



A CRITIQUE OF MANJU KAPUR'S A MARRIED WOMAN

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Abstract

Manju Kapur is a well-known Indian novelist who emphasizes women's life in her novels. She cries against gender discrimination and advocates for gender equality for a well-balanced society. Her second novel *A Married Woman* is a true representation of the life of an Indian married woman. The novel studies Astha's struggles to relocate herself defying the patriarchal norms. Astha comes out of the patriarchal boundary by participating in the national issues. She redefines herself by transcending patriarchal threshold and reclaims her individuality by becoming a successful painter. Through the portrait of her protagonist Astha Kapur vividly manifests the possibilities of woman's emancipation from traditional bondages by incorporating various issues in her life. The paper is an analysis of the author's attempt to rewrite the story of a married woman from 'an insider's point of view'. It studies the manifold issues of the novel highlighting the harsh realities of a married woman as reflected in the novel. The objective of the study is to find the peculiar characteristics of Kapur as a novelist. It also aims at finding the validity of the novelist's arguments and concepts regarding Indian society and its women's lives.

Key words: Patriarchy, Emancipation, Bondages, Secularism, Heterosexuality.

Indian women writers occupy a prominent place in Indian writing in English. Among the notable ones mention may be made of Kamala Markandaya, Anita Desai, Kamala Das, Jhumpa Lehri and many more. Most of them focus on Indian women's life, their struggle for liberty, autonomy, identity and selfhood. But it will be unfair to confine Indian women writers' caliber within the circle of women's lives only. They have explored their potentials in various issues of our country like Kiran Desai in *The Inheritance of Loss* discussing the Gorkhaland Movement or Bharti Mukherjee in *Desirable Daughters* dealing with immigrant issues. They show their versatility by bringing varicoloured elements in their works hence enriching Indian literature.

Manju Kapur is one such Indian woman novelist who deals with several issues in her novels. Her second novel *A Married Woman* is a remarkable novel imprinting her excellence in literary world. It studies the struggles of Indian married women in their endeavour to redefine themselves. Through the portrait of the protagonist of the novel Astha the novelist deeply analyses Indian women's predicaments, bondages, compromises and sacrifices, self-effacement and attempts to assert their identities. The novel vividly depicts the multi-layered and multi-coloured life of an Indian married woman.

Thematically, the novel gives a detailed account of Astha's struggle to assert her selfhood. It is in the Bildungsroman form as it records Astha's journey from childhood to adulthood documenting her transformation. It shows how Astha develops as a successful painter and individual surpassing various hurdles in her way to success. It recounts Indian traditional mores that assign a fixed image to Indian women and the fights of Indian women to subvert that stereotype. At the very beginning of the novel the conservative norms of Indian upbringing system for girl child is depicted as expressed in the lines: "Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear. One slip might find her alone, vulnerable and unprotected"(1). Astha's parents strictly follow the codes and conducts of Indian Hindu family in nurturing up her. They do not want to take any risk that will blemish her character. "Her education, her character, her health, her marriage, these were their burdens. She was their future, their hope,"(1) and so they guard her very carefully. In one of the incidents where Astha's mother finds out Astha's romantic fantasies which she expresses in her journal her parents become even stricter in training her to be an ideal wife. They "bring her books of moral and intellectual substance"(1) and insist her to read Gita, Vedas and Upanishads so that she gets virtues of tradition and right ways to live. They train Astha in such a way to befit her to her future roles.

Astha absorbs every lesson through her blood and skin in order to fulfil her parents' wish. After her marriage with Hemant she is in the illusion that she can fulfil their dream. She declares herself to be the most blessed creature in the world. She has everything that every married woman wishes to have - a well-to-do family, supportive and sophisticated in-laws, a loving husband and two children- a daughter and a son. At the early stage of her married life she feels "her life was opening up before her in golden vistas" (42). But sooner than later in the course of her married world she realises that she has secondary position in her family. Every decision is to be taken by Hemant. Her opinion in the family matter is almost negligible. She is treated as a teddy bear, a toy that has to follow Hemant's dictates. She has the feminine mystique, a situation,

