



### **Lesbian Feminism in Manju Kapur's *Married Woman***

Dr. Swati Srivastava

Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Science and Humanities, Ambalika Institute of Management and Technology, Lucknow, India.

Dr. Avneesh Kumar Singh

Associate Professor, Department of Applied Science and Humanities, Ambalika Institute of Management and Technology, Lucknow, India.

#### ABSTRACT

Kapur's preoccupation with the female revolt against deep-rooted family values and the institution of marriage is followed through to her novels. It is an interesting case study of lesbian narrative strategies in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*, female gender and sexual identity is inextricable from national identity. The novel exposes the domestic relationship. Astha's lesbian relationship with Pipee is, instead, a derivative expression of Astha's feminist awakening within a patriarchal structure. The novel preserves heteronormativity in the end. Astha in her restlessness turns into a lesbian and becomes irresponsible with everything including her children and her husband, and Peepalika a lesbian widow. She constantly struggles for recognition and a social cause. Astha married life offers her sumptuous smoothening through conjugal bliss but slowly she feels the pangs of alienation and dissatisfaction. She is brought up in a traditional homely environment of a typical middle class family. Her husband is busy with the business and Astha feels loneliness at home. She joins the profession of teaching. Hemant has little time to share Astha's feelings and her daily routine matters. Astha develops affair with a woman Pipeelika which offers her much comfort. She is trapped in an inescapable situation.

*Keywords: lesbian, patriarchal, dispassionate, married, seduction.*

*A Married Woman* (2002) is the story of Astha an educated, upper middle class, working, Delhi woman. Astha longs for a purpose in her life, other than being a wife and mother against a vividly realized backdrop of Indian politics. She was the only child of her parents. Her education, her character, her health, her marriage were her parent's burdens. She was their future, their hope, and though she did not want them to guard her so carefully, they did. Astha's mother prayed for a good husband for her daughter. Her father also took enormous care of his daughter. He even slapped her once or twice to shape her in his estimate. Manju Kapur brings out her young heroine's emotions "Tears surfaced, but she wouldn't act sorry, would rather die than show how unloved and misunderstood she felt" (2002 2).

By the time Astha turned sixteen, she was well trained on the diet of "mushy novels and thoughts of marriage" (2002 8). However, like a common school going girl she often imagines a romantic and handsome young man holding her in his strong manly embrace. It was then that she saw Bunty, a handsome soldier who frequented her house. Day and night, she thought of him. Nursing the illusion of love at first sight, she penned her emotions and sent letters to Bunty at his Boarding School. After an exchange of few letters, Astha's flirting came to an abrupt end the day her mother smelt of it. Later Astha understands much to her chagrin that it was her mother who was instrumental in sowing the seeds of discord in her daughter's friendship with Bunty. When Astha was in college, her mother focused anxiously on their primary parental obligation. In the mean time, she becomes emotionally engaged with Rohan and they enjoy a physical relationship. This relationship is finished within a few days as Rohan moves to Oxford for further studies and she gets married to Hemant. Here Kapur offers fascinating glimpses into the working of a woman's mind as her struggle to come to terms with her identity in a patriarchal world. Astha represents the woman's race, the changing Indian society where the upper middle class educated woman who, although financially independent, is still facing the problems of adjustment

between the old and the new, between tradition and modernity. Astha, presents one such person who is in search of her soul mate. In quest of her identity, she forges many relationships with different persons.

Soon after marriage, Astha gets disillusioned about human nature. She tried to make her husband understand that she was an individual, she must get her due respect, and she could never tolerate being a doormat. According to Kapur's opinion as expressed in *A Married Woman* In the Indian domestic sphere, "wives have to dance to all sorts of tunes of their husbands" (44) . However, Astha wanted to be different. Within a few months, dullness began to taint Astha's married life. She had to wait all day long for her husband's arrival. As Manju Kapur puts it, "her future suddenly seemed very pedestrian" (2002 47). She took up a teaching job in Delhi and enjoyed it very much. However, back home sometimes she had to wait very long for her husband to draw his attention to her.

