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Feminist Perspective of Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

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Abstract

Manju Kapur is one of the famous Post-Independence Indo-English writers. She is a feminist writer as she concerns for the pathetic and oppressive situation of Indian women in all her novels. Her novels denounce the Indian women's socio-cultural predicament caused by their entrapment in the male dominated, patriarchal society. Her leading novels are *Difficult Daughters, A Married Woman, Home, The Immigrant* and *Custody*. Most of her female protagonists are educated wives and belong to the middle class families of India. They face struggle for freedom, identity and equality with men and space of their own. Their suffering and suffocation in the family and the marital bonds are clearly reflected in her novels. The present paper is a study of Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* in feminist perspective.

Keywords: Manju Kapur, *A Married Woman*, feminist, women, patriarchal, Indian woman, suffering.

A Married Woman (2002) is the second novel of Manju Kapur which focuses on the revolt against the deep-rooted family values and the institution of marriage. In this novel, the novelist concerns with Indian woman who strives to gain name and space in life and social-cultural domains. She focuses mostly on the woman and her wishes, desires, actions and reactions. Manju Kapur writes:

> I am interested in the lives of women whether in the political arena or in the domestic spaces. One of the main preoccupation in all my books is how women manage to negotiate both the inner and outer spaces in their lives what sacrifices do they have to make in order to keep the home fires burning and at what cost to their personal lives do they find some kind of fulfillment outside the home. (Kapur 1)

Astha is the female protagonist of *A Married Woman* who belongs to the middle class family and is in search of her identity against the existing patriarchal set up and

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appears as an independent woman. She is a well-educated married woman and has everything a married woman desires to have in life – a well settled husband, loving children and happy and comfortable life. In the views of Gupta:

> Though she seems to be happy being a teacher and mother of two kids, there is always an undercurrent of resentment against being treated as one of the inferior sex (Gupta 13).

A Married Woman is a search for identity of Astha out of frustration, alienation, suppression, isolation and distress in the manmade culture. She is a daughter of the traditional middle class parents who are conscious and worried about her education and marriage. In the Indian culture, the middle class parents are always anxious about the future of their daughter, her education and marriage. Marriage of a daughter for them is a burden as they have to find a proper life partner for a daughter. Even after marriage, some problems like dowry, joint family system and her adjustment in the in-law's family etc. are some of the critical issues for them to solve. Astha's mother is a traditional Indian woman who cannot think out of the narrow gender biased roles of the patriarchal society. Astha's mother wishes to perform her daughter's marriage ceremony at the proper time. Her mother teaches and trains her how to live and adjust in the in- law's house, how to obey or worship her husband as a God like a traditional Indian woman. Her mother advises her:

> When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the Shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth? (Kapur 1)

Like many other grown up girls, Astha has her own dreams and desires. She has her own romantic world. She has her dreams of a prince. The result is, she falls in love with Bunty. Her love towards Bunty is narrated beautifully by the novelist:

> Day and night the thought of him kept her inside churning, she was unable to eat, sleep or study. Away from him her eyes felt dry and empty. Her ears only registered the sound of her voice. Her mind refused to take seriously anything that was not his face, his body, his feet, his hands, his clothes (Kapur 8-9).

As generally happens with a teenage girl in the Indian culture, Astha's affair meets tragic end. Leaving behind all these affairs with Bunny, she enters the college where she again falls in love with Rohan, a professor of the college. Out of love she establishes physical relations with him but Rohan refuses to marry her after sipping her body and leaves her alone and goes for higher studies at Oxford University. He does not love her but only uses her to satisfy his physical needs. She is caged by middle class values and she has to accept her fate. Eventually, she agrees to marry Hemant, a man who is chosen by her parents for arranged marriage. Hemant is a well settled, foreign returned man who belongs to a bureaucrat family. Both of them settle down at the posh area of New Delhi. But Astha is not happy and satisfied with her married life. She gets fed up with the boring and dull life as she has to live alone at home for the whole day. She has to wait for long hours to be a part of Hemant's company. She is trapped in the traditional role of a wife, daughter and daughter-in-law. As she thinks:

> What was she to do while waiting for Hemant to come home? Her in-laws were not demanding, for the housework they had help, and supervision, no matter how painstaking, still left her with enough free time to be restless (Kapur 46).

