

Negotiating Female Agency in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur, a famous Indian women writer in English, focuses on the issue of lesbianism in her second novel *A Married Woman*. The Lesbian sexuality re-defines the very idea of 'new woman'. The author theorizes women's resistance and proves that women are capable of endangering subjective and emancipatory epiphanies. Women are capable of renouncing the social compass that directs identity formation and articulate self-composed discourses.

KEYWORDS

Lesbianism; Emancipatory; Identity.

Women's body is the site which is continuously exposed to the array of social and cultural ideologies that impact their identities in multiple ways. Women are engaged in subverting these practices through negotiation, strategizing and contestation. Women are engaged in the twin process of compliance and resistance, submission and rebellion, silence and speech, to assert their identity as women. It is important for women to view and construct their embodied self on what they consider their own terms and not as defined by some external agencies. They are capable of challenging dominant gender norms and altering certain 'normalizing' practices, thereby making their lives worth living.

Manju Kapur focuses on the emergence of the lesbian as a cultural and

political subject. The rising consumer class of the 1980s and 1990s and the economic liberalization of the 1990s saw a shift in the attitudes to sexuality. The 'new woman' who emerged during this period is signified by and celebrated for her sexual overtness. In the novel *A Married Woman* Astha, the protagonist of the novel is brought up according to the norms of middle class traditional society in which there is apparent suppression of women sexuality and desire. But she negotiates the social and sexual standards of the dominant culture and tries to establish her identity by having temporary involvement with Bunty and fleeting love relationship with Rohan. She enjoys autonomy and independence but to a limited degree. Rohan ditches her and breaks her heart. Her parents exercise their patriarchal

power to regulate her sexuality and control her assertiveness by forcing her into an arranged marriage.

Astha imbibes middle class values which instills the notion that as a married woman her position is secondary to Hemant. As an intellectual being she suffers from a sense of incompleteness in her married life. She wants to give meaning to her life but finds her life given to drudgery and self-negation.

"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." (50)

Being a modern, educated woman she takes up the job of a teacher as "there was pleasure of interacting with minds instead of needs." (72) She has the natural gift of sketching and creative writing. She snatches any short interval which accidentally, happens to be. To escape from the monotony of her married life and give expression to creative faculties she involves herself in writing a play for a street theatre group under the supervision of theatre activist Aijaz. She connects with a social group and makes a few paintings to be sold in an exhibition sponsored by the Manch and expresses her self-imposed loneliness in art:

As her brush moved carefully over the canvas, her hand grew sure, her back strengthened, 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)

Manju Kapur's protagonists defy patriarchal notions that enforce women towards domesticity. They assert their individuality and aspire for self-reliance. Astha soon realizes, "a willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth are the

essential prerequisites of a married woman." (231) She exerts her agency and interrogates socio-cultural constructs:

Discussing her feeling with Hemant usually led to argument, distance and greater misery but in the struggle to express herself she found temporary relief and suddenly her life seemed less constricted. (79)

Her resistance and interrogation emphasize non-compliance to the system of power that poses threat to dominant ideology. She changes from a woman who wants love to a woman who values independence. In the course of time, she gets more involved in political and social activities. Hemant tries to impose restraint on her, "keep to what you know best, the home, children, teaching. All this doesn't suit you." (116) but Astha defies him and the traditional entrapment of daughter-wife-mother. Being sick of sacrifice, she is "fed up with Indian womanhood used to trap and jail." (168) And as an awakened, educated and intellectual soul, she sets out on her quest for a more meaningful life and on the path of full human status.

Awakened by her sense of duty to society, when Aijaz is killed, she joins the massive protest rally. Hemant complains "as wife, you think it proper to run around abandoning home, leaving the children to the servants." Astha analyses her position "as his wife? Was that all she was?" (188) She shows resistance to dominant patriarchal ideology and challenges socially constructed and narrowly determined, gender role expectations defined by masculine hegemony and goes to Ayodhya and gives an emphatic speech on the global issue- violence and when asked by her husband "Why do you have to travel to Ayodhya?" retorts, "It is important for everyone to do what they can, to make things better, you have to try." (212)

Astha challenges the dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist unquestionable, knowing that deviance of

any sort would be condemned. She exercises her individual choice and establishes relationship with Pipeelika to find refuge from the tyranny of heterosexual relationship. She comes to realize that marriage is not sex but also interest, togetherness and respect. She pens down her own concept of marriage:

maybe 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 want. To be more yourself because all of you is able to love in a way the other responds of, (260)

and with Hemant

she felt like a woman of straw, her inner life dead, with a man who noticed nothing. (287)

Astha has never been interested in breaking the mold of heterosexuality but she finally steps outside the conventions of her middle class life and her internalized gender training by starting an affair with Pipe. In Pipee's opinion, "It is more a question of choice than people make out. That is what I believe at any rate. Besides, sex is sex, don't you think? It is other things that become important." (220). This homosexuality is not natural but forced on them by the repressive circumstances of repression, lack of freedom and loneliness. For these women, their self-identification as women who love each other means both a statement of free sexual choice, as well as repudiation of patriarchy. Challenging heterosexuality requires a multiple struggle against social habit. It requires in short, a re-drawing of economic, social and sexual power. Now sexually involved with

another, Astha realized, "How many facets of the relationship between her husband and herself reflected power than love." (233)

For some time, the female protagonist rejects the rules of a ritual bound society to seek autonomy. She challenges the patriarchal heterosexual power structures, which have invalidated and stigmatized lesbianism/homosexuality. The lesbian pair creates their own world within the larger mainstream heterosexual world and feel proud of it; thereby effecting a crucial reversal in the subject position. Their relationship foregrounds questions of female desire outside patriarchal scaffolding. Through its explicit portrayal of lesbian sexuality the story reveals the under belly of Indian society and the possibilities available for agency and the expression of female desire. Overall it offers simplistically sexual expression as the vehicle of female liberation.

Irrespective of whether in the end the writer endorses sexual behaviour or not, the very fact that Astha is allowed some sort of sexual autonomy in the midst of a scenario of confinement, subjugation, depression, repression and social ridicule leaves behind an emphatic message. Through the representation of lesbian desire as ultimately about the routine nature of female same-sex desire, which is under wraps only because of patriarchal structure of society, run by men and acceded to by women, the novel maybe seen as fighting for the rights of women who love and want to live with women in different ways.

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