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## **Resilience and Retrospect of a Woman in Manju Kapur's Novel *A Married Woman***

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### **Abstract:**

Manju Kapur, a contemporary novelist, contributes works that resonate with young women of the present era who struggle between tradition and modernity, particularly Indian women facing violence in a male-dominated society. Beyond physical abuse, women endure silent harassment that leads to mental instability. In Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*, the protagonist, Astha, struggles with suppression from her husband, who frequently accuses her of mismanaging the family and household. This mistreatment becomes a source of trauma, manifesting as chronic headaches in the novel. Astha turns to a lesbian relationship with her female partner, Pipee, finding solace and relief from her pain. However, the plot reveals that Astha faces similar domination from Pipee. Through self-realization, Astha embraces her responsibilities as a wife and mother, ultimately becoming a successful married woman. This paper highlights the journey of a woman who undergoes trials to attain her identity.

**Keywords:** Mental Instability, Suppression, Trauma, Pain, Lesbian, Solace, Self-Realization

### **Introduction**

Women in literature are often portrayed by writers in various dimensions. Male authors typically depict them as naïve, kind, and compassionate, often treating them as passive beings. However, women writers use their characters as instruments to represent the voiceless women in a male-chauvinist society. Manju Kapur, a contemporary writer, denounces the violence and injustice imposed on women both at home and in society by patriarchal structures. In her second novel, *A Married Woman*, Kapur presents a perspective on women that transcends traditional roles. She allows her protagonist, Astha, to break free from the conventional marital relationship that suffocates and hinders her purpose in life.

### **Astha's Early Life**

Astha, an only child born to a middle-class family, is raised with her parents' aspirations for her to lead a decent lifestyle. Her father prioritizes education, believing it will secure her a bright future and independence. Her mother instills traditional values, preparing Astha to become a dutiful wife and mother. Astha experiences two failed love affairs—first with Bunty and later with Rohan—both from upper-class backgrounds, which falter due to social disparities. Ultimately, Astha enters an arranged marriage with Hemant, a businessman, and becomes a typical Indian wife.

#### **Astha's MarriagewithHemant**

Astha feels desperate amid her monotonous household chores. She grows weary of her husband's late returns home, longing for intimacy that he does not reciprocate. Instead, she reflects, "Her subservient position struck her. She had no business kneeling, taking off his shoes, pulling off his socks, feeling ecstatic about the smell of his feet" (AMW 50). The initial spark of their honeymoon fades quickly. Astha's bold decision to become a teacher at St. Anthony School marks a step toward a new identity, despite opposition from her husband and in-laws, who prefer she remain at home. Astha balances her duties at home and school, but she observes Hemant's increasing domination, particularly after her father's death, when he disposes of her father's books without her knowledge, depriving her of her rights and freedom.

As a mother of two, Astha faces new responsibilities and pressures, leading her to resign from her job. This shift transforms her from a woman seeking love to one valuing independence. Her financial autonomy opens her eyes: "Her salary meant she didn't have to ask Hemant for every little rupee she spent" (AMW 72).

#### **HerMentalTrauma**

Astha develops chronic headaches from the strain of caring for her children, husband, and in-laws. Her realization that she is prey to Hemant's superiority complex shatters her idealized image of him. Ira Jha notes, "Astha's mental trauma is similar to Elaine Showalter's concept of CFS (Chronic Fatigue Syndrome). According to psychologists, physical pain originating from mental anguish is generally the consequence of unhealthy restrictions on someone's perception" (78). Hemant neither values her feelings nor grants her freedom to express them, often leading to arguments. Astha begins writing poems, finding temporary relief: "In the struggle to express herself, she found temporary relief" (AMW 79). When accused by her husband of writing only sad poems, she defends them as expressions of emotion, beginning to expose her inner world.

#### **Master and Slave: A Financially Crippled Woman**

Manju Kapur illustrates through Astha how financially dependent women are often controlled by their husbands. Astha's mother entrusts her husband's money to Hemant, believing he will manage it better. However, Hemant accesses the funds without informing Astha, denying her knowledge of her own inheritance. Astha pleads, "She meant nothing personal. She didn't want to feel dependent, that was all.

Surely equals could relate better than master and slave?" (AMW 99).

### **The Recognition for Her Talents**

Astha meets Aijaz, the founder of 'The Street Theatre Group,' at a workshop. Aijaz recognizes her talent in writing scripts and drawing, sparking a secret crush. This fades when she learns Aijaz is married to Pipee, a woman working in an NGO. After Aijaz is tragically burned alive with his crew during a riot, Astha paints to honor him, collaborating with Reshana, a member of his theatre group. Her exhibition earns her fame and 20,000 rupees, and even Hemant expresses pride in her achievements.

### **The Powerlessness of Astha Within Marriage**

Astha feels betrayed during a vacation when Hemant uses her exhibition earnings to book her flight to Goa, while he pays for the children's tickets and his business associates' expenses. He spends lavishly on a luxurious hotel but dismisses her desire to buy a silver box during shopping. Anita Balakrishnan observes, "Hemant dismisses her desire as madness, and his dismissive tone towards her underlines her complete powerlessness... as the box becomes a symbol of her powerlessness within the marriage" (110).

