

LOST AND FOUND-UNSHACKLING FROM SERFDOM TO REDEFINE SELFDOM IN MANJU KAPUR'S A MARRIED WOMAN

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Abstract

For centuries, women have been thrown into a pattern that dictates them to replicate the behaviour of the generations of women under male dominance. They have been made to believe that they are incapable of receiving respect or fair treatment from a male society. They are the dull and insignificant shadows of men, mistaking servitude for idealism. They slide into nothingness and cower in their fears and insecurities. These terrorized and oppressed women experience their moments of spark to snap their ties with the repressive customs and render themselves a refreshing transformation to rewrite their identity. They muster their courage to get self-sufficient and build a world of strength in and around them to rise above prejudices and stigmas. This paper explores the rough journey of a woman, who breaks the stereotypes designated by the self-indulgent men, and finds her bold self in her pursuit of identity and freedom in Manju Kapur's A Married Woman.

Keywords: identity, freedom, self-respect, empowerment, assertion.

INTRODUCTION

Since time immemorial, women have been portrayed as delicate and unintelligible creatures, designed only for domestic work. They have been just pieces of glamour, objectified to only serve and please the male counterparts, either in a family relationship or in a work force or in any other social institutions. Indian women writers in the recent times are preoccupied with the gender disparities, domestic violence, procreation, sexual dysfunction and the emotional and psychological trauma of women in the family relationships. The growing number of works on several issues of women and their deep agony addressed by the feminist writers like Manju Kapur come as a strong and constant reminder of the pathetic, unprogressive society. Her works are credited for their bold feminist strokes and come as vehement protest against the

patriarchal society. Contrary to the general perception of modern times, women are still oppressed and exploited in every possible way. She questions the traditions that offer men a huge privilege to reign over women. Manju Kapur opens up in one of her interviews,

I am a feminist. And what is a feminist? I mean I believe in the rights of women to express themselves in the rights of women to work. I believe in equality, you know domestic equality, legal equality. I believe in all that. And the thing is that women don't really have that-you know even educated women, working women. There is a trapping of equality but you scratch the surface and it is not really equal (U.M. 04).

Equality of women is a far cry from reality. The selfish men and the smothering hold to prove their supremacy over women is a universal systemic ailment.

In 'A Married Woman', Manju Kapur shows Astha's journey from a normal, submissive, faceless female to a determined, sensible, vibrant and complete woman. The novel is set against the backdrop of the changing face of India, popping out of the Hindu-Muslim religious clashes over the sacred land in Ayodhya. The political unrest is also suggestive of the inner turmoil of Astha. Her association with Aijaz and Pipeelikal ends her the power to write a new version of herself.

Astha belongs to the orthodox society that thrives on women's subjugation and unquestioned masculine arrogance. Her father seems to be quite radical in his thoughts and plans about Astha's career. But her mother, a typical Indian wife educates her daughter to remain deeply stuck to her conventional roots. Astha's boyfriends, Bunty at school & Rohan in college, fatten her teenage dreams, and adolescent passion and urges. Those affairs which she thought would take her for a long run end abruptly. She enters into a wedlock with Hemant, a US return MBA and a well-settled young man of her parents' choice.

Astha, like any other married girl in Indian society, is convinced that she was born to perform duties for men, drawn out by men again. Manju Kapur attacks the cultural construct that encourages men to see women as no better than puppets, dancing to their tunes. Simon De Beauvoir remarks how a woman offers herself to the traditional system of servitude in *The Second Sex*:

There is unanimous agreement that getting a husband or in some cases a 'protector' - is for her (woman) the most important of undertakings. She will free herself from the parental home, from her mother's hold; she will open up her future not by active conquest but by delivering herself up, passive and docile, into the hands of a new master (352)

Astha finds a blissful life with a fine measure of love, sex, children and material pleasures in marriage. She feels quite content that "she had partaken of the archetypal experiences marked out for the female race" (Kapur 68). She becomes the perfect clone of her prototypes and traps herself in the opinions of the conventional society and feeds the dutiful wife, mother and daughter-in-law in her.

