

Autobiography of *A Married Woman*

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ABSTRACT

This article is a thoughtful observation on a married woman, her compulsions and predicaments in a social-taboo ridden world and her constant struggle for empowerment with reference to Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002). There has been much critical interrogation on the relationship of autobiography with empowerment of women. In the process of rethinking empowerment, scholars have drawn attention to the nuanced practices of narrating the self and invading into the public as a mode of empowerment for women. Though I will explore these issues in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*, my primary focus of this article is to form a fresh perspective on the following questions: What are the strategies that women employ to gain a voice? How do women's writings problematize the dichotomy of private and public? Are autobiographies or narrations the self always empowering for women? Central to my approach is an exploration and examination of how autobiographical practices can reflect, perpetuate, and also shatter cultural myths about gender and mark intervention in history to rewrite the grand narrative.

Keywords: Women Empowerment, Feminism, Autobiography, Manju Kapur

INTRODUCTION:

In "Professions for Women," Virginia Woolf speaks of a certain phantom she had to struggle with. She describes her at length:

She was intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of

family life. She sacrificed herself daily. . . she was so constituted that she never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others. . . .

(Ch. 27)

She has called her “The Angel in the House,” who came between the author and her writings. So, she caught her by the throat and killed her. My article is a thoughtful analysis of the nuanced forms of narrating the self a woman resorts to overcome her compulsions, predicaments and limitations in a social-taboo ridden world and her constant struggle for empowerment with reference to Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* (2002). The novel under discussion has attracted critical attention for it unfolds and powerfully explores two evidently controversial subjects – Hindu-Muslim confrontations and same-sex intimacy between women. But my focus is to explore the complicity of relation between private and public, and problematize the liaison of autobiography and empowerment. In the process, I shall attempt to re-define autobiographical practices as my article posits alternative, more inclusive parameters for the genre, based on an examination of the many forms (e.g., diaries, letters, poems, painting and fiction) which an individual’s autobiography might take.

A brief account of the story of *A Married Woman* in the outset is worth narrating for an understanding of its thematic concerns. Astha Vadera, the protagonist of the novel, is an MA in English, and she has an arranged marriage with Hemant, a professional who subsequently becomes an entrepreneur, and they have two children. She takes up the job of a school teacher with the consent of her in-laws and lives a comfortable life until she meets Aijaz Khan, a secular Muslim involved in a progressive theatre group. Their blossoming friendship abruptly ends when Aijaz perishes tragically, burnt to death by a Hindu mob in the wake of the Ayodhya dispute. Later, in Ayodhya, Astha first meets Pipeelika (Pipee), Aijaz’s widow who is qualified in sociology and economics and works for a Delhi

NGO named Ujjala. Against all social norms, the friendship between the two women develops into a fully intimate same-sex relationship, but finally it terminates with Pipee leaving for pursuing her PhD in the United States and Astha is left with no option but to return to her marriage.

BREAKING THE BOUNDARIES

The first sentence of the novel runs “Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman with large supplements of fear” which clearly states that the novel addresses the woman’s question (1). It reminds me of the following often quoted lines of Simone de Beauvoir which still remain unmatched in the realm of feminism:

One is not born, but rather becomes woman. No biological, psychological or economic fate determines the figure that the female presents in a society, it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature . . . which is described as feminine.

(1973, p. 301)

But, a born rebel against the conventions, Astha did things which did not befit her upbringing and tried to have her own way. A teenager Astha fell in love with Bunty, a neighbour who worked in the Army and wrote letters to him. It is significant that the letters Bunty wrote to her were mainly about the ‘public’ as opposed to her ‘private’ letters which conforms to the binary of public and private corresponding to the world of men and women respectively. In college, Astha developed an affair with a boy called Rohan and recorded a vivid and passionate account of her love and longings in her diary. When discovered by her mother, she lied that those were the notes for a story she was writing, a product of her imagination (p. 26-27).

