



About Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

Contact Us: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

Editorial Board: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529
Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Across the Threshold of Hetero-normative Culture: A *Married Woman* by Manju Kapur

Manjeet Kumar Rai
Assistant Professor
Department of English
Govt. Degree College
Tehri Garhwal
Uttarakhand

Abstract:

Culture, gender and sexuality are the terms that are fluid in nature and in a state of perennial flux. With the onset of revolution in every field, these concepts too were transformed into a discursive space replete with contestations. In the culture of a country like India, where marriage has been granted a sacred status, there is a dire need to problematise the seemingly innocent concepts like love and intimacy within marriage, aligning them with the economic and cultural, socio-legal structures of society and by extension the nation. It needs to be understood that women's issues, their sexuality and any theorization of their agency cannot be understood as separate from social issues but they are integrally related to the meta-narrative of power relations— state, family, kinship, tradition, community- affecting women on the one hand and other marginalized sections of society on the other.

The social construction of gendered sexuality is said to be influenced by culture. Baumeister completed a study that looked at female erotic plasticity, suggesting that women are more susceptible to influence by social and cultural factors in regard to sexuality than men are.

The present paper seeks to position sexualities within a wide range of changing social, cultural and political contexts so as to better understand its shifting and unstable meanings with special reference to *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur. Within a larger discursive realm, this paper attempts to analyze the connection of sexuality to its socio-historical context and see how it is socially constructed in the cultural matrix.

Keywords: Marriage, Hetero-normativity, lesbian, homo-sexuality,

Marriage, as an institution has always enjoyed a sacred and sanctified status in India, more so if it's an arranged marriage. According to Hindu Dharma, the ceremony of marriage is a firm uniting of two souls such that after marriage the individual bodies remain as separate entities but the souls merge into one harmonious whole. The idea behind the institution of marriage in Hindu Dharma is not to foster self-interest, but love for the entire family (and society).

Before delving deep in to the paper, let us have a glance on what *Manusmriti* says about women: 174. Her father protects [her] in childhood, her husband protects [her] in youth, and her sons protect [her] in old age; a woman is never to be left unprotected. 9:3.

155. The nuptial texts are applied solely to virgins, [and] nowhere among people to females who have lost their virginity, for such [females] are excluded from religious ceremonies 12.8:226.

156. The [recitation of the] nuptial texts are a certain proof of a valid marriage; but the learned should know that the marriage ceremony is complete with the seventh step 13.8:227.

169. For if the wife is not attractively garbed, she will not attract her husband; and if she has no attractions for him, no children will be born. 3:61.

170. If the wife is beautifully bedecked (rocate), the whole house is bright; but if she is destitute of decoration, all will appear dismal. 3:62.

“*A Married Woman*” is again set amidst the conflicts of love and has the backdrop as the aftermath of Babri Masjid. The novel traces the journey of Astha, the protagonist, towards her self-identification and self-actualization. Astha is the voice of an ordinary middle class woman with higher sensitivity who are able to decipher the incompleteness and vacuity in their life and try to fulfil the desires of their soul rather than being content with bodily desires and material comforts. Her sense of extroversion is revealed through her brave decisions that assist a great deal to find a way out for herself by the end, uncared for the society or her own family which hampered her inner self until then. Though Astha is depicted as an introspective nature in the beginning, she projects herself in the end and her extroverted self who strives hard to attain success. What is a marital utopia for most of the women becomes a claustrophobic cellar for Astha because of her sensitivity to herself and the surroundings. Her inner self is on a continual search for someone who understands her and pays her the due respect she wished for. She wishes to be more than a wife, a mother, a daughter-in law and a daughter. Death of Aijaz does shake her to an extent but she dares to give a second chance to herself and thus she befriends Pipeelika, a widow, with whom she finds the peace that was lost. Astha breaks the laws of nature and even society, in her relationship with Pipeelika. In these ways, her extroverted activities do not imply that she wanted to be superior to man, but she longed for the equality and something beyond that in order to fulfill her duties at home and in all the undertakings. Such thoughts act as an aspiration for her to evolve into a new woman of rebellious streak. This can be testified when she says “Really Ma, don’t you think women can be responsible for their own Investments?”

