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The Politics Of Misrecognition And Gender Struggle In Manju Kapur's A Married Woman

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Abstract

This paper is about the women's conditions during the post-independence era discussed by Manju Kapur in *A Married Woman*. The novel is an exploration of women's lives and their relationship with other family members, tradition vs modernity, women vs women, changing roles of women and dominance of patriarchy. The story revolves around Ashta, a strong and determined woman. She suffers to be recognised in private and at public places for her individual identity, autonomy and dignity. Her resistance is against being misrecognized due to assigned gender roles and the patriarchal system of the society. She aspires to subvert the patriarchal ideologies, social norms and conventional values of family. It appears that Kapur aims to inspect how patriarchal systems, social and political norms regulate the concept of misrecognition of a woman's identity.

Keywords: Manju Kapur, misrecognition, recognition, patriarchy, identity.

Introduction

This paper intends to look into the politics of misrecognition and gender struggle through the lens of *A Married Woman*. It attempts to focus on the multifaceted dimensions like economic, social, political and cultural norms of misrecognition and gender struggle, applying the theory of recognition by Honneth and the theory of performativity by Judith Butler. The focal point of this paper is to figure out the ways of misrecognition which mould women's lives. Axel Honneth develops the notion 'how an individual seeks for recognition in forms of love, rights and esteem and how this absence of recognition creates social conflicts' in his book, *The Struggle for Recognition: Social Conflict and the Grammar of Social Life* (1995). He describes three forms of recognition: Love- 'recognition of an individual with specific needs', Rights- 'recognition of a person for equality legally' and Esteem- 'to recognise individuals' identity and abilities'. This paper aims to look into Ashta's life and how she struggles for love, rights and esteem, applying the ideas of Axel Honneth. Furthermore, this study also explores the idea of established gender norms and its

fragility, referencing the theory of Judith Butler's performativity. Judith Butler's remarks that gender roles are not fixed. It is just a performance that a man or woman plays in society. Manju Kapur, as a contemporary author, investigates the idea of how a woman character is misrecognized under the pressure of patriarchal ideologies. They seek for love, equality and self-esteem, but this systemic set up of society leads to misrecognition of women. This misrecognition causes inner conflicts and a chaotic environment in family and society. Kapur uses this theory of recognition to present a picture of women and their struggles, regarding love, rights, esteem and gender binaries, to familiarize the readers in post-independence India.

The novel, *A Married Woman*, is the story of an independent woman, Astha. She is a painter. She wants to secure her future in the field of painting. She has no siblings. Her parents are worried about her marriage. Her mother believes that it is the parents' responsibility to marry their sons and daughters before their death. If they die without fulfilling their responsibility, they cannot get peace in the next world. She says to Astha: "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) Astha doesn't want to marry at her early age. Although her father supports her interest in paintings, her mother doesn't want to educate anymore. Her mother is ready to arrange marriage for her. Astha is taught about marriage, customs and duty of a wife and mother: "She was brought up properly as befits a woman..." (AMW 02).

The story revolves around her married life and her extra marital affairs with a woman, Pipilika, a modern and activist. Astha is a modern woman, who has dreams and ambition to develop her own identity. As a romantic woman, she has a vision for a handsome and loving husband before marriage. She hopes for love, equal opportunity and respect in her in-laws house. As throughout history, it is very difficult for an Indian woman to get the same respect, love and opportunities in an Indian family and society. After passing her M.A examination, Ashta married Hemant. Hemant is a well-educated person. He has returned from America. He has two sisters, who are married. Hemant has a good image in family and society. He runs his own business. Although Hemant is not a very traditional husband, he wants his wife to follow all norms and customs of the family. He hopes from his wife to be an obedient wife and daughter-in-law. Astha tries to manage all the things at the initial stage of marriage, while on the other, she hopes for love and care from her husband. For her husband, his business and family are priority, not the dreams and desires of Ashta. This ignorance of Hemant shatters the hope and dreams of Ashta. Honneth remarks that if a person doesn't get all these three forms of recognition, he or she suffers from existential crises also.

