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## **LESBIANISM AND WOMANISM: A STUDY OF MANJU KAPUR'S *A MARRIED WOMAN***

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### **Abstract**

*A Married Woman* is the second novel of Manju Kapur, published in 2002. It is the story of a female since her childhood to a mature married woman. The novel depicts the vulnerability and biased upbringing of a girl just to make her ready enough to fit into the socially and culturally pre-set role of a daughter-in-law in a conventional Indian family. These traditionally approved roles and pre-determined Lakshman Rekha or boundaries beyond which Indian female is forbidden to venture. The protagonist of the novel, Astha is not allowed to voice her grievances by her parents and in-laws and when she is not given that much respect and love she rightly deserved, she looks outside her family in search of her identity, existence, respect, independence and true love. She finds that comfort and solace in a lesbian relationship with her friend Pipeelika Trivedi (a widow). The novel skillfully underlined the need to comprehend the fact that Indian females are quite capable of having equal parts in political economic and social issues. Since her childhood, Astha is being fed chunks and pieces of irrationally followed moral ethics and conventional norms that dictate what a girl should or should not do and what are her pre-determined limits and protocols in matter of her post-marriage life.

### **Keywords**

Lesbianism, Patriarchy, Heterosexuality, Biased, Identity, Bisexual.

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In the field of Indian English Literature, women writers hold the prestigious position, particularly Indian women novelists who delineate Indian women with outstanding skill and ease in their works of fiction. Manju Kapur is one of those novelists who solemnly voice the concern of the middle class Indian women and society in her works. She was born in 1948 and the author of six successful novels. Her works are usually considered feminist in nature and most of her novels are considered to be the pensive tale of human relationships. In all her works, readers find the delineation of man-woman relationship with special reference of modernity and its adverse effect. She basically focuses on the circumstances how human relationship is being affected by internal as well as external factors from time to time. The modern issues like high ambitions, disloyalty, bewilderment, self-centeredness etc. seem to deform the real concept of human relationship in the modern era. In almost all her novels, the protagonist tries to find out a new and separate place where she can cherish her freedom without relying on patriarchal world.

In the novel *A Married Woman* Kapur seems to find out the different alternatives of man-woman relationship. She tries to portray a new role, new existence and new incarnation of women. Initially Astha, wife of Hemant seems an ideal Indian woman who is good daughter, a lovely wife and a devoted mother but as the story develops, readers gradually realize that Astha is completely unorthodox and goes beyond in defining new role and liberty for her womanism. The novelist tries to represent the image of modern woman through the character of Astha. She shows her rebellious nature in dealing with her independence and liberty. Through the novel *A Married Woman*, it is seen a systematic and specific pattern in depicting the concept of new woman in India. Kapur has presented the struggle of woman in the transformation of society where age-old traditions and conventions are subjected to be re-shaped and re-defined.

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Her protagonists are strong enough to challenge age old traditions and patriarchal society. They do not fear to break the conventional norms which become the barrier to achieve their dreams and aspirations. Astha, the protagonist of the novel is the powerful exponent of Kapur's idea of feminism, which she always tries to cultivate through women characters. As the novel *A Married Woman* is set with the backdrop of modern life where love, loyalty, satisfaction, devotion like feelings are absent. The Babri Masjid demolition symbolizes the demolition of human values. The novelist puts the events together in such a way which helps us to take up the incident as a metaphor. Astha's marriage demolishes just like the Babri Masjid that could not make a bridge of the two religious groups of the country.

The novelist presents the character of an Indian woman in a new way where Astha, a married woman breaks the pre set norms of heterosexuality (through her relationship with Pipee), domesticity (through political activism and creative expression) and an imposed Hindu idealism (through her deep involvement with a Muslim activist Aijaz). Even after having a married life, Astha lied, cheated on her husband with Pipee and always tries to convince her mother to take care of her children and household while she is in the company of her lover Pipee. She does all these things because her relationship with Pip gives her satisfaction; and makes her feel important, loved and wanted. She thinks while comparing Hemant and Pip:

When...(Astha) 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 they made love it was Pipee's face Astha saw, her hands she felt. She accepted the misery of this dislocation as her due for being a faithless wife.<sup>1</sup>

Another reason for being disloyal to her husband is that Astha also suspected Hemant for having an affair during his foreign trips as he has many chances to commit adultery. In her opinion:

Thought of all the late nights (he had spent) at the factory, the trips out of town, the extended trips to South-East Asia, the condom, the many opportunities there must have been, but I said nothing.<sup>2</sup>

Her marital sex turns passionless event which seems as if their physical intercourse is the last and the only pillar on which Astha and Hemant's married life based on. During a family trip to USA when Astha questions her importance in his life and finds no response, she offended:

You think marriage is just sex... Is that what you call it, chasing? Not having sex on demand? There has to be something more between us. I have to feel it is me you want.<sup>3</sup>

Astha actually wants Hamant to give her respect and a sense of togetherness which she wants to feels and cherish but when she does not get it from her husband and gets soothing company of Pip. She starts giving her more attention to Pip then her husband and family. Above

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all, initially this relationship with Pip does not make Astha guilty because in her opinion, they both are women that do not give any clue of suspicion or doubt but gradually she realizes her mistake and gets back to her pavilion.

