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Manju Kapur's a married woman: Theme of female struggle

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Abstract

From a feminist point of view the study of novel reveals Astha's revolt against age old customs, traditions, one sided family values and the institution of marriage. She is the woman who asks a bit more of life than tradition will automatically give her. She wishes instead of security, comfort and respectability, her emotions and spiritual needs to be recognized.

Keywords: Revolt against traditions, main domination and marginalization

Introduction

Manju Kapur continued with the theme of female struggle and her strive of breaking up of the shackles of cruel tradition in her second novel, A Married Woman. The story of this novel created a sensation after its publication. In this context Dr. Kumar explains – 'A Married Woman [2002] was the second novel by Manju Kapur once again underlining and articulating the central concerns of Indian woman. In this novel Astha, the young heroine, is the representative of the woman striving to gain their space in life and socio-cultural domains. Like Difficult Daughters [1998] the theme of patriarchal bondage runs deep in the story ^[1].'

The novel deals with the real practical problems of a woman pre and post marriage. Astha is the only child of her parents and hence her parents have a lot of expectations from her. Therefore, she is brought up and nurtured in a usual atmosphere of a middle class family. Her father continuously warns her to do hard work in her studies. His purpose behind it is not to make her independent only. He is worried to find a good husband for her. He is not the only person who is worried about her marriage, but Astha's mother is also thinking on the same line. The beginning is conventional, highlighting traditional, middle class Indian attitudes towards marriage. The way Astha's mother gradually collects a spoon by spoon, a sheet by sheet and jewellery by jewellery for her daughter's marriage locates the story and defines the ambience in which the plot is to be unfolded. Her mother believes that if parents die before their daughter gets married they can't get peace. The parents nurture Astha in such a way that she can get a perfect match for herself. She is forced to do morning walk and Pranayam with her parents. Perhaps this sort of motivation has affected the psychology of Astha very deeply. Perhaps it is because of her parents over cautiousness, Astha begins to think that getting love is the only aim of this life. She begins to imagine:

"a shadowy young man holding her in his strong manly embrace ^[2]."

She is a prey to unclear longings to such an extent that she desires almost every boy she sees with a thought in her mind. It is also true that under her dreamy nature, she falls in love, first of all with Bunty and then with Rohan. Astha falls in love with Bunty in the very first meeting therefore it can be called love at first sight. Astha's affection in her teenage towards Bunty is quite natural, and she is not able to leave her memory for him. Manju Kapur describes Astha's mental state:

"Day and night the thought of him kept her insides churning; she was unable to eat, sleep, or study ^[3]."

Astha is stunned by the sensation of love. She is unable to eat, sleep and study. This is true only in case of Astha and not in case of Bunty as he doesn't have this feeling. As a result, Astha has to take initiative. In general it is man who takes initiative in love affairs.

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It is he who follows, plans and woos. This is reversed in the case of Astha. It is she who takes all the initiation first. She invites Bunty for a movie. She writes him letters when he is in the Academy and starts flirting. But it does not last long as her mother interferes and her fancies end in tears.

After her breakup from Bunty, she finds a new love in the arms of Rohan whom she meets in the final year of her college. She has also a physical relationship with him. In Indian society it is not tolerated to have physical relationship with anyone before marriage. Therefore, Astha lies about her visits and doings to her mother. She goes with Rohan in his old Vauxhall, frequently in the evening. For that she pretends of evening walk. She enjoys her meeting with Rohan until mob catch them in the act. This affair also ends when Rohan moves to Oxford for his further studies. Being a student of English literature and grown up in the modern society of Delhi, she is not a firm believer in culture and tradition. Even she is not interested in the person whom she doesn't know or whom she doesn't love. Finally she gets married to Hemant. After marriage they go to Srinagar for their honeymoon. She is very happy as her husband takes her every care and does everything that he finds useful in making their honeymoon memorable. After honeymoon, they come back to Delhi and Astha sinks herself in the role of daughter-in-law. Her time is spent visiting and shopping in the morning and more:

Back in Delhi, Astha submerged herself in the role of daughter-in-law and wife. The time spent in the kitchen experimenting with new dishes was time spent in the service of love and marriage. Hemant's clothes she treated with reverence, sliding each shirt in his drawers a quarter centimeter out from the one above so they were easily visible, darned all the tiny holes in his socks, arranging his pants on cloth-wrapped hangers so there would be no crease. With her mother-in-law she visited and shopped in the mornings, the memory of the night past, and the expectation of the night to come insulting her from any tedium she might otherwise have felt ^[4].

