



Validation of Sexual Diversity in Manju Kapur's a Married Woman

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ABSTRACT: This paper analyses the corroboration of sexual diversity in Manju Kapur's novel *A Married Woman* (2002). It also aims to portray the patriarchal dominance over educated female characters and their search for identity in the society. Manju Kapur's novels present female revolt against deep-rooted customs and traditions which become reason for *their* subjugation in a patriarchal society. *A Married Woman* is a remarkable case study of female psyche and her sexual identity. The novel exposes the marital relationship where a woman is subjugated by a man and the society at large. Astha's lesbian relationship with Pipee is her expression of feminist awakening and liberty from oppression in a patriarchal structure. Astha finds herself miserable and alienated in her own home and tries to find solace in a lesbian relationship with Pipeelika. Astha's journey from a house wife to a painter and a social activist narrates how a woman can be a writer of her own destiny. She not only fights for her equal rights but constantly struggles for a social cause. At the onset, Astha leads an opulent and blissful married life but slowly she feels the pangs of alienation and disappointment. Hemant is an archetypal husband who is busy with the business and has little time to share Astha's every day routine matters. Astha is brought up in a traditional middle class family who has fostered her to depend on her husband. Consequently, the steady movement from strength to passivity leads to stress and mental health issues. This novel reveals the fact that the position of women in a society cannot be secured by her economic independence alone as it is generally supposed. It needs a cultural shift.

KEYWORDS: lesbian, patriarchal, alienation, subjugation, archetypal.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The present paper aims at exploring the sexual identity of a woman as a means of liberation in Manju Kapur's novel 'A Married Woman' (2002). This novel presents educated woman's struggle between convention and modernity. *A Married Woman* questions the status of women in a traditional Indian society that sees woman in the role of an obedient daughter, a submissive wife and a compliant daughter-in-law. Manju Kapur boldly rebels against such impounding roles for women and emphasizes on self- dignity and independence for them. She allows the reader to delve deep into the woman's psychology in contemporary India, revealing that women maybe allowed to move out of their homes, seek employment and carve out a niche for themselves but still they are seen more as proficient mothers and wives in primary role, relegating other roles as secondary. Through Astha's journey, she reveals how today's woman ultimately takes path to freedom and dignity. This novel also throws light on the control over a woman's sexuality within marriage which conveniently descends her to a status of a lesser being. This study has used a qualitative content analysis of Manju Kapur's second novel to unfold subjective interpretation of the text data as well as identification of the theme and the main characters. Qualitative content analysis has directed towards the investigation of how sexual orientation of woman has changed in Indian marriage. This study found out that in an Indian marriage, woman needs to be just a compliant and docile partner because it brings stability and harmony into marriage. Woman is not allowed to express her feelings and preferences as it may destroy the foundation of her marriage. Lesbianism is used as an expression of self love and autonomy between two educated independent women in the novel. It has just been shown at its initial stage as an affair inside the four walls.

II. DISCUSSION

Astha was the only child of her parents. Her parents took great care of her education, her character, her health, her marriage and her future. Astha's mother prayed for a good husband for her daughter. The business of

her life was to get her daughter married. She groomed her daughter to be a traditional bride. She was expected to perform the role of a wife, a mother and household duties. Marriage is the destiny usually offered to a woman by her family. As a wife, she was taught to obey the whims and fancies of her husband all through her life. But her father believed in strengthening her daughter's hand with the power of education. He even slapped her for her impudence and carelessness in studies. He showed a lot of concern for her daughter. He took her for a stroll through the colony in the evenings. His words and action showed what a doting father he was!

"He didn't want his daughter to be like him-self, dissatisfied and wasted. You have so much potential, you draw, you paint, you read, you have a way with words, you do well academically, the maths is a little weak, but never mind, you must sit for the competitive exams. With a good job comes independence. (Kapur 4)"

"By the time Astha turned sixteen, she was well trained on the diet of mushy novels and thoughts of marriage. (Kapur 8)" Like a heroine of her passionate novels, she often imagines a romantic, shadowy young man holding her in his strong manly embrace. When she saw Bunty, a handsome boy who was being trained in the Defence Academy in Kharakvasala and now home for holidays, she fell in love with him. Nurturing the delusion of love at first sight, she spent many hours penning down her feelings and sent letters to Bunty at his **Defence Academy**. After some time Astha's supposed love affair came to an abrupt end as her mother sensed it. Later when Astha went to college, again she fell in love with a boy of her age. She developed a physical engagement with Rohan and thought about him day and night, she was unable to eat, sleep or study. This relationship too ended within a few days as Rohan moved to Oxford for higher studies. Astha got enrolled in MA and in her final year, her marriage was fixed with Hemant. Astha felt complete in the role of a wife and ideal daughter-in-law. Astha's marital life was surprisingly rewarding, full of love and ardor. "She felt a woman of the world, the world that was covered with the film of her desire, and the fluids of their sex. (Kapur 46)"

