labour, emotional resistance, and the intersections of gender, caste, and age. A further article by Nesavathy and colleagues, published in 2026, explicitly addresses working women, employment, and financial independence in Nair's novel.

These studies demonstrate that neither women's economic independence nor gendered labour in *Ladies Coupe* can be claimed as an unexplored subject. The present article therefore does not propose to establish novelty simply by bringing feminism and employment into a discussion of these texts.

Instead, it investigates a more specific comparative problem: how entrepreneurial activity and salaried employment relate to women's control over resources and their capacity to negotiate family expectations. The distinction between Nisha's productive enterprise and Akhila's breadwinner role provides the principal organising concept.

The proposed contribution is a comparative application of a common analytical framework to these different economic situations. It examines access to income, control over resources, family obligations, and the practical possibilities of independent decision-making.

This research gap remains provisional. The studies identified above establish the need for differentiation, but a definitive claim of originality requires full-text examination of existing research on both novels and any scholarship that already compares them through feminist political economy.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Feminist political economy

Feminist political economy provides the primary theoretical framework for this study. It examines how economic activity is shaped by gender relations, social institutions, and the unequal distribution of resources and responsibilities.

Nancy Fraser's "Contradictions of Capital and Care" (2016) explains the relationship between economic production and social reproduction. Social reproduction includes the activities through which households and communities are sustained, such as domestic work, caregiving, and the maintenance of social relationships. These activities may be essential to economic life while remaining unpaid or undervalued.

This perspective is relevant to the selected novels because women's economic participation occurs within families that continue to impose expectations concerning care, duty, and respectability. The framework raises the question of whether participation in paid work changes the organisation of domestic responsibility or simply adds another demand to women's existing obligations.

3.2 Resources, agency, and achievements

Naila Kabeer's "Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment" (1999) offers a complementary framework. Kabeer conceptualises empowerment through three interconnected dimensions: resources, agency, and achievements.

Resources include material and other assets that support the possibility of choice. Agency concerns the ability to define goals and act upon decisions. Achievements refer to the outcomes associated with those choices.

Applied to literary criticism, this framework prevents the analysis from treating income generation as sufficient evidence of empowerment. A woman may have access to employment or entrepreneurial activity but limited authority over how her earnings is used. Conversely, financial resources may provide opportunities to negotiate relationships even when complete independence remains unattainable.

Together, feminist political economy and Kabeer's framework make it possible to analyse economic agency as a relationship between material resources, personal choices, and structural constraints rather than as a simple consequence of employment.

IV. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The study has four objectives:

1. To examine how entrepreneurial activity and salaried employment are represented in *Home* and *Ladies Coupe*.
2. To investigate the relationship between economic contribution, financial autonomy, and decision-making power.
3. To analyse how family obligations and gendered expectations shape women's economic agency.
4. To compare the opportunities and limitations associated with different forms of economic participation.

The research adopts a qualitative comparative methodology based on close textual reading. The two novels constitute the primary sources, while peer-reviewed literary criticism and theoretical publications provide the secondary framework.

The analysis is organised around four categories: access to economic resources, control over resources, negotiation of family obligations, and the outcomes of women's choices. Relevant narrative episodes are examined in relation to these categories, with attention to characterisation, family relationships, and the representation of work.

The method is interpretive rather than empirical. The novels are treated as literary representations of gendered economic relationships, not as statistical evidence about the experiences of all Indian women. Any conclusions must therefore remain grounded in the specific social and narrative contexts of the texts.

V. ENTREPRENEURIAL ASPIRATION AND ECONOMIC AGENCY IN *HOME*

Manju Kapur's *Home* presents a multigenerational family whose identity is closely connected to a traditional cloth business and established expectations surrounding family continuity. The household operates within a social environment in which individual aspirations must be negotiated against collective obligations. Women's opportunities for productive activity are consequently shaped by gendered assumptions about family responsibility.

Nisha's pickle-making enterprise provides a significant point of departure for examining these relationships. Her productive activity can be interpreted as an attempt to establish an identity through work and to exercise capabilities beyond the roles conventionally prescribed for women within the family. Entrepreneurship potentially offers an alternative space for self-expression, productive decision-making, and recognition.