The conflict grows in Astha. She suffers from recurring migraines and then a growing distance from her husband. Astha has to fulfill the demands of growing children, pressure at home, and silent disapproval of in-laws and the attitude of her an unresponsive husband who does not understand her perspectives. Astha finds an escape in her writings and her sketching. Then she started writing poetry but the husband did not appreciate the poems. She had composed some two hundred poems. These poems talked about her experiences endlessly. She found temporary relief in her scribbling writes Binod Mishra. However, "discussing her feelings with Hemant usually led to argument, distance, and greater misery" (2003 79). Hemant's competing desires in a fast changing world force him to leave his job and set up a TV manufacturing unit. His official assignments force him to undertake many jobs and he gets less time for his family. Astha's teaching job though not taxing divides her between his family and school. She finds her children happy with their grandparents and back home she has to fall back upon her loneliness. The feeling of marginalization and neglect has telling effects upon her. The doctors diagnose no physiological disorders, only tension. As time progresses Astha turns inward and feels ill at ease. She feels herself distanced from Hemant and finds lack of concern. Her poem, "Changes" captures the pain, longing and determination: "I would never suffer again but no matter how many times I heave..." (2002 81). The conventions of the patriarchal society make her husband go by his wishes and he does not treat Astha as an equal. Even in money matters, he does not consult her. Whatever Astha questions him he simply crushes Astha's right to speak.

In this struggle for individuality, Kapur portrays Astha as an individual who engages in constant negotiations of her religious identity and personal desires between the private and public spheres. Astha desires to actively participate in the public sphere in order to reconstruct her religious and national identity from from that of a Hindu who sees Muslims as the other to a more secular identity, where she views all religions from an impartial critical lens. When Astha desires to go to Ayodhya to protest against the proposed demolition of the Babri Masjid, her decision is opposed by her mother-in-law, who insists on the tolerance of Hinduism. At the same time, the mother-in-law refuses to engage in the discussion of an implied Hindu tolerance. The mother-in-law's refusal proposes a fundamentalist mentality. Since Astha's contact with a Muslim activist, Aijaz, she desires to reconstruct her religious identity. Kapur demonstrates that Astha's recognition of the drawbacks of letting her family and her immediate Hindu community shape her religious identity for her comes about her encounter with Aijaz.

In the case of Astha both the aspects of sexual freedom can be evident, particularly extra-marital sexual relationship in new dimension of rebel feminism. She seems to have challenged the constraints of the middle class existence and the established notions of heterosexual relationships with Pipee. In this connection Ashok Kumar says:

Manju kapur has exposed a woman's passion with love and lesbianism, an incompatible marriage and ensuing annoyance with passion to revolutionize the Indian male sensitivity, she describes the traumas of her female protagonists from which they suffer and perish in for their triumph. (Ashok 165)

A lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of explosion. She is the woman who, often beginning at an extremely early age, acts in accordance with her inner compulsion to be a more complete and freer human being than her society - perhaps then, but certainly later - cares to allow her. These needs and actions, over a period of years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, the

accepted ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, until she is in a state of continual war with everything around her, and usually with herself. She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as personal necessity, but on some level she has not been able to accept the limitations and oppression laid on her by the most basic role of her society the female role. The turmoil she experiences tends to induce guilt proportional to the degree to which she feels she is not meeting social expectations, and/or eventually drives her to question and analyze what the rest of her society more or less accepts. She is forced to evolve her own life pattern, often living much of her life alone, learning usually much earlier than her heterosexual sisters about the essential aloneness of life and about the reality of illusions. To the extent that she cannot expel the heavy socialization that goes with being female, she can never truly find peace with herself. For she is caught somewhere between accepting society's view of her - in which case she cannot accept herself - and coming to understand what this sexist society has done to her and why it is functional and necessary for it to do so. Those of us who work that through find ourselves on the other side of a tortuous journey through a night that may have been decades long. The perspective gained from that journey, the liberation of self, the inner peace, the real love of self and of all women, is something to be shared with all women because we are all women.

