

Conflict Between Tradition and Modernity in Manju Kapur's 'A Married Woman'

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Abstract

'**A Married Woman**' is a genuine work of Manju Kapur, which tells the story of honest love, set at a time of political and religious upheaval, narrated with an intelligence for anyone who has known life's responsibilities. It shows a sincere feminine confession about her personality cult in the personal allegory of traditional marriage. Manju Kapur has depicted her women characters in the novel as they are leading their life in the patriarchal setup of the society. Manju Kapur has narrated frankly the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but the depiction of cultural displacement in the culture where individualism and protest have often remained separate ideas and marriage and the woman's role at home is a central focus. What happens when the old customs lose their power and the woman no longer believes her life should be determined in this narrow fashion is the underlying theme of Manju Kapur's absorbing second novel, **A Married Woman**, in which her protagonist, Astha Vadera, undergoes profound changes against the backdrop of an India that is also evolving. This research paper attempts to show the shift in values and how women have started acknowledging themselves as the co-equals of man.

Keywords: Tradition, Marriage, Family, Alienation, Lesbian.

As told earlier Manju Kapur's '**A Married Woman**' deals with the female protagonist, Astha who is born and nurtured in a middle class household in Delhi. Her father is a government servant and mother is a teacher in a school. Her parents are of different temperaments. Her father considers that his daughter's future lay in her own hand and also believes in the novelty. But her mother believes in traditional ways and often declares:

"When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the Shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?"

She is always anxious about her marriage. In spite of numerous instructions Astha doesn't walk on the path of her parent's views. She wants to follow her own ways.

From her early years, Astha is in search of true love and companionship. 'Astha is chained by her middle-class values to her roots. She is the only child of simple, god fearing parents who are very protective of her and expect her to confirm to traditions....Brought up in such atmosphere, Astha's natural talent of painting takes a back-seat and her diet of 'mushy novels and thoughts of marriage' give her the wings to search for a boyfriend.' When the day dawns she is introduced to Bunty. She falls in love with him and spends too much time together planning meetings with him. Her friend Gayatri supports her and manage everything. But unfortunately their love fails to bloom because of the obstinate traditional nature of parents. Then her young heart breaks, bleeds and wounds simultaneously. The affair makes her mother more vigilant. She forces her to marry as soon as possible:

"The girl is blossoming now when the fruit is ripe it has to be picked... If she marries at this age, he will have no problem adjusting."

Romantic at heart, Astha doesn't like arranged marriage. She has already taken the taste of love and considers that love alone must be the base of a life-long relation like

marriage and therefore when her mother invites a boy to see her, Astha refuses to meet him and weeps 'for the lack of love in her barren life'. The barrenness of her life is broken by Rohan, a final year student in the college. She is whole-heartedly involved with him that she breaks her parent's restricted tradition and misses no opportunity to love and every moment of his company. In him, she finds a sure solace from the troubles and pains of loneliness she had felt in the past.

Astha loves him so passionately that she dreams of marriage with him. Again fate mocks at her. Rohan leaves her. He goes secretly to America never again to be hers. His deception further breaks the heart of Astha and pushes her in the valley of grief.

She has changed her aim now and she decides to complete her education. When Astha is in the final year, Hemant Wadera's family sends a proposal. Hemant is an MBA, foreign returned son of a rich family. The boy does not believe in dowry. It makes her parents more happy. On the other hand, Astha is anxious because of her former surreptitious affairs.

Against her romantic dreams, she is married traditionally. She devotes herself in the household routine of a daughter-in-law and a wife. Her husband and her in-laws don't stop her from serving as a teacher in school. Later her job is never considered seriously. She tries to maintain the golden mean between her job and her home. But Hemant neither respects her nor her involvement with the activities in school.

Hemant becomes fully materialistic and the motto of his life is earning and hoarding more and more. He gives no time to Astha, which makes her feel alienated:

"She felt cold, dreary and distanced from him. She had been waiting for him all day, thinking of being together, but nothing of this was reciprocated."

This emotional incompatibility leads her to angst and depression. Astha feels hurt and discriminated and therefore she gets distracted from her husband. She gets further shock sensing Hemant's reluctance to see her become a mother. Her dream is satisfied with the birth

of a girl child, Anuradha. Because of the child, she feels like a complete woman. Hemant is proud to be a father but he is more inclined to a son than to a daughter. Even the Pan-American husband couldn't abstain from desiring a son and her heir:

"I was so pleased Anu was a girl. But that doesn't mean we should not try for a boy.... we will have a son, and if we don't we needn't stop at two."

Astha satisfies the expectations of the family when she gives birth to a son. Even Astha's mother overwhelmingly becomes happy because of the birth of her grandson, 'the carrier of the line, the seed, the name'. Astha knows that their relation has become very superficial, one that has lost genuineness because Hemant is too practical and devoid of any sympathy for her. Her personal conflict and emotional pain are unresolved matters that leave her appalled. An indifferent attitude of her husband and her inability to find a meaning in life trouble Astha. She wishes to maintain her own individuality than sacrificing and accommodative woman.

