

THE RELUCTANT REBELS: REPRESENTATIONS OF WOMEN IN MANJU KAPUR'S A MARRIED WOMAN

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Abstract

The phenomenon of women concealing their pain and suffering within the depths of their hearts is a prevalent and noteworthy occurrence observed across various cultures and geographical locations. The act of surreptitiously expressing these distressing experiences serves as compelling evidence of women's remarkable capacity to internalise and bear such agonies in solitude. Throughout history, individuals who consistently don masks and project an aura of contentment have played a significant role in bolstering the male ego. This kind of occurrences has been happening since the beginning of time. In certain instances, the manifestation of female anger can be observed as a means of alleviating their emotional distress and anguish through a variety of alternative methods. This research paper endeavours to delve into the psychological distress experienced by women in Manju Kapur's novel, *A Married Woman*, and also shedding light on the various alternative choices women make in order to seek fulfilment and happiness as an act of escapism.

Keywords: Agony, Cultural conflicts, Marriage, Tradition, Victimization

Introduction

Manju Kapur consistently portrays two distinct types of female characters, one who exists within the domestic sphere and another who exists outside of it. It can be inferred that the woman is striving to maintain a balance between her professional and personal life. *A Married Woman* is an unorthodox piece that embraces contemporary literary cultural themes. Astha, the protagonist, is brought up in a traditional middle-class family. Astha's mother, a teacher, is very protective of her only daughter and she expects her to conform to tradition. Astha's education, her character, her health and her marriage are the burdens of her

parents. She is their only hope and future. She frequently tells Astha that when she will be married, their duty will be over. Marriage is the only destiny offered to Astha by her mother. Astha's mother is a believer of old ways, she always reminds Astha that marriage must be her final goal: "When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth." (1)

The parents of Astha like other typical Indian parents take much interest in her reading Vedas. Astha's mother tells her, "Our shastras teach us how to live. You will learn from the Gita, the Vedas, the Upanishads." (27-28) Of course Astha has no interest in those texts with the protest that her Hindi is not very strong. After two unsuccessful love affairs of her adolescent period, Astha finally gets married to a boy of her parent's choice Hemant, the US returned MBA. Appreciation from her husband in the initial days of her poetry and sketches make Astha hopeful of a good marriage and a very encouraging husband. In their honeymoon in Kashmir, Hemant expresses the happiness to Astha because "I wanted an innocent, unspoilt, simple girl, he went on." (41)

Hemant is sure that Astha is a virgin. The importance of virginity is expressed by Sarojini Sahoo as: "In every society, it is hoped that a woman should keep her chaste." (30) She feels that "Her life was opening up before her in golden vistas . . . Upon the roof, hand in hand; Astha's heart was full of love as the lake was full of water." (42) In the beginning Astha plays the role of a traditional woman in her married life so Astha's mother-in-law likes her. Astha is "always adjusting to everybody else's needs." (227) Astha has seen her mother forever sacrificing for the sake of the family. She has done allhousehold work in the kitchen very patiently. Kapur realistically narrates the experiences of Astha:

"The days passed. Astha had not imagined that sex could be such a master. Slightly ashamed, she kept hidden that she longed to dissolve herself in him, longed to be the sips of water he drank, longed to be the morsels of food he swallowed. The times he was away she was focused on one thing, the moment of their union." (46)

When Anuradha, Astha's daughter is four years old, Astha conceives again. Astha's mother brought a poojari to perform special pooja to propitiate the Gods to grant them a boy for Astha. The birth of Anuradha brings happiness for both grandparents. After that Hemant

plays the role of modern father to help her wife but it is only temporary. Soon after the second delivery Hemant becomes a typical traditional father. Sunita Agarwal describes Hemant's character in "Circular and Circuitous: Feministic Perspectives in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*" as "Hemant was changed from being an all-American father into an all-Indian one, little caring for Astha and family." (172) Like a traditional Indian father, Hemant wants Astha to take care of the baby. Hemant plays the role of a traditional father and husband. As the text says:

"After he came home the last thing he wished to bother about was taking care of a child. 'It's your job', he said. 'That's not what you thought when we had Anu' replied his wife. 'I can't do everything myself. It's tiring'. It was also boring, though this was not acknowledged. 'It's woman's work', said Hemant firmly. Hire somebody to help you, or quit your job." (70)

Astha's mother is the representative of a traditional woman in the novel. After the sudden death of Astha's father due to chest pain, Astha's mother is left alone. Astha insists her mother to come to her house but her mother denies because it is not our tradition to live with daughter and her in-laws. Astha asks Hemant to convince her mother to come to his house but he shows no interest. In fact Kapur highlights the destiny of daughter's parents in Indian tradition to live alone and helpless after their daughter is married because it is considered that they have no claims to their daughter after her marriage. Astha's mother says, "You live with your in-laws, and besides where is the room in these government flats." (54)

