

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.53032/tcl.2017.2.5.38>**Existence and Lesbianism in Manju Kapur's *a Married Woman*****Swathi Krishna**

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English & Research Centre,
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The patriarchal Indian society never ever accepted the homoerotic notions of any manner, even in literature it was an untouchable part. Manju Kapur's iconoclastic second novel *Married Woman* challenges and questions, the perspectives about homosexuality and queer literature our society pampers. It showcases how the main protagonist of the novel, Astha an educated, qualified, independent, middle class woman, finds herself in a dilemma in between the old customs followed by her family and the society, and the modern thinking and ideals of the developing society. At first, she seems enjoying her demystifying married life as a dutiful wife. As the time progresses the busy life style of her money minded, unresponsive husband leads her to disillusionment. Astha feels discomfort with the male supermasist, heteronormative notions of the defying Indian society. She chooses pipeelika, a widow as her lesbian partner and finds solace in each other's arms. This was a protest towards her family and husband who considered her as a unpaid servant. When pipeelika decides to go to USA, Astha decides to follow her heteronormative conjugal family life. Through this novel, Manju Kapur endorses the idea that feminism can be really understood through lesbianism, that outside heteronormative structures, by focusing on the traumatic life lead by bisexual women.

Keywords- *Queer, Feminism, Lesbianism, Heteronormative, Bisexuality*

Indian English women writers who appeared in the realm of literature in the post independence period took great concern to invoke feminist awakening in a quite different manner. Writers like Anita Nair, Gitanjali Shree, Abha Dawesar, Hiranmayee Mishra and Manju Kapur tried to present the most authentic and reliable lesbian experience of upper middle class womenfolk of our country living wrapped within the limits of social ostracism. Manju Kapur, a post colonial feminist writer, has been often considered as the Jane Austen of

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Modern Indian English literature. She fought against the oppressive fabrication of gender inequality in her novels. She offered an attempt to reconstruct and rewrite the lives of Indian womanhood from a woman's point of view. Her five critically acclaimed novels *Difficult Daughter*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *Custody* questions the masculine-feminine concepts, norms of phallogocentric Indian society and orthodox traditional values inflicted upon women. Manju Kapur connotes the dilemma of new Indian women torn in between the values of orthodox, traditional society and the developing modern world. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak writes about this situation in her article 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' "Between patriarchy and imperialism, subject constitution and object formation the figure of woman disappear not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the 'Third -World Woman' caught between tradition and modernization." (61) Kapur offers a derivative expression to the alienated, dissatisfied psyche of women who struggle to find their space in a male dominated socio-cultural spectrum. These female protagonists are mostly educated, talented, aspiring women who are suffering within the confines of a conservative male chauvinistic society. Manju Kapur's characters tire to carve an identity for them in male dominated world. They are bold, self-sufficient, educated, stoic women who question the attitude of considering them as 'other' or as 'men's shadows. They want to let the patriarchal society learn that the new Indian women dare to cross the threshold of doll-houses.

Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* is set amidst the communal turbulences created by the controversial Ram Janma Bhoomi- Babri Masjid issue. On the backdrop of this issue Kapur tells the story of Astha, an educated middle class woman residing in Delhi. Her mother was always anxious about her future in terms of married life. From childhood onwards Astha was groomed by her mother to fulfil the traditional role of a wife. She often declared: "When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?" (1) As per traditional Indian values, it is always a mother's duty to train her daughter to be a good house wife. But Astha's father was an enlightened man who believed in educating his only girl. Though Astha was brought up with a false sense of security and a forced sense of heterosexual married life, just like any other teenage girl she had fantasies about love and romance. She believed in love marriage and during her college life, she falls in love with Rohan. Unfortunately, Rohan leaves India for further studies and a better career. Later she grasped the reality that she had been used as a sex toy and that their physical relationship was mere infatuation. Astha thus realised for the first time, the bitter truth regarding the manipulation of women by men for sexual gratification.

