

ISSN-0976-8165



# THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

**VOL. 15 ISSUE-3 JUNE 2024**

**15 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS**

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ISSN 2278-9529

**Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal**  
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## **The Making of a Woman: Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* as a Novel of Stereotypical Gender Roles**

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.12671193>

**Article History:** Submitted-27/05/2024, Revised-20/06/2024, Accepted-21/06/2024, Published-30/06/2024.

### **Abstract:**

This paper tries to explore the elements related to gender and its identity. Manju Kapur's novel *A Married Woman* talks about the central character, Astha, who faces objection because of her gender. From the beginning, this novel talks about the difference between a girl and a boy in the terms of their upbringing. It is the very reason that a woman faces constant humiliation throughout her life and many times she is unable to achieve or do what she likes. It is the making of a woman from a human being in the patriarchal setup. It is the society that decides what a woman should do and shouldn't. In this novel, Astha is considered only as a woman who has no aspirations and choice. She is supposed to act according to her husband and mother-in-law. She is not supposed to live her life according to her choice. She is not born as a woman rather she is made a woman.

**Keywords:** Class, gender, marriage, sexuality, patriarchy.

Manju Kapur's novel *A Married Woman* deals with the life of a middle-class married woman who is educated and has aspirations to do something worth living. The whole narrative deals with the position of woman in a middle-class family. In this novel, Astha is the central figure who is a homemaker in the middle-class family. Through this novel, Manju Kapur raises different issues related to women like patriarchy, representation in different areas, domination on the basis of gender, answerability and sexuality. Not only this, the novel also explores the different roles a woman plays in her life in a single day and throughout her life. This novel also talks about the expectations of a woman and the part which she wants in her life.

To understand clearly, these opening lines of the novel are relevant enough to describe the condition and position of women in the patriarchal setup “Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear. One slip might find her alone, vulnerable and unprotected. The infinite ways in which she could be harmed were not specified, but Astha absorbed them through her skin, and ever after was drawn to the safe and secure” (1). The question arises as why the novel opens with the lines which differentiates the upbringing of a girl and a boy. The word ‘fear’ connotes the mental setup of a woman that remains throughout her life. Here, the upbringing of the girl is being talked about. When there is a girl, fear is something which accompanies her. It is all about the patriarchal setup where a girl child is raised in a way different from the boy. It is the starting of discrimination in the family which is meant for the girl to live in that way only. Here, Simon De’Beavour’s concept of making women in the world of men seems right. She argues that “one is not born woman rather becomes a woman”. Same happens with Astha also. She is also not supposed to do many things like other girls. There are dos and don’ts for a girl in a traditional middle-class family.

*A Married Woman* is the story of Astha. She is the single child of her parents. Her parents are serious about their daughter’s marriage. It is the ultimate goal for them to find a good match and marry her as soon as possible. Here, daughter’s marriage in a traditional middle-class family is considered as the main responsibility of the parents. It is believed as the way to get salvation. Her mother says, “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). This declaration by Astha’s mother puts stamp on the mentality that a girl should be married as early as possible. This is one of the main reasons that marriage of a girl is considered more important than her education.

As mentioned in the novel that Astha’s parents are looking for her match, and they are able to find the one. Astha is married to Hemant. To consummate their marriage, the newly wedded couple goes to Kashmir. Hemant and Astha perform sexual activities. She had not thought that there will be so much of it. She experiences the sexual activity for the first time in her life. Till now, she had only experienced the kisses of her boyfriend, Rohan, only. They spent quality time in Kashmir and comes back to their home in Delhi.

Back in Delhi, their sexual activities were more often and Astha’s husband Hemant is curious for something new in the sexual activity. He learns new sexual positions and tries to experiment with unique postures and positions to make it different every time. Hemant has

literature related to sex which he puts in his wardrobe. He is focusing on the sex very much. It can be noted that he is trying to get much pleasure. Here, Astha becomes an object to fulfill the bodily desires. In the course of sex, woman has no say, she has to act according to her husband and the same happens with Astha also.

