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Movements of New Woman in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

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Abstract

Manju Kapur's novels present women's need for self-assertion and a conflict for her own destiny, emancipation identity and self-realization. She shows the hidden intricacies of woman psychological conditions in her novels. Her female characters make an attempt to dismantle the gender polarization up to a great extent. The female characters in the novels of Manju Kapur are not traditional women who think that marriage is their fate and they are to follow the commands of their husbands. They challenge traditional norms and break all social taboos and restrictions and emerge as a modern woman who is conscious of herself. The female characters in the novels of Manju Kapur are the personification of the 'modern women'. They are highlighted as convention-bashing new women, subverting the male chauvinism. Manju Kapur's women characters are developed characters. The general stress in her novels is on the enlightenment of female characters and their empowerment. Women in struggling for their rights in general and their identity in particular in every field of activity make perceptible progress especially in the domestic sphere. Female protagonist unlike the female characters of the past, assert themselves and come into the centre of attention. Men begin knowing women as formidable force in all spheres of activity.

Keyword: Assertion, empowerment, emancipation, male-chauvinism, exclusion.

The protagonists in the novels of Manju Kapur are perceived as women struggling against all hardships. She has always attempted to delineate the sufferings of women at a deeper level in her writings. The presentation of feminism is clear in her novels. This is depicted in the struggles of her female protagonists their struggle for identity and their emancipating behaviour. The female world is the main feature in her novels.. The novelist not only comes to value education and the higher things in

conscious existence but also shows the negative aspects of life. The endless vicissitudes of conscious existence create her a matured lady. She rejects the patriarchal norms to approve her identity and achieves contentment in her life. Kapur's novels show the hard labour of women to assert their identity.

A modern woman is career oriented because she understands it is her economic independence which motivates her struggle against the male-dominated society. Manju Kapur creates her female characters as being modern women in their approach to life. Kapur presents the situation of the fast changing times, renders her female characters capable of adapting themselves to changing times that challenge them at every phase in their lives.

Manju Kapur, in her second novel *A Married Woman*, like a few other contemporary Indian novelists, attempt to rethink femininity. Astha, while experiencing the conscious existence of a traditional wife with her husband Hemant and a typical Indian mother to her children, is paving a way of emancipation which, under normal situation an Indian wife and mother would not have courage to do.

After her college education, she is married to Hemant who is an America returned son of a rich bureaucrat. Astha, is happy in her married life. Kapur highlights the fullness of womanhood that Astha feels, *She felt a woman of the world, the world that was covered with the film of her desire, and the fluids of their sex.* (Kapur 46)

Simmi Gurwara has the same opinion

In the early years of her marriage, she was captivated by the magic of their sexual life. She eagerly looked forward to a physical union with her husband and enjoyed it immensely thinking physical intimacy to be the be-all and end-all of her married life.

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(Gurwara 90)

But the happiness of marital realm slowly disappears. Arrival of unhappiness comes into Astha's married life and she starts feeling a sense of boredom which suffocates her at home.

Hemant becomes busy and does not spend time with her. Astha should seek some service; and she becomes a teacher and this vocation permits her some space and welcoming transformations from her monotonous routine of household chores. But this change has brought about another turn in her conscious existence that reveals new traits of her personality. It inspires a series of dramatic alterations in her life. Astha unfolds the actual person of her inner world and it is the larger outer space that gives her wider range to exhibit her prolific personality. But for these alterations, she faced various challenges in life. When Astha conceives for the first time, this news spreads ripples of happiness in both the families. The prospective father would like to have a male child. When Astha's mother like Hemant's mother expect for a male child, Hemant tells them that he would like to have a female child and wonders why men in India make such a gender distinction.

Astha is happy to have such a spouse like Hemant as he is above gender prejudice and this is an evidence of his broad-mindedness. Here he presents himself like an American bred. Hemant lessens her responsibility of work by assisting Astha in bringing up the child.

After some years Hemant announces to Astha that he would have a male child, —*I want to have my son soon.* (Kapur 68) This comes to her as an unexpected shock and asks Hemant what they should do if a male baby is not born. Hemant, in a casual tone, insists that they should go on trying until they have a male child. Astha rejoins that trying again and again for a male child might interfere with her teaching career to which Hemant, in a heckling tone, tells her that teaching is hardly a serious job ...*Oh-ho, what is there in teaching?* (8) In this regard Bhagabat Nayak opines that,

Astha's marriage to a Pan American and Pan Indian husband in her parent's choice is a miscalculation.

