

Thwarting Male Hegemony through Reversal of Sexual Subalternity: A Study of Lesbianism in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

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Abstract:

Subaltern Studies is one of the major subdivisions of Postcolonial Studies. In Postcolonial Studies colonizer is recognized as the 'Self', colonized as the 'Other' and apart from the 'Self' and the 'Other', there is also another group whose condition is worse than the colonized 'Other' and who lives most of their life remaining invisible to both the 'Self' and the 'Other' are the subaltern group of people which comprises mostly peasants and labourers. However, apart from male subalterns, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak also sees Indian women as same as other subaltern groups of people. According to Spivak in her most celebrated essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Indian women are forced to live between two forces of antagonism- traditional force of colonized and modern force of colonizer coming from two different directions- one from the traditional male hegemony and another from modern British ruling class. Fragmented into two halves for becoming unable to compromise with these two antagonistic forces, an Indian woman is compelled to lead a life of subalternity. Of late Spivak's theory of female subalternity has been criticized much among many Indian women novelists who protested it vehemently through their write ups. Among those Indian women novelists, Manju Kapur deserves well to be mentioned. Almost all female protagonists in Manju Kapur's novels achieve the status of new woman going beyond the level of their status of subalternity. Astha, the female central character and heroine of her most celebrated novel *A Married Woman* appears before us as a controversial figure of female freedom and emancipation from position of sexual subalternity in the form of lesbianism threatening the male hegemony of heterosexuality. The present article explores this very theme of lesbianism as a negation of subaltern sexual status in reference to male hegemony of heterosexuality in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*.

Keywords: Female, Hegemony, Lesbianism, Sexuality, Society, Subalternity

In recent years the concept of subaltern has earned a distinctive and special place as one of the latest subdivisions of postcolonial theory. Tracing back history, though subaltern as a term was first employed by the Italian political activist Antonio Gramsci in his article “*Notes on Italian History*” which later appeared as a part of his celebrated book *Prison Notebooks* written between 1929 and 1935 referring to a person or a group of people in a particular section of a society subjected to the hegemony of the ruling elite classes, the concerned term in reality, did not get wide popularity and recognition till the emergence of ‘Subaltern Studies Group’ or ‘Subaltern Studies Collective’ in the early 1980s founded by the famous South Asian historian Ranajit Guha comprising other South Asian scholars David Arnold, David Hardiman, Touraj Atabaki, Gyan Pandey, Sumit Sarkar, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty and Shahid Amin. This group of scholars globalizes the concept studying Indian peasantry historiography from subaltern point of view. At the initial stage of subaltern studies in India, the aim of this study was to save the history of Indian peasantry from the hegemonic control by the elite land lords, and write a history from below. Being confined within the study of Indian peasantry historiography, the study of woman lately appeared in this study. Women as a study in subaltern groups came on the scene only after the intervention of Indian-American post-colonial feminist critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak who took the subaltern concept to a further more complex theoretical debate in her groundbreaking essay, “*Can the Subaltern Speak?*” in 1988. Till Spivak the concept of subaltern mainly focused on certain groups of people comprising workers and peasants. Even Gramsci, the founder of the term ‘Subaltern’, intended to use the term keeping in mind those peasants and workers who were exploited and oppressed by Benito Mussolini, the leader of the National Fascist Party and his agents. Spivak added a new chapter to the history of Subaltern studies dealing with the issue of gender and feminism. According to Spivak, an Indian woman is forced to live between two antagonistic poles – tradition and modernization. Caught between these two antagonistic polarities, Indian women lose their voice. The very identity of an Indian woman becomes disappeared, “not into a pristine nothingness, but into a violent shuttling, which is the displaced figuration of the ‘third-world woman’ caught between tradition and modernization” (Spivak 102). Spivak’s theory on female subalternity gives rise to many controversy and criticism. In reaction to Spivak’s theory, a body of Indian female novelists came upfront in the beginning of present century. Among them, Manju Kapur is the most celebrated name. Instead of becoming a character caught between tradition and modernity, Manju Kapur’s women characters live on their own. They never sacrifice their freedom on the altar of tradition. Out of tradition they appear completely as new and modern women who know how to challenge the male hegemony. In this connection Manju Kapur’s *A Married woman* brings before us a most controversial picture of female freedom and emancipation from position of sexual subalternity in the form of lesbianism threatening the male hegemony of heterosexuality. The present article explores this very theme of lesbianism as a negation of subaltern sexual status in reference to male hegemony of heterosexuality in Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman*.