To Astha life becomes chaotic and gloomy and therefore when she comes in contact with Aijaz Akhtar Khan, the founder of the Street Theatre Group, she immediately develops a liking for him. Aijaz also admires Astha for her artistic talents. He is the teacher of history as well as the performer in theatre. He tries to remove the thoughts of loneliness and melancholy from the life of Astha and unfolds new world of love and assists her to develop into a woman of independence, confidence and enterprise. Hemant never gives a patient ear to her thoughts and 'perception about life.

Aijaz's sudden death in a communal frenzy during Ramjanmabhumi and Babri Masjid demolition disturbs Astha and her intelligent views about Hindu Muslim co-existence. In spite of a gamut ' of frightening emotions Astha continues working for and supporting the cause of the new society. Astha participates in the rallies and is proud to be a part of the sampradayakta Mukti March. Hemant can't understand Astha's conviction and her slogg

for the cause of the Munch. Though she crosses the threshold of neurosis, she realizes life is not all smooth sailing. Now her bed relations with Hemant become interludes of emotionless unfulfillment:

"That night Hemant started his sex routine. 'No' said Astha, 'I don't feel like it'... 'Then what ? 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 other for that.'"

Astha meets Pipeelika, the widow of Aijaz, during this phase of her mind. They are the oppressed or the victims of male oriented society. The similarity of the sadness helps to form a bond between two. Therefore, they cross social boundaries to find fulfillment and understanding in each other's arms. Besides taking an unparalleled emotional pleasure, the relation spurs them to get united for the cause of social awakening. She tries to commit herself on the issues of religious tolerance and harmony. Her thrust becomes deep when Aijaz dies in communal riot and hence she becomes spokesperson for religious existence:

"In essence women all over the world are the same, we belong to families we are affected by what affects our husbands, fathers, brothers and children.... We judge not by what people tell us, but by what people experience in our homes... Tomorrow your sacrifice will have been forgotten because the duty of life is towards the living."

"Astha is ensnared into misalliance with her male partner of an extremely different temperament and character. Her life contends with pressures much greater than those exacted by her attachment to Pipeelika, a woman she meets half a way through the narrative of her life's journey. Both Astha and Pipeelika have failed to reach the climes of their emotional and physical passions with men - one due to her rich socio-political understanding and the other for the misfortune. The murder of Aijaz has sterilized Pipee's feminine sensibilities. Rather by fairing in love with each other both have made their loves refreshing".

Astha does not have a place in her own home that she can call hers. Her role in the family is that of an unpaid servant. She passes her life without marital vows. She realizes that the situation is gloomy. She is leading a meaningless and marginalised life without moral support and bonding.

"A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth."

The male supremacy in the society intensifies the suppression of women as their relationship with their husbands reduces to be merely superficial and very little genuine. Astha considers her marital life emotionally unrealistic and unconvincing but at the same time, she is aware that her lesbian relationship with Pipeelika would never be accepted as a means of emancipation but would merely remain as flirtation and lustful physicality. Astha is nervous because of the lack of emotional attachment in her relation with Hemant as she realizes his inadequacy as a supportive husband.

Lesbianism strongly challenges the age old themes of marriage and is one of the outcome of feminism. Lesbianism concerns the priorities and rights of women to define and stress their sexuality. According to Anne Coedt, "The consideration of lesbianism as a personal option grew out of a very different reason. For many feminists, there has always been a logical, theoretical connection between the elimination of sex roles and the possibility of loving other women. With some this became a reality when they met a woman they were attracted. For others, lesbianism has meant a freedom from male relationships in general... other feminists saw a love relationship with a woman as a positive thing because they felt other women could not encourage the passivity and submissiveness that they had previously found themselves falling into with men most important of all, perhaps, women found that there were other women to love in their own right as persons".

Manju Kapur's 'A Married Women' portrays the lesbian relation between Astha and Pipeelika. Astha forgets her past miseries and anxieties with her growing interest and intimacy with Pipeelika. Every morning brings her new hopes of life and enthusiasm, till, one day, she accidentally finds a condom in Hemant's suitcase. It is an unbearable shocking incident which arouses commotion within her. Astha feels more cheated, deceived and deprived than ever.

Pipee becomes too much demanding as their relation grows. She considers unsatisfied by their short meetings, asks Astha to break all ties with her earlier life, and shift to Pipee's flat along with her children. Though her heart had tried freedom from her family, and she had willingly abandoned her once upright and moral behaviour in society, such an agreement is quite unacceptable to her conventional behaviour.

Their relationship cannot provide the permanent relief from their sufferings. At the beginning, their relations is like dreamy and is expressively fulfilling but gradually everything involved in it loses its passion and lust. As days pass on Pipee starts to force Astha against her will even on futile matters. As the victim of male-oriented society, Astha is aggrieved to find Pipee too in that role of an over-demanding partner.

Pipee's constant plans to leave to America, leave her alone and make Astha completely a morose person. At that time, she fails to judge whether she has committed a severe mistake, an irredeemable sin to be a paramour of Pipee. Pipee's departure ruins the very secret emotions in the life of Astha.

In a nutshell, "In her writing, Manju Kapur has emphasized on the issues in the context of patriarchy, inter-religious marriage, family bond, male-female bond, co-existence of past and present in the socio-political facts. She has narrated her woman protagonist as a victim of biology, gender, domestic violence and circumstances".

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