

A Married Woman: Transcendence of Threshold for Contentment

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Abstract: While making our choices and reading the chosen text as readers, we often make references to tradition and culture, time and history, as also to class and gender, psyche and behavior. Apart from these, there are several other identifiers of people, which may refer to in order to see how they are constructed in literary text. What we wish to highlight here, is something of a more specific nature and that too with respect to women characters in the novels of Manju Kapur. Purpose of this paper is to examine that how much Astha, the protagonist characters of Manju Kapur's novel has got success in breaking the boundaries and limitations of her pre-defined cultural rules and regulations. This paper tries to find out one more thing that does Astha really possess the characteristics of the new rebel woman?

Keywords: Women, Marriage, Relationship, Desire, Social Fabric, Manju Kapoor

In the novels of Manju Kapur, we find women in their new form. We find them defying the definition of Simon De Beavoir about the woman. Simon has told that a woman "is a womb, an ovary, she is a female – this word is sufficient to define her." But this is not the case with Manju Kapur's women characters. They are the women of the 21st century struggling for their freedom and the power to take their decisions by themselves. They struggle to save their individuality and self-respect as well. Ignoring the so-called primary responsibility of domesticity and children, they move out of the shackles of society and domestic life. Transcending the threshold of their homes they do all which are considered taboos in their present social fabric. They discard all the so called emotional entanglements which are made under hegemonic practice to suppress their potentials and their all wishes. Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* has got two major women characters, named Astha and Pipee. Among all, the character of the novel Pipee is the closest to Astha. The relation she makes and develops with Pipee is strange and awkward for her, but still she continues with it. Her intimacy and closeness with Pipee is beyond expression. It can be judged by the fact that the information and feelings, which were so secret to her, she, shared it with Pipee. Whatever Astha has shared with her diary in her adolescent age, she felt hesitated to share that with her mother. She felt hesitated to share that with her husband, Hemant. But when she opens all the secrets of her life towards Pipee, there was not a single mark of hesitation between them. Story of this novel begins with Astha, indicating that she has been brought up and nourished in as usual atmosphere of an Indian middle class family. She is her parents' only child and also a center of a lot of expectations. Her father always focuses her to do hard work in her

studies. But the purpose behind all the enforcement is not only to make her independent but also his intention in which he thinks that if his daughter, "sit for the IAS," she will "find a good husband there." (3)

It is not only Astha's father who is worried about her marriage but also her mother thinks on the same line. She thinks and believes that if parents die without marrying their daughter "they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth." (1) And this is the reason that she always insists Astha to pray to God for it. Perhaps this sort of motivation has affected the psychology of a girl child very deeply. She began 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." (1) She is prey to inchoate longings to such an extent that she "desired almost every boy she saw" with a thought in her mind "would true love ever find her?" It is under her dreamy nature that she falls in love, first of all with Bunty and then with Rohan. Day and night the thoughts of love keeps her churning from inside. She is neither able to eat nor sleep or study. All this churning, brooding, and musing over the issue of true love perplex her mind so much that she transcends the intangible line of so-called sanctity and enjoys the physical relationship with Rohan. But here also her search for true love doesn't seem to achieve any fruitful favor. Her all attempts go in vain when Rohan moves to Oxford for his further studies and she remains all alone on the lonely path of the search of true love.

Astha is a student of English literature and has grown up in the modern society of Delhi. Her marriage is settled with Hemant, a Delhi businessman, the only son of a renowned bureaucrat of Delhi.. Astha's new family lives in Vasant Vihar, a posh colony in New Delhi. She starts her marriage life with Hemant. Author's description of Astha's married is unique in its nature. Her portrayal of the marriage bed of newly wedded couple is so unusual that it tears down the dreams, fantasies and excitement of a reader regarding a married life. It will not be an exaggeration, if I use the words that it almost finishes all the charms and splinters all the dreams related to a married life in a very brutal manner. Astha gets fed up with her married life very soon. Though she tries to adjust herself in her new surrounding, nothing falls in place. She tries to engage herself in one thing or the other but she doesn't get the solace from any source. Household responsibilities are not enough to engage her for the whole day, so , in order to utilize her time more efficiently , she joins a public school after much resistance from her husband and in-laws. It is after her appointment in this school, her personality begins to explore the new possibilities of the world. She comes in contact with new phases and areas of life. And when she begins to take interest in all these things, she comes to know about the boundaries and limitations existing around her. One day the school organizes a workshop with the help of an artist Aijaz Akhtar Khan. Aijaz is the founder of "The Street Theatre Group" and teaches history and it is during holidays he performs plays in school, slums, streets and villages. The purpose behind these all things is just to generate social awareness. This time, he is in the school of Astha. Consequently, Astha comes closer to him and starts getting impressed by her versatile personality.