She proves herself an accountable, affectionate, considerate and dedicated daughter-in-law and wife. Both of them are satisfied with each other. She forgets Bunty and Rohan. Now, Hemant is everything for her. His presence gives a real pleasure for her. She hopes to enjoy every moment in his arms. She as a partner in Hemant's life tries to console him every time. After two years of her marriage, like other married woman, she also wants to become mother. She does not ignore the concept of womanhood like other women from fashionable and aristocratic society. She enjoys each and every moment of her pregnancy.

Then there is transformation in the relationship between Hemant and Astha. Because of too many responsibilities, Hemant begins to give very little time to Astha. In the beginning, Astha fails to understand this. Astha wants to be close with him but Hemant fails to maintain balance between his occupation and his wife's passionate fulfillment. One day, Astha falters and demands to have a better relationship between them and the quarrel begins.

"There is nothing wrong with our relationship."

"Are you saying there is something wrong with me?"

"You said it, not I."

"But i am not happy, so how can you....."

"You think too much, that is the trouble ^[5]."

Now Astha understands the meaning of marriage, for her, it means sacrifice of everything on the part of woman. As there is no inner satisfaction in her life, she wants to do something

for herself. She joins a school as a teacher. It brings changes into her life slowly but steadily. Her personality began to explore. During her job as a teacher, she comes in touch with new phases and areas of life and she begins to take interest in external affairs. Her school organizes a workshop. In this workshop she happens to meet Aijaz and is fascinated by the multifarious personality of Aijaz. Her inborn instinct of searching for love arises here. Though she was a mother of two children, she is attracted to Aijaz but this relationship does not flourish. She feels very shocked when Hemant shows her the news of Aijaz's murder. Being an artist, she realizes the deepest pain and agony inside her.

"Astha could not read further for the tears in her eyes. She turned away her head to cry some more ^[6]."

Astha has a strong desire for sex and physical relationship from the very beginning, however, Hemant seems to be unaware of this fact. Hemant's sense of antipathy increases commotion and havoc in her heart. She finds it difficult in the company of Hemant. Even the trifle things make her restless and unbearable. She herself thinks that she could have done many things with money spent on Goa trip.

"She thought hopelessly of all the things she could have done with that money, of the beautiful silver box she could have possessed and she could be admired forever ^[7]."

Astha wants to live her life in her own ways. However, she thinks that as she is a woman, she is made to do a lot of sacrifices. But she, being a contemporary woman, doesn't want to sacrifice her dreams, pleasures and freedom in the name of family. She is fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood. She compares her situations and conditions to that of Hemant. When in order to deliver a speech on behalf of Manch. Astha goes to Ayodhya, she meets Pipeelika Khan, a widow of Aijaz. She is attracted towards her. After they come back to Delhi, they begin to meet each other again and again. One day Pip suddenly asks her:

"Have you ever been in a relationship with a woman ^[8]?"

For Astha, it is something strange. From her childhood, she has imagined only about the manly hug. She has never seen woman from this point of view. But as she lives in Pip's company and feels attracted towards her, she cannot resist her from having relationship with Pip and finally a lesbian relationship begins to develop between them. In the course of time, both of them try to find a perfect partner in each other. Though for Astha this relationship is strange and awkward, she shares every secret of her life with Pip which she hesitated to share with her mother or her husband, Hemant. Gradually, their relationship becomes more and more demanding. On one hand, Pipee wants Astha wholly devoted to her and on the other hand, Astha does not want to break away from her family. Astha wants to navigate in both vessels. She also wants to leave everything for the sake of Pipee but she is well aware that a married woman's world in Indian culture is her family. Perhaps, at this juncture, Astha doesn't find herself strong and bold enough to leave her marriage and live with Pipee. Therefore, the relationship breaks up.

Hence, Manju Kapur's Astha, the protagonist of *A Married Woman* is different. She turns to lesbian questing for emotional fulfillment and challenging the ego-centricism of her husband, who looks for heterosexual love even outside marriage for her self-fulfillment and handles sex like drinking water. Astha is unusual even from Virmati of Manju Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughters* who transgresses social code having married the man of her choice against the

desires of her mother like Ammu of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* and Saru of Deshpande's *The Dark Holds No Terror*. Being cheated and dominated by their husbands these women fight and rebel against their suppression. In their emotional upheavals they don't bend down to surmount rather break the rules of society.

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