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## **Kaleidoscope of Enigmatic Relationships: A Study of *Another Man's Wife and Other Stories* By Manjul Bajaj**

**Dr. Maneeta Kahlon**  
Assistant Professor English  
Shanti Devi Arya Mahila College  
Dinanagar, Distt -Gurdaspur, Punjab.

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### **Abstract:**

**Objective:** The present paper aims to study Manjul Bajaj's book *Another Man's Wife and Other Stories*, a collection of short stories that was shortlisted for The Hindu Prize for Best Fiction 2013. The book has several short stories, nine to be precise and each story is unique and haunting and yet simple. Her detailed research and empathy come through in the stories set in varied locations, backgrounds and situations. All the stories are essentially about women, celebrating all aspects of woman in all their beauty and how they try to create a space for themselves within this largely patriarchal society. The best part of the characters of these stories are that they fight free of stereotypical images and present a hard-hitting scathing attack on society. The stories are a subtle and indirect attack on social, economic, political, personal and moral corruption. Themes are explored through the guise of sarcasm and humour.

**Keywords:** Bajaj, integrity, morals, poverty, humanity, society.

Manjul Bajaj is a prolific writer. She grew up in Lucknow. She graduated in Economics from Lady Shri Ram College, Delhi University and did a Masters in Rural Management from IRMA at Anand and another in Environmental Science from the University of London. For much of her adult life she has worked in the field of rural development and the environment. Her debut novel was titled *Come, Before Evening Falls*.

*Another Man's Wife and Other Stories*, is Manjul Bajaj's second book, a collection of short stories that was shortlisted for The Hindu Prize for Best Fiction 2013. The book has several short stories, nine to be precise and each story is unique and haunting and yet simple. Her detailed research and empathy come through in the stories set in varied locations, backgrounds and situations. All the stories are essentially about women, celebrating all aspects of woman in all their beauty and how they try to create a space for themselves within this largely patriarchal society. The best part of the characters of these stories are that they fight free of stereotypical images. Her words bring alive her characters and we relate to them instantaneously. Manjul Bajaj describes her fiction as, "Through my fiction I attempt to explore and understand the beauty and confusion of that which we are as a people, and what being a modern person belonging to this very ancient civilization and culture entails".

The stories do not fall into the division of rural urban, rich poor rather it encompasses all women and reflects on what it means to be a woman and how each woman explores her femininity within the constraints of societal expectations, Raising and answering questions of what it entails to be a woman?

The title story *Another Man's Wife* comes at the end of the book and is slightly longer than other stories yet it is a beautiful story of the protagonist Kuheli, who has recently come to the village after her grandfather's death, and chooses Devji, as her suitor according to their tribal custom however a major disaster strikes when the government decides to evacuate the village, along with several others, to facilitate the construction of a dam. Or that their lands were going to be submerged by it. The tribals suffer greatly and the only work available for them is manual labour. The troubles are explained in this manner "The children suffered terribly, for both Kuheli and Devji had to work at the canal site, where they were engaged in digging out the earth on the canals which were being relined. Their five-year old, Nanlo had to fetch the day's drinking water, feed Babla and himself the food Kuheli cooked and left behind for them, tend to their three remaining hens, safeguard their belongings and protect himself and Babla from bullying and attacks by older boys and no-good drunken perverts." (213)

In the meantime Dhansukh Bhai the local contractor puts his eye on Kuheli. For Kuheli this is the moment of choice to accept his offer or to see her husband and children starve also she is wise enough to know that no amount of money is going to last long and thus she persuades her husband and tells Dhansukh Bhai that she would agree to be his mistress on the condition that he was to give her land back to her that of course is impossible but Dhansukh wanting her desperately gives five acres of his own land in Nanded, Maharashtra.

Kuheli asks for time to settle her family in the new place but seeing them dislocated and Devji drunk at not being able to reconcile with the bargain Kuheli has struck she brings Chanda, her beautiful widowed cousin and her children to look after her family, having done all she can she goes to Dhansukh Bhai to fulfill her part of the bargain.