"a problem that has no name"(16) faced by married women in their married life as declared by Betty Freidan in her epoch making book *The Feminine Mystique*. Like every married woman Astha also tries to define herself in relation to her husband, her children and family. She seeks her personhood in her so called perfect family. She engrosses the beliefs regarding every husband that Simone de Beauvoir describes in *The Second Sex* in the lines: "He is a demigod endowed with virile prestige and destined to replace her father: protector, provider, teacher, guide; the wife's existence is to unfold in his shadow; he is the custodian of values, the sponsor of truth, the ethical vindication of the couple"(480). She seeks a companionship with her husband with a hope of gaining completeness in her life. But she is disillusioned by her subordinate and subjugated position in her married world. Time and again, through various actions and activities Hemant reminds her of her marginalised position. She cannot claim anything of her own in her married life. She lives as a shadow of Hemant. Her world is circumscribed to domestic matters. Individuality has no room in her life. Even if Astha desires to erase this non-existence and break this dependency for a life of a liberated being she cannot vocally express her urge as a slight agitation against the fixed norms means ruining her smoothly running married life.

Manju Kapur manifests her talent in the art of characterisation. Her protagonists are round characters having their own peculiarities that bring a vibrant, lively and unique identity to them. Astha, in *A Married Woman* too shows transformations and changes in her personality in accordance with the changing time and space. She, though presented as a typical Indian wife at the initial stage of her married life, develops her personality representing herself as a modern Indian wife who embraces both traditional and modern values in her life. Even if she upholds the traditional values of her family she cannot totally suppress her urge for selfhood. She cannot neglect her urge for self-identification for long in performing her obligations to the family. In many situations she shows her agitations against the patriarchal norms and attempts to relocate herself. She can be seen as an example of the 'androgene' to borrow Virginia Woolf's term, an individual having

both the features of man and woman. Astha relentlessly performs her duties to the family yet does not want to live as a submissive and self-effacing woman compromising her individual wishes and upholding idealisation. She embodies the women of contemporary society that Chandra Bhusan Singh describes in "Changing Social Perspective in Modern Age":

In this rapidly progressing world they [women] are redefining their proper place. They have revolted against their exploitation, victimization and marginalisation. They are questioning the sexual politics in which they are always victimized. They are busy reshaping themselves in a more humanistic mould, emphasizing thereby the need for a thorough re-examination in depth of marriage and man-woman relationship for a better understanding and sharing of mutual love and respect. (34)

Kapur presents Astha as the model of the New Woman, an image of modern woman that many Indian writers both male and women portray in their works. She is the epitome of the challenging woman who resists male dominance and seeks for women's emancipation from traditional bondages.

In Astha's journey of self realisation the author brings a different shade in the plot of the novel. As mentioned above Kapur shows her versatility in the treatment of manifold issues in her works. She interlinks the subthemes with the main themes thus bringing uniformity in the texture of the novel. Kapur juxtaposes varied subthemes with the main theme in this novel too. Through such treatments of the subthemes she delves into the psychological and philosophical entities of human mind. One of the important issues in the novel is the Babri Masjid issue. The controversial issue that has been recently settled down by the apex court of the country gives a different shade in the novel. The contentious issue attracts concerns not only from the country but also from the world. It takes many decades to give a verdict on the case of Ramajanambhoomi and Babri Masjid. To deal such a sensitive issue in a great detail by the novelist is noteworthy. This is one of the elements in the novel

through which Kapur shows her dynamism as a writer.

The novelist analyses mindset of every Indian regarding the demolition of the mosque in the country to give a socio-religious note in the novel. Her presentation of contradictory perspectives between Hemant and Astha regarding this very sensitive issue provides us a platform to discuss diverse viewpoints. Astha voices for humanitarian values through her views and acts regarding the demolition of the masjid. She joins conference, marches and protests to show her solidarity for a united nation. Her protest against communalism gives us a pure insight regarding humanities, its values and beliefs. Astha performs her duties of a married woman trying to fulfil all the expectations of her family, yet she, as a citizen shows her individual feelings and emotions towards the nation by expressing her socio-political and religious awareness for the betterment of the society. She comes forward transcending her strict and busy familial duties, roles and responsibilities to fight for the secularism of the country. She along with the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch cries for the integrity of the nation. They seek justice for the inhumane killing of Aijaaz and his team who fight for secularism of the country. As a part of her contribution to the fight against communalism Astha captures the cry of the nation by painting the images of the protests in her canvas. She crosses the fixed paradigm of a married woman by participating in the national issues. She tries to reinvent herself through her awareness of socio-religious issues by going beyond her domestic roles. Archana Shelke rightly opines that "Astha desires to become independent outside the boundaries of her home. At the same time, she is bound by her duty as a "good" mother, daughter and the other domestic roles she embodies"(105). Hemant, however, devalues her contribution for the unity of the nation. He reminds Astha of her responsibilities as a wife in the line "As my wife, you think it proper to run around, abandoning home, leaving the children to the servants"(188). Instead of encouraging Astha's feeling for the nation he rather treats her as an irresponsible wife. He even mocks at Astha's religious awareness. Hemant not only