Rather, blames of mismanagement, incapability and wastefulness were laid on her by Hemant. Meeting with Aijaz further led Astha to compare and contrast between the two guys, one very perceptive, ever giving what Astha sought for, ever appreciating for what she did, even encouraging her to do something for her own and other quite dispassionate, objective to all Astha did. For him manoeuvring homely chores was the sign of good wife. Hemant's indifference even in Aijaz's death rather than consoling furthered her distance from him. Smothered and choked in her within Astha sought one or other outlet through which she could express her repression. Painting became that channel, but there would be no one who could discern the sympathy and appreciation for what she did. It could be Hemant, but not at all, or it could be Aijaz, but no more. The ideal gratifications go its outlet in dream where she was with Aijaz not with Hemant. In this way her sought affair with Aijaz found accomplishment in dream.

In a move, that juxtaposes the personal with the political, Kapur sets Astha's heightening consciousness of her limits within the framework of unfolding history. Her investment in the workshops that the actor-activist Aijaz Khan conducts in her school makes her aware of incidents beyond the immediate microcosm of her home that she can hope to make intervention in some small way. Her growing involvement with Aijaz's progressive work on the Ram-Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid conflict in Ayodhya compels her to see herself in spatial contexts larger than the well-defined limits of her home. Aijaz's tragic death is an outcome of this violence: in its wake, Astha is recruited as a sympathizer and artist in the anticommunalism activist group (the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch) that is formed to commemorate Aijaz. It is on one of the trips to Ayodhya with this group that she meets Pipeelika Trivedi-Khan, Aijaz's widow who is a sociologist and works for a Delhi NGO. Although her marriage to Aijaz had been—at least outwardly—a secular statement breaking down the Hindu-Muslim divide, Pipee had lost faith in the kind of organized activism that the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch claims to undertake, and in this disenchantment, that draws Astha to her. It seems noteworthy that Astha and Pipee first encounter each other in a public space branded by the wounds of history, and from here on out, public spatial settings become a leitmotif in their relationship.

Nevertheless, Astha becomes caught in a dilemma: should she stay with the tradition and Astha tells her husband that she is going on a pilgrimage to the Babri Masjid mosque at Ayodhya, and there she and Pipeelika steal a few days of peace together. Kumar says:

Manju Kapur has exposed a woman's passion with love and lesbianism, an incompatible marriage and ensuing annoyance. With passion to revolutionize the Indian male sensitivity, she describes the traumas of her female protagonists from which they suffer, and perish in for their triumph. She is stunned at the intensification of fundamentalism and the augment of religious zealots to uplift and elevate the country by a crusade and establish paranoia by presenting evil as a historical necessity (2008 165).

Astha was frequently going to Pipee for her sexual needs. *Sexual Satisfaction* as Joseph Bristow observes, "is a fundamental human need" (Bristow 12). While the lesbian attempt drags Pipeelika to the

world of forgetfulness, Astha takes a sweet revenge on her husband. Having chosen an alternative form of sexual identity willingly, Astha would not mind, as Judith Butler argues, “to destabilize the entire system of sex regulation that undoes binary oppositions such as gay/straight” (Stuart 345). Women are now portrayed as more assertive, more liberated in their view, and more articulate in their expression than the women of the past were. Instead of downgrading the elements of suffering at the hands of her lover or husband or man, she has started asserting her substantive identity in action, not in words. Women have established a coherent class structure one of assertion of identity and defiance of male supremacy, and protest at being subordinated by man.

Astha wants to break her dependence on others and proceed on the path of full human status that poses a threat to Hemant and his male superiority. She finds herself trapped between the pressure of modern developing society and shackles of ancient biases. She sets out on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationship. She canonizes and comments on her feminine sensibility, by raising the social issues related to women.