To come out from the dullness of life, she decided to do the job of a teacher at St. Anthony's School. Her job brought her a change in her life and she started involving into the external world and came to know about the boundaries and limitations around her. Now she has changed her status from a housewife to a working woman. She has started to come out from the four walls of the house. She is no more a caged bird but starts to live like a free bird. This is the beginning of her search for identity. Like a traditional Indian woman, she tries to balance her personal and professional duties. Like every Indian wife, she performs dual duties of a dutiful wife by serving her husband and a teacher. Besides, she performs her all household duties like cooking, cleaning, washing clothes, upbringing children and taking care of husband and in-laws. By doing this, she realizes her subordinate position in her husband's house. Through the character of Astha, Manju Kapur exposes the position of thousands of traditional wives who are considered as the 'subservient' to their husbands. As Astha feels:

> Her subservient position struck her. She had no business kneeling, taking off his shoes, pulling off his socks, feeling ecstatic about the smell of his feet (Kapur 68).

According to the Indian culture, for a woman giving birth to a child is very important. It is a dignified position for a woman. The life of a woman can be fulfilled only when she gives birth to a child. Astha also wants to fulfill her life with the dream of a child. Therefore, she tells her husband to have a child. In the course of time, she becomes a mother of two children: Anuradha and Himanshu. Astha becomes involved with the upbringing of the children.

As the time passes, Hemant turns out to be a busy man and gives more emphasis to his business for building up their future and does not care for Astha and children. In fact, he refuses to help her in the nourishment of children. Due to changed attitude and carelessness of Hemant towards Astha, their married life is disturbed. Astha is always dissatisfied with the attitude of Hemant towards them. This disturbed relationship has snatched the happiness of the house. Though she manages everything, both inside of the house and outside of the house, she has been claimed by her husband for mismanagement, wastefulness, inefficiency and incapability. She cannot find the same care, warmth and attention from her husband as she had been acquiring in the past. Astha cannot find some way to come out of the situation and therefore she finds her own remedies to relief the feelings of insolence and loneliness in writing poems as well as involvement in sketches. Drawing and painting are the source of relief for her. By writing poems and drawing sketches, she expresses her pain, suffering, anguish and grief.

Through, the character of Astha, the writer wants to reflect the hard and struggled life of an Indian woman. In the patriarchal culture, woman does not have her own identity. She is like a caged bird without wings who does not have right to fly

independently. Indian woman has to follow the instructions of male. Before marriage she has to obey her father and after marriage she has to obey her husband. She doesn't have right to select the path of her wish. Under the particular pressure and control, woman has been suffering a lot till the present day. She is discriminated and biased in lien of her sex. This reality of the society is reflected in Manju Kapur's novels. Here, she reveals the secondary position of a woman in spite of her quest for equality and a worthy member of the patriarchal society. Wife is always forced to follow the husband while the husband does not care for the feelings of wife. Astha's feelings and emotions are not taken into consideration by Hemant.

Another female character in this novel is Astha's mother. The novelist very tactfully portrays the character of Astha's mother. She is a typical Indian woman who strongly follows the patriarchal norms like a traditional Indian woman. She is habituated to live under the male dominance and she personally favours the male dominance in the family. She also advises Astha to worship her husband like God. That is why, when she sells one of her plots, she hands over the large amount of money to Hemant, not to Astha. When Astha asks her about it, she replies: "He is a man, he knows about money. He will invest it for you and the children." (97)

Both the characters are in sharp contrast with ideologies. One represents the typical Indian woman and the other represents the modern or new woman of the 21st century with new thoughts and ideologies. Astha raises her voice against the male dominance and fights against the family and the society to establish her identity. Like an Indian woman she does not want to turn her face from the familial responsibilities of a wife, daughter-in-law and a mother but she wants to participate in all the decisions of the family.

The novelist portrays Astha as an independent woman. But there are various occasions where she faces the problems of identity. During the family holidays the family visits Goa. In Goa, she wants to purchase a silver box but her husband refuses to purchase it. She is badly rejected by her husband that hurts her a lot. This is the condition of most of the working Indian women who earn for the family but has no independent right to spend it for themselves. Out of hatred, she claims:

> I also earn. Can't I buy a box if I want, even if it is a little overpriced? You earn ! snored Hemant. 'What you earn, now that is really something, yes, that will pay for this holiday. (Kapur 165)

Such suppressive and oppressive attitude of Hemant harms the dignity of Astha. It proves that due to the dominance of male in the family and the society, a man has a right to take every decision. When Hemant denies Astha to buy the silver box, her dignity is hurt and her self-respect and independence are shattered which promotes her to develop a feeling of guilt, negativity and lack of self-respect in facing the challenges of life. Sharma and Maheswari remark on Astha:

> Astha understands a married woman's place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death in Indian status. (Sharma and Maheswari 145)

