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Quest For Identity: A Study of Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

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Manju Kapur, in her novels has portrayed the numerous schemes developed by the patriarchs to curb female freedom and independence. She has tried to divulge the various ways in which patriarchy relegates woman to the periphery. The discriminating patterns of education proffered before the sons and the daughters baffle us.

Education for a daughter is seen as an alternate option of marriage. A daughter is educated not to go out and take up a job. On the contrary, her education is a trap to hunt down a good husband and become a perfect wife and daughter-in-law representing ―Indian womanhood. Thus, marriage is the ultimate institution where all women should enter after the successful completion of education.

A Married Woman deals with women's issues in the present context. The theme centres around women and their conflicts against different people in different circumstances at different points of their lives. The protagonist Astha, tracing her life from her young adulthood through her early middle years unsure of herself and her own capabilities and her struggles to become a writer or a painter or a social activist. This can be traced back to her own upbringing in the hands of typical middle class parents whose sole aim is to own a plot in the suburbs and get rid of their duty as parents by marrying off their only daughter. They think education of a daughter as a means to an end, the end being the ultimate institution of marriage. She needs to get a degree which is a trap to hunt a good husband and go on to play the role of a perfect wife and daughter in law.

So, once married, she tries her best to fit in the roles that have been moulded for her and her tribe.

In her efforts to fit in perfectly to the moulds of an endearing wife and attentive mother, she at times, forgets her own identity, gets carried along the sway. She enjoys the initial few years of

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matrimonial bliss which includes treading the unexplored realms of physical attraction enjoying for the very first time the joys of physical intimacy with her husband.

She feels complete as a woman after she is taken. But after this initial euphoria and fervor ebbs differences begin raising their head. Her husband, once being the all American husband, becomes an all Indian one. As he becomes more and more involved in his business, he compels her to be the children's mother and father. She finds herself girdled with more and more responsibilities which leads to temperamental incompatibility. This troubled marriage causes her a lot of anxiety, isolation and discomfort and she blames herself for all the unhappiness in her troubled relationship which manifests itself in the form of terrible headaches. She is a working woman but is denied the right to spend what is her own. This form of ostracization leads to restlessness and she yearns for freedom. She finds herself suffocated by the growing needs of the family-"always adjusting to everybody's needs". (MW 227) Astha understands a married woman's place in the family to be that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death in her Indian status. She feels for herself that "A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth", (MW 231) are the necessary prerequisites of a married woman. Being torn between her duty and responsibility, faith and fact, public ethos and personal ethics she thinks "a tired woman cannot make good wives", (MW 154) and struggles for an emotional freedom from her mundane existence.

Her life seems to be like a free spirit saddled in the typically suffocating North Indian traditional society. She has a distant husband, non-interfering though disapproving mother in law, demanding children and a recluse mother. She feels all her moves are closely being watched which make her so frustrated and wanting of a private space for herself even if it is in a corner of her house where she can be herself away from the watching and prying eyes that seem to follow her everywhere. Astha asserts herself by asking for a separate space to paint and this very act of hers defines her identity. This demand of hers is seen as opulence and not a requirement. Having space of one's own is definitely the biggest assertion in the spatial sense. Hemant even comments the space that she possesses would be the source of envy for many women. Fulfilling her duties towards everyone, increasingly passionless marital sex, simmering and seething within take their toll surfacing from time to time as paralyzing migraines.

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Entwined to this, there is the Babri Masjid episode also. There is communal tension between Hindus and Muslims, the mosque itself symbolizing the centuries old uneasy co-existence between them. For Hindus the existence of the mosque is an affront to their national and religious pride. They are intent on demolishing it. Astha finds herself caught in a terrible dilemma and these communal frustrations mirror Astha's own turmoil. She finds herself standing, unable to decide which path to tread on – the familiar one which is traditional and ensures her the safety of her home and children or run towards the liberating freedom which her soul so yearns for. She feels that her marriage is no less oppressing and damaging than raging political and religious situation.

She tentatively becomes attached with a theatre group and feels a fleeting attraction or a passing infatuation, which finds its manifestation in a passionate dream, towards the charismatic political street theatre actor Aijaz who is married to another striking and headstrong woman Pipeelika. Astha cannot help but compare her husband with Aijaz. She finds the former to be indifferent, dispassionate and taking her for granted, maneuvering homely chores, attending social get-togethers, helping the children with their homework expecting her to be a good wife..

When she was with Hemanth, she felt like a woman of straw, her inner life dead, with a man who noticed nothing. (MW 287)

When Aijaz is charred to death by a raging mob she is devastated but her husband's indifference rather than consolation after Aijaz' s death helps in furthering the distances that they already had. After Aijaz's death she joins the Manch for the cause of communal violence and this is her first independent decision which marks a turn of her life. This decision of hers isn't really approved by Hemant in an admonishing tone he says "Please keep to what you know best, the home, children, teaching. All this doesn't suit you."(MW 116).

