

Reimagining the New Woman: A Feminist Study of Astha in A Married Woman

Dr. J. Bhavani

Assistant Professor of English
Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Nagercoil.
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, Tirunelveli)
Email: bhavani.j@holycrossncl.edu.in

Abstract:

Manju Kapur's fiction foregrounds the awakening of feminine consciousness within the structures of patriarchy. *A Married Woman* explores the evolving identity of its protagonist, Astha, who embodies the tensions between traditional domestic expectations and emerging feminist selfhood. While she initially appears as a dutiful daughter and conventional wife, Astha gradually develops a critical awareness of the constraints imposed by marriage, religion, and socio-political structures. Her emotional and intellectual restlessness leads her to question normative gender roles and seek fulfilment beyond domestic boundaries. Through a feminist lens, this paper examines Astha's transformation into a representative of the "New Woman," negotiating identity, desire, and agency within a patriarchal society. Kapur's nuanced portrayal reveals the psychological conflicts and socio-cultural challenges faced by contemporary Indian women at personal, professional, religious, and political levels. The study argues that Astha's journey signifies not rebellion alone, but a reimagining of womanhood grounded in autonomy and self-realization.

Key Words: Feminine Consciousness, New Woman, Patriarchy, Gender Identity, Selfhood.

Contemporary Indian English fiction has persistently engaged with questions of gender, identity, and agency within patriarchal structures. Among the significant voices in this discourse is Manju Kapur, whose novels foreground the emotional and psychological landscapes of middle-class Indian women negotiating tradition and modernity. Her second novel, *A Married Woman* (2003), interrogates the institution of marriage, the politics of domesticity, and the emergence of female subjectivity in postcolonial India.

This paper examines how Astha, the protagonist of the novel, embodies and redefines the concept of the "New Woman." Through a feminist reading, the study argues that Astha's journey is not one of outright rebellion but of negotiation between desire and duty, autonomy

and attachment, selfhood and social expectation. Kapur's portrayal reimagines womanhood as a continuous process of resistance, accommodation, and self-assertion within a deeply gendered social order.

In Indian society, marriage functions not merely as a personal union but as a social institution embedded within cultural continuity. Raymond Williams's conception of culture as a "continual selection and re-selection of ancestors" illuminates how traditional practices, such as parental anxiety over daughters' marriages are sustained across generations. Astha's upbringing reflects this cultural framework: her mother's daily prayers for a suitable husband symbolize the internalized belief that a woman's destiny culminates in marriage.

Astha initially appears as a dutiful daughter who eventually consents to an arranged marriage after failed romantic relationships. However, her consent does not imply ideological acceptance. Rather, it marks the beginning of her negotiation with a system that defines womanhood through domestic containment.

Simone de Beauvoir famously observes in *The Second Sex* that marriage is the "destiny traditionally offered to women by society" (475). This observation becomes central to understanding Astha's transformation. Her marriage to Hemant initially promises companionship and validation and even she is very much proud of him because "Rohan had abandoned her, Hemant had married her, he valued her, he thought her pretty" (MW 38). Yet, over time, it reveals the asymmetrical power dynamics embedded within patriarchal domesticity. Hemant's liberal façade gradually gives way to conventional expectations. While he encourages Astha's artistic interests, he simultaneously confines them within the boundaries of domestic convenience. His resistance to her social and political engagement underscores the limits of male liberalism. Astha is permitted creativity but not autonomy.

Astha wholeheartedly assumes her role as a dutiful daughter-in-law and responds to her husband's sexual expectations. Like many married women, she yearns for motherhood; however, Hemant postpones the prospect, dismissing her desire by remarking, "You can't be so old-fashioned" (MW 56). The denial and postponement of motherhood further threaten Astha's sense of self. Ironically, once she becomes a mother, she confronts another patriarchal anxiety the preference for a male heir. The birth of her daughter does not elicit the same social celebration as the birth of her son, exposing the persistence of gender bias. Astha's refusal to "keep trying" for a son reflects her feminist assertion against reproductive expectation.

Astha's headaches described as the "disease of modern life" symbolize the psychological cost of performing multiple, often conflicting roles: wife, mother, daughter-in-law, teacher, and artist. The home, traditionally imagined as a woman's sphere of fulfilment, becomes a site of exhaustion and invisibility. Critics such as Malati Mathur have argued, "The home has long been considered the only area of activity for a woman. That was the place where she was supposed to find satisfaction in the performance of her duties in the varied roles of mother, daughter, sister, and daughter-in-law" (85). Hemant's shift from an "all-American father" to an "all-Indian one" further reinforces the cultural expectation that childcare is exclusively a woman's responsibility. Patriarchy thus reasserts itself even within ostensibly modern households.

Astha's realization that she is expected to be "a willing body at night" and an obedient presence by day crystallizes her awakening. Marriage, once imagined as partnership, reveals itself as structured dependency. Kapur's Astha believes that marriage is not merely a means to fulfil sexual desire but a platform that brings people together, fosters happiness, and nurtures mutual understanding. However, traditional family structures and household responsibilities disturb her, pushing her to take up teaching assignments not only as an escape from loneliness but also as a step toward economic independence,

Set against the backdrop of communal tensions in postcolonial India, the novel situates Astha's personal unrest within a broader socio-political context. Her involvement with a theatre troupe and political activism signifies her attempt to expand beyond domestic confinement. Unlike her earlier romantic searches for fulfilment, this engagement represents ideological awakening.

However, Hemant's discomfort with her political involvement exposes the fragile tolerance of patriarchal authority. He accepts her economic contribution and artistic hobby but resists her public voice. This distinction highlights a crucial feminist insight: patriarchal systems may permit controlled participation but resist transformative agency.

The emergence of the "new woman" is a result of colonial influence and the impact of Western culture. Postcolonial India has witnessed a transformation in women's identities, moving away from traditional stereotypes toward a more self-aware and independent image. The spread of education and awareness of their rights, both in political and personal sphere has fostered a sense of individuality among women. As India established its own national identity, new opportunities emerged for women to reflect on and redefine their own roles in

society. Ashok Kumar, in his article, observes: “Feminist trends appeared on the horizon and they came into conflict with the conventional moral code—In fact, a set of new paradigms related to a woman’s life came into existence—tradition and modernity, self-assertion and self-effacement, economic dependence and independence, and so on” (20).

Astha believes in equal rights for men and women, and modern women like her acknowledge that society is composed of both genders without discrimination. They do not differentiate between their sons and daughters. In this regard, Yashika Chandana observes:

She is surprised at the reaction of the family and society when they remain ciphred of Anuradha's birth but get an overwhelming approval of motherhood after the birth of Himanshu. In her feminist assertion, Astha does not appreciate superstition, sex subjugation, or the pride and prejudice associated with having children solely based on their gender in the Indian perception. (91)

In the modern context, particularly with the growth of women's education, there is no discrimination based on sex.

The “New Woman” in Indian English fiction has often been portrayed as either radically rebellious or tragically defeated. Kapur avoids both extremes. Astha does not abandon her family, nor does she wholly submit to patriarchal control. Instead, she occupies a liminal space of negotiation. Her assertion of equal rights, her resistance to son preference, her economic independence through teaching, and her artistic self-expression collectively mark her departure from passive femininity. Yet her emotional attachments and eventual return to domestic structures complicate simplistic feminist readings.

Astha’s journey suggests that the New Woman in contemporary India is not defined by rupture alone but by redefinition. She challenges patriarchy not always through dramatic rebellion, but through persistent self-awareness and incremental resistance.

In *A Married Woman*, Manju Kapur presents a nuanced exploration of female subjectivity within marriage. Astha’s evolution from compliant daughter to questioning wife and politically aware individual illustrates the tensions between tradition and autonomy in postcolonial India. Through a feminist lens, her trajectory reveals that womanhood is neither static nor singular but continually negotiated.

The Protagonist, Astha does not emerge as a triumphant revolutionary, nor as a defeated conformist. Instead, she embodies the complexity of the New Womanone who reimagines identity within, rather than entirely outside, the structures that seek to confine her.

Kapur thus reframes feminist discourse in Indian English fiction by foregrounding negotiation, ambiguity, and psychological depth as central to female emancipation.

Works Cited:

Kapur, Manju. *A Married Woman*. India Ink, 2002.

Chandana, Yashika. "Quest for Identity by 'HER' in the Novels of Manju Kapur- *Difficult Daughters* and *A Married Woman*." *International Journal of Language, Literature, and Translational Studies*, 1.4 (2014): 84-94.

de Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*. Translated by H. M. Parshley, Vintage Books, 1989.

Kumar, Ashok. "Portrayal of New Women: A Study of Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*." *Indian Writing in English: Critical Ruminations*. Eds. Amar Nath Prasad and John Peter Joseph. New Delhi- 2006. 193-202.

Mathur, Malati. "Crossing the Threshold: Women in Shashi Deshpande's *Small Remedies* and Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughters*." *Critical Responses to Feminism*, ed. Binod Mishra. New Delhi. 2006. Pg: 85-108.

Williams, Raymond. *The Long Revolution*. Chatto & Windus, 1961.