

WOMEN AND RELIGION: A STUDY IN MANJU KAPUR'S A MARRIED WOMAN

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Abstract

This paper reflects on the female character's involvement in religious controversy. Manju Kapur, an Indian Woman novelist furnish examples of a whole range of attitude towards the importance of tradition in her novels. Her female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individuals caged within the limit of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. Manju Kapur in her novels presents women who try to establish their own identity. A close study of Manju Kapur's novels projects the view that when an Indian woman inspite of her education, status and intelligence, tries to marry according to her own choice, is likely to spoil her prospects in both the worlds namely the life at her mother's home and at her husband's home. She revolts the former and hopes to embrace the latter.

Literature is an art expresses life in words that appeal to our own sense of the beautiful. There are many writers but few artists. Literature represents a language or a people, culture and tradition. The history of literature follows closely to the development of civilization. The roots of all modern academic fields can be found with the pages of literature. Literature introduces new words of experience. It is the body of written works in a particular style or particular subject. It is the mirror of life. C.S Lewis says, "Literature adds to reality, it enriches the necessary competencies" (12).

The seed of Indian Writing in English was sown during the period of the British rule in India. Now the seed has blossomed as evergreen tree, fragrant flowers and ripe fruits. The fruits are being tasted not only by the native people, but also by the foreigners. a number of male and female writers bring out their writings and received awards. Among those writers, Manju Kapur is one of the famous woman writer who expressed the talents of women through her characters. She is described as a "Mirror of Society" and she hopes that the series adaptation of her novel *A Married Woman* is set against the backdrop of the Babri Masjid demolition. Kapur believes in writing about the affects and impacts an event has created and caused in the society.

Veena Das's and Gyanendra Pandey's ethnographic work on 1947 Partition and 1984 anti-Sikh riots attempts to theorize how women participate in the communal violence. They do not pay adequate attention to how women participate in communal riots by engaging themselves in violent acts or by questioning the logic of communal riots. According to Veena Das, "Communal conflict, which has to do with worldly issues between people belonging to different religious denominations whom political leaders of different stripes have sought to mobilize or organize on the basis of political, economic, social and cultural demands that they supposedly share in common" (37). In regards to women's identity, Gayatri Gopinath points to the formulation of women within the household and the society in general and Sandra Freitag specifically refers to the formation of women's identity in the community. In both their formulations of women's identity, there is an assertion of idealistic purity and a confinement of women to the domestic or private spheres. Gayatri and Sandra opine that, "But because of the context in which therapy was offered we do not get a sense of the politics of family and community within which such dramas took place (98).

On the other hand, Peter Van-der Veer points out the formation of religious identities through the lens of family, that is, family acting as an influencing force in shaping the religious identity. At the same time he resists viewing the family as the only influence. Since the family belongs to a larger political economy, Veer is quick to point out that religious identities are not formed within the family in isolation from forces such as the changing political conditions outside the family. On the other hand, Gopinath points out that women are confined to the private and domestic sphere, and therefore women's religious identities are not shaped by a larger political force. *A Married Women* deals with women's community and religious identity, influenced by gendering processes.

Kapur's novel *A Married Woman* primarily focuses on Astha's relationship with men and women in her life at the time of the Ram Janmabhoomi - Babri Masjid controversy and the Hindu - Muslim riots that followed the destruction of the mosque in 1992. Brought up in a lower - middle class Hindu family, Astha moves into an upper middle class Hindu family through her marriage to Hemant. However, the novel deals with the religious investigation of three female characters in the novel - Astha, Pipee and Astha's mother, Sita. Sita is ironically named after the mythical Hindu God, Rama's wife which deals how female religious identities are negotiated in the private and public spheres. Astha, a married Hindu woman, crosses the boundaries of heterosexuality through her relationship with Pipee. She involves herself in homosexual relationship with Pipee through political activism and creative expression and an imposed Hindu identity through her interactions with a Muslim activist, Aijaz.