Now, when we tease out the seven vows of a marriage, we find that it centers on some fundamental aspects needed to live a fulfilled life: vows of love, duty, respect, fidelity and a fruitful union that binds the couple in a companionship forever. But in actuality, these vows that needed to be mutual obligation turn out to be lopsided most of the times.

Like every girl, Astha too dreams of a blissful marriage, full of love and romance- a marriage fulfilling all the seven vows that take place at the ceremony but in actuality vows remain vows and with the advancement of time the whole edifice of her dreams turns to dust. “A deep seed of happiness settled in the pit of her stomach, she was married; she didn’t have to be the focus of her parents’ anxieties any longer. She was now a homemaker in her own right, a grown woman, experiencing her first plane ride.”(37) Astha had everything that a girl desires for at the superficial level but at the deeper level, there was something more that Astha as a human being desired for.

A few months and dullness began to taint Astha’s new life. What was she to do while waiting for Hemant to come home? (46) Since she had all the material and emotional comforts now, it was a desire of self actualization that had crept in her. Astha, on the insistence of Hemant took a teachers’ job and found it quite satisfactory but it was not the spare time and a job that was disturbing her rather it was the growing insensitivity of her husband towards her that pained her much. All the seven vows stand in the witness box one by one when they are tested in the daylight of reality. The love borne out of passion had already dissipated in her marital life and Hemant was emerging in his new avatar of a patriarchal mindset no matter he had a foreign degree and he was US returned. Hemant like a patriarch too is equally desirous of a male heir as

his mother was. He pressurizes covertly in support of her mother's claim of going for puja and pundits for a male heir. When Astha complains about taking care of the child alone as tiring, he says "It's a woman's work, hire somebody to help you or quit your job." (70) Thus Astha finds herself emotionally alone and being undermined at the same time as an individual and is surprised how she 'had partaken of the archetypal experiences marked out for the female race.'

Astha's repeated search for a conformation discloses her lack of confidence and even reflects her upbringing where she had to look for approval for everything from the patriarch of the family. But later after Aijaz's death she joins manch for the cause of communal violence and this was her first independent decision which marked the turn of her life. This decision of her wasn't really approved by Hemant, and in an admonishing tone he said "please. Keep to what you know best, the home, children, teaching. All this doesn't suit you." (116).

Hemant detested Astha's involvement with manch and tried to emotionally discourage and manipulate her in the name children and familial duties. Even her mother-in-law looked at this disapprovingly and told her that a woman's place is within the confines of house not on the roads and politics is not a field where woman should participate. "Her mother-in-law looked at her. 'It is not a woman's place to think of these things', she said firmly." (186). In spite of her family's disapproval she carried on with her activities and even went to Ayodhya for Yatra. It was their abomination, which made Astha more determined. Astha asserts herself by not succumbing to her husband's demands and even through economic independence. This was one of the major reasons which pumped Astha with confidence. She was well aware of economics of power and money, Hemant asserted his control because all the finances were under his control and she was dependent on him.

Now the question arises is what led Astha to embark upon a lesbian relationship that too when her bodily desires were fulfilled by Hemant and she was not of a woman with deviant streak in her nature. What was the crevice in her conjugal life that led her to defy the hetero-normative norms of the society and seek love in Pipeelika? Astha the protagonist considers marriage as a spiritual union of the two rather than mere physical. Although her husband fulfills her physical desires but she feels emptiness in her life. It is because of this empty space in her life, that she turns towards Pipeelika with whom she forms a bond that takes a physical turn.

It was not just that she craved for the body of a Pipeelika rather it was more than the body. Adrienne Riche in her article *Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence* criticizes the limited view of Alice Rossi who believes "Biologically men have only one orientation- a sexual one that draws them to women,-- while women have two innate orientations, sexual toward men and reproductive toward their young." Rich protests and says that she is against "the power men everywhere wield over women, power which has become a model for every other form of exploitation and illegitimate control". This power that Hemant exercised over Astha in the most petty matters of her individual choice smothered Astha and propelled her to move towards Pipeelika with her mind, heart, body and soul where body was a medium to feel the warmth of her belongingness to Pipeelika in love. There follows a torrid affair between Astha and Pipeelika Khan: two women crossing social boundaries to find solace and understanding in each other's arms. Kapur writes about sexual encounters without any literary inhibitions. Her descriptions are unnerving and passionate at the same time.

