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THE THEME OF LESBIAN RELATIONSHIP IN MANJU KAPUR'S  
*A MARRIED WOMAN*

Dr. SANJAY KUMAR SWARNKAR<sup>1</sup>, ARTI GUPTA<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Head , Department of English,<sup>2</sup>Research Scholar  
C.S.J.M. University, Kanpur



ABSTRACT

In Indian writing in English there are so many writers who have written a number of novels in the respect of feminine perspective like Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Anita Nair, Arundhati Roy etc. Manju kapur and others have intuitively perceived the gender issues upsetting women and presented women as an individual who fights against suppression and oppression of the patriarchy. Manju Kapur has presented the women of the 1940s when women had no choice to assert their rights. Women were not supposed to raise voices for their rights, protest against injustice. In her novel *A Married Woman*, Manju Kapur shows the life of Astha, heroine of the novel, who struggles in her whole life and she indulges in lesbian relationship with Peepilika. This paper analyses the patriarchal norms confronted by the women characters in Manju Kapur's Novel.

**KEY WORDS:** Gender, identity, homosexuality, love and marriage.

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Manju Kapur was born in Amritsar, a town in the northern Indian state of Punjab in 1948. She completed her Bachelor of Arts from Miranda house University College for women. She earned her M.A. from Dalhousie University in Canada and she further did M. Phil from Delhi University. She is currently a Professor of English in Miranda House, an Arts and Science College for Women under University of Delhi with her name Majul Kapur Dalmia. Her novels are stories of women living a life of marginality. She is the author of the four novels. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* is about three generations in a single family. Her second novel, *A Married Woman*, shows how a woman turns towards the lesbian relationship with a widow, Pipeelika. *A Married Woman* is also called "fluent and witty". It is beautiful, honest and seductive story of love and deep attachment, set at a time of political and religious order. Astha, an educated, middle class woman, has everything. She has two children, dutiful loving husband and comfortable surroundings. But she ends up having a physical relation with a much younger woman Pipeelika, the widow of a political activist, Aijaz. In her interview with Nivedita Mukherjee, Manju Kapur says-

"It is an attempt to inject an element of artistic and emotional coherence. Actually a relationship with a woman does not threaten a marriage as much as a relationship with a man."<sup>1</sup>

Literature has been rather conservative in exploring lesbianism. No doubt, Ismat Chughtai's *Lihaaf* (1941) set the trend but it was written long back and should have set the trend for writing and bringing into the open more lesbian novels, stories or drama but it did not happen why? That perhaps can be explored as due to societal pressures, patriarchal construction of society and the general milieu of the nation which was against depiction of such stories and by and large such stories remained sensational news items to be read, discussed and then forgotten. Kamla Das's autobiography *My Story* (1976) perhaps was a bold attempt at discussing lesbianism at a time when it was furtively hidden as it led to public shame. She talks of her desire for her friend at boarding school and her attraction to other women in her life.

Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of modern Indian women writers who have significantly contributed to the progression of Indian fiction. She is a post colonial writer who reveals the true position of women in a patriarchal society and deals with the problems of women. Her novels present the longing struggle of women to establish an identity. In her novel *A Married Woman*, Astha is the main protagonist of the story. The story moves around her. It is a romantic story of Astha and her husband, Hemant. In this novel Astha engages with someone else. She has a high fantasy about her life. After marriage with Hemant, she acts like a mature lady who does her duty faithfully. Her husband and In-laws are happy with her. Hemant is a loving and careful husband of his wife. He always tries his best for Astha.

She has two children, Anuradha and Himanshu. Astha joins a school and teaches where she meets Aijaz. Aijaz is a Muslim and a political activist. He marries with Pipeelika Trivedi. She lives in Delhi alone, sufficiently isolated from conventional society to believe her choice of partner concerned only herself. Her mother is afraid of this marriage. Despite the rejection of the family, she marries with Aijaz. After some time of her marriage, Aijaz dies and she remains alone.

According to the tradition and rituals, it is said that the life of a widow is like a fish which is kept away from the water. She is the burden of the family even sometimes she is blamed to be the cause of her husband's death. It is also said that she cannot take part in any religious activity. Everyone sees her with the suspicious glance. But here Manju Kapur shows a strong and self-dependent widow, who passes her life firmly and faces all the difficulties of the society. She takes her decision according to herself. She is independent. In this novel Manju Kapur portrays the story of two women, one, who is married and have all the luxury of life but not satisfied with her husband and on the other side, Pipeelika, a widow, is far away from the luxurious life and searching a long life partner. Another Indian novelist, like Jhumpa Lahiri, has also described the plight condition of a woman, Gauri. She is the main protagonist of her novel, *The Lowland*. She also indulges with the lesbian relationship. Gauri is also a widow. Her husband, Udayan, is killed in the Naxatile movement. After his death she is ill treated by the Udayan's family.

Kapur shows Astha's growing and evolving at various stages through various relationships and she becomes the first Indian novelist who highlights woman's desire for homosexuality. The roots of tradition, living up to the benchmark of the Ideal Indian Woman, sacrificing for the family, putting self behind, devaluing herself, being content to live in the safety and security of the husband, home and family continually come in conflict with her post modern sensibilities that lend her wings to question established norms, to search for her identity, to long for a soul mate, to develop, to enter socially forbidden relationships.

