



Quest For Selfhood And Liberty In Manju Kapur's A Married Woman

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ABSTRACT: Post Modern Woman writers like Kamala Das, Nayantra Saghal, Anita Desai, Shobha De, Namita Gohale, Manju Kapur, to name only a few, write about women's protest and assertion as an individual and not just 'other' in relation to man. The works of these women writers can be classed in the female phase as these deals with search for identity and self assertion. This present paper is confined to Manju Kapur's **A Married Woman**, the second novel of the writer of *Difficult Daughters*, which was awarded for the first best novel of a writer under Eurasia section. Her female protagonists usually live on an edge and are driven to despair, breathing in a conventional and confined atmosphere. Astha, the protagonist of Kapur's **A Married Woman**, puts up a brave struggle to liberate herself from the shackles of tradition and convention. With all the might and self-confidence, she proves her individual capabilities and realizes her selfhood.

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I. QUEST FOR SELFHOOD AND LIBERTY IN MANJU KAPUR'S A MARRIED WOMAN

Literature is a truthful expression of life through the medium of language. Its success lies in blending both art and morality in such a beautiful way that art, in the long run, becomes the thought and guiding philosophy of life. Novel is a product of post colonialism in India. It has come through English language and Western education. Its progress in India is due to the liberal thought from the West, which again a product of post colonialism.

Elaine Showalter's essay "Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness" is a noteworthy attempt to liberate women from the traditional and conservative bondages. It highlights the need for feminist theories to work out a framework. She lays stress on gynocritics which deals with themes which are concerning on the experience of the writers. She says:

The Feminist critique is essentially political and polemical with theoretical concern To Marxist sociology and aesthetics; gynocritics is more self- contained and experimental with connections to other modes of new feminist research...[we may]

Compare the feminist critique to the Old Testament, looking for the sins and the errors of the past, and gynocritics to the New Testament, seeking the grace of Jersmiah's of the feminist critique can lead us out of the Egypt of female servitude to the promised land of the feminist vision. (INGOU, MEG-05, p.39)

Simone De Beauvoir in her classic work **The Second Sex** highlights the position of women and encourages women to fight for the various odds and hazards impending the path of progress. Her concept of "Woman as Other" is very significant in the life of a career- oriented woman. She observes:

"...humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him She is not regarded as an autonomous being... [woman] is simply what man decrees: thus she is called 'the sex' by which is meant that she appeals essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex- absolute sex, no less. She is defined and differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her; she is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is ... the Absolute- she is the other. (The Second Sex, P.33)

Keeping in mind the aforesaid observations made by the different champions of Feminism, It is clear that the concept of women liberation which is gaining ground today everywhere is the result of a number of people. It is interesting to note that in modern age most of the women are educated. They want to lead a life

of freedom and liberty without any of the patriarchal domination. They are no longer flowers in the vase of men, only meant for decoration. They are now seen asserting their individuality and their equal rights on par with men.

Women writing in English in India is a by-product of the Western feminist movement. During the late 1800's and the early 1900's women won a number of new rights for them. The Feminist moment effected changes in the status of women and it is a turning point in the history of the society. Indian society is essentially patriarchal in its nature, even though men have depicted women as a Shakthi, the Mother Goddess. The post colonial Indian English fiction by women upholds the Indian spirit at large. It depicts the Indian woman's thought and emotion effectively. Recent Indian writing depicts the diversity of women and the diversity within each woman, rather than limiting the lives of women to one ideal. Manju Kapur is one such world acclaimed writer. Her first novel **Difficult Daughters** (1998), won her the commonwealth prize for first novel (Eurasia section). She followed her debut with four novels—*A Married Women* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2009), *Custody* (2011), all of which featured women protagonists caught up in a personal tumult and on the brink of profound change. All these novels observe the continuity with their predecessors in portraying the lives of Indian middle- class lower middle- class families and above all their women members struggling to break the age old silence against gender based domination in patriarchal Indian society—a society where marriage is regarded as the ultimate goal and destiny from which these women can not escape. Kapur's female protagonists from Virmati to Nina are the representatives of that female folk who long to be free from the stale social customs and traditions but are never allowed. They are mostly educated and their education leads them to independent thinking, they struggle between tradition and modernity.

This paper is a modest attempt to study the character of Astha the protagonist of Manju Kapur's **A Married Woman** as a fitting model of the concept of new woman. *A Married Woman* (2002), is the story of a teacher, poet and artist whose canvas challenges the constraints of middle class existence. Astha an educated, middle class Delhi woman, "brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear" (P.1) ... enters a traditional Indian arranged marriage with Hemant a foreign returned MBA; and a bank employee with a good parentage and property. Hemant's competing desires leads him to leave his job and enter a business partnership with his sister and later on setup a TV manufacturing unit of his own. He becomes so busy that he gets less time for Astha and his family. Astha begins to feel that she has sacrificed her own identity while striving to fulfill her familial duties and traditional roles. She suffers loneliness.