Dhansukh Bhai had thought that he would get pleasure in this dusky woman of the earth but her cold indifference to his lovemaking leaves him feeling insecure and emasculated and leaves Dhansukh Bhai seeking reassurance in his wife Urmi, the wife he had long forsaken for other sexual pleasures. Now it is in union with this long-neglected wife that he can feel like a sexually strong man again.

In the bargain Kuheli discovers power when she holds herself against Dhansukh Bhai "Hold back and harness. Everywhere she looked she could see the principle in action. Hold back rivers and harness them for power and irrigation. Hold back foodgrains in godowns and harness the rising prices for profit .... girls held back their love, using the power of their virginity, to harness a groom with". (261)

Urmi Behn also discovers a new relationship with her husband earlier the docile wife she is now the aggressor in their relationship and has put behind her inhibitions and is ready to meet Dhansukh Bhai all the way and practice the ancient science of Kamasutra on him , Dhansukh Bhai is ensnared in the ‘silken web of erotic pleasure’ that his wife is weaving for him and he is content to let her play the dominant role because it was her whimpering body which had made him feel complete ,thus Kuheli is incidental in gives a new meaning to this husband –wife relationship where sex is no longing wanting and taking but is now an act of equals .

However, Kuheli’s decision though taken in the interest of her family leaves her husband desolate and leads her husband to find solace in the arms of another woman. He says, “The greater man serves the larger cause, the lesser man simply does what it takes to live” (263) Kuheli after teaching Dhansukh Bhai and also learning, “that somewhere ,a river had breached a dam and swept them both into its eddying currents –no longer aggressor and victim ,tormentor and tormented ,hunter and prey ,just two creatures of flesh ,blood and bone ,their breathing united in a shared rhythm ,their business with each other finally done”(282) arrives home a month earlier than anticipated to find Devji and Chanda living like a family .

Kuheli is horrified and shocked that the family she so lovingly provided for hasn’t missed her and new associations have been formed but once again she realizes that “the river of our emotions...is deep, dark and unfathomable and every twist in its course is not ours to dictate” (279) and with this she looks forward to the future “because the only way out of fear is through it, step by faltering step”. (278) The character of this young tribal woman Kuheli who is both bold and vulnerable in equal measure stays with us even after the story finishes.

The next story ‘*Ripe Mangoes*’ opens with the lines, “Ammi, you are a whore!” (1) The story is about a young married woman, a kathak dancer and her journey to seek love. Trapped in a marriage of convenience to an old man she chooses infidelity to make herself forget resentment and feel alive. She is challenged by her adolescent daughter who loathes her because she sleeps with their resident tutor. The protagonist has weekend with her husband and weekday’s trust with her paramour. However, she refuses to feel guilt “After you inhabit the perfect harmonic note, what other music would you chase?” (14) The truth of their relationship and that of the narrator and her husband is an eye-opener.

It is a tale of betrayal, betrayed by her parents she in turn betrays her husband and others but there is also the knowledge of this betrayal. “Like the time when I was pregnant with Arif , the ripening bump on my belly just beginning to show and he had discussed the finer aspects of mango farming with me ,even as his eyes had roved over my belly. He said, Begum, a wise farmer doesn’t search the wind to see from where the seed flew in, he is content that the ripe mangoes are his to claim” (15)

*Under the Moonlit Sky*’ is the name of a houseboat on the Dal Lake, where Rohini and Venkat spent their honeymoon. They form an affinity with Bakhtiar and Mehjabeen, who run the

houseboat together. They philosophize on love and how lucky they are to have found this elusive love. On returning, "Rohini found out that in more routine circumstances love didn't blossom and flower as naturally as it did in Srinagar in springtime.....It needed careful tending and constant watering to be kept alive." (155)

Although they live in their own company apartment, and not with Venkat's parents, coping with Venkat's mother turned out to be tougher than anything Rohini could have envisaged. Rohini and Mehjbeen communicate with each other but things are not well at both the ends. Rohini has not been able to conceive over the years and Mehjbeen though the mother of two beautiful children is upset by the turmoil in Kashmir. The story resolves itself by the annual gifts sent to each other and the glimmer of hope which shines through from these gifts.

