

## Emergence of New Woman in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

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### Abstract

India is a "Multicultural Postcolonial Nation". In a nation like India, culture manifests itself within the multiple contexts of caste, religion and class. Postcolonial literature has its impact on every aspect of literature, theme, characterization, language and so on. It can be identified by its discussion of cultural identity. The main theme of postcolonial women writers is the interplay between 'gender identity' and national identity. Women want to carve out an identity for themselves and make some space in strange places. In postcolonial literature space and place occupy a vital role in the society for women. Empowered women not only help in bringing gender equality but these women also help the society to lay a necessary foundation for a world that has equal economic, peaceful and healthy environment. The works of Manju Kapur offer a compelling case for an equitable society in which women are valued and acknowledged in all walks of life. The restrictions in post on women by patriarchal society must be lifted. The secondary standing of women in society is a result of patriarchal, paternalistic, and moralistic laws and regulations.

This paper aims to investigate the female psyche in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*. Also it examines the fascinating, unique pattern of development of the 'New Woman' as it is depicted in Manju Kapur's fiction. Her protagonists defiantly oppose the patriarchal society, shattering the myth of the submissive wife, selfless mother and holy woman. Her female characters stand up to challenge the male dominated society's fictitious moral code. It displays

women's feelings and introspective thoughts. The female characters created by Manju Kapur communicate self-identity and self-evaluation. Different facets of female characters give rise to feminist perspectives. Their lives become increasingly gloomy and unclear. In order to claim their identity and find fulfillment and self-satisfaction in their life, they stomp and resist the demands and limitations of patriarchy.

**Keywords:-** Quest, Marriage, New Woman, Patriarchy, Feminism.

Manju Kapur's novels reveal how modernity's excesses have resulted in a hollow modern society and way of life. Being one of the most influential writers in India, she has pushed for the advancement of women's strength and empowerment. She has written six great novels, namely *A Married Woman*, *Custody*, *Difficult Daughters*, *Home*, *The Immigrant* and *The Brothers*. Besides these novels, Kapur has written short stories- *The Necklace*, *The Birth of a Baby*, *The Power Behind the Shame* and *Speaking up* for Inter-Community and Cross Marriages.

The idea of 'New Woman' surfaced in the late 19th century. The term 'New Woman' was first used by an Irish writer named Sarah Grand in her famous article *The New Aspect of the Woman Question* published in March 1894 in the *North American Review*. New woman in her article referred to independent women who exerted their autonomy in the domestic and private spheres of life. After that this term has been used for a woman who fights oppressive social conventions to gain autonomy and self-fulfillment. Menon rightly states, "Feminism is not about that final triumph, but about the gradual transformation of the social field so decisively that old makers shift forever"( 222). Similarly, 'New woman' also represents a woman who is trying to bring equality in a society which has been male centered and male dominated. For a long time females have been made to work for males gratification. This inequality is so deeply ingrained that we are just able to scratch the surface. Still a very small fraction of women in the society have truly accessed power to be independent of male domination. Looking back to the days when women were restricted to their homes can help us understand how women's status has changed over time.

All women who have made the decision to assert their moral authority are seen as ‘New Woman.’ These women’s traits are complex and multifaceted. The face of a new woman changes along with societal norms. Vijayalakshmi Seshadri writes about the new women’s fiction,

Women have to their credit a whole series of literary achievements over the last ten to twelve years, and the fact that these creative activities have extended to the urban middle class will hopefully result in an increased literary output. However, it is even more important that they should entail corresponding changes in the audience and the critical scene so that the new woman and her portrayal in literature will find adequate acceptance. (180)

We can see confidence in contemporary women to strive for success regardless of any challenges that they may face due to guardians of patriarchy.

According to Indian tradition, a woman must defer to her husband in every possible respect. She must make the marital home pleasant for him. She has to take care of the kids, prepare the meals, and clean up after herself. She has to submit to her husband’s demands without question and never inquire about money. But what happens when the woman no longer feels that her life should be decided in such a limited way, and the outdated customs lose their influence? Manju Kapur’s captivating second book, *A Married Woman*, revolves around this idea as its main character, Astha Vadera, experiences significant transformations against the backdrop of a changing India. Astha is an educated, upper middle-class, working woman in Delhi.