In India, marriage is always a sacred and sanctified institution. Even in the twenty first century, the patriarchal hegemonic Indian society tries to reinforce the ideologies of Manu, author of Manusmriti. Mandakranta Bose quotes from *Baudhayana Dharmasutra* in his

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Women in Hindu Tradition: Rules, Roles and Expectations “Her father protects her in childhood, her husband guards her in her youth, and her son takes care of her in her old age; a woman never gains independence.”(qtd. In Mandakranta: 85) Her mother, who believed in such ideologies, wanted to marry her off as soon as possible and she found Hemant as a match for her. Hemant was the son of a bureaucrat, who had completed MBA from America. After marriage Astha enjoyed the marital bliss by experimenting in the kitchen, doing household duties, neatly fitting into the role of a typical housewife. Her husband had always pampered her by calling her ‘baby’ or ‘darling’. He always wanted to confine her as an ignorant, innocent, submissive person. She soon found her life as a wife dull and monotonous and got fed up with the passionless sexual life and also the hegemonic power Hemant exercised on her. Adrienne Rich in her article *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* criticised such masculine attitudes “the power men everywhere wield over women, power which has become a model for every other form of exploitation and illegitimate control.” (12)

Astha found that her husband had completely turned out to be an epitome of Indian male chauvinism. After her father’s death Astha wanted to possess his books for his memory. But one day she came to know that her husband had donated it to a library without her knowledge. When she questioned it, he disappointed her by pointing out that there is no space for books in his house. Hemant says “Come on, Az, donate them to a library. We can’t clutter up our house with a lot of old books. And you know you don’t read them.” (86) Her mother joined an Ashram after Astha’s father’s death. One day she let Astha know that she want to sell her home. Astha disagreed, but with Hemant’s help she carries on the sale. After a few days, she disclosed to Astha that she gave a part of the proceedings of the house to Hemant. She was shocked to realise that even her right to ancestral property was denied by her own mother. When Astha asked how she can give the money to Hemant instead of her, her mother replies “Why not? He is a man, he knows about money. He will invest it for you and the children.” (97) Astha gets annoyed by her mother’s thought that, women can’t handle the money by themselves. She asks her mother “Really, ma, don’t you think women can be responsible for their own investments?” (97)

Astha, as an educated woman tries to prove her identity and she is seeking a place in her family through various ways. To escape from this clutches of male chauvinism, she began her career as a school teacher. But Hemant ridiculed her and successfully persuaded her to resign from the job. “Oh-ho, what is there in teaching? Hardly a serious job, you just go, talk to some children about poems and stories, organise a few clubs, and come back.” (68) Soon she gets beleaguered, torn in between her job and familial responsibilities. The attitude of her emotionally detached, non-understanding and subjugate husband leads to her disillusionment. For relief she turns to poetry and sketching which is not at all appreciated by her husband. Whenever she questioned his attitude he branded her as a silly woman. Finally realisation

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about the state of her married life dooms on her: “What kind of fool had she been to expect Hemant to understand? She had a good life, but it was good because nothing was questioned. This boat could not be rocked. She should paint that on a canvas and put it up on the wall, and stare at it day and night, so that its message burnt its way through her brain into her heart. This boat cannot be rocked.” (165)

As a turning phase in Astha’s life, she met a social activist Aijaz at her school. He appreciated her artistic skills and encouraged her. After a few days she found in the newspaper that Aijaz Akhtar Khan (the founder of the Street Theatre Group) and his crew members were burnt alive in Ayodhya over the controversial Babri Masjid issue. After his death, she met with Reshana, the singer of the Street Theatre Group. Reshana had set up the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch, a forum in memory of the Street Theatre Group. Astha was asked by Reshana to donate a painting for the exhibition devoted to workers’ unity and secularism. Thus with Reshana’s encouragement Astha revived her artistic skills which have been neglected by her husband. When she demands a separate room ‘a room of her own’ to work in peace her husband looks distinctively annoyed and rejects it. For her paintings, Astha receives Ten Thousand Rupees. This new identity as an artist raises her status in her family. But how to spend the money was out of her choice. Her husband decided to spend the money to go on a holiday trip to Goa. Here the common belief that financial stability makes a woman independent is shattered to the ground. While at Goa, when Astha expressed her desire to buy an antique silver box, Hemant refused. Here Astha is denied to use her own money to buy something she liked. When Astha protests and says that she too is an earning individual, Hemant remarks: “You earn! What you earn, now that is really something, yes, that will pay for this holiday.” (165)