Kapur examines how the life of Ashta is full of the absence of love, respect and esteem. As an individual, Astha seeks love, care and attention from her husband, and as a human being, she wants equal opportunity and rights in all the fields of life and as a woman, she wants to get recognised by her own individual identity and her own talents and achievements. As a newly married woman, Astha performs the traditional gender roles: "sliding each shirt in his drawer, a quarter centi-meter 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 thinks that her husband will support her for her career in arts, but being a male, he expects her to stay inside the home and keep it near and clean. After some time, Hemant becomes ready for a teaching job for Astha. Astha is good at arts. She is a teacher. She arranges a performance on the theme of political conflicts, regarding Babri Mosque. Her husband, Hemant, is not interested in Astha's political activities. He thinks that women are not made for political movements. They are made for home and household activities. When Asht gets pregnant and begets a daughter. Hemant is so prejudiced of male child concept, he is not ready for a female baby. He wants a male child. After some time, Astha tries again and gives birth a male child to fulfill her husband's desire: "When Astha's son was finally born, she felt a gratitude as profound as it was shamedher status rose.....she was fulfilled." (68) After becoming mother of two children, she has no time for herself. It becomes Astha's responsibility to take care of children. Her husband doesn't help her in nurturing and caring for the children. Astha opposes this norm of caring for children all alone. Hemant said strongly: "It's a woman's work. 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)

Hemant is biased with traditional gender norms, religious biases and women's limited relationships. When Ashta gets involved in a Street Theatre Group, with a Muslim character, Aziz, her husband starts criticizing her for her involvement in social movements with a male character. Where Hemant doesn't consider Astha's potential in arts, there Aziz recognizes and admires Astha's efforts in paintings and poetry writing. This motivational support of Aziz attracts Ashta. Here, the situation of Astha can be compared to the situation of Rosie of R. K. Narayan's *The Guide*. Rosie, who is a good dancer, but her dance potential is understated by her husband and recognized by Raju. Finally Rosie gets attracted towards Raju.

As a traditional Indian husband, Hemant doesn't want her wife to have a relationship with a male. When, Ashta comes to know about Aziz's death through the newspaper, she starts crying. Hemant asks: “Why are you crying? What was he to you?” She gets frustrated because of her husband's behaviour and replies angrily: “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) After Aziz's death, Ashta becomes involved much more in social activities, social mobs, and gatherings to make justice for Aziz. During this process, she forgets her traditional role of wife and mother. This creates conflicts in her relationship with her husband. Even Hemant does not allow her to attend the gatherings at Rashtrapati Bhavan: “you seem to forget that your place as a decent family woman is in the home and on the streets.” (172) Astha starts realizing that a married woman, in Indian society, is only an unpaid domestic labour. She cannot think of divorce because it is unacceptable in our country. It deteriorates the lives of women. They face social stigma and shame. It invokes a sympathetic feeling in her heart and mind: “A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth were the necessary prerequisites of Hemant's wife.”(Kapur 231)

Kapur portrays misrecognition of Ashta's potential and abilities by her husband and by other family members. Her husband blames her for her carelessness towards family. As Astha hopes in a married life, she doesn't get anything like that. This leads to an alienation from her husband. She starts searching for love somewhere else. As Honneth remarks love is a basic need for all individuals. In the case of Astha, she is deprived of the basic need of a human being. Another thing is that respect and equality, Astha doesn't get the same respect and opportunities as her husband gets in the family. Her mother doesn't give the money in the hands of Astha, but in the hands of Astha's husband. Her mother says: “he is a man, he knows about money” (97). She wants to get involved in social movements, but her husband tries to remind her of her feminine role and identity. The last thing discussed by Honneth is esteem in which a character's abilities should be recognised. In the context of Astha, her abilities in arts and her involvement in social movements are misrecognized and undervalued. These lack of recognition develop conflicts in the heart and mind of Astha.

Ultimately, she gets console in presence of Pipeelika. She is a social activist. She works in an NGO. Pipeelika is the wife of Aziz, who died in communal riots. These frequent meetings between Astha and Pipeelika result in a romantic relationship between them. Astha realizes the peace and comfort with her what she never gets in her husband's home. Astha expresses to Pieelika, “I love you; you know how much you mean to me; I try and prove it every moment we have together, but I can't abandon my family, I can't. Maybe I should not have looked for happiness. But I couldn't help myself Oh Pipee, I'm sorry I am not like you” (242). Both of them have gone through loneliness in their lives. Their strong desires for love, care, respect and mutual understanding bring them closer to each other. Astha missed all these emotions in her married life and Pipeelika has lost her husband at an early age. She has a barren life after marriage. It is her relationship with Pipeelika, where she feels a peaceful life and all. Kapur describes, “when, she was with Hemant she felt like a woman of straw, her inner life dead, with a man who noticed nothing, with whom for that very reason it was soothing to be with. Her body was his, when they made love, it was

Pipee's face Astha saw, her hands she felt. She accepted the misery of this dislocation as her due for being a faithless wife (287).

