

**A QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND SELF INDEPENDENCE IN MANJU
KAPUR'S A MARRIED WOMAN**

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur is an emerging figure among the women writers of Indian English Fictions. She is a world acclaimed writer for reflecting the feministic vision in her novels. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* received International acclaim and was awarded the Commonwealth prize for Eurasia Section. Her second novel *A Married Woman* is a story about love, passion and attachment set at the time of political and religious turmoil. It also delineates the story of a young Indian middle class educated woman who raises voice against male chauvinism in order to carve her own identity and individuality. At the same time, her female protagonist revolts against deep-rooted family values and the institution of the marriage to yearn self independence and dignity not only outside the house but within too. The novel draws the picture of incompatible marital relation where woman lives under her husband's oppressive attitude that leads to frustration and loneliness in life. Thus, the present paper will attempt to highlight how woman struggle for her identity in society. It will also try to elaborate on how her female character assert for self-independence in tradition bound surrounding.

In pre-independent era women had carved a different status and image in Indian society. They upheld the image of submissive, passive, obedient and docile women who failed to raise voices for their rights, protest against injustice and unequal treatment in the male dominated society. The earlier Indian women novelists portrayed women as the silent sufferer, a worshipper of their husband, a strict observer of social taboos and the supporter of traditional values and ethics. At the same time, they occupied the subordinate position to their counterpart with no space for herself and no identity as well. But the post-independent feminist writers are largely focused on women's quest for identity that was influenced by various changing forces of reality like the advent of feminism, spread of education, freedom movement, social reforms, frequent touch with the west etc. They have brought far-fetched transformation to explore the unexplored maladies and the plight of Indian women in society. Feminist writers like Kamala Markandaya,

Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Desai, Arundhati Roy and others have made a strong impact by depicting the changing face of Indian womanhood and presented women as an individual that rebelled against injustice and the traditional role of exploitation and oppression of the patriarchy. The female protagonists of these writers delineate women struggle for their identities and to assert their individuality in society. Therefore, Binda Sah states “Identity cannot be arrested in a proper name: a name is not an identity; identity is self-revelation and the quest for identity is the quest for self-a journey towards the discovery of the self.” (Sah 14) In Elaine Showalter’s *A Literature of their Own* states that the main theme of women literature since 1920 is the quest of “self discovery” and “a search for identity.” (Eagleton 13) On the other hand, in Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* admits that the problem of women is not only of sex but it’s about identity crisis. She claims, “for woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment - autonomy, self-realization, independent, individuality, self actualization- is as important as the sexual need, with a serious consequences when it is thwarted.” (Friedan 448) Manju Kapur in her novels explore woman years for separate identity and self independence in a traditional society where they are urged to live under man’s authority and attitude.

Manju Kapur is a well known Indian woman novelist who has notably contributed to the progression of Indian English fiction. She is a world acclaimed writer for reflecting the feministic vision in her novels. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* (1998) received International acclaim and was awarded the Commonwealth prize for Eurasia Section. This is followed by four other novels *A Married Woman* (2002), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2009) and *Custody* (2011) Her novels deal with the lives of middle class Indian women who fights to break the tradition of silence against male domination in Indian patriarchal society. The female protagonists of Manju Kapur’s novels are mostly educated. “They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunge into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless background.” (Gupta 11)

A Married Woman concerns with Indian woman who strive to gain space in life and socio-cultural domains. The female protagonist Astha is a middleclass educated married woman who is in search of her identity against the existing patriarchal set up and appears as an independent woman. It is a story of love, passion and deep attachment that was set up during the demolition of the Babri Masjid. In this novel Astha has everything that a married woman desires to have in life – her loving children, a duty oriented husband and comfortable life. Gupta states, “Though she seems to be quite happy being a teacher and mother of two kids, there is always an undercurrent of resentment against being treated as one of the inferior sex.” (Gupta 13) Through the protagonist Astha, the novelist delineates a sensitive woman who quests for identity out of frustration, distress, alienation and isolation in patriarchal family.