Since letters and diaries are autobiographical in nature, the above instances direct attention to the public/ private dichotomy and point to the difference in the writings of men and women.¹ It brings to my mind the following questions which are the central

questions of this article: Is woman's narrative only recording of private life or a testimony/ intervention in public as well? How do women's writings problematize the dichotomy of private and public? What are the strategies that women employ to gain a voice? Are autobiographical practices always empowering for women?

A dialogue with these important preoccupations of this article requires, first of all, an interrogation into the status of a married woman. I would like to dwell on the initial position of Astha, a married woman, to trace her journey from powerlessness to empowerment. After her marriage, Astha's insignificance, helplessness and invisibleness in her own house, especially when it comes to decision making, is vividly portrayed by the author. She has a good life, but it is good because nothing is questioned. She reflects on the necessary prerequisites of a married woman: "A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth" (p. 231). She contemplates marriage a terrible decision as it puts her in a lot to bear rage, pain and indecision. For Astha or for any other married woman "marriage is not just sex"; rather it should provide "interest, togetherness and respect" (p. 275).

Then, a woman has to not only cross, but also break the boundaries to fight for her rights and pave the way for other women. Astha's life took a new turn after she screens with Aijaz Khan the Ayodhya issue for a school play titled "Babri Masjid: Fact, Fiction and You." Aijaz's appreciation of her as opposed to her husband's callousness makes her admire him. After Aijaz's death, a newly politicized Astha takes part in a rally in Delhi to protest the killings, and she becomes an active member of the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch, a forum formed to fight communalism and defend secularism (p. 147). Stepping into the public is an act of resistance and a conscious attempt towards empowerment on the part of Astha. In spite of her family's disapproval she carries on with her activities and even goes to

Ayodhya for the Yatra. Political participation also bestows Astha with power and authority. The intellectual stamina as well as emotional appeal of her speech at Ayodhya is impressive, as revealed in the following extract:

In essence women all over the world are the same, we belong to families, we are affected by what affects our husbands, fathers, brothers and children. . . . We judge not by what people tell us, but by what we experience in our homes. And that experience tells us that where there is violence, there is suffering, unnecessary and continuous suffering. . . . History cannot be righted easily, but lives are lost easily, pain and trauma to women and children come easily. (p. 198)

Astha connects the private suffering of women in the domestic sphere due to infliction of violence to effect of violence in the public domain, thereby linking the private and the public and driving home the point that women suffer the most from public upheaval. She negates the binary system of private and public which creates a dangerously limited view of women's experiences. Her speech also hints at a significant difference that is marked in the approach of woman and man to both the worlds. After the demolition of Babri Masjid, while Hemant tries to reason away this act of violence, Astha is pained by the suffering of the innocents nationwide and cross border irrespective of religions (p. 296-297). The tone of humanism that underpins Astha's views signifies that women can accommodate a larger view point than men.

The final part of the novel centres on the relationship between Astha and Peepilika. Astha disrupts the traditional restrictions to enter the same sex relationship with her. She feels that "men understand only the physical" (p. 219), but "intimacy with Pipee, for her, is "complete and absolute, expressed through minds as much as bodies" (p. 231). The relation between husband and wife, Astha senses, has been a power relation rather than a relation of love. That's why after the first love making with Pipee, she is triumphant as, for her, it is "a wife's

revenge" (p. 232). This argument relates to Kate Millett's observations in *Sexual Politics* (1969) on the attitudes towards women that pervade the work of prominent twentieth-century authors like D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930) and Henry Miller (1891-1980). Both were held in high regard by many critics for their daring and liberating depictions of erotic relations. Millett, however, showed that the attitude of their male characters towards women was not so emancipated at all. Instead, they were denigrating, exploitative, and repressive in their relations with women. Since this is the case, Millett argues, the private sphere is, just like the public realm, thoroughly political where the same power-based relations exist. Thus, the private and the public cannot be seen as wholly separate – on the contrary, they are intimately linked.