After a few months of her marriage, dullness began to ruin her happiness. There was a time when a woman needed a man for protection but today she needs a man for companionship, she needs a partner who would share her feelings and emotions. She tried to get freedom from her seclusion by joining as a teacher in a school. She yearned to get freedom from an archetypal daughter-in-law's role. She enjoyed her new role as a teacher. But things did not change at home. She had to struggle to get her husband's attention. Her loneliness resulted in recurring migraine. She found escape in her poetries and sketches but her husband did not appreciate the poems. Sharing her emotions and feelings with Hemant always led to arguments and further distance between them. When she **got** pregnant, she became unhappy with the society's fondness for a baby-boy. Manju Kapur gently condemns the patriarchal mindset of the society in her novels. When her daughter Anuradha was four, Astha conceived again. "But she was not allowed to forget that everybody, her colleagues, her in-laws, her husband's friends 'wives, her mother, the cook, the gardener and the part time help all had an opinion about her baby's gender, and that almost universal opinion was that it would be a son and heir. (Kapur 68)" It is remarkable to see that mothers and other elderly women play a fundamental role in establishing patriarchal norms and become a medium for another women's subjugation in the society.

Astha was torn between her household responsibilities and job. Hemant proved to be a **typical** husband, he shared no household responsibility. He considered marriage as a physical relationship and fulfilling the social needs of his wife as his only marital responsibility. He had no understanding for Astha's emotions and dilemmas. He never consulted Astha in **the** financial matters. She was frequently dashed by the blame of mismanagement, inability, negligence and wastefulness by Hemant. He used to snub her decisions and opinions but Astha revolted against his insensitive behavior. She refused to be a mute sufferer in this cruel male dominated society. She reinforced her individuality and challenged the conventional roles enforced on her. While talking to her colleagues she said, "She didn't want to be pushed around in the name of family. She is fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail. (Kapur 168)" She started seeking fulfillment in more than one way. She longed for a purpose in her life, other than being a wife and mother which went parallel to the intensely apprehended backdrop of communal turbulences centered on the controversial Ram Janma Bhoomi. There was political and religious turmoil nationwide whereas a clash between tradition and modernity in Astha's house. She became socially concerned and politically active in the company of a Muslim professor of History, Aijaz Akhtar Khan, who came to her school to conduct workshops. After meeting him, she realized that man can be considerate, encouraging and admiring too. Astha was deeply hurt with Aijaz's death and Hemant's indifference even in such grievous time fuelled resentment in her. She tried to relieve herself through other channels. She engaged herself in painting as well as social and political activities which were a quiet escape from female bondage. Aijaz's death stimulated her to join the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch. On one of the trips to Ayodhya with this group, she met Aijaz's widow, Pipeelika. She found in Pipee an empowered, modern woman. Pipee was not governed by societal rules made for **woman**; rather she was a free bird. She married a Muslim, joined an NGO dealing with alternative education for slum children and fell in love with a girl at the age of seventeen. During the pilgrimage to the Babri Masjid mosque at Ayodhya, Astha and Pipee spent peaceful time together. Astha advocated **for** more secular religious identity where all religions were equal;

Muslims were not considered adversaries of Hindus. She believed mutual trust must be developed to create harmony in the country. She faced opposition from her mother-in-law who refused to engage in the discussion **pertaining to Hindu tolerance.**

Lesbianism surfaced as a result of dissatisfaction with patriarchal norms which controls the female mind and body. "Lesbian feminism is typified by the assertion of difference and a desire to break the mould of the established order of things. It challenges the celebration of reproductive motherhood and the virtues of passive femininity valorized by the patriarchal paradigm. Lesbian feminism privileges multiplicity of meaning, resisting normative classifications and expressing skepticism about the underlying pattern of domination persistent in male logocentrism" (Mukhopadhyay 113) Manju Kapur shows how Astha took a sweet revenge from her husband by gaining autonomy in a lesbian relationship with Pipeelika. She was in a constant war with everything around her. She had been denied freedom of expression. It was an act of rebellion against male supremacy. Marriages in India take away most of women's right to be an individual and make them submissive and traditional against their will. Women are emotionally abused and it often goes unaddressed in India. It is especially very distressing for the ones who do not easily accept to these gender roles. Mary Wollstonecraft rightly said, "It is vain to expect virtue from women till they are in some degree independent of men; nay, it is vain to expect that strength of natural affection which would make them good wives and mothers. (Wollstonecraft 73)" As a natural consequence, Astha was drawn towards Pipeelika after hearing her liberal ideas about religion and marriage. Her sufferings in the hands of a conformist society pushed **Pipeelika** further close to Astha. Pipeelika suffered immensely due to social aggression and religious intolerance, her husband died trapped in the Matador, suffocating and screaming. Both women tried to ease their emotional trauma in each other's company. Astha looked for partnership, love, respect, appreciation and self-fulfillment as a married woman but she got all that after becoming a lesbian. Anita Nair too sketched a character in her famous novel "Ladies Coup" that made her way to lesbianism but Marikolanthu who had seen poverty all through her life and was tutored brutally. She stood up for what she believed in, not caring for the society. "I didn't know what I was doing. All I knew was that it came to me unbidden, the manner in which I could erase that pain, fulfil desires in her...(Nair 260)" Both are distinct from each other in approach, Marikolanthu had nothing to lose and she tried to relieve her Sujata Akka by comforting her pain and agony. On the other hand it was a desperate attempt by Astha to break patriarchal ideology which deprived **woman**, a right to be a free being. "When she was with Hemant she felt like a woman of straw, her inner life dead, with a man who noticed nothing, with whom for that very reason it was soothing to be with. Her body was his, when they made love it was Pipee's face Astha saw, her hands she felt. (Kapur 287)" Astha and Pipee's relationship invited more conflicts and distance between Astha and her husband. Astha refused to be in proximity with Hemant after she found condom from his travelling bag. "Do I have to give it just because you are my husband? Unless I feel close to you I can't – I'm not a sex object, you have others for that. (Kapur 224)" On the other hand Pipee drew her closer being more appreciative and she was forced to think being a wife means "A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth. (Kapur 231)" A woman's right to her own body cannot be violated in the name of marriage. Marriage does not grant control over a woman's body **by** her husband.

The present scenario reflects that the patriarchal roots are deeply embedded in our society. The idea that a woman must perform her wifely duties and never refuse to have sex with her husband reflects that after marriage, she ceases to have any autonomy over her body, any interests or desires of her own, and that male sexual privilege is the fundamental principle governing marital relations, in which the only role of the woman is to be a compliant being. The questions surrounding the control over a woman's sexuality within marriage are not answered because they conveniently relegate the second sex to the status of a lesser being.

After some time, the workers of the factory went on strike and Hemant was diagnosed hypertension. He decided to spend time with her sister Seema in the US during summer vacation which meant a long parting of Astha with Pipee but her not going would be like getting divorce and disclosure of disagreement with her husband too which would be publicized in no time. When Pipee got to know about the plan she disapprovingly said, "One should never have affair with married people, they are the worst. (Kapur 268)" It was the beginning of separation between them. Pipee tried to coax Astha to leave her husband who neither **understood** nor **valued** her. She suggested her to organize her own exhibitions to be independently able to look after her children. Pipee's frustration became evident through these words. "Your children, your children, don't hide behind them. Live with me. Bring them. (Kapur 269)"

Later, Astha experienced a sense of guilt for not meeting the social expectations. "I love you, you know how much you mean to me, I try and prove it every moment we have together, but I can't abandon my family, I can't. May be I should not have looked for happiness, but I couldn't help myself. I suppose you think I should not be in a relationship, but I had not foreseen... Oh Pipee, I'm sorry I am not like you. (Kapur 242)" Astha had experienced fulfillment in Pipee's companionship. Pipee had been a source of perennial love for her. Astha had found a new identity and liberation with this relationship. She received affection and admiration from Pipee which she never received from Hemant. "Astha thought if husband and wife are one person, then Pipee

and she were even more so. She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her. (Kapur 243) Unfortunately, their separation came in the form of Pipee's decision to move on and pursue PhD as she could sense no future of their relationship. She was more confident and free in her choices. Astha turned back to stability a married woman has, her husband and her children. She was unable to break her childhood imbibed patriarchal conventions. Her journey towards self-realization did not move further to accomplishment.

I. CONCLUSION

Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* brings into the issue of self-realization and women emancipation. In spite of many achievements, much remains to be done to improve the status of women. Equal sharing of housework is still a dream for working women. Women find that household chores and rearing of children is still largely their task. The status of a woman in a society cannot be secured by her financial independence alone. It depends on customs and traditions of the society too. Woman should be empowered with equal rights in a family. Her decisions and opinions should be valued and followed. A new dimension of woman in politics has emerged in recent years all over the world. A woman is performing different roles and leaving a great impact in the society. Woman's role has changed at an amplifying speed. Formerly she was not a part of any political matter, but she has advanced in many aspects. More and more women have now been entering into politics leading to more dynamic participation and social reorientation of the country. Present scrapping of section 377 of the Indian constitution is further strengthening of a liberal society. Our society who is still living in the bondage of dogmatic social standards, prejudiced ideas, rigid stereotypes, insular mindset and stringent perceptions need such reforms. There has been an apparent change in the attitude of people towards woman's sexuality. Woman's expressions, feelings and self fulfillment that have not been socially accepted as per Indian rules, values and practices are now considered crucial for woman's individuality. Astha's leaning back on her husband's shoulder may seem to be a back treat but awakening of a woman's consciousness leading to self-satisfaction and delight is a great step towards woman emancipation. It should be considered as a successful attempt by any woman in the intricate situations of her life which could become a source of motivation for other women to move further towards liberation. It takes courage and confidence to pursuit for emancipation from patriarchal norms irrespective of consequences. Lesbianism has been effectively used in this novel to establish firm relationship between two women and it also condemns existing forms of patriarchal exploitation. It is not just a sexual preference but an identity of a woman beyond male's domain. Kapur has always shown respect for social institutions in her novels. She presents a liberal society whose fabric may change its hue but will retain its fundamental nature.

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