Resistance to Patriarchy in Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman*

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The novel *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur is a feminocentric protest against the phallocentric patriarchal culture. The male world imposes unlimited controls on women. Traditions and customs provided moral sanctions for such inhuman and cruel impositions to disempower women. Kapur however in this novel empowers her protagonist Astha to give a strong resistance to patriarchy by denouncing the prescribed norms of a society.

Asthा had the infatuations of adolescent period like any other girl. But they are turned into oblivion. She has to start a different life after her marriage with Hemant. She is disillusioned with her husband’s love for her. Family affairs are not right with her. Her mother-in-law likes her to be an enduring and sacrificing woman like traditional wives and mothers. She is always under pressure of work and suffocating with her responsibilities to meet everybody’s need. She is “always adjusting to everybody’s need” (227). She thinks that a married woman’s status in the family is always dependent on her husband. She is torn between her duty and socio-religious concept. She is tired of her responsibility and thinks “a tried woman cannot make wife good.” (154) she is reeling under the stress and depression of a married woman who is no better than an unpaid servant. She has to please 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.” (231) she is marginalized in her own family by vicious social atmosphere. She thinks of freedom from stress and depression. She thinks of a good job thinking that “with good job comes independence” (4) So, she joins as a teacher but this job also does not set her free from distress and stress of discrimination.

Asthा has to lead her life in a pitiable condition. She feels suffocation with her responsibility to her growing needs of members of the family imposed on her. Her condition becomes poorest of the though she is a teacher in the status of a married women. Her husband is also very much indifferent to her feelings and sentiment.
which extends her agony. Her status becomes subservient like that of our unpaid servants. Socio-political, economic and cultural matters are responsible for her dependent and subjugated condition.

Asthya reacts against men’s insensitive attitude towards women’s plight. She rebels against traditional attitude of conservative society that women should be like earth, she should bear the burden of the family and act strictly according to the traditional norms of the society. She should not open the mouth against atrocities inflicted on her by her husband or her in laws because religion does not allow her to speak against her husband and her in-laws, however atrocious they may be. She can’t place her personal grievances. The expression of her personal grievances is supposed to be the transgression of traditional norms. The women like untouchables and other marginals of the society. Of success and survival. Whosever transgresses is bound to face rejection. “But the protagonist of the novel Astha rejects the traditional views of the society. She asserts her personal identity ignoring the conservative thoughts of her family. According to her view, “Religion is a choice as much as other things” (89). She rebels against her husband for her self fulfillment challenging then traditional restriction and compulsion of women. She turns to Pipelika a Hindu Brahmin girl who has married Aijaz Akhtar Khan, a sensitive Muslim lecturer in History. Astha appreciates Pippelika’s ideas of love and marriage. She married a Muslim, being a high cast Hindu against her mother’s wishers and social sanction. She asserts her right to marry the man of her wish like, Ammu of Arundhati Roy’s The God of small Things and Saru of Deshpande’s The Dark Holds no Terror.

Projecting Astha as a lesbian Manju Kapur has posed a threat to male ego centricism which blinds men to the plight and pitiable situation of women and challenged the male – chauvinism which has deprived women from socio-economic and political rights and emotional fulfillment compelling them to be subservient and subjugate. Post colonial novelists like Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Bharati Mukherjee, Anita Manju Kapur have unraveled men’s unquestionable superiority in family matters and social affairs. They have focused on the plight of women in general and Indian women in particular. Manju Kapur like Shashi Deshpande has focused on the women’s problem and explored the possibilities of their emancipation from the atrocious clutches of male chauvinism defying man made prejudices.

Manju Kapur aims at A Married Woman’s passion for another woman and makes lesbianism a powerful component for the satisfaction of woman’s emotional urge and sexual pleasure. Lesbianism provides as much pleasure to women as heterosexual intercourse. Having realized women’s oppression and emotional starvation like Astha and Pipelika the novelist has turned them into lesbians for their self fulfillment and posing challenge to male chauvinism. Both are victims: One is the victim of domestic violation while the other is the victim of social violence and becomes widow when her husband dies in a riot. If there is any violence whether domestic or social, women are more affected in our society. After the death of her husband Pipelika has lost everything she had. Now nothing is left to her to lose. But she doesn’t best her heart.

