
Kapur's *a Married Woman*: a Feminist Perspective

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A Married Woman is a well-balanced depiction of a country's inner development – its strength and its failures – and the anguish at a woman's unrest, which is as complicated as the social and political upheaval going on around her. **-The Observer**

ABSTRACT:

Indian writers in English have made the most significant contribution in the field of the novel. Despite all its problems and challenges, Indian English novel, has stood the test of time. And it proved its worth and relevance. The fecundity of modern Indian novel in English can hardly be ignored. Feminist writers give top priority to the maximization of freedom of woman or minimization of patriarchal priority. This may cover the issues of identity, inequality factors, gender discrimination and exploitation as the second sex. Feminist writers aggrandize their aggressive phallic selves to degrade the spirit of women as source of submissive sexual object. The women writers like Ruth Praver Jhabvala, Nayantara Sahgal, Nargis Dalal, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur and others who portray their plight and fight for their rights. Manju Kapur took eight years to publish her first novel, *Difficult Daughters* in 1998 for which she won Commonwealth Award for the Eurasian region. She took next four years to publish her second novel, *A Married Woman* in 2002. Like Anita Desai, Manju Kapur's main foot hold is the exploitation of the deep recesses of human psyche, going beyond the skin into the constant struggles raging the soul of human beings at the conscious level and describing the atmosphere of the mind. She is the pointer of moods and wills of desires and dreams of conflicting choices and inner experiences. She believes that woman needs something more than just food, clothes and accommodation. Through the protagonist Astha, Manju Kapur beautifully portrays honest and seductive story of love and deep attachment. *A Married Woman* is the story of an artist whose canvas challenges the constraints of middle class existence. A beautifully honest and seductive story of love, set at a time of political and religious upheaval, *A Married Woman* is for anyone who has known life's responsibilities. The story is simple-a married woman struggles to keep her identity intact while seeking equal opportunities within and without the familial threshold. The protagonist named Astha appears as silent Ibsenite voice and votary of woman's emancipation. The novel *A Married Woman* centres round a middle class Delhi-based Hindu family. Hemant, an America-returned Delhi business man, married Astha Bhadra, a middle-class educated Hindu girl. Initially their married life runs smooth and they have two children, a son Himanshu and a daughter Anuradha. Astha teaches in a college. Their conventional marriage is smooth, sound and healthy till Astha meets Aijaz Khan, a secular Muslim involved in Militant left wing theatre group. Their nascent friendship is cruelly brought to an end when Aijaz meets his lamentable doom in communal riots over Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. Then Astha is encountered with Pipeelika, the widow of Aijaz. Pipeelika is a qualified Hindu girl from mother's side. She is

M.A. in economics and sociology. Astha and Pipeelika is a lesbian couple. Their love relationship reaches a climax when Pipeelika flies to US for her Ph.D. Astha again gets back to her emotional family attachment. Manju Kapur is convinced that the new, educated Indian woman has the capacity to determine her priorities for self-discovery.

Feminism is rapidly developing as a significant critical ideology. It constitutes a major segment of the contemporary writing in English. There are innumerable Indian authors who have written in English. Some have reached incredible heights of literary firmament and are shining stars. Kapur's novel *A Married Woman* (2002) seemingly simplistic, has a polyvalent sub-text that attests to many propositions being propounded about feminism. Astha is a woman of middle class family. She is the only daughter of her parents. She is an educated, upper middle-class working woman. Her education, character and marriage are her parents' burden. They are very conscious of them and they never forget to remind Astha to realise it. Kapur deals with the middle class women characters, who though educated and aspiring, are not able to realise their potential due to the stifling environment in Indian families. At times, they have to fight with the society at large. Her parents want her to study the eligibility level of the requirement of marriage. But as Kapur's other heroines also wants to feel freedom. Astha's mother tells her:

Her mother 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?' (p. 1).

Astha and her parents are living in the government quarters in South Delhi. Her father is a government servant. And her mother belongs to an orthodox tradition. Her parents have brought her up with utmost care and calculation in order to get a good husband for their daughter. Her mother is a conservative and orthodox traditionalist. Astha has no belief in what the traditions say:

I don't believe in all that stuff,' said Astha,' and think, as an educated person, neither should you.' (p. 1).

