

The Plight of Woman in Manju Kapur's a Married Woman

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Abstract

The present paper delves into the plight of Astha, the protagonist of ManjuKapur's A Married Woman in her quest for self-fulfillment, autonomy and identity. The perception and status of women has undergone a drastic change in India. Women saw glorious times as well as they were submerged into utter misery until the middle of the nineteenth century and are now on their way to recapturing their lost glory. A number of women writers, beginning with Kamala Markandaya, up to the present writers of the first decade of the twenty first century, have very boldly projected, analyzed and discussed the real status of women in India. One such prominent writer is ManjuKapur. Kapur's novels explore the unexplored torn psyche of women in her journey towards self-identity. A Married Woman revolves around the pre and post marriage phases in the life of Astha. The novel presents a deep understanding of the plight of Indian women, their longings and agonies, conception of companionship, idea of freedom and the need to be accepted and respected as a human being with equal rights and aspirations.

KEY WORDS: woman, plight, self-identity, marriage, patriarchy, agony, aspiration.

The perception and the image of women have undergone a vast change among the minds of Indian novelists during the last four decades. The female characters constructed by the Indian novelists assert themselves and defy marriage and motherhood. They have moved away from the traditional portrayals of enduring, self-sacrificing female characters to more vibrant and are ready to break the barriers of tradition and to spend their lives in search of identity within and outside the society. Recent women novelists like Shoba de, Anita Nair, ManjuKapur, etc., rather than limiting their women to one ideal, depict both the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman. They reinterpret mythology by using new symbols and challenge the canonic forms. The women writers added a new dimension to Indian English fiction with their beautiful insights and analysis of the changing socio-cultural ways and values that have given Indian women new roles and images. They have also realistically portrayed the Indian women's aspirations, anguish and sense of frustration. The present paper explores the plight of Astha, the protagonist of ManjuKapur's A Married Woman in her quest for self-fulfillment, autonomy and identity.

ManjuKapur has established herself as a novelist in the vast domain of literary world very effectively with her six novels. All her novels, Difficult Daughters, A Married Woman, Home, The Immigrant, Custody and Brothers portray diverse features of human dilemma. She presents the contemporary picture of today's women who is eager to break

free from the fetters of their patriarchal family to build a world of their own. Kapur's novels describe the longing struggle of women to establish an identity. They try to liberate themselves both physically and emotionally without any kind of hesitation and bondage. Her women successfully battled to assert their choice and also broke the oppressive patriarchal norms in order to retain their self-respect and self-gratification. *A Married Woman* (2002) is the second novel by Kapur and she articulates the central concerns of Indian woman. In *A Married Woman*, Astha lived a life of her own and she did not submit to the will of her counterpart but she faced inner turmoil and agonies in her journey in search of individuality. The quest for autonomy, according to Simon de Beauvoir is "to discover and nurture her authentic self through lived experience for self-realization" (Beauvoir 295). She strives hard to gain space in life and social-cultural spheres.

The story revolves around the pre and post marriage phases in the life of Astha. She is brought up in the typical middle class household in Delhi. She is educated and working woman. The opening line aptly illustrates her growing up years. "Astha was brought up properly as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear" (Kapur 1). Her mother successfully controls her daughter. She imbibes deep values of the family in her daughter. Her mother is very protective of her and expects her to conform to traditions. Her first encounter with Bunty fails as he is asked to do nothing with Astha and her affair with Rohan is too short lived as Rohan moves to Oxford for further studies. Astha is married to Hemant, an MBA from the US and her mother's approved man. From here, the journey and the plight of a married woman begin. Astha represents the whole woman race in the fast changing Indian milieu where the upper middle class educated woman is still facing the problem of adjustment between the ideals of convention and modernity.

Astha leads a blissful life in the beginning and is blessed with two children. She has proved herself as a responsible, loving, caring devoted wife and daughter-in-law. After a short period of excitement and enjoyment, dullness and monotony enters into her life. Hemant's attitude to her also changes after some years. She is left "with enough free time to be restless in" (Kapur 46). Due to the household drudgeries she feels incomplete as an individual, still repressed and anguished. She longs to be an independent individual. She continues sketching and also scribbles poetry. "She wrote about love, rejection, desire and longing" (Kapur 79). She felt temporary relief in the struggle to express herself. As per the suggestion of her family, she joins in a school as a teacher. This job brings changes into her life. She begins to explore her personality. Shalini R. Sinha truly avows that "this new career of hers, though vetted and approved by her family, is never allowed to come before her other more important roles- that of a wife and a mother" (Sinha 196).

