



Forged Letters, Fractured Lives: A Study of Manipulative Motherhood in *The Stationery Shop of Tehran*

Dr. Somedutta Mukherjee, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Centre for Distance and Online Education, The University of Burdwan, Purba Bardhaman, West Bengal-713104, India.

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0005-9310-825X>

Research Article

Abstract

This paper critically examines manipulative parenting as represented through the character of Mrs. Aslan in The Stationery Shop of Tehran (2019) by Marjan Kamali. While much of the existing discourse on maladaptive parenting is grounded in Western psychological frameworks, there remains a gap within literary and cultural studies in addressing covert emotional manipulation in specific sociocultural contexts. Through a close reading of the novel, the study analyses key tactics of manipulative parenting, including guilt induction, conditional affection, emotional invalidation, emotional blackmail, and intrusiveness. It highlights how Mrs. Aslan strategically employs these mechanisms—particularly through threats of self-harm and interference in Bahman’s relationship—to assert control and undermine his autonomy. The paper demonstrates how these practices, though framed within the rhetoric of maternal sacrifice and aspiration, function to erode autonomy and enforce compliance. Ultimately, the novel foregrounds the enduring psychological impact of such manipulation, revealing how parental control can shape identity, relationships, and the capacity for independent choice across the lifespan.

Keywords: Manipulative parenting, Psychological control, Emotional blackmail, Maternal authority, Intrusiveness, *The Stationery Shop of Tehran*.

Introduction

Parenting stands as one of the most powerful environmental forces influencing a child’s emotional, cognitive, and social growth. The approaches and attitudes adopted by caregivers shape not only a child’s immediate behaviour but also leave a lasting imprint on their psychological well-being across the course of life. Among the various parenting styles such as authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful—as pointed out by Animisetty, “authoritative parenting has consistently been associated with positive psychological outcomes such as self-regulation, self-esteem, and resilience” (Animisetty 2025, 746). In contrast, maladaptive parenting styles—especially those marked by emotional manipulation and psychological control—are increasingly acknowledged as harmful to children’s mental health and identity formation. One such pattern is manipulative parenting: a subtle yet deeply damaging approach that relies on guilt, fear, conditional affection, emotional invalidation, and control to secure obedience and foster dependence. Despite a strong theoretical foundation in Western scholarship, there is a relative scarcity of research within literary and cultural studies addressing manipulative parenting in the Iranian context. Iranian psychological literature and public discourse continue to prioritize more visible forms of abuse—such as physical punishment, academic pressure, and neglect—while covert emotional abuse remains largely overlooked. This relative invisibility also results in a critical gap in literary and cultural analyses, limiting nuanced understandings of how such covert dynamics are represented, perpetuated, and internalized



within specific sociocultural contexts. Against this backdrop, my present study seeks to offer a critical reading of Marjan Kamali's novel *The Stationery Shop of Tehran*, examining how culturally normalized forms of manipulative parenting shape the psychological well-being of young adults.

The Stationery Shop of Tehran (2019), written by Iranian American novelist Marjan Kamali, is set across Tehran and the United States between 1953 and 2013. The novel traces the poignant love story of Roya and Bahman, a young Iranian couple who meet and fall in love in the 1950s at a stationery shop. Roya is raised alongside her younger sister, Zari, in a household shaped by forward-looking parents who nurture a sense of ambition in their daughters. In contrast, Bahman is raised by a mother whose temperament is marked by emotional volatility and a controlling disposition. The study aims to determine, through a close reading of the novel, whether Mrs. Aslan can be understood as a manipulative parent, and to examine how her behaviour influences both the individual directly subjected to it and those within her immediate relational sphere.

Unlike overt forms of abuse, manipulative parenting often evades recognition and critique, particularly in cultures where family hierarchies, obedience, and parental authority are deeply valued. In certain sociocultural contexts, such as among Persian communities, emotional manipulation may become woven into the moral fabric of parenting and normalized under the guise of discipline, love, and familial responsibility (Animisetty 2025, 746). Psychologically controlling parents exert pressure on children to conform to their expectations, frequently employing emotionally manipulative strategies such as inducing guilt, conditional affection, invalidating feelings, resorting to personal attacks, restricting open expression, and displaying inconsistent or erratic emotional behaviour (Choe et al. 2023, 72). Through a close reading of the novel, this study seeks to examine whether Mrs. Aslan may be characterized as a manipulative parent, particularly in light of the above-mentioned traits, and to analyse how her parenting practices shape the emotional and relational lives of those around her.

