Feministic Analysis of Manju Kapur’s A Married Woman

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Postmodern tendencies have been reflected in Indian writing in English over the past few years. This paves way for the creation of new socio-cultural and political situation and circumstances that pushes the marginal or the extreme marginal to the centre stage. Feminism as it is an accompanying issue of postmodernism is the product of such a sensibility. It has been derived from the Latin word ‘Famina’ which means woman. In the beginning, it was discussed by Alice Rossi, an American in a Book Review published in the Athenaeum in April 1895. Feminism got a new shape since the publication of The Feminine Mystique by the American female novelist, Betty Friedan in 1962. But it moved upward rush in 1980’s and held the center age. It picturizes the dilemma of contemporary women seeking freedom from prejudiced male-dominance. It condemns discrimination against women and deconstructs the traditional patriarchal constructs to pick up their voices against repression and sex-subjugation. As Robert states, “male-female stereotype rules are being deconstructed day-by-day in the postmodern world” (Rationale 98).

Conventional systems and Customs are deep-seated in India and in the traditional system “Indianess” (Rationale 98) is structured around gender discrimination giving more space to male for supremacy. Right from the marriage, the bride’s integration into the family begins. She is directed and instructed into the lifestyle of her husband’s family. But despite her all efforts to dedicate herself genuinely to the well being of the family she is considered an outsider. Her opinion or ideas hardly gathers any moss in spite of her good education and intellectual caliber. She often experiences frustrated and alienated. But when the same bride turns into a mother-in-law and has an authoritative voice, particularly over the daughters and daughters in law, she becomes not only an advocate but even the custodian of the same culture.

The second novel of Manju Kapur’s A Married Woman, is set in Delhi against the milieu of communal turbulences centered on the controversial Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Majid. The novel traces the story of Astha from her childhood to her forties from side to side various hopes and miseries, complements and refusals, and recognitions and aggravations. As Robert clearly mentions in his article, The novel A Married Women is heavily plotted. It traces the life of Astha from her young adulthood through her early middle years. In the process she dates with a couple of young men of her own choice like her western counter parts, marries a man of her parents’ choice and discovers the joys of intimacy with her husband, begets children, yet grows distant from him and struggles to become a painter. Much against her husband and her other family members she becomes a social activist, and falls in love with a woman, and finds herself—sort of, more (Rationale 102).

She reflects the middle class values and seems to enjoy her mental bliss for a long time but gradually experiences that there is something certainly lacking in her life. She suffers from a sense of incompleteness, suppression and agony which is further provoked by her involvement into the outer world of upheaval and protest. But the substitute she seeks temporarily is also hollow from within and fails eventually compelling her heaving a sigh of relief.
A Married Woman can be read at the feministic level. In this novel Astha is the heroine who brings the fight of Virmati further to new battlegrounds. Thus the novel can be read as a feministic study. Manju Kapur is one of her interviews opens her mind:

I am a feminist. And what is a feminist? I mean I believe in the rights of women to express themselves in the rights of women to work. I believe in equality, you know domestic equality, legal equality. I believe in all that. And the thing is that women don’t really have that—you know even educated women, working women. There is a trapping of equality but you scratch the surface and it is not really equal (U.M. 04).

The female protagonist of the novel Astha who is the daughter of a cultured father and an orthodox mother, has an earnest desire for passive co-existence in the family. But she is dominated against and discriminated at her-in-law’s house. There, she is made-up to have a willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and a submissive mouth. Her marriage with Hemant, the son of a government official in Delhi, does not show to be based on mutual co-operation and appreciative. It can be understood from these lines, In the domestic space, Hemant behaves like a typical hypermasculine. In other words, he is a proud member of a patriarchal society dominated by machismo and heterosexuality. The postcolonial notion of hypermasculinity is brought to the surface in colonial texts like The Home and The World authored by Rabindranath Tagore (Rationale 104-105).

