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MANJU KAPUR'S "A MARRIED WOMAN" AND THE SEARCH FOR A DISTINCT IDENTITY

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ABSTRACT

In the galaxy of Indian novelists in English, Indian woman writers too shine luminously like their male counterparts by their significant contributions to the enrichment of Indian English novels. In the past, the works of women writers were undervalued due to some patriarchal assumptions. Women were confined within an enclosed arena. It is observed that the writers explicate the whole world of women with simply stunning frankness. Indian woman novelists have turned towards the woman's world with great introspective intensity and authenticity. Such stalwart literary figures are Kiran Desai, Shashi Despande, Kamala Markandaya, Manju Kapur and so on. Manju Kapur is such an eminent figure who needs no introduction. The idea that all woman meant to get married and be submissive to their husbands was allotted a second look when we go through the books of Manju Kapur. She inspires women to cross the threshold of family life. She grapples with the intermingling of traditional and modern ethos. In this paper, I delve into the question of searching for a distinct identity in special reference to Manju Kapur's, "A Married Woman".

Key words: galaxy, enrichment, authenticity, submissive, distinctive identity

INTRODUCTION

Marriage is a very sacred thing. It holds a great significance in Indian culture. It is assumed as a union of two souls. It embodies trust, co-operation, honesty, commitment and understanding. Both of the counterparts encompass the duties and responsibilities to run the married life smoothly. In traditionally, all of the duties, compromises, and limitations were assigned for women. Women were confined in four walls. Gradually it incurred suffocation in them. They revolted against the puppet treatment of patriarchal system. It results in the emergence of a number of new revolutionary stars in the literary sky. They left their indelible imprints through their works. Woman

writers in our country have fought for their space and evinced to the world that women are not condemned to silence and that speech can empower them. Their work is significant in making society aware of women's demands, providing a medium for self-expression, rewriting the history of India, reconstructing stereotypical images and reassuring the status of women.

Manju Kapur's work is a woman activist's talk not on the grounds that she is a lady expounding on women's issues. But she tries to comprehend a lady both as a lady and an individual pressurized by obvious and imperceptible contexts. She explores the middle class woman's cultural identity and the struggle for the self. In the fiction of

Manju Kapur, the role of woman has undergone a significant alteration. Her writing is merely an analysis of female character and cultural identity. She describes a female character in a real way. In depicting, the inner subtlety of a woman's mind, Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female Psyche. The woman in the novels of Manju Kapur is personified as a new female who struggles against the social evil customs. The protagonists of her novels try to break the tradition of silence. Experiencing disgusting absurdity, her protagonists try to nourish the estranged self in a meaningless and chaotic world. Her concern with and search for the causes of human suffering lends intensity and depth to her writings.

Women, under the patriarchal pressure and control, are subjected to too much more burns and social ostracism. They are more discriminated and are biased in lieu of their sex. Women live and struggle under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society are reflected in the writings of Manju Kapur. She delves deep into the psyche of her women characters where she finds them struggling to strike a balance between self and society. She depicts the exploration of the disturbed psyche of the Indian woman laying emphasis on the factors of loneliness and alienation. Her novels portray the inner lives of hyper sensitive women who are in eternal quest for meaningful life. Her protagonists suffer intensely because of their futile attempt to find emotional contact, response and understanding. She is concerned with the psychological mind of Indian woman who undergo inexpressible sufferings in their marital life.

We see the budding of new women in Manju Kapur's heroines, who do not want to be rubber dolls for others to move as they will. Defying patriarchal notions that enforce women towards domesticity, they assert their individuality and aspire self-reliance through education. They nurture the desire of being independent and leading lives of their own. Kapur highlights the factors which curbs the freedom of the female to live, grow and actualize herself the way men do. The manner in which religion, tradition and myth are misused to condition women into an acceptance of their secondary status causing them to lead

claustrophobia and circumscribed lives. The female protagonists resist and overcome the ideological suppression and reshape ideals to re-invent themselves in a meaningful way. In this sense, her novels are a significant contribution towards the realm of Indian English fiction and feminist psycho analysis in India.