Her inner turmoil and quest for identity leads her to "The Street Theatre Group". Aijaz is a lecturer of History and a founder of the theatre group. Astha's social spirit and attitude is motived and boosted by Aijaz. Aijaz appreciates her for her intelligent and talented mind when he reads her script on the burning issues of Babri Masjid and Ram Janmabhoomi to be dramatized in the school. Though Astha's husband knows very well that she is a good and intelligent writer and a poet, he never appreciates her while Aijaz appreciates her every time. Astha constantly compares her husband with Aijaz and feels that Aijaz is better than her husband as he always helps her, favours her in every difficult situation and appreciates her for what she does while Hemant blames her every time of mismanagement and incapability. In result, Astha involves more and more in outside works. She is deeply involved in workshop organized by the theatre group. Meanwhile, a tender feeling is developed between Astha and Aijaz. Unfortunately, Aijaz and his troupe members are dragged and murdered while performing the play on Babri Masjid and Ram Janmabhoomi. Their death motivates and leads Astha to emerge as a social activist and starts taking part in rallies for justice in spite of the resistance of her husband. She is also busy with the painting for the donation of an exhibition set up in memory of The Street Theatre Group. Due to her all these activities, it is not possible for her to pay attention to the family and house. So Hemant becomes angry and advises her to give up all these activities. But Astha refuses as she wants her own identity, self-independence and self-fulfilment. It is clarified when she utters, "I want something of my own" (148). Like Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own,* she wants to have her own. Her words "I need more space" (156) are important to understand the character of Astha. She even asks for the room which belongs to Sangeeta, his sister but Hemant becomes angry and refuses to fulfil her demand.

Astha desires a space of her own. She also wants to enjoy her life not only within the house but outside the house. So, she decides to go to the meeting of the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch to protest and condemn the decisions of building up the temple of Lord Rama at the place of Masjid outside Rashtrapati Bhavan. But Hemant and her in-laws refuse it. Ignoring them, Astha decides to go to Ayodhya as the Manch insists her to deliver a speech on the public meeting. Now she has made up her mind to fight against old taboos of the patriarchal society. She visits Ayodhya where she meets Pepeelika, the wife of Aijaz. They visit various places and temples altogether. They come close and understand each other very well. They share common pain and suffering and at last establish new relationship i.e. lesbian relationship. As Ashok Kumar narrates:

> Astha likes to have a break from dependence on others and proceeds on the path of full human status that poses in threat of Hemant and his male superiority. Although, she finds herself trapped between the pressure of the modern developing society and shackles of ancient biases she set out on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationship. (Kumar 134)

Astha finds satisfaction in the arms of Pipee. Unlike her husband, Pipeelika seems to be more understanding, caring and loving towards her. Astha refuses being close with Hemant when she finds a condom from his bag and instead she shows more

interest in Pipee. Her association with Pipeelika gives a new turn to her quest for identity. There is a clash between the roles of a wife, mother, daughter-in-law and that of a lover. But she feels that being a wife and a mother, she cannot deny her responsibilities of the family. Astha decides to leave her home, husband and children for Pipee but Pipee receives a letter from her brother regarding Ph.D. registration in an American University. Pipee leaves her and Astha returns her own conventional married life. Meanwhile Hemant also develops a chest pain due to the burden of his work and Astha's attention is diverted towards him. Like an ideal Indian wife, she takes proper care of Hemant's health, diet and exercise. Though Astha has sought lesbian relationship to take revenge upon the patriarchal society, its tradition and especially upon her husband, emotionally she cannot get free from her marital home. Even when she is busy with Pipeelika, she is always worried about her children.

The end of the novel is very important. It shows that an Indian woman fails to break the bondage of the family. In her quest for identity and full independence in life, Astha comes across various stages through various relationships. She also enters the socially forbidden relationship: lesbian relationship. Astha finds some kind of fulfillment outside the home by establishing lesbian relationship with Pipeelika. She has everything – husband, children, familial status and comfortable surroundings. But she feels lacking in her life what she wants to fulfill. This time Astha's decision to return to her family and not to abandon it is not forced upon her, it is her own decision which she as a mature woman chooses. She comes back to the traditional roots but with her own decisions. Thus, Astha represents the image of a New Woman who longs to have her own space in the orthodox patriarchal culture. She fights for freedom and raises her voice against the male dominated society. She has tried to be her best to break the silence of suffering, tried to move out of the caged existence and asserted the individual self. She has tried to be herself and yet she does not break up the family ties.

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