undervalues Astha's work but that of the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch too.

Kapur brings in varied ideas regarding the issues of the masjid. The words in the Ramjanambhoomi Nyas pamphlet are worthy to note:

This is not a new 'political' struggle. It is the 77th attempt in the history to restore the Ramjanambhoomi, our heritage. Thus far over 300,000 kar sewaks have laid down their lives in the 400 years.

Psuedo-secularists want the mosque declared a national monument forgetting that Ram was an Indian and Babur an invader. It is a national dishonour if a symbol of invasion is so declared:

'Now Ask Yourself!'

Can even the most tolerant, most reasonable and peace-loving Indian run away from his pride – the reason for his being? The time has come to fight for our threatened faith.

'Hindus unite! Act as one.

Not against anyone!

But in defence of our motherhood'. (188)

A widow also opines that "Ram was born right on the exact spot where the Babri Masjid is. You can even see from the pillars inside that there was a temple there. Eight pillars with Hindu carvings, mango leaves, goddesses, apsaras, kalash in black stone. Where did they come from? They built the mosque around them to mock us"(194-195). She further expresses her perception regarding the Muslims in the lines – "Even now, Muslims living here really have their allegiance somewhere else. You will see during cricket matches they want Pakistan to win, this is not their soil"(195). The view of the widow describes the misconceptions regarding Muslims as Astha opines – "Hers would be the gentle voice declaring 'they' were all the same, and these were words that would have a longer reach than any missile thrown"(195). This perception is presented in contrast to that of another group of people:

History can be used to build or to destroy. We choose the lessons we wish to learn from it. For years Muslims and Hindus have lived peacefully together. It is the British who suggested that an ancient temple was destroyed so that Hindu would turn against Muslim. Brothers and sisters, we have seen what the British succeeded in doing. They believed in Divide and Rule. They ploughed rivers of blood through our country. The same dark forces threaten us now. It is politicians who are creating religious insecurities to get votes. Do not let them succeed. (196)

Religious issue is very sensitive. It is concerned with feelings of many people. Religion is affiliated to the ethos, beliefs and identity of the people and that of the nation at large. So the analysis of religious issues of the nation gives us a thought provoking insight to ponder on the veracity of its absoluteness. Kapur through various instances delves into the complex religious situations of our country and highlights its complicated concepts. Amidst this debate and situation Kapur encompasses the lesbian relationship in the plot of the novel. The female bond between Astha and Pipee brings a different taste in the novel. The lesbian scene in the novel is presented in contrast to the heterosexual relation between Astha and Hemant. Astha in her heterosexual relation lives at the periphery. Her world is monitored and screened by her husband. She cannot claim anything of her own in the relationship. The relation of "power rather than love"(233) fetters her free will shattering her individual dreams.

K.C. Asha in "Same-sex Love in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*" puts that "the disharmony, disillusionment, suppression, injustice and anguish they [women] suffer in marriage force them to seek weird tracks to escape from it and discover themselves. In their struggle for autonomy and fulfilment in life, they turn to other women for solace and assert their rights as women, individuals and human beings"(68). Astha seeks that solace in her female bond with Pipee. She finds a different world in her relation with Pipee. There is love, respect and mutual understanding in this

relationship. There is “pleasure of an intimacy that was complete and absolute, expressed through minds as much as bodies”(231). “She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her”(243). They have different roles to play; different demands are made on them. But they are bound by a common bond. They are like “two flies caught in a sticky pool they cannot leave”(241). The oneness and completeness that Astha seeks in her married life is achieved in her female bond with Pipee.