The social structure and the gender discrimination equate women to nothing. They are always thrown to the bottom of social hierarchies and are forced to embrace tradition creating wretched stereotypes out of them. They have not been given space to exercise their rights or prove their worth to the world. Their voices have been muted and souls, mutilated for eons by the predominant male world. Astha wonders at her own plight: "Her subservient position struck her. She had no business kneeling, taking off his shoes, pulling off his socks feeling ecstatic about the smell of his feet" (Kapur 49). Astha fumes inside when her position as a wife, an equal partner is questioned by Hemant. Without Astha's consent or any discussions with her, he decides on his own to donate her dad's books to a library. She demands equality but Hemant displays the master figure in the family. She wonders, "Then who am I? The tenant? We could have found room, we could have built book shelves, done something, we could at least have discussed it" (Kapur 86).

The patriarchal society does not accede to the women's basic demands. The facile discussions on women's liberation would not impact any change in the society unless the women themselves break the pattern of the past tradition. They are still stuck to what they have been rather than what they want to be. The two different worlds of men and women have to comport with each other and only then, the marriage becomes a success. When Astha expects Hemant to lend support in taking care of children, he readily snaps her saying, "It's a woman's work.... Hire somebody to help you, or quit your job" (Kapur 69). The patriarchal society warns a woman that if she wants to become a mother, she should give up her dreams and life. Astha feels broken, powerless and enraged in the role of "an unpaid servant" (Kapur 167), but suppresses her emotions. She is "pulled by the cords of transition, on the one hand, and by her own reluctance and hesitation to act, thanks to the social conditioning, on the other" (Talwar 29). But that fragile and helpless female does not shy away from the society when her marriage falls apart. Astha awaits her moment to prove her strong selfhood. But Hemant devalues her again with his patriarchal ideology, which assumes women as incompetent, brainless commodities and men as intelligent creatures, capable of administration and autonomy. He exerts unfair dominance over

Astha during a family trip to Goa, which was sponsored by Astha from her own earnings. When she wishes to buy a carved silver box, it gets instantly turned down by him. Manju Kapur voices Astha's frustrations and helplessness: "Nine thousand five hundred rupees spent on one of the worst weeks of my life, thought 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 forever. But the money spending was decided by him, not by her" (Kapur 166). Astha feels utterly helpless and infuriated. Her damaged self-esteem finds its way to liberation. Gunjan comments on Astha's vulnerability and resilience as follows:

She represents the whole woman race, the changing Indian society where the upper-middle-class educated woman who, although financially independent, is still facing the problem of adjustment between the old and the new, between appearance and reality and between theory and practice. It explores the space of such women through Astha and boldly presents a new perspective. (97)

Astha's invigorated spirit states, "She didn't want to be pushed around in the name of family. She was fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail" (Kapur 167).

Manju Kapur's women protagonist display their firm refusal to conform to tradition, and protest against exploitation and oppression wielded by the male society. They come as a proof that they are no inferior to men and are destined, not to suffer, but to rewrite their own fate. They resist the age-old customs and question the status of subservience to claim their space and break free from the patriarchal hegemony. These empowered new women challenge the patriarchal ways that have marginalised them under the customs of marriage and family relationships.

The long-subdued women hold more power to freedom when self-realisation sets in. They reject to habituate themselves to play a second fiddle to men. The loneliness and estrangement they face in relationships actually reveals them a new self that resents the social labels. When they are taunted constantly by the self-absorbed men, these women choose to retaliate, manifesting themselves into free and

empowered individuals. Their determination to find a way out triggers them to assert themselves.

Astha senses the insignificant space, she shares with Hemant and understands the emptiness that gradually consumes her. She feels that "if the marriage is terrible, it is good to be able to leave" (Kapur 167). When her presence is zeroed down by Hemant, Astha desperately looks for an escape route to fight the void and the everyday drudgery of her life. She picks up teaching to restore her energy and to define her purpose in life. But she struggles to juggle her work and family. She feels worthless in "a willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth" (Kapur 229). Her exhausted inner self is tired of "always adjusting to everybody's needs" (Kapur 225) She feels physically and emotionally drained and longs to be understood by Hemant.

Astha pours out her frustrations and her cold, frozen life in her poems, which Hemant criticises for being dry and sombre. He does not care about what she is going through on the inside, instead expects her to show up to the needs of his family and his big fat ego. Simone de Beauvoir pictures the struggles of a working woman in *The Second Sex*:

Thus the independent woman of today is torn between her professional interests and the problems of her sexual life; it is difficult for her to strike a balance between the two; if she does, it is at the price of concessions and sacrifices which require her to be in a constant state of tension. (705)

Despite the frustrations and the burden of shouldering the family as a single mother (with zero support from Hemant), she is quite happy about the woman she is becoming into. She quips "between her marriage and the birth of her children, she too had changed from being a woman who only wanted love, to a woman who valued independence. Besides there was a pleasure of interacting with minds instead of needs" (Kapur 70-71).

