

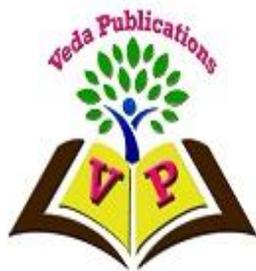
MANJU KAPUR'S *A MARRIED WOMAN*: A UNIQUE FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVE

Sudershan Earla

(Lecturer in English, Hindu College, Guntur-AP)

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.54513/JOELL.2022.9119>

ABSTRACT



Feminism in Indian literature, particularly in Indian English writing is a byproduct of the Western feminist movement. But we cannot totally negate the contribution made by our freedom struggle, independence, spread of education, concern for economic development and stability, employment opportunities and above all the resultant new awareness of our women. As far as feminism concerned regional literatures too fall in line with this pattern. The Indian women caught in the flux of tradition and modernity bearing the burden of the past and aspirations of the future is the crux of feminism in Indian literature. A search for identity and a quest for the definition of the self have become the prime features of women in literature under the sway of feminism. Feminist literature highlights the basic differences between a boy and a girl, or a man and a woman in the changed context of contemporary life. And so one of the major issues, in spite of the variations in minute details, recurrently dealt with by feminist writers is identity crisis.

Keywords: *Identity Crisis, Gender Biased, Economic Instability, Lesbian Experiences, Employment Opportunities, Independence Freedom.*



A discrete study of the essays include in this volume on modern Indian English novels as well as works of writers of other common wealth countries reveals that the women serve to reflect the writers sense of isolation, fear, bewilderment and emotional vulnerability as a symbol not only of growth, life and fertility, but also of withdrawal, regression, decay and death. In the works of these modern novelists we witness the typical feminist traits—sudden awakening, acute introspection, a stasis in time and action, an inthought-of ending with a definitive decision. Very often these works do not offer a tangible solution for the feminist. But the experiences rendered through the feminine consciousness invariably point to an inner exhilaration suggesting the beginnings of a fresh awakening, a much sought-after percept of the feminists. Indian English fiction, poetry and drama are replete with the male-female confrontation, problems of adolescence, and coming of age with special reference to women, explicit and latent pleadings for equality, liberty and self-preservation, even risking the normal safeguarding of man and conventional production of hallowed tradition. The dreamy spires of Anita Desai's characters, the high voltage confessional poetry of Kamal Das, strongly reminding us of Virginia Woolf and Sylvia Plath, respectively are only two striking examples.

Manju Kapur being one of the most renowned women writers of the contemporary era in India portrays the vulnerable condition of women in the Indian society and also delineates how they are being kept ignorant about education and emancipation. In her novels she gives vent to the

gender discrimination still overtly prevalent in the field of education. A few feminist theorists have also exposed on how patriarchy creates havoc in the lives of women by denying proper education. With the British invasion, Indian men became aware of women education but the enthusiasm died out half way. So even after 65 years of Indian Independence, the condition of women has barely changed. Manju Kapur's novels circumscribe the condition of women education since Independence till the present era.

Mary Wollstonecraft deftly asserts her claims about women's hindrance towards freedom and independence by these two most straightforward sentences in her masterpiece *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792). It has been rightly said that this book speaks as much to the problems of women in the twenty-first century as it did to those of the contemporaries of Wollstonecraft during the 18th century. What makes the book so grounded even in this era is that – the social and economic realities of women's place in society has barely changed since then. *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* voices woman's right to education. Wollstonecraft delineates that not only is it an inherent right of women to be educated, it is a social imperative as well; else succeeding generations would inherit their parents' ignorance instead of their wisdom. According to her opinion the most perfect education is to enable the individual to attain such habits of virtue as will render it independent (31). Nature has created man and woman as human beings with different biological niceties. Nature has not shown any discrimination between the two sexes apart from their physical distinction. Everything available in



nature was equally distributed to both the sexes. The structural inequality between the men and women is not due to the biological necessity but by the cultural and societal construction of gender differences. Lacan also supports the view that gender is created, it is not inborn. An infant enters with a self-identity and later develops to 'Symbolic Order'. Symbolic order stands on the side of patriarchal powers, constructing its meaning through sets of binary oppositions like man/woman, mind/nature, activity/passivity in which the power of males is dominated.