At one instance, when Hemant asks Astha to wear sexy clothes, Astha objects, “What do you think I am? A whore?” (43). This objection from the side of Astha proves that she has self-respect and this act of wearing sexy clothes is not meant for a girl of traditional family. Here, it can be noticed that Astha doesn’t want to be a sex object to satisfy the man whether it is her husband. She, as a woman, is considered as a mere body what her husband wants to see. She further asks her husband, “So I am to be your teddy bear?” (44). It is already noticed that she is not there to be a mere teddy or the one without any say.

At the request of Hemant, Astha puts on the sexy dress brought by him, and when she sees herself, she falls in love with herself. It is described in the following words:

She put it on and there from below her chin, a deep cleavage appeared with black laced mounds on either side, the dark nipples straining through black net hearts. She almost didn’t recognize herself, with the sexual parts so emphasized. She raised her arms to take out the pins from her hair, watching as her breasts rose and thrust forward, feeling an excitement that embarrassed her. (Kapur 44)

Through this dress Astha enters into the world where she finds her passions and what she never thought or saw about her body and mind. The dress brings to her another dimension from where she can see herself. It is mentioned that she was not aware of the sex before marriage, but afterwards she discovers her sexuality. As the time passes, it is Hemant who desires it more than Astha, and then Astha wants to give more than what Hemant wants in sexual activity. Astha finds herself that she also needs sex. Astha’s desires are mentioned in the following words:

Slightly ashamed, she kept hidden that she longed to dissolve herself in him, longed to be the sips of water he drank, longed to be the morsels of food he swallowed. The times he was away she was focused on one thing, the moment of their union. When he came through the door, she wanted to jump on him, tear his clothes off, thrust her nipples into his mouth, and have him charge his way through her. One with him, one with all that mattered.

'I haven't really lived,' thought Astha, 'till now I did not know what life was all about.'

She felt a woman of the world, the world that was covered with the film of her desires, and the fluids of their sex. (Kapur 45)

These lines regarding the sexual desires of Astha are worth reading and understanding. It is not only Astha, rather it is about all women who come from traditional middle-class families and are not aware about their sexuality. There is distinction between men and women in terms of expression for sex. This insight into sex gives Astha a new meaning to life. She wants to have sex more and more; she wants her husband to play with her body. Her desires are only up to her. What she thinks is impossible to express in words. These desires say a lot about Astha or those women who are unable to express themselves due to gender and cultural barriers.

Astha's married life begins with excitement and happiness, she enjoys sex a lot, but as the time passes, dullness begins in her life. She joins a school as a teacher to pass her time and works hard. After the school, she is there to take care of her husband who often comes late from the office. In this way, a woman's life is being discussed. With work, she has to look after the house also. Astha does all with responsibility.

Working hard throughout the day, Hemant tries to get some time for sex. It is like a safety valve for Astha. It acts as a remedy for her. It is described as:

Astha lay back, aware of every inch of her skin, aware of every thread she wore, now about to be dislodged. The day, with its petty vexations flowed away from her. This, what was going to happen, was the central thing in her life. (Kapur 50)

Life goes well for some time and then sexual activity slows down after the birth of a baby girl. Family life takes a new shape, Hemant starts his own business and leaves the job. Hemant has no time left for the family and gives time to his business. On the one hand business is growing while on the other hand his relationship with family, especially with his wife Astha, seems to fade. Astha becomes mother for second time and gives birth to a baby boy named Himanshu. Astha remained herself busy again in her children. Family life continues and seems stressful as Astha finds no time for her. Hemant remains busy in his business and meanwhile Astha suffers from headaches. Astha visits the doctor when headaches worsen more.

Sometimes, the headache becomes so severe that she gets no relief from the medicines. This condition of Astha represents the life of a homemaker who has to look after the family and gets no time for herself. This hectic life makes them sick. Ruchika Singla and Shilpa Chaudhary argue in their paper regarding the married life of Astha in the following words:

Soon conventional married life makes her monotonous. She feels her married life oppressive and suffocated in the routine of repetitive responsibilities as wife and mother. After much resistance from her husband and her parents, she begins teaching profession which is commonly available profession to the suffocated house wives in India. But her insensitive, indifferent and even infidel husband increases her restlessness and her life becomes a metonymic extension of the “migraines” which she begins to suffer frequently. (Singla and Chaudhary 144)

Astha engages herself in painting and writing poetry to get rid of the stressful life. She composes the following poem:

Astha pens the poem *Changes*:

The eventual release from pain  
In the tearing relentless separation  
From those in habit loved

Can Come so slowly  
It seems there will never be a day  
Of final peace and tranquility

Who promised me, that if I  
Did gaze upon reality  
Accept it, embrace it, befriend it

I would never suffer again  
But no matter how many times  
I heave the doorways of my soul

To let the chill light in  
The darkness grows silently

To hide me in the break of day. (Kapur 79-80)

On closer scrutiny of the poem composed by Astha, it can be seen that somewhere the poem reflects her own life which is expressed in these words. This poem talks about the relationship and the situation which is accepted by the poet. Astha is not different from this situation in her life where her husband Hemant is busy with his business and she is unable to get his company. She has accepted this harsh reality of life that there will be no peace. She also promises herself that she is not going to suffer anymore. Through this poem, she tries to convince herself and accepts the reality of life. From another perspective, this poem throws light on the plight of married women who are destined to do the daily chores and are confined to home only. They have accepted their roles as a mere homemaker and doing it without making any noise or demand.

Hemant's objection to her poetry brings to light the condition of a woman where she is not free to express her emotions or do what a woman wants. Astha tries to make him understand that poetry is about emotions, but he does not like emotional poetry. Astha leaves writing and continues to paint. This domination of man over woman is not only on her body, rather on the passions and emotions that puts a woman in the position where she is unable to find her identity. When a woman does not have freedom to do anything out of her choice, she either becomes iconoclast or the slave.

Regarding gender roles, Hemant asks Astha that it is woman's role to look after the children. He says the following words:

After he came home the last thing he wished to bother about was taking care of a child.

'It's your job,' he said.

'That's not what you thought when we had Anu,' replied his wife. 'I can't do everything myself. It's tiring.'

It was also boring, though this was not acknowledged.

'It's woman's work,' said Hemant firmly. 'Hire somebody to help you, or quit your job.' (Kapur 69)

This conversation between Hemant and Astha regarding looking after the children throws light on the roles of men and women in the society. Hemant firmly says that it is woman's work to look after the children. When Astha objects to it, Hemant asks her to quit the job or hire someone. Over here, it can be seen that woman is supposed to compromise either by making arrangement or quitting the job but man is not supposed to compromise in any situation. Looking after the children is considered as a woman's job in the society and it is accepted as the norm in the middle-class patriarchal setup.

Regarding gender roles, as noted elsewhere, Astha volunteers with other social activists in the time of communal tension in the country. She wants to do something for the society and it is a kind of escapism for her to get herself involved in these types of activities.

Astha's mother-in-law objected to her active involvement in the following words, 'It is not a woman's place to think of these things,' she said firmly. (185). Here, Astha faces objection just because of her gender. Astha's involvement is not considered relevant here by her mother-in-law as it is a man's job to take part in the social activities. This is the reason that only a few women have been acknowledged in the history for many reasons.

Despite the refusal from the family, Astha goes to Ayodhya with another activist, Reshma, to develop peace. Astha thinks about her role as a woman and not as an individual. Astha's feelings can be understood by the following lines:

That night she couldn't sleep. Her mind refused to rest, roaming restlessly among the things that made up her life, her home, children, husband, painting, the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch. Was it too much for a woman to handle; was her mother-in-law right? But why? Her children were well taken care of, she had trustworthy servants, she had someone who cooked better than she, she had left her teaching. And yet she was chained. (Kapur 187-188)

Astha finds herself in the shackles of responsibilities just because of her gender. But she goes to Ayodhya and tries to break those shackles.

To conclude, it can be said that Astha becomes the victim because of her gender. It can be seen that there is construction of identity on the basis of gender. Since her birth, Astha has experienced the role of gender in her life. At different stages, she finds that her gender becomes a kind of obstacle for her to achieve what she thought. She tries to resist at different points but ultimately compromises to live according to the norm of the society where a woman is



supposed to be a homemaker. Astha is considered only as a body, who is supposed to fulfill the desires of her husband, to look after the children and the house. Astha's qualities as a painter and poetess are not considered by her husband in positive way. In all, Astha suffers only due to her gender as a woman. From the beginning to the end, there is making of a woman in the patriarchal setup.

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