After meeting Pipee, Astha feels spellbound. She really swallows her direction, and acts accordingly. Pipee makes her feel that away from her home where she can lead a fuller life because she has already potential so she can never do anything wrong. Pipee seems to be understanding Astha more than Hemant. Moreover the former instigates her to indulge in the new relationship with her, “There was no aphrodisiac more powerful than talking, no seduction more effective than curiosity.”(p.218).

So to conclude Astha’s rediscovery of her difference with her husband, her change from a tender and hopeful bride to a battered wife and her meeting with Pipee made her realize the other state of woman in her familiar distress leading her to an immoral rather than amoral guilt consciousness of lesbian love rationalizing her outmoded morality.

Kumar asserts, “Astha likes to have a break from dependence on others and proceeds on the path of full human status that poses in threat to Hemant and his male superiority. Although, she finds herself trapped between the pressure of the modern developing society and shackles of ancient biases she set out on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationship” (Kumar 134). Astha falls in love with Pipeelika. She finds satisfaction around the arms of Pipee. Unlike her husband, Pipee seems to be more understanding, loving and caring towards her. Therefore their few meeting established a physical relationship and they become uneasy and restless if they don’t meet for one day. Such relationship between them explores clashes between Astha and her husband. However, their relationship rebels against man’s attitude and his superiority by exhibiting their quest for freedom as well as asserting self independence in a male dominated society. Astha refuses being close with Hemant after she found condom in his bag and instead show more interest in Pipee. At the same time, she avoids being together with him on any issue as he is so indifferent and lacks of understanding of her emotions. On the other side, Pipee brainwashes her by saying that true love cannot be felt at bodily level only but it should ensure union of souls, emotions and ideologies. Thus, she feels, “men were so pathetic, so fucked up themselves, they only understood the physical, and in this way she felt soothed” (2002 219). When Hemant desires to make love with her, Astha tells him, “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” (2002 224). Verma comments, “For Astha a marital life meant participating in all activities, discussing all issues with her husband but for Hemant this relationship meant physical relationship and just fulfilling the social needs of his wife” (Verma 56).

Her association with Pipeelika gives a new turn to her quest for identity and self fulfillment. There is a conflict between the roles and responsibilities of a wife, mother, daughter in law and that of a lover. Astha is also trapped in dilemma between her desire for freedom and her obligations toward family, whether she should stay within the traditional family or she should run away for self independence. But, Astha realizes a large part of her life belongs to her children and recognizes her traditional and social responsibility as the wife of Hemant. Therefore she feels, “A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth were the necessary prerequisites of Hemant’s wife” (2002 231). On the other side, Pipee tries to separate Astha from her husband who neither appreciates nor understands her in order to give a full commitment to her love. Astha wants to move these two passages keeping in

balance side by side, without giving up either one of them. But as a wife and mother of two children, Astha tells Pipee;

I love you, you know how much you meant to me, I try and prove it every moment we have together, but I can't abandon my family, I can't. Maybe I should not have looked for my happiness, but I can't help myself. I suppose you think I should not be in a relationship, but I had not foreseen...I'm sorry I am not like you (2002 242).

On the other hand, when Astha gets all the comfort and affection from Pipee that she doesn't receive from Hemant, she thinks, "...if husband and wife are one person, then Pipee and she were even more so. She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her" (2002 243). Therefore, the marital relation of Astha and Hemant turns out to be devastated. Astha realizes herself as a faithless wife and accepts the miseries that come to her life. Therefore, she feels, "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 made love it was Pipee's face Astha saw, her hand she felt. She accepted the misery of this dislocation as her due for being a faithless wife" (2002 287).

In the end, Astha reaches nowhere. Ultimately, she has to come back to her family and readjust herself in ancient traditions. Kapur shows that in Indian patriarchal society where tradition is so strong a woman fails to get out of such bondage and carve a separate identity of her own. Thus, the two women Astha and Pipeelika ultimately compromise and find their own ways, knowing that they cannot have a future together. Astha, in her quest for self identity and full independence in life comes across various stages through various relationships and even enters the socially forbidden relationship i.e. the lesbian relation. But, she fails and turns back to her own conventional married life after realizing that a woman's real position lies within the family. Therefore, Astha represents the image of new woman who longs to have her own space in the traditional patriarchal society.

