

Tradition, Modernity and History in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

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Indian Writing in English is no longer a bogie attached to the British Engine, but it is running smoothly on its own track with the help of its own engine. It is gaining ground by leaps and bounds not only in the field of Indian fiction but also in Indian poetry and drama in English.

The conflict between tradition and modernity finds a prominent place in the portrayal of women by women novelists. Women who conform to the existing moral ethics and code and social norms, especially with regard to their relationship with men, especially with regard to their relationship with men, and reactions to familial frictions can be termed as traditionalists. Those who defy traditions and opt for modernity are non-conformists. Conformity to a pattern does not mean dumb acceptance of all that is thrust on them. It takes for granted a certain degree of willingness and whole-hearted acceptance. Conformists hold on to the set tradition; sometimes even at the cost of individual happiness. A tradition-bound woman may sacrifice her happiness for the sake of the well-being of the family as a unit, but at the same time retain her individuality.

The Indian women novelists are blazing a new trail worldwide, winning critical acclaim and international recognition. Novelists like Arundhati Roy, Manju Kapur, Bharati Mukherjee, Geeta Mehta, Jhumpa Lahiri have been crowned with literary glory by winning international accolades and awards like the Bookers Prize, the Commonwealth Writers Prize for Debut Novel and the National Book Critics Award. The primary task of Indian Women novelists has been, to attempt an imaginative meditation between the traditional forces of Indian Patriarchal joint family system and the new demands of modernity. They further seek to reconstruct socio-cultural values from a women's view point.

Manju Kapur's absorbing second novel, *A Married Woman*, (2002) in which her lead protagonist, Astha Vadera, undergoes profound changes against the backdrop of India that is also evolving. While Manju Kapur's first novel *Difficult Daughters*, is a family saga against the historical backdrop of partition, her second novel is a work of investigative reporting on the most controversial and political issue of the demolition of Babri Masjid and a woman's obsession with love and lesbianism. The novel is a kind of narrative on a woman's incompatible marriage and resultant frustration and the contemporary political turmoil in its historical context. In the novel, Kapur has taken writing as a protest, a way of mapping from the point of a woman's experience. Kapur negotiates different issues emerging out of a socio- political upheaval in her country.

In Kapur's novels, the setting is middle class Indian family life. It is in this atmosphere that she unravels the unhappy situation of the Indian women. They are caught in the conflict between responsibility to oneself and conformity to the traditional role. Her novels are an attempt to see why and how women are still so weak and submissive, how both the emerging new and still traditional women act and react to the fact of being considered inferior in the patriarchal society, and how they are breaking the traditional images and gain their recognition as individuals. Facing challenges at every step from patriarchy, the woman is engaged in the dialectics of survival to batter her own personal existence. She confronts the tradition-oriented society and it is she, who has to bear the twin whip of heritage and modernity. The conflict between values imbibed through traditional upbringing and the impact of education and employment is adequately described in all the four novels of Kapur.

Kapur has remained very candid and truthful in presenting the women and the challenges they face in their personal, professional, religious and socio-political levels. She desires to prove through her woman protagonist that, "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). Like *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman* "has a sophisticated plot." (Naik and Narayan 100). The story of love is honest. Set at a time of political and religious upheaval it is narrated with sympathy and intelligence for anyone who has known life's responsibilities. The novel is a sincere confession of a woman about her personality cult in the personal allegory of a bad marriage. Astha, the sensitive daughter of an enlightened father and orthodox mother has grown

in a middle- class educated family in South Delhi and becomes a housewife, teacher, painter, and a lesbian in her status of a married woman she fights for her self- assertions. Unlike many unmarried girls she had her infatuations of adolescent love for Bunty, a boy of another colony and for Rohan who left for overseas for a better career. But her real story of love and marriage started with Hemant, the son of a successful government official in Delhi. Soon after marriage, Astha gets disillusioned about human nature in general and politics of the country in particular. She is fed up with the politicians who, in the guise of democrats and socialists, attempt to organize different yatras for their vote banks under the pseudo- secular banner of national unity. On the other hand, these yatras have become inauspicious for the nation. Sharing her feelings "we should struggle with her, agonize together with her about her choices, and weep with her once she's made them." (Mongia 3).

