

POWER, POLITICS AND HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS IN MANJU KAPUR'S A *MARRIED WOMAN*.

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur's novel "A Married Woman" discovers the complex interplay between Power, Politics and Human relationships in the context of Indian society. Set in the 1990s, the novel portrays the lives of Astha, a middle-class woman who is unhappily married, and her lover, Pipeelika, a lower-class Hindu-Muslim artist. Man is a social animal who cannot afford to live in isolation. He needs other human beings to communicate, share his dreams, idealize, enjoy and to attain the feeling of belongingness. So he enters into various relationships in lieu of his needs and aspirations. These needs can be physical, emotional, psychological, financial, spiritual so on and so forth. Relationships, therefore, become a vital rather indispensable thread which binds these otherwise individual human beings into a unified whole called society which is an extended unit of family. These relationships, lend a unique color to society. Relationships affect and are in turn affected by individuals. With every passing minute, outlooks and perspectives change bringing about a change in relationships. Relationships change silently, gradually and constantly beyond conception. Most of us however, spend a lifetime in comprehending this apparently simple thought. The dynamics of relationships depend upon the equation of power which the individuals possess. Woman has been regarded as the weaker sex and a secondary place has been assigned to her in society. Patriarchy is an important instrument in the hands of man to subdue and suppress the identity of woman.

Keywords: Infidelity, Relationships, Compromise, Jealousy and Cultural Expectations.

Manju Kapur is an Indian novelist and educator, born on May 27, 1948, in Amritsar, Punjab, India. She has authored several acclaimed novels, including "Difficult Daughters," "A Married Woman," "Home," "The Immigrant," and "Custody." She completed her Bachelor's and Master's degrees in English Literature from Miranda House, Delhi University, and then went on to earn a Ph.D. from the University of Delhi. She worked as a teacher for many years and served as a professor

of English at Miranda House. Her novels explore themes such as love, relationships, gender roles, societal norms, power-politics, Human relationships and the conflict between tradition and modernity in contemporary India. Her writing style is characterized by vivid characterization, emotional depth, and a keen eye for detail. Kapur has received numerous awards and honors for her contributions to Indian literature, including the Commonwealth Writers' Prize, the Crossword Book Award, and the Padma Shri, one of India's highest civilian honors, in 2008.

The novel explores the intersection of power and politics in Indian society. The characters in the novel are influenced by political and religious divisions, which have been a major source of conflict in India for decades. Astha and Pipalika come from different religious backgrounds, and their relationship is viewed with suspicion by both Hindus and Muslims. Their love becomes a symbol of resistance against the societal norms and prejudices that govern Indian society. The opening lines of *A Married Woman* reveal its post-colonial, feminist appeal. Kapur seriously tries to change perception of woman in a male-dominated, patriarchal society. The opening lines of the novel depict how the patriarchal society regulates the life of woman with definite set of rules and regulations with the ulterior motive to dominate her. The process begins from a very young age on different pretexts. As it has been depicted in these lines:

“Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear. One slip might find her alone, vulnerable and unprotected. The infinite ways in which she could be harmed were not specified, but Astha absorbed them through her skin, and ever after was drawn to the safe and secure.” (*A Married Woman* 01)

The novelist beautifully and realistically depicts the influence of patriarchy and male domination on the psyche of young Astha who gradually transforms into an independent woman. Astha faces biological subjugation in her relationship with her father in the childhood and her husband in her adulthood. Her inability to buy an art piece in Goa exhibits her economic dependence. Her parents constantly remind her that she is vulnerable and unprotected and so is their liability, “She was her parents' only child. Her education, her character, her health, her marriage, these were their burdens. She was their future, their hope, and though she didn't want them to guard their precious treasure so carefully, they did, oh they did.” (*A Married Woman* 01)

Later, her husband and in-laws also make her realize that as a bride, wife and mother she is not independent and any act of her is challengeable in family life. Astha's shock on hearing Hemant's remark makes her seriously envisage her position in life. Hemant's fierce reaction on Astha's

involvement with the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch (SMM), a reaction which negates her independent identity and undervalues her position in the family shocks her beyond comprehension,

“As my wife, you think it proper to run around abandoning home leaving the children to the servants - Astha feels infuriated, 'As his wife? Is that all she is?'” (*A Married Woman* 188)

Once Astha's gradual establishment as an artist begins, which also ensures her financial autonomy and opens her eyes to the financial injustice heaped upon her by her husband, ironically enough, Hemant begins to assert his patriarchal position. His decision about Astha's hard-earned money on the family holiday planned at Goa in off-season turns out to be a nightmarish experience for Astha. Instead of feeling refreshed and close to Hemant, the holiday ends up making her depressed and distanced further from her husband. Financial dominance of the husband over wife has been stressed through the antique silver box incident in Goa. Astha is rudely refused to purchase the silver box of five thousand rupees, even with her money. Hemant retaliates thus:

“You earn! Snorted Hemant. What you earn, now that is really something. I have earned for my ticket she thought, but this was not the place to bring it up. She thought hopelessly of all the things she could have done with that money. But their money spending was decided by him, not by her.” (*A Married Woman* 165-167)

This conversation between Hemant and Astha is an eye-opener on the role money plays in husband-wife relationship. This financial dominance of males depicted through Hemant is characteristic of the men folk in general. Financial management is still considered the sole domain of males. Women, literate or illiterate, still feel dependent either on their father, brother, husband or male colleague for the investment of their money. A New Woman, that is, a woman who asserts her economic independence and refuses to acknowledge the male dominance in her financial matters is still not accepted easily. Astha exhibits the so-common, almost universal dependence syndrome of the conventionally brought up Indian woman on man. Astha depends upon Hemant for her physical, emotional, psychological and financial needs. Though, an earning member herself, she permits Hemant to take all her financial decisions to ensure marital harmony. Because, it is a common belief that handling of finance is not a woman's cup of tea. Hemant is the financial head of the family who does not feel the need to discuss even Astha's parental money with her or take her advice on the proper mode of its investment. Throughout the novel, Astha complains indirectly, regarding her ignorance on the real state of the financial condition of the family. She says:

“But meanwhile, I feel so clueless about our financial situation - I know she trusts you, certainly much more than she trusts me, but is it such a bad thing if I know how much is in my name and how I can have access to it? Astha was pleading now, begging Hemant to understand. She didn't want to feel dependent that was all.” (*A Married Woman* 99)

The roots of this financial conflict lay in the dictums of the patriarchal society. Because of the household activities woman could not move out to earn money. Moreover, she was not supposed to keep even that money which she had earned; rather was supposed to hand it over to her husband who was thought to be wiser in money matters. Money thus, became an instrument in the hands of the husband to control his wife. It was and still is a major area of conflict where women in general and wife in particular compromise their genuine decision-making power with self-imposed silence so as to avoid disharmony and tension in marriage. As Virginia Woolf states, “In the first place, to earn money was impossible for them, and in the second, had it been possible, the law denied them the right to possess what money they earned.” (Woolf 29)

It seems that the increasing cases of divorce most of the times have financial supremacy of women as the root cause. The quarrels, the distance and ultimate separation most of the times are an outcome of financial assertion of females which directly hits the male ego. Born and brought up in a society where sadly but truly gender discrimination does exist, men are unable to accept women as their equal. Simone de Beauvoir in the introduction to her landmark work, *The Second Sex* (1949) writes:

“Thus humanity is male and man defines woman not as herself but as relative to him: she is not regarded as an autonomous being. ...for him she is sex- absolute sex, no less. She is differentiated with reference to man and not he with reference to her: She is the incidental, the inessential as opposed to the essential. He is the subject; he is the Absolute-she is the other.” (Beauvoir 03)

It is through these beliefs that the patriarchal system of the Indian society has been subjugating its feminine population. Their achievements and abilities remain unacknowledged, relegating them to the status of a goddess or a tart but not a woman, a human being. Novels of Manju Kapur are a protest against these principles. They tend to break this image of women and assign them their rightful place in the society.

There is no doubt that patriarchal values are crumbling slowly but surely in India, with growing number of women acquiring education, not only basic education but also professional education. This has not only brought financial security for them but has also enhanced their self-confidence and added to their social stature. They are now growing conscious of their individual selves and asking others to respect them. The fiction of Manju Kapur not only takes note of the exploitation of women in the patriarchal system but also records the change that is taking place. The survival tactics women adopt to emerge from the dilemma of nurturing various relationships at the same time preserving their identity is unique and needs applause.

Its dictums very cleverly transfer all the significant power in the hands of man. The position of woman in India has not been different from that of woman elsewhere. Like most of the societies in the world, Indian society also has been patriarchal. The Indian culture and tradition are based on the Hindu view of life. It rests on the foundations of religious beliefs such as rebirth, immortality of soul, sin, virtue, action and morality. The Hindu philosophy believes in the continuity of the past in the present in which the actions of the previous birth play a determining role in the present birth. Most legendary women have been described as unusual even if they have achieved pre-eminence. Their high position is thought to be the result of their favorable fate. So their exceptional achievements are attributed to fate and not to their ability.

Human society, in general, throughout the world has mainly been dominated by the male giving birth to the patriarchal system in which woman has been given a secondary role. According to Virginia Woolf, the subjugation of woman is the central fact of history. Simone de Beauvoir has called the woman, "the second sex" to denote the secondary place that she occupies in the patriarchal society. The female finds no place of its own but the one in relation to man. Beauvoir says, "Woman has always been man's dependent if not his slave. The two sexes have never shared the world in equality." (Beauvoir 20) She goes back to the history of civilization to seek explanation for the dominance of male in society. She comes to the conclusion that women's reproductive system proved to be a great handicap in taking control over the material world and consequently in challenging patriarchy. Because of this vulnerable state of giving birth to children which incapacitated her physically for a length of time and made her dependent on the male for food and shelter, she had to accept the male dominance in the family and consequently in society and state. She could not perform hard tasks and moreover with no means to regulate the number of children, most of her time was spent in bearing and rearing of children. Household work suited her and thus woman was left imprisoned in the sphere of repetitive household chores. De Beauvoir writes, "The domestic labors

that fell to her lot... imprisoned her in repetition and immanence; an identical form, which was perpetuated almost without change from century to century; they produced nothing new” (Beauvoir 94) since the male supported the woman and children, he emerged as the bread-earner and so the master of the family. He did not limit himself to the routine work but went on to explore and fashion the world in his own way. Another reason for male supremacy in the early stage of civilization was the value attached to dangerous acts like hunting which man used to perform. Beauvoir remarks, “For it is not in giving life but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to sex that brings forth life but to that which kills.” (Beauvoir 96)

Economic activities were the base on which the progress of society rested. Because of her involvement in the household activities women could play no significant role in the creation of wealth. As a result she had no right to property. Woman remained busy only in bringing up the family. In this way the patriarchal system relegated woman to the domestic world and suppressed her social identity. In his work, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*, Engels is of the view that the status of woman was dependent on the social division of labor. There existed equality between the sexes when there was a common nature of work for both of them, “Woman's strength was adequate for gardening... the two sexes constituted in a way two classes, and there was equality between their classes.” (Engels 85) With the invention of machinery, there came a change in the status of women because it brought the idea of private property. The man started taking the labor of other men whom he reduced to slavery and so the master of slaves and others dependent on him, he became the master of woman also; and this was, “the great historical defeat of the feminine sex.” (Engels 85)

The status of women had been that of a dependent. The labor of women inside home was seen as trivial in comparison to man's productive labor outside home. Life of women in the patriarchal society has practically been man-made. Women have done what men have either permitted or compelled them to do. This gave them no opportunity to develop an individual identity. Before marriage their father, after marriage their husband and later on, their son was their master. More than the physical and financial subjugation, it was the mental subjugation that left women with no self of their own. To complete the mental subjugation, man created an ideal image of woman that suited his own needs - the image of a caring, loving, sacrificing creature, who put the good of others before her own good and who conformed to the moral codes of society fully, while materially deprived in real life, she has been described with symbolic significance in Literature. As Virginia Woolf highlights:

“Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant. She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction; in fact she was the property of her husband.” (Woolf 56)

Barring a few exceptions, women as a class had been strictly confined to the boundaries of the household. They were denied formal education and were taught since their childhood to obey the males in the family. Sacrifice, forbearance, obedience, silence etc. have been the hallmark of their lives. The greater their adherence to those so-called virtues the more they were lauded by the male-dominated society.