Astha is a daughter of the traditional middle class parents who are very conscious about her education and marriage. Mother desires to perform the marriage ceremony of her daughter at the right age. She tells Astha, the worth of a woman lies when she gets married and serves her husband like worshipping to God. She claims, “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?” (*A Married Woman* 1) On the other hand, her father insists his daughter should concentrate more on studies to have a successful career and lives her

own life independently. Thus he says, “If she did well in her exams, she could perhaps sit for the IAS and find a good husband there.” (AMW 3)

Astha, like many other grown up girls, dreams of a romantic world where she imagines a “Shadowy young man holding her in his strong manly embrace.” (AMW 1) She involves in love affair with Bunty, her first object and crush:

“Day and night the thought of him kept her inside churning, she was unable to eat, sleep or study. Away from him her eyes felt dry and empty. Her ears only registered the sound of her voice. Her mind refused to take seriously anything that was not his face, his body, his feet, his hands, his clothes.” (AMW 8-9)

Astha’s affair with Bunty turns out to be a tragic ends. When she enters into the college, lacking behind all her past memories, she again falls in love with Rohan, a professor of her college. She enjoys meeting with him at the same time enjoys physical relationship. Later on, Rohan refuses to marry her after sipping her body and left her alone for higher studies at Oxford University. Though, Astha is grown up with care and protection but she is crossing the limitations and boundaries of a traditional society. Finally, she agrees to marry with a man whom her parents traditionally arranged for her. Hemant is a foreign returned man who belongs to a bureaucrat family, they settled down in Vashan Bihar, the posh colony of New Delhi. In course of time, Astha gets fed up with this new life and dullness began to taint her. She thinks;

“What was she to do while waiting for Hemant to come home? Her in-laws were not demanding, for the housework they had help, and supervision, no matter how painstaking, still left her with enough free time to be restless in.” (AMW 46)

Astha tries to forge a new identity as a teacher at St. Anthony’s School. She becomes a woman who transforms her occupation of housewife to a working woman. At the same time, she tries to keep a balance between inner and outer spheres. She performs the role of a dutiful wife by serving her husband as every Indian wife does. Above this, she also engages at other work like kitchen, washes clothes and arranges them. Manju Kapur delineates through the protagonist Astha, the position of a wife consider as subservient to her husband. Astha feels:

“Her subservient position struck her. She had no business kneeling, taking off his shoes, pulling off his socks, feeling ecstatic about the smell of his feet.” (AMW 50)

Every married woman of the society feels that life is more meaningful when she has a baby. Therefore, Astha tells to her husband she wants to have a baby. In course of time, she becomes a mother of two children namely Anuradha and Himanshu but somewhere along the passage of life, Hemant changes his attitude towards Astha. He turns out to be a busy man who gives more emphasis on his business for building up their future. He refuses to help her in nourishing and upbringing his son Himanshu. Therefore, “between Anuradha’s birth and Himanshu’s, Hemant changed from being an all-American father to being an all Indian one.” (AMW 70) Such indifference attitude of Hemant developed disharmony in their marital life. This discontented relation leads to defiance and restlessness and collapse of the institution of marriage. Sharma & Maheshwari assert, “her temperamental incompatibility with her corporate thinking husband compels her to play the role of ‘mother and father’ for her children.” (Sharma & maheshwari 143)

Astha has to manage and perform every duties and responsibilities of a wife, mother, daughter and teacher without getting any help from Hemant. Above this, Hemant blames his wife for mismanagement, incapability and wastefulness as well. Sometimes she feels like resigning from school because she has to manage single handedly with her problems – husband, children, household responsibilities and job as well. Therefore, the novelist delineates, “between her marriage and the birth of her children, she too had change from being a woman who valued independence. Besides there was the pleasure of interacting with minds instead of needs.” (AMW 71-72)

When Astha returns home after the operation of her nose, she could not find the same care and attention from Hemant as he had been in the hospital. She realizes that her children spend more time with their grandparents. When she complaints to Hemant about her children, he responds if the age old parents are happy being with children; let them spend together. The novelist delineates a woman without her children around and lack of understanding from her husband build the feeling of loneliness, isolation and restlessness to her mind. Thus Astha claims, “what about me? As it is when I am in school Himanshu is upstairs. When I come home I want the children. I hardly have you, I should have them.” (AMW 78) Therefore, Astha finds her own remedies to relief the feelings of insolence and loneliness in writing poems as well as involvement in sketches. Through her poems and paintings, she expresses her anguish, grief and suffering in various situations. Astha reflects the hard and struggle life of a woman who live in bondage with no gratitude and identity as well.