The feeling of loneliness and marginalization has telling effects on her. Astha turns inward and starts writing and sketching a passion she generated during her school and college days. She felt relieved as she vent out her anguish and alienation through her sketches and poems. Writing alleviated the heaviness with in her and in the struggle to express herself, she found temporary relief. One of her poem titled 'Changes' expresses her feeling of loneliness and relief:

The eventual release from pain In the tearing relentless separation From those in habit loved Can come so slowly It seems there will never be a day Of final peace and tranquility (p.80)

Hemant, finds her poems self-indulgent and comments that they would expose her feelings of unhappiness and loneliness to the world. She gives up writing and continues rather sadly to draw.

Astha's married life suffers pangs because of the callous treatment of her own people. Hemant is a peerless performer in bed but once the couple becomes parents of a daughter and a son, the imagined mansion of their married life develops cracks. Astha finds it difficult to come out of her own imaginations.

Her growing dissatisfaction is played out against a background of Indian political and social unrest. Her sinking spirit suddenly bubbles up when Aijaz, a theatre personality takes interest in her and asks her to write the script of the play to be staged in the school. Her script on Babri Masjid gets immense appreciation from Aijaz, whereas to Hemant, it sounded like a parrot. He says to Astha: "Please, keep to what you know best, the home, children, teaching. All doesn't suit you." (p.116) Astha feels flattered and a sudden touch of Aijaz affects her deeply, "What did it mean, did he want to have an affair with her, why had she been so startled by his hand on her knee, why hadn't she responded but she was a married woman with two children and those right before her eyes." (p.114)

Astha becomes involved in the political movement when Aijaz, the theatre personality and social activist she had admired is killed in the Hindu-Muslim conflict in Ayodhya. At the center of the unrest is the threatened demolition of Babri Masjid, a mosque that is supposedly built on an ancient Hindu site. It is in this scenario that Astha as a politically conscious painter, by now part of the Sampardayakta Mukti Manch, goes to Ayodhya where she meets Peepilika, NGO, Aijaz's widow and a lapsed lesbian. Astha finds an admirer in Peepilika for her oratorical skills. They come closer and share their secrets with each other. Astha's tears and her utter disappointment provide Pip with a safe subscriber to her seductive ways. Here Manju Kapur introduces to the lesbian love, Pip-Astha relationship as an important link in the novel.

Pip makes Astha realize that the true union in love meant not only the meeting of bodies but also of souls, sentiments and ideologies. Pip propels Astha to organize an exhibition of painting and become self-

dependent. Astha feels a new lease of life and Pip makes her realize the real meaning of marriage. The lines of her diary express her concern of happy marriage:

Our room, our bed, on which we spend hours. May be this is what good marriages are like. To be able to express what comes into your head, and know it will be understood as you meant it. To be more yourself because all of you is able to love in a way the other responds to. (P.260)

Astha's relation with Pip is full of dreams and desire but this cannot continue longer. Astha realizes that she was becoming unworthy of Pip's demanding nature. The intimacy and comfort she receives from this affair, contrasts strongly with the distance she feels in her rigidly defined role as wife and mother. She wants to leave Pip and wishes to hate her. It is not denying the fact that Pip provided vibrant moments to Astha. Yet she cannot leave family and children. She grows realistic: "I live my life in fragments; she is the one fragment that makes the rest bearable. But a fragment, however, is still a fragment." (p.264) She feels relieved that in a few months she would not have to talk to Pip anymore. The dawn of realization rejuvenates Astha, once Pip takes her flight to Illinois. Astha ultimately makes a decision to stay within the safe and strong bonds of her family rather than the radical and liberating option of following her lesbian lover. She is grateful to her husband who noticed nothing, with whom for that very reason it was soothing to be with. She also feels comfort with the tools of her trade:

There she was with the shrouded canvases, bottles of turpentine and linseed oil, tubes of colour lying in baskets around the easel, and grey rags stiff with dried paint. These were the tools of her trade, these were the things that established her separate life, touching them was comfort. (p.299)

Astha devotes herself to painting because 'work' was the only place she forget everything, where she could become her mind, her hand, and the vision inside her head. Ultimately she gets solace in the world of art epitomized by the painting exhibition organized by her husband. Her exhibition proves to be successful. More than half of the paintings sell and Astha makes almost two lakhs. Through Astha, Kapur offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal contemplation, social organization and control mechanism by her desire and inner potentials as an individual to attain personal recognition. She is progressive and conscious of her rights and potentials but she quickly compromises to the fact that a woman's real position lies within the family unit which she must sustain and protect and not ignore or neglect due to the false notion of being 'liberated'. In this sense, Astha is not only the face of the new woman of our time; but also the typical Indian woman of our time.

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