However, the existence of an enterprise does not automatically establish economic independence. A feminist political-economic reading must distinguish the act of producing goods from control over the conditions and outcomes of production. Relevant questions include whether a woman can determine how her work is organised, whether she can sustain her activity alongside domestic expectations, and whether her productive identity is recognised as legitimate within family relationships.

Nisha's enterprise therefore offers a way to investigate the difference between economic activity and agency. Work can create a sphere in which women's skills and aspirations acquire practical significance, but the opportunities associated with that sphere remain dependent on the surrounding social arrangements.

The novel also places individual ambitions within a family structure that attaches importance to marriage, respectability, and domestic responsibilities. This context complicates the assumption that entrepreneurial activity necessarily enables a woman to escape patriarchal authority. Even when work provides an alternative identity, its continuity and significance may be affected by the expectations governing her personal life.

Kabeer's framework helps clarify this tension. Entrepreneurial activity represents access to a productive opportunity, but the extent of empowerment depends on the agency it enables and the consequences of the choices made. Income generation alone cannot establish whether a woman possesses meaningful control over her circumstances.

The novel is therefore relevant not simply because it presents a woman who undertakes productive work, but because it allows the relationship between work, identity, and family expectations to be examined critically. A detailed close reading must trace the narrative development of Nisha's enterprise and its relationship to her personal circumstances rather than assuming that the business necessarily produces lasting autonomy.

This interpretation also requires caution. Nisha's experience is shaped by a specific family and narrative context. It should not be treated as a universal model of women's entrepreneurship or as evidence that economic activity produces the same results across different social locations.

VI. SALARIED EMPLOYMENT AND THE BURDEN OF PROVISION IN *LADIES' COUPE*

Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe* offers a contrasting representation of economic participation through Akhila, an unmarried woman who works as an income-tax clerk. Following her father's death, she assumes responsibility for supporting her family. Her employment gives her a regular economic role, but this contribution becomes closely connected to familial expectations and obligations.

Akhila's position exposes a central contradiction in the relationship between income and autonomy. She possesses a form of financial independence because she earns a salary, yet her role as provider restricts the space available for personal choice. Her family depends on her contribution, while the expectations associated with her position as daughter and sister continue to influence how she is permitted to organise her life.

The significance of this situation lies in the difference between material responsibility and decision-making authority. Akhila's income sustains the family, but this does not automatically establish that she has equivalent freedom to determine her own future. Her economic contribution can therefore coexist with social and emotional constraints.

Kabeer's framework makes it possible to analyse this situation without reducing Akhila to either an empowered working woman or a passive victim. Her employment provides resources, and her decision to reconsider her future demonstrates agency. Nevertheless, the circumstances in which she exercises that agency remain shaped by family expectations and social conventions.

The novel's narrative structure strengthens this examination. Akhila encounters other women whose experiences of marriage, work, care, and personal choice differ from her own. Their stories create a comparative space in which the assumptions governing women's lives can be questioned. Rather than offering a single model of liberation, the narrative presents different negotiations between social obligation and personal autonomy.

Mitra's 2023 analysis of care labour and resistance in *Ladies Coupe* is particularly important to this discussion. Her study shows that the novel has already received critical attention for its treatment of gendered care and patriarchal relationships. The present article therefore focuses more narrowly on the relationship between paid employment, the responsibility to provide, and the freedom to make independent decisions.

Fraser's account of social reproduction further illuminates Akhila's situation. Paid work does not occur independently of the family arrangements that sustain everyday life. When women's economic contribution is accompanied by expectations of care and continuing responsibility for relatives, employment may increase their obligations without producing a corresponding redistribution of authority.

Akhila's experience thus challenges the assumption that a salary necessarily produces liberation. Her economic role provides resources, but the ability to use those resources in pursuit of a self-directed life

depends on the social conditions surrounding her work and family responsibilities.

