

Man-Woman Relationship in A Married Woman by Manju Kapur

Suksham Ahluwalia

Associate Professor , Department of English

Arya College Ludhiana

Abstract :

Astha, the female protagonist of A Married Women 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.

KeyWords : Patriarchy, Male Chauvinism and Individuality

Manju Kapur puts for forth traditional concept of marriage prevalent in Indian society while dealing with man-woman relationship in this novels. Astha was in her final year of college, when the offer of marriage came from Hemant, an American MBA, working as an assistant in a Bank, and more importantly coming from affluent family. Astha's first meeting with Hemant gives approval of her marriage but she was quite nervous during the meeting. She begins to think about her early life, particularly her relationship with Rohan. She is muddled whether to tell Hemant about her relationship with Rohan or not. The engagement was done immediately after the meeting between Astha and Hemant and marriage was performed in grand fashion.

After marriage, they went on for honeymoon in Kashmir. They saw many places and valley and enjoyed each and every moment. But even during their honeymoon stay in Kashmir Astha couldn't forget Rohan. Therefore, she scolds herself. As Hemant takes care of her all the time during honeymoon, Astha is satisfied with him. She forgets Bunty and Rohan. Now, Hemant is everything for her. She realizes the importance of him when he is away from her. Hemant's presence gives a real pleasure to her and she hopes to enjoy every moment in the arms of Hemant. She also realizes the importance of sex and she acknowledges the fact:

*"Astha had not imagined that sex could be such a master."*¹

Even though Hemant is extremely contented with his own life in terms of materialistic fulfillment but Astha, being the partner in his life, convince him all the time. She tells that money is not everything and within limitations, one can live with happiness. Astha wants to become mother after two

years of her marriage. It shows that she does not ignore the concept of womanhood like many women belonging to fashionable and aristocratic society. She enjoys each and every moment of her pregnancy:

“Astha enjoyed every aspect of her pregnancy. As it advanced, she became more and more bucolic.”²

Hemant too does not ignore Astha during her pregnancy as most of the husbands ignore their wives during their period of pregnancy for several reasons. Hemant does not follow them. The love and affection of Hemant for Astha makes her comfortable during her pregnancy. Still the traditional fears were always present in her mind.

“Astha had heard men were revolted by the way women looked when they were pregnant but not Hemant.”³

Up to now everything is in tune between Hemant and Astha, but as the days pass, the changes take place and the tension begins to creep in their relationship. Hemant's burden increases. He is bothered by many responsibilities at a time. He has to take care of his industry, his better half, his baby child, Astha's mother and his own parents at the same time. As a result, he spares very little time to spend with Astha. In the beginning, Astha does not mind it. She wants to be close with him but Hemant seems to be unable to make balance between his wife's emotional satisfaction and his business. There seems to be communication gap between them that oppresses Astha's mind and resultantly minor quarrel begins. The following conversation between them underlines this fact:

“Hemant, why is it that we never talk anymore?”

“We talk all the time.”.....

“Grow up, Az, one can't be courting forever.”⁴

Astha outwardly seems to be quite happy for being a teacher and a mother of two kids, but there is always undercurrent of resentment against being treated as one of the inferior sex. Hemant, her husband, shares the burden of looking after his first born and is quite liberal in his views. However, the outer sheen wears off gradually and Hemant proves to be an autocratic husband. He becomes an all-Indian husband and father. He begins to behave as the product of Indian patriarchal culture.

“Between Anuradha's birth and Himanshu's, Hemant changed from being an all-American father to being an all-Indian one.”⁵

Astha now realizes the meaning of marriage. It means sacrifice of everything. She becomes the mother of two children. Her family is complete but there is no domestic satisfaction in her life. She wants to live her life in her own way. She thinks that she is a woman and a woman is supposed to do a

lot of sacrifices. However, being contemporary, she doesn't want to expense her visions, delights as well as autonomy for the sake and name of family. She is tired of the model of Indian womankind. She wants parity with her husband. She wants to have the right to complain as Hemant has. She feels the necessity of having freedom like Hemant to ask him as to where is he going. However, her husband, Hemant is so commanding that he leaves no space for Astha to demand parity and lead her own life. It makes her to wonder on his claim and imagine that

“If there would ever be a day when she could feel that same right to complain that Hemant did.”⁶

Astha, the female protagonist, again and again experiences her nowhere existence. Her voice of protest and rebellion ultimately results in broadening of silences between Astha and Hemant. The two gradually drift apart. Astha's profound quest for identity and for considering her an equal and worthy member of society increases day by day. She quarrels with Hemant and shouts at mother when she comes to know that the books of her father have been donated to a library without taking her into account. She expresses her anger as:

“Why did you do that, they were mine as well, I loved them.”⁷

She experiences the feeling of an outsider in the house and hence, she asks Hemant who she is. She also asks that is she a tenant. Astha feels devastated because she is not consulted before taking any major or minor decisions. Even when Astha's mother sells her plot and gives the money to Hemant to manage, Astha feels embarrassed and being treated as weak and inferior. It aggravates her. In fact, Astha does not want to take man's position, she simply wants to be partner in sharing all the happenings and activities. This further widens the ravine between husband and wife.