He's intelligent sensitive, socially committed, a history lecturer, a theatre activist ... They talked for hours, it became dark and Aijaz insisted on escorting her back to her flat. She lays awake at night thinking of him. He seemed so gay and light hearted, with many interests besides teaching. Not only he managed and encouraged drama activities in his college, but he was the prime mover and shaker of the street Theatre Group. (AMW 118-120)

Pipee, a social activist and Astha's lover and Sita, a traditional Hindu woman are considered as the public spheres in *A Married Woman*. The narratives of both Pipee and Sita are crucial, as both women are able to pursue interests but they are unable to lead happy life when their husbands were alive. Widowhood seems to open up new ways of being for these two women. Pipee engages in her desire for Astha and Sita works to acquire a strong Hindu religious identity. In Kapur's novel *A Married Woman* Astha's narrative emerges as a negotiation of desire between her home, private and domestic sphere and her activities outside the home, public and political sphere. While Astha tries to be a good wife, mother, daughter and daughter-in-law at home, she also tries to reshape her national and religious identities through her growing social awareness and involvement in the public arena. As Gopinath points out, "There is a pull-push between desire and duty for Indian women" (263). Astha desires to become independent outside the boundaries of her home. At the same time, she is bound by her duty as a good mother, daughter and the other domestic roles she embodies. Kapur depicts such tugs of war within a world of gender politics, where male agents of patriarchy set the limits for women and so women must struggle for their version of individuality.

In the struggle for individuality, Kapur portrays Astha as an individual who engages in constant negotiations of her religious identity and personal desire between the private and public spheres. As Anita Nair comments: "The key to the plot is the Babri Masjid episode. If one is looking for a metaphor, here it is. A nation falling apart because of differences that can't be bridged. A family falling apart because of differences that can't be bridged" (84). Astha desires to actively participate in the public sphere in order to reconstruct her religious and national identity. When Astha desires to go to Ayodhya in Uttar Pradesh to protest against the proposed demolition of the Babri Masjid, her decision is opposed by her mother-in-law, who insists on the tolerance of Hinduism. At the same time, the mother-in-law refuses to engage in the discussion of an implied Hindu tolerance. The mother-in-law's refusal proposes a right-wing fundamentalist mentality. Since Astha's contact with a Muslim activist, Aijaz, she desires to reconstruct her religious identity. Kapur demonstrates that Astha's recognition about her family and her Hindu community shapes her religious identity but later she gives more importance to Muslim community because of the affection with Aijaz. For Astha, Aijaz acts as the turning point in her life to understand about the double standards that is the contradictions in the religious and political ideologies. Due to this realization, she insists on going to Ayodhya along with an activist group, and protest against the demolition of the Bahri Masjid. Kapur highlights that the formation of personal bonds with the other can allow for a better understanding of the other. Astha's personal interactions with Aijaz sets the tone for the novel.

Kapur also shows that difference in opinion about the other caste people lies in the lack of knowledge about them. The following exchange between Astha and her mother-in-law exposes the contradictory views that the two women hold on nationalism and religion:

'But why go to Ayodhya?. This is all politics, you should not get involved. Besides, have you thought about what you are going to protest? Lord Ram's Janamsthan [or, birthplace] is in Ayodhya, is there any

country in the world where the birthplace of their god is not honoured ? Hindu tolerance does not mean you accept everything and anything . Is this the pride we have in ourselves ?" But Mummy , if the temple is constructed , thousand of people will die agitating over it . Why ? They could feed hundreds of poor children on the money they are collecting for the bricks Her mother - in - law looked at [Astha] , ' It is not a women's place to think of these things ' she said firmly . (AMW 186-87)

Here ,Astha is reminded of her place by her mother - in - law , when she insists on joining the protests against the destruction of the BabriMasjid . The place in question is within the domestic sphere , which is in opposition to the public sphere . In this exchange, the public sphere appears to contain the religious, social and political activities.

The BabriMasjid represented a sacred place that could be contested publicly by two opposing religious groups , Hindu and Muslim. Similarly, the mother - in - law asks Astha to consider which space she belongs to . Instead of looking at the space as a sacred space that can be contested by two opposing identities ,Astha sees the space as a national space , where nation is not a Hindu nation , but a secular nation . Moreover , the mother - in law evokes nation and national pride . So she places Astha in a space which is both domestic and Hindu , and where national pride equals Hindu pride. Moreover , in this instance , the idea of a married Hindu woman protesting against the destruction of an Islamic structure of worship , the mosque , is not only a transgression into the public sphere , but also a transgression of an Indian citizen against India . Astha's status as a married woman is important , since her mother - in - law reminds her of her duties as a married woman , with children . In other words ,Astha's duties are confined to the activity of the domestic household . Similarly , her national identity is also brought into question , as the mother - in - law subscribes to the idea of Hindu nationalism . By equating Rama's alleged birthplace of an Indian God , rather than a Hindu God , the older woman exposes her own religious identity of a Hindu , who has been persuaded by right - wing propaganda , and who views India as strictly a Hindu nation . In this familiar atmosphere that is inhabited by women of narrow ideologies such as Astha's mother - in - law , Astha commits the crime of alienating herself purposely as a Hindu , an Indian and a married woman . It becomes evident from their conversation that Astha's mother - in - law is incapable of separating her religious and her national identity. Equating the supposed birthplace of the Hindu mythological hero , Ram , with Indian pride , and consequently supporting the destruction of Indian history . Astha's mother - in - law fails to cancel Astha'squestion , and instead hushes her through her reminder of Astha's place within the domestic sphere. The place becomes an area of contention , as it is unclear what this place actually symbolizes . On one hand ,Astha is set within the boundaries of the home and domesticity and on the other hand , she is denied the freedom of thought even within those boundaries since it is not a woman's place.

Through this exchange between the two women ,Kapur points to the underlying ambiguity of a woman's place . Astha's attempt to overstep into the political and religious activity threatens to the boundaries set for a married , heterosexual Hindu woman . The religious identity that Astha's

mother-in-law imposes upon Astha is destabilized by Astha's own agency to form her religious identity. Astha's desire to redefine her place is a challenge to these imposed identities, especially in a secular India. Through Kapur, how Hindu majoritarianism unhesitatingly equates the Hindu community with Indian nationality, as well as the conditions that question the meaning of a secular India.

Astha's struggles to establish her own individual religious and national identity emerges again in her conversations with her husband, Hemant. Astha's Indian national and Hindu religious identities are both challenged and conflicted by the mixed messages that she receives from Hemant. Hemant's entry into Astha's life was that of an US educated Indian with modern ideas. But to Astha, he reveals his own prejudices in his weak arguments over the Babri Masjid - Ramjanmabhoomi controversy:

This whole thing is very complicated, said Astha. " People make it so complicated the husband. " Otherwise what is there in an abandoned mosque? The government is too bloody soft on these Muslims that is the problem. You don't know their religion... Astha stared at her husband. Was he agreeing that people should be killed in the name of God? she didn't want to know what he thought. (108-09)

Hemant's conflict over how he should present himself to his wife is reflected in his contradictions. On one hand, he admits that people make the controversy complicated, but in the same line, he reveals his true feelings through the use of the word " bloody " (108) to describe Muslims. Through his revelation that Hindus are us and Muslims are them, he posits the two religions as being at odds with one another within India. This separation comes about through an equation of violence with Islam. Thus this educated Indian man reveals himself to be a right-wing Hindu Indian, who openly voices his feelings towards Muslims, and who he sees as others, and they are considered as non Indians. Despite his seemingly secular education in the U.S, Hemant fails to view the Ramjanmabhoomi - Babri Masjid controversy with a critical eye. However, Astha questions these divides between the two religions. Even though she is educated in India, she is seen as more communal by western scholars. Astha's interactions with Aijaz bring about a desire to challenge such divides. Here Kapur again points to a need for socialization as a way to pain her personal prejudices. In this interaction between Hemant and Astha, Kapur wants the reader to cope with Astha. Kapur's novel *A Married Women* describes Astha's position as a favourable position, where she is able to overcome such prejudices through her continued personal interaction with the Muslim Aijaz.

