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MANJU KAPUR'S *A MARRIED WOMAN*: ASTHA'S AGONY

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ABSTRACT

Women all over, hold and hide their pain and suffering in the very core of their hearts and not airing them is ample evidence of their ability to keep such agonies to themselves. Always wearing a mask and giving the impression of living in joy, they have been boosting the male ego from time immemorial. Sometimes the female fury does find an outlet choosing an alternate way to dissolve their pain and suffering. This paper attempts to explore the mental agony of Astha in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* and also throws light on her alternate choice to derive pleasure and happiness as a means of escapism.

Key words: Agony, Frustration, Pain, Suffering, Turmoil.

Manju Kapur, an accomplished Indian writer of English language was born in 1948 and was a Professor of English at Miranda House in Delhi. Her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*, received the Commonwealth Award for the Eurasian region in 1999. The women of India have indeed achieved their successes, but if there is to be a true female independence much remains to be done. The fight for autonomy remains an unfinished combat and it is from that perspective, Manju Kapur returns to the narration of women's issues in her second novel, *A Married Woman* (2003). Kapur's preoccupation with the female revolt against deep-rooted family values and the institution of marriage is followed through to this novel. It is evident from her novel that Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic women eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact.

A Married Woman is the story of Astha, a young woman brought up in Delhi in a typical middle class household. Astha as the opening line of the novel states, "was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear" (1). As she is the only child of her old-fashioned parents, their only responsibility is to marry Astha off. But Astha's world is different and is fascinated. Her longing is different:

By the time Astha was sixteen, she was well trained on a diet of mushy novels and thoughts of marriage. She was prey to inchoate longings, desired almost every boy she saw, then stood long hours before the mirror marveling at her ugliness. Would she ever be happy? Would true love ever find her? (8)

Astha wants a love marriage but her marriage is an arranged marriage with Hemant, an Assistant Manager in a Bank with entrepreneurial ambitions. Her married life starts with love and companion-ship and Astha enjoys every moment being with Hemant. It has been two years after her marriage and she delivers a baby girl. By the time Hemant starts his new TV business and becomes busy that Astha begins to feel: "Somewhere along the way Hemant's attitude to Astha changed" (66). But she later consoles herself that she

has to be adjusting. Astha conceives again and this time she delivers a baby boy. Astha becomes busy with her role as a wife, mother, daughter-in-law and also as a teacher. She begins to have her headaches: "It was in this two children, husband, servants, job scenario that Astha started to have headaches" (74). Day by day her headache becomes severe and "slowly her life changed to accommodate her headaches" (75).

After undergoing an operation for her headache, Astha tells Hemant that the reason for her headache is that she always feel alone. As Jyoti Singh in her essay observes: "The absence of reciprocity of care thus generates feelings of worthlessness, lack of zest, isolation, depression and inertness, further leading to neglect, lack of communication, alienation, conflict and identity crisis" (IWN 97). But Hemant answers her that it is he who is alone and not Astha. Astha finds temporary relief in writing poetry, which expresses her desire and longing. Though her poetry reveals her inner feelings and emotions, Hemant fails to understand that he is the reason behind her agony and longings. She begins to concentrate on things which will help lessen her pains and as a result she gets a chance to meet Aijaz Akhtar Khan, founder of 'The Street Theatre Group', who is asked to hold a workshop in the school. Astha starts admiring Aijaz, who encourages Astha's writings and drawings.

Astha feels sad when she thinks about Aijaz's departure and her state of loneliness. Her pain reaches no boundaries when she comes to know that he is murdered in communal clashes and cannot meet Aijaz forever. Astha cannot explain her feeling but "sobbed rocking to and fro with rage and grief" (139). Astha's agony and turmoil kill her for she doesn't know how to overcome them but manages to pretend as if she is happy. Meanwhile Astha attends a meeting in Ayodhya where she happens to meet Pipeelika, the grieving widow of Aijaz. Astha and Pip spend some days visiting holy temples and mosques and they have a good chat over Astha's writings, her husband and her children. They begin to meet more often for they have started admiring each other that "an element of secrecy entered the relationship and gave it an illicit character"(218). As they become closer to each other, Astha's relationship with her husband starts waning and she starts fighting for trivial matters with Hemant: "Now sexually involved with another, she realized how many facets in the relationship between her husband and herself reflected power rather than love" (233). Her desperation towards her husband makes Astha lean more towards Pip. But this does not last long when Pip gets a sponsor for her Ph.D and decides to go abroad. Though Astha doesn't want to leave Pip, she doesn't want to abandon her children and go with Pip as Pip wishes.

Astha after Pip's departure starts looking after her family and enjoys being with them. After Pip returns from her trip, they continue to see each other, "but there was now a carefulness between them" (282). They decide to breakup their relationship and live their own lives. Astha gets ready to face everything accepting and taking life as it comes though she feels and longs within. When finally Pip gets Ph.d in U.S and prepares for her journey, Astha makes up her mind to face the reality: "She accepted the misery of this dislocation as her due for being a faithless wife" (287). Astha feels a complete isolation after Pip's departure but she manages to move freely for it is her fate. She falls into a complete state of solitude:

Mechanically she changed, brushed her teeth, put cream on, got into her side of the bed, pulled the sheet up, and turning to the very edge lay absolutely still. Motion of any kind was painful to her. Her mind, heart and body felt numb. It continued like this for days. She felt stretched thin, thin across the globe. (307)

Astha in order to relieve from her mental agony chooses alternate way to derive happiness but that proves to be the root cause for her frustration throughout. Anuradha Verma in her essay observes:

In Manjukapur's heroines we find emergence of a new woman who awakes in satisfying her mental, physical, psychological, sexual needs. She has delineated a clear picture of the gender biased society. Her heroines try to re-define their self and come out of the traditional mould framed for them. (PC 162).

Astha in *A Married Woman* is a perfect example for the type of women stated above. Thus Manjukapur's *A Married Woman* represents through Astha, the agonized woman who tries to overcome her "cultural identity and forge a 'self-identity', an attempt which leaves a woman hard hearted and desolate"(PC 150).

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