She is duty-bound to be a stable wife and sacrificing mother, like a sacred cow in the position of married woman. It traps to her bodily exploitation and emotional hunger. Being depressed of her emotional discharge, she recklessly seeks for it and drives to a “substitute-husband” (Rationale 110), lesbianism. Manju Kapur in her novel A Married Woman through the protagonist –Astha, has stamped out a self-governing life of the woman for self fulfillment and advocated for inter-religious marriage and female-female relationship divergent to the patriarchal norms of traditional society.

Asta had the passions or infatuations of a teenager like any other girl. But those infatuations are turned into oblivion. She has to set up a diverse life after her marriage with Hemant. She is cynical with her husband’s love for her family relationships are not right with her. Her mother-in-law likes her to be a stable and sacrificing woman like customary wives and mothers. She is constantly under stress of work and suffocating with her responsibilities to meet everybody’s need. She is “always adjusting to everybody’s need” (A Married Woman 227). She senses that a married woman’s status in the family is always dependent on her husband. She is torn between her responsibility and socio-religious perception. She has no emotional free will from the domestic relationships. She is exhausted of her responsibility and thinks “A tired woman cannot make wife good” (AMW 154). She is reeling under the pressure and dejection of a married woman who is no better than an unpaid servant. She has to give pleasure to her husband and for pleasing him; she must be “A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth” (AMW 231). She is marginalized in her own family by sadistic social atmosphere. She thinks of freedom from stress and depression. She thinks of a fine job thinking that “with good job comes independence” (AMW 4) so, she joins as a teacher but this job also does not keep her free from distress and trauma of discrimination.

Indian Society prefers a baby-boy rather than a baby-girl. “Manju Kapur gently digs at the Indian attitude of preferring a baby-boy to a baby-girl in the novel” (Rationale 107). Astha’s family proves that their need of baby-boy by their superstition belief, “When her daughter Anuradha was four, Astha conceived again. Her mother brought in a poojari to perform special pooja to propitiate the gods to grant them a boy for Astha” (Rationale 107). Having given birth to Himansha a son, she does not feel substardard to anyone in the society and the family members are thankful to her because they feel “the family is complete at last” (AMW 68). Astha also feels happy about her motherhood like a married woman but she does not like the gender-discrimination. She is much traumatized at the uninterested response of members of the family and society at her daughter, Anuradha’s birthday. But she obtains an appraisal and sanction of motherhood after the birth of her son—Himanshu. She abhors such a false notion and discrimination between a daughter and a son, such an outlook of Indian traditional society is injurious to equal status of women who “feel caught up in the
web of daily life” (AMW84) and fall a victim to tension and depression that is “the disease of modern life” (AMW76). The narrow-minded socio-cultural tradition is responsible for such a dilemma of women in our society “Where we must recognize the critical role played by popular culture in reinforcing prejudices against women”. It gives women to be broadminded like earth instead of conveying them equal status like men. Manju Kapur has responded harshly against unequal treatment of women in our family and society. The perception of male dominant patriarchal society that women should treat like the holy cow is challenged by the novelist. Women must have their equal position like men in socio-economic set of our society. We have to revolutionize our traditional prejudices against women and act them as equal partners in our life. Astha has to lead her life in a pitiful condition. She experiences suffocation with her responsibility to the increasing needs of members of the family forced on her. Her condition becomes despicable though she is a teacher in the position of a married woman. Her husband is also very much unconcerned to her feeling and emotion which stretches her agony. Her position becomes submissive like that of unpaid servants. Socio-political, economic and cultural stuff are responsible for her dependent and subjugated condition. “It appears [...] the community allows women to do only unpaid work within her home and forces them to be utterly dependent on their husbands. But these husbands are often irresponsible men her father being one such” (Kapadia. Frotline, 79).