In her novel "A Married Woman", Manju Kapur has taken writing as a protest, a way of mapping from the point of a woman's experience. This novel is a sincere confession of a woman about her personality cult in the verge of a bad marriage. The novel raises the controversial issue of homosexual relationship in a challenging way. This is getting more and more visible in the modern society, though we may or may not accept it.

The novel "A Married woman" revolves around Astha. It talks about the different stages of a woman, pre and post marriage. By keeping the traditional values, Astha's parents are desperate for her marriage. The mother of Astha has the opinion:

"There is time for everything. The girl is blossoming now. When the fruit is ripe, it has to be picked. Later she might get into wrong company and we will be left, ringing our hands. If she marries at this age, she will have no problem for adjusting. We too are not so young that we can afford to wait" (kapur,20)

Hemant is an MBA from America and serves as an Assistant manager in a bank in Delhi. Hemant seems to match her dream of an ideal husband in the beginning of their married life and this marriage seems to fulfill her girlish dreams. Astha belongs to a typical middle class family but she breaks the chain of her traditional family. Before marriage she fell in love with a man. These all romantic feelings of love flutter in her virgin heart right from teen age. But this episode soon comes to an end when Astha's mother complains against it to Bunty's parents. During her final year of graduation, her aching heart finds relaxation in the luxurious ambience of Rohan. Astha's aspirations receive a bolt from the blue to know Rohan's departure from her life. Rohan goes to Oxford for higher education.

In her early days of marriage, she enjoys life. She was better half of Hemant, but from the

firmament of romance, one has to come down to the ground of realism. Then their marriage falls into the expected pattern. When Astha was expecting her first child, her mother-in-law wishes her to have a boy. Kapur depicts such tugs of war within a world of gender politics, where male figures and female agents of patriarchy set the limits within which women must struggle for their version of individuality. Their first child is a girl. Hemant's desire to have a son makes Astha dissatisfied and uneasy. When Astha is pregnant for the second time, everyone hopes for the birth of a son.

"When Astha's son was finally born, she felt a gratitude as profound as it was shamedher status rose.....she was fulfilled." (Kapur,68)

Gradually Astha turns to write poetry and this alleviates the heaviness within her. But Hemant thinks these emotional outpouring as "positively neurotic". Art is a refuge to her, she struggles to express herself, put her thoughts on the canvas. Her ideas and opinions are perpetually belittled by her husband and her needs as a person are generally trampled by her responsibilities towards her family.

Her life takes a different turn, when Aijaz comes to the school where she teaches. He asks her to develop the script for a play centered on Babri masjid turmoil. This is the first time when Astha encounters a man who appreciates her talent and therefore feels drawn to him, but he is brutally murdered. Her aching heart gets some relief in the caring words of Aijaz. It allots a sense to her emotional need.

As a married woman, Astha becomes an enduring wife and sacrificing mother. Her temperamental incompatibility with her corporate thinking husband compels her to play the role of "mother and father" for her children. This denies her self-fulfillment and leads to the collapse of the institution of marriage. Restlessness drives her to enjoy absolute loneliness, a sort of entrapment by the family, its commitments, its subtle oppression and she yearns for freedom. She is suffocated with the growing needs of her family and "always adjusting to everybody's needs". Astha understands a married woman's place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thinking of

divorce brings social and economic death in her Indian status. It incurs a feeling in her:

"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."(Kapur 231)

The novel is studded with a lot of incidents one can relate to. It opens many aspects which cannot be underestimated. A thing like Hemant does not involve Astha in any of the financial decisions, and the way Hemant does not understand her feelings at all and still Astha has to carry on the charade of a happy married life just for the sake of her children and her family. Astha's state of mind and her sensitive nature cannot be understood by Hemant and her family. Astha suffers humiliation and exploitation by the elders and society.