1. Inducing Guilt:

Guilt induction operates as a subtle yet powerful manipulative tactic in which parents position children as responsible for their emotional well-being. This tactic often disguises control as care, leading children to equate compliance with love and loyalty. Through this mechanism, children are compelled to regulate their behaviour in order to protect the parent's emotional equilibrium. In the long term, this can foster a lingering sense of emotional indebtedness and difficulty in establishing healthy personal boundaries. In his final letter of confession to Roya, Bahman writes the following about Mrs. Aslan:

She told me I had no idea the pain I was putting her through, how all she'd wanted was for her one son to have a life that was successful and filled with the right people in the best circles and that meant marrying Shahla [...] She had busted out of the class into which she'd been born, and now, instead of letting me marry for love, she insisted that I just keep going as if I were an athlete grabbing her baton. I would not be allowed to stop running, would not be able to turn around, as if my marriage to someone I loved would somehow negate the 'progress' she had made in fighting her fate. (Kamali 2019, 270)

Bahman's reflection on his mother's words reveals a clear pattern of guilt induction as a form of psychological control. Mrs. Aslan frames her expectations in terms of personal sacrifice and suffering, thereby shifting the emotional burden of her aspirations onto Bahman. His refusal to comply is thus not merely disobedience, but an act that appears to betray her sacrifices and undermine her life's efforts. By casting Bahman as "an athlete grabbing her baton," Mrs. Aslan denies him autonomy, positioning him instead as a vehicle for the continuation of her ambitions. His life is not his own to shape but an extension of her unfinished journey. This reinforces the



guilt-tripping dynamic: any deviation from her prescribed path—such as marrying for love—becomes laden with emotional consequences, as though it would invalidate her progress and render her sacrifices meaningless. Bahman is compelled to prioritise his mother's emotional needs over his own desires, internalising a sense of responsibility for her well-being. In the long term, this dynamic not only restricts his agency but also fosters emotional conflict, as his pursuit of personal happiness becomes inseparable from feelings of guilt and indebtedness.

2. Conditional affection

Conditional affection refers to “parents providing love and affection when children display particular behaviors or attributes and parents withholding love and affection when children do not” (Choe et al. 2023, 84). Basically, it is a pattern in which love, approval, or validation is extended to a child only when they conform to parental expectations or desired behaviours (Animisetty 2025, 749). Rather than being experienced as stable and unconditional, affection becomes contingent upon performance, obedience, or achievement. Quite pertinently does Kaur opine, “The employment of conditional love delivers another significant blow to a child's self-esteem. When a parent's affection and approval are explicitly or implicitly contingent upon the child's behavior, achievements, or compliance with the parent's desires, the child learns that their worth is not intrinsic but rather something that must be constantly earned. This fosters a deepseated fear of disappointing the parent, leading to a relentless and often anxiety-ridden pursuit of external validation” (Kaur 2025, 1083-1084). In such an environment, children learn to equate their worth with their ability to please, often suppressing their own needs and desires in order to secure approval. Mrs. Aslan's behaviour can be productively understood through the lens of conditional affection, wherein love and approval are not offered freely but are made contingent upon compliance with her expectations:

She had raised their boy; did anyone in the entire city doubt the energy and intelligence and absolute talents of her son? Was he not the sun and the stars [...] She wanted to prevent this catastrophe of a match. Her gorgeous son, who had so much to offer, who could do fabulous things with his life! Marrying some bookish, average girl who thought reading novels translated from Russian or English was something worthwhile, who was pretty but not astounding so, whose father struggled to maintain his stagnant clerkship. (Kamali 2019, 59-60)

At first glance, her admiration for Bahman—describing him as “the sun and the stars”—appears as an expression of maternal pride. However, this praise is not unconditional; rather, it is rooted in how well he embodies her aspirations of success, prestige, and upward mobility. Her valuation of him is tied less to his individuality and more to his potential to fulfil a carefully constructed ideal. Her rejection of Roya further underscores this conditionality. By dismissing Roya as “average” and socially inferior, Mrs. Aslan frames Bahman's romantic choice as a “catastrophe,” not because it threatens his happiness, but because it disrupts the trajectory, she has envisioned for him. In doing so, she implicitly communicates that her approval—and by extension, her affection—is contingent upon his adherence to her standards. Bahman is celebrated as long as he aligns with her expectations, but risks devaluation if he chooses otherwise.