HISTORY, AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND EMPOWERMENT

The second part of this article is an analysis of complexity of relation between autobiography and empowerment of women. Central to my approach is an exploration and examination of how autobiography can reflect, perpetuate and also shatter cultural myths about gender. The creative outlet autobiographical in nature can take varied form. Astha tries diary, poems and painting. She expresses the pain, suffering, inner conflict and loneliness of a married woman despite being surrounded by husband, children and parents-in-laws in the poems she writes and "writing alleviated the heaviness within her, a heaviness she found hard to deal with" (p. 79). By retelling and reclaiming the events of one's life, writing serves as a psychotherapeutic tool. But when Hemant conveys that her poems reveal her unhappiness, she quickly becomes defensive and protests that those are not about her. Even writing poems about sadness and suffering and her own state instills in her fear of self-exposure. Astha encounters the phantom, "The Angel in the House," and but could not kill her at the moment. To negotiate with this constraint, she gives up writing and turns to

painting, a genre, which she thought, is less revealing and self-exposing (p. 82). It exhibits that women are too self-conscious to canvass their thoughts uncensored and it prompts questions on the authenticity of women's autobiographies and other modes of narration of the self.

Unquestionably, it calls for a discussion on relation between diary and story, autobiography and novel and the thin dividing line keen to melt away. As Helen Cixous explains in her discussion of memory and life writing, "All biographies like all autobiographies like all narratives tell one story in place of another story" (*Rootprints*, 1997, p. 178). The slippery borders between fact and fantasy, chronicle and good story, the dependability on memory are configured in Astha's poems, diary as well as paintings.

In recent times a substantial body of feminist scholarship scrutinizes women's personal narratives, i.e. memoir, autobiography, diaries, travel writings, letters as well as autobiographical elements in their fiction and poetry to bring out their historical, political and literary significance. The complex and critical relation of women with their autobiographical inscriptions has been analyzed by Yuen-yi Lo (2012) in her article "She is one and all – Writing Nushu, women's script in an autobiography." She talks about the Nushu, women's script which is believed to have been created and practiced exclusively by women in the Shangjiangxu Township, Jiangyong County, Hunan Province, China for some hundred years. Through a set of unique matriarchal scripts, these women developed a tradition of storytelling, orally in chants, in embroidery, and in written form. The women in the Nushu region have not only invented and written their own sentences, they have practised writing (the difference) in their own script: using their own creative syntax and grammar, writing without punctuations, and they have chanted their stories. The exclusive use of this secret script united the women in an exclusive sisterhood, through

which they had formulated a particular women's culture that was rarely covered in history. In addition, with their abundant records of biographies and autobiographies in the form of a booklet, the women in the Nushu region set an example of empowering women to go on creating their own history. In fact, the act of writing itself has been universally acclaimed by the feminists as a means of women empowerment for "when a woman writes she assumes maleness and authority" (Bhattacharya, 2015, 35).

Narrating the self provides an opportunity to explore history from a personal perspective. Astha did it through her diary as well as paintings. As for Astha's paintings, most of them represent the significance the political issue of Ayodhya for her and the permeable boundaries between experience and imagination obliterate in them. The first painting she donated to the cause of Sampradayakta Mukti Manch was the sketch of a procession with a broad road, on one side, lines of figures holding banners, on the other side, rows of cars, scooters and all sorts of vehicles, the trees in the central section and the large blue sky, nevertheless "public matters." Gradually, her paintings grew more subtle and symbolic. She dreamt of an intimate scene with Aijaz in a scooter-rickshaw which inspired her next painting titled "Women Travelling." Here, in representing the intensely private longing, Astha could do away with the fear of the mother's discovering the diary or the husband's interpreting the poems in her painting. Other subtle delineations of public mark her painting named "Yatra" portraying in Rajastani miniatures the journey of a Hindu Leader with a temple on the one hand and the Babri Masjid on the other, and the "March for Justice" canvass with a group of candle marchers huddled before the gates of the Rashtrapati Bhavan. The artist and the activist become indistinguishable in her paintings. Her paintings are records of both private and public. Thus, women's autobiographical practices are interventions in history which problematize the binary of private and public.

