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Negotiating Patriarchy, Women's Empowerment and Fundamentalism in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

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Abstract:

The sharp rise of religious fundamentalism since the last two decades of the last century has posed immense threats to human life and dignity. Religion has had a stronghold on the life of the individual and collectivity since ages. But the terrific and hazardous power it has displayed in the contemporary world, in its zeal to gain power and political clout has made life more threatening and under siege form the votaries of fundamentalists. Its impact is more disastrous on the lives of women. In this paper I would like to explore how Manju Kapur has delineated the impact of fundamentalism on women in her fiction *A Married Woman*. I would also argue that the novel ostensibly delineates women's fight for autonomy and her gaining empowerment. But women's empowerment proves to be an illusion as it is confronted with the menacing power of fundamentalism and is throttled under patriarchy that is one of the potent tools of the religious zealots affecting the lives of even the average secular person.

Keywords: Fundamentalism, patriarchy, women's empowerment.

Set against the backdrop of *Ramjanambhoomi* agitation Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002), is embedded within the broader framework of an ongoing dialectics between secularism and religious revivalism and its impact on women in India. This study is a modest attempt at examining the negotiation between patriarchy, women's empowerment and fundamentalism¹; as contextualised in the novel's narration of the protagonist's confrontation with Hindu fundamentalism². Since the focus of this paper is on the figure of the female I will pay close attention to the patriarchal aspect of fundamentalism. My argument is that woman's emancipation that the novel delineates is ultimately eclipsed by the overarching sway of religious fundamentalism. It is illustrated by Astha's defeatist retreat into the sanctified domain of heterosexual married family life. The novel's foregrounding of the voice of dissent by the metropolitan female literati is finally thwarted when faced with the immense potential of religion and patriarchy. Her experiences illustrate how a subtle and diffuse impact of fundamentalism is prevalent even in apparently modernized secular³ families.

With rapid modernization, urbanization, industrialization and the colossal socio-economic and political changes throughout the world in the twentieth century, religion has assumed a new primacy in personal and public affairs. Its effects can be gauged not only from the actions of the mainstream practitioners of fundamentalism but the gradual assimilation of a gendered religious ideology among the upwardly mobile and literate strata of society. The increasing literacy and employment among women and their appearance in the public domain has made it difficult for religion to retain its earlier absolute sway over women's lives. This has led to the reconfiguration of women's roles. The development of new theoretical paradigms

seeking to retain and preserve patriarchy became inevitable for the upholders of religious chauvinists.

While fundamentalism is seen to have variegated influences and responses its central concern for male dominance remains uncontested across spatio-temporal locales. Martin Riesebrodt describes fundamentalism as, “a protest movement that reacts primarily to the replacement of patriarchal structures and social morals by modern depersonalized, bureaucratic structures and social morals” (quoted in Hardcore 135). Steve Bruce writes that the egalitarianism ushered in by modernity has led to a change in a woman’s social positioning but unable to undermine religious misogyny. He asserts that gender assumes primacy than race or class in religious considerations, the latter being shifting ambiguous categories. He says, “Having spent centuries elaborating theological defences of particular patterns of gender relations, religions find it harder to change their stances on gender relations while insisting that nothing much has changed than to change similarly their attitudes to race or class” (32). In sanctioning and granting rights⁴, hitherto provided to women only rarely and after great struggles fundamentalists vociferously condemn those aspects of feminism that might challenge or subvert the existing hierarchy. The rapid proliferation of female education and their rise in the job sector renders women to fresh trajectories of subjugation and exploitation. There are considerable segments of the population where education and jobs are not women’s rights but are endowed to them as privileges for which they should forever remain grateful. And these vital insignias of female emancipation must be in consonance with society’s erected binaries. A great deal of effort is directed by the fundamentalists to devise new ways to retain control over women’s lives and there is excessive focus on controlling the hierarchal and male privileging model of the family. Helen Hardcore says:

In the late twentieth century a weakening of the insistence on absolute distinctions between female and male roles, growing pressure on married women to enter the paid work force, the rise of feminism, and a diminution of male monopoly on cash income contrived to challenge the legitimacy of patriarchal authority. This became the battleground on which the fundamentalist agenda on the family centered. (135)

The complexity of the Indian nation⁵ renders difficult any simplistic generalization about the status and struggles of Indian women. A Third world rapidly developing nation, Indian women have enjoyed the prestigious positions of a President, Prime Minister, various other top bureaucratic positions and high profile jobs. The Constitution grants equal rights to men and women and does not discriminate in terms of sex. Various acts as the Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 and Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, and laws have been passed by the Indian Government to fortify and secure the rights, position and safety of women and lessen the injustices against them considerably. The areas related to inheritance and property rights, rape and sexual abuse, dowry and divorce have been the major concern for reform. Still a vast gulf emerges between theory and praxis. Often the marginalization of women can be traced to the low status assigned to women in religious scriptures and ancient customs. The religious codes and laws that are biased towards women are used by vested interests to boldly justify their suppression of women seeking a divine justification for their gross injustices. In this context the misogyny inherent in religious fundamentalists becomes one of the prime factors propelling society towards subjugating the ‘weaker’ sex. They ingeniously exploit religion injunctions that are in their

favour and are biased towards women whereas they conveniently ignore those rare aspects of religion that give women some control and a sense of individual human dignity. Working at the grassroots level they spread the poison of prejudice in society in a diffused indecipherable way hampering women's progress. If we focus at the fundamentalist lens through which Indian women are analyzed the dilemmas and struggles of her surfaces. Women are the prime target group of the fundamentalist. Women's behavior, her role and her relationship with men and family, become the bedrock of the fundamentalist argument. The 'New woman' is still a victim of religion, with patriarchy as its vital tool ensuring her suppression. Marty and Appleby in *Fundamentalisms Observed* claim that:

the religious aspect of fundamentalism tends to express itself in the following four ways: as a 'fighting for the worldview associated with the religion; a 'fighting with' the myths, traditions and doctrines created by the religion; a 'fighting against' those who do not subscribe to the religion; and finally, a 'fighting under' the god or other transcendent reference thought to be the religion's ultimate source. (Quoted in Saha and Carr 2)

In the Indian context, masculine accreditation is endorsed by mythologizing the role of the Indian woman as embodying the traits of Hindu goddesses: Sita, Savitri, Damyanti or Parvati – quintessence of acquiescence, silence, chastity and sacrifice, with man being the active pivot of their lives. While there is excessive praise endowed on the sacrificing mother and devoted wife, the religious texts are replete with instances of attempts at female subjugation. The *streedharma*⁶ as propounded in the *Manusmriti* and advocated by the laws of Manu lays undue emphasis on the obligations and attributes of a woman. Indeed a strong streak can be evinced from the sacred texts seeking to curtail female independence. Pt. Chandra Bali Tripathi quotes from *Manusmriti* that, "every man should endeavour that the women in the household are kept under control. The father should control the women before marriage, the husband in youth and the son in her old age, for women do not deserve freedom" (187). It further states that:

A woman must not perform any important task, even at home, independently, be she an adolescent, young or old. She should remain under the father in childhood, under the husband in youth and under the sons, if she is widowed. She must not yearn to live independently and separately from the father, brother or sons, as the case may be because this gives a bad name to the families. (Quoted in Tripathi 188)

Man-made religious creeds permeate the societal fabric so intensely that its codes, claims and prohibitions appear as natural. The repressive intrusion of theological beliefs and the consequent restrictions imposed on individuals has a cumulative effect on women. Her autonomy is curtailed and a defeatist and subservient mindset is fostered. Astha's upbringing in an educated, yet, ritualistic and strictly religious Hindu household makes her perceptive to the inherent discrepancies and bigotry of religion. Her artistic penchant is disapproved as contaminating. Her mother considers it her primary obligation to acquaint Astha with minute details of religion. A working woman, Astha's mother belongs to the group of urbanized female intelligentsia bowing to the claims of religiosity. The struggle to be righteous while enjoying the fruits of modernity, propel them towards rigid doctrinal and ritual observance. If the worth of secular education in an increasingly competitive world is acknowledged its dampening effect on the pristine essence of religion is also highlighted. Consequently there is an overwhelming emphasis on acquaintance