3. Emotional Invalidation

Emotional invalidation refers to “the feeling that one's emotions are invalid, unreasonable, irrational, or should be concealed” (Caskey 2022, 11). Emotional invalidation involves dismissing, minimising, or undermining a child's feelings, thereby denying the legitimacy of their emotional experiences. Instead of acknowledging the child's perspective, the parent may label their emotions as exaggerated, irrational, or unworthy of attention. For Mrs Aslan, Bahman's zeal for nationalism and the Prime Minister was “useless” and she “didn't need her



boy embroiled further in useless political activism. She wanted Bahman to succeed. Join the oil company, make money” (Kamali 2019, 60). By characterising his nationalist zeal and admiration for the Prime Minister as “useless,” she reduces what is, for Bahman, a deeply meaningful engagement with identity, purpose, and collective belonging into something trivial and misguided. In doing so, she denies the legitimacy of his convictions and the emotional significance they hold for him. Her insistence that she “didn’t need her boy embroiled” in such pursuits further shifts the focus from Bahman’s aspirations to her own anxieties and expectations. Rather than engaging with his perspective, she imposes her own framework of success—economic stability, professional advancement, and financial gain—thereby invalidating alternative forms of fulfilment. The directive to “join the oil company, make money” exemplifies this substitution, where personal meaning is overridden by a narrowly defined, utilitarian vision of achievement.

Emotional invalidation, as a tactic of manipulative parenting (Choe et al. 2023, 88), serves to maintain control by discouraging open emotional expression and reinforcing the parent’s authority as the sole arbiter of what is “appropriate” to feel. Over time, children subjected to such invalidation may begin to doubt their own perceptions and internal states, leading to confusion, suppressed emotions, and difficulty in articulating their needs. In the long term, this can result in diminished self-worth, emotional insecurity, and challenges in forming healthy, communicative relationships. In his final confessional letter, Bahman states, “I was supposed to be the ‘boy who would change the world.’ But life has a way of squashing dreams, plans, ideals. In the end, I barely served my country” (Kamali 2019, 281). His statement captures the long-term psychological consequences of growing up under emotionally manipulative parenting, particularly in the forms of conditional affection and emotional invalidation. His admission that “life has a way of squashing dreams, plans, ideals” suggests not merely circumstantial disappointment but a deeper erosion of aspiration, likely intensified by the persistent dismissal and redirection of his desires. Under conditions where his nationalistic passions were invalidated, and where affection was tied to conformity, his capacity to sustain and pursue his own ideals becomes compromised. What emerges instead is a subdued, conflicted self, caught between what he once valued and what he was made to prioritise. Bahman’s concluding remark, “I barely served my country,” reveals a persistent sense of inadequacy and quiet regret. It points not only to the failure of a personal aspiration but also to the internalisation of an external standard against which Bahman continues to judge himself. This feeling of insufficiency emerges from a sustained tension between imposed expectations and repressed desires, where the inability to fully inhabit one’s own choices leads to a diminished sense of purpose and a fragile self-conception.

4. Emotional Blackmail

Madhuri Animesetty states that “this manipulative style involves using fear, obligation, or threats to control behaviour” (Animesetty 2025, 750). In this dynamic, the parent leverages the emotional bond to coerce compliance, often implying—directly or indirectly—that love, approval, or stability will be withdrawn if the child fails to conform. Discussing the effects of emotional blackmail, Susan Forward, Donna Frazier and C. Newman state that “though we may be skilled and successful in other parts of our lives, with these people we feel bewildered, powerless” (Forward et al. 1996, viii). Bahman experiences exactly this kind of bewilderment and powerlessness in front of his mother’s erratic behaviours and emotional manipulations. In his final letter to Roya, Bahman recounts how Mrs. Aslan resorted to emotional blackmailing, threatening to take her own life should he choose to marry according to his own wishes:

My mother was standing on a small stepladder. Her arms were by her sides. In her right



hand she held a large butcher's knife. My body went cold [...] In a swift move, she lifted the knife. Then she pierced her own throat [...] Gently, she stroked my head. When I looked up, drops of blood had bubbled up on her neck. (274-275)