Astha's participation and proximity to Aijaz and his workshop kick off her journey of breaking all the boundaries one by one. It is in this workshop, her suppressed desire for true love comes to the fore once again. She is fascinated by the multifarious personality of Aijaz, even though she has become the mother of two, Himanshu and Anuradha. It is another thing that Astha doesn't get chance to flourish this relationship, as workshop finishes before this absurd fascination of Astha comes into Aijaz's notice. This affection of Astha for Aijaz is almost unnoticed until Hemant shows Astha the news related to murder of Aijaz in the newspaper: Astha could not read further for the tears in her eyes. . . She turned away her head to cry some more. (139) After her marriage with Hemant, Astha's life runs smoothly, but it is the entry of Aijaz which has given birth to repression and anguish in her life once again. Astha has a strong desire for passionate love and physical relationship from the very beginning but Hemant doesn't seem to be aware of this fact. So, when Aijaz dies, it is the power of the hidden love dwelling in the heart of Astha which takes her to the condolence meeting held at Constitution Club. Astha "put on a white sari" and goes "straight from school to meeting" with the purpose of being at least "with people who felt as she did." She also wishes to meet Aijaz's wife but she cannot. She takes an active part in procession, rallies or Manch related to Aijaz, forgetting the rules and regulations of a middle class family. Or we can say that being a woman of the 21st century, she doesn't care for such limitations. She crosses all the thresholds in order to fulfill her duties related to *Sampradayaakta Mukti Manch*, a forum set up in memory of The Street Theatre Group. Astha ignores her responsibilities not only towards her husband, children and family but she doesn't care for her health also. She ignores the warnings of her husband, when he says: "You seem to forget that your place as a decent family woman is in the home, and not on the streets." (172)

Astha wants to live her life in her own ways. Being a modern woman of this century she doesn't want to sacrifice her dreams, pleasures and freedom for her family. She gets fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood. She blames and complains the whole society for its nature and set up which are made to submerge the wishes of a woman. Most of the time, she ponders that she is a woman and tries to compare her situations and conditions to that of Hemant. On the New Year's Eve, when Hemant asks her: "Where are you going? I am free, you know that." (172) Astha wonders on his demand and thinks that "if there would ever be a day when she could feel that same right to complain that Hemant did." (172) Astha doesn't want to follow the rules and regulations made by traditional society. She doesn't want to live a conservative life. Astha belonging to a middle class family has never cared for its boundaries. She was always involved in those things, which have never been considered respectable for a middle class woman either it is the case of before marriage or after it. In order to fulfill the object of delivering a speech from the side of Manch, she gets ready to go to Ayodhya. And it is the first time, when her mother-in-law objects her: "It is not a woman's place to think of these things." (187) But she doesn't care even for her mother-in-law suggestions. According to conventions, being a wife of a husband, it is

not proper for her to run around, abandoning home, leaving the children to the servants. But she does all these things without a mark of any regret on her face.

It is in Ayodhya, she meets Pipeelika Khan, widow of Aijaz. She feels somewhat attracted towards her. She likes the way she smiles, while at that time she was not aware of the fact that she is the wife of Aijaz. She comes to know about it later. Well, when both of them come back to Delhi, they began to meet again and again. One day Pipee asks her, "Have you ever been in a relationship with a woman?" (219) At this question, Astha feels uneasy and doesn't answer. It was something strange for her; because from her very childhood, she has imagined about the manly embrace. She was also involved in love affairs but it was all with boys. She has never seen woman from this point of view. But she succumbs to this attraction towards Pipee as she lives in her company and feels attracted towards her. In case of Pipee, she was not habitual but familiar with lesbian relationship. When Astha throws Pipee's question back to her, she informs her that she had enjoyed it much before her marriage, when she was in school. From such conversation, a lesbian relationship begins to develop between these two women. Both Pipee and Astha suffer lacuna in their lives but this new physical and emotional relationship between them, quench their respective appetite for true love. They start finding solace in each other's company. With the passage of time their relationship becomes more and more demanding. Pipee begins to dominate the relation and Astha too finds solace in her dominant affection. Pipee wants Astha totally committed to her and completely oblivious of her family. But Astha was not ready to break up her relations with her family. "She want to sail in both boats, keeping these two important parts of her life separate from each other." Though Astha has got a soul mate in Pipee, she wants to be in touch with her family. In the beginning of their relation, Astha is very much devoted to Pipee. This devotion of Astha reaches to an extent of leaving her family for Pipee. But later, after the resurrected love and care of Hemant as well as the involvement of Pipee in her professional life makes her realize that even if she leaves everything for Pipee, she will be alone and marginalized in her relationship with Pipee. Astha has always transcended the boundaries throughout her life but this time she hesitates to take this step. She doesn't find herself bold enough to leave her marriage and go with Pipee. So, eventually her relationship with Pipee comes to an end just like her relationship with Rohan who left her after having physical relationship with her. In the beginning Rohan enjoys her body but leaves her for his career similarly she is left by Pipee in the later part of the novel. Both these partners of Astha exploit her in their own way. But towards the end of the story, we see Astha taking a firm and candid decision to get back to her family after leaving Pipee. This decision of Astha is no where influenced by the conservative ideas of society. This is her own decision and she takes it with full conviction. As per her calculative and modern nature she takes this decision to re-unite with her family somewhere answers her own questions like where she will get more freedom, honour, economical safety, and power of taking her decisions. Astha legally

belongs to the place of her husband, and she has a lot of rights there. But if she chooses to live with Pipee, she will have to live there on her own risks. Because living with Pipee, there is no legal rights and security on the part of Astha. So, we can conclude that Astha is a candid, calculative and courageous Indian woman who takes decision for her own contentment and satisfaction. This protagonist of Manju Kapur has proved that increasing education, better job opportunities and awareness of rights bring the woman out of their threshold, so that they can take care of their individuality, self-respect and contentment.

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