In this novel Manju Kapur has openly defied social code of marriage in which women are compelled to play passive role in in-law’s house. They have to accept the accepted views of male members of the family whether they like them or not. Their husband’s views imposed on them without a bit care for their sentiments and
personal requirements which lead their lives to discontentment and restlessness. They can’t voice their. Agony and unhappiness against their husband over their troubled relationship. Their voices against their husband and in-laws would lead them to total isolation from social constructs and leave them to the place where they would have no refuge. They are compelled to be enduring and sacrificing wives without the care of their personal requirements. Manju Kapur has challenged such traditional views of Indian society, having turned Astha to lesbianism.

Sona, Nisha’s mother, wanted her daughter to be “groomed in the traditions of Banwarilal household” (92). Nisha however protested that all these fasts and observation were irrational… “why should I? That’s for older women. She din’t want to spend the day without food or a daughter was one who helped her every time anybody ate” (126). To Sona “cooking” and “marriage” are more important than “education for a woman”. After being admitted into a college, Nisha loved Suresh, a boy of lower caste understanding fully the idea of a modern marriage:

Nisha tossed her head “I am not a fool” she announced as she thought of the love that had driven her own parents to marry, of all the films she had seen, with myriad combinations of unequal background between boy and girl: rich-poor, Hindu-Muslim –Hindu – Christian, high class-low class, educated – uneducated. Love was the bridge over the great divide. Personal worth was all. The pure mind and the feelings of the heart. (146).

Nisha’s understanding of “personal worth”, “Pure mind” and “feelings of the heart” in connection with marriage is against the traditional, patriarchal values. In contrast her family does not approve all these. Even Suresh, her love, who has firmly assured her of marrying her at all odds, betrays her at the time of crisis. Nisha now believes that Suresh in an “eternal fucker”, a coward and a hypocrite. He is perhaps pressurized by the “force, money and threats” used by her family. It was however difficult on the part of her parents to find a suitable person for Nisha, who was ma mangle. She, therefore, resorted to work like a teacher to pass time and subsequently ran a business independently. Through this, she achieved great confidence to lead a life of freedom. Finally she was married to manglic, a widower from Daryaganj and enjoyed love and complete freedom. She was the woman who had her own way for her business and got full co-operation from her husband and in-laws. After ten months of her marriage, she gave birth to twins-a son and a daughter. She had the fulfillment of life having been surrounded by “friends, relatives, husband, babies” (337) in the naming ceremony thinking “All mine… all mine” (337).

Nisha in Home has to pay a heavy price for her modernity and independence during her college days; heartbreak, social ostracizing, skin disease, helplessness and a long period of spinsterhood. Nisha is denied the freedom to go out once her family members come to known about her affair, “All day she remained in the house, a prisoner of her deed, a prisoner of their words. She was distrusted too much to be allowed to put a foot outside” (201). As word about her affair spreads in the city it diminishes her chances or an arranged marriage. A family which has come to see her rejects her on the ground of rumours it has about her, “They were an old-fashioned family, they believed in old-fashioned values, and those values included absoluted purity” (221). She is manglik which means that she will have to marry a manglik boy, and that makes it all the more difficult for her family to find an appropriate match for her (187). For her eczema Nisha is forced to undergo all sorts of treatments – allopathy, nature cure, homeopathy, Tibetan medicine, and allopathy again (217-40). Her sufferings ensue due to her insistence to marry suresh, a marriage which does not come off.

Nisha, however does take in independent decision again when life becomes too tedious and depressing for her. While earlier when she pleaded to her father to work in their retail cloth shop, he hand coaxed her to take up a job as a nursery school-teacher which he assured her was “just a time pass, beti, just a time pass’ (270). But later Nisha, dissatisfied with the job, fantasizes herself as “the maker and seller of suits” (285). She decides to start a business of salwar suits, begs her father to help her in the initial investment, takes Rupees twenty – five thousand
as loan from him, and starts work – hiring the master tailor, other workers, buying sewing machines and the necessary equipment and begins manufacturing the suits which she labels “Nisha’s Creations” (293). Within a year, Nisha’s suits become very popular, bringing good profit and she returns half the loaned amount, and invests more money in her business and regains her lost self-confidence.