with religious scriptures, mythologies and legends. Girls are the primary captives since they are conduits for future transference of cultures and traditions. Hence, despite her disenchantment Astha is forced to a painstaking regimen of prayer and spiritual understanding. If girls are the receptacle of tradition mothers are held liable for disseminating religious views and moulding a child's perceptions. Birth of a girl in such cultures thrusts immense burden on the parents. It becomes imperative that her life is supervised and dictated by the elders. The mother is encumbered with the liability of inculcating in her daughter the virtues of womanhood and the values of family life. The girl's sexuality, needs, desires and actions are rigorously controlled. Matrimony and motherhood become the twin goals and destiny for women. Indeed, the title of the novel, *A Married Woman* is significant for it stresses two important factors. *Firstly*, it indicates the perils that befall a married woman in her pursuit of emancipation. *Secondly*, it illustrates how a woman's identity is curtailed by restricting her identity as a *married* woman, as her sole desirable identity. Significantly, women in the novel, apart from the primary characters are referred to by their husband's name or as mothers.

The marriage of the girl child in a Hindu household becomes indispensable to relieve the parents of the cycle of rebirths. Apprehensions of divine punishments and retribution curb rationalism. It becomes explicit in the novel with Astha's mother struggling to accumulate dowry and efforts made to beautify Astha. Astha's story illustrates lucidly how fundamentalism operates at the grassroots level of society, solidifying ancient prejudices that appear in new guise with each passing decade. A woman's liberty concerning education, job, sexuality, reproduction is still restricted. Indeed, the inherent tension between fundamentalism and secularism focuses on the conceptualization of the sexes, the specificities of gender relations, woman's sexuality, marriage, motherhood and family, the basic and private sphere of society. "And it is in this 'private' zone of secularized societies that fundamentalists have enjoyed their greatest success in reclaiming the world they supposed to have existed before the troubling advent of secular modernity" (Hardcare 147). Since, family is considered the fundamental component of society, a repertoire of faith and religiosity from which traditions, culture and beliefs are passed on it is held to be a sanctified domain. Extensive care is taken to preserve its values and transgressors are forced to abide or suffer as a pariah.

In a society where marriages are still arranged by parents and the liberty to choose a spouse, an exception, Astha yields to the social mores, hoping her marriage will ameliorate her grievances. Tragically her expectations are belied and her predicament assumes a new momentum. Astha's marriage provides a shift from a religious to a secular household, where rituals are not as meticulously observed, yet, the fundamentalist's ideology of a woman's denigrated status and extolling the role of wife and mother is ingrained. The exclusive rights of a woman's body, sexuality and productivity that marriage confers to a husband further intensifies her anguish. He satiates his own desires while remaining oblivious and insensitive to her cravings. It expresses the societal fissure where man authoritatively claims carnal satisfaction, but where even the notion of a woman's sexuality is abhorred. Even Astha's claim to motherhood is suppressed and she has to wait for two years for his approval to get pregnant. Ecstatic at the birth of his first daughter the husband soon transforms into a stereotypical chauvinist, desiring to have a son. "Of course we will have a son, and if we don't we needn't stop at two" (61). He generously approves of her mother performing a special 'puja' for a male child. Society is still seen fretting under the weight of patriarchy where birth of a girl may be

acceptable but a family is never considered complete without a male child, the true bearer of the family's legacy and carrier of progeny.