Protest of subalternity is very common in almost all the novels written by Manju Kapur. Her *Virmati* in *Difficult Daughters* reacts against the family conservatism in order to seek educational freedom, her Nisha in *Home* cherishes the desire to transform the world she lives in into a world of equal compatibility with male counterparts; her Nina in *The Immigrant* involves into pre-marital sex with her teacher and in the present novel under study *A Married Woman* the protest of subalternity takes something new in the form of lesbianism hardly written earlier. Opposite to sexual subalternity, Astha in *A Married Woman* acts not as a counterpart of male hegemony, rather she takes refuge in new, something unconventional relationship in the form of lesbianism. Reconsidering the new image of womanhood, Manju Kapur deconstructs the man-made image of female subalternity in *A Married Woman* where her heroine Astha is like the phoenix getting new identity after being borne out from ashes of subalternity. Kumar has truly opined reflecting on Manju Kapur's protagonist Astha and her escape from becoming a voiceless subaltern caught between tradition and modernity: "Astha likes to have a break from dependence on others and proceeds on the path of full human status that poses in threat to Hemant and his male superiority. Although, she finds herself trapped between the pressure of the modern developing society and shackles of ancient biases she set out on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationship" (Kumar 134). Manju Kapur shows Astha's growth and evolution at different stages through many relationships and she comes to be known as the first Indian novelist who concentrates woman's longing and desire for homosexuality. The origin of traditions, living up as per ideal Indian woman, giving up self-interest for family, keeping self behind, devaluing herself, being satisfied to live in the safety and security of the husband, home and family deliberately come in conflict with Astha's post modern sensibilities that drive her to make a flight on her wings of freedom to interrogate founded norms, to search for her real identity, to desire for a true soul mate, to develop, to enter and to embrace socially forbidden relationship.

The novel as its title suggests is the story of a married woman, named Astha who marries an attractive young man, named Hemant with whom Astha, for a few years, lead a happy conjugal life but the situation starts to take an adverse turn when Hemant becomes more occupied with his business and struggles to spare time for her. Even he undergoes an unexpected behavioral change. Hemant who had once been caring husband always ready with love and affection unasked becomes a complete changed man. He hardly takes any notice to Astha's feelings. Hemant who had once been against categorization of sex used to equally treat both male and female. At the time of Astha's expectation of her first child, Hemant insisted, "In America there is no difference between boys and girls. How can this country get anywhere if we go on treating our women this way?" (Kapur 56). Later when a baby girl, named Anuradha was given birth by Astha, Hemant left no stone unturned in taking due care of the baby girl. By Hemant's high ideals and noble thoughts, Astha started to be drawn to her husband more than ever. Her

joys knew no bounds when she observed her husband taking keen interest in the upbringing of the baby girl.

But under the mask of appearance, there was a hidden face of typical male chauvinism always unnoticed which was waiting to be clearer only for a time being. Hemant's hidden face comes to the fore when he starts demanding a son before Astha, "I want to have my son soon", declared Hemant, looking emotional and manly at the same time...I want to be as much a part of his life as Papaji is of mine" (Kapur 59-60). Joya Chakravarty rightly remarks, "Hemant's desire to have a son and his insistence that he would not stop until he has one, makes Astha dissatisfied and uneasy. She cannot fathom her man" (Chakravarty 202). Astha undergoes an uncertainty of life with Hemant. Hemant remains insensitive to Astha's craving for love. Physicality of love comes to pass between them but there always lacks strong emotion which once Astha felt. "For Astha a marital life meant participating in all activities, discussing all issues with her husband but for Hemant this relationship meant physical relationship and just fulfilling the social needs of his wife" (Verma 56). Astha's life is filled with emptiness in the company of Hemant. She starts looking for a partner who would supply her emotional support along with physical love. However, Astha never oversteps the sanctity of relationship between her and her husband tied with a sacred bond of marriage. Rather making another heterosexual relationship with other man, Astha finds solace in another woman's embrace by making homosexual relationship. Joya Chakravarty observes, "Astha does not want to cross the threshold of her married life: she does not want any other man. What Manju Kapur is hinting at is that had Hemant been more appreciative of and sensitive to his wife's needs, Astha would have felt a more complete woman" (204).

The lesbian relationship between Astha and Pipeelika grows fast. Their chance meeting brings colour in their life since their condition proves more or less same. When Astha meets Pipeelika, Pipeelika is a widow woman whose husband Aijaz, in an act of religious animosity, has recently died. Both women are passing through same experience. Pipeelika has become widow after losing her husband and Astha, though her husband is living, is a metaphorical widow since her husband has left her completely unloved and uncared. Thus, the condition of women is that one has lost her husband and other is deprived of what she expects from her husband. The meeting brings out positive result in the life of both women. One enters into the life of other like the first few raindrops on parched land. Astha starts feeling her life meaningless without Pipeelika. The tie starts growing stronger. "Astha's slow discovery of her differences with her husband, her change from a hopeful bride to a battered wife and her meeting with Pipeelika Trivedi leads her to realize the other state of woman in their 'familiar distress'. This leads her to an immoral, rather amoral, guilt consciousness of lesbian love rationalizing her outmoded morality" (Nayak 224). A new revival comes to pass in Astha's life under the strong