Even if Astha desires to live with Pipee she is trapped by her duties and responsibilities to her family. Even in her dream she expresses her priorities to her family – “I have a room, small but private, where my family pass before my eyes. It is very light, before me a wall which divides the house, but I can see my children, that satisfies me, though to them I am invisible, that satisfies me too”(241). She cannot leave her husband “who neither knows nor appreciates”(242) her because she has her children to look after. She is used to the set dynamics of business of raising up of children that does not include companionship and understanding. She sees “herself as a bird pecking at a few leftover crumbs from the feast of life”(242). Her inability to leave her family brings an end to her relationship with Pipee. Her indecisiveness regarding her relation with Pipee makes the end of her happy world. She cannot forsake her responsibility as a mother to fulfil her individual desire. This is an evidence of Manju Kapur’s giving more importance to family life than the individual one. She makes Astha fed up in her relationship with Pipee. Astha sidelines her individual desires and sexual longings in performing her larger responsibilities. It can be said that Kapur upholds Indian familial values with gender equity. She makes her heroine come out of the paradigm of patriarchy in search of her identity thus becoming a successful painter without abandoning her responsibilities of a wife and a mother.

Another beauty of the novel is the use of symbols in the novel. Symbols are used by eminent writers to express their ideas in the minimum words. Manju Kapur utilises symbols in all her novels. Her maturity in handling symbols in her writing enhances the beauty of her writing. Kapur manifests her

mastery over the use of symbols in this novel too. As the novel deals with various issues adding a variety in its theme and construction it needs several techniques and tactics to bring uniformity in its texture. Kapur’s use of symbols is one such technique. In the novel Astha is compared to a teddy bear that follows the dictates of her husband. The political unrest of the country due the communal riots can be seen as a symbol of Astha’s inner unrest because of the chains of roles and responsibilities that constraint her will.

Another technique Kapur utilises in the novel is the use of letters. Kapur presents her philosophical ideas in the novel through letters. In most of her novels she uses letters as a medium to express her philosophical ideas and arguments. In case of *Difficult Daughters* it is through the letters of Harish to Virmati she presents her notions regarding education. In *Custody* Shagun expresses her unhappy life with Ashok in her letters to her mother hinting that she regrets for destroying her family.

In this novel Kapur displays spiritual aspects through the letters of Astha’s mother to Astha. Kapur portrays Hemant as a struggling industrialist. Through the life of Hemant and his father Kapur manifests the materialistic greed of human being. In contrast to this Kapur presents spiritual life of Astha’s mother. After the demise of Astha’s father her mother lives in an ashram forsaking all worldly desires and devoting to the will of the God seeking inner peace. Astha sees her mother’s move as an ultimate way to compromise in her existential struggle as she has no son to protect and guard her in her old age. But her mother perceives it as a medium of gaining salvation from worldly desires and greed. The philosophical ideas conveyed through one of the letters of Astha’s mother are noteworthy to mention:

Perform action with full understanding that you have no control over the result. Success and failure have to be faced by everyone. By being thoughtful, reflective and prayerful we can overcome the spirit of ‘I’ness that dominates all our actions. This approach keeps families intact and we don’t become insecure. We have set up to relax in, this

paves the way to security, and to self understanding.

The meaning of life is struggle. There are challenges in all walks of life, how to tackle them is the question, not to run away from home, work, society and obligations.

Perform your duties with detachment. Learn to give and not take. When you develop the spirit of giving intelligently, there is peace in the mind. Most of our problems are due to discontent with what we have. (88)

In this way Kapur presents her philosophical ideas in the novel. Through letters she conveys her arguments regarding human greed and how to control it for a peaceful life.

Thus, Kapur brings forth a range of issues in the novel giving multiplicity in its texture. She is adept in maintaining uniformity in the plot of the novel by making these varied issues revolve around the life of Astha and interlinking them with the main theme. Portraying Astha's life with a multiple of issues makes her more real and vibrant so that every Indian married woman can define herself with Astha's life. It vividly elucidates the complicated psyche of an Indian married woman. In short, it can be concluded that the novel truly marks Kapur as a successful writer. The author acutely explains the stern patriarchal codes that compel Indian married women to live a life of sacrifices and compromises and the probable solution for the revolt of women against the gender biased norms.

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