

## **FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE IN MANJU KAPUR'S 'A MARRIED WOMAN'**

**Ch.SRI RAJA RAJESWARI**  
**Secondary Grade Teacher**  
**Mandal Parishad Primary School**  
**GURAZA – 1**  
**Mudinepalli Mandal, Eluru District**  
**ANDHRA PRADESH**

### **Abstract**

The popularity of Manju Kapur in the world of Indian English fiction is accelerating due to her exceptionable mastery over the realistic presentation of family and marriage institution. Both are important for the existence and functioning not only of society but also for the sustenance and continuity of human being. Among many salient features of this basic and fundamental institution, gender role is the most significant. Marriage institution in India is androcentrism where male centered norms determine and rule the gender roles of a man and a woman to be performed. In other words, it is the system in which man is power executer and woman is submissive and the form through which male's power is executed. However, the rapid changes in the society have brought the emancipation of women, resulting into the assault over the inequality of gender roles in marriage institution. This is brilliantly presented by Manju Kapur in her second novel, 'A Married Woman'. Astha the protagonist, attempts to deviate from the 'traditional female gender roles' i.e. nurturing, self-sacrifice, homemaking and availability. The present paper aims at the enquiry of how Astha's actions and reactions to the inequality of gender roles leads her to indifference, hostility, infidelity, anger, resentment and unhappiness, and finally dragging her on the verge of shattered marriage.

**Key words:** marriage, androcentrism, gender roles, male-power, marriage, society, women

### **Introduction**

The real greatness of Manju Kapur lies in the fact that the social structures she creates are so realistic to the Indian social landscape that it presents a wide arena for the researchers to probe into her novels with different overwhelming approaches. She shows comprehensive skills in delineating social happenings at micro level in various social institutions especially marriage institution. Kapur's second novel, A Married Woman is the most influential in this category. Astha and Hemant, the protagonists of the novel are married couple whom we find in our daily life. Since their childhood they are grown up with appropriate gender roles. 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. The novel centers on Astha and Hemant who come together through marriage institution, fully conscious of their appropriate gender roles. However, as the novel develops the gender roles seem to change of both Astha and Hemant and set the novel on the course of shattered marriage. Hemant goes through changes from Americanized husband to the typical Indian husband for whom the protection and control of woman is responsibility of male gender. On the other side, Astha, a married woman is expected to be typical Indian wife. She shows the symptoms of gender roles. Astha has everything, an affluent family, loving children, and a dutiful husband. So why should she be obsessive by a sense of restlessness and dissatisfaction? The answer lies in the fact that

gender roles in Indian society are male centered where woman is at many disadvantages. It is through male created standards that her actions and activities are given meaning, thus making her dependent creature. Kapur shows this inequality of gender roles, and when it is resisted, how it leads to the shattering of marriage.

### **The Concept of gender roles**

We are encircled by gender experience from the time we are very small. It is ever there in dialogue, humor and argument, and it is called upon to give explanation of everything from toy preferences to food preferences. "Gender is embedded thoroughly in our institutions, our actions, our beliefs and our desires that it appears to us to be completely natural." (Eckert and Sally, 1) Again, gender differs from sex. Sex refers to the biological characteristics distinguishing male and female. This definition emphasizes male and female differences in chromosomes, anatomy, hormones, reproductive systems, and other physiological mechanism. Gender refers to those social, cultural and psychological traits associated to male and female through particular social contexts. Sex makes us male or female; gender makes us masculine or feminine. Sex is an attributed status because a person is born with it but gender is an achieved status because it must be learned.

A role is the expected behavior associated with social position of a person. Roles are performed according to the social norms, shared rules that steer people's manners in specific situation. Social norms determine the privileges and responsibilities of male and female. The expected roles of a wife in Indian society are nurturing, self-sacrifice, home making and availability where as the roles of husband are to be bread winner, disciplinarian, and ultimate decision maker in the household. Gender roles are perpetuated by systems of patriarchy, male dominated social structures leading to the oppression of women. Patriarchy demonstrates androcentrism-male centered norms to which all persons adhere. In these systems male are more dominant and women are submissive. However, due to the rapid social changes, accepted social norms regarding gender are often in status of instability. This leads to conflicts in social institutions including the marriage institution.

### **Discussion of the study**

As soon as a child enters the world, society welcomes it with perpetual norms. There is no escape from gender socialization. A child is trained of what it is to be a man and woman in terms of behavior, attitude, relations, traditions customs and so on. Therefore, Beauvoir is very right when she writes, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman." Astha, the central figure of the novel is also trained with appropriate female gender norms. She "was brought up properly as befits a woman..." (AMW 02) She was her parent's only child. Her education, her character, her health, her marriage are the burden of her parents like every patriarchal Indian parents. A marriage for Indian woman is the ultimate destination rather "it is the duty of every girl to get married" (DD 15) where she is expected to perform her so far trained gender roles. Astha weds Hemant, an American returned, son of the bureaucrats, settled in New Delhi. Their marriage takes place through traditional way, enquiring thoroughly background of the groom because, "this is a question of their (our) girl's happiness" (132). At the outset, Astha and Hemant look like an ideal couple, made for each other. However as the novel proceeds, their prescribed gender roles start changing, giving entry to the disappointment and distress. Hemant being westernized to some extent shows liberalism as he welcomes baby girl when Astha conceives first time. Still, traditional male gendered attributes are rooted unto the core of his personality. He decides to marry Indian girl because "American women are too demanding. Their men have to cater to all their whims and fancies"(40). It evidences that Hemant is the representative of patriarchal male gender

norms. At this background it becomes crystal like water to investigate and evaluate the gender role of Astha.