Asthia responds against men’s insensitive behavior towards women’s dilemma. She walks against traditional attitude of traditional society that woman should be like earth. She should hold and live with the burden of the family and react strictly according to the conventional norms of the society. She should not open the mouth against the harassments imposed on her by her husband or her in laws because religion does not permit her to disclose the matter against her husband and her in-laws, however atrocious they maybe. She can’t take up her personal injustices. The expression of her personal injustices is believed to be the breaking of transitional norms. The women like untouchables and other marginals of the society are marginalized against in the conservation of society. ‘Women and untouchables have no place in their system of success and survival. Whosoever disobeys is bound to face rejection’. But the heroine of the novel Astha pooh-poohs the conventional views of the society. She anchors her personal identity ignoring the traditionalist thoughts of her family. According to her view, “Religion is a choice as much as other thing” (AMW 89). She rebels against her husband for her self-satisfaction challenging then conventional barriers and enforcement of women. She turns to Pipeelika a Hindu Brahmin girl who has married Aijaz Akhar Khan a sensitive Muslim Lecturer in History. Astha welcomes Pipeelika’s ideas of love and marriage. Pipeelika married a Muslim, being a high caste Hindu against her mother’s desires and social sanction. She anchors her right to marry the man of her desire like Ammu of Arundhati Roy’s The God of Small Things and Saru of Dehpande’s The Dark Holds No Terror.

Asthia poses an eye for an eye to her husband Hemant turning to lesbianism in relationship with Pipeelika who is also the prey of social aggression as she turns into a widow after the death of her husband in a riot. “As Astha had a substitute-husband in Pipee, she didn’t create a scene at all in the condom-episode. Rather she thought that if her husband had an extra ‘other’ in his life, she could also have an extra ‘other’, a kind of Old Testament tit for tat attitude” (Rationale 110).

Finding herself trapped in traditional socio-political and cultural system and chained up in inhospitable and antagonistic behavior of her husband and in-laws, she starts seeking for her fulfillment and more meaningful life turning to lesbian relationship with Pipeelika who eases her mind from emotional hassle and gives pleasure which she does not acquire in relationship with her husband in the state of a married woman. She is conscious of her self-fulfillment like a postmodern woman tries to break free of dismantling social codes that restrict her from asserting her own womanhood. “Transgression of the strictly constructed boundaries is welcomed” (Selen Aktari 5) in the postmodern context. Turning to lesbianism and challenging social code, she sanctions herself in association with Pipeelika, “Many of these lesbians identified themselves as lesbian feminists to emphasize their connection to all women and many of them identify as lesbian separatists to
stress the connection they felt to lesbians everywhere and the strength they got from being with other lesbians” (Chandra 110).

In an eye view of Astha as a lesbian, Manju Kapur has pictured a threat to male “egocentricism” (Wikipedia) which blinds men to the dilemma and pathetic situation of women and challenged the patriarchal ideology which has deprived women from socio-economic and political rights and emotional fulfillment trapping them to be submissive and subjugated. Postmodern writers like Arundhati Roy, Bharati Mukherjee, and Manju Kapur have unraveled men’s indisputable dominance in family matters and social affairs. They have focused on the troubles of women in general and Indian women in particular. Manju Kapur like Shashi Deshpande has focused on the women’s problem and dug out the possibilities of their liberation from the dreadful authority of male chauvinism challenging man made discriminations.

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. Ammu gives up her life on the alter of conventional discrimination against men and women. But Astha of A Married Woman takes a diverse, secure and protected path of rebellion against male chauvinism. She neither breaks herself nor becomes violent in the violation of conventional notion of society rather she turns into more severe in her attack on the traditional customs of socio-cultural set up of established patriarchal system in turning herself to lesbianism. She defies male chauvinism of her husband on the one hand while on the other she pleases the emotions of womanhood in her lesbian relationship with Pipeelika. “Slowly Pipee, put her arms around her. She could feel her hands on the narrowness of her back […] feeling her back with the palm. They were enclosed in a circle of silence, the only sound, the sound of their breaths, close together and mingled” (AMW 230-31).