Astha strongly reacts to her mother in challenging the inequality of gender and sex. This may be a strong feminist voice which suppresses women's freedom. And this is some sort of radical feminism. Chaffing at the constraints of patriarchal oppressiveness, Kapur's novels brought in a new dimension of feminism into play: the search for freedom from ideological subjection to the search for a spiritual dimension. What it sought and achieved was by and large a common platform of support structure- the ability and the courage to voice out dissatisfaction and to point out the insufficiencies and negligence of exploitations of women's psyche. Challenging an old tradition, forging a new one almost all of us today are part of a tradition we cannot accept and accept a tradition we cannot really belong to. Astha grew with the education that the enlightened parents could afford to give through school and college. Before her marriage, Astha was attracted towards Bunty, a young boy of another colony, but had to put him away from her mind owing to her mother's interference. Bunty's parents lived in one of the bigger houses of the Pandara Road Colony. Kapur describes Bunty who was away in Kharakalavalasa in the defence academy:

He had glossy black hair which he wore in a small puff over a high wide forehead. His eyes were like soft black velvet, set in pale sockets over the faint blush of his

cheek. And just beneath that the bluish black shadow of an incipient beard, framing a red mouth. As she stared, steady, unwavering, he felt her gaze, looked up and smiled. His teeth were small, white and uneven, and she lost herself in them, he raised his left eyebrow slightly. She shuddered, and weakly smiled back. Thus began her torture. If only she didn't see him so often, but Bunty was restless during his holidays. Boarding school, boarding college, as a result he knew few people in Delhi. He took to dropping in with his sister. There was the attraction of her devotion. Day and night the thought of him kept her inside churning; she was unable to eat, sleep, or study. Away from him her eyes felt dry and empty. Her ears only registered the sound of his voice. Her mind refused to take seriously anything that was not his face, his body, his feet, his hands, his clothes. She found temporary relief in sketching him, sketches that were invariably too bad to be mulled over. (pp. 8-9).

Astha falls in love with him. Their affair had a tragic end. In the mean time, Astha is emotionally and physically engaged in a relationship with Rohan who moves to Oxford for further studies. Both her early affairs end tragically, destabilising her although she becomes knowledgeable of male exploitation. The experience leaves her both mentally and physically sick as she drifts through college to university. The beginning is conventional, highlighting traditional, middle class Indian attitudes towards marriage. The way Astha's mother gradually collects a spoon by spoon, a sheet by sheet and jewellery by jewellery for her daughter's marriage locates the story and defines the ambience in which the plot is to be unfolded. The subtle way in which Manju Kapur creates an aura of dissatisfaction around Astha; we know for sure that a revolution is in the making. The generation of the protagonist is bound to revolt against their lives being manipulated. Rohan created the first sensation of feeling and closeness in their drive in the car, but soon after Astha realised the sheer infatuation of adolescent love when Rohan left for overseas to carve a better career for himself. The real story of Astha begins when she gets married to Hemant, the son of a successful government official living in Delhi. Soon after their marriage, in their journey to Kashmir during their honeymoon, Astha realised the real meaning of marriage. Hemant, the husband to begin with gives her all the love, security and material conveniences that a married man in Astha's place would have yearned for:

Astha's heart was as full of love as the lake was full of water. (p. 42).

Before her marriage with Hemant, Astha, in the final year of her marriage, is deeply involved with Rohan. She starts missing classes, lies at home and hunts for isolated places to spend time with Rohan. They start with kisses and move further. Rohan uses her as a sex-doll and he plays with her body to satisfy his sexual appetite. Rohan goes abroad to study and Astha knows that he does not love her and he was just playing with her emotions and her body. Astha Bhadra's married life with Hemant, an America-returned Delhi business man runs smooth. They have two children, a son Himanshu and a daughter Anuradha. Manju Kapur has successfully portrayed the conflict of tradition and modernity in her characters. The speciality is that her female characters are only involved in clash against male-dominated traditional world but they have also suffered this conflict in the form of generation-gap. Society and family as a group and social institution stand in the way of the woman. Kapur has been making consistent effort to make her women independent and bold. The novel *A Married Woman* traces the study of Astha from her childhood to her forties through various hopes and despairs, compliments and rejection, and recognitions

and frustrations. Astha imbibes middle class values and seems to enjoy her mental bliss for a long time, but slowly feels that there is something certainly lacking in her life. She suffers from a sense of incompleteness, repression and anguish, which is further aggravated by her involvement into the outer world of rebellion and protest. But the alternative she seeks temporarily is also hollow from within and fails ultimately compelling her leaving a sigh of relief:

*The new generation of women delineated in **A Married Woman** shows the split in their personalities. They are all highly educated and are accustomed to the sound and furies of the world. Their eyes and ears, ascertained to the ups and downs of the fast changing world long to experiment something unusual to satisfy their suppressed ego. And in their venture to do so, they fell a prey to false temptations. These temptations distance them from their practical responsibilities and they burgeon forth a tree of detachment. The urge to lead their own lives and the impulse to galvanize them drive them ultimately to disappointment.*¹

The protagonist of this novel, Astha, breaks the chain of her traditional family. Before her marriage she fell in love with Bunty, an army cadet at NDA, Khargawasala. These romantic feelings of love flutter in her heart from her teenage. They write letters to each other. But this love affair comes to an end with Astha's mother complains against it to Bunty's parents. Rohan also goes to Oxford for his higher education. Astha's parents are desperate to see their only child safely married. According to Hindu philosophy one cannot find 'Moksha' without marriage. Simon De Beauvoir says:

*Marriage is the destiny traditionally offered to women by society.*²

Astha refuses every suitor. Hemant is an MBA from America. He is the son of a bureaucrat in the Commerce Ministry. Hemant serves as an assistant manager in a bank in Delhi. Astha submerges herself in the role of daughter-in-law and wife, experimenting in the kitchen, arranging and reordering her life, neatly fitting into the pattern of a mother. Her time is spent visiting and shopping in the morning and more:

Back in Delhi, Astha submerged herself in the role of daughter-in-law and wife. The time spent in the kitchen experimenting with new dishes was time spent in the service of love and marriage. Hemant's clothes she treated with reverence, sliding each shirt in his drawers a quarter centimetre out from the one above so they were easily visible, darning all the tiny holes in his socks, arranging his pants on cloth-wrapped hangers so there would be no crease. With her mother-in-law she visited and shopped in the mornings, the memory of the night past, and the expectation of the night to come insulting her from any tedium she might otherwise have felt. (p. 43)

Wrapped in the marital bliss in the satisfaction that she can give her husband, Astha spends years sinking into oblivion. But soon the dullness and monotony start tainted her new life. Very soon her married life changes and she feels fed up. Astha thinks:

The days passed. Astha had not imagined that sex could be such a master. Slightly ashamed, she kept hidden that she longed to dissolve herself in him, longed to be the sips of water he drank, longed to be morsels of food he swallowed. The times he was

away she was focused on one thing, the moment of their union. When he came through the door, she wanted to jump on him, tear his clothes off, thrust her nipples into his mouth, and have him charge his way through her. One with him, one with all that mattered. I haven't really lived, though Astha, till now I did not know what life was all about. She felt a woman of the world, the world that was covered with the film of her desire, and the fluids of their sex. 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 housework they had help, and supervision, no matter how painstaking, still left her with enough free time to be restless in. (p. 46).

Traditional Indian society limits woman's individual development and growth. She has to abide by many rules and restrictions as she is controlled by man throughout her life. Kapur's women live and struggle under the oppressive mechanism of a closed society are reflected in her writing. She probes into the suffocated psyche of her protagonists to lay bare their suppressed desires, ambitions and frustrations, soothe their aches and pains and activate them and make them realise the significance of their existence. Astha starts a new life by teaching in a public school after much resistance from Hemant and her parents. When she gives birth to a boy child, everybody is very happy. Her mother observes:

When Astha's son was finally born she felt a gratitude as profound as it was shamed. 'The family is complete at last' said Astha's mother piously, feeling her own contribution. Hemant's mother agreed, too happy in the birth of her grandson, carrier of the line, the seed, the name, to respond with her usual reserve to someone she increasingly felt was her social inferior. The naming ceremony of the boy was carried out on a much grander scale than that of Anuradha's. Caterers were called, and they came early in the morning, setting up their fires in the narrow driveway. The priests arrived for an elaborate puja and havan. The letter taken out for the baby's name was 'h'. An auspicious sign, same letter as his father said everybody, and he was christened Himanshu. (p. 68).

Unfortunately in our society, if a woman is unable to give birth to a boy child, she is regarded as socially inferior. Job anxieties and family stresses make her even worse tempered. In such physical and mental state, she starts sketching and writing poetry but there also she finds no refuge and in the end she gives up. Socialist, feministic attitude is reflected in the character of Astha. Astha's mother sells her plots and gives the money to Hemant to reinvest it. It is the feeling of Astha's mother that they cannot manage it since they are women. Astha challenges it:

'Really, Ma, don't you think women can be responsible for their own investments?' (p. 97).