Astha is chained by her middle-class values where she wants to uplift herself to upper class, but is always afraid of failing down to lower class. Her first encounter with Bunty and then with Rohan, fails because of her middle-class status and she accepts her fate and goes for arranged marriages where she plays the role of a typical Indian housewife but very soon gets frustrated in waiting for her husband after the work and taking care of children and in-laws. Astha is born and brought up in a traditional middle-class family. Her parents are very conscious of her needs and role in a middle-class family. Her mother is very protective of her and she expects her to conform to traditions. She often tells Astha that “The real meaning and worth of a

woman lies in getting married happily and having children and serving husband as a god” (75). She tells Astha: “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). It is important to note that Manju Kapur allows the patriarchy to operate through the mother. Through her novel *A Married Woman*, Kapur works tirelessly to dispel this skewed and entitled perception of women, whose demands for equality and freedom have gone unanswered in the patriarchal society. Women are consequently deprived of the ability to act and make their own decisions, remaining purely in the realm of imagination, a fantasy to be dreamed and treasured. This novel offers a fascinating glimpse into the workings of a woman’s mind as she struggles to come to terms with her identity in the society. Astha is such a person who is in search of her identity and the one who could be helpful to her in her pursuit. She forges many relationships with different persons.

She represents the whole woman race, the changing Indian society where the upper-middle-class educated woman who, although financially independent, is still facing the problems of adjustment between the old and the new, between appearance and reality and between theory and practice. It explores the space of such women through Astha and boldly presents a new perspective. (97)

Manju Kapur bases the narrative on the idea that women in today’s society are in a unique position and they stand on the precipice of social change. This novel gives voice to women’s frustrations, disappointment, and alienation in a patriarchal world. This book makes us consider how Astha, a married woman searching for her identity, expresses her disapproval of the patriarchal system in place and grows into an independent woman. Amar Nath Prasad observes in this context: “Women are no longer flowers of the pot for only decoration; rather they are fragrant flowers of the open garden diffusing aroma to all comers, braving the storms and rains” (98).

Brought up in such an atmosphere, Astha “was well trained on a diet of mushy novels and thoughts of marriage” (8), which give her the wings to search for a boy friend. Bunty is the first object of her crush. “Away from him her eyes felt dry and empty. Her ears only registered

the sounds of his voice. Her mind refused to take seriously anything that was not his face, his body, his feet, his hands, his clothes..." (8-9).

Astha remains absorbed all the time in thinking about him and begins to perceive her future in him. She has to start a different life after her marriage with Hemant. Thinking of achieving her true soul-mate, Astha felt complete in the role of an ideal wife and ideal daughter-in-law. Astha's marital life was unexpectedly good, full of love and passion and she felt her husband to be the best person in the whole world, so much so that she kept hidden her thought that "she longed to dissolve herself in him, longed to be sips of water he drank, longed to be the morsels of food he swallowed" (46). Her mental state reveals the psychology of a typical Indian girl for whom a happy marriage happens to be the greatest achievement in life.

Astha does not realize that a man could not always love. Deliberately she lets herself being treated as a tamed pet rather than an individual woman with self- respect whose involvement with the outside world is as important as her man's. She did not mind him ignoring her discussion of her job with him, for she was just living to enjoy the full bliss of her conjugal life. It was the central thing in her life. So far her husband loved and so far her corporal lust was satisfied, she would not consider anything else. In marriage the woman is always subjugated when it comes to the call of the flesh and blood. Like a common woman, Astha limits her world to her room where she enjoyed the bliss and for which she waited throughout the day even while working in the school or at home.

The denial of dignity and the blame of being irresponsible towards her family kept Astha in perpetual mental turmoil, which goes parallel to the political and religious turmoil nationwide. It is in this scenario that Astha meets Pipeelika Trivedi. The feeling of betrayal on discovering the traces of her husband's infidelity in his tour luggage made Astha justify her own relation with Pipee. Her closeness to Pipee made Astha communicate with her very easily and on all levels. She felt comfortable in her relation with Pipee and no one suspected their relation. While she is with Pipee, she worries about the children and wonders how they would be managing without her. Astha's search for soul-mate finally culminated in Pipee. If a husband and wife are one person, then Pipee and herself were even more so, she reasoned. She had revealed aspects of

herself that she had never before revealed. “Both forget their personal anguish and agony. Both gain inner strength from women’s liberation. Both fulfill female bonding in passionate fantasies and love making” (19). She felt complete with her.

Although Astha finds herself trapped between the pressures of family life and social norms, she makes daring decision about her life. By portraying the inner subtleties of a woman’s mind, Kapur demonstrates a mature understanding of the female psyche, the feeling of inferiority, and how she bravely and honestly confronts her male counterparts on a daily basis with reason and logic. Values are changing, and women are beginning to recognize their equality with men. In today’s social environment, the lofty ideals of feminism have been swept aside, but man and woman still have a structured interdependent relationship. However, the woman must continue to strive for her freedom rather than accepting her fate. The idea of gender equality is still unreal.

Thus, Kapur shows how gender roles are rigid in our society and thus checking the freedom of disadvantaged gender. She successfully sprays light over inequality of gender roles in Indian Marriage Institution. The gender roles are assigned for male and female according to the prevalent social norms of particular society.

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