Manju Kapur believes that the woman needs more than bread, butter and physical comfort. They want to satisfy their emotional hunger from their male counterparts. Astha's diversion towards Aijaz is due to her dislike for a routine life of a married woman in Hindu society. Her individuality, her longing for liberty carry her far away from her family obligations.

Astha's status as a married woman is important to note here, since her mother-in-law reminds her of her duties as a married woman, with children. In other words, Astha's duties are confined to the arena of the domestic household. Similarly, her national identity is also brought into question, as the mother-in-law subscribes to the idea of Hindu Nationalism. In this familial atmosphere that is inhabited by women of narrow ideologies such as Astha's mother-in-law, Astha commits the crime of alienating herself purportedly as a Hindu, an Indian and a married woman. It becomes evident from their conversation that Astha's mother-in-law is incapable of separating her religious and her national identity. On one hand, Astha's place is set within the boundaries of home and domesticity, and on the other hand, she is denied of the freedom of thought. Therefore, if it is not a woman's place to voice her opinions even while within the domestic sphere, then where is a woman's space located? Astha's attempt to "transgress" into the political and religious arena threatens to usurp the boundaries

set for a married woman. The religious space that Astha's mother-in-law imposes upon Astha is destabilized by Astha's own agency to form her religious space.

Kapur shows that despite these obstacles that Astha faces from her husband and his family, Astha is able to exercise her agency in forming her own views on the national and the religious through a conscious decision that she makes. Astha's conscious decisions are helped by her interactions and close contacts with other characters whose national and religious identities do not follow the pro-right wing sentiments of Hemant and her in-laws. Her growing awareness of religious conflicts that exist outside the safety of her home comes about through her interactions with Aijaz Khan, a secular Muslim. Against the backdrop of communal unrest in India with the Hindu-Muslim conflict over sacred ground in Ayodhya, Manju Kapur develops the unrest within Astha's life. Her marriage becomes questionable after she involves herself in the outer world of rebellion and protest. So it can be implicitly cited that a nation is shattered because of religious differences and dynamics of politics where as a marriage is shattered because of differences that somehow can't be bridged.

The other highlight of the book is Manju Kapur's description of Astha and Peeplika's relationship. Peeplika is a widow of Aijaz. Their loneliness and need bring them closure. Pipeelika offers her much comfort because they are facing the same trauma. Her suffering compels her to fall in an inescapable situation. "A Married Woman" explores Astha's longing for a purpose to her life other than being a wife and mother. As Binod Mishra says:

"The new generation of woman delineated in A Married Woman evinces the split in their personalities. They are all highly educated and are accustomed to the sound and fairies of the world. Their eyes and ears, ascertained to the ups and downs of the first changing world long to experiment something unusual to satisfy their suppressed ego. And in their venture to do so, they fell a prey to false temptations. These temptations distance them from their practical responsibilities and they burgeon forth a tree of detachment. The urge to lead their own lives and the impulse to

galvanise them drive them ultimately to disappointment." (Mishra 205)

To conclude one can say that Manju Kapur registers her concern for Indian Women in this novel. She dwells on various feministic issues in this novel like female education and their empowerment, financial independence and so on. She narrates important issues of class and nationhood and connects them to the emerging sense of female identity in post colonial India. Manju Kapur advocates the plausible reality that education brings dignity, honour and power. It is important to note that education plays dominant role in the lives of women. If in certain cases it fails to free them from the shackles of male dominance, social tradition and popular prejudices. It also gives them the authority to doubt and question to assert and reshape their lives. Her novel A Married Woman enables us to get an idea of the feminist struggle against biases and search for distinct identity. We can say that her novel evokes some concern over the problems of women in a male dominated society where laws for women are made by men in its social matrix and a husband stands as a sheltering tree. Hence progress and development depends on the emancipation and empowerment of both the sexes.

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