Soon after their marriage, Astha assumed the female gender roles in “sliding each shirt in his drawer, a quarter centimeter out from the one above so they were easily visible, darning all the tiny holes in his socks, arranging his pants on cloth wrapped hanger so there would be no crease”(40). She hopes that her husband will encourage her to be an artist and feels herself lucky for having him in her life. At this stage of her life, she was in her appropriate female gender role as androcentrism demands. She “longed to dissolve in him, to be the sips of water he drank, longed to be the morsels of food he swallowed” (46) Once the nectar of marital bliss is consumed, dullness began to taint Astha’s life. Undemanding in-laws at home, working husband at outside left Astha with enough time to be restless. She considers a job. But in egalitarian society a working woman is accepted as well as respected but in traditional society there are many constraints for woman to work outside home. Her prime duty is keeping home. Hemant being male gendered objects Astha’s working as a journalist because they have to stay out late and allows her to be a teacher since it is only “half day working and home will not suffer”(47)

Nurturing of the children is solely women’s responsibility in Indian marriage institution. Hemant is fully conscious of his male gender role. He wants a male child to maintain his family name. According to him, looking after children rests on the shoulder of woman since the ages. Astha revolts against her gender role of caring of children: “It’s a woman’s work,” said Hemant firmly. “Hire somebody to help you, or quit your job.” “This is your son, the one you wanted so much. It’s nice if we look after him together.” (70)

Gender inequality has many iniquitous effects, but some of the most powerful and stable of these occur in interaction. In traditional society the voice of woman is not heard seriously. She is set off at various interactions. Being a bread winner of the family Husband becomes the ultimate decision taker in the home. This happens frequently in Astha’s life. Her attitude and her thoughts are always taken negatively by her husband. Even Astha’s mother handed over money came from property selling, to Hemant without interacting with Astha because “he is a man, he knows about money” (97) This male centric attitude of the society deprives of woman from wealth and power. In the words of Ridgway, “when woman find that what they say in interaction is not listened to or taken as seriously as what men say, it results into the loss of their wealth and power.(Ridgway, 125)

The coming of Aziz Akhtar Khan, the founder of the Street Theatre Group, in Astha’s life has put her in dilemma. At one hand Hemant tries to control and oppress the free spirit of Astha and at other hand Aziz Khan is the embodiment of refined sentiments and gentleness who not only recognizes but also admires the genius of Astha in painting and writing. However in traditional Indian society it is considered as immoral for a married woman to think of other man except a husband. Hemant irritated when he sees tears roll down from Astha’s face after reading Aziz Khan’s death in the newspaper. “Why are crying” he demanded. “What was he to you?” annoyed by the insensitivity of her husband she replies him: “I can’t weep for the whole world, only when it means something to me...I knew him, he was always working for everybody’s good, even the children loved him. And he has been burnt to death. Isn’t that reason enough?” (139)

The untimely death of Aziz Khan has spun Astha's actions, directed more towards social cause; attending meeting, gathering mob, painting pictures for the exhibition, and less towards her female gendered roles; looking after children, husband and home. She forgets her traditional role and flung herself for the justice of Aziz Khan's death. When Astha asks Hemant about her going to attend the demonstration at Rashtrapati Bhavan, he replies her, "you seem to forget that your place as a decent family woman is in the home and on the streets." (172) woman in Indian society is looked upon as biologically weak and submissive, and therefore must be protected. Established social norms develop into stereotypes regarding male and female gender role. Male are considered biologically stronger than female. "Such beliefs about inferiority due to biology are reinforced and then used to justify discrimination directed towards females (Lindsey, 3) the arrival of Aziz Khan has sown the seeds in the mind of Astha against gender inequality in marriage institution and the arrival Pipeelika has shaken the very base of it. Astha develops an intimate relationship with Pipileeka. They frequently talk and meet and enters in lesbian relationship. Astha thought that if husband and wife are one person, then Pipeelika and she were even more so. She had shared herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her. She thinks of divorce with Hemant because "she she didn't want to be pushed around in the name of family. She was fed-up with the ideal of Indian womanhood.."(168) Hence, the novel is the projection of shattered marriage. Inequality of gender roles are the root of marital conflicts in the present scenario. A female has different of set of gender roles which are male centered, and unfortunately these must be followed for the social approval. Astha experiences this and realizes that, "A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth were the the necessary prerequisites of Hemant's wife" (231 )

### **Conclusion:**

Thus, Manju Kapur highlights very effectively gender inequalities in her novel, A Married Woman. Hemant's disapproval of Astha's "non-traditional female gendered roles" such as neglecting children and home, over valuing self interest than self-sacrifice, participating in street demonstrations, roaming with Pipeelika and watching lesbian-gay film- has widened the gap between them and results into a shattered marriage. The society based on androcentrism exploits women through various social institutions and marriage institution stands atop among them. Astha is the victim of such exploitation. Male centered norms check the free spirit of woman and force them at many disadvantages. They dislocate themselves and suffer from identity deprivation.

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