Astha appreciates Aijaz and Pipee for the ideals of their conjugal life and their secularist vision like a modern feminist, she appreciates Aijaz's aesthetic and creative genius and for his working on slum life and sufferings of underage girls. She admires Pipee's asserting herself to marry against societal recommendations. However, the story ends with the compromise as the two women find their own ways knowing they cannot have a future together. After qualifying in the GRE Pipee leaves for the USA to pursue her Ph.D. Upon Pipee's departure, Astha lives again mechanically in an emotional vacuum as if "Her mind, heart and body felt numb. It continued like this for days. Astha sinks into stupor, desensitized to the immediate surroundings of her home, she feels stressed thin, thin across the globe" (2002 307). Here Manju Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female psyche, depicting the inner state of a woman's mind, the rupture in the relationships through an image of desired connectedness. Mithu. C. Banerji, comments, "*A Married Woman* is a well balanced depiction of a country's inner development its strengths and its failures and the anguish of a woman's unrest, which is as complicated as the social and political upheaval going on around her" (Mittu 2003). If Astha becomes the victim of male passion, Pipeelika becomes the victim of communal riot. "Astha is Kapur's new woman, conscious, introspective, educated, wants to carve a life for herself to some extent she even conveys a personal vision of womanhood by violating current social codes" (Malik 17).

Through Pipeelika, Astha finds a satisfaction that she did not get from her husband. Whenever she approached Pipee, her heart beat faster as a girl's heartbeats faster whenever her lover subjects her to closer bodily scrutiny. If Astha could not meet Pipee, she "felt terrible the whole time" (2002 230). Once they were standing in Pipee's apartment. Slowly:

Pipee put her arms around her. She could feel her hands on the narrowness of her back, on the beginning spread of her hips. Gently she undid her blouse hooks, and her bra, looking at her face as she did so and slowly she continued, feeling her back with her palm, coming round up towards her breasts, feeling their softness, especially where the nipples were, feeling them repeatedly, in no hurry to reach any conclusion.

They were enclosed in a circle of silence, the only sound, the sound of their breaths, close together and mingled (2002 231).

Astha uses the relationship to carve out her independence within the public sphere, for Pipee, the relationship is a way of negotiating with Aijaz's death. Kapur uses Astha and Pipee's relationship to a shade of complexity to female religious identity in India. For Astha, a clandestine homosexual relationship with a widow of a Muslim man symbolizes a space that does not fall within the boundaries of either the private or the public spheres, as dictated by patriarchy. At the same time, the relationship allows Astha to move between the boundaries of both spheres unquestioned, as a homosexual relationship is, as Gopinath remarks, "Either condemned or ignored" in India (1999 263).

