



FEMINISTIC PERSPECTIVE IN MANJU KAPUR'S A MARRIED WOMAN: A STUDY

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A woman in an arranged marriage is liberated by a desire that threatens her family and future. A Married Woman comes out as a kind of work that is unconventional yet carrying the textual culture trends. The protagonist is dwelling in the conventional and contemporary contextual society. An only child raised to become a dutiful wife, Astha is filled with unnamed longings and untapped potential. In the privacy of her middle-class Indian home, she dreams of the lover who will touch her soul. But her future was mapped out long ago: betrothal to a man with impeccable credentials, with motherhood to follow. On the verge of retirement from their service, Astha's parents are desperate to see their only child safely married. "The girl is blossoming now. When the fruit is ripe it must be picked. Later she might get into the wrong company and we will be left wringing our hands, if she marries at this age, she will have no problem adjusting. We too are not so young that we can afford to wait." (Page 20).

The story, set in 70's and 80's, revolves around Astha, a talented painter, and the only daughter of a senior bureaucrat and a mother who is a teacher by profession. Astha's life since beginning has been controlled by her mother, who has always imposed her decisions on her daughter. Like a typical mother, she focuses all her energy on moulding Astha into an ideal wife, a daughter-in-law and a perfect mother.

She rebelliously refuses every suitor, until she meets Hemant, whose time at university in the States has turned him into a liberal thinker. Returned from America, he is liberal in his attitudes to women, ambitious and sexually adventurous. But, yet, he wanted to marry a woman from India as Indian women are not as demanding as that of America.

"American women are too demanding. Their men have to cater to their whims and fancies," said Hemanth. (Pg.40)

After two short lived affairs, Astha finally gets married to Hemant, an MBA from the US, with everything arranged by their parents. Astha has been blessed with a loving husband and affluent surroundings - and yet is consumed with niggles of dissatisfaction. She has everything a woman would need, but though being a matured middle-aged woman she feels a little alienated in her marriage as time passes. But somewhere between their first and second child, Hemant changes from being an All-American father into an all-Indian one:

"After he came home the last thing he wished to bother about was taking care of a child. "It's a woman's work," said Hemanth firmly." (Pg70)

Between her marriage and the birth of her children, Astha too has changed from being a woman who only wanted love, to a woman who valued independence. Besides there was the pleasure of interacting with minds instead of needs.

At first, Astha's arranged union with handsome, worldly Hemant brings her great joy and passion. But even after bearing him a son and daughter, she remains unfulfilled. As Hemant becomes increasingly involved in his business Astha finds herself consigned to a traditional female role and discontent slips



in. Astha feels incomplete as an individual. Her ideas and opinions are perpetually belittled by her husband and her needs as a person are generally trampled by her responsibilities towards her family: “Her husband stared at her. ‘Are you all right?’ Astha looked self-conscious. ‘Of course I’m all right, why shouldn’t I be?’

‘You sound like a parrot’. ‘To have an opinion is to sound like a parrot?’(Pg 116)

Her teaching job leads her to work with a charismatic young Muslim, Aijaz. Her life takes a different turn, when Aijaz, a street play artist comes to the school asks her to develop the script for a play centred on Babri Masjid turmoil. This is the first time when Astha encounters a man who appreciates her talent and therefore feels drawn to him:

“Azaz turned the papers over. Astha drew fast and there were ten sketches in all. ‘For how long have you been drawing?’he asked. ‘On and off since I was young. ‘You should continue. You capture whatever is going on well.’ (Pg 114).

Aijaz is murdered brutally while performing a play involving the issue of Babri Masjid-Ram Janambhoomi. This is when Astha truly aligns herself with the cause, much against the wishes of her family that never understands her feelings:

“Hemant, watching her, immediately lost his temper. ‘why are you crying?’ 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? Astha stared at her husband in revulsion. Ten men had died in the most ghastly way possible, and this was all he could say. Did he have no feelings?’(Pg 139-140).

During all this, she meets a much younger woman Peeplika, a social activist, and thus begins a relationship that breaks all the conventions. Her search for meaning takes her into a world of art and activism and a relationship that could bring her the love and freedom she desires. But at what cost to her marriage and family is a debatable question. . Astha begins to paint using her art to raise funds for the political group founded in Aijaz’s memory. Her increasing involvement leads her chance to encounter with his widow resulting in a relationship that will rock her faith in her marriage to its foundations with grace and humanity. As a married woman Astha explores a purpose to her life other than being a wife and mother against a vividly realised backdrop of Indian sectarian politics.

As we delve into Astha's adult life we find a free spirit trapped in a suffocating traditional society, whose restrictions belie the fact that we are fast approaching the 21st century. Her distant and cruel husband, interfering mother-in-law and disapproving mother watch her every move. She pushes her frustrations aside, and focuses on her duties as mother, wife and daughter. Her children, husband and increasingly-passionless marital sex take up her life. But the tensions continue to simmer, surfacing from time to time as paralyzing migraines.

Religious tensions between Hindu and Muslim mirror Astha's frustrations. Although her marriage seems far less violent than the political and religious situation, it is in reality no less oppressive or damaging.

The beginning of Astha's "rebellion" against conforming to the norm starts when she starts taking interest in conceiving a play about the Babri Masjid troubles. She meets likeminded people and drifts



off into the world of activism. Her family's attitude towards her activism enrages her all the more and she inadvertently falls in love with Peeplika, an NGO worker. Their relationship has friendship as a base and deepens into something more as time passes. The story is about what happens to the relationship between Peeplika and Astha and also how Astha manages a double life- the life of a lover of a woman and that of a married woman with kids and responsibilities.

She begins an extra-marital affair with a younger woman, Pipeelika, the widow of a political activist and a political street theatre actor and jeopardizes everything. A rapport is quickly established between them, and her usually-controlling husband for once allows her to cultivate the friendship. And besides, another woman couldn't possibly be a threat to his relationship. Against all odds, the relationship grows and the two women become intense lovers.

“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.” (Pg. 28).

But Astha becomes caught in a terrible dilemma; should she stay with the tradition and safety of her home and children, or make a run for her freedom and an unthinkable love. Astha tells her husband that she is going on a pilgrimage to the Babri Masjid mosque at Ayodhya, and there she and Peeplika steal a few days of peace together. But somehow Astha's destiny is as desperate and uncertain as the fate of the mosque, a building that has stood for centuries as a symbol of uneasy co-existence between Hindu and Muslim but is now, more than ever, under threat. For a large number of extremist Hindus see the mosque's existence as an affront to their national and religious pride and are intent on demolishing it, as well as any Muslims that get in the way. The novelist depicts the gripping political situation with the same fervour and graphic detail as she describes Astha's actions and inner turmoil. Beset by enraged Hindus, pleading Muslims and crooked policemen, the mosque, like Astha's marriage, will stand or fall depending on the courage and clout of those willing to fight the aggressors in the name of liberty and tolerance. . If one's looking for a metaphor, here it is: a nation falling apart because of religious differences and the dynamics of power politics; and a marriage falling apart because of differences that somehow can't be bridged. It is in this scenario that Astha as a politically conscious painter, by now part of the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch, goes to Ayodhya where she meets Peeplika, NGO, widow and a lapsed lesbian. Astha by now the reader perceives is ripe for an affair. And who better than Pipee into whose womanly dyke arms she falls willingly...without having to endure the guilt of doing it with a man...if that isn't a cop out, what is? And Peeplika gets a positive response from the American Universities! Astha’s heart is filled with pride; but the very idea of her beloved Peeplika’s departure from her is quite hard for her to digest. She gets a weird idea of getting the University bombed and blasted even before her friend went there. But there would be other places. The real act of leaving is in the decision, not in departure.

The most heinous act of the demolition of Babri Masjid takes place resulting in great commotion in the country.

“They’ve broken the mosque,” she found herself telling Hemant. They have done it atlast. ‘I know’. ‘You know?’ Astha stared at him. ‘It was on the BBC last night.’ ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ ‘What was there to say? I didn’t know you were interested.’ He was lying. She had gone to Ayodhya twice, painted the masjid at least five times, scripted a play about it, and he didn’t know she was interested?



This was his revenge for being concerned in things other than him. She turned away, sickened by everything.” (Pg 291-292).

Following the demolition of the Babri Masjid, there’s a huge march by the activists protesting the heinous act. The nation and its people demand answers. The massacre follows the demolition. There arises argument between Hemant and Astha regarding the commotion in the country.

Whose voice will be stronger remains to be seen: “The most effective way she had of making a statement was with paint, and she focused on that. It took her mind off her personal predicament, with such violence around her, her problems seemed small. She turned to brush and canvas to make her contribution to her country; she hoped it would be noticed. It was only a drop in a large, large ocean, but drops added up.” (Pg. 297)

Hemant turns helpful to Astha as she restricts herself contributing to the nation through painting: “He welcomed the breach between her and any activism, but she had been too long married to linger over the source of his appreciation.” (Pg. 299) And with the departure of Peeplika for the States, Astha finds herself in a state of illusion, reluctant towards life and everything. She resumes to her routine with no enthusiasm:

“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.”(Pg. 307)

References

1. Page numbers in the brackets refer to the text *The Married Woman* by Manju Kapur; India Ink Publishers; New Delhi.
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