Astha's family affairs are also not so good and nothing is right with her. Hemant doesn't prove a suitable boy nor does she become a desirable daughter-in-law in her in-law's house. In the Kosher world of Saas bahu social dynamics, she does not want only to be heavily sindoored, bejewelled and walk around the tulsi plant every morning and offer a mandatory pooja. As a married woman she becomes an enduring wife and sacrificing mother. Her temperamental incompatibility with her corporate thinking husband compels her to play the role of "mother and father" for her children. This denies herself fulfillment and leads to the collapse of the institution of marriage. Discontentment leads her to defiance and restlessness. Her anxiety, discomfort, loneliness and isolation do not encourage her to give voice to her unhappiness over her troubled relationship, rather it prompts her to develop the feelings of guilt, negativity and lack of self-esteem in facing the challenges of her life. Restlessness drives her to enjoy absolute loneliness, a sort of entrapment by the family, its commitments, its subtle oppression and she yearns for freedom. In the midst of a family and its vast minefield of income, expenditure, rights, responsibilities, knowledge, discontent, restlessness and dependency, Astha enjoys the fate of the poorest. She is suffocated with the growing needs of her family and "always adjusting to everybody's needs." (A Married Woman 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. She contemplates marriage a terrible decision as it puts her in a lot to enjoy bouts of rage, pain and indecision. Judging the male impression of woman she thinks that a married woman is an object of "mind fucking." (MW 218). She does not think "marriage is just sex" (MW 275) rather it provides interest, togetherness and respect. Being torn between her duty and responsibility, faith and fact, history and contemporaneity, public ethos and personal ethics she thinks "a tired woman cannot make good wives", (MW 154) and struggles for an emotional freedom from the scourge of the nation.

She develops psychosomatic symptoms of stress and depression balancing between existing and living. Astha's slow discovery of her differences with her husband, her change from a tender and hopeful bride to a battered wife and her meeting with Pipeelika Trivedi lead her to realize the other state of woman in their "familiar distress". (MW 188) This leads her to an immoral, rather amoral, guilt consciousness of lesbian love rationalizing her outmoded morality. Being marginalized by the affluence of her family, vicious social atmosphere, sheer hysteria of communalism and quarrel of two communities for god over a small thing, she is disillusioned in the empirical study of man's nature and his framing of social values. There is the evolution of a romantic fantasy in her lesbophobic imagination for her definition and self reliance. Astha's marriage to a Pan-American and Pan-Indian husband in her parents' choice is a miscalculation. Hemant's foreign education, banking profession and money minting addiction do not make Astha happy for a long time. Hemant's resignation from the banking job and joining in T.V. manufacturing business, Astha's joining as a teacher, her giving birth to Anuradha and Himanshu bring enough change in her life. Her impression that "with good job comes independence" (MW 4) is proved wrong and she "seemed very pedestrian". (MW 47). By giving birth to a son on the one hand, she proves herself not "socially inferior" and enjoys the gratitude of her family members for whom "The family is complete at last" (MW 68) and on the other she expresses commitment to her profession.

Beleaguered by her job, small children, husband and household responsibilities, Astha sometimes thinks of resigning from the school, but between her marriage and the birth of her children, she too had changed from being a woman who only wanted love, to a women who valued independence. Her salary means she did not have to ask Hemant for every little rupee she spent. And so the once looked down-upon job becomes dear to her. She cannot leave it. But this

over exertion makes her sick. Job anxieties and family stresses make her worse. In such physical and mental state she starts sketching and writing poetry but finding no refuse, she gives them up.

At the historical level, this novel deals with the past and the contemporary history. The novelist through her characters probes the past history and questions the contemporary history. Kapur brings the narrative to 1987 & creates a situation where focus is shifted to Ayodhya, Babri Masjid and Ram Janambhoomi. Mrs Dubey the Principal of the School where Astha works, asks Astha to manage a workshop of the Street Theatre group after the end of session in March for students. Thus Aijaz Akhatar Khan, a History lecturer and the founder of Street Theatre Group comes into picture.

Though Aijaz was a History teacher, during the holidays he used to perform in slums, factories, streets, villages and small towns to create social awareness. In Astha's school while teaching the boys the tricks of the trade of theatre, he tells that the aim of theatre is to show to people the facts of life. He reads out the lines of a newspaper and he touches the Ayodhya issue – Babri Masjid – Ram Janambhoomi dispute. He asks Astha to write a script of a short play dealing with this subject. It was too much for Astha but she had to delve-deep in the history. Kapur says:

It was a temple, a birthplace, a monument to past glory, anything but a disused nesting place for bats. Despite all this, it had endured for over four years. (MW 108).

