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The Culturally Marginalized in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

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Abstract:

The relationship among human beings, from the history of mankind, was deep and intimate. People used to give variant interpretations to them as was fit for the occasion. But the perspective and outlook change when the relationship under discussion is about the interpersonal relations in the female world alone. Relationship between women can be termed as more of an emotional one. It can be termed sensual, platonic and finally to take it a step further, a relationship that is tagged and labelled as 'lesbian'. Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* revolves around the life of Astha and Pipeelika who encounter an emotional entanglement of the personal and the familial. This type of an attachment between two women is analysed in this paper.

Keywords: relationships, sexuality, marginalization, lesbianism, empowerment, culture, queer.

Sexuality has long since emerged as an area of analysis which determines the cultural structure and dimension of the people of our society. There is an element of exclusivity, a marginalisation, and even a stigmatisation which we relate to sexual differences in people – especially towards people who we classify as “the other” or the homosexuals. Your sexuality can play pivotal roles in determining your identity if we follow and uphold the theoretical line of thoughts of eminent theorists like Michael Foucault. Clarifying his stand point further, Sexuality, Foucault says, is an expression of the identity of the self. It basically forms part of your inclination. But the fact is that it has always been there in all individuals. He has even come to the point of stating that sexuality has attained the status of a discourse. But before attaining a full- fledged angle to this area, Sexuality as an area of discipline had an interdisciplinary past. It was only towards the 1990s that it came to be associated with the broader area of Cultural studies. Ever since Queer studies and theory has been boldly recognised as an area of study and criticism in the wide spectrum of literature.

The relationship among human beings, from the history of mankind, was deep and intimate. People used to give variant interpretations to them as was fit for the occasion. But the perspective and outlook change when the relationship under discussion is about the interpersonal relations in the female world alone. It can vary from the love and support extended to blood relations [sisters, cousins, relatives of the female gender], friendship with girls in the age of adolescence, proclamations of sensual love between mature women and so on. But what marks out these relations is the fact that the masculine gender is exclusively out of this world. It is a topic and a relationship trend that is elusive in a peculiar way. But it is relationship none the less between human beings. Relationship between women can be termed as more of an emotional one. It can be termed sensual, platonic and finally to take it a step further, a relationship that is tagged and labelled as 'lesbian'.

The irregularity is that a lesbian relationship can be within a fully accepted, socially recognised institution like marriage - in the heterosexual context. But the emotional intensity of the women engaged in such a relationship category is pretty much intense. It is worthwhile to research the pertinent question as to what makes a woman enter into a liaison that is termed 'lesbian'. Or still, what element forces them to have a close and intimate [physical or not] relationship? Of the many reasons, the well defined, traditional, rigid role of gender difference from within a family and the indelible mark of women tagged with marriage and motherhood might be reason enough for a woman to enter into such a relationship. Our society has tutored us in a way that we believe marriage and its consummation in motherhood is the best options to a peaceful and settled life. This has its sheen, undoubtedly. But are woman being raised only for this? Is this not relegation and marginalisation enough? Does this not come with a crisis in identity coupled with cultural displacement? Can this situation be similar to the proverbial golden cage of the bird that is for eternity trapped in the cage?

We have numerous examples from Indian literature to exemplify this. Let me steer you to a likelihood we have in our Indian context. Let me explain how lesbianism can be deployed in novels to represent women who were treated as mere culturally marginalised subjects. Here I am referring to the novel by the Indian writer Manju Kapur titled *A Married Woman*. Lesbianism / gay refer to a sexual difference in human beings. But it is an identity none the less though a form of cultural marginalisation. But I would like to point out how through this segregated margin of identity, a woman, who was confined within the restraints of a middle class family, gained an identity, an independence of her own. Let me introduce you to Astha and Pipeelika two opposing characters from the novel that embarks on a trip of pleasure and intimacy that they believed to be complete and absolute. Their relationship was filled with the promise of love. Astha is the protagonist in the novel whose casual Indian life is filled with romantic notions about getting married and leading a life of utter bliss thereafter. Eventually she gets married into a rather upper class family, but her life becomes so monotonous that she gradually gets dragged into the boredom associated with marital life. We confront Astha in the domesticity of her life and seek to find out the what and the why of her lesbian status and the intricacies of her relation with Pipeelika. It will not be wrong to conclude that Astha's lesbian desire and bias is due to the gender disparity in her marital life. With their growing intimacy Astha's endearments of her lesbian lover Pipeelika gets reduced to Pipee, Pip and finally P. She gets the command and the inner strength to involve and participate in things that challenges the margins and constraints of her typical middle class family existence. What makes *A Married Woman* more fascinating is that the novel begins in the time milieu of the 1980's and ends in the 1990's. That point in time in India was remarked as the most controversial year in the political history of the country - when the Babri Masjid was demolished. The novel is significant from the context of the political upheavals detailed too.