Manju Kapur projects a married woman’s a passion for another woman and creates lesbianism a powerful component for the fulfillment of woman’s emotional urge and sexual satisfaction. Having understood women’s tyranny and emotional hunger like Astha and Pipeelika the novelist has put them into the lesbian trace for their self fulfillment. Both are victims: one is the victim of household violence; the other is the victim of societal violence and becomes a widow when her husband dies in a riot. If there is any violence whether household or social, women are more pulverized in our society. After the death of her husband Pipeelika has lost everything she had. Now nothing is left to her to lose. But she doesn’t lose her heart. Astha also unlike Manisha in Anita Desai’s The Voices in the City does not like survival and passive suffering. She does not make a suicidal attempt like Manisha. But she is more rebel for her rights. Being possessed with women’s manifold problems, Manju Kapur, like other women novelists and some male novelists, has turned to feminism. Prejudice and discrimination are meted out to women in conventional socio economic culture of patriarchy system. Feminism is an escape mechanism. This we can understand from the lines of Chandra,

Women’s voice against injustice and inequality to unravel the fact that feminism is the consequence of the culture or society shaped and governed by men to suit their needs and interest regardless to women’s basic needs and happiness. In this man made society everything is meant for the pleasure and profit of male sexuality. (Chandra107)

In this novel Manju Kapur has openly rebelled against social code of marriage in which women are forced to play a passive role in their in-law’s house. They have to accept the customary views of male members of the family whether they like them or not. Their husband’s ideas are imposed on them without bothering about
their emotions and personal needs which bring their lives to unhappiness and restlessness. They can’t voice their agony and discontentment against their husbands over their distressed relationship. Their worries against their husbands and in-laws would bring them to total seclusion from social constructs and leave them to the place where they would have no asylum. Manju Kapur has defied such conventional views of Indian society, having turned Astha to a lesbian. Nayantara Sagal has also condemned such situations of Indian women in her novel Rich Like Us. She has criticized insensitive approach of man towards his wife. In this novel Ram Swoop marries Rose though he is already married to Mona. But he is not fulfilled still then. He builds up love affair with Marcella and reveals it to Rose which shakes her sentiment. Rose worries a lot after this incident. She is distressed and there is storm inside her threatening to burst. Sahgal’s women also respond against the total devotion to their husbands. They are also freaking with seditious views against patriarchal monarchy but inside the framework of patriarchal system of society. Sahgal states that “Her anguish and rage fought for an outlet and gathered a gale inside her without a word said, as music threatening to burst but not bursting” (Sahgal 115).

The national crime bureau has registered the increase in number of violent crimes against women in recent years. Despite the astonishing proliferation of laws, violence against women including rape, sexual abuse, female foeticide and sexual harassment still happen on a shocking scale. Indeed, the past decade has shown an extraordinary increase in the number of major violent crimes against women. Though the aggression against women continues in many ways, they have covered a long distance towards equality. Feminist movement has contributed a significant role in this regard, and created the womenfolk courageous and motivated to change the conventional social discrimination against women. The first women Indian President Pratibha Patil has pointed in this regard: “Beginning with their determined efforts in the days before our freedom, today, our women continue to strive to transform the social order in a more just and equal manner” (Patil).

A very recent survey report of National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) is very shocking which discloses the inequitable approach of parents against their daughters. “NSSO” reveals shocking discrimination by families against girls on the issue of their education. This attitude continues outside too and prevents women from getting remuneration work, on equal wages. The denial of education to girls begins early within the families (ToI 10).