Hemant appreciates his wife's knowledge about motherhood and family. But he becomes skeptical when she punctures his monopolistic claim of manhood and frees the female gender of the responsibility of the child's sex. "It is the man's chromosome that decides the sex..." (61). Hemant, who had hitherto admired her intellectual potential, accuses her of 'reading' so much that it fills her mind with "unnecessary ideas" (61). It demonstrates how society produces and establishes distinct zones of knowledge to be accessed by the male and female. While a man, solely because of his gender prioritization has unlimited and unbounded admittance to all spheres of knowledge, a woman's sphere of knowledge is clearly demarcated. Within the circumscribed zone she is permitted to acquire knowledge that merely enhances her role as a woman, as propounded by religion and patriarchy, and acquaints her with activities restricted to the private sphere. Any acquisition or articulation of knowledge outside this realm is considered not only unwomanly but also defiantly disobedient. Such rebelliousness incites not only denunciation but also rigorous attempts at suppression and rejection.

Astha's transformation from a housewife to a working woman merits close analysis. The liberty of deciding her career is not hers. At the prospect of journalism, "Mother and husband expressed scepticism" (47). Teaching as a profession becomes unanimously approved as the only profession suitable for her. Society's proclivity towards teaching as the preferable and ordained vocation for a woman rests on the premise that the comparatively shorter working hours does not impinge on her daily duties and domestic responsibilities. Moreover, the restricted schedules and interaction with young children minimizes the scope of socialization and intermingling and hence, protects them from the supposed contamination of the public spaces. Further, the notion of sacredness associated with a teacher-student relationship in the religious landscape of India and the presupposition of women as incapable of other professions validates teaching as the only option for them. Yet, the very fact of teaching as befitting a woman lowers it men's esteem. Hemant, who himself decides about Astha's profession later scorns it as a job that only provides a temporary pastime yielding meager income and even tells her to resign if the job hampers her womanly duties. "Oh-ho, what is there in teaching? Hardly a serious job, you just go, talk to some children about poems and stories, organise a few clubs, and come back" (69).

Later she is suggested to leave the job if she is unable to balance it with her domestic responsibilities. It is only with great resilience and personal effort that she manages to retain her occupation. Her situation echoes the protagonist's dilemma in Kapur's *Home*, where Nisha's aunt shudders at the prospect of Nisha becoming a working woman. "Nisha must understand that women's work was allowable only in unconventional situations (no children), and that respectability demanded it be avoided as much as possible" (Kapur, *Home* 211). Nevertheless, the job that Astha reluctantly accepts at her relatives' discretion, makes her realize the difference and she, "starts enjoying the financial independence and the security that came along the recognition and appreciation for her work. It gives her boost to her individuality" (Guruwara 91). The academic atmosphere intellectually rejuvenates her. She feels socially stimulated, worthy, decisive and empowered.

The workshop organised by her school in 1987 brings the issue of fundamentalism in full play. Astha's involvement makes her insightful about the wide discrepancy between faith and fact. A resistance to mounting resurgence is glimpsed through increasing alertness and an

organized participation of women and children. Yet, the very notion of women's participation in the public sphere seems to threaten male hegemony. Even harbouring on the fringes of political and social activism is considered an instance of willful female contravention, and when it is associated with religio-national hues the ignominy is compounded by the taint of sacrilege and national betrayal. Hemant energetically repudiates Astha's genuine interest in civic matters and tries to jeopardize her efforts. Initially he derides her opinions, and then emphatically blames her of neglecting her obligations. Later when she plans her Ayodhya trip to protest against the mosque's desecration, he plans his own business tour. Despite the fact that Astha asserts herself and overcomes all the hurdles, it is she, who ultimately recedes and falls into the trap of conventions.

Barring Astha, everybody in her family regarded Babri Masjid as a symbol of religious and national affront. It was a reminder of their past slavery and humiliation which must be demolished to regain their utopian Hindu era. Though not active members of the resurgent creed, they supported the religious militancy, according a minority status and second class citizenship to the Muslims. Holding them solely responsible for the nation's vivisection the *Hindutva* ideologues demanded the Hinduization of the country. As Naipaul says that the demand for 'Indianization' of the motherland grew until in the later decades of the twentieth century:

'Indianization' no longer meant a redistribution of jobs, a sharing-out of the British legacy. It was the slogan of an opposition party, a populist-religious appeal to Hindus, a word of threat to minorities, part of the intellectual confusion, the new insecurity, the blind dredging up of dormant fantasies and obsessions, the great enraged stirring from below. (124)

Massive mobilisation schemes on a national scale like the telecast of Hindu epics, the marches modeled on the epical 'yatras' were undertaken to cultivate a distinct religious appeal. The fragmented Hind populace splintered by caste and class divide was coalesced by juxtaposing common tales of their ancient glory and recent servitude. Religious affirmation assumed a martial vindictive aspect. It was accompanied with vituperative condemnation of the common enemy, the Muslim. The religio-cultural agenda of ascertaining Hindu supremacy was aligned with the goal of assuming state control. The ultimate objective was to overpower the minorities, force them to assimilate to the dominant mainstream or confront Hindu rage. It was amidst this political commotion that the Ramayana and the Mahabharata was serialized and viewing it had become almost a ritual in every Indian household. Images of the sacrificing and benevolent epic heroes were overhauled and deliberately reconstructed as valiant and revengeful warriors to further the aggressive mood of the era. Ram's story became, "an inspiring tale of good vanquishing evil, of bravery, of sacrifice and eventual triumph" (Fernandes 310). To the credulous mass cleansing the land of pollutant Muslims and forming *Akhanda Hindu Rashtra* became a signifier of their patriotism and religious allegiance. Astha's grim contemplation at the ritualized observance of the Ramayana by her children, so enthusiastically supported by their grandparents becomes symbolic of her helplessness. She finds herself alone in her endeavour to provide her children an upbringing free of the taint of religious prejudice.

The diverse responses of women in the novel show how women themselves become keen accomplices in the spread of fundamentalism and impede female advancement. The proselytizing zeal of Astha and Pipee find their foil in Astha's mother. She is the staunchest advocate of the religious ideology, entreating her to concentrate on family, the sole arena carved for a woman.

For her, widowhood is the ultimate peril that befalls a woman after which her life practically ceases to exist. Widowhood becomes an indicator that life henceforth is to be bereft of all pleasures and devoted wholly to religion. Consequently, she resigns, disposes off her property and becomes a swami's disciple to Astha's great horror. There are indications in the novel about her loneliness. Yet, to abide by religious codes she does not contemplate living with her daughter. Astha vainly persuades as she sees her self-reliant mother falling a prey to the elusive charms of religion. Hemant's mother is unable to comprehend Astha's commitment to secularism. Her silent antagonism finally erupts in a suppressed rage, "[b]esides have you thought about what you are going to protest? Lord Ram's Janamsthan is in Ayodhya...Hindu tolerance does not mean you accept everything and anything" (186).

Pipeelika Khan, Aijaz's widow is the autonomous character of the narrative refusing to bow down either to patriarchy or fundamentalism. Nevertheless, they had to confront social ostracism. Pipee's mother was convinced that Aijaz being a Muslim will be guilty of polygamy and triple 'talaq'. Unable to dissuade her daughter she urges her, "At least make sure my grandchildren are Hindus" (122). The novel, indeed, demonstrates how prejudices and misconceptions about persons from other religions prevent intra-religious bonding and co-operation. Astha's meeting with Pipee signals the beginning of the end of her secular commitment. Their lesbian relationship overshadows their activism to the extent that the *Ekta Yatra* towards the end is undertaken by them solely for being together. Pipee's companionship becomes her priority and she even contemplates rejecting the *Ekta Yatra* altogether. "Pip, why can't the two of us go on a holiday for the weekend, why the Ekta Yatra?" (248).

Religious strictures invalidating the concept of a homosexual family and the fear of social stigmatization, forces her to detach from Pipee. Describing the fundamentalists' discomfort with a woman's sexuality and their homophobia Ruthven remarks:

In all such instances, fundamentalist concern to maintain the family as a social unit and transmitter of conservative values has been overtaken by a neurotic obsession with correct sexual behavior... When homoerotic feelings clash with the heterosexual values formally endorsed by religion, homophobia (directed against those who acknowledge and give expression to such forbidden sentiments) provides an all too and obvious and easy way out. (79)

The lesbian liaison becomes only a temporary refuge. Astha prefers her unhappy married life to Pipee's unconventional love. The thought of being a traditional wife makes her recoil. Yet, when Hemant falls ill she succumbs to the conventional mores, ignores herself and concentrates on her husband and children. When Pipee demands for a full-fledged independent relationship, Astha retreats until she clutches, "that rock of stability women had, her husband and children" (285).

Shocked by the mosque's desecration, the nation's mayhem and her personal tragedy she loses faith in everything except herself. Painting becomes her only solace. "Work was the only place she could forget everything, where she could become her mind, her hand, and the vision inside her head" (301). Yet, the financial security that comes with her artistic career does not fully empower her. It is Hemant who is "quite the manager of his wife's career" (304). It is Hemant who plans about the management of her finances and decides to provide exposure to her work through his friend's help. Intricately the web spun around is revealed. Women's empowerment proves to be a chimera, when confronted with the dependency on the male's

approval, generosity and support for every important aspect and decision of their life. Whether it is her education, marriage, career or her personal life; each has to be sanctified by the male guardian. Astha never really gains the complete sovereignty she desires. She is unable to fragment the inferior status accorded to women though through her persistent efforts she negotiates and assumes a certain level of flexibility. She undeniably achieves economic success but ultimately depends on her husband in matters relating to the earning, expenditure and savings of her finances.

The relegation and marginalization of women in the educational and economic realm contributes to their failure in emerging as truly emancipated beings. Women's economic potential is disvalued primarily because their income is comparatively less and their wage is considered merely an additional input into the family's finances, which again is to be supervised at by the male. It becomes explicit when early in the novel Hemant authoritatively spends her salary on an air ticket while denying her the permission to buy a silver box for herself. Religion further fixes the dependency of women on the male members for control of their finances and heritage. Not only housewives, but even earning women are entirely dependent on their male custodian for supervision of their assets. The widespread assumption that women are safe and secure only under the guidance and protection of the male, make them willingly or forcibly surrender their economic privileges to their male custodians. As Helen Hardcare asserts:

Thus the fundamentalist injunctions by which women remain peripheral to advanced economic sectors are perceived as having an element of economic realism, that is, legitimating and sanctifying an economic inevitability. Because fundamentalists tend to restrict women's rights to own property, women lack economic resources that they can control independently" (142).

Not only Astha is denied the control of her inheritance or participation in any decision regarding it, she is also denied any knowledge of the investments. Even her father's treasured books are donated to a library without her consultation. Her query regarding her own legal inheritance meets with her mother's moralizing and a bitter reproach and sarcasm from her husband.

Astha's education and marriage are decided by her parents. Her job and her future course are dictated by her husband. Even she is denied the opportunity to decide about when to have children or the number of children she wants. All rests on the authority of her husband. Her determination to gain a distinct 'space' for herself and her egalitarian tenets are repressed by the greater social and religious forces. Her fight for secularism and tolerance is finally suppressed by the manipulation others, who function not only as her family members but also as faithful members of a religious community. Women's empowerment and full autonomy relies not only on assertion of individuality and defiance of restrictions but on wresting the power to decide and act freely. Her autonomy depends on her capability to make free choices and act independently. It is in this domain that Astha tragically fails. The stability, security and privilege that Astha achieves cost her her sovereignty. Her silence at the end signifies her resignation and her emotional and psychic incarceration. She feels as a derelict, writhing within the confines of an incompatible marriage. Yet, all her problems do not give her strength enough to seek for divorce and live an independent life. As Balakrishnan writes:

The overwhelming importance given within Indian society to the norms of femininity set down in the ancient Indian texts like the Ramayana, Mahabharata and

the Dharmashastras have ensured the limitation of the female self-discovery mode to a temporary separation and ultimate recuperation into the sexual and maternal role. (106)