The inner experiences of Indian women within the familial sphere of house has been documented in the form of fiction by Indian authors who represent a negotiation of desires between the private and public sphere; likewise Astha's life emerges as a negotiation of desires between her house (private and public sphere) and her participation in activities outside the house (public and political sphere). She tries to maintain the balance between the both as she tries to be a good wife, mother and daughter-in-law at home, at the same time she also tries to reshape her national and religious identities through her active participation and involvement in public arena and social awareness activities. An emotionless husband, interfering mother-in-law and disappointing mother makes Astha to escape from her life and finds solace in Pipee's comforting arms.

It is the novelist's skill that she craftily weaved the plots and subplots with the different incidents of the domestic as well as political turmoil. Astha's decision of going Ayodhya with Pipeelika, leaving her husband and children for almost one month shows the emergence of a bold, courageous new woman in traditional patriarchal Indian scenario who wants to establish her identity separately in public arena. Her lesbian relationship with Pipee also depicts her efforts to break out the age-old conservative views and notions about hetero-sexuality.

Manju Kapur presents both the diversity of woman and the diversity within each woman rather than controlling their lives to one pre-set ideal image. Kapur's women protagonists are not tortured physically by their husbands or in-laws but they are suffered mentally or psychologically. Though they are conscious about their rights but knowingly or unknowingly they are kept dependent on their husband even to fulfill their basic needs. On the contrary, they are rooted in conventional background but they are always emerged as strong individual at the end of the novel.

*A Married Woman* explores the inner journey of her protagonist's mind from imprisonment to liberation which shows novelist's mature understanding of female psyche and inner subtlety of a woman's mind. Since ancient time, woman has been chained with ideal female concept of softness, sacrifice, sympathy and duty. On this, famous feminist Simone De Beauvoir has aptly remarked:

It is not by increasing her worth as human being that she will gain value in man's eyes; it is rather by modeling herself on their dreams.<sup>4</sup>

The novel *A Married Woman* has been a controversial novel because of its different theme, it focuses on the emergence of hetero-sexualism which is often considered abnormal in Indian society. On lesbianism, a well known critic Suzanne Pharr comments:

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To be a lesbian is to be perceived as someone who has stepped out of line, who has moved out of sexual/economic dependence on a male, who is woman identified.<sup>5</sup>

On analyzing the reasons why Astha indulges herself in lesbian relationship, one concludes that initially it was Aijaz to whom Astha attracted but after Aijaz's death; she comes to know about her widow Pipeelika with whom she felt flourished, independent individual. Though it was completely unethical and unconventional, she indulges herself in such relationship even after knowing its result. Describing the first physical intimacy of the lesbian, the narrator states:

In between (the sex) they talked, the talk of discovery and attraction, of the history of a three month relationship, the teasing and pleasure of an intimacy that was complete and absolute, expressed through minds as much as bodies.<sup>6</sup>

However, it becomes very difficult for Astha to face her family after her first sexual encounter with Pipee. The novelist writes:

She (Astha) returned home in a daze. As she neared her house, she succumbed to panic, she was a mother, and nothing should disturb that. For a brief and guilty moment she wished she was like Pipee, alone and free, but she checked herself. A large part of her belonged to her children that was how she lived her life. She couldn't imagine any other way.<sup>7</sup>

Astha's affair with Pipee can be called as 'the wife's (Astha) revenge' on her husband (Hemant) who believes that 'women are always mind-fucking'. When she stays at Bangalore on her Ekta Yatra with Pipee, Astha realizes the physiological and psychological similarities she shared with her lover Pipee.

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 mean it. To be more yourself because all of you is able to love in a way the other respond to.... Why can't I live here (in Bangalore) forever with her (Pipee), forget I have a life outside this room, this bed, these arms, this mind that sees me the way I am and loves me still.<sup>8</sup>

It concludes that she was happier living with Pipee than with Hemant. Astha's choice of becoming a bisexual can be given a term i.e. *Wife's Revenge* or a desperate urge for cherishing some emotional and relational comfort. But many questions like Does she have a future with Pipee? Will she really be able to break all ties with her past life- leave her children, her husband for good- and make a fresh start with Pipee? Will her social, moral and familial obligation come in the way of her new promising life with her best friend that is full of unconditional love and understanding? makes her numb and finally she returns to her family and husband. Thus after analyzing the relationship between Astha and Pipeelika, one can conclude that their lesbian relationship has less to do with sex.

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