In her struggle to identify her individuality, she understands her place as a housewife in her family. “She was a wife too, but much of her was required there. “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.” (231) Earlier Astha’s struggle against patriarchy was limited to her family. Later she takes this struggle out of her family to the society by embarking on a new career as a social activist. Her activities in Sampradayakta Mukti Munch and her companionship with Reshana helps Astha to explore her artistic skills and individuality. This acquaintance with Reshana made her to realise the suppressed identity of her own self, which the society tried to bury inside her. From a self constrained wife she began to rise as a free thinking, independent woman. But she was not anymore ready to be a puppet in the hands of her husband, and rejects his protest against her new activities, which violates the roles, and norms assigned to Indian woman. Much to his annoyance she went to Ayodhya to deliver a speech on the socio-political matter of communalism. At Ayodhya, she meets Pipeelika Trivadi, the widow of Aijaz. When she feels the pangs of alienation and disillusionment in her married life, her relationship with Pipee becomes a lesbian relationship. After all, both of

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them were the victims of certain social values, Astha that of marital constraints, Pipeelika that of communal fanaticism. Pipeelika was in need of a companion and she works like a guide to Astha. She makes Astha realise that she is not a slave. She has dignity and honour. Astha has her abilities and artistic skills which can't be suppressed by anyone, not even by her husband. It was with Pipeelika's advice that Astha finally dare to ask Hemant to get her a car with her mother's money. Hemant hesitates to admit this idea and he asks her "Who is putting these ideas into your head? (227)

Both of them soon opt for a lesbian relationship between them. Anne Kodet in her influential essay *The Myth of the Vaginal Orgasm*, remarks "The recognition of clitoral orgasm as fact would threaten the heterosexual institution. For it would indicate that sexual pleasure was obtainable from either men or women, thus making heterosexuality not an absolute, but an option." (97) This statement about the liberation of women through clitoral sex turns out to be true in Astha-Pipee relationship. As for Astha it was a revenge towards her husband and his family who tried to restrict her to the clutches of familial bond. Moreover, this relationship was a kind of self exploration. It was a protest towards the society and her family, which tried to tie her within the limits of a familial life. She wanted to make them know that, women were capable of protesting in ways which they termed as unorthodox. Her association with Pipeelika was a vociferous call to denounce the prescribed norms of the socio-cultural behaviour. Their relationship was a slap on face of heterocratic Indian society. Indian sexist society only admits heterosexual relationship, and the protagonist Astha, in the words of Judith Butler tries "to destabilize the entire system of sex regulation that undoes binary oppositions such as gay/straight." (345)

Pipeelika helps Astha to walk towards liberation. She constantly tries to make Astha realise that she is not anybody's slave. Pipee once remarked when she realised Astha's sad state of being tangled to her family: "Leaving a marriage, even like yours, could not be easy. I do feel that away from that house and those people you will be able to lead a fuller life. You have so much in you, so much to give, but take your time. Whatever you do it'll be all right." (243) Pipeelika understands that it is impossible for Astha to leave her family and hence Pipeelika leaves India for further studies. Her departure greatly saddens Astha. Thus the novel tragically ends with Astha accepting her hetero-normative conjugal life which pleases the norms of an andro-centric society.

Indian women have always been engaged in a quest for identity and trying to move out of the caged existence. Their identity has always been decided by the rules put forward by the oppressive patriarchal Indian society. The way they talk, their way of dressing and their duties as wives and mothers were decided by them. Simone de Beauvoir's views which she expressed in *The Second Sex*, "one is not born but rather becomes a woman" (330) is very well visible in our society, where every woman is considered as another's property. Manju Kapur in her novel *A Married Woman*, draws a bisexual space for an Indian woman, who

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thrives for an identity. The identity crisis faced by the Indian women is mainly represented through the character of Astha. She tried to assert her womanhood by defying pro-men, patriarchal notions of her husband who tried to imprison her in a domestic life by indulging in a lesbian sexual life. Manju Kapur portrays Astha as a character, who moves away from the stereotypical image of woman as enduring and self-sacrificing to a bold, outspoken, ambitious, self-assertive and determined one. Throughout the novel one can see how Astha uses her homosexual relationship with Pipeelika as an act of resistance to the sexual identity imposed upon her. Thus Astha emerges as an emancipated, new woman by defying the norms of traditional patriarchal society and by embracing a new shade of feminist awakening through her lesbian experience.

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