Manju Kapur's novel 'A Married Woman' is the story of a woman who suffocates throughout her life between the modern and traditional systems. Astha Vadera, the protagonist of the novel rightly portrays the role of a woman who suffered herself amidst the traditions and current circumstances. Astha was brought up in a middle class family in Delhi. She was fortunate enough to have her parents whose only concern was their only daughter's safety. Astha's father was concerned about her education while her mother was concerned about her marriage. Though Astha was sometimes angry at her father's concern towards her academics, she felt sorry when he shared his feelings of hoping a high potential for her daughter. The words were amiably set by Manju Kapur.

Manju Kapur's second novel naturally raises inquisitiveness in the readers after reading her first novel which won the International acclaim. She continued to win the hearts of the readers even in the second novel. Being a woman, Manju Kapur's protagonists are women, who are educated, well brought up, subtle and have the courage to fight

themselves for the sake of their self-reliance, individuality and identity. A man or a woman strives for their own identification in the vast continent of competitive human society. It is not rather easy to establish one's own identity in the cut throat competition of the fast developing world either in the society or in the family.

Manju Kapur explores a totally different aspect of educating a girl in her next novel, *A Married Woman* (2003). Like any other woman of her age Sita, Astha's mother, believed in the age old, traditional ways. She regularly prayed to God to marry off Astha to a good husband. But Astha's father believed in the modern era. He felt that his daughter's future lay in her own hands, and these hands were to be strengthened by the number of books that passed through them. He always kept himself updated about Astha's studies. He didn't want his daughter to be dissatisfied and wasted like him. He always encouraged her about her potentials, her flair for painting and her way with the words; he insisted that with a bit of practice in Mathematics, her weak point, she could sit for the competitive exams. Her father feels that a good job can fetch her independence. But the manipulation was another way of finding a good match for his daughter. He consoled his wife in private that if Astha did well in her exams, she could perhaps sit for the IAS and find a good husband there. Thus, the final destination fixed for their daughter is marriage, only the perspectives in the attitudes of the parents differed. This patriarch, being a pen pusher himself, shrewdly camouflages his real intentions, while encouraging his daughter to study hard. He too never thinks beyond the boundary of marriage.



As the opening statement states 'Astha was brought up properly', her parents were included in all the parts of her life giving her good education, good health by taking her to regular walks, making her practice pranayam, meditation and ultimately a good marital life. Astha's mother was more observant about her teenage daughter. Astha is crazy about Bunty, a neighbouring boy in her teenage. Bunty was a student of the Defence Academy and when he returns to his academy, Astha tries to continue her passion through letters. Bunty, not well aware of Astha's love towards him replied her discussing about his camps. These letters were caught by Astha's cautious mother and she had to give up her first love. When Astha was in college she was once again attracted to Rohan. But unfortunately her second love was also a failure as Rohan was a materialistic man. Astha was well aware of Rohan's attitude that he didn't really love her, but only wanted to pass his time with her. As Astha was a good writer and a painter she penned all her feelings in a diary which was found by her mother and she had to escape saying it was a story that she was writing for a magazine.

Astha's mother was so keen about her daughter's marriage. Every Sunday, her duty was to look at the matrimonial columns and enquire about the bride grooms. Astha, who was not interested in arranged marriage, did not respond to the match that her mother had arranged for her without the knowledge of her father. After Astha had joined her post graduation course, she got a proposal from the Vadera's family for their only son Hemanth, a

foreign returned M.B.A. Her father gave importance to his daughter's opinion as she was the one who is going to be with him for the rest of her life. But her mother was worried about her father's retirement and she forced her daughter to marry Hemanth Vadera. But Astha had already become independent in her thoughts and ideas considered her father as the best reliable person to judge the match.

