

Tradition and Modernity: Re-visiting the Changing Images in Manju Kapur's A Married Woman

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Abstract- Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* is a novel that displays a spectrum of diverse cultural, sexual and gender identities. The novel opens up spaces that are self-reflexive on the line of democratic incorporation of voices of those in the fringes. At the same time, it re-interrogates the lines of division that we draw in terms of mainstream and queer, us and them, male and female, and the personal and the public. In a way, it will not be wrong to assert that the present paper argues and endorses the declarations at the beginning that the protagonist envisions the embrace of lesbianism as a protest to the patriarchal values by exploring the history of unique gender expressions throughout the country.

Keywords- Gender, identity, spaces, society, diaspora

1. INTRODUCTION

In a nation like India, it is necessary that we recognize and reclaim the precedents for non-binary genders, though a tough act, but a much-needed one. Very convincingly Kapur's novel projects how a nation like ours which is shown to foreground principles of peace, and is rife with anti-racism and decolonization, fails to fulfil the demands of the queers. The queers face exclusion, misrepresentation and rejection from straight communities, but at the same time, their personal interaction with the members of the queer communities is not a blissful affair too. Something like lesbianism, which is showcased in Kapur's *A Married Woman*, is not only embraced, adapted and altered in a local context, but it is also reiterated as an inspiring platform to link and motivate sexually marginalized allies across the country, and the globe, as evidenced in intersectional activism of the present day India. How important it is to take up activism and aesthetics of a multihued culture to create a scene that reflects both global as well as indigenous paradigms of gender and sexuality is aptly delineated in a novel like, *A Married woman*. Facing exclusion and marginalization from some of their own communities and families, lesbianism has to be read and examined from many angles. ManjuKapur constructs the difference between a Eurocentric queer scene and a local one creatively. The alternative discourse that runs in the underbelly is based on the need to celebrate and create safe

spaces for the queers. The novel functions at a deeper level through its subtle engagements with and its particular responses to colonization, immigration, diaspora, homophobia and racism. The community movements and collaborative ventures for those traumatized and rejected by mainstream society develop a new understanding of the mutability and malleability of gender and sexuality. This, in turn, projects the characters of such communities a medium to bring together a sense of self-identity, which is evidently well portrayed, in the relationship between Astha and Pipeelika in *A Married Woman*.

Phenomena, such as same sex desire, reflects the extent to which the marginalized or stigmatized forms of sexual behaviour literally make their way into culture and socio-political settings. This reverse accommodation managed and expunged by people who are driven by the norms of heterosexuality in a social space, is effectively linked to political gain. Also, this act does not help in accruing increasing visibility to same-sex attraction. It is portrayed as an act of aberrance, again nothing more than a virulent form prejudice. There is also an interlacing of economic and social scape goating. Throughout history, this kind of unconventional tabooing around is generically aligned with the bartenders of religion, law, and medicine. The society has a record of deploying old weapons to combat the sexual deviants, and there is a vibrant history of suppression of the queers. Kapur's *A Married Woman* exposes the power play inherent in the world of forbidden, thwarted love, and the nuances of homoerotic projections. Her highly sensuous style of depicting the attraction between Pipeelika and Astha, the heavy-lidded, youthful bodies in languid expressions also sift through episodes of anxieties.

As projected in the novel, *A Married Woman*, India is a nation that has certain conventional systems, customs, mores and prejudices that are difficult to do away with, not to mention the deep-seated gender discrimination and a strict gender divide. What ManjuKapur brings to the fore is that structure of dismay and anguish that calls for a kind of restructuration. She questions "Indianness", a set of beliefs and solidified traditional paradigms. But it won't be wrong to state that "Indianness" is steeped

in space that hand over more power to men at the cost of women, more freedom and supremacy to the former at the cost of the latter. The novel sheds light on a woman's journey right from her entry into her husband's household as a new bride, a phase that proves transitional to her own identity. Set in a riot torn Delhi at the backdrop of communal tensions stemming from the Ram JanamBhoomi - BabariMajid controversy, the novel is woven around Astha and her journey. It traces the important moments of her life right from her childhood to her forties, foregrounding her trials and tribulations, her struggles and jubilation, hopes and miseries, and defeats and victories. In the author's own words, "she was her parent's only child. Her education, her character, 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." (1)

