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The struggle and survival of a new woman in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

M.Geetha¹ and J.Sundar Singh²

¹Department of English, Sri Shanmugha College of Engineering and Technology, Pullipalayam, Salem-637304.

²Department of English, Karunya University, Coimbatore- 641114.

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the struggle of women who aspire to be independent, achieve distinct position for herself and to get education, freedom and identity in the society. Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* highlights Astha's struggle and survival as a new woman insisting on liberation from patriarchal social structure and thinking. She emerges as a free woman, destroying the chain of tradition. Kapur thus portrays the woman from different angle by placing her in the midst of socio-economic struggles.

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Introduction

Since the establishment of the society woman is branded as the weaker sex, denied full justice, social security, economic liberation and political awareness. An awareness of the inequalities present in society paved way to broaden the women's liberation movement in the mid 19th century. One of the pioneers for providing the impetus is Simone De Beauvoir's voice through her book *The Second Sex*:

Female exists in the human species, today as they always make up about one half of humanity. And yet we are told that femininity is in danger, we are exhorted to be women, remain women, become women. It would appear, then, that every female human being is not necessarily a woman, to be so considered she must share in that mysterious and threatened reality known as femininity. Is this attribute something secreted by ovaries? Or it is a Platonic essence, a product of the philosophic imagination. (312)

The astringent and conical social web constrained women to obliterate her 'self', her eccentricity and separate identity. In modern era the self finds it intricate to come to stipulations with the social web because the central values nurtured by the self and the outer social demands are incompatible. This helplessness to formulate the self familiar with the social web results in the alienation of the self. O.P. Saxena writes:

....Self alienation, however, means the loss of the contact of the individual self with any inclination or desire that are not in agreement with the prevailing social patterns, as a result of which an individual is forced to manipulate in accordance with the social demands or feels incapable of controlling his actions.(71)

The long line of women writers from Christine de Pisan to Mary Wollstonecraft and through Simone de Beauvoir to present day feminist thinkers protest against the inequities of women. Sandra Lee Bartky writes,

Feminist consciousness is the experience in a certain way of certain specific contradictions in the social order. This means that the feminist apprehends certain features of social reality as intolerable, what Sartre would call her 'transcendences', her project of negation and transformation, makes possible what are specially feminist ways of apprehending contradictions in the social order. Feminist consciousness thinks a 'fact' into a 'contradiction', from the vantage point of a radical project of transformation.(23-24)

Due to 'contradictions' in our society the status of women alters and new conceptions of self and society come into conflict with older ideas about a women's role, her destiny and even her 'nature'. Sushila Singh writes.

The feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization. As a philosophy of life it seeks to discover and change the more subtle and deep seated causes of women's oppression. It is a concept of raising of consciousness of an entire culture.(33)

Thus the feminist consciousness is the consciousness of victimization, to apprehend oneself as victim is to aware of an alien and hostile force which is responsible for the blatantly unjust treatment of women and for stifling and oppressive system of sex role. It is interesting to find that Kapur's novels abound with female protagonists feminist consciousness and this is a feminist trait. Her female characters usually live on an edge and are driven to despair, breathing in a conventional and confined atmosphere. They put up a struggle, though it is a silent one and refuse to be subdued. It is true that Kapur's protagonists are never able to show resentment openly, much less revolt, yet they are acutely conscious of suppression and oppression and are unwilling to take it in their stride.

In the 1970's and 1980's Shashi Deshpande, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai, Namita Gokhale, Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, and Manju Kapur fought to erase the passive victimized women model. They write about woman's protest

Tele:

E-mail addresses: geethamothi.38@gmail.com

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and assertion as an individual and not just as 'other' in relation to man. They revolted against oppression, suppression, infliction and torture caused by a male dominated world. Their women protagonists revolt against arranged marriages and exercise their free will in choosing their own mates as the right choice. They seek relief in taking recourse to love marriages and premarital affairs. Their self-emancipation, self-expression, self-fulfillment and self-actualization is realized in terms of walking out of marriages and indulging in extra-marital affairs as a means of escapism temporarily from the stifling atmosphere encapsulated within the institution of marriage. This leads to irretrievable breakdown of marriages, separations, divorces, re-marriages, even neuroticism or lesbianism. The women writers who have the strongest sympathy for their protagonists strive to restore their life through their writings. Their novels reveal, in the borrowed expression from Andrew Milner and Jeff Browitt "how andocentric cultures constructed persistently negative cultures of Women". (131)

