

RECONSTRUCTING FEMININE IDENTITY: A LESBIAN FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE OF MANJU KAPUR'S A MARRIED WOMAN

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Essentially the Indian society is socially structured as an andro centric platform and constructed by a heterosexual hybridist concept of masculine and feminine, constituting a dependant hierarchal binarism where the former is most celebrated and the latter less privileged. Wrapped within the orthodox cultural milieu, most of the patriarchic societies and especially the Indian society invariably demands a gender specific and hetero sexual behavior from all the individuals and deems only heterosexuality a normative order.

In the modern contemporary trend of English fiction, the controversial feminine concept of lesbian identity is bagging popularity and significance. The sensational woman authors like Shobha De, Suniti Namjoshi, Nayantara Saghil and Manju Kapur are some of the Indian woman writers who have pioneered the agenda of vociferously lacerating the gendered oppression that have dwarfed woman and have represented an exclusive space for a lesbian identity in the realm of Indian English fiction. In the contemporary segment Lesbian feminism is being acknowledged as a separate domain and being voiced as a provocative measure against male chauvinism that wages a relentless war for identity, throwing overboard the essentialist paradigm of homosexuality.

Manju Kapur's **a Married Woman** is a dynamic attempt to explore woman's lesbian identity from a woman's perspective in a culturally backed and socially constructed humanist

patriarchal society. Judith Butler rightly observes the possibilities of dislocating the hetero normative gender discourse in her book Gender Trouble:

The more insidious and effective strategy [for subversion of the patriarchal power structure] is a thorough going appropriation and redeployment of categorizing identity themselves, not merely to contest sex, but to articulate the convergence of multiple sexual discourses at the site of 'identity' in order to render that category, in whatever form, permanently problematic. (163)

The very title a **Married Woman** literally indicates the radical move of a fully exhausted traditional Indian married woman saturated with the adverse facets of marital bond as a means to salvage her fragmented self. She ventures to subvert the norms of the Andro centric society by deconstructing the taboos of religion, culture and gender by swapping a passionate harmonious chemistry of a woman -woman relationship within a matching wavelength of body, mind and soul effecting a complete dissolution of 'otherness' with an autonomous sense of 'oneness' hoisted and proclaimed. She fixes her novel in the period of a historical event of the Babri Masjid issue in 1992, a perilous threat that encircled the whole of India, staging a massive outburst of communal riots casting India an embodiment of a blood stained land of terrorism and reckless massacres.

As a feminist, Manju Kapur in her novel a **Married Woman** attempts to challenge the patriarchal canons, deconstructs the phallo-centric creative, decodes gendered oppression, racial discrimination and destabilizes the east- west patriarchal discourses of religion and culture. With indomitable courage Manju Kapur articulates a counter discourse of an exclusively feminine lesbian identity and unleashes the saga of the obliterated women within the Indian frame work. Through her characterization of the woman protagonists in her novel The Married Woman, Manju Kapur questions the so called approved facet of the essentialist paradigm of a hetero sexual hierarchical ladder and endeavours to challenge the hegemony in a feminine perspective.

Manju Kapur attempts a feminist critique in a socio cultural perspective within the Indian brain wave that scrupulously nullifies the social taboo encrusting lesbianism and tends to invert the hegemonic Indian traditionalism. She seeks a reconstructed space and an approved identity

for the lesbian self and tries to recreate her ambience to initiate the revision of the chauvinist prototype of a compelled hetero normative sexuality. She glorifies the chemistry of a woman-woman relationship in contrast to the compelled heterosexual normative order imposed by the prejudiced andro-centric society. Through her novel *a Married Woman*, Manju Kapur projects the silent psychological threats taxing women and ventures to redefine the fragmented woman self in a feminist stance within an exclusive feminine space. Manju Kapur advocates a critique of the feminine identity that dismantles objectivity and calls for a subjective revision of the inherent facets of the patriarchal hetero normative order. She tends to subvert the existing order, reappropriate the patriarchal ideology of 'universal sisterhood' and refigure womanhood by promulgating a theory of 'difference' that remodels the so called hetero normative order in a conventional society.

The protagonist Astha, the daughter of a government servant father and a traditional Indian mother hailed from a middle class background in Delhi. Though Astha was given a convent education, she was backed by strong cultural and spiritual ties to which Astha felt inconsistent, rootless and illogical to acclimatize who longed for radical and emotional ventilation during her exuberant adolescence. She imbibed beautiful painting talents within her. Her adolescent love affairs with Bunty and Suresh ended up as ultimate failures with least gratification and tint of a real love. She later realised that these love affairs were like passing clouds and the literal manifestations of an irresistible infatuation for the opposite sex more specific of the adolescent age. Exhausted by the heartaches of adolescence Astha longed to marry a well settled romantic groom with modern ideals and western education.

Much worthy to her expectations Astha got wedded to an arranged match Hemant, a man with romantic features who had an American MBA degree and worked as an officer in a private bank. Astha's married life started with great pompous celebrations much to her parent's satisfaction for having fulfilled their duty successfully. Astha enjoyed the riches, travels, comforts and joy of a full fledged marital life. Hemant turned out to be the most gratifying romantic hero who admired Astha and encouraged her painting skills in the beginning. In course of time Astha started learning the lessons of life and the rear side of the people around her through her day to day practical experiences. She started losing the attention and the concern of her husband. Astha tried to divert herself by taking a teaching career in a school for a meagre

salary. The prosperity of Astha's house flourished with Hemant's transition from a bank job to a television business. He made frequent trips to foreign countries and established his family status. Initially Hemant posed himself as a gentleman with western ideologies articulating on woman's equality and his fondness on having a girl child. But when Astha was pregnant the second time he behaved like a product of patriarchic traditionalism wanting to have a son for which he encouraged his mother to perform rituals and Puja.

At one point of time Hemant became a blend of patriarchic hegemony who completely ignored and neglected Astha's ill health condition, her frequent migraines and her physical yearnings. He strictly refrained from taking care of his children and helping Astha personally. After one of Hemant's foreign visits, Astha found a set of condoms in his suit case to her horror. As an educated and wise male chauvinist, Hemant managed the situation very tactfully. The indifferent attitude of Hemant made Astha realise the painful realities of life. Much to her shock Hemant was strictly against Astha's active participation in the political event and mocked her. She started brooding over her undignified and underestimated slaving status as a wife and mother fully exhausted with domestic chores and child rearing. Astha ran into a state of depression that resulted in continuous physical ailments. The couple lacked compatibility and understanding wherein the patriarchal domination ruled over their relationships manifesting its plight in different ways. After her father's death Astha's mother nominated Hemant as a caretaker of their property since Astha's husband and mother undervalued Astha's potential as incompetent and immature in money management. The family assessed Astha as a docile and dependent 'woman' capable to manage only children at school which resembled child rearing at home.

Though Astha held a decent status in the society blessed with a sound financial position and a respectable familial back ground, she suffered from a feeling of saturation, alienation, negritude and most importantly a sense of 'otherness' wherein she was culturally and traditionally segregated in a mechanical marital bond bound by materialistic concerns. Torn by ordeal experiences, Astha was fully aware that a slaving mentality and a willing body were the essential requisites and the prescribed norm for a successful traditional wife in the Indian context. Manju Kapur portrays Astha's position as a wife and mother in the Indian segment:

A large part of her belonged to her children.....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)

Astha understood that planning for a divorce in the Indian scenario would deprive her social status and cause an economic death in her life. She wanted a real ventilation and redemption from the clutches of the exhaustive patriarchal domination in the name of marriage. In a school function Astha came in contact with a political activist and a famous stage performer Aijas Aktar Khan. Drawn by his motivation and revolutionary ideas Astha started preparing manuscripts for a stage performance related to the sensational Babri Masjid issue under the guidance of Aijas Khan. Poised in the confidence instilled by Aijas Khan, Astha made a vast research on the Babri Masjid issue which yielded a constructive output and received a grand applause and recognition.

The unexpected assassination of Aijas Khan within few months of his marriage with a social worker Pippelika Trivedi turned Astha's life upside down. Astha wanted to voice against the assassination of Aijas Khan who was burnt alive in a van along with his colleagues on his way to a stage performance based on the Babri Masjid issue. A nationwide rally was organised by the friends and fans of Aijas Khan to condemn his assassination in which Astha was an active participant who earned the strong disapproval of her husband and family. She wanted to show her gratitude to the good soul that encouraged her potentials and spotted her talents. Astha contributed paintings on sensational themes to the Sampradayakta Mukti Munch that organised a wing articulating criticisms against the murder of Aijas Khan and the communal fanaticism. Astha helped the Munch in fund raising to organize a nation wide meet in Ayodhya as an anti communal force against racial discriminations and religious fanaticism with regard to the Babri Masjid issue. Thus Astha emerged as an orator in Ayodhya and a professional painter who received public attention, applause and recognition.

In Ayodhya Astha came into an inexplicable acquaintance with Pippelika Trivedi a radical woman and a widow of the political activist Aijas Khan. Very soon there was a strong emotional bond between the two who shared a close intimacy and cared for the well being of each other physically and psychologically. Astha thought: "...if husband and wife are one person then Pippie and she were even more so. She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her". (243) They had such a matching wavelength of body, mind and soul that they ended up in a physical culmination and defeated an alienated sense of 'otherness'. At this quintessence of an exclusive femininity, Astha and Pippie drew mutual solace and

redemption from their mechanized hassle laden lives. Hite's psycho analytical study of Lesbian Feminism reveals:

Woman's real life dissatisfaction with hetero sexual romantic love relationships have been documented by studies which have found women to be generally disappointed and frustrated with the lack of emotional identity in the love relationships with men. (Women's Power and Resistance: 27)

Pippelika was a determined woman who was courageous and ready to face any challenging situation right from her childhood. She was a sensible woman with rational ideologies. She had a mother and a brother and was working for an NGO after finishing her college education. She was raised in a boarding school that preached traditional values and the essence of religion where her widowed mother was a teacher. Right from childhood Pippee was a rebellion who was totally against the traditional norms and the orthodox culture of the conventional patriarchic society. Much to the disapproval of her mother, Pippee fell in love with Aijas Khan and married him throwing the boundaries of culture and religion. But she was shattered psychologically by the sudden and unfortunate assassination of Aijas Khan. It took more than six months to recoup herself from her depression. The grieved souls Astha and Pippee made a wonderful pair who travelled in a same wavelength of body and mind. They sought an expression and relief through their intimacy. Weeks Jeffrey aptly remarks: "Political lesbianism is a return to nature and nature is now benign, female and lesbian". (Quoted in Women's Power and Resistance, p.181)

Fundamentally Pippee was self willed who realised and claimed her rights on her body and mind. She was bold enough to ascertain her autonomous state and declare her lesbian status candidly to the society. But Astha's position as an Indian wife and mother levied responsibilities upon her demanding commitments to be fulfilled. Through her radical move towards lesbianism, Astha hosts a subtle warning to the hegemonic Indian traditionalism. Hemant became sensitive to the indifferent behavior of his wife. There was a great change in Hemant's behavior and his chauvinistic attitude that he started missing Astha very badly. He concentrated more on his family and realized that Astha was only physically present with him yet mentally absent. Hemant

observed the inherent changes obvious in Astha's behavior. The cold behavior of Astha was a literal sign of a mute missile threatening the patriarchic hegemony.

Practically speaking, Astha has adopted a defensive strategy through her secret relationship with Pippee to resist the andro centric hegemony. But Pippee was prepared to encounter any challenge that questioned her autonomy and individualism. As Pippee remarks on Hemant: "He is not your owner, you know, he'll have to face up to his inadequacies". (234) Essentially Astha bagged no courage to declare herself a lesbian in the Indian society where she held the status of a wife and above all who was committed to discharge her duties and responsibilities as a mother of two children. She did not dare to risk the custody of her children for her individual gratification. As a typical Indian mother Astha withheld her desires and did not enjoy a complete autonomous status at the expense of her children's happiness. So she had to part Pippee once for all who left for USA to pursue her PhD and take up a new career. Eventually Astha could also be regarded a new woman in the sense that Astha had emerged as a skilful orator and a good painter who established her identity more constructively in spite of the limitations and constraints set by her orthodox family and the conservative society.

Thus Manju Kapur connotes a vociferous call against the hegemony that suggests a revision of the andro- centric perceptions by deconstructing and subverting the compelled hetero normative order through her protagonists Astha and Pippee. She substitutes the hegemonic patriarchy by foregrounding a lesbian feminist stance where Pippee enunciates a radical move and Astha that of a 'mute resistance' against male oppression. The novel *Married Woman* dethrones the inherent definitions of gender, religion, culture and tradition that traces woman's inherent potentialities to rise up to the occasion at the right hour and also to exercise a radical mission with guts to proclaim their self identity as and when circumstances warrant.

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