Women in India have been caught in a paradox. Woman here has been lauded as a 'Devi' - a goddess who is a symbol of virtue and goodness. There are innumerable manifestations of these goddesses and women have been imprisoned in these images. This, however, does not tally with the actual position of women in Indian society. From early times of history women in India have been given a lower position. The desire for a son which has been deep rooted in the Indian psyche reflects the superiority of the male in society. Patriarchal authority has been sanctified in India by religious texts. Commenting on texts like the Manusmriti, the Kama sutra and the Ramayana, Jasbir Jain remarks, “Different in so many ways from each other and focusing on law, sex and tradition respectively, they have one thing in common. They all seek to subordinate women and argue for control over them.” (Jain 100) There has been provision of male control and dependence for a woman. In her childhood she has to be under the control of her father; after marriage under the control of her husband and in her old age, if the husband is dead, under the control of her son. So all her life she has to be under the control of a male. Marriage for men symbolizes power and authority whereas for women it stands for submission, dependence and passivity. This inequality is basically due to the custom where a man takes his wife and a woman is given in marriage. Thus the institution of marriage in India, as in most other places, is heavily tilted in favor of man, and is largely a transfer of ownership. The liking and desires of woman are not taken into account and the decision solely rests with the man. Love marriages are frowned upon as the assertion of the individual will. Female submission is regarded as the basis of a harmonious relationship between wife and husband. After marriage a woman is supposed to discard all those traits of personality that hinder her from becoming an ideal wife, or daughter-in-law. The girl's training for becoming an ideal wife, daughter-in-law and mother begins in her late childhood when culturally designated roles are inculcated in her. She learns that the 'virtues' of womanhood which will take her through life are submission and docility as well as

skills and grace in various household tasks. Anger and aggression have no place in her scheme of things. At the heart of the novel is the portrayal of human relationships and the complex emotions that underpin them. Astha and Pipalika's relationship is not just about physical desire; it is a meeting of souls that transcends societal barriers. The novel challenges the traditional notion of marriage and questions the validity of societal norms that suppress individual freedom.

She depicts how the equation of power is tilted more in favor of man to subordinate and subdue woman. They depict this dichotomy between the politics of power and human relationships. Her novels which appear to be ordinary stories about the life of ordinary, middle-class people tend to fulfill more than one purpose. The ordinary issues, happenings and emotions depicted through the novel have a universality attached to them. They tend to enlighten the readers about the workings of a family and the role power plays in dominating the weaker sex. The difficulties and restrictions faced by women in contemporary India, which prove to be a hindrance in the emergence of their independent identity, the cultural and social milieu and its effect on human beings particularly on women, politics behind marriage and connotations which the terms home and happiness convey. Most important of all, based and belonging solely to the domestic space they serve to improve the reader's understanding of a system which is gradually fading out in Indian society.

In Conclusion, "A Married Woman" is a powerful exploration of power, politics and human relationships in the context of Indian society. The novel offers a poignant commentary on the complexities of love and the struggle for personal freedom in a society that is bound by rigid societal norms and traditions. Her novels succeed to serve this purpose. She has successfully portrayed the effects of patriarchy on the psychological development of women. The marginal status enjoyed by women in their homes, in marriage, in relationships and in society and women's acceptance of these principles in the name of culture and religion has been depicted with great dexterity. Even the educated and professional women like Virmati, Astha, Nisha and Nina have to work really hard to create a space for themselves in this male-dominated society. She tends to highlight a number of issues through the prism of family and how the interplay of relationships is pregnant with manipulations, internal politics and the imbalance of power.

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