These words open up a familiar vista for us. Astha's life is no different from an ordinary middle-class girl's in India, bogged down by family responsibilities and parental aspirations. These sentences prepare us to embark on a journey ridden with an enormous feeling of self-abnegation and alienation that would unsettle Astha in the future. After all, she is shaped up as a plaything by the significant members of her life, notwithstanding her biological parents, then her husband and his family members. Her parents did not leave any stone unturned in ingraining middle class values in her. They took a sneak peek into Astha's diary and were astounded to read a vivid explanation of intimate moments with her love. Moral counselling followed, and also an act of taming this wild cat that lost its direction and was going astray.

Soon it dawned on Astha that something in her life was creating a vacuum and a lacuna. This sense of incompleteness lead to much soul-searching only to find venting out her involvement in the outer world of upheaval and protest, then a kind of self actualization in her relationship with a woman much to everyone's shock. Her constant quest to find meanings in different ventures and phases of life (motherhood and also her noble Manch work to help the needy and wronged) prove temporarily hollow and empty compelling her to question her calling and her own life. A special emphasis on motherhood, its imperatives and its forceful grasp on a woman's life and the worth that we draw out of it is a different angle to the novel:

The novel focuses on the political, economic, and institutional features of mothering and also visualises that social change is possible if we look at the issue of intensive mothering from a different angle. Astha's mother, like many others, wanted to be applauded for raising a good daughter. In this regard, Gigy J. Alex opines that, "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 for her, everything in her life goes perfectly according to the plans designed by others, whether it is her parents or husband or the society". (2012:123)

Astha seems to experience the suffering of her own mother who sacrifices her whole life for the family. The remnants or leftover dreams that haunt her mother are hard to miss. She always pines for certain material stability. She is driven by the desire to possess a plot of land and build a house. ManjuKapur poignantly describes the physical appearance of the mother which points to the latter's service and labour, joyless existence and mundane realities: "Astha looked at her mother, at the sallow skin with liver markings, at the carelessly dyed hair, black and white, at the hands gnarled from a lifetime of housework, the veins standing out on the blacks, only fifty, despairing, shrivelled, and old." (16) Astha's mother is instrumental in trimming the daughter's new grown wings and curtails her new found freedom. Astha's life is oriented right after her marriage, and the new bride's strategic acceptance and also, a kind of rejection in the family begin a new chapter in her life. Astha's assimilation in her husband's family at one level is resisted, thus assigning her the label of an "outsider," a tag that is writ large on her face despite her multiple attempts to get accepted. In the Indian households, it is indeed precarious, the position of the daughter in law which needs a bit of elaboration and critical analysis. In most instances, the daughter in laws are wronged but is the same woman, a mother in law, with whom power lies, who is the custodian of influence in such spaces. Thus, a woman becomes the perpetrator of patriarchal norms and codes. This is an irony. An unhappy Astha took a backseat right after some days, and the sheen of the new marriage started to wear off: "A few months and dullness began to taint Astha's new life. What was she to do while waiting for Hemant to come home? Her in-laws were not demanding, for the house work they had help, and supervision, no matter how painstaking, still left her with enough free time to be restless in." (46)

Astha notices a change in the family's treatment of her daughter, Anuradha after her small son was born. Right from the beginning Hemant made it clear that he wanted a son. He went to the brink of desperation, coaxing and pleading her to fulfil his wish. This attitude of Hemant for a boy exhibits a prejudiced preference, of course, for the masculine gender, which is the pivotal cause for female infanticide in a country like India, "I want to have my son soon declared Hemant, looking emotional and manly at the same time. I want to be as much a part of his life as papaji is of mine" (61). ManjuKapur here describes a lineage and a connection that cuts across generations. This is an