Astha's life takes an unpredictable turn when she met Aijaz, a political activist and the leader of the group dramatizes social issues. He appreciates Astha as an individual and her artistic talent. "Suddenly, she glimpsed possibilities, suddenly her life seemed less constricted" (Kapur 115). She participates in the workshop organized by the group and she feels that a tender feeling develops between Astha and Aijaz. But soon Aijaz was killed in a horrific act of communal violence. She actively involves with the activities of Mukti Manch. The Manch commissions her to create a painting. She crossed all the edges

in order to fulfill her duties related to the Manch. In fighting against communal violence, Astha finds a facet of her 'self' that gives her a sense of power, which reveals itself visually in her paintings.

The picture 'Yatra' earned twenty thousand rupees and she has also drawn twenty images on different themes. Her paintings earn two lakhs in an exhibition. But the issue of Astha's career did not show her economic power. When the family went on a holiday tour to Goa, she expressed her desire to buy a silver box. Though the money she earned was used for the ticket, Hemant did not allow her to buy the silver box. "Money spending was decided by him, not by her" (Kapur 167). The conventions of a patriarchal society believe that money matters are managed best by men than women. Economic dependence on man makes the female psyche move towards subservience. Astha was helpless. Her mental agony is strikingly revealed by Kapur:

Nine thousand five hundred rupees spent on one of the worst weeks of my life, thought Astha, as she stepped into the hotel bus for the airport. She thought hopelessly of all the things she could have done with that money, of the beautiful silver box she could have possessed and admired forever. But their money spending was decided by him, not by her (Kapur 167)

Astha's aspiration for independence begins with her trip to Ayodhya to participate in the movement organized for Hindu-Muslim harmony. She emerges as a social activist. She is fed up with the status of "an unpaid servant" (Kapur 168) and her common sacrifice for her family. Kapur writes that "she didn't want to be pushed around in the name of family. She was fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail" (168). At Ayodhya she meets Pipeelika, Aijaz's widow. Pipeelika made a major influence on Astha's quest. She is attracted towards Pipeelika. They share an intimate love and concern. In Pipeelika, Astha finds a true companion and vice-versa. Both women develop a strong sexual relationship. Banerjee comments that the "two women crossing social boundaries to find solace and understanding in each other arms" (Banerjee, p). The intensity of their relationship affects the relationship between Astha and Hemant. She found herself in dilemma. She feels the powerful presence of Pipee in her life that helped to overcome her miseries. But when Pipee left for USA for her studies Astha returned to her marital home and her children. She reasons: "I live my life in fragments; she is the one fragment that makes the rest bearable. But a fragment however potent, is still a fragment" (Kapur 264).

The relationship between Astha and Pipee is beyond tradition and culture. But their loneliness and yearning for love and closeness culminates in each other. Kapur offers us an insight into the minds of two women. Lesbianism for Astha and Pipee was an assertion of their self since it has driven away the feeling of being alone. Bhaghat Nayak observes, "A Married Woman conforms to the rules of lesbianism and gay theories, and explore the hidden aspect of a woman's passionate life as defined by comfort levels without societal sanctions. Thus, the novel has broken a new ground in the genre of Indian English fiction of modern times" (Nayak 234-235).

Manju Kapur delineates the mental agony of her woman in the twenty four entries from a diary written by Astha. The diary is marked for its description of Astha's personal

experiences of anguish and irresolution. It also gives voice to her unexpressed agonies. Her diary exposes her inner self, the self that yearns for freedom. Her narrative emerges as a discussion of her yearnings between her home and her activities outside her home. Astha tries to be a good wife, mother, daughter and daughter-in-law at home. At the same time she tries to reshape her own self. She struggles against the patriarchal norms for her identity. About the delineation of Astha's life Ashok Kumar rightly comments:

ManjuKapur has exposed a woman's passion with love and lesbianism, an incompatible marriage and ensuing annoyance. With passion to revolutionize the male sensitivity, she describes the trauma of her female protagonist from which they suffer, and perish in for their triumph. She is stunned at the intensification of fundamentalism and the argument of religious zealots to uplift and elevate the country by crusade and establish paranoia by presenting evil as a historical necessity. (Kumar 165)

Kapur has set the novel against the backdrop of the most controversial Babri Masjid issue. The social and political disarray of the nation is as complicated as the internal aspiration and anguish of her protagonist. Manju Kapur, through Astha portrays the dilemma of the urban middle class educated women who experience discontent in their lives as they suffer from identity crisis in spite of their material comfort. She realistically depicts the woman and challenges they face in personal, religious, sociological and psychological levels. All through her life Astha tries to make her place in the male-dominated society and also tries to achieve her identity but how far she succeeds in her effort is full of questions. She symbolizes the struggle of woman for the survival in this society. Among all the heroines of Kapur, Astha seems to be more assertive and active in her quest from innocence to experience. K.K. Singh rightly says, "Astha's aspirations are not simple, her search for identity is not baseless, her frustrations are not meaningless and her orthodox behavior is not shocking" (Singh 60). Thus, the novel constructs a deep understanding on the plight of Indian women, their longings, view of companionship, idea of freedom and the need to be accepted and respected as a human being with equal rights and aspirations.

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