Here, Mrs. Aslan weaponises self-harm to exert absolute psychological control over Bahman. The scene is not merely an expression of distress but a calculated act designed to instil fear, shock, and an overwhelming sense of responsibility in her son. By staging such a dramatic and violent gesture in his presence, she ensures that her suffering becomes inseparable from his choices. Her calmness while “gently” stroking his head creates a disturbing contrast with the violence of the act. This juxtaposition intensifies the manipulation — maternal tenderness is intertwined with self-destruction, making it impossible for Bahman to separate love from threat. The act of harming herself becomes a message—that his autonomy carries catastrophic consequences for her life. Bahman is not simply persuaded but psychologically cornered; any assertion of independence is rendered morally unthinkable because it is tied to the potential loss of his mother. The responsibility for her survival is implicitly transferred onto him, creating a burden that far exceeds normal filial obligation. The trauma of witnessing such an act has a deep psychological impact on Bahman:

I stood among the fallen books, among the words of artists who'd spent happy, circuitous hours writing, honing their words for years [...] I wanted to leave and not come back to that shop, to escape from the whole city, to run away and hide somewhere. I rushed out. On the pavement I heaved forward and vomited and hid my tears as best as I could from passersby. (Kamali 2019, 277)

The stationery shop, once a space of love, intellectual companionship, and emotional intimacy between Bahman and Roya, is violently transformed into a site of trauma and coercion. By choosing this very location to stage her act, Mrs. Aslan does not merely threaten Bahman—she deliberately invades and contaminates a space that embodies his autonomy, affection, and personal happiness. The shop, which once represented possibility and emotional freedom, is now overwritten by fear, shock, and moral conflict. Bahman's reaction—his urge to flee, his physical collapse, and his attempt to suppress his emotions—can thus be understood as a response not only to the act itself but also to the destruction of a meaningful emotional refuge. The violation of this shared space intensifies his sense of loss: he is not only being coerced into relinquishing Roya but is also being stripped of the symbolic space where that love was nurtured.

Mrs. Aslan's manipulative behaviour does not end here; even after relocating to a villa in the north for her supposed ‘recovery,’ she continues to subject Bahman to emotional blackmail. Bahman confesses:

That next morning, in the villa, I walked into my mother's room. I didn't even have to say a word. I didn't have to tell her that I wanted to contact you. She took one look at me and said, “You call that girl, you tell that girl where we are, you let on to any of this, and guess what, Bahman?” A smile spread across her pale face. “I'll do it again. And this time, I'll do it all the way. I promise you.” She sucked in her breath and held her hand to her neck. “Just let her go, Bahman. For me. You communicate with her and I'll do it again.” (Kamali 2019, 279)

Here Mrs. Aslan moves from a performative act of self-harm to an explicit and calculated threat of self-destruction. Unlike the earlier incident, which carried an element of shock and ambiguity, this moment is marked by clarity and deliberation. Her words— “I'll do it again. And this time, I'll do it all the way”—function as a direct ultimatum, leaving Bahman with no space for negotiation or resistance. The “smile” on her face, coupled with the gesture of holding her neck, introduces a chilling theatricality to the threat. This is not an uncontrolled emotional outburst



but a staged performance designed to maximise fear and compliance. The invocation of her previous act—now transformed into a repeatable threat—ensures that Bahman relives the earlier trauma, reinforcing his sense of helplessness. The phrase “Just let her go, Bahman. For me” encapsulates the core mechanism of emotional blackmail: the conflation of love with sacrifice. By framing his abandonment of Roya as an act done “for” her, Mrs. Aslan converts coercion into moral obligation. Compliance is presented not as submission, but as filial duty, thereby intensifying Bahman’s guilt and making resistance feel like an act of cruelty.

5. Intrusiveness

According to Choe et al., “intrusiveness [...] concerns ‘what’ parents aim to control and emphasizes that parents attempt to change their children’s minds on matters that do not warrant parental intervention” (72). It also concerns “‘how’ parents intervene in the child’s personal domain” (72). Basically, intrusiveness refers to the persistent violation of a child’s emotional, psychological, and sometimes physical boundaries under the guise of care, concern, or involvement. Such parents insert themselves excessively into the child’s thoughts, decisions, and relationships, often refusing to recognise the child as an autonomous individual with independent desires and a private inner life. This behaviour may manifest through constant monitoring, unsolicited interference in personal choices, controlling friendships or romantic relationships, and an insistence on knowing or dictating every aspect of the child’s life. In Kamali’s novel, Mrs. Aslan’s manipulation extends beyond emotional blackmail to a direct violation of personal boundaries, as she actively intrudes into Bahman’s relationship with Roya by altering and forging their letters. Through this calculated interference, she disrupts their communication, ultimately coercing Bahman into severing his relationship with Roya and marrying a partner of her choice. In his final confessional letter to Roya, Bahman writes:

I was determined to marry you, despite the threats, the illness, the hell. That’s why I wrote that last letter. She could not stop us. She could not end our happiness with the threat of suicide! I had had enough, and I had decided to escape. She was holding us hostage with her threats, and I didn’t want her to have that power over me. (Kamali 2019, 281)

Bahman’s assertion reveals a moment of heightened self-awareness, where he begins to recognise his mother’s actions as an illegitimate intrusion into his personal domain. In light of Choe’s formulation that “behavioral control or structure could be intrusive if the child believes the area that their parent intervened in (or structured) belongs to their personal domain” (74), Mrs. Aslan’s intrusiveness lies not merely in the act of control but in Bahman’s perception of it as a violation. Her threats of self-harm function as a mechanism to regulate Bahman’s behaviour in an area he believes should be governed by his own will. Marriage and romantic attachment constitute a deeply personal sphere, central to one’s identity, autonomy, and emotional fulfilment. Bahman’s determination “to marry [...] despite the threats, the illness, the hell” signals his attempt to reclaim authority over this domain.

Sensing Bahman’s growing resistance, Mrs. Aslan recalibrates her strategy of manipulation, shifting from overt emotional coercion to a more invasive form of control. Rather than relying solely on threats, she directly violates his personal boundaries by intervening in his private sphere. Her deliberate alteration and forgery of the letters exchanged between Bahman and Roya exemplify this intrusion, as she not only disrupts their communication but also asserts control over a relationship that rightfully belongs to Bahman’s personal domain. Devastated by his mother’s manipulations, Bahman writes:

She knew I waited for you at the square. She knew I was heartsick with worry over you. And when I read your last letter and told her in anger and confusion that you had said



you wanted to see no more of me [...] she laughed. She told me, “Good, I told you so, I told you that girl is no good,” and she promised to starve herself to death if I tried to reconcile with you, if I tried to get you back. (Kamali 2019, 281)

This passage brings into sharp focus the convergence of intrusiveness and emotional blackmail in Mrs. Aslan’s manipulation of Bahman. Her prior interference—altering the address in Bahman’s letter and forging Roya’s supposed rejection—creates a carefully engineered misunderstanding that severs the relationship at its most vulnerable moment. What appears to Bahman as abandonment is, in reality, the result of his mother’s deliberate intrusion into his private correspondence, thereby appropriating control over a deeply personal domain. Her reaction to his distress is particularly revealing. Instead of responding with empathy to his “heartsick” anxiety, she laughs and asserts, “I told you so,” thereby invalidating his emotional pain while simultaneously reinforcing her own narrative about Roya. This response exemplifies a dual tactic — the emotional invalidation of Bahman’s suffering and the consolidation of control through the distortion of reality. At this point, Bahman is not only misled but also trapped: the relationship has been dismantled through deceit, and any effort to restore it is foreclosed by the threat of maternal self-harm. His autonomy is thus constrained on two fronts—externally, through the falsification of communication, and internally, through the fear and guilt induced by his mother’s threats. Taken together, this moment exemplifies the extent of Mrs. Aslan’s control. She does not merely influence Bahman’s choices; she engineers his reality, dictates his emotional responses, and precludes alternative outcomes. The result is a profound psychological entrapment, where love, loss, and obligation are inextricably intertwined, leaving Bahman unable to distinguish between his own desires and the consequences imposed upon him.

Conclusion

In conclusion, a close reading of *The Stationery Shop of Tehran* reveals that Mrs. Aslan embodies a complex and deeply insidious model of manipulative parenting, one that operates through multiple, interlocking tactics rather than a single mode of control. Her behaviour encompasses guilt induction, conditional affection, emotional invalidation, emotional blackmail, and intrusive boundary violations, all of which function collectively to regulate and ultimately dominate Bahman’s emotional and personal life. The impact on Bahman is enduring and deeply internalised. His sense of self, his capacity for autonomous decision-making, and his emotional well-being are all shaped by the constant negotiation between personal desire and imposed obligation. The loss of Roya is not merely a romantic tragedy but the culmination of a prolonged process of psychological conditioning, where love, guilt, fear, and duty become inextricably intertwined. By situating Mrs. Aslan within the framework of manipulative parenting, this study underscores the need to recognise and critically examine covert forms of emotional control, particularly within cultural contexts where such behaviours may be normalised or obscured. The novel thus emerges as a compelling literary space for examining the enduring consequences of such parenting, illustrating how the gradual erosion of autonomy in childhood can echo across a lifetime, influencing identity formation, interpersonal relationships, and the ability to exercise independent choice.

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