The concept of democratic socialism is reflected in the character of Astha. She finds faults in her father-in-law and mother-in-law for bringing up of Hemant to never regard women as beings to be consulted in their own lives:

Her mother had delivered her into Hemant's hands. If her mother was at fault, so was her father, for managing the money, and teaching his wife that this was normal behaviour, so her mother-in-law for bringing up Hemant to never regard women as

beings to be consulted in their own lives, so was the Swamiji for teaching that only in detachment lies happiness, which lesson can be read in as many different ways as there are people and attachments. (p. 98).

The conventions of the patriarchal society make her husband go by his wishes and Astha is not treated as his equal by him. Even in money matter, he does not consult her. Once while unpacking the travel suitcase of Hemant, Astha was shocked to find a condom. Hemant tries to convince his wife that girls are often offered to business tycoons, but he never accepted them. But the discovery gave a big jerk to her marital life. This discovery of a condom, of course, could not be taken to have created as much stir as the feeling of Desdemona's handkerchief in *Othello*. It created a big ripple in the marital life of Astha. When Astha and Hemant planned a family trip to Goa, the ticket was arranged by the money earned by the sale of one of Astha's paintings. Astha's desire to buy a carved silver box was ruthlessly crushed down by Hemant. He says:

'You earn!' snorted Hemant. 'What you earn, now that is really something, yes, that will pay for this holiday.' (p.165).

The tone of refusal hurt her. She was an earning woman, why could she not have a say in how some of their money was spent. She never said anything when Hemant chose to squander money on air line tickets, why could she not buy a box she liked? The male dominance was clear:

Nine thousand five hundred rupees spent on one of the worst weeks of my life, though Astha, as she stepped into the hotel bus for the airport. She thought hopelessly of all the things she could have done with that money, of the beautiful silver box she could have possessed and admired for ever. But their money spending was decided by him, not by her. (p. 167).

Astha's mother failed to provide any emotional solace to her. Her mother was now living in the aura of influence of a Swamiji trying to solve the riddles of life and getting spiritual enlightenment after the death of her husband. Astha searches a place for herself in the male dominated society. Society, morality, values are like bondage to her. She is leading forward in an ambiguous manner in the midst of relentless urbanisation and the far reaching western influences. Dr. Ashok Kumar says:

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writings has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas and marital bliss and the women's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact. ³

Her mother sold her plot and shifted to Rishikesh. This was not comprehensible to Astha. The relationship of her mother with the Swamiji evoked many questions in her mind and even a visit to Rishikesh could not solve the puzzle. Her mother's entrusting all the financial matters and a

big part of the money, as her father's legacy to Hemant was shocking to Astha. She was also pained to learn of the donation of her father's books to the library. Her desire to preserve some of the books as her father's memory remained unfulfilled. A turning phase in Astha's life comes when she decided to go to Ayodhya for a protest against fundamentalism. Her mother-in-law and her husband disapprove her going. Manju Kapur is the first Indian feminist to introduce the lesbianism and lesbian love as an important question to be discussed by the advocate of women rights. Kapur's assertion of sexuality in the form of lesbian relationship may create much hue and cry. Kapur told in an interview to Ira Pandey about the introduction of this plot clears all confusions:

This relationship suggested itself to me as an interesting means of making Astha mature and change. An affair with a man would have been the classic ... and so I ruled it out and tried out a same sex affair, I don't know how successful. I have been nor is this based on any real life relationship. It is as I said a writers experiment with a lot. 4.

Astha comes into contact with a social worker named Aijaz who appreciates her talents as a writer and narrator. Aijaz Akhtar Khan, a Muslim from U.P who married Pipeelika Trivedi, working in Ujala, throws himself entirely to his love with Pipee and his activities in organising performance against the communal tension on the Babri Masjid issue. Curiously enough, Astha too finds herself deeply involved in the turmoil being in Delhi itself and closely associated with all the events taking place during the pre-demolition period of Babri Masjid. Both the plots of Hemant and Astha and Aijaz and Pipee get intricately merged into each other and move fast with all the explosive events that appear to affect seriously the peaceful social life of the country. A street theatre group comes to her school to hold a workshop. Astha becomes friendly with the owner of the group, Aijaz. He dramatizes social issues like unemployment, poverty, communalism etc. Aijaz performs at schools, at factory gates, outside offices, at bus-stops. Astha is asked to write a script of the drama on Babri Masjid. She works hard and gets a lot of appreciation from him. They develop a very good relationship between them. Aijaz Khan is a sensitive, socially committed lecturer in history. He is a theatre-activist and founder of Street-Theatre Troupe. Pipeelika is his wife. She is a Hindu Brahmin girl. Astha appreciate the couple for the ideals of their conjugal life and secular vision. Aijaz is a creative genius. He worked for the ostracized people and sufferings of under-age girls. Pipeelika marries a Muslim against her mother's desire. She challenged the society. Kapur's first novel is a struggle of a woman against age-old traditions where as the second novel *A Married Woman* is the struggle to live life creatively and in a meaningful way. Aijaz, the dramatist is the voice of wisdom and sanity and inspite of all the differences between him and Astha, he comes close to her and convinces her to act on his theory:

'It doesn't matter, Astha,' he said. His voice was coming at her, his eyes were looking at her, any second and his teeth would glow at her. She was married, she should not be registering these things. She shifted uneasily on the hard canteen bench, clutching her bag in her lap. 'The thing is,' he went on 'we have to create awareness. There may be differences of interpretation, it doesn't matter. If our players and our audience think for one moment about this issue, we have done our job.' (p. 110).

When Aijaz goes to a village to make a performance with nine of his troupe members, he is caught by some anti-social elements that killed Aijaz and his friends in a vehicle. They were really burnt alive. Astha finds herself fed up with her husband's mechanical and routine love. Now Pipeelika enters her life. Kapur attempts to present quite a new facet of a married woman. They feel the pleasure of a different love:

They were standing. 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 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 again and again, 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. In the small bedroom, Astha tense with nervousness. She was afraid, yet there was no going back. Sensing how she felt, Pipee took her time, touching every crevice of her body with her mouth. The sweaty patches of her armpits with small stiff hair beginning to poke out, the soft fold flesh where the arm joined the torso, the hard bony part behind her ears, the deep crease between her buttocks, the hairiness between her thighs. In between they talked, the talk of discovery and attraction, of the history of a three month relationship, the teasing and pleasure of an intimacy that was complete and absolute, expressed through minds as much as bodies. Afterwards Astha felt strange, making love to a woman took getting used to. And it also felt strange, making love to a friend instead of an adversary. (p. 230-231).

Astha spends more and more time with Pipee. She shares her feelings with her. She feels that her place in home is just of a housewife who is:

She was a wife too, but not 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. (p. 231).

In the sight of Astha, marriage is what provides interest, togetherness and respect. She does not think that marriage is exclusively meant for sex or animal copulation. It is seen in their conversation:

It was easier to let him come, and Astha sat on the toilet seat, feeling a bit strange. It had been a long time since they had shared any intimacy.

'Go away,' she said at last, 'I can't pee.'

He ran the tap.

'Now?'

A small trickle. Hemant tore a piece of toilet paper and advanced his hand toward her legs. The trickle stopped. Her legs tightened. 'Please leave the bathroom,' she stammered.

'Why? I'm your husband.'

'So what?'

'So everything.'

'You think marriage is just sex.'

'Of course I don't. What do you want that I don't give you?'

'Interest. Togetherness. Respect.' (p. 275).

Astha needs Pipee as a support to her new-found independence and Pipeelika needs her to find herself. It is an unnatural relationship for Astha. For Pipeelika it was a stop-gap arrangement. She was using Astha to fill the void that Aijaz has created as well as to have a red peg to hang on. Astha acquires an unacceptable sexuality in trying to rise above feeling merely a body. Now she is on the verge of losing her conventional marriage with Hemant and traditional family life. She lives in a haze. She is neither bold nor so strong enough to live with Pipee forever. Her attempt to satisfy her emotional need is clear defiance that is short lived but truly she rises against the oppression and negligence of her husband. Astha returns to her husband not because she is afraid of conventional morality but only because she realises that her husband does care for her. When Aijaz Khan died, Astha feels it from the heart. She cannot stop her tears and sentiments:

Hemant, watching her, immediately lost his temper. 'Why are you crying?' he demanded. 'What was he to you?' 'Some murderers trap and burn a whole theatre group in a van and you ask me why I am crying?' 'This kind of thing happens all the time, I don't see you wasting your tears.' 'I can't weep for the whole world, only when it means something to me. Maybe I am deficient, but I knew him, he was always working for everybody's good, even the children loved him. And he has been burnt to death. Isn't that reason enough? She sobbed rocking to and fro with rage and grief. (p. 139).