Astha, who was brought up well and sent to a well-reputed family, was well respected even in the school she worked. In spite of her pregnancy she continued her job. After Anuradha, the first child was born they could settle well by building a spacious house of their own before the retirement of her father-in-law. On the other side Astha's poor parents who were very careful about their future could only buy 280yards near Trans Jamuna, a not yet established colony. So they had to search for a rented house and within a year after shifting into it, Astha's father died of cardiac arrest leaving his wife Sita alone to sail in the ocean. Astha's well cared for her mother and wanted her to stay with them. She feels Hemanth's intervention into their family matters would make her mother feel comfortable, but Sita was quite self respective and did not like to stay with her daughter's family. She turns to a devotional life transforming into a new Sita leading the rest of her life in tranquility in Rishikesh. When Astha finds it difficult, her mother consoles her saying it's not good on her part to stay with her daughter's family and as daughter Astha bursts out saying:



'I wish you wouldn't be so stick-in-the-mud, Ma. Why didn't you have a son to look after you when you were old, if you cannot take anything from a daughter? Why did you stop with me?' (85)

Astha, a truly loving child concerned about her mother feels worried about her, but later she realizes the intensity of her mother's words as she could understand Hemanth could never become a son but can only be a son-in-law. She feels happy when she visits her mother in Rishikesh, her concern was to relieve her mother from the religious influence but she could finally understand that she was the person who needed to be rescued and saved not her mother. Astha parents were disciplined and thoughtful throughout their life and could lead a secured and peaceful life without causing any trouble to their only daughter Astha.

Astha was lucky to receive the affection of her in-laws as well as Hemanth. But the time has brought about some changes in Astha's life. When Anuradha was born Hemanth was quite positive about having a female child. When Astha's mother hopes they should have a son for carrying the name of the Vadera's. He sardonically remarks with his westernized influence. 'In America there is no difference between boys and girls. How can this country get anywhere if we go on treating our women this way?' (57)

When Astha conceived for the second time, her husband was so anxious of having a male child and makes his mother to perform some puja everyday, which makes Astha nervous. She doesn't have any discrimination between a male or a female

child for she feels irrespective of the gender they are her own blood. Luckily Himanshu was born relieving the entire family from tension. Otherwise Astha was horrified at his feelings he said to Astha 'Don't worry, sweet heart, then we will try again, it's perfectly all right. Why do you get so tense for nothing?' (68)

It was quite natural for Astha to be nervous, as the gender couldn't be decided by her. A woman is blamed if she cannot bear children, even if she can give birth again the problem arises with the gender as if it is her own mistake. Astha was lucky enough to be got exempted from this problem as she had a complete family, a girl and a boy as everybody wishes. Hemanth resigned to his post and started manufacturing T.V sets. He was successful in business, but it was quite natural that he could not balance between his family and business at which Astha grew restless. The love and affection which she received in the beginning of her married life started to vanish. She began to lead a dull and monotonous life which is rather mechanical to every home maker, added to it an extra work teaching. Hemanth, who recognized her talents was happy at her potential skills in painting and writing, but was not able to encourage her as he was trying hard to establish their present and future.

Hemanth a devoted husband, a dutiful father and adorable son always ran a tight ship to be a successful person. He took care of his wife's headaches, treated her as a baby, and admired her but his frequent travels and Astha's pressure as an employee and homemaker created disturbances between them. May be they are so serious in Hemanth's point of view, but Astha could not adjust



herself. Hemanth feels that he had done everything to their family but Astha lacks her recognition. She likes to spend more time with Hemanth which has become impossible to her because of his work pressure and frequent travels. She tries to adjust herself by mollifying that her husband is working for them making their life comfortable.

The responsibilities of Astha in the school sometimes made her to sacrifice her own time at home. When the principal Mrs Dubey invited the Street Theatre Group, she was forced to accept volunteering the students during her holidays. Though she did not like it she was not having any other alternative other than convincing Anuradha and Himanshu to take along with her. Hemanth had arranged his time to spend with his family in their vacation which became impossible as Astha had no choice. It's a universal problem which is commonly seen in many families, where husband and wife are busy with their own activities. None would like to compromise and make their relations worse than ever. At last Hemanth had to adjust and finally Astha involved herself in the historical street play.