### **Astha Turned a Lesbian**

Astha's quest for a new identity leads to significant consequences in her married life. Resisting her husband and mother-in-law, she travels to Ayodhya, breaking free from the traditional roles of wife, mother, and daughter-in-law. At a rally, she speaks out against violence toward women: "We judge not by what people tell us, but by what we experience in our home. And that experience tells us that where there is violence, there is suffering, unnecessary and continuous suffering" (AMW 197). In Ayodhya, she meets Pipeelika, Aijaz's widow, and their instant friendship blossoms into a relationship that disrupts her marriage: "Thus an element of secrecy entered the relationship and gave it an illicit character" (AMW 218).

Manju Kapur challenges the male-chauvinist notion that women are sexual objects for men's pleasure. Astha boldly tells Hemant, "Do I have to give in because you are my husband? Unless I feel close to you, I can't—I'm not a sex object" (AMW 224). While Hemant travels abroad and has an affair, attempting to conceal it, Astha's relationship with Pipee highlights societal double standards. Simmi Gurwara notes, "In the case of men, a relationship outside marriage is not that difficult, but for a woman, because of her obsessively self-deprecating nature, it is more than difficult. And even if she manages to have it, she is overwhelmed by the familial drudgery that she has to pull off uncomplainingly, come what may" (89).

However, Astha's relationship with Pipee disrupts her life. She becomes preoccupied with her lover, neglecting her children and household, and lies frequently to Hemant: "Her lies grew skilful" (AMW 233). Torn between her marriage and her romance with Pipee, Astha is reminded of her responsibilities: "But I can't abandon my family, I can't" (AMW 242). Pipee, however, leads an

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independent life unhindered by such obligations.

#### **Astha's Extramarital Affair**

Astha becomes a victim of female alienation. Hemant disregards her emotions and values, confining her to the roles of obedient wife and daughter-in-law while using her body for his pleasure. Astha seeks not only love but also equality, which is denied, stifling her autonomy and self-fulfillment. Her relationship with Pipee fulfills these expectations: "She felt complete with her" (AMW 243). This represents a form of female revenge against a male-dominated society. Dr. Sudista Prasad Singh observes, "She starts searching for fulfillment and a more meaningful life, turning to a lesbian relationship with Pipeelika, who relieves her mind from emotional stress and provides pleasure which she does not get in association with her husband in the status of a married woman" (74).

#### **The Spiritual Awakening Relieves Her to Discover the Real Being**

Astha is on the verge of abandoning her role as a typical wife. However, spiritual guidance from her mother at an ashram reminds her of her responsibilities as a wife and mother. Her prayer to Christ for stability during the difficult decision to join Pipee on the yatra or stay with her children reflects her compassion: "So I need not run all over the place looking for love and confirmation. Give me substance, God, give me a life that has not been lived for nothing. And protect my children" (AMW 252). This underscores her emotional and physical devotion to her children.

**A Rift in the Relationship of the Women** The relationship between Astha and Pipee begins to fade during the Ekta Yatra. Pipee's demands for Astha's company make her weary, as Pipee feels Astha does not reciprocate fully. Pipee's insistence on joining the yatra pressures Astha to prioritize her lover over her family. Km. Kavitha explains, "She realizes that any relationship, even that between a woman and another woman, becomes demanding after a length of time" (155).

During the yatra, Pipee ignores Astha, focusing on activities. After returning to Delhi, Pipee leaves Astha alone, prompting her to say, "I wish I had the energy to hate her" (AMW 264). Even after resuming their routines, Pipee distances herself from Astha.

#### **Introspection and Reunion of Astha and Hemant**

When Hemant is diagnosed with hypertension, Astha meticulously follows the doctor's advice, managing his diet and exercise. A planned trip to the USA with their family reunites Astha with Hemant, serving as a spiritual pilgrimage for the couple. For Hemant, it offers relaxation and rejuvenation, while Astha notes, "Yet she had enjoyed being with her family, enjoying comparative ease between Hemant and herself" (AMW 280). Astha desires to end her relationship with Pipee, observing a lack of harmony. When Pipee gains admission to a PhD program abroad, she confronts Astha about her family trip: "You went away with your family, that was bad enough, and I didn't say anything, because it's no use, and then you do this, why have me?" (AMW 281).

#### **The Separation of the Women**

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Pipee uses this as an opportunity for separation, stating, “And of course, whatever happens, we will always be friends” (AMW 282). Astha, hoping their love could heal the rift, is disappointed. Over time, she transforms into a dedicated housewife, prioritizing her family’s well-being: “At this prevarication, for the first time Astha felt relief that in a few months she would not have to talk to Pipee anymore” (AMW 300).

Astha wishes to show Pipee her paintings before Pipee leaves for America, scheduling a convenient date. However, at the exhibition, Pipee treats Astha like a stranger, causing her pain. With grief, Astha accompanies Hemant to see Pipee off at the airport.

### **Conclusion**

The women part ways after Astha bids farewell to Pipee at the airport, each choosing their own path. Chitralkha Basu explains, “Astha is not fully convinced that she should take the crucial step of coming out and setting up an alternative family with Pipee, an action which would threaten the moral code most Indian middle-class families adhere to” (23). Manju Kapur breaks the conventional man-woman relationship by having her protagonist turn to a lesbian relationship as a form of resistance against male hegemony, only to later return to the role of a responsible married woman.

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