act of privileging the male in the family. It is indeed paradoxical that the educated family of Hemant is desperate to have a male child. Astha's mother also shows the same wish of a grandson. She retorts, "You are still such an innocent what people say and what they do are two different things. Besides why is Hemant working so hard? For whom, if not his son?"(67). ManjuKapur describes that not only Hemant, but the other members in the family are also tormented by the constant desire for the male child: "But she was not allowed to forget that everybody, her colleagues, her in-laws, her husband's friends' wives, her mother, the cook, the gardener and the part time help all had an opinion about her baby's gender and that almost universal opinion was that it would be a son and heir". (68) Afterwards, the family's joy knew no bounds at the birth of male child and also all pitched in to take care of him in many ways. The family members openly declared their preference of the boy over Astha's daughter, Anuradha. This not only exposes the lacunae in the societal set-ups that we uphold, but it also lays bare a lopsided thought process which calls for a total remoulding and remapping. In the novel ManjuKapur exposes the hegemony of gender in theorizing sexuality. She hinges on the fluid nature of Astha's desire. Not only sexual orientation is the principal organizer of erotic experience, but it is also a woman's way of expressing herself through her bodily needs and cravings. If we take account of the heterosexual-homosexual binary, we observe that hetero-sexuality is based on the eroticization of difference. On the other hand, homosexuality can be called a desire for likeness. The preference for same sex desire in *A Married Woman* is poles apart from the dominant heterosexist discourse and it creates a split in the understanding of normative heterosexual desire. Also comes to the purview the psychic consequences and psychological release of Astha whose personality goes through a period of change and oscillation into different extremes. The capacity to love and the subjective urges of Astha are parameters to gauge the intensity of her relationship with a female, and also the fact that she is no longer in self-denial, posits a new mode of thinking before us. The act of turning to another woman can be taken as an act of challenging the decorum and forceful regime of the society. The conventional barbwire that hold a woman captive and the laws of enforcement are turned upside down by Astha.

2. CONCLUSIONS

In India lack of lesbian theorising and the restriction of public approval of the word, "lesbian" hints at the notoriety that accompanies it, not to mention the criminalising of homosexuality which leads to the invisibility of such communities. The recent scrapping of Section 377 has been an optimistic agenda for the queers who are thumbed down by

people in mainstream spaces upholding conservative social attitudes. This legal step gave them the hope to challenge the institution of heterosexual marriage, and its other sacrosanct affiliations. At the face of disputes and debates on identity and history, in a country like India can we relate to lesbian experience as a unidirectional, homogeneous discourse? What about the further questions of race, religion, age and physical ability which give in to the complications of identity? Usually, sexual practice is understood as only taking place between differently gendered bodies. To be queer, to desire a (sexual) relationship with a same gendered person, is seen as a negative construct, and becomes political when posited against the conservative moral codes that remain dominant across the regions, as well as accompanied by a desire to protect so called 'traditional' culture and values (Elliston 2014; Presterudstuen 2014; Schmidt 2003). However, any notion of non-heterosexuality is considered as taboo and promiscuous, and is therefore regarded as inauthentic and is shunned. To challenge the existing constructs of gender based roles is difficult and Kapur precisely pointed it out in *A Married woman*. Also, we cannot deny that the emerging hybridized identities are relevant and empowering, a fact that is touched upon by Kapur, although with much caution and subtlety. What's important is an immediate response to understand this complex lineage of gender-liminality in Indian cultures as espoused by Kapur, and also the workings and ways of operation in understanding demographics, issues and challenges faced by the communities, not to mention the developing policies and official engagements of the government. In a country like India to generalize the 'face' of queer culture is irrelevant as in the particular cases of being non-white and being from diverse socio-economic classes render individual experiences unique. However, in this context, a novel like *A Married Woman* gives a new bounce to Astha's relationship with Pipee which is both emotional and physical. 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 Pipee's face Astha saw, her hands she felt. She accepted the misery of this dislocation as her due for being a faithless wife. (287) The pleasure she derives out of this union is new, liberating and ecstatic, unlike anything she tasted in her conjugal ties with Hemant. Pipeelika offers Astha grounds to dismantle social codes that restrict her from asserting her womanhood. This transgression is based on free play and egalitarianism. Astha's feelings for Pipeelika are described in the following words: "Meanwhile her best time at home was when she was fantasizing about the one she loved without interruptions, lost in her thoughts, wallowing in her feelings" (232). This lesbian bonding between two women is a site of new investments and inclinations,

even though the narrative does not use the word 'lesbian' for either of them even in a single instance. Strangely enough, Pipee mirrors Astha and vice versa. This sameness is accentuated in the narrative of the novel. Not the difference.

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