Relations between homosexuals are quite rare in a country like India where the Patriarchal families are more prevalent. Women entered jobs, became entrepreneurs and good home makers. Unfortunately the pressure on them turned them that there were publicly ostracized. When Astha identifies Hemanth's flaw, he could cover it as a simple issue. Astha could not trust Hemanth as there was a suspicion in her mind but she had no other alternative other than accepting him as her

husband. If her lesbian relation was identified by the society or her family she could have become a black sheep. Fortunately as Pipee was a woman, none had doubts about their relation, they were considered as boon companions.

Manju Kapur intelligently shows the flaws in her protagonists, the consequences that pushed them to be trapped and pulls them out safely. She makes the society realize what happens to an individual if they don't have their own will power and balance as life is full of challenges and hurdles. Virmati in *'Difficult Daughters'* or Astha in *'A Married Woman'* were victims of patriarchal forms of family. Unfortunately they fall in false traps and ruin their identity instead of gaining independence. The characters in the novel were interwoven sharply connecting to the series of events in the stories. Each character was delineated in such way that they justified their role to make the novel a vivacious novel. After Astha's introduction to Aijaz Khan, the author meticulously introduces the character of Pipeelika Khan, her mother and then their marriage, Aijaz's death, Astha's involvement in the Manch activities, her encounter with Pipeelika, and turning into a lesbian relation and at par she concentrates on Astha's family, mother settling in Rishikesh after the death of her father, Hemanth's business prosperity, problems in his business, his travelling, health and Anuradha and Himanshu's involvement in the family segment between parents and grandparents.

Manju Kapur's shows two main feminist issues in this novel. The first one is radical feminism



and the second one is Marxist feminism. Radical feminism highlights the patriarchal origins of disparity between men and women, especially the domination of men on their opposite sex. It views patriarchy as dividing rights, liberty and supremacy by gender. It combats the present political and social organization as they are the true blue supporters of patriarchy. It fights with patriarchal dominance. Gerda Lerner summarized radical feminism as, "Reforms and legal changes, while ameliorating the condition of woman and an essential part of the process of emancipating them, will not basically change patriarchy. Such reforms need to be integrated within a vast cultural revolution in order to transform patriarchy and this abolishes it" (3)

Radical feminism is a new approach which wants to create new methods to understand the various forms of social or biological oppression. Radical feminists strongly believe that women's oppression is a biological phenomenon. It starts due to weakness caused by childbearing and depending on men for their survival. They feel that there is a need for biological revolution to make women independent. As Firestone expresses, "the heart of woman's oppression is her childbearing and childbearing roles. And in turn children are defined in relation to this role and are psychologically formed by it; what they become as adults and the sorts of relationships they are able to form determine the society they will ultimately build." (72)

However, occasionally Kapur's rendition of a lesbian relationship sometimes distracts the reader from the tensions of the situation and the core

sensibilities of the characters. Nevertheless, A married woman is a well balanced depiction of a country's inner development its strengths and its failures- and the anguish of a woman's unrest, which is as complicated as the social political upheaval going on around her. (Banerjee)

Two different kinds of marriages were shown. One, an arranged marriage between Astha and Hemanth, and the other love marriage between Pipeelika and Aijaz. Both seemed to be alike as far as the families were concerned. Astha had a complete and secured life but she struggled for self-identity and suffered when her husband was away on his business tours. But she was well cared by her family; much importance was given to her by her husband. Economically she was having a secured position. She had in-laws just above the stairs and mother to look after and care about her and her family. She had a job which gave her satisfaction to fulfill her desires as a painter and a writer. Pipee's mother had many apprehensions about Aijaz but he proved to be a lovable person. She was satisfied at her daughter's marriage. Even Aijaz's mother accepted Pipee as their daughter-in-law. They didn't leave her even after the death of Aijaz. Aijaz and Pipee also had a contended life, though it was for a short time. The author could balance both the marriages with pros and cons attached to the systems imbibed in it.

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