Pipee emerges as the stronger and more resolute figure of the narrative. She boldly severs an unfruitful relationship and immigrates to USA. Her emancipation becomes dependent on her ability to disengage from the vicious atmosphere of resurgent forces. The shrinking capability of the motherland, that itself is a hostage to fanatics, in providing space and opportunity to women to achieve their goals is emphasized. It is intriguing that all the secular women characters are solitary fighters. They finally disperse, becoming dim, scattered voices amidst the overpowering din of revivalism. Religious orthodoxy not only has adverse consequences for women, but also impedes the overall progress and prosperity of the nation. Women's full participation in economic, social and political life is still obstructed by the vicious forces of fundamentalism, of which a biased patriarchy is the most virulent manifestation. The novel reveals how despite acute discontent and intolerance of the intelligentsia for fundamentalism, women fail to emerge as truly empowered beings. Kapur elucidates that the women's defeat by the pervasive aspects of fundamentalism rests more on their final withdrawal than on the potency of the hostile agents. The drawback in women's fight against fundamentalism is highlighted by Astha's disillusionment and despair. Contrary to Astha's belief that Hemant, "seems to have changed his political opinions", it is she who feels the futility of her efforts. She says, "Maybe Hemant was right. What was the use of forcing motorists, passengers and pedestrians to listen to the voice of tolerance and peace? It had not prevented anything. Maybe the true victory of fundamentalism was the total despair of the secularist" (205).

Deciphering and dismantling of false hegemonic knowledge assumes a crucial urgency at this troubling juncture. If women are to achieve full independence, their awareness of the inequities has to be accompanied by resolute determination and continued resistance. Only continued participation rather than retreat or erasure will dilute and efface the insidious trends of fundamentalist societies. The exponential increase in new levels of alertness among women and their protest against religious hostility may be perceived as an optimistic strand. Kapur's representation of the vulnerability of women and their persistent efforts alerts the reader to conflicting trends in contemporary society. By making her protagonist finally returning to home, the author underscores the intricacies of fundamentalism, the complexities of which is to be decoded before the goal of women emancipation is achieved.

Notes:

¹ The term 'fundamentalism' has become a much debatable and highly politicized term since the latter decades of the twentieth century. A full analysis of the term is beyond the scope of this paper. For a detailed investigation of the concept see Steve Bruce, Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby, Santosh C. Saha and Thomas K. Carr, Malise Ruthven and T. N. Madan. This term is used here in the sense of religious revivalism, religious conservatism, religious orthodoxy, and religious traditionalism, bearing in mind the intense misogyny and patriarchal component of fundamentalism.

² It is difficult to describe Hindu fundamentalism, since the term 'Hindu' itself is a recent invention. It was first used by the Muslim conquerors to designate people who resided by the river Indus. As a self-ascriptive word it has been increasingly used by indigenous Indian people,

belonging to the *Sanatan Dharma* since the eighteenth century. Hindu fundamentalism is thus, an anomalous concept, since unlike the fundamentalism of the monotheistic Abrahamic world religions as Judaism, Christianity or Islam; it has no definite set of fundamentals of faith or practices. The phrase refers to the resurgence by the upholders of the *Hindutva* creed who gained much strength and support during the *Ramjanmabhoomi* agitation leading to the desecration of the Babri Masjid, and the Gujrat carnage of 2002.

³ It means that unlike the earlier era when women faced immense hurdles and were not allowed to acquire secular knowledge and work outside the home for cash income, they have comparable ease today in rightfully accessing literacy and jobs. This does not mean that they have achieved absolute freedom. Rather their predicament has changed and they have to confront new challenges posed by the patriarchal society that is acutely vigilant about retaining and strengthening its hold on women.

⁴ The complexity refers to the heterogeneity of Indian women across various categories as religious, regional, linguistic, caste, class or urban-rural divide.

⁵ ‘Secular’ in this paper is used in the sense of tolerant towards other religious peoples. It is not used in the Western sense of hostility towards religion, or absolute separation of the church and the state or the public and the private that are respectively considered to be the sphere of the profane and the sacred. For a detailed study of the term see Priya Kumar; and T.N. Madan.

⁶ *Streedharma* refers to the *dharma* or the essential obligations and duties of a woman as consistent with rules and regulations enshrined in the ancient sacred texts of the Hindus.

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