The torment of women against their suppression and their subjugation of being broken by conventional society and their own families are mirrored in many ways. Though we can boast of extraordinary achievements of Indian women like Sunita Williams, Saniya Mirza, Kiran Mazundar and Kiran Bedi. A large number to working women face sexual nuisance both at their homes and working places. They are deprived of equal status and integrity. They don’t have a say in decision making processes like men or a few honored women like Sonia Gandhi, Mayawathi, Jeyalalitha and others. The suffering of down-trodden women is unspeakable as we see in the torment of Sohini the woman of Mulkrj Anand’s novel Untouchable. But postmodern women can’t accept the violence imposed on them. They lift up a brave face against such exploitation of women. They are always in hunt of their fulfillment. They become rebellious when there is intrusion upon their liberty R.K.Narayan’s Rosie does the same in The Guide and Shanta Bai in The Dark Room. Shabitri who is tortured by her husband is the typical example of conventional Hindu wife. She is tormented in the name of custom and religion. But Shanta Bai is quite dissimilar from her fulfillment. She makes adulterous affair with Ramani for her satisfaction. Rosie, the female protagonist of R.K.Narayan’s novel The Guide has fought against her husband due to his unresponsiveness towards her love for dancing which conveys her identity. A constraint forced on her which is overpowering and unbearable is transgressed by her having accepted Raju who is concerned to her. Having defied the social customs that restrict a married woman from self satisfaction, she anchors her individuality showing her flair of dancing as Asha anchors; her identity resorting to lesbianism with Pipeelika challenging her husband’s indifference to her love.
Though women are clamor for freedom from traditional restrictions which distinguish between man and woman they have been endowed with special power by nature. From time immemorial they have been performing at the centre stage of power. History bears witness of such matters. Salman Rushdie has exposed in his most recent novel, *The Enchantress of Florence* that Jodhabai tried “Seven types of unguiculation” on Akbar to keep him at her side. Seduction is an influential weapon for enslavement of men. Robert Green writes in his book *The Art of Seduction* that seduction has come out of the need for feminine power. Seduction is nothing but mental witchcraft-psychological persuasion that follows pattern-attraction, a taste of sensual pleasure, then once the man is hooked, a withdrawal, forcing him into a pursuit of favors once enjoyed and then ultimately, slavery to the woman”(Sunday times 2).

The female characters of Manju Kapur, Astha and Pipeelika did the same. They are new women of postmodern era who adopt the means of empowerment for self satisfaction. They deconstruct every possibility of self reliance and struggle towards absolute freedom from social and economic constraints. Like the new women, Astha becomes a teacher to stand her own and she anchors her individuality. Pipeelika goes to U.S.A for pursuing her higher education to get a PhD degree. Both of them try to release themselves from social restrictions having adopted the means of empowerment. They are always in search of a place of their own where no one will exploit them. They will have their own identity and they would be able to enjoy physical satisfaction and emotional relationship.

In this novel Manju Kapur has shown that change in the norms of conventional patriarchal system is important for women’s rights and their individuality. Inter caste and inter religious marriage reduce the women from traditional restrictions. They are always in search of their individuality. Postmodern women can’t bear sex suppression and subjugation. They want co-existence and equal handling in socio-political aspects of life. They would not bear social or domestic aggression. Social or religious matters should not interfere with their individuality. If their individuality is defied they would challenge the whole system.

Manju Kapur has defied such subjugation against women in her novels. Astha, the female protagonist of *A Married Woman* who seeks for freedom, transgresses the traditional concept of women’s subservience and patience like the holy cow. Only economic freedom is not enough for them. Socio-religious culture has to accept their individuality. The researchers have to permit her to let her be what she decides and let her have the integrity which has been ignored to her for ages. They can no longer remain submissive, subjugated and discriminated.

In Astha-Aijaz-Pipee episode, religion has been decreased. Aijaz himself is a secular and open-minded Muslim. He is connected with a theatre group which works for the awakening of society. Pipee also runs an N.G.O. and Astha is also shown connected with a Manch. Her paintings also help in carrying out a new type of political consciousness. There are no embarrassments for matters such as lesbianism, extra marital relationship etc. A post–modernistic trend has been seen by the novelist through this novel.

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