Kapur has well portrayed the irritation, anguish and travails of Indian middle-class women who are at a loss to condemn social conventions and traditions. Although she tries her best to find her place in family and society, she reaches nowhere because of her moral imbalance and unnatural wishes to be in communion with Pipee. M.C.Banerjee says:

*However, occasionally Kapur's rendition of a lesbian relationship sometimes distracts the reader from the tensions of the situation and the core sensibilities of the characters. Nevertheless, **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 political upheaval going on around her.*⁵.

In the company of Pipeelika, Astha realises the natural issues and participates in Rama Mandir and Babri Masjid issue and casts aside the family issues. Now the break with Pipee is inevitable. Differences creep in and harmony between the two is broken. Astha realises that the breaking up

of this relationship would be a slow process. Lesbian sexuality is explained by Kapur as an intense instinctive desire to seek and elsewhere individually and collectively in the case of chiefly women who feel a gap, a vacuum in their life inspite of being involved in all the activities of day-to-day life, social, marital, cultural, domestic and much other things. Kapur lays bare the feelings of Astha whose vacuum in life is filled by Pipee's intense love for her. Without her everything looks empty and meaningless to the extent that she finds herself reduced to a mere straw in the presence of Hemant:

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.
(p. 287).

She is a faithless wife. She finds her true self, the real meaning of life in the new lesbian identity that gives her a coherence and legitimacy for her existence. In the end Astha reaches nowhere. Ultimately, she has to come back to her family and readjust herself in ancient traditions. Christopher Rollason says:

The women in India have indeed achieved their successes in half a century of independence; but if there is to be a true female independence too, much remains to be done. The fight autonomy remains an unfinished combat. ⁶.

The novelist presents the whole controversy through an intellectual's point of view. Manju Kapur advocates pluralistic, global culture. *A Married Woman* is the only novel of Kapur in which history, contemporary and past has over taken feministic activism of Manju Kapur. The novel may be compared with Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* and Gita Hariharan's *In time of Seige*. In all the above novels authors cherish and patronise the secular, multi-ethnic ideals of Indian society. We find that the cherished ideals and values have been distorted. A society without values exists in which old values have lost their relevance and new values do not exist. A post-modernistic ethics have spread its wings everywhere. *A Married Woman* deals with tradition versus no tradition, permanent versus temporary moral versus a moral, usual sex to unusual sex, factual history versus imaginary history and religion versus in-humanism. The life in the novel presents contradictions, paradoxes, illusions and fantasies. These contradictions can be seen in different relations and situations present in the novel, observe the husband Hemant, Hemant and Aijaz, Astha and Pipee, Pipee and Samira, theatre and the real life, history in theory and history in practise and so on. *A Married woman* deals with the themes of alienation and the need to love, to be loved and accepted and understood. It also deals with the extra-marital affairs of the protagonist. The novel has the issue of Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi and the frenzied reaction of the people as the focal point. The political malaise of this issue and Astha's attempts to present it on the canvas are somehow side lined due to Astha's sexual forays. Art is a refuge for the protagonist, Astha. She struggles to express herself, put her thoughts on the canvas. She realises the futility of her sexual forays with Pipeelika even though she is in love with her. But she is not keen to leave her husband and family and this complicates matter though Astha continues to meet Pipee. Readers of this novel get the feeling that Pipeelika has been using Astha to serve her own needs. Even

Reshma Singh exploits Astha's artistic skills for the benefit of the Sampradayaka Mukti Manch. Astha hopes for a word of appreciation from Hemant, her husband but this is not forth coming. The novel ends with Pipee leaving for the USA to do her Ph.D as suggested by her brother who sponsors her. Astha sees her off at the airport and returns to the fold of her family. The last part of the novel moves fast with the demolition of Babri Masjid followed by riots and disturbance all over the country in the midst of which Astha is torn between her marital life on the one hand and the lesbian love for her friend Pipee on the other. With the departure of Pipeelika, the novel comes to a logical end leaving Astha with a feeling of emptiness:

Mechanically she changed, brushed her teeth, put cream on, got into her side of bed, pulled the sheet up, and turning to the very edge lay absolutely still. Motion of any kind was painful to her. Her mind, heart and body felt numb. It continued like this for days. She felt stretched thin, thin across the globe. (p. 307).

Indian women are respectful of their marriage and even though alternatives are available, they are neither acceptable nor fulfilling. Ultimately she has to surrender herself in the name of culture, tradition, religion and family. J.S.Mill says:

*That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes . . . the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.*⁷

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