The novel nevertheless presents agency as possible. Akhila's journey and the women's stories encourage reflection on choices that have previously been constrained by social expectations. Her situation illustrates that autonomy may involve reconsidering established responsibilities and imagining alternative ways of living, even when the material and emotional consequences of such decisions remain significant.

VII. COMPARATIVE DISCUSSION: ENTREPRENEURSHIP, EMPLOYMENT, AND PATRIARCHAL NEGOTIATION

The comparison between *Home* and *Ladies Coupe* reveals two distinct relationships between economic participation and women's agency. Nisha's pickle-making enterprise represents productive aspiration and the pursuit of an identity through entrepreneurial activity. Akhila's salaried employment represents regular income combined with the burden of supporting family members.

The distinction matters because entrepreneurship and salaried work do not necessarily provide identical forms of opportunity or constraint. Entrepreneurial activity raises questions about productive control, the sustainability of a business, and the recognition of women's work.

Salaried employment raises questions about the relationship between regular earnings, familial dependence, and personal decision-making.

Despite these differences, both situations can be examined through the relationship between economic resources and agency. Kabeer's framework suggests that the possession of resources is only one dimension of empowerment. The ability to make choices and act upon them is equally important, as are the consequences of those choices.

In *Home*, Nisha's enterprise provides an opportunity to examine the relationship between productive activity and the pursuit of a distinct identity. In *Ladies Coupe*, Akhila's employment demonstrates how earning a salary may coexist with restrictions arising from family responsibility. The comparison therefore directs attention to the conditions under which economic participation can support independent decision-making.

Fraser's concept of social reproduction adds a structural dimension to this argument. Women's participation in paid work does not necessarily remove their responsibility for sustaining family life. If domestic and care obligations remain gendered, economic activity may be accompanied by continuing demands on women's time and resources.

This does not mean that work is ineffective or that economic participation has no emancipatory potential. Rather, its effects must be understood in relation to the arrangements within which it occurs. Income may create new possibilities, provide a basis for negotiation, or support decisions that would otherwise be difficult. Yet the existence of such possibilities does not establish that patriarchal power has disappeared.

The comparison also highlights the importance of distinguishing economic agency from complete independence. Women may exercise meaningful agency within constrained circumstances, and their choices may involve negotiation rather than an absolute break with family relationships. A nuanced feminist analysis recognises these partial forms of autonomy without overlooking the structures that limit them.

The article's principal analytical contribution is therefore a comparative distinction between earning and economic agency. Its originality, however, cannot be assumed from the use of this distinction alone. The literature review must establish whether existing scholarship has already applied an equivalent framework to these two novels or examined the same relationship between economic participation and family authority.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This article has examined paid work, economic agency, and patriarchal negotiation in Manju Kapur's *Home* and Anita Nair's *Ladies Coupe*. Through feminist political economy and Kabeer's framework of resources, agency, and achievements, it has distinguished economic participation from the substantive autonomy that participation may or may not provide.

Nisha's pickle-making enterprise offers a literary context for examining entrepreneurial aspirations and the negotiation of productive identity within family expectations. Akhila's salaried employment presents a different situation in which financial responsibility for

the family coexists with constraints on personal choice. The comparison demonstrates why these forms of economic participation should not be treated as equivalent or assumed to produce uniform outcomes.

The analysis suggests that economic agency depends not only on earning income but also on the capacity to make meaningful decisions, negotiate obligations, and exercise control over resources. Gendered family arrangements and expectations surrounding care may limit the freedom associated with paid work, even when women contribute substantially to household welfare.

The article does not claim that this subject is entirely unexplored. Existing criticism has already addressed individual liberation in *Home* and care labour, employment, and financial independence in *Ladies Coupe*. Its proposed contribution is a comparative framework that examines the relationship between different forms of economic participation and women's capacity to negotiate patriarchal expectations.

Further research should test this contribution through a systematic review of the full scholarship on both novels and a more detailed analysis of the primary texts. Such work would clarify whether the proposed comparison establishes a sufficiently distinctive argument.

Ultimately, the relationship between work and emancipation cannot be understood through income alone. A feminist account of economic agency must also consider control, choice, domestic responsibility, and the social conditions that enable or constrain women's autonomy.

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