Nina is married to Ananda, who is a dentist living in Canada and holds non-resident Indian (NRI) status. He was born into a devout Brahmin family that adhered to certain beliefs. Following the tragic demise of Ananda's parents in a road accident, his maternal uncle compelled him to relocate to Canada, as he had already established himself in Halifax for the past two decades. Ananda excelled in his studies at the dental college and defied all the morals instilled in him by his parents. He consumed alcoholic beverages while attending college. Upon the completion of their marriage proposal, he contemplated embarking on a fresh chapter of life with Nina in Canada. However, upon establishing themselves in Canada, both individuals began to dismantle the ideals they had previously acquired. She defies societal norms by consuming meat for the first time. Upon her arrival in Halifax, she steadfastly adhered to her upbringing by abstaining from consuming them. Following an only

fortnight of their matrimonial union, he abruptly departs from her side and relocates to Canada. Nina embarks on a solo journey to Halifax subsequent to obtaining her visa.

Her initial encounter at the Toronto airport was really unpleasant due to the immigration woman posing numerous questions that she deemed irrelevant. She experiences a profound sense of shame. As an immigrant, Nina encounters various challenges such as the quest for self-identity and sensual unhappiness within her married relationship in Canada. Nina experiences alone while being situated 10,000 miles distant from her mother and her colleagues at Miranda House. Ananda continues to be actively involved in his clinic. She experiences a sense of isolation and is trapped in the transition between Eastern and Western cultures. Ananda aptly described her as “the perfect mix of east and west.” (85) Nina's marriage ended in dissolution. She is now without a place to live and unemployed. She laments “I miss home – I miss a job – I miss doing things. I feel like a shadow. What am I but your wife?” (237). Their marriage deteriorates after she discovers Ananda's impotence, which ultimately leads to their separation.

Subsequently, Nina opts to wear jeans and a t-shirt. Despite her discomfort with western attire, she remains committed to embracing the latest fashion trends. In order to establish social connections and express her true self, she adopted Western attire and mannerisms. Nina encounters numerous challenges in the unfamiliar environment. Despite altering her perspective, she remains unable to persuade individuals and get esteem. Prior to marriage, she held the position of a lecturer, but her circumstances have changed in her new location. Sue, the wife of Ananda's friend, advises her to overcome her troubled mood and motivates her to enrol in a two-year Library Science Course. Throughout the duration of this course, she coincidentally encounters Anton, with whom she establishes an unlawful romantic relationship outside of her marriage. Her relationship with Anton mirrors her previous engagement with Rahul, her coworker who harboured malevolent intentions towards Nina. He is a promiscuous individual who feigns affection towards her solely to engage in a physical relationship. Due to the unhappiness in his marriage, Ananda seeks solace in another woman, Mandy, his recently hired receptionist, with whom he engages in an extramarital relationship.

Nina made the bold choice to start over after she recognized her error. Nina's mother's demise renders her free from any obligations and emboldens her to make the decision to separate from Ananda. Kapur concludes the novel with this Nina's statement: “Perhaps that

was the ultimate immigrant experience... For an immigrant there was no going back. ... When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, and a new family. It had been possible once, it would be possible again.” (334)

Nina's aspiration for a blissful marital existence ends on a discordant note. From a feminist perspective, her choice to move away from Ananda appears to be a triumph of feminism. However, based on Indian cultural norms, it appears to be unfair. In this work, readers discover that Nina and Ananda, both indulging in extramarital affairs, engage in mutual deception, ultimately leading to the downfall of their marital relationship for which they share equal responsibility. They hold the belief that physical pleasures take precedence over all other aspects of married life. Nina's response exemplifies the inherent universality of women and their challenges.

The novelist adeptly portrays the immigrant mind through the characters of Ananda and Nina. Furthermore, she articulated the arduousness of an immigrant's role in maintaining equilibrium between two distinct cultures. The individual continuously oscillates between several cultures, transitioning from their country of origin to their adopted immigrant country. She is compelled to seek ultimate satisfaction and fulfilment through marriage and having children, as society denies her the opportunity to attain professional success and establish her own identity. Finally, the protagonist Nina has undergone a complete transformation in both her personality and mentality. She cultivates a fresh perspective on life and begins to progress forward.

Conclusion

Manju Kapur strives to demonstrate the correlation between women's financial empowerment, their ability to establish their identity, and their enhanced confidence in decision-making and handling personal challenges. The novelist conveys this sentiment by portraying it through the character of Nina in the story. Nina's solitude imbues her with strength rather than vulnerability, empowering her to assert control over her life in her own circumstances. Astha yearns for freedom and defies the customary notion of women's submissiveness and tolerance, akin to the revered status of the holy cow. Merely possessing economic freedom does not suffice for their needs. Their social and religious culture must acknowledge them as distinctive people.

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