influence of Pipeelika. Astha is offered with everything she has not by Pipeelika. The impact of Pipeelika's presence in Astha's life proves so strong that Hemant's love seems to her forgotten memory hardly intruding in her life. She restores the long forgotten pleasures of life in Pipeelika's embrace. "Astha thought that if husband and wife are one person, then Pipee and she were even more so. She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her" (Kapur 241). They move fast in a torrid affair. Both of them forget the social boundary drawn between licit and illicit. They become free citizens in their world. Astha hardly misses any opportunity to meet Pipeelika whenever situation arises. Both utilize every moment of their meeting for full gratification of their sexual desires. Sexual satisfaction as observed by Joseph Bristow "is a fundamental human need" (Bristow 12) of which no one should be deprived.

With their growing lesbianism, both Astha and Pipeelika appear inseparable to each other. Just as Pipeelika drinks the water of Lethe to erase the past memories related with her husband Aijaz in her act of lesbian relationship with Astha, likewise Astha also takes a sweet revenge on her husband Hemant having involved into the act of lesbian relationship with Pipeelika. Their choice of homosexuality in lieu of heterosexuality destabilizes the total system of sex regulation. Both women appear to us bold and enough courageous who hardly fear to go to the farthest extreme in quest of their fulfillment of love and desire. They experience the satisfying relationship in each other's embrace. Contrary to heterosexuality where there lacks mutual respect, homosexuality based on mutual love and care appears to Astha more welcoming. She finds in it no place of desiring subject and desired object as seen in heterosexual relationship. Out of the desired object of male hegemonial power, often appearing distant and enigmatic, both women emerge as new women in their act of lesbianism which transforms them from desired objects to desiring subjects. They find their new role hitherto unknown to them in their new relationship.

However, Astha confronts with same difficulty which majority of lesbians pass through in their life. Her position even after emerging as a new woman is no more than a subaltern who hardly gathers courage to announce her present sexual orientation. She is torn into two halves- her desire for lesbian love and her duty for heterosexual family. Being incapable of leaving one for the other, her condition becomes pathetic. She is found caught between tradition and modernity. Kumar truly observes: "Astha likes to have a break from dependence on others and proceeds on the path of full human status that poses in threat to Hemant and his male superiority. Although, she finds herself trapped between the pressure of the modern developing society and shackles of ancient biases she set out on her quest for a more meaningful life in her lesbian relationship" (Kumar 134). Through different relationships Manju Kapur has presented Astha's growth and evolution at different stages in the course of the narrative. The origin of traditions,

living up as per ideals of a typical Indian woman, sacrificing self-interest for the sake of family, holding self back for the interest of others, devaluing and derogating herself, being confined to live within the bounds of home and family, being complacent with the safety and security of her husband and family often come in conflict with the post modern sensibilities of Astha that well prepare her for a flight on her wings of liberation to bring into question every established norms or standards, in quest of her true identity, to long for a true soul mate, to flourish, to undertake and to hold a socially forbidden relationship.

Through lesbian relationship with Pipeelika, Astha faces same difficulty of subalternity faced by Indian women as stated by Spivak, “caught between tradition and modernization” finding herself fragmented into two halves- her desire and longing for love and her duty and responsibility towards her family. However she tries to hold the grip of lesbian relationship firmly even after finding herself standing between the forces of traditional male hegemony and the desire of individuality over subalternity. Contrary to what Spivak asserts in her most celebrated essay “Can the subaltern Speak?”, “the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow”, (Spivak 83) Manju Kapur’s female protagonist Astha comes out from the shadowy life of subalternity challenging male hegemony. In the act of lesbianism both Astha and Pipeelika act neither the subjective role of male hegemony nor the objective role of female subalternity, rather they play a role what Simone de Beauvoir has justified in *The Second Sex*, “Inversely, a woman who wants to enjoy the pleasures of her femininity in feminine arms also knows the pride of obeying no master...the association of two women can take many different forms; it is based on feeling, interest, or habit; it is conjugal or romantic; it has room for sadism, masochism, generosity, faithfulness, devotion, caprice, egotism, and betrayal; there are prostitutes as well as great lovers among lesbians” (Beauvoir 431). Through reversal role of her protagonist Astha in terms of subalternity Manju Kapur reconsiders the institutions of love, marriage and relationship: “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 protagonist from which they suffer and perish in for their triumph” (Kumar 165). Thus Astha in Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman*, appearing as a new woman who is educated, self-conscious, and introspective and one who knows how to harness a life for herself and even one who presents a personal vision of womanhood by decoding the current social codes, does not come into the class of sexual subalternity dominated by male hegemony.

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