The physicality of their relationship is satisfying because it is based on care, love and mutual respect for each other. Astha starts enjoying her company. “Given certain circumstances, there was no aphrodisiac more powerful than talking, no seduction more effective than curiosity” are so realistically true and reflective of Astha and Peeplika’s relationship. With this relationship Astha finds herself torn between two halves-her desire for love and affection and her duty towards her family. “Afterwards Astha felt, strange, making love to a woman took getting used to. And it also felt strange, making love to a friend instead of an adversary” (Kapur: 2000, 231).

Dr. Ram Sharma in his *A Married Woman: A Woman’s Quest for a New* observes, Kapur shows Astha’s growing and evolving at various stages through various relationships and she becomes the first Indian novelist who highlights woman’s desire for homosexuality. The roots of tradition, living up to the benchmark of the Ideal Indian Woman sacrificing for the Astha involves herself so deeply in Pipeelika that no longer she finds any interest in having sex with her husband. She phones her at least five times daily. Astha begins to lack in her family duties and consequently her children suffer from her negligence. Many times her conscience haunts her for having an extra-marital affair with a woman. For this reason she wishes she was to be like Pipeelika, alone and free. Astha understands a married woman’s place in the family to be that of an ‘unpaid servant’ or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death to her status as an Indian wife. She feels for herself, “A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth,” (231) are the prerequisites of a married woman like her. “There are hollows in my life, and I wanted them filled” (202).

Traditions in Indian society are so strong that a woman cannot break them and get out of it to make a separate identity. Astha’s morals force her to think that in lying to her husband she is committing a sin. Since her childhood, she is taught never to tell a lie. Every time in the past whenever she had lied for anything, she had been punished by God. It had happened with her before marriage when she lied to her mother for the boys with whom she had friendship. And now she can’t restrain herself for telling lies for the sake of Pipeelika as she feels every touch of Pipeelika gives her heaven’s joy and she doesn’t want to lose her. “She thanked God again for this love in her life, when she had thought all chances of love was over” (235). “My whole life is a fabric of lies, ‘said Astha sadly, ‘you are the one true thing I have” (242).

All such works like *Lihaaf* by Ismat Chughtai and *A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur are attempts to impart normalcy to lesbian desire and relationships and see it no different than heterosexual love but at the same time there is a profound awareness that this kind of love would require great sacrifices and strength on the part of a woman to live within the society. Maya Sharma in her extraordinary book *Loving Women – Being Lesbian and Unprivileged in India* interviews a factory worker Vimlesh who says,

You ask me if I have heard the word “lesbian”. No, I have not heard it, I am attracted to women.

Why create these categories, such deep differences between male and female? We are all human beings, aren’t we?

Lesbianism thus is reflected in all these works but it is still a far cry from actual representation and somehow the works that are attempted on such a controversial theme of Lesbianism are an apology at describing these relationships in all their complexities. There is a need for honest writers and more welcoming readers to come across such themes and instead of awing at it, one should try to understand the reason for the birth of such relationships.

Works Cited:

- Chahana, Kuhu. Plurality of Lesbian Existence in Modern Indian Writers: Manju Kapur, raj Kamal Chaudhary and Geetanjali Shree.” %4.3 (2010): 190-219. *JSTOR*. Web. 26 Mar. 2016.
- Calhoun, Cheshire. “ Separating Lesbian Theory from Feminist Theory.” *Ethics* 104.3 (1994):558-551. *JSTOR*. . 06 Mar. 2016.
- Chandana, Yashika. “Quests for Identity by Her in the Novels of Manju Kapur.” *IJELR* 1.1 (2014): 84-94. Web. 24 Feb. 2016.
- Kapur, Manju. *A Married Woman*. New Delhi: IndiaInk, 2002. Print.
- Nitonde, Rohidas. *In Search of a Feminist Writer*. New Delhi: Partridge India, 2014. Print.
- Rich, Adrienne. “Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence.” *Signs* 5.4 (1980): *JSTOR* .Web. 27 Mar. 2016.
- Sharma,Ram. *Rise of New Woman: Novels of Manju Kapur*. New Delhi: Mangalam Publications, 2013. Print.