Kapur's second novel *A Married Woman* (2002) did not attract much attention but it carried the feministic movement a few steps ahead of her previous novel. It has many more ideological & theatrical implications than *The Difficult Daughters*. The torch bearer of women's emancipation, Kapur has carried the fight of women of colonial frame to new battlefields with possible consequence of fettering the chain tradition. *A Married Women* may be studied at three levels. First at the feminist level. Second at the historical level and lastly – at the level of deconstruction and post modernism. In this novel Astha is the heroine who carries the fight of Virmati further to new battlegrounds. Thus the novel can be read as a feminist study. Kapur in one of her interviews opens:

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 the educated women, working women. There is a trapping of equality but you scratch the surface and it is not really equal. (*Unheard Melodies* 4)

The crucial meeting point of consideration in *A Married Woman* is woman – her travails and privations, tension and irritation, thoroughness and anguishes. This novel suggests that appeasement is what characterizes the life of the widespread run of the middle-class women in India. Unable to defy social conventions and traditional morality, she finds herself enmeshed by yearning and despondency, qualms and hopes, loves and hates, withdrawal and alienation, suppression, and marital discord and male chauvinism. Indeed, Kapur's chief thematic concern is with woman's struggle, in the milieu of modern Indian society, to find and preserve her identity as wife, mother, and most of all as human being, and the operative sensibility in this novel is distinctly female and modern. She has exposed a woman's passion with love and lesbianism, an incompatible marriage and ensuing annoyance. With a passion to revolutionize the Indian male sensitivity, she describes the traumas of her female protagonists from which they suffer, and perish in for their triumph. She is stunned at the intensification of fundamentalism and the augment of religious zealot to uplift and elevate the country by a crusade and establish paranoia by presenting evil as a historical necessity.

Kapur desires to present evidence through her woman protagonist that, "a woman should be aware, self-controlled, strong-willed, self-reliant and rational, having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense"(Nahal 17). She apprehends the approach of an apocalyptic social climate with the rise of the fundamentalists and fanatics in nation's spurious politics that take religion to be ultra-patriotic.

As in a typical Indian family, Astha in *A Married Woman* "was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear". Astha's education, her character, her health, her marriage, these were the burdens of her parents. Her parents are very conscious of her needs and role in a middle class family. Her mother is very protective of her and she expects her to conform to tradition. She often tells Astha that the real meaning and worth of a woman lies in getting married happily and having children and serving husband as a God. She tells Astha:

When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?(*A Married Woman* 01)

Like any typical Indian parents Astha's parents too took an enormous interest in her reading matter. Her mother told her, "Our Shastras teach us how to live. You will learn from the Gita, the Vedas, the Upanishads". However, Astha didn't show much interest in those texts with the pretext that her Hindi was not very strong. In the mean time, obviously suspecting something fishy in Astha's secret life, her parents "tightened their surveillance" (28). In the final year of the college, she is deeply involved with Rohan, a senior student of university, in order to make her identity. They enjoy each other's company.

He kissed the fingers, nails, palms; he felt the small hair on the back with his closed lip. Astha felt something flow inside her as she stared at his bent head. She had never been aware of her body's separate life before. (24)

But it is soon over as Rohan went abroad for study. She had been a victim of male passion and Astha enrolled for M.A., "bored and unenthusiastic" and her marriage is settled with Hemant, the foreign returned son of a bureaucrat living in the post colony of New Delhi.

In domestic space, Hemant behaves like a typical hyper masculine. In other words, he is a proud member of a patriarchal society dominated by machismo and heterosexuality. In the post colonial texts like *The Home and the World* authored by Rabindranath Tagore, Sandip thinks aloud:

We are men, we are kings, and we must have our tribute. Ever since we have come upon the Earth we have been plundering her; the more we claim her she submitted.... The one delight of the Earth is to fulfill the claim of those who are men ...Likewise, by sheer force of our claims, we men must have opened all the latent possibilities of women (152).

Astha sat stunned. What kind of a fool had she been to expect Hemant to understand? She had a good life, but it was good because nothing was questioned. This boat could not be rocked. She should paint that on canvas and put it up on the wall, and stare at it day and night so that is message burnt its way through her brain into her heart. This boat cannot be rocked. (99)

Astha's involvement with the Street Theatre Group lends fuel to the fire of her quest for identity. Aijaz, the leader of the group

dramatizes social issues. Despite her husband's annoyance Astha participates in the workshop organized by the group. During this workshop she finds that a tender feeling develops between Astha and Aijaz. This brings to her a unique feeling. "Perhaps she shouldn't think of him so much, but soon it would be over, where was the harm, it made her happy, and that in itself was worth something" (113).

After the death of Aijaz and his troupe members' while staging play on Babri Masjid-Ram Janambhoomi controversy, Astha emerges as a social activist and starts taking part in rallies and staging, in spite of much resistance from her husband and in-laws. She is sick of her frequent sacrifice for her family and her status of "an unpaid servant" but now "she didn't want to be pushed around in the name of family. She was fed up with ideal if Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail" (168). She decides to go to Ayodhya to chart her course as a social activist to fight against old oppression and suppression. But Hemant reacts fiercely against her decision and asks her:

As my wife, you think it proper to run around abandoning home, leaving the children to the servants? Astha went into familiar distress. As his wife? Was that all she was? (199)

However, she defies him and undertakes her trip to Ayodhya. During her stay there she meets one of the participants, Pipeelika and visits various places and temples with her and begins to like her. She realizes about Pipeelika, "A stranger she had hardly spoken to, to bother about her clothes, what was wrong with her?" (200). Astha's association with Pipee gives a new dimension to her quest of identity. Pipee comes to Delhi and spends time with Astha. A powerful emotional relation develops between them despite offences from her husband and children. Astha falls in love with her. A strong sexual relationship is established between them within few meetings. Astha spends more and more time with her and enjoys her company.

The conflict between her roles of wife, mother and that of a lover continues and she finds herself torn between her desire for freedom and duty towards her family. She realizes that any relationship, even that between a woman and another woman, becomes demanding after a length of time. Pipee wants Astha totally committed to her but she wants to sail in both boats, keeping these two important parts of her life separate from each other. Astha finds a soul mate in Pipee.

Astha thought that if husband and wife are one person, then Pipee and she were even more so. She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her. (243)

She is on the verge of losing her conventional marriage with Hemant and traditional family life. She lives in a haze. Her roles of mother and wife are on litmus test. She decides to leave her home, husband and family for Pipee. But suddenly, Pipeelika is offered a scholarship from American university to do research and the relationship comes to an end. Whereas Nina, the protagonist of Kapur's latest novel *The Immigrant* (2008) is an extension of Astha in so far as she refuses to submit herself to the patriarchal notions of her husband, Anand, maintains her own individuality and struggles to carve out her own identity. Kapur shows Astha's growing and evolving at various stages through various relationships and becomes the first Indian novelist who highlights women's desire for homosexuality. The roots of tradition, living up to the bench mark of the ideal Indian woman, sacrificing for family, putting self behind, devaluing herself, and being content to live in the safety and security of

husband, home and family continually come in conflict with her post modern sensibilities that lend her wings to question established norms, to search for her identity, to long for a soul mate, to develop, and to enter socially forbidden relationships. Kapur shows Astha rowing and evolving through this relationship.

The beginning of the end of Astha's marriage, founded upon her sacrificing her own identity while trying to satisfy the traditional duties of a Hindu wife, coincides with the events leading up to the Babri Masjid demolition. As Anita Nair comments: "The key to the plot is the Babri Masjid episode. If one is looking for a metaphor, here it is. A nation falling apart because of differences that can't be bridged. A family falling apart because of differences that can't be bridged" (84). But Kapur's use of history is less than effective. She is far better when exploring the psyche of Astha and tracing her evolving subjectivity, as Nilanjana S. Roy observes in her review.

If Astha's lesbian affair with Pipeelika was a prelude to her achieving an autonomous identity, it is far from successful. Her affair with Pipee, Aijaz's widow, is narrated in a first person diary format to set it apart from the omniscient third person narration used in the rest of the book. The narrative technique is possibly used to provide a glimpse into Astha's innermost feelings, but these are revealed to be mere confusion. Pipee is as controlling as Hemant, with Kapur merely exchanging a lover of one gender for another. Nilanjana S. Roy observes, "Pipee's gender is almost irrelevant, except as a convenient plot device: her role in the relationship is masculine, classically butch. Change the 'she said' to 'he said' and surprise, it's a conventional man-woman relationship" (80). After Astha's trip with her family to Disney World and London the relationship breaks down irreparably. Pipee decides to go to America to pursue her Ph.D. and Astha goes back to her old life. But there is a difference, as Astha continues her paintings and finds an outlet for her pent-up rage. Perhaps her developing artistic talents consciously prefigure her greater autonomy within her marriage.