Astha's argument with Hemant points out Astha's questioning attitude which challenges Hemant's religious identity as a Hindu and reveals Astha's own secular identity as an Indian. At the same time, Astha's secular identity fails in the face of Hemant's personal assertions. She is unable to openly challenge her husband's authority in the activity of politics. Even though this exchange takes place at home, in the domestic sphere, Astha considers politics as belonging to the public sphere. Hence in her own conditioning to stick to the domestic sphere, she is unable to challenge Hemant's views on the public sphere. At this point, Astha's religious identity is

slowly emerging , and she is afraid that by challenging her husband's opinions , her religious identity will be brought into question . Astha does not question her husband , because she reveals an inner strength as she decides to prepare herself with knowledge on the issue and figures out her own views on the issue before openly confronting her husband .

Astha reveals this inner strength, and subsequently Hemant's hypocrisy, in a later exchange with him where she voices her opinion on the Ramjanmabhoomi - BabriMasjid issue:

‘You sound like a parrot [said Hemant to Astha]

To have an opinion is to sound like a parrot ?”

Please, Keep to what you know best, the home, children, teaching .

All this doesn't suit you'. (116)

Hemant exposes his own lack of knowledge in the controversy by his own inability to counteract Astha's arguments by demeaning Astha's opinion . Moreover, Hemant shows his own fear at being undermined in a space that he believes is his area of expertise and so, he pushes Astha into the domestic, private sphere through the reminder of home and children limiting her from voicing her opinions through deemed political belonging to the public sphere.

Kapur shows that despite these obstacles that Astha faces from her husband and his family, she is able to exercise her ideas in forming her own views on the national and the religious identities through a conscious decision that she makes. Astha's conscious decisions are helped by her interactions and close contacts with other characters whose national and religious identities do not follow the pro-right-wing sentiments of Hemant and her in-laws .Astha's growing awareness of religious conflicts that exist outside the safety of her home comes about through her interactions with Aijaz Khan, a secular Muslim. At the same time, Kapur's choice of Aijaz as the prophetic revelation for Astha is perhaps a bit too convenient. Kapur chooses a secular Muslim, over a secular Hindu, deliberately to reveal the complexities of national and religious identities that exist within Astha's family. Hemant after Astha's interactions with Aijaz, reveals his inner prejudices towards Muslims. Aijaz's presence in Astha's life also brings into focus that Muslims are very different from the views that her family holds. Astha's own journey towards a self-discovery of her own religious identity comes about through her recognition of the gap that exist between how her family perceives Muslims and Aijaz's opinion of Muslims . Through her personal interactions with an educated secular Muslim man , who aims to create awareness through social work and street plays, Astha learns to form her own opinions about religion and nationalism.

Astha comes into close contact with Aijaz through her engagement with her school play about the Ramjanmabhoomi-BabriMasjid controversy. Astha participates in the protest only out of her love for humanity as she thinks about the BabriMasjid as:

Astha stared at the picture of the BabriMasjid . What was it about this monument that had created so much bloodshed and fighting over two centuries ? It was not even remarkable, squat and three-domed, surrounded

by trees. How could she effectively present its history, long and tortured in a manner that was simple without distorting ? (107)

Astha's personal concern over the possible misrepresentation of the issue within the school play reflects her consciousness. She seeks to present an unbiased view of the controversy beyond the representation of the historical, political and religious complexities of the controversy. Astha chooses Aijaz, instead of Hemant, to sort out her inner conflict in this matter.

Astha grows in the development of her religious identity . She brings out through her paintings a violent confrontation between Hindu and Muslims where Aijaz loses his life. Again instead of blaming the Hindu mob that lights fire to the vehicle with Aijaz and his group locked inside, Astha strives to reveal the different facets of the RamjanmabhoomiBabriMasjid controversy. She has painted a picture which shows:

On one end was a temple , on the other was the BabriMasjid , on its little hill . Between the two , the Leader travelled,in a rath flanked by holy men, wearing saffron, carrying trishuls Besides the rath on motorbikes were younger men ... whose clothes she painted saffron as well, to suggest militant religion. She sketched scenes of violence, arson and stabbing that occurred in towns on the way, people fighting, people dying. (157-58)