(Nayak 225)

Astha finds a striking change in Hemant's behaviour which alters from an all-American to an all-Indian personality; and he is the victim of male ego. Once, Hemant attributes the nature of sex to do and indicates, to her understanding, about the difference between the deed accomplished by a male and the action accomplished by a female. He frankly tells her that she had better quit her service in order to arrange the household chores in a suitable manner. He has completely identified with the interests of his functions to the fulfil exclusion of Astha's own interests which created her lonely and depressed. Although, she has often thought of leaving her job, she is disinclined to take this decision, since she celebrates a happy feelings of independence as a teacher. Gradually her pure love of independence relegates her erstwhile most cherished wish to be one with her affectionate spouse to her. Thus, one observes a change in Astha's demeanour towards herself and towards her spouse. Her craving for love slowly gives way to her sense of freedom which she values most and which is connected to her job. Since Astha feels her spirits developing expansive through her interaction with other people in the society, she likes to be a teacher rather than be a wife at home. And she realizes that her salary meant she does not need to ask Hemant for every little rupee she spends. Simone De Beauvoir's the two prerequisites for woman's freedom

Economic independence and liberation from orthodox traditions of society.

(Beauvoir 328)

Hemant becomes too preoccupied with his work to pay any due heed to her unlike in the past; consequently, the distance happens gradually with ever-increasing accountability, both as a mother at home and instructor at school. There is little space for relaxation and as a consequence she is suffocated and this culminates in psychological anxiety than physical pain. Astha is essentially a being that yearns for emancipation; hitherto the happy condition with her affectionate husband used to alleviate the load of her deed. But now the ever-increasing separation that develops between them rises into a psychological pain a kind of Chronic Fatigue Syndrome in terms of Elaine Showalter. this is a result of unhealthy limitations on someone's opinions. In other words as psychologists define, is when the cherished picture of one very affectionate person to the victim of this anxiety is disturbed. In Astha's context, the cherished picture of her imaginations is her spouse who, for his own

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causes, stops to be the centre of her dreams. Kapur shows the condition

It was in this two children, husband, servants, job scenario that Astha started to have headaches. (Kapur 74)

Astha provides vent to her suppressed feelings through writing poetry and sketching images and they are painted with the colour of dark aspects. The language is oblique, but it is her own feelings represented continuously which gives an secure place from her pent up feelings.

There is mental incompatibility between the wife and husband. Like most husbands with a traditional mindset, Hemant thinks that he fulfils all the material needs of her wife that a wife desired for; but he ignores one significant reality that wives need fulfilment of their emotional requirements rather than their physical needs. Hemant lacks a creative and sensitive brain, and therefore cannot feel the beauty of Astha's poems. But now her poems seem to be bleak ...*all about cages and birds, and mice, and suffering in situations that are not even clear.*(84) Her poems are nothing but the real reality of her inner world. Her emotional pain is not understood by Hemant and he is that...*if others read these poems, they might actually think you weren't happy.*(81) This is one of the cardinal reasons for the rift that goes on widening and this has a far-reaching effect on their marital relationship.

Astha, comes in contact with Aizaz Akhtar Khan, a history teacher, the founder of The Street Theatre Group', and a social worker. He organized a workshop in Astha's school to enlighten the students about Babri Masjid - Ram Janambhoomi' controversy. The novelist presents the situation where Aizaz appreciates Astha for her artistic talents. Aizaz, summons Astha by her name; she is thrilled when he calls so since, she is used to being addressed by her husband as baby' or Az'. Her name is her identity and Aizaz recognizes her talents and asks her to prepare a script about the Babri Masjid - Ram Janambhoomi' episode. She feels flattered and naturally draws a contrast between her husband who discourages her at every stage and Aizaz who recognizes her talent. Astha feels dignified because for the first time, she has been valued for her existence. Referring to the same Ishwar aptly comments

She feels somewhat suffocated, exploited and unnoticed at home. It is Aizaz's trust

which motivates her to think out of the house. He makes her think about the ongoing socio-political activities which become her future interest.

(Ishwar 2)

Aizaz's motivation assists her to develop. She is attracted to him, basks in his appreciation and drawn towards his attractive personality; but her moral obligations forces her to continue to live in a limbo until his untimely demise in a Hindu-Muslim riot. Astha pays heed to Aizaz passing glances at her searching idea and smiling at her even though the occasion does not summon for it. This creates her feel that there is no harm in imagining about him as it gave her delight and it's worth something. Subsequently, when Aizaz's touches her knee, she reminds herself that she is married, with two children. Talwar states

She is pulled by the cords of transition, on the one hand, and by her own reluctance and hesitation to act, thanks to the social conditioning, on the other.

(Talwar 29)

Astha immediately comes in reality and removes all these notions associated with Aizaz; but she is definite that Aizaz has great admiration for her creative works and this delights her and a silent connection is established between them and ...*suddenly she glimpsed possibilities, suddenly her life seemed less constricted.* (Kapur 115)

Hemant reads out that Aizaz and the troupe of actors were burnt alive by religious fanatics in the newspaper to Astha and she starts crying over the ghastly incident. Hemant, indifferent to the shocking tragedy, inhumanly interrogates his spouse, why she weeps over the demise of somebody who is nothing to her. Astha informs him that any such ghastly tragedy would invite for human sympathy and this fills a deep sense of repugnance in her towards her husband. Manju Kapur states

Astha stared at her husband in revulsion. Ten men had died in the most ghastly way possible, and this was all he could say. Did he have no feelings? (140)

After the ghastly tragedy of Aizaz and his troupe, *The Sampradayakta Mukti Manch* has been organised in memory of the dead to carry on the note of secularism. Astha emerges a social activist, involving herself with the

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activities of the *Manch*. Reshana advises to Astha that she might contribute her mite through her paintings to the *Manch*. Astha has duties of domestic accountabilities on one side and her moral obligations as a teacher and a social activist on the other side. Hemant wishes his wife to leave her service if she so insists on her painting but she could never do that as her duty is something that provides her freedom and assertion. Astha realizes that her job ...represented security, not perhaps of money, but of her own life, of a place where she could be herself. (49)

She feels proud and sees the vision of herself as a woman who had sold two paintings in one year and, ...she felt rich and powerful so what if this feeling only lasted a moment.(159)

In this connection Sushila Singh states that

Through Astha, Kapur offers a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organization and control mechanism by her inner potential as an individual and her desire to attain personal recognition.

(Singh 65)

Astha's colleagues happen to talk about marriages and divorces as they take place in the West and in India. Astha being a new woman, sick of sacrifice, is fed up with the concept of ideal Indian womanhood that is used to trap and jail, does not wish to be pushed around in the name of family and tentatively provides her idea that...It may not be a bad thing, ... If a marriage is terrible, it is good to be able to leave.(Kapur 168) Astha is motivated to state this as she was somewhat disillusioned with the rocky terrain of her own marriage. In spite of some disagreements between Hemant and Astha, the latter has never protested against him; all her differences with him are said in asides. Even when she wishes to go to Ayodhya in association with the *Sampradayakta Mukti Manch*, Hemanth openly protests stating that, as his wife she is not supposed to leave home, leaving the children to the servants. She goes into her familiar anxiety presenting ...as his wife? Was all that she was (188) as if she has no individuality of her own.

The arrival of Pipeelika Trivedi in the conscious existence of Astha is very important as the former exercises a powerful impact on the latter. Pipeelika, the young widow of Aizaz meets with Astha at Ayodhya. Astha who is very eager to know Aizaz's spouse ever since his demise is overwhelmed with curiosity to know

more about her when Pipeelika's individuality as his wife is recognized to her.

She is curious to know more about Pipeelika and they begin to interact more often and a solid sexual relationship is established between them. Thus...an element of secrecy entered the relationship and gave it an illicit character. (218) and in their context ...there was no aphrodisiac more powerful than talking, no seduction more effective than curiosity. (218)

S. Robert Gnanamony has also commented

The reader by now understands from their behavior that as far as sexuality is concerned, it is not something biologically given or transmitted by the genes, rather it is a cultural construct, which is learned in society due to certain circumstantial constraints.

(Gnanamony 112)

Astha feels a self-absorbing delight in her physical union with Pipeelika which cannot express in words. During the concise spell of sexual congress, they celebrated their relationship discussing of their discovery and attachment towards each other, the complete closeness presented through their minds as much as their physical unions. And even Astha gets it...strange, making love to friend instead of an adversary. (Kapur 231) As Jyothirmaya Tripathy comments, elsewhere that their sexual conduct presents that

An alternative exists and this is not less enjoyable, that sexuality does not mean pulverization of the female principle, and lionization of a dominant male. It proves that sexuality is a pleasure not a power structure.

(Tripathy 290)

A woman has various roles to play in the society ; daughter, wife and mother. Astha is a family oriented woman. It is the mother in her that dominates more than any other role that she is to frolick. Even the role of a wife is secondary to her. So, as a woman, she provides her paramount significance to motherhood; although, at one time she is attracted to be free as Pipee, she evaluates this thought.