A Married Woman pans out the tale of a marginalised woman - in terms of how her sexual preference gains strength from the companionship which she treasures with another individual. But in this case it is a woman. Our society always looks at the relationship with people of the same sex with a deviant eye. Astha's inherent urge to respond to a problem in society would have been suppressed and would never have borne fruit in the monotonous, almost inactive arena of her marital life had she remained there. But Pipeelika steers her through life and makes Astha a better, stronger married woman, who feels occupied and worthy in her day today life. She feels proud on being elevated to the stratum of a self assured and assertive woman - a far cry from the stoic existence she had. Ashta glorifies in the calmness of her inner self and finds contentment in the strength that she finds from the companionship with Pipeelika. It is evident from these words.

As the flames smoked through the wet leaves, Astha cupped her hands around the mug of tea. It was Flowery Orange Pekoe, a delicate and flavourful smell. She smiled, thinking of the year ahead. She had found what she really wanted to do, something she was good at, she was lucky. She felt strongly established enough as a painter to give her art the time and energy that was its due. She was ready to leave her job. She had been teaching almost fifteen years, staying because it had been a good occupation for a woman. (Kapur 180)

It is evident that Astha gains confidence and the inner woman which was dormant in her come to the forefront with her woman identified experiences with Pipeelika. She adorns the new persona of a political painter which makes her express things, for which she could find neither companionship nor compatibility with her husband or with her colleagues at school. She is fed up with being pushed around in the name of family and also with the ideal of the submissive Indian womanhood fed into her mind by her mother. Maybe she wants to escape from being stereotyped and from the suffocating clutches of her two children, her husband, interfering in laws, servants, demanding job and the whole stifling domestic scenario. Pipeelika is a medium which Astha uses to express herself. She finds in Pipeelika a youthful carelessness and casualty which she wants to garb on. She becomes aware of the possibilities of having a freedom of expression through the paintings [which she is good at] that she draws and sketches. The Manch acts as an impetus to her expression and growth.

We cannot call the novel as something which heralded the idea of lesbian culture in the Indian novel but it was written at a time when lesbianism was surfacing as a topic of discussion in recognised circles. The novel explores the protagonist's sexual freedom being responsible for the emotional liberation in her. Astha does not go back to the confines of domesticity but becomes more powerful and emerges more triumphant in the life that she will have to lead in the future. She finds her life with Pipee as a means of physical comfort and an escapade from her psychic violence within her domestic setup. She could have gone back to the confines and curbs of a restricted and marginalised filial existence, but because of the lesbian relationship which she has with Pipee, Astha emerges fully throttled to face a life of liberation. She finds such a liberated life a true recognition of her womanhood.

From the context of *A Married Woman*, it is the lesbian sexual preference on the part of Astha that makes her stronger to deal with the challenges that life hurls at her. The Indian concept of the girl children of a family donning the role of the traditional Indian woman playing the customary roles of mothers, wives and daughter in laws are also issues to be thought about.

The post colonial 'lesbian' text of Manju Kapur is a narrative which deals with the placing of humans in a hetro patriarchal space. Between Astha and Pipeelika we encounter an emotional entanglement of the personal and the familial. Astha tries to perceive her relationship with Pipeelika from the vantage point of view of a 'married woman' just as the title suggests. Feel free to think that this novel is the story of a married woman with a difference. The concept and practice of female bonding being termed lesbian was there earlier and it is not a new idea. But the feelings associated with this did not come out in the open probably because of the fear of alienation or marginalisation that one will face from society.

A new age has begun where we have a handful and more of similar literary outbursts by way of novels and films in our Indian set up. Shobha De's *Strange Obsession*, Rita Garg's *Precursor of Love*, and Anita Nair's *Fire* are brilliant examples. The entrance of a global market in India and the rise of a consumer culture with roots embedded in the Hollywood

extravaganza have given way to a culture that is welcoming changes even in the field of topics hitherto considered taboos. In a way it is good that nations like India are becoming modernized so as to accept and acknowledge such liberated thoughts as lesbianism amongst others. The presence of a lesbian is everywhere – in female only places, in our family, in politics, amongst friends and so on.

As by way of conclusion whether we like it or not lesbianism or other sexual preferences is a way of life that has gained momentum and has permeated into our existence. Why one gets attracted to this need is to be fully analysed before marginalising and ostracising them within the confines of a tabooed society. Lesbians are human beings who need the respect and acknowledgement just like any other individual living in the face of this wonderful planet of ours.

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