Astha is not happy in borrowed clothes and her outlook towards life and self steadily transports her to a world of empowerment and success. She does not shy away from the society when her disillusioned married life slaps her hard. She does not want to squeeze her world down to her husband and kids. Her association with Aijaz

Khan, Director of the Street Theatre Group, opens new doors to her. He encourages her and acknowledges her talents as an individual, debarring the gender discrimination. She gets infected with his energising self and draws her radiance from his deep maturity and strong presence. Her involvement in the various activities of Mukti Manch gives her voice and power to scale new altitudes and establish her identity. Her paintings display the same depth and voice that get her both revenue and recognition. After the brutal murder of Aijaz in the communal riot, Astha goes to Ayodhya to participate in the rally for communal harmony, much to the annoyance of her husband and family. She sets out to do what she wants to rather than what the social norms dictate her.

Astha's meeting with Aijaz's widow, Pipeelika, at Ayodhya is one of an instant attraction. Astha has been craving for love, respect, space and recognition in her married life. When Astha accidentally finds a condom in Hemant's suitcase, she suspects his loyalty to her. It throws her in a state of panic and drives her to live life at her free-will as he does. Her outbursts of anger, humiliation, helplessness and desperation find a vent in Pipeelika. Her physical connect with Pipeelika is a strong and firm protest against the misogynist society. It gives a different shade to her own definition of intimacy and love. The emotionally emaciated Astha finds her physical and mental nourishment in Pipeelika, which she could not experience with Hemant. Her chronic headache, deeply severed emotions, servile existence and failed marriage finally find a cure and comfort in the overpowering and intense physical love of Pipeelika. They pair up to explore their own world of happiness and freedom in terms of sex. Their passionate moments together come as an antidote for the pain brought about by the power structure of the masculine world. She spends more time with Pipeelika and ignores the complaining and demanding husband. She slowly slips out of the social conventions and embarks on a trip to discover the purpose of her existence. Both the females do not desire to stay liked and accepted or to get the approval from the male world to validate their individualism.

Pipeelika expects absolute commitment from Astha, but the latter visibly understands the limitations of their relationship. Astha reasons out, "I live my life in fragments; she is the one

fragment that makes the rest bearable. But a fragment however potent, is still a fragment" (Kapur 262). Astha does not believe in tearing apart from the family and she shifts grounds and gets back to her husband and children. Astha settles for a decent, though not a loving relationship with Hemant. She learns to deal with her fears and distances herself from the marital toxicity. Pipeelika feels disappointed and leaves for USA to pursue her studies. Astha finds her way to picture her feelings on canvas, which wins admiration even from the indifferent husband. Her experiences direct her towards her destination. She becomes an illuminated and free woman, not cringing in shame, guilt or terror imposed by patriarchy.

Manju Kapur shows that these seemingly weak and the most enduring females can emerge as stronger and fiercely independent individuals who do not need men to survive or to stay happy. She sees the power within women to outrun themselves in their journey to liberation and self-identity. They do not want to fit themselves into the shoes of Cinderella and wait at the mercy of the charming prince. They understand that beneath that charm lies the horrid face of male cruelty. They can no longer betray themselves into waiting to be rescued nor do they want to be sympathized with. They outgrow their timidity and render bold voices to their miserable plight and fight their battles and become their own warriors to get empowered. They rise from meek to might and play heroes to be an asset to themselves and to those around them.

Astha's journey teaches her to tear open the cocoon of social restrictions to explore the possibilities of a beautiful, colourful and free life. She refuses to recoil into the miserable world of her own and to stay passive and docile to be tamed by the male subjugation. She understands the need to hit the point of freedom from those heavy flakes of oppression and liberate herself from the flawed roles of traditions. She is on a positive start, making decisions on her own. She makes her choices, not let the choices make her. She is no longer vulnerable or willing to be victimized in the plagued social norms. Instead, she chooses to walk alone with pride, dignity and self-love. She articulates her intense desire to be respected, appreciated and needed. She is a unique combination of compassionate and self-assured

individual with grit and determination. She becomes a representative of the new woman and lifts herself above the repressive male hold and strengthens herself both economically and emotionally. As a self-assured and daring woman, she walks the world free to live her life in her own terms to retain her space, dignity and lost happiness.

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