As a hubby, Hemant is betrothed in making love sometimes considerate but it is only when he has to make Astha ready for his drive. He does not like Astha's impulses and fantasies and also her being a painter. He even does not like her working as a teacher. His is a physical love for Astha and not spiritual love. He seems to be in love with Astha's body and not her soul and mind. He wishes to have sex and Astha is fed up of it. Therefore, she is compelled to respond.

“Then what? Do I have to give it just because you are my husband? Unless i feel close to you I can't – I'm not a sex object, you have others for that.”⁸

The relationship between Astha and Aijaz further worsens their relationship. She becomes attached towards Aijaz within fifteen days. She loved looking at him on the stage. She loved his everything, especially his high spirit approach towards life. His high spirit and free thinking have highly influenced Astha. His entry in Astha's life gives birth to repression and anguish in her life once again.

Aijaz's murder shocks Astha whereas Hemant remains calm and quiet at the death of Aijaz. She realizes the deepest pain and agony inside her.

Astha, the protagonist of the novel can be called a new woman who tackles the situations of her life without creating any violence but being dutiful towards her responsibilities in the family. The novel deals with the inner turmoil of a new woman, who feels a lot of difference in her life after marriage but at last she struggles for her basic rights of equality, identity and self-satisfaction.

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”⁹

She is marginalized in her own family by sadistic social atmosphere. This leads to her quest for self as an individual. At the very outset, Astha's identity is established as a girl. Astha is brought up in an orthodox and a protective atmosphere. She ends up in the stormiest times in search of herself. The ambiance in which she is brought up is explained as *“She was well trained on a diet of mushy novels and thoughts of marriage”¹⁰*. Such nourishment gives her the annexes to search for a suitable buddy. Her boyfriend, Bunty is the first boy who is the object of her mash. But Astha's affair with Bunty ends in tragedy and leaves a depressed longing in her heart.

Hemant, her husband too, who at first seemed to be a guy with open outlook, western thoughts and ideologies, turns out to be a loyal member of chauvinistic Indian male lobby. Thus Astha's desire of fulfillment recedes. She feels cold, dreary and distanced from him. Throughout the day, she has to wait for Hemant and think about him and to long for Hemant's company. However, it was never replied positively. Astha's expectation and pleasure was being destroyed again and again and Hemant was responsible for this.

“Her subservient position struck her. She had no business kneeling, taking of his shoe, pulling off his shocks, feeling ecstatic about the smell of his feet.”¹¹

Astha's education gives her the wings to question such a system and to want to be treated as an equal by her husband. Astha pleads and begs Hemant to understand that she wishes to be independent. She wants parity. However, Hemant declines her request forcefully. It makes Astha aware of her position in the family. She thinks that there are some basics of a married woman. They are *“a willing body at night, a willing pairs of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth.”¹²*

However, Astha rejects the grinding mill of patriarchy and tries to forge a new identity. After much resistance from her husband and in-laws she starts teaching in St. Anthony's School and now she

plays twin roles as a house maker and a working woman .Also she attempts to express her identity through her poems, however in that also she is not free as her poems are scrutinized by Hemant. He callously disrespects Astha's pouring of her feelings out in her poems. He refuses to recognize battle in Astha's mind which she tries to reflect through her verse. Even when Astha asks him, he replies in such a way that she is left completely depressed, disheartened and, therefore, she stops writing poems. She is left only with the option to stop writing verse and she opts for it. Her thoughts are that if she earns salary she will be free to spend and will not require asking Hemant for every rupee she requires to spend. Her thoughts run as:

*"Her salary meant she did not have to ask Hemant for every little rupee she spent."*¹³

However, Astha feels frustrated and disillusioned when she wants to buy an antique silver box for their Goa tour and Hemant refuses to purchase it. Their conversation in this respect is very explicit example of woman's dependence on man though she earns money.

"I also earn. Can't I buy a box if I want, even if it is a little overpriced?"

*"You earn!" snorted Hemant. "What you earn, now that is really something, yes, that will pay for this holiday."*¹⁴

As per the convention of a patriarchal society of India money matters are managed best by men and women need not to be consulted about anything. Astha understands this and says:

*"Money spending was decided by him, not by her."*¹⁵

In Astha's journey, one can see the transition of a self-sacrificing woman towards assertive and ambitious woman, trying hard to seek a medium for self-expression. Her paintings gave her the escape to be herself and forms separate identity from her husband and family. This arena is opened to her by Aijaz, the leader of the group that dramatizes social issues who comes to take workshop in school during summer vacation. Astha's repeated search for a conformation exposes her deficiency of self-confidence and even replicates her childhood where she had to look for consent for everything from the head of family.

After the murder of Aijaz and death of his troupe member's while staging a play on Babri Masjid Ram Janmabhoomi controversy, she joins manch for the cause of communal violence. This is her first independent decision which marks the turn of her life. She emerges as a social activist and starts taking part in rallies and staging. Hemant and Astha's in-laws did not like Astha's above decision. So Hemant in an admonishing tone said:

*"Please. Keep to what you know best, the home, children, teaching. All this doesn't suits you."*¹⁶

Hemant does not like Astha's engrossment with manch. Therefore, he advises her to pay more attention to her kids and household duties. He also tells her that her participation in the activities of manch does not suit her. Her mother-in-law also dislikes it and tells her that woman is supposed to confine herself into the four walls of the house. She is not supposed to take part in the politics and the activities on the road. In spite of her clan's displeasure, she carries on with her engagements and she even participates actively in AyodhyaYatra. It is because of the outrage of family members, Astha becomes more firm and strong-minded. She is tired of sacrifices. She feels that she has done many sacrifices in the name of family and therefore she does not wish to lose anything anymore further. She is also fed up with the typical Indian married woman values and principles.

*"She was fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail."*¹⁷

As a result, Astha, the female protagonist, proclaims herself and does not give up to her hubby's desires. She proclaims herself through monetary independence. Monetary independence pushes her to self-confidence. She knows well the financial side of authority and power of money. She has now become well aware that Hemant is able to exert his authority only because he has all the finances under his power. She is not as independent as Hemant in money matters. This is the truth of maximum Indian females. They are compelled to live and stand the injustices inflicted on them by their male companions. It is because they don't have any other source of existence. Therefore if they have to exist they have to bear the injustices. Along with the injustices of in-laws, Astha has to bear injustice of her mother. She believes Hemant more than Astha. Therefore, she offers money which she gets from selling land to Hemant and not to Astha. This act on the part of Astha's mother affirms the conventional opinion that female cannot be entrusted in financial matters.

At a point of time, Hemant asks Astha to leave her job under the pretext of ill health, but it seems quite possible that he was insecure of Astha's growing independence. It is not just for money that she wants to paint but for it gives her life. To her, it represents security, not perhaps of money, but of her own life, of a place where she could be herself. Astha in spite of Hemant's disapproval goes to Ayodhya to plan her track as a social activist to combat against ancient domination and subdual. There she meets the participants, Pipeelika and visits various places and temples with her and begins to like her. Astha's association with Pipee gives a new dimension to her quest for identity. Pipee comes to Delhi and spends time with Astha. In spite of objections from her husband and children, Astha establishes a commanding relation with Pipee. She falls in love with Pipee though she is a woman. In a very few meetings a strong sexual relationship is established between them. Astha begins to spend more time with her. She likes her company. *"Afterwards Astha felt strange, making love to a woman took time getting used to."*¹⁸

The conflict between her roles of wife, mother and that of a lover continues and she finds herself uncertain between her desire for freedom and duty towards her household. She realizes that any

relationship, even that be between a woman and another woman, in the course of time turn out to be demanding. Pipee wants Astha wholly devoted to her but at the same time she wants to float in both vessels. 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.”¹⁹

Astha proclaims herself by requesting for an isolated space to paint; this very act of hers outlines her individuality. This demand of hers is seen as luxury and not a necessity. Having space of one's own is certainly the biggest proclamation in the altitudinal sense. Hemant even remarks the space that she owns would be the cause of jealousy for many women. That's not all through which Astha defines herself the ultimate identity marker comes in form of Pipeelika her choice of beloved. This was the most gregarious choice to assert one's identity she out does all the societal norms of heterosexuality by choosing a lesbian partner. She not only had emotionally satisfying relation but the ultimate physical fantasies were also realized. She was so satisfied with Pipeelika that sex with Hemant just became mundane activity. This was same Hemant she longed for, in the initial days of her conjugal life. With Pipeelika she was her complete self and it even made 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 battered wife and her meeting with Pipeelika makes her realize the other state of woman in their familiar distress. This is the reason which leads her to a corrupt, rather unethical guiltiness of lesbian love vindicating her unfashionable decency.

From a feminist point of view the study of novel reveals Astha's revolt against age old customs, traditions, one sided family values and the institution of marriage. She is the woman who asks a bit more of life than tradition will automatically give her. She wishes instead of security, comfort and respectability, her emotions and spiritual needs to be recognized. She challenges the male domination. According to Nayak, ManjuKapur through Astha presents,

“a frontal challenge to patriarchal thought, social organizations and control mechanism.”²⁰

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