Moreover, a careful consideration of Astha's diaries show how history might intersect in a woman's formulation and production of her text and in the process how history is intervened in a woman's text. Astha undertakes the Ekta Yatra with Pipee, and before and during the journey, she records her daily life, thoughts and talks with Pipee in a diary with dates. Her diary registers political turmoil during the Ramjanmabhoomi Babri Masjid issue of 1990s much like man's diary. The entry dates begin 26 November and conclude 13 January (1992). Its worth to historians, literary critics and people interested in the socio-political turmoil of the period can hardly be undermined. She also talks of the difficulties involved in getting out of a home for a married woman having children, her attitude towards Hemant, her impression of Pipee and opinion of national and political events. In its tone and matter and the mingling of private and public, Astha's diary subverts the expected and more conventional diary by women. Her diary can also be viewed as a distinctly private record, much along the lines argued by Pauline Polkey (2000) in her article "Reading history through autobiography" in which she discusses some of the politically active women of late nineteenth-century Britain and their personal narratives. While deliberating on Simcox's *Autobiography* as a distinctly private record, Polkey quotes from Linda Anderson's "At the Threshold of the Self":

It would be wrong to see the production of autobiographical narratives as having no ideological significance – no basis within nor reference to history or culture . . . It is necessary to take into account the fact that the woman who attempts to write herself is engaged by the nature of the activity itself in re-writing stories that already exist about her . . . She is resisting or changing what is known about her. Her place within culture, the place from which she writes, is produced by difference and produces difference. (as cited in Polkey, 2000, p. 494)

The author's explanation of history through women's personal chronicle comprises a cognizance of women's historical positioning along with a review of the content of our knowledge

of history. A deviation from its allotted sphere, Astha's diary represents an insightful intervention within history's grand narrative. Also, we cannot undermine the discursive potential of fictional texts, considering the augmented complexity of the autobiographical act, particularly by writers who make identification with specific intellectual itineraries and history a subtext of their narratives. The strategy involves an intentional and creative positioning of the author in history and culture through her characters. It is pertinent to mention here the French philosopher Paul Ricoeur who describes the interwoven relationship between history and fiction in his three volume work *Time and narrative* (1984-88), rightly arguing that the tendency to force history and fiction into two separate categories belies their fundamental interdependence on each other.

CONCLUSION

Finally, Astha evolves as a painter as well as a person. Despite the diversity in understanding of empowerment, there is consensus that access to resources is essential to practise empowerment. After selling her paintings, Astha felt rich and powerful, the concealed argument being money or economic independence makes one powerful. Encouraged by Pipee, she emerges from the shadow of the Manch to hold an exhibition of her own.

As her brush moved carefully over the canvas, her hand grew sure, her back straightened, 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. (p. 299)

Thus, Astha's empowerment operates on two stages – it emanates from a growing self-confidence and an inner transformation of an economically independent woman to overcome conflict of private and public; at another level, it proceeds with an expression of the self in the form of poems,

diaries and paintings. Thus, Manju Kapur presents in her novel the journey of a married woman who moves away from traditional portrayal of enduring, self-sacrificing woman towards self-assured assertive and ambitious woman making society aware of her demands and in this way providing a medium for self-expression.

NOTES

1. With regard to the third world nineteenth-century Indian autobiographical writings, Partha Chatterjee made the observation that men generally modulated their personal situation and experiences into the public sphere such as nation and succeeded in configuring a robustly confident self-identity with the result that their writings deserve the status of *carit* and *atmacarit*. But, details of daily life lived within the network of families and kinsmen within “home” and those of social history smothered woman’s self so much that their writings were more familiarly known as *smritikatha* or “stories from memory,” failing to deserve the appellation merited by male autobiographical writings.
2. See, Chatterjee, P. (1999). *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. 1993. New Delhi: Oxford UP.

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