Lesbians are often seen as anomalies that do not fit into the heterosexual family paradigm. Pharr elaborates: "To be a lesbian is to be perceived as someone who has stepped out of line, who has moved out of sexual/economic dependence on a male, who is woman identified" (1998 18). A Lesbian is the rage of all women condensed to the point of destruction. These needs and actions, over years, bring her into painful conflict with people, situations, feelings, behaviours until she is in a state of continual fight with everything around her, and usually with herself. She may not be fully conscious of the political implications of what for her began as personal necessity. Kapur traces the actual process by which woman is 'womanized' by locating and foregrounding the overt and covert means of women's bondage and conscription by ideologies, stereotypes and limited choices. Society allows a woman to enjoy her body and sexuality only in heterosexual intimacy bound by ties of marriage. Kapur presents the reality of married life in a traditional society where a woman has to efface her personality and surrender one's very existence. Astha realizes: "A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth are the essential prerequisites of a married woman" (200-2 231). She exerts her agency and interrogates socio-cultural construct and discovers "many facets of the relationship between her husband and herself reflected power than love" (2002 233). Fed up with disintegration of the body, she wants to reinvent herself as a human being and get back her female body with its desires, aspirations, emotions, feelings and dreams and sets on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationship with Peepilika, a widow. For some time, the female protagonist rejects the rules of a ritual bound society and challenges the patriarchal heterosexual power structures which have invalidated and stigmatized lesbianism/homosexuality. The lesbian pair creates their own world within the larger mainstream heterosexual world; thereby effecting a crucial reversal in the subject position. In the moments of their heightened ecstasy they are not mother, wife and daughter or property of patriarchal system but individual self who are the sole owner of their bodies. Through its explicit portrayal of lesbian sexuality the writer reveals the under belly of traditional society and the possibilities available for agency and the expression of female desire. Overall, it offers simplistically sexual expression as the vehicle of female liberation. In Astha's case, the internalized patriarchy embodied through her in-laws, husband and mother, disallow for such a suspicion, raising only angry retorts at Astha's sudden freedom. Hemant disapproves Astha's connection with Pipee because Pipee is a Muslim by the virtue of her dead husband's last name, and "one of those social activist types" (2002 227). By demanding Pipee's work through his categorization of all social workers as "those types." Hemant struggles to establish his superiority and importance in Astha's life. Hemant tries to portray social workers as an opportunistic group of people, who use social work for raising money for themselves, rather than for a greater good. However, despite Hemant's resistance to Astha and Pipee's relationship, Astha finds an unusual strength in a same sex relationship, and uses that strength to her advantage. Astha discovers her own creative independence through Pipee's encouragement. Pipee says to Astha, "Have an exhibition, do something of your own" (2002 269).

For Pipee, Aijaz's death acts a catalyst for her to pursue interests other than social activism. She engages in a relationship with Astha, a relationship that rises out of both women's need to connect with each other in their inability to deal with a violent death. At the same time, Pipee's relationship with Astha allows her to pursue her own sexual impulses. Astha creates the outlet that Pipee needs to come to terms with her own independence. Pipee's independence exists only within the role of an activist, but through Astha's constraints as a married woman, Pipee realizes that she can exist in a different capacity that can allow her own identity to flourish. Her desire to exist in a relationship free of constraints allows her to

fantasize about a homosexual utopia. Pipee urges Astha to leave her family and come away with her (2002 269), unable to understand Astha's conflicts despite the oppression that Astha faces at home. While Pipee's decision to pursue graduate studies might appear to be a sign of freedom. In her choice, Astha reveals a woman who is both confident of who she is, as well as a woman held back by the desires that are unavailable to her due to family and society constraints. Despite, her desire in developing a cogent personal identity, Astha is pulled back by some of the inner conflicts rising out of her (internalized) patriarchal conventions.

Pipee and Astha protest against this image in their ways and the both are surviving. What is interesting is not the fact that they survive, but how they do so, and their journey of self-discovery toward psychological freedom. The heroines take the uncommon path of lesbianism hitherto a taboo and socially unacceptable relationship in the Indian context (Bristow 17). Their actions might prove to be liberating and affirmative of their identity. They do not seem to be bothering even if they would be put into a zone of exclusion. Such a change of attitude in them moves us to understand that it is possible to transcend established reality and convention. Both the heroines Pipee fully and Astha partly would miss their womanly destiny in order to choose independence. Manju Kapur thus through her narrative constructs a feminocentric protest against the heterocentric, homophobic and phallocentrically glamorized patriarchy and in doing so she is rather constrained to present her heroines as lesbians (Milhoutra 164).

Quest for identity is largely a social phenomenon in India, a phenomenon influenced by various changing forces of reality, freedom movement, education, social reforms, increasing contacts with the west, urban growth etc. A new era of emancipation for the Indian women, an era of increased opportunities and a more dynamic participation in the social and intellectual life of the country ushered in by the great social reorientations, which came at the turn of the century. Feminism emerged as a worldwide movement to secure women's rights on the one hand and love, respect, sympathy and understanding from males on the other. It focused on women's struggle for recognition and survival and made them realize that the time has come when they should stop suffering silently in helplessness.

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