'*A Deepavali Gift*' is the story of the protagonist Jujube, who wants to give her niece, Sarita the perfect gift. Sarita arrived in the ancestral home to live with Jujube when her parents died. Living with her single aunt, she gets tied down to the place and begins to think herself as permanent fixture in the home.

Jujube is shackled and trapped by the triviality of her life "The sensation of being trapped inside a pettiness not of my own making overwhelmed me. Those mugs, these cups, how did any of it matter? Surely, I deserved bigger battles than this?"(233) Her trusted major domo, Jugal, asks her to make the Diwali list .Jujube has a difficult task of finding the right gift to please everyone and sets about handpicking the gifts but her mind is elsewhere at how she can free Sarita and encourage her to live her life without restraint .She confides to the readers that "Whatever wisdom I have has been hard-earned – each meaning carefully culled out of the dictionary of human experiences and emotions and put in its precise place in the matrix. Meaning doesn't come easy. The Great Crossword Setter in the Sky is capricious and willful, demanding absolute obedience. You can waste the better part of a lifetime arguing about the randomness of the clues, the setting of the squares, why a certain square is black and not white as you need it to be, question the whole point of doing the crossword – what, after all, is to be gained by solving it. Only after all the chattering is over and you give your complete attention to it, does the perfection of the pattern reveal itself. As is, where is, everything fits. And at the end, when it's all done, there is no reward to be had – the joy of doing it right is all the reward there ever is. (141)"

To enable Sarita to live her own life and not to be tied down to the house she takes the difficult decision of selling the house and moving into the MB Club rooms so that Sarita can decide to marry Rohit. "I wanted to tell her that we virtuous women set too much store by our virtue. If we don't let the man who love us take our body, time will take it anyway, without passion, indifferent to its beauty. I no longer believe that there are thick dossiers on each of us in the heavens and a record kept of our every deed and omission. At most each of us is given four or five chances at happiness. At the hour of reckoning we are left alone with ourselves to answer this- did we grab our opportunities with open arms or did we let them slip through our fingers,

did we squander those chances or make something of them, did we sit our life out on the earth caged in prisons of our own making or did we have the faith and courage to walk out and know ourselves as the inheritors of the world and all that it has to offer? (144) The title is reflected in This story of giving, and moving on, Lighting up someone else's life is sometimes the best way to celebrate this festival of lights.

The story *Crossed Borders*, seems to be a simple story of crossing borders and coming in search of greener pastures but the green pastures turn red and the young boy has knowingly – unknowingly committed four murders but that is not the main plot. It's a crime for which he evades punishment by running all his life but the guilt at the sin he had committed years ago leads to his redemption when he does not commit a murder at his mistress's orders rather he kills the mistress but allows the young child and its mother the right to live. An unexpected end that makes Bahadur's wrong deed somehow right and he stands redeemed in the readers' eyes.

*Marrying Nusrat* is the story of Nusrat and her attempts to set up a chicken work co-operative centre in a UP village, and the fascination the narrator, an adolescent boy, feels for her. Nusrat's attempts at establishing the cooperative along with help of Yakhni Begum, The Sarpanch is told in fascinating detail. There is of course resistance from the menfolk, especially from Yakhni Begum, son, Jameel, the defacto sarpanch, but the old lady gets her own way. Nusrat gets ready to leave her job as she gets a proposal of marriage from a Stockholm based groom.

The narrator pours out his love for this older, divorced woman and promises her that he would marry her after coming back from Pune where he was going to do a computer programmer course for two years. Two years he dreams of coming back and marrying the woman of his dreams Nusrat but when he sees her he realizes that there is no way he could marry her as she seemed older and so plain and he addresses her as Nusrat Appa. "The thing the world variously calls love, desire; attraction is an azad parinda, a free bird. It sits in our heart for a bit and sets it aflutter. But it does not ask for our permission before flying out, anymore than it did when it winged its way in (129)

'*The Birthmark*' is a grim story about the condition of women in Punjab and Haryana and how brides are imported for the men in these villages. The story is about female foeticide is the story of transformation of Rajjoji from someone who attempts female foeticide but. However a birthmark changes the course of events and ends on a happy optimistic note as she turns into a crusader against the same and what is the birthmark it is nothing more than mark of a thorn of the kihar wood which made a small wound. Rajjoji notices this birthmark at the exact moment that she's going to perform the abortion on her daughter-in-law as she was a trained midwife however this mark which she thinks to be a birthmark makes her transfixed because a similar birthmark was there on her daughter's body the daughter that she herself had killed and buried in her backyard.

She feels blessed and thinks that it is God who has given her a chance to redeem her sin. “News of a star-shaped birthmark spread through the adjoining villages. There had been a sign from God that their stolen daughters were being returned to them. Slant-eyed, snub-nosed, with alien features and complexions, carrying with them the blessings of distant wood, mountain and river spirits, they carried in their veins fresh blood to redeem the race” (59)

*Me and Sammy Fernandez* is the story of the narrator, Cory Dinshaw, she has been an ardent fan of Amethyst Fernandez, a famous Goan singer, and is shocked by her suicide. She falls in love with her son, Sammy. Her parents, especially her father, are against the match as he is a non-Parsi. They do marry but the marriage is doomed from the very beginning as her lover turned husband is a paranoid, brutal man. “There should be a rule against letting lovers marry. It's like allowing the blind to walk the tightrope. Or taking fish out of water and asking them to swim or asking HIV positive men to donate sperm. Reckless. Irresponsible. Doomed from the word go.” (66)

The marriage was a fiasco and Cory came to know that her husband had murdered his mother and palmed it off as suicide she shoots him and knows that,” The media is my profession. I know how it works. They will crucify me well before that” (84) she wonders how come she got involved in this mess.

*"Lottery Ticket"* is about this family comprising of two university teachers Ravinder and his wife Sukrita, while Ravinder's mother runs a dhaba from her home in Kamla Nagar ever since she was widowed, several years ago. Both the mother –in –law and the daughter-in—law do not see eye to eye even on something as basic as food “In Biji's universe food was a cultural construct, a measure of civilization; a deeply moral and complex ethics underlay the preparing and sharing of it. For Sukrita food was fuel, something to keep the body going- nothing else. Two value systems as disparate as hers and Biji's could not share one kitchen without bloodshed and grief. Shreya is a brilliant child and Sukrita knows that Kamla Nagar property is extremely valuable, in real estate term and selling it would help finance Shreya's higher education abroad. Sukrita goes ahead to find some retirement homes that she feels would be suitable for her mother-in-law. The young protagonist Shreya's only desire is to pursue higher studies of her choice in a prestigious institute abroad or settle back to the mundane life working at a coffee shop as her family cannot afford to pay for her dreams."Getting the Life you liked. Or Liking the Life you'd got. Those were the only two roads to adulthood, everything else was childishness". (193).

Her brother Ronish desperately wants things to work out for his sister and even thinks of murdering his grandmother but of course he doesn't though he knows that evil is manifest within everyone.”

The ugly, the unexpected, the violent, the unconscionable is always with us. If only people would stop staring all agog at the television screen and shine a light instead at the darkness inside their soul.” (194) and that is why he understands that buying a lottery ticket as a hope to solve

the family's problems is not a wholly inappropriate response to the random universe. The relationships between the husband, wife, father son, mother son are all so beautifully described

Manjul Bajaj does not pass judgment on any of her characters, the stories are sensitively written there are no blacks or whites rather there are many hues and shades of the colour grey itself. She makes us understand that relationships are primarily about passion and power.

The book is well crafted and Bajaj has written the stories with sensitivity and restraint. Her prose is lyrical and we flow with it into every story. But then, like the protagonist in the story 'Nusrat' says, "Nusrat never fussed or hemmed about telling a story like other storytellers do. No clearing of the throat or slipping of a clove into her mouth or asking for water or tea. It was as if the story of the day was in the air surrounding her, waiting to be plucked out and told. "Listen then," she would say, tilt her head to one side and simply begin" (107) and similarly so does Manjul Bajaj tell her stark and simple stories beautifully.

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<http://www.amazon.com/Manjul-Bajaj/e/B0034P3VP4>