However, “This has always been a man’s world” (Beauvoir 93) is true to a woman who has to live according to the decisions made by man. Through the protagonist Astha, Manju Kapur reveals that woman still upholds the position of inferiority in spite of her quest for equality and a worthy member of the patriarchal society. Astha is very emotional when Hemant refuses to keep her father’s books with them. Instead, he makes the decision to donate it to a library. Astha claims to her mother for agreeing his words but her mother added, “It is Hemant’s house, and he said there was no room.” (AMW 87) Astha gets angry with her husband as he has not consulted her before taking up any decision. She expects equality but Hemant plays the role of primary position in patriarchal family. She exclaims, “Then who am I? The tenant? We could have found room, we could have built bookshelves, done something, we could at least have discussed it.” (AMW 87) Again, in course of time, when Astha’s mother sells her plot, she delivers the large amount of money to Hemant’s hand instead of her daughter. When Astha asks why it is to him, her mother says, “He is a man, he know about money. He will invest it for you and the children.” (AMW 97) Such attitude of Astha’s mother exhibits woman regards as a subordinated figure of a man. Manju Kapur reveals Astha is a woman of today who raises voice for equal treatment with man in society. Though Astha accepts her duties at home but she wants to participate in any decision taken by her husband either in management or investment. Thus she expresses, “Really Ma, don’t you think women can be responsible for their own investments?” (AMW 97)

The novelist portrays Astha as a type of woman who is economically independent but facing the problem of adjustment, sacrifice and compromise to her male counterpart. While they are visiting Goa for a family holiday, Astha wishes to purchase an antique silver box but Hemant refuses to possess it. The conversation between Astha and Hemant turns out to be revealing, “I also earn. Can’t I buy a box if I want, even if it is a little overpriced?” ‘You earn!’ snorted Hemant. ‘What you earn, now that is really something, yes, that will pay for this holiday.’”

(AMW 165) Such oppressive and suppressive attitude of man poses constraints on woman to be an autonomous being in spite of financial independence. Therefore, in Astha's family, everything turns out to be decided by Hemant. Thus she feels, "their money spending was decided by him, not by her." (AMW 167) However, Hemant refuses to buy a box is deeply hurt and injured Astha's dignity and self independence. This attitude prompts her to develop a feeling of guilt, negativity and lack of self esteem in facing the challenges of life. Thus Sharma & Maheshwari asserts, "Astha understands a married woman's place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death in Indian status." (Sharma & Maheshwari 145)

Astha's involvement in "The Street Theatre Group" lends her to the quest for identity. Aijaz is a history lecturer and founder of such theatre group. He is a man who motivates and awakens Astha's social spirit and socializes her thinking. She also finds new taste engaging in social issues. When she writes the script on the burning issues of Babri Masjid and Ram Janambhoomi to be dramatized in school, her intelligent and talented mind is appreciated by Aijaz. But, she does not get such gratitude from her husband even if he knows his wife is a writer as well as painter. Therefore, Ishwar states, "She feels somewhat suffocated, exploited and unnoticed at home. It is Aijaz's trust which motivates her to think out of the house. He makes her think about the ongoing socio-political activities which become her future interest." (Ishwar 2) Astha is deeply involved in workshop organized by the theatre group despite of her husband's annoyance. During the workshop, a tender feeling developed between Astha and Aijaz. On the other hand, Aijaz and his troupe members are dragged and murdered while performing a play on Babri Masjid Ram Janambhoomi controversy. The death of Aijaz motivates and leads Astha to emerge as a social activist and starts taking part in rallies for justice, in spite of much resistance from her husband and in-laws. Besides this, Astha is busy in painting for the donation of an exhibition set up in memory of The Street Theatre Group. Hemant tells her to give up her job as she gives more time on painting and nothing else and even forgets the responsibilities of a family. He further tells Astha, her working never brought enough money at all. But, Astha who seeks for self independence and self fulfillment in return expresses "I want something of my own." (AMW 148) She wishes to make enough money out of her painting in order to rent her own studio one day. Like Woolf asserts in her book *A Room of One's Own* "a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction." (Woolf 13) Astha also says, "I need more space" (AMW 156) and asks the room which belongs to his sister Sangeeta so that she can work peacefully but Hemant refuses to give her demand. Thus, Astha becomes very angry and "finally she steeled herself, she shut the door, and if disturbed too often locked it. In this way a certain uneasy privacy was granted her." (AMW 157) Above this, she is also sick of her frequent sacrifice for family but now "she didn't want to be pushed around in the name of family. She was fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail." (AMW 168)

Asha is a woman who seeks a space of her own and also desires to enjoy her life not only within the house but also outside world. She is decided to go to the meeting of the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch to make protest and demonstrate outside Rashtrapati Bhavan as an anniversary of the massacre and to condemn the decisions of building up the temple of Lord Ram at the place of Masjid, But, Hemant is against her wishes and tries to stop her. He claims, "You seem to forget that your place as a decent family woman is in the home, and not on the streets." (AMW 172)

Above all this, Astha has decided to go to Ayodhya as the Munch insists to deliver a speech on the public meeting in spite of her husband and mother-in-law's constraint attitude. She also has a strong desire to be part of social issues and to graph her course as a social activist to fight against old oppression and suppression of patriarchal society. Her visits to Ayodhya give a new dimension in her life. There, she meets Pipeelika, the wife of Aijaz. During their stay, they visit various places and temples and establish a new relationship called lesbian relation. Ashok Kumar asserts, "Astha likes to have a break from dependence on others and proceeds on the path of full human status that poses in threat to Hemant and his male superiority. Although, she finds herself trapped between the pressure of the modern developing society and shackles of ancient biases she set out on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationship. (Kumar 134) Astha falls in love with Pipeelika. She finds satisfaction around the arms of Pipee. Unlike her husband, Pipee seems to be more understanding, loving and caring towards her. Therefore their few meeting established a physical relationship and they become uneasy and restless if they don't meet for one day. Such relationship between them explores clashes between Astha and her husband. However, their relationship rebels against man's attitude and his superiority by exhibiting their quest for freedom as well as asserting self independence in a male dominated society. Astha refuses being close with Hemant after she found condom from his bag and instead show more interest in Pipee. At the same time, she avoids being together with him on any issue as he is so indifferent and lacks of understanding of her emotions. On the other side, Pipee brainwashes her by saying that true love cannot be felt at bodily level only but it should ensure union of souls, emotions and ideologies. Thus, she feels, "men were so pathetic, so fucked up themselves, they only understood the physical, and in this way she felt soothed." (AMW 219) When Hemant desires to make love with her, Astha tells him, "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." (AMW 224) Verma comments, "For Astha a marital life meant participating in all activities, discussing all issues with her husband but for Hemant this relationship meant physical relationship and just fulfilling the need of his wife." (Verma 56)

Her association with Pipeelika gives a new turn to her quest for identity and self fulfillment. There is a conflict between the roles and responsibilities of a wife, mother, daughter in law and that of a lover. Astha is also trapped in dilemma between her desire for freedom and her obligations toward family, whether she should stay within the traditional family or she should run away for self independence. But, Astha realizes a large part of her life belongs to her children and recognizes her traditional and social responsibility as the wife of Hemant. Therefore she feels, "A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth were the necessary prerequisites of Hemant's wife." (AMW 231) On the other side, Pipee tries to separate Astha from her husband who neither appreciates nor understands her in order to give a full commitment to her love. Astha wants to move these two passages keeping in balance side by side, without giving up either one of them. But as a wife and mother of two children, Astha tells Pipee;

"I love you, you know how much you meant to me, I try and prove it every moment we have together, but I can't abandon my family, I can't. Maybe I should not have looked for my happiness, but I can't help myself. I suppose you think I should not be in a relationship, but I had not foreseen...I'm sorry I am not like you." (AMW 242)

On the other hand, when Astha gets all the comfort and affection from Pipee that she doesn't receive from Hemant, she thinks, "...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." (AMW 243) Therefore, the marital relation of Astha and Hemant turns out to be devastated. Astha realizes herself as a faithless wife and accepts the miseries that come to her life. Therefore, she feels,

"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 made love it was Pipee's face Astha saw, her hand she felt. She accepted the misery of this dislocation as her due for being a faithless wife." (AMW 287)

Astha is on the verge of taking decision about her life with Hemant, her conventional marriage and traditional family life for Pipee. She decides to abandon her home, husband, children so that she would be able to live her life on her own term. But, Pipeelika receives a letter from her brother Ajay who is staying in America. The letter is about sponsorship registration of PhD in an American University. Pipee informs to Astha that she is leaving India for her further studies in America. Astha feels that her life is again deceived but significant. Thus Astha returns to her own conventional married life. Rajput asserts, "Astha and Pipee both are living under illusion of making themselves free from male bondage but when their freedom is weighed on the scale of morality, values and maintenance of family peace, they stand nowhere." (Rajpur 117)

To conclude, Kapur shows that in Indian patriarchal society where tradition is so strong a woman fails to get out of such bondage and carve a separate identity of her own. Thus, the two women Astha and Pipeelika ultimately compromise and find their own ways, knowing that they cannot have a future together. Astha, in her quest for self identity and full independence in life comes across various stages through various relationships and even enters the socially forbidden relationship i.e. the lesbian relation. But, she fails and turns back to her own conventional married life after realizing that a woman's real position lies within the family. Therefore, Astha represents the image of new woman who longs to have her own space in the traditional patriarchal society.

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