However, for a woman, there is much more to consider beyond financial independence and personal satisfaction, as Nisha realizes soon after her marriage at the age of twenty-six. Due to her immediate pregnancy, she is slowly forced to let of her brother’s wife Pooja’s care, Nisha is tired of worrying about the time and wife Pooja's care, Nisha is tired of worrying about the time and attention she needs to give to her business, and her inability to do that due to her physical state and her mother-in-law’s silent disapproval. Nisha feels relieved when her husband Arvind assures her that she could restart her business again later. She thinks, “Just to let it all go and sleep, sleep, To not think of fashion the latest designs, laces, fabrics, colour schemes, embroidery patterns, to not have to try and placated Masterji, to concentrate on what was happening inside her body” (333-34). Much more in control of her life again and confident of her latent business acumen, Nisha does not feel a sense of loss when she is forced to surrender her work, which has been her passion to a traditional way of life again. Once successful as a businesswoman, she will always have a choice to become one in the future.

Yogendra Singh asserts for the Indian society that “as forces of cultural modernization grow there will also simultaneously grow the feeling of national identity and identification with the nations’ past tradition. Cultural modernization will under this process assume a synergetic form and persist along with traditional values”(121). Nisha refuses to unresponsively submit to the stultifying forces of tradition. In oppressive situations, she falls back upon the modern values which education and their parental Home has provided them, and look for more satisfying alternatives. She inch toward freedom from patriarchal oppression, each in her own way, and combine tradition with modernity. By representing the difficult choices exercised by women in conservative Manju Kapur, vouches for the urgent need for Indian women as well as women of other origins to empower themselves and to assert their individuality and thus to facilitate the positive aspects of modernity and to neutralize the constricting elements of conservatism in a basically traditional society.

While a women’s education and employment is still superseded by her parents’ desire to procure for their daughter a prosperous husband, many sociological studies like Promila Kapur’s Love, Marriage and sex and Marriage in the working Women in India, reveal that better education and employment have exposed women to a set of new values which influence their attitude to marriage and their status in society. However this “new women”, educated, economically independent and, a product of urban India, finds herself in a conflicting situation. The breaking-up of the joint family, her exposure to new ideas, the widening of her “space” beyond the walls to the house, have led to her consciousness of her own individuality. She now seeks companionship. This need comes in conflict with the fact that the social structure is still based on historical and patriarchal principles. She must now redefine her status and this is not an easy task. It is this new woman who lies at the heart of most of the novels of recent women writers writing din English. Feminism has become one of the most significant developments in modern Indian English literature. It has brought about an insistent searching exploration of the role and status of women in society.

These women writers herald a new morality – a morality not confined to physical chastity. It demands accommodation of individual longings for self-fulfilment. The most prominent women writers belonging to the older generation are Kamala Markandaya, Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, Anita Desai and Nayantara Sahgal. The writers belonging to a relatively younger generation are Shashi Deshpande, Bharati Mukherjee, Anjana Appachana and Manju Kapur. While these writers have denied that heir novels have any feminist bias, the fact remains that almost all the novels written by them have a strong feminist intent and the women issue lies at the heart of all their works. So many feminist writers have focused on the violence against women and tried to protect women
from sexual abuse and harassment. Different laws have been enacted by the Govt. Of India to protect them from domestic or social violence but only the enactment of the laws and women’s resort to feminism cannot bring complete change and equate them to men. Laws simply can not solve women’s problem until the conservative attitude of the society changes.

Traditional family in our society is very much responsible for such a pitiable condition of women. Prejudiced parents do not allow their daughters to have equal status like sons. Girls are not allowed to have the same privilege like boys. Code of conduct for girls is different from those of boys. Some girls are prohibited even from going to schools as their parents don’t think that their education is also essential for development.

Works Consulted