The patriarchal system, which is perpetuated by men and women both, is visible in this novel also. It can be seen that Ashta is feeling bliss in the presence of Pipeelika, but at the same time she is discouraged by other women characters. Her mother never support Astha for her creative writings and for arts. She is only worried about her marriage. Kapur demonstrate a very pathetic situation of married women in Indian society. Ashta is supposed to be a good wife and mother, but nobody cares about her emotions. Her parents search a person for Astha, who is well educated and well established in career, but they don't think of Ashta's inner dreams and desire. Although her father never underestimate her arts skill, but he doesn't support openly. Hence the concept of women vs women whether as a supporter of patriarchy or as a breaker of norms runs parallel in the story. First, Astha is forced to follow man – made norms by her mother, on the other hand, she is supported to follow her dreams by Pipeelika. Initially, Ashta does her best to perform the role of an obedient wife and mother, but finally, she chooses for herself after meeting Pipeelika. Astha's inner transformation refers gender fluidity and a demand for recognition. These drastic changes in her attitudes verify the notions of Butler's performativity.

Eventually, Pipeelika decides to go to America for her doctoral degree. Astha moves to her husband and her children, while; "Her mind, heart and body felt numb - It continued like this for days. She felt stretched thin, thin across the globe" (A Married Woman 307). This departure of Pipeelika from India and from the life of Ashta brings a drastic change in Astha's life. She thinks that life has again created an obstacle for her, but now she is strong enough. Ultimately, Astha starts her married life again. Rajput observes: "Astha and Pipee both are living under the illusion of making themselves free from male bondage, but when their freedom is weighed on the scale of morality, values, and maintenance of family peace, they stand nowhere" (Rajput 117). Now Astha develops her career in paintings and her paintings are an expression of her suppressed desires. She spends her time in paintings and writings. Her writings are manifestations of her fragmented dreams and hope for a new beginning. Manju Kapur remarks, "As her brush moved carefully over the canvas, her hand grew sure, her back straightened, she sat firmer on her stool, her gaze became more concentrated, her mind more focused. A calmness settled over her, tenuous, fragile, but calmness nevertheless. She thought of her name. Faith. Faith in herself. It was all she had" (299). Now Astha aims to be recognised by people. She wants her respect in the family and society and she has a desire for her abilities to be recognized. People praise for her efforts to create her own identity and to develop her individuality. Astha feels that the arts and teaching career: "represented security, not perhaps of money, but of her own life, of a place where she could be herself." (49)

The female characters of Manju Kapur emerge as a modern woman, who defines the idea of gender as a performative role not a fixed role. Initially, Astha performs the role of a traditional submissive woman, but later she recognises her worth and starts hearing her inner self. She represents the idea of Judith Butler that gender is fragile in its nature. On the other hand, Pipeelika also follows her inner self. She doesn't care for the society and its norms. Pipeelika is a very strong and modern woman, she tries to defy the norms created by patriarchal society. So, Ashta and Pipeelika, both, prove that they can love for themselves. If society leads to misrecognition, they can recognize their potential, search for self-love and can make efforts for equality. Their affirmations regarding their career indicate a new form of modern women, who break the role of submissive wife and mother. Sometimes it refers that Manju Kapur doesn't agree with Simone de Beauvoir's statement: "a woman is a womb, an ovary, she is a female - this word is sufficient to define her" (Beauvoir 12).

Kapur's female characters are not as traditional as the female characters of the other authors. They are very determined in making their decisions. They struggle a lot to create their own identity and to make people recognize their worth. They are aware about their rights and don't compromise with their self-respect and

self-esteem. Kapur portrays such a picture of women characters, who don't want to end up just being a mere puppet in the hand of patriarchy. A patriarchal system expects women to be ideal daughters, wives and mothers, but Kapur's women characters try to break this image of ideal women. They negotiate their lives and aim to have rights over her body and mind. They want to liberate themselves from the clutches of male chauvinism, which aim to decide women's gender, sex, and control their achievements. Kapur disregards these male ideologies through her characters.

Astha gets indulged in Sampradayakka Mukti Manch, a communal group that raises a voice against muslim community and its religious places like BabriMasjid. Being a member of this groups, Astha is requested to deliver a speech about the situation of women due to the impact of communal violence, regarding Ramjanbhoomi and BabriMasjid. It is because women can feel that they also have "some kind of a voice" (185). Throughout the whole speech, Astha expresses women's situation in Indian society, she doesn't discuss the issues of BabriMasjid -Ranjanmabhoomi conflