



## PROFESSION FOR A MARRIED WOMAN

Dr. ANJALI TRIPATHY

Assistant Professor, Department of English  
Orissa University of Agriculture and Technology, Bhubaneswar  
[anjali1tripathy@yahoo.co.in](mailto:anjali1tripathy@yahoo.co.in)



Dr. ANJALI  
TRIPATHY

### ABSTRACT

This article reflects on the life of a married woman, her obligations and impediments in a social taboo ridden world with reference to Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002). Here I do not intend to address the much talked about question of women's suffering in marriage because of demand for more dowry, or domestic violence (these two still being the key issues in Indian context); rather it deals with the subject of economic empowerment of women whom marriage can also handicap in ways other than dowry and violence. Scholars have deliberated on economic empowerment of women in the broader context of women empowerment and have mostly equated economic empowerment to employment. But this article seeks to attend to the ramifications of economic empowerment of women through a thematic analysis of Kapur's *A Married Woman*. I would address the issues of how employment does not always ensure economic empowerment and how economic empowerment supplements other forms of empowerment for women.

**Key Words:** Economic Empowerment, Women's novels, Feminism, Manju Kapur

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### Introduction

In "Professions for Women," a paper read to the Women's Service League, Virginia Woolf is quite eloquent about the story of her profession and speaks of a certain phantom she had to struggle with. She has called her "The Angel in the House" who used to come between the author and her writing and so tormented her that at last she killed her (ch 27). She goes on to describe the Angel in the House:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family life. She sacrificed herself daily. If there was chicken, she took the leg; if there was a draught she sat in it—in short she

was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. Above all—I need not say it—she was pure. Her purity was supposed to be her chief beauty—her blushes, her great grace. In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. (Ch. 27)

This picture of an ideal woman conceived and reinforced by a patriarchal society and the constant struggle of women to come out of its clutches is a universal feminist concern. The lines quoted above flashed in my mind, when I viewed a video which went viral on the WhatsApp recently. The Boston agency posted this job listing online for a

“Director of operations” position at a company called Rehton Inc. The requirements for the job were as follows: Standing up almost all the time, constantly exerting yourself, working for 135 to unlimited hours per week, degrees in medicine, finance and culinary arts necessary, no vacations, and the workload goes up on holidays. But, surprisingly, SALARY—NIL. The job advertisement got 2.7 million impressions from paid ad placements. Only 24 persons enquired. They were interviewed via webcam and their real-time reactions were captured on video. The surprise and suspense involved in the job quickly turned into pure sentiment when the interviewees and the viewers learnt that there are millions of persons doing this toughest job—the job of a mother.

The video took my heart away and made me shed the pearls from my eyes. It reminded me of my mother’s ceaseless works, her always busy hours, and yet the never complaining soothing tone. “How is this possible?” I wonder as I load my husband with all sorts of complaints after a busy day.

It is really time to rethink on the job of a mother or let me use the phrase “a married woman” to sound a little more objective to conform to the demand of research. This article is a thoughtful observation on a married woman, her compulsions and predicaments in a social taboo ridden world with reference to Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* (2002). The novel under discussion has attracted critical response for it reveals and powerfully explores two evidently contentious themes—Hindu-Muslim conflicts and same-sex intimacy between women. But this article purports to address the issue of economic empowerment of women and analyse its ramifications for women. Through a thematic analysis of the novel with a particular focus on the protagonist Astha, it intends to interrogate on the following issues: how employment always does not ensure economic empowerment; how women labour to acquire agency by deploying different ways; and how economic empowerment supplements other forms of empowerment for women.

A brief account of the story of *A Married Woman* in the outset is worth narrating for an

understanding of its thematic preoccupations. Astha Vadera, an MA in English, has an arranged marriage with Hemant, a professional who subsequently becomes an entrepreneur, and they have two children. She takes up the job of a school teacher with the consent of her in-laws and lives a comfortable life until she meets Aijaz Khan, a secular Muslim involved in a progressive theatre group. Their nascent friendship ends when Aijaz perishes tragically, burnt to death by a Hindu mob in the wake of the Ayodhya dispute. Later, in Ayodhya Astha first meets Pipeelika (Pipee), Aijaz’s widow who is schooled in sociology and economics and works for a Delhi NGO. Against all social standards, the friendship between the two women matures into a fully intimate same-sex relationship. But finally it terminates with Pipee leaving for pursuing her PhD in the US and Astha is left with no other preference but to return to her marriage.

#### **A Married Woman?**

In the beginning, I would like to point that the effectiveness of the following often quoted lines of Simone de Beauvoir still remains unmatched in the realm of feminist studies and holds good in Indian context:

One is not born, but rather becomes woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the female presents in a society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine. (301)

In Kapur’s novel, the protagonist Astha, too, “becomes” a woman. The first sentence runs “Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman with large supplements of fear” which clearly states that the novel addresses the woman’s question (1). Astha’s mother believes in “the old ways” according to which the responsibility of parents for a daughter is to get her married.<sup>1</sup> But her father who relies on “the new ways” opines that “with a good job comes independence” and wants her to be independent before marriage (2-3). However, Astha fails initially to become the independent woman that her father envisions.

After marriage, Astha “had to be adjusting, that was what marriage was all about” (67). She

played the Angel in the House, while her husband Hemant was busy in building “their” future by starting the business of making TVs. Here recurs the age-old excuse of patriarchy which forces the feminist in me to scream, “While men want power and money, and love pursuing it, why do they pretend that they do it for ‘their’ future?” Astha’s cultural conditioning leads her to stay unsuspecting in the beginning and believe her marriage to be a satisfactory one. But, gradually she understands, “she had a good life, but it was good because nothing was questioned” (99). Astha’s position is a representation of the conditions of Indian married women in general. She ruminates on the prerequisites of a married woman: “A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth” (231). There was no question of exercising choice in any matter. She rightly deliberates that for her part (or for any other married woman) “marriage is not just sex”; rather it should provide “interest, togetherness and respect” (275). In her diary Astha wrote about an ideal marriage in an indeterminate tone, “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” (260). Clearly enough, Astha’s marriage was not like this in character and spirit.

#### **Women, employment and empowerment**

After her marriage, when she is suggested by her in-laws’ family to take up a teaching job, Astha ponders, even wonders, but fails to protest aloud, “Whether all women were destined to be teachers or nothing” (47). It leads to a question which disturbs countless women like me: “Whether a girl has the right to make her own choices in life or has to tread on the path society has carved for her?” Naila Kabeer associates empowerment with the ability to make choices: “One way of thinking about power is in terms of the ability to make choices. To be disempowered means to be denied choice, while empowerment refers to the processes by which those who have been denied the ability to make choices acquire such an ability” (13). Thus, employment alone does not guarantee empowerment for a woman; it should also ensure one’s choice. Since Astha’s joining the school does

not involve her own decision, she has to go a long way to get herself empowered. The question of choice is a key concern of this article (which extends to all decision makings) to which I shall return later. Nevertheless, employment leads to Astha’s transformation from “being a woman who only wanted love to a woman who valued independence,” when, as a teacher, she becomes conscious of the pleasure of interacting with minds instead of needs (72). At school, she is appreciated and valued for one tenth of the work she does at home, and she is rewarded with a salary for it too. Thus, once looked-down-upon job becomes precious for her as it facilitates realizing her self-worth.

Now the questions arise: how can a woman overcome the oppression of married life? Is employment sufficient guarantee of empowerment for women? The question of empowering women through employment and choice has been discussed by Kathryn E. Khumalo and Wayne A. Freimund in the context of Kwandu Conservancy, Namibia. The authors sum up a number of research in the area and comment that employment can have empowering effects on women:

It can empower by enhancing women’s self-confidence and self-worth, improving access to financial resources and information, reducing dependence on family members, increasing household-level decision-making power, boosting financial savings skills, and increasing women’s solidarity and social mobility. It can also motivate women to challenge traditional gender roles and increase community awareness that, like men, women can make significant financial contributions to households. (1026)

They also recapitulate the disempowering consequence of employment: “Employment can also disempower. It can create a ‘double burden’ for women who must continue to fulfill household responsibilities outside of formal work hours, exacerbate social tensions between men and women, and expose women to harassment en route to and within the workplace. Relatives may exert control over a woman’s earnings, inciting conflicts over household expenditures. Women may lack

control over working conditions and encounter wage discrimination. Finally, child care requirements can fuel women's anxiety over their children's well-being" (1027).

Judging by the above mentioned standards, Astha's employment is disempowering in the beginning, but she imbibes the empowering effect in course of time. The increasing monotony of her work place is broken and her life takes a new turn after she screens with Aijaz Khan the Ayodhya issue for a school play. After Aijaz and his troop are abducted and burnt to death, a newly politicised Astha takes part in a rally in Delhi to protest the killings, and becomes an active member of the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch, a forum formed in memory of the Street Theatre Group to fight communalism (147).

Employment thus enables women to cross the private to step into the public, a man's world, hence a space of power and authority. Feeling insecure at Astha's growing independence, Hemant efforts to persuade her to leave her job on the plea that it does not bring enough money. But for Astha her job means something more than money: "It represented security, not perhaps of money, but of her own life, of a place where she could be herself" (149).

### Crossing the Threshold

The public/private dichotomy surfaces in the novel as Astha's mother-in-law tries to dissuade Astha from joining a rally by reminding her that her "duties" are confined to the domain of domestic. Hemant also despises her involvement with the Manch and tries to emotionally maneuver her in the name children and household duties.<sup>2</sup> In spite of her family's disapproval, Astha dares to cross the threshold. Her participation in rallies is suggestive of an attempt to "transgress" into the political arena threatening to usurp the boundaries set for a married Hindu woman. She carries on with her activities and even goes to Ayodhya for the Yatra. It is their resistance, which makes Astha more determined. Astha fights to acquire "agency" for it "refers to people's ability to make and act on their own life choices, even in the face of others' opposition" (Kabeer 14). Agency in relation to empowerment refers to actively exercising choice,

and doing it in ways that challenge power relations. Astha is on her way to acquire agency.

The final part of the novel centres on the relationship between Astha and Aijaz's widow Peepilika. Astha breaks the traditional boundaries to enter the same sex relationship with her. The relation between husband and wife, Astha senses, has been a power relation rather than a bond of love. After the first love making with Pipee, she feels triumphant having challenged this power relation and considers it as "a wife's revenge" (232). She reflects that "men understand only the physical" (219); but "intimacy with Pipee, for her, was "complete and absolute, expressed through minds as much as bodies" (231). The relationship with Pipee was empowering for Astha. It made her confident, assertive, and independent.

Though the concept of same sex relationship is a much contested issue, its supporters and critics having their own sets of arguments, I think, most of the women would agree to the need of an intimacy through both bodies and minds in relationship with their partners—men or women. What attracts me in the story is the unconventional and the subversive power of female body, much like the stories of Mahasweta Devi. Mahasweta dares to depict the female body as a site of resistance in *Mother of 1084*, and her stories, namely "Doulati," "Draupadi," and "Stanadayini" ("Breast Giver") to cite a few, and wages a war against all forms of oppression. She takes up the tropes of the mother, her corporeality and biology and politicises them to question the patriarchal power structure and the nation-state. For example, in her story "Draupadi," the female body in its sexually abused nudity confronts the state and challenges its brutal apparatuses. As for "Stanadayini," another story, the female body shows the commoditization of its reproductive capacity and lactating resources within the matrix of exploitative socio-economic relations. When this body is old, unserviceable and devastated by breast cancer, and it is abandoned by those whom it nourished, and it raises disturbing ethical questions about human relationship. Thus, the corporeality of the female body can unleash a huge amount of thematic possibilities and subversive power in the

fictional writings by women. Both Mahasweta Devi and Manju Kapur cross the boundaries to present in their writings the resistance power of the female body.

### Rethinking (economic) empowerment

Now, we come to the crux of this article. Often the term women empowerment is used vaguely. Traditionally, equal access to health, education, participation in decision making in social, economic, political and cultural life is seen as gender equality and it is assumed that promoting gender equality empowers women. The UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, formed in 2011 has six main focus areas: violence against women, peace and security, leadership and participation, economic empowerment, national planning and budgeting, and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In her article "Rethinking Women's Empowerment," Elisabeth Porter draws attention to another significant fact that connecting empowerment with the fulfillment of equality and the realisation of rights must be locally driven in order for empowerment to be practised in cultures where gender equality is not the norm. In Indian context, the need to address economic empowerment of women separately remains pressing.

"What effect poverty has on the mind; and what effect wealth has on the mind," contemplates Virginia Woolf in Chapter 1 of *A Room of One's Own*. Let us discuss. The stark reality of most of the Indian women is that they have to live and bear the atrocities caused by their husbands as they don't have any other means of survival. Generally, "social and economic death after divorce traps women in unhappy marriages" (Kapur 168). Even when Astha discovered the condoms in Hemant's travelling suitcase, she forced herself to be content with his explanation as it was too dangerous to venture further (214). Possibility of social and economic insecurity after separation silences many women. Often they are left with no choice. Further, in India women have little right over marital property. According to Hindu Women's Right to Property Act (1937), upon separation or divorce, an Indian woman is entitled only to maintenance from her husband. She has no right to the assets, such as

house or commercial property, bought in her husband's name during the marriage. Though the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005 bestows on women right to equal share in father's property, but customary practice has superseded over law. Thus, economic dependence and oppression block a person's ability to make choices.

Now, we return to where we began, "Does economic independence ensure empowerment for married women?" Evaluating the effects of employment on empowerment of married women demands a close look not only at woman's access to income-generation opportunities, but her ability to control her earnings, since control is mostly exercised by the husband. I believe that economic independence for women not only implies working for a wage, but also includes a right to manage their own money. But in Kapur's novel Astha is not allowed to manage her money. Even Astha's mother didn't entrust Astha with the money she got by selling the plot which was the legacy of Astha's father; rather she trusted Hemant with it as she believed, "He is a man, he knows about money" (97). When Astha hesitantly raised the issue before Hemant and wanted to know the way she could have access to her money as she did not want "to feel dependent," Hemant was indignant (99). In spite being economically independent, Astha is not able to do things herself. Hemant squanders Astha's money on air tickets for a trip to Goa, but she is denied purchasing a little overpriced antique silver box. Astha's real independence would come only with economic efficiency.

The distinction between economic independence and economic efficiency would be worth analysing. Economic independence entails, as outlined above, earning one's own money, but economic efficiency calls for the capacity as well as capability to manage one's assets. And it is the latter concept which, I believe, is a prerequisite for women empowerment. As discussed earlier, it also involves the right to choice of profession. Certainly, Astha's leaving the school job and opting for painting is a conscious choice in terms of empowerment.

Kumar and Varghese (2005) defines women empowerment thus:

Women empowerment, in real sense, does mean the loss of men's traditional power and control over the women of their households; control of her body and her physical mobility; . . . Empowerment is a process where women, individually and collectively, become aware of how power relations operate in their lives. With this awareness, they gain self-confidence and strength to challenge gender inequalities at the household, community, national, regional, and international levels. (57)

Astha's empowerment, too, comes with an assertion of her right over her life, body, assets, and action. It encompasses a growing intrinsic capability, greater self-confidence and an inner transformation to overcome opposition from private and public. Gradually, Astha grows assertive, and asks for a separate space to paint (156). She, literally, wants "a room of her own" for painting in solitude. Virginia Woolf asserts that "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction" (13). Astha insists on acquiring both for her creative work as well as for her independent selfhood. Influenced by Pipee to become an assertive woman from being an adjustive one, she also asks Hemant for an independent car. "I need to be independent. I am always adjusting to everybody's needs," she pleads (227). At the same time, she evolves as a painter as well as a person. She manages to emerge from the shadow of the Manch and gets prepared to hold an exhibition of her own:

As her brush moved carefully over the canvas, her hand grew sure, her back straightened, she sat firmer on her stool, her gaze became more concentrated, her mind more focused. A calmness settled over her, tenuous, fragile, but calmness nevertheless. She thought of her name. Faith. Faith in herself. It was all she had. (299)

Despite the diversity in understanding of empowerment, there is consensus that access to resources is fundamental to practising empowerment. After selling a few paintings, Astha had felt rich and powerful for a moment, the concealed argument being money or economic

independence makes one powerful, and this moment of feeling powerful would have lingered if she were the real owner of her money (159). But Astha learns to develop economic efficiency after this exhibition, when her paintings are sold for lakhs. She also develops confidence on herself as she admits in the lines quoted above. Hemant's attitude too alters. It leads to the inference that money changes the perspective of people about a person. Higher income raises one's position in the family and becomes his/her social case marker.

#### Conclusion:

Kabeer states three important closely interrelated criteria to explore the concept of empowerment: agency, resources, and achievements. According to her,

Agency represents the processes by which choices are made and put into effect. It is hence central to the concept of empowerment. Resources are the medium through which agency is exercised; and achievements refer to the outcomes of agency. (14)

Greater control and increased capabilities to overcome barriers all translate into increased agency or the ability to make and implement choices. By the end of the novel, Astha has gained agency, resources, and achievements, and hence, empowerment. Thus, this article is not intended to be an agenda for radical feminism, nor a treatise on war against men. With a focus on complexities of relationship, it theorises on a married woman's right to independence and advocates equal rights and responsibilities of both the partners in marriage as well as a change in stereotyped attitude towards a married woman as well as a married man.

#### Notes:

1. The theme of marriage and motherhood has been a key preoccupation of the novels of Manju Kapur. In *Difficult Daughters* (1998), Virmati's mother wanted her to be married to a suitable boy. *Home* (2006) is about Nisha who longs for a meaningful career, but is forced into waiting for marriage. In *The Immigrants* (2008), Kapur has featured the mother's obsession with Nina's marriage, the complexities of an arranged marriage and the "ultimate expectation" from marriage—motherhood. In

*Custody* (2011), Ishita's mother, too, has the same worries.

2. But here again comes a woman's question: "Are children only women's responsibilities?" According to Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act (1956), women are still not equal guardians of their children. A father is considered the "natural guardian" of a child, while mother is the secondary guardian and the custody of offspring under the age of 5 only is ordinarily awarded to the mother. If a father has more right over his child, it is logical that he shares at least equal responsibility.

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**Dr Anjali Tripathy** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at Orissa University of Agriculture and Technology, Bhubaneswar, Odisha. She has published in the area of Post-colonialism, Feminism, Indian Diaspora, Partition Literature and Indian Writings in English. Her research interest also includes Translation Studies, Business Communication and ELT. She can be contacted at: [anjali1tripathy@yahoo.co.in](mailto:anjali1tripathy@yahoo.co.in).