Astha involves herself so deeply in Pipeelika that no longer she finds any interest in having sex with her husband. She phones her at least five times daily. Astha begins to lack in her family duties and consequently her children suffer from her negligence. Many times her conscience haunts her for having an extra-marital affair with a woman. For this reason she wishes that she was to be like Pipeelika, alone and free. Astha understands a married woman's place in the family to be that of an 'unpaid servant' or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death to her status as an Indian wife. She feels for herself,

"A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth," (231)<sup>2</sup>  
are the prerequisites of a married woman like her.

Traditions in Indian society are so strong that a woman cannot break them and get out of it to make a separate identity. Astha's morals force her to think that in lying to her husband she is committing a sin. Since her

childhood, she is taught never to tell a lie. Every time in the past whenever she had lied for anything, she had been punished by God. It had happened with her before marriage when she lied to her mother for the boys with whom she had friendship. And now she can't restrain herself for telling lies for the sake of Pipeelika as she feels every touch of Pipeelika gives her heaven's joy and she doesn't want to lose her.

"She thanked God Again for this love in her life, when she had thought all chances of love was over".(235)<sup>3</sup>

"My whole life is a fabric of lies, 'said Astha sadly, 'you are the one true thing I have". (242)<sup>4</sup>

She attempts, to go out and find herself individually in the outer world but ultimately she returns to the four walls of her house. Astha's mind is also set according to the patriarchal way. While in the company of Pipeelika she never forgets that she has children at home.

"A large part of her belonged to her children"(231)<sup>5</sup>

Every time she runs back it is because of her children. Once Hemant's health becomes very down and his Doctor advises him to go out of the city for some rest. When Astha tells about her summer plan to Pipeelika, she becomes angry with her. At that time Astha talks like a devoted wife and her words hurts her and due to this a sour quarrel starts between hers because Pipeelika does not like her plan. When Pipeelika stares at Astha anxiously, Astha says;

"You are independent so you can talk like this. You need money, Astha Flashed, 'or do you think I should be independent on his money? Stands in the streets with a begging bowl? Live in an ashram like my mother? What about my children."(269)<sup>6</sup>

Listening this Pipeelika says:

"Your children, your children, don't hide behind them. Live with me. Bring them' 'but no- you don't even try- Ant why don't you try."(269)<sup>7</sup>

Although she is progressive and conscious of her rights, she quickly compromises to the fact that a woman's real position lies within the family. Astha wants to live with Pipeelika and it is very difficult for her to bear when Pipeelika goes to US to complete her Ph.D. Astha feels and cries when she has to part from Pipeelika.

"I live my life in fragments, she is the one fragment that makes the rest bearable." (264)<sup>8</sup>

Ashok Kumar Says:

"Manju Kapur has exposed a woman's passion with love and lesbianism, an incompatible marriage and ensuing annoyance. With passion to revolutionize the Indian male sensitivity, she describes the traumas of her female protagonists from which they suffer, and perish in for their triumph."<sup>9</sup>

Through the character of Astha and Pipeelika, Manju Kapur has reflected on the present day Indian woman. Astha is Kapur's new woman "conscious, introspective, educated, wants to carve a life for herself, to some extent she even conveys a personal vision of woman hood by violating current social codes.

The women's question today is, therefore, no longer an issue confined to the position of women within the family or their rights to equality with men in different aspects of social life. It is part of the total, far broader question regarding the direction of change that our society is taking - economic, social, political, and the intellectual perception and analysis of that process. In the first phase, the women's question emerged essentially in the context of the identity crisis of the new educated middle class. Manju Kapur's female protagonists are mostly educated, aspiring individual caged within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity. It is their individual struggle with family and society through which they plunged into a dedicated effort to carve an identity for themselves as qualified women with faultless backgrounds. The novelist has portrayed her protagonists as a woman caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. The writer addresses many issues that are related to the middle class women. Whether or not a girl has the right to make her own choices in life is an issue dragged this way and that, for a long time in our country. Facing equal assault from the chauvinists who declare that woman's place is inside the house, and the feminists who

condemn the idea of taking the husband's surname after marriage, the idea finds a middle path here. There is after all a difference between possessing and protecting.

Thus, Astha, the main heroine of the novel, has got success in breaking the boundaries and limitations of her pre- defined cultural rules and regulations. She is a bold and active woman who takes steps against the male -dominated society. Astha wants to live in her own ways. She thinks that she is a woman and woman is made to do a lot of sacrifice but as a modern woman, she does not want to sacrifice her whole life, her dreams, pleasures and freedom in the name of her family. Astha is the woman of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. She has calculated everything very closely. She has broken her boundaries throughout her life. She is really a very courageous, smart and intelligent woman. She possesses almost all the characteristics of a 21<sup>st</sup> century rebel woman. Manju Kapur, through the character of Astha, has proved that increasing education, job opportunities and awareness of rights bring the women out of their threshold so that they are able to take any decision in their own ways.

Maya Sharma in her extraordinary book *Loving Women – Being Lesbian and Unprivileged in India* interviews a factory worker Vimlesh who says,

“You ask me if I have heard the word “lesbian”. No, I have not heard it, I am attracted to women. Why create these categories, such deep differences between male and female? We are all human beings, aren't we?”<sup>9</sup>

Thus lesbianism is reflected in all these works but it is still a far cry from actual representation and somehow the works are an apology at describing these relationships in all their complexities like hetro sexual relationships .Shall I end by saying that a few honest writers and more welcoming readers would result in more lesbian literature that would not skirt around the issue but present it as ordinary stories of love and desire.

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