Novelist goes deep in analyzing the whole controversial episode of Ayodhya since the British rule till the opening of locks at the orders of High Court after independence. Astha goes to India International centre libraries etc. to know as much as possible. The script of the play was prepared in consultation with Aijaz and the play was entitled – “Babri Masjid – Fact, Fiction and you”. It is staged and students and parents go to watch it. Himanshu and Anuradha the children of Astha also take part in the play. Astha's husband Hemant also views it, at the school of his wife. Christopher Rollason has pointed out two very important aspects – First he comes out with the motive of the novelists:

In Kapur's novel Ayodhya as symbolic space is closely linked with a complex and many sided exploration of the notion of history. Indeed both Ayodhya and history are among this novel key words. (Rollason 43).

Before the above conclusion, Christopher Rollason has called Ayodhya a signifier of contemporary India and aptly quotes Michael Wood:

Ayodhya is thus a signifier of both ancient and contemporary India, of both the co-existance and the antagonism of the Hindu and Muslim faiths. As Michael Word has recently put it,it is theatre where myth has been translated into modern metaphor.(Rollason 43).

In *A Married Woman*, the narrative takes a ghastly turn, when Aijaz along with his troupe of Street Group Theatre is abducted and cold bloodedly murdered. The theatre activists were staging their street play in one of the towns. This ghastly murder of eight people has not been shown but reported through the newspaper. Thereafter candle march, protest rallies are carried out in Delhi. A Sampradayikta Virodhi Manch is also established by the protagonist. Astha also makes a trip to Ayodhya and the facts are brought to daylight. Pipee the widow nof Aijaz joins Astha in her protest to fundamentalists. The demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992 by Hindu fundamentalists has also been presented. But it has also been reported and described by the omnipresent novelist as a narrator. The novelist presents the whole controversy through an intellectual's point of view. Kapur advocates pluralistic, global culture. *A Married Woman* is the only novel of kapur in which history, contemporary and past has over taken feminist activism of Kapur.

She decides to go to Ayodhya for a protest against fundamentalism. Her mother-in-law disapproves her going as, 'You know I never try and stop you from doing anything. Even when you neglect the children, and are busy in your paintings and meetings. I do not say anything. I am not the type to interfere.....but it is my duty to point out that you are going too far.'(MW 187).

Her husband too reacts fiercely, ‘As my wife, you think it proper to run around, abandoning home leaving the children to the servants.’ Astha goes into familiar distress. As his wife? Is that all she is? This is again where her modernity clashes with traditional thinking of her husband.

During her stay at Ayodhya she meets one of the participant Pipeelika and visits various places and temples with her and begins to like her. Later she is informed that the woman she met was Aijaz’s widow. Pipee comes to Delhi and spends time with Astha. A powerful emotional relation develops between them despite offences from her husband and children. Astha falls in love with Pipee. A strong sexual relationship is established between them within a few meetings. Astha spends more and more time with Pipee. She is on the verge of losing her conventional marriage with Hemant and traditional family life. She lives in a haze. Her roles of mother and wife are on litmus test. She decides to leave her home, husband and family for Pipee. Suddenly Pipeelika is offered a scholarship from American University to do research. She leaves India to study abroad and Astha returns back to her family hump and heartbroken.

The roots of tradition, living up to the benchmark of the ideal Indian woman, sacrificing for family, putting self behind, devaluing herself, being content to live in the safety and security of husband, home and family _continually come in conflict with her postmodern sensibility that lend her wings _ wings to question established norms, to search for her identity, to long for a soulmate, to develop, to enter socially forbidden relationships.

Ultimately Astha grows and evolves through these conflicts and transcends into a talented woman, surer of herself and more confident, ”As her brush moved carefully over the canvas, her hand grew sure, her back straightened, she sat firmer on her stool, her gaze became more concentrated, her mind more focused. As calmness settled over her, her tenuous, fragile but calmness nevertheless. She thought of her name. Faith,Faith in herself. It was all she had.” (MW 299).

Tradition and modernity are the stages through which Astha passes in the novel. Women in Kapur's novels seem to be a personification of a 'new' woman who has been trying to throw off the burden of inhibitions she has carried for ages. We note a remarkable change and more confidence in her walking, talking, working and almost everything.

This novel furnishes example of a whole range of attitudes towards the imposition of tradition. However Mrs. Kapur seems aware of the fact that the women of India have indeed achieved their success in sixty years of Independence; but if there is to be a true female independence, too much remains to be done. The conflict for autonomy and separate identity remains an unfinished combat. When she expresses some aspirations as man do, she is labeled as feminist. Though rebellions demand determination and a will to stand by the causes of rebellion at any cost, the heroines in the novels of Kapur have often come up to paying the prize of their rebellion.

This is the irony of Manju Kapur'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 after boldness to themselves they lack courage and resume to patriarchal hegemony. This is what happened with Astha in the novel. She finds herself trapped between the pressures of the modern developing society and shackles of ancient biases she sets.

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