In the painting Astha chooses to highlight the aspects of Hinduism, where Hindu symbols are appropriated by politicians for their own means. By revealing the potential for violence as a part of Hindu fundamentalism, Astha negates the popular belief that her family, and other Hindus like her family hold. In contrary to, Hemant's argument that violence is a part of Islam, Astha shows that violence is not a part of any religion, but a product of misusing religion through her painting. In this revelation, Astha shows her own thoughts, where she refuses to take sides either with religion or politics. She believes in capturing the complexities of personal gain and power struggle on the side of the politicians that lead to the death of both innocent Muslims and Hindus. She decides to depict the controversial scene in the aftermath of Aijaz and his theatre group's violent death caused by a Hindu mob as follows:

A horrendous incident took place here last night, in the township of RajpurAijazAkhtar Khan, noted theatre activist and his troupe were dragged from the site of their performance, and taken away in a Matador along with the bodies were found near the river. The culprits are still absconding. (138)

Astha realizes herself as a free thinking woman, who refuses to have her own religious identity to be exclusively determined by gendering processes. The gendering processes exist, but Astha uses her agency in ways that defy these processes throughout the narrative.

Astha's reworking of her own identity is also revealed by the content of the speech she prepares for women at Ayodhya. In the aftermath of Aijaz's death, Astha becomes caught up in her work with SampradayakkaMuktiManch, a group that comes into existence in communalism that seems imminent in the face of the pressure to destroy the BabriMasjid. As a part of this Manch, one of the members requests Astha to make a speech to women at the volatile site of Ayodhya so that women realize that they have “some kind of a voice” (185). In her speech,

Astha appeals to women's emotions, rather than the technique of the BabriMasjid - Ranjanmabhoomi controversy:

In essence women all over the world are the same, we belong to families, we are affected by what affects our husbands, fathers, brother and children We judge not by what people tell us, but by what we experience in our homes And that experience tells us that where there is violence, there is suffering... History cannot be righted easily, but lives are lost easily,pain and trauma to women and children come easily. (197-98)

Despite her desire to articulate a position as an individual unaffected by the gendering processes she experiences in her family, Astha admits that this may not be the case for other women, especially the "basti women " (198) who are poor and belong to the lower classes. Yet, Astha also strives to align herself with the poor women. She understands the class distinctions between herself and the women she addresses. Astha speaks from a privileged position, at the same time she tries to appeal to women not from that privileged position but from a common platform of womanhood. She could have stayed within the confines of her upper middle-class home in Delhi, and avoided facing the realities of the Ramjanmagboomi-BabriMasjid situation. But she chooses to make the trip to Ayodhya to voice her opinion, and at the same time, connect with women from classes different from her own. She does not appeal to the women as an Indian or even as a Hindu, but as a member of the same gender. In doing so, Astha separates religion and national pride from the issues of humanity, where violence affects women equally, regardless of whether they are Hindu or Muslim. Here, Astha realizes her female identity over her religious and national identity.

Kapur, thus demonstrates that, practicing one's religion is not in opposition to being tolerant of other religions. However, Astha and Pipee are secular from religious identity, which differs significantly from that of Sita's religious identity as a Hindu. Sita consciously chooses to follow a Hindu religious guru's teaching, as a means to understand how her religious identity as a Hindu functions within the society. Her journey into discovering her religious identity takes place in Rishikesh, at an ashram, which is disconnected from the realities of the pressures of everyday domestic life. By being divorced from these realities, and by being a widow without family attachments, Sita has more freedom, than either Astha or Pipee, in her journey of self-discovery. In their personal journeys of self-discovery, Astha, Pipee and Sita have to contend with men during their married lives. By juxtaposing all three women in the background of the BabriMasjid-Ranjanmabhoomi controversy, Kapur brings to light the complex ways in which Indian women have to negotiate their national and religious identities at moments of communal violence. Moreover, often, these negotiations result in direct confrontation, as in the case of Astha and her in-laws. This shows that a women's religious identity is not static but is dynamic and fluid determined by the changing private and public conditions of the society. Kapur's fictional representations of three women negotiating their identities at moments of communal violence insights on the complex dynamics of different co-existing Hindu religious identities.

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