Astha, after having felt the private pleasures of lesbianism with Pipee, transforms powerful enough to inform her husband that she is not a sex object and she is not in a mood for love-making, when he insists on it. She interrogates him. *Do I have to give it just because you are my husband?* (Kapur 224) Of late, Astha has been

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involved in love with Pipee and she fantasizes her experiences with her and looks upon it without qualms since both of them are women, Kapur thus brings out this scenario saying, *...so far as her marriage was concerned, they were both women, nothing was seriously threatened.* (232)

Astha likes to have a path of independence that poses a threat to Hemant and his male-dominated personality. In the meanwhile, Pipee attempts to instigate Astha for an absolute commitment towards their secret relationship. When Pipee informs Astha about her Ph.D. course, Astha is a bit surprised that this may put an end to their new-fangled relationship. Immediately she feels that one can never be one with another person; it is better to acknowledge this so that conscious existence becomes easier.

Astha realizes that Pipee wishes to have full commitment in this connection, namely her relationship with Pipee, with no strings connected. This is complete unacceptable to her, understanding that Pipee was stating *...if Astha had her children, she had her Ph.D., as though you could equate the two.* (241)

In a temperament of self-sympathy, Astha experiences herself as a bird pecking at a few leftover crumbs from the feast of conscious existence. She oscillates between the two worlds, one that is her family and the other, her close connection with Pipee. This confusion is resolved in favour of her family interests and she accepts to Pipee thus *...I love you, you know how much you mean to me, I try and prove it every moment we have together, but I can't abandon my family, I can't ... Oh Pipee, I'm sorry, I am not like you.* (242)

Astha feels herself trapped and torn between her two duties: quest for emancipation and her family responsibilities. She feels that any affinity could be demanding after a length of time. Though she does not come out of her family life, she feels complete fulfilment in her relationship with Pipee and feels her a soulmate. In spite of herself, Astha realizes the solid grasp of Pipee on her. At every step, Pipee declares her authority over her so much that Astha feels alienated in the absence of Pipee. Elsewhere, Astha shows her complete fulfilment owning the company of Pipee *... my life in fragments, she is the one fragment that makes the rest bearable. But a fragment, however potent, is still a fragment.* (264) Astha feels secluded and somewhat separated when someone is

in Pipee's company. She wishes Pipee all for herself, this may be her fault and she ponders. *How do people have affairs? They seem very complicated businesses.* (251) Astha is humane and optimistic in her opinion towards friendship but unable to prove herself she also gets emotionally alienated to come out of limbo.

Astha keeps her marital life on a higher pedestal understanding well to support the system that marriage provides her with. Astha somewhere down the line accepts the significance of marriage in her conscious existence. It is a result of the values that she imbibed from her parents, especially her mother, who ingrained the purity of marital life in her mind by repeated doses of ostentation.

Finally, Astha develops through these conflicts and progresses into a creative and confident woman. She attempts to reform her individuality through her developing social consciousness and engagement in the public arena.

Throughout her conscious existence, she struggles against male-oriented society in order to make a niche for herself. Towards the end of the fictitious tale, one perceives that Astha develops as a modern woman passing through various conflicts and proves herself with highest confidence in her. Kapur presents Astha as a well-developed woman to that point where she began her married life. Gradually, a sense of calmness settled on her which is a symbol of fulfilment. She thought of her name, Faith *...Faith in herself. It was all she had.* (299). Here, it is apt to quote chaman Nahal who observes:

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)

Manju Kapur, through her heroine Astha, dethrones the inherent patterns of gender, religion, culture and tradition that present women's inherent capabilities or rise up to the condition at the right hour and also to exercise a radical mission with guts to announce their self-autonomy. In this sense, Astha is not only the face of the modern woman of our time but also the actual woman. Seema Malik says in this connection that *...Astha is Kapur's New Woman; conscious, introspective, educated, wants to carve a life for herself,*

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to some extent she even conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social codes. (Malik 171)

In conclusion ,the result of this critical study of Manju Kapur's female protagonists permits one to perceive a progressive change with regard to their forward opinions against the traditional values which mark the modernity of their views. They appear more emphasised when they are contrasted with the opinions presented by those of the traditional behaviour. From Virmati of *Difficult Daughters* to Astha of *A Married Woman* , one observes development from a lower phase to a higher one towards self- individuality by resisting hoary tradition. Thus Kapur's female characters struggle to make a niche for themselves. They are energetic women who raise their voice against the oppressive traditional norms and wriggle out of the coils of tradition. They are standard enough to ignore these traditions as stumbling blocks in the way of their happy understanding.

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