Hemant detests Astha's involvement with the Manch and tries to emotionally maneuver her in the name of children and familial duties. Even her mother-in-law looks at this disapprovingly and tells her "a woman's place is within the confines of house not on the roads and politics in not a field where woman should participate." (MW 116)

Both Pipeelika and Astha are distraught in their own ways over Aijaz's loss. Their common despair draws them together. It is in this scenario Astha, battered emotionally, living a bleak existence goes to Ayodhya and meets Pipee, a lapsed lesbian and is easily drawn towards her free and assertive nature… may be to find an escape… without having to endure the guilt of having done it with a man. In an interview to Nivedita Mukherjee, Manju Kapoor says, "It is an attempt to inject

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an element of artistic and emotional coherence. Actually a relationship with a woman does not threaten a marriage as much as a relationship with a man" But when she ends up having a physical relationship Pipee, Astha finally throws off the fear instilled in her by her parents and her husband. She is so satisfied with Peeplika that sex with Hemant just becomes mundane activity. This was same Hemant she longed for, in the initial days of her conjugal life. With Peeplika she is her complete self and it even makes her realize many facets of her relationship with Hemant which reflected power than love. Astha's slow discovery of her differences with her husband, her change from tender and hopeful bride to a battered wife and her meeting with Peeplika makes her realize the other state of woman in their 'familiar distress'

"Do I have to just give it because you are my husband? Unless I feel close to you I can't- I am not the sex object, you have others for that." (MW 224)

In Peeplika she finds her true companion and an intimate emotional and physical relationship sprouts between them. This leads Astha on verge of losing her conventional marriage. But her relationship fails to see the full bloom as Peeplika leaves India to study abroad and Astha returns to her family. But the courage with which she undertakes the risks involved of losing the acquisitions of her conventional marriage and safe family make her emerge as a winner. The novel raises the controversial issue of homosexual relationship in a challenging way. After all gay and lesbian relationships are not mere fancies. This is getting more and more visible in modern societies though it may or may not be accepted.

If God had given her love, there was no time supplement with the gift, so Astha often found herself wishing despairingly, she could live each day twice, once with Hemant, once with Pipee and once in the ordinary plane.

When she was with Hemant, she felt like a woman of straw, her inner life dead, with a man who noticed nothing, with whom for that very reason it was soothing to be with. Her body was his when they made love it was pipes face Astha saw, her hands she felt. She accepted the misery of this dislocation as her due for being a faithless wife.

As she continues to paint, she feels more confident. Astha's conflict between oppressive patriarchal culture and her imagination and sensibility is sorted out through the independence she gains by taking decisions for herself.

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The writer is very truthful in presenting through the characters of Astha and Pipee the challenges they face in their personal, professional religious and socio-political level. The changing image of woman moving away from traditional portrayals of enduring self-sacrificing women towards self-assured, assertive and ambitious woman making the society aware of their demands and in this way providing a medium of self-expression.

The tale that thus unfolds powerfully explores how, in a still-traditionalist India entering the age of globalization, evolving personal relations on the micro social level are shaped by wider historical forces, yet can in their turn reshape that same history in an adumbration, potentially utopian even if partial and temporary, of new and more diverse forms of human relationship.

Manju Kapur's Astha is on a never ending quest for equality and this could be felt in this quest the author's own demand for a niche for women. Astha could be found struggling against odds and in certain instances not only a male dominated society but also against women, who have for centuries placed decision making powers in the hands of men, who are considered by them as head of the family, who must be consulted for everything. When Astha's mother decides to leave, sells off her plot and gives the balance to Hemant to manage or invest wherever it suits him best, Astha is shattered and her statement testifies it when she says, "Really Ma, don't you think women can be responsible for their own investments? (MW 97). She takes up teaching but not without protest from her husband. It was just because of her quest for an identity for herself. But her husband thinks of it as petty as he is a believer of the old ways and is the firm believer of that men work out of the home, women within. Men carry forward the family line, women enable their mission.

She enjoys the pleasures of material prosperity – good house, bank balance, occasional trips abroad but experiences a void in spite of it all. She reprimands herself at times for being unreasonable but nevertheless is dissatisfied with this hollowness and this is the irony of Manju Kapoor's women. There comes a transitional phase in their life and they tend to become different from a traditional woman and want to break out into new paths. However, the change is more of theoretical in nature. When it comes to reality, they lack courage and resume to patriarchal hegemony. What happens to Astha is the most representative of the destiny of the Indian woman; even the educated lot. Herein the author succeeds in raising a question by becoming a representative of her clan: Even in this age of liberty and emancipation of women, why is it that women are cordoned off within the four walls of their homes and wonder why have they been denied the right to choose their own destinies? But she also reminds us that this quest of identity is relentless, ceaseless and never ending.

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