There are numerous examples of western texts that conform to the pattern of the self-discovery narrative with the woman's separation from her family symbolizing her emerging subjectivity. The paucity of such narratives among Indian novels is perhaps testimony to the strength of traditional familial bonds outlined in the epics and the Dharmashastras. The effects of such bonds are seen in the repression endured ever in a "normal" relationship, reflected in Astha's quandary.

It is essential at this point to sound a cautionary note. As Roop Rekha Verma clarifies, "Hindu culture cannot be equated with Vedic culture as it is far more complex. However, the conception of femininity is almost constant in the midst of this plurality. The culture that arose from the later Vedic literature has influenced other cultures in India and these do not differ much in their perspectives on women. In Indian culture, a woman is seen only as an auxiliary to man" (443). The virtues required in a wife are completely self-negating: self-sacrifice, tolerance and submission. It is in the light of these repressive notions that the Indian woman's difficulty in achieving autonomy in her quest for self-discovery should be viewed.

Rita Felski outlines, "...the conflicting tendencies underlying oppositional social movements: a desire for integration with the larger social community as a means of overcoming a condition of marginalization and an insistence upon the qualitative difference of cultural perspective as a means of articulating a challenge to dominant values and

institutions, a stress on difference which resists assimilation into the mainstream of social life" (150). It would appear that for Hindu women the desire for integration emerges stronger, as seen from the narrative resolution chosen by Kapur in *A Married Woman*. The novel is unable to oppose the authority of a version of female experience that nullifies female autonomy, in spite of rejecting the notion of a completely self-negating Hindu wife. It presents an alternative version with the potential for inspiratory status, proceeding on the assumption that autonomy within a Hindu marriage is not an impossible concept. In the final analysis, perhaps the clue to Astha's future autonomy lies in the meaning of her name, hope. Astha's return to her marital home and her children may be founded on her hope and a vision of future empowerment and autonomy.

At the historical level the novel deals with the past and the contemporary history. She novelist through her characters probes the past history and the questions the contemporary history. Kapur brings the narrative to 1987 & creates a situation where focus is shifted to Ayodhya, Babri Masjid and Ram Janmabhoomi. Mrs. Dubey the Principal of the School where Astha works, asks Astha to manage a workshop of the Street Theatre Group after the end of session in March for students. Thus Aijaz Akhtar Khan, a History lecturer and the founder of Street Theatre Group comes into picture. Kapur introduces him:

Aijaz is a wizard. He is actually a History lecturer but his knowledge of drama is immense. Besides writing his own plays and songs, he has adapted Brecht, Shakespeare and Greek tragedy into Hindi (102).

Though Aijaz was a History teacher, during the holidays he used to perform in slums, factories, streets villages and small to create social awareness. In Astha's school while teaching the boys the tricks of the Ayodhya issue – Babri Masjid- Ram Janmabhoomi dispute. He asks Astha to write a script of a play dealing with this subject. It was too much for Astha but she had to delve deep in the history. Kapur says:

It was a temple, a birthplace, a monument to past glory, anything but a disused nesting place for bats. Despite all this, it had endured for over four years (108).

Novelists goes deep in analyzing the whole controversial episode of Ayodhya since British rule till the opening of locks at the orders of High Court after independence. Astha goes to India International centre libraries etc. to know as much as possible. The script of the play was entitled – "Babri masjid-Fact, Fiction and you". It is staged and students and parents go to watch it. Himanshu and Anuradha, the children of Astha, also take part in the play. Astha's husband Hemant also views it at the school of his wife. Christopher Rollason in one of his brilliant articles "To build or to destroy" History and the individual in Kapur's *A Married Woman*- has pointed out two very important aspects – First he comes out with the motive of the novelist:

In Kapur's novel, Ayodhya as symbolic space is closely linked with a complex and many sided exploration of the notion of history. Indeed both Ayodhya and history are among this novel keywords (JCL 43).

In *A Married Woman*, the narrative takes a ghastly turn, when Aijaz along with his troupe of the Street Group Theatre is abducted and cold bloodedly murdered. The theatre activists were staging their street play in one of the towns. This ghastly murder of eight people has not been shown but reported through the newspaper. Thereafter candle march, protest rallies are carried out in Delhi. A Sampradayikta Virodhi Manch is also established by the protagonist. Astha also makes a trip to

Ayodhya and the facts are brought to day light. Pipee the widow of Aijaz joins Astha in her protest to fundamentalists. The demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 by Hindu fundamentalists has also been presented. But it has also been reported and not described by the omnipresent novelist as a narrator. The novelist presents the whole controversy through an intellectual's point of view. Kapur advocates pluralistic, global culture. *A Married Woman* is the only novel of Kapur in which history, contemporary and past has over taken feministic activism of Kapur. The novel may be compared with Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Gita Hariharan's *In Time of Siege*. In all the above novel the authors cherish and patronize the secular, multi- ethnic ideals of Indian society.

When we look from the angle of deconstructionist and post modernist we find that the cherished ideals and values have been distorted. A society without values exists in which old values have lost their relevance and new values do not exist. A post-modernistic ethics have spread its wings everywhere. *A Married Woman* deals with tradition versus no tradition, permanent versus temporary, moral versus amoral, usual sex to unusual sex, factual history versus imaginary history and religion versus inhumanism. The life in the novel presents contradictions, paradoxes, illusions and fantasies. These contradictions can be seen in different relations and situations present in the novel, observe the relationship between Astha and her mother, Astha and her husband Hemant, Hemant and Aijaz, Astha and Pipee, Pipee and Samira, theatre and the real life, history in theory and history in practice and so on. A post-modernist tries to find out meaning in contradictions and paradoxes which the life provides. However reality is illusory, relative and circumscribed by variable. Yet *A Married Woman* is comparatively a better effort than the previous one on the basis of varied theme and wider canvas.

In the resulting universe there are no absolutes or fixed points, so that Universe we live in is 'decentred' or inherently relativistic (*BeginningTheory* 67).

Kapur's novel is based on the assumption that women insist on liberation from patriarchal social structure and thinking; that they strongly protest against every cruelty committed on them by any fair name of religion or morality.

Tradition in Indian society is so strong that a woman of average capability fails to break them and get out of them to make a separate identity of her own. She makes her attempts, she covers some distance but ultimately she returns to the four walls of her family to lead the life of slavery and servitude in the patriarchal set-up. She is progressive and conscious of her rights, but she quickly compromises to the fact that a woman's real position lies within the family unit which she must sustain and protect and not ignore or neglect due to the false notion of being "liberated". In this sense Astha is not only the face of the new woman of our time also the real woman of our time. "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" (Simone De Beauvoir 16)

Kapur also deals with the position of woman as daughter, a wife and mother. All her female protagonist hailing from middle class status challenge the existing socio-cultural patriarchal system. In the social milieu, they are educated, modern, intelligent, bold and assertive. Even though they try to transcend the social hierarchy by demolishing it, they often undergo

serious psychological traumas in the absence of an alternative, planned feminist ideology that may give them freedom, security and peace of mind. The protagonists such as Virmati (*Difficult Daughters*), Astha (*A Married Woman*,) and Nisha (*Home*), ultimately return to the traditional mode of life, most probably thinking that home is where they may get space and peace. Kapur voices the implicit idea that man always expects sacrifice from women and he is always callous enough to overlook the need of her fulfillment. During these negative and positive pictures, Kapur's draft is quite clear and unchanged, the lack of self identity in a woman is the root cause of many conflicts, an endowed cry for selfhood is prerequisite for all round mellowness and contentment. The vigor and vitality of the two novels, *A Married Woman* lies in its rich social web that expresses Kapur's apprehension for a woman who, uprooted from the familiar environment of her childhood, girlhood and youth, leaves behind the most determining part of her life, and moulds herself a new in a completed strange environment, with entirely latest set of rules and regards it as the only permanent fact of her survival. The concept of new women in Indian society varies from those one in the West and so Kapur has endeavoured to evolve her own stream of emerging of new women grounded in reality. She has her own concerns, priorities as well as her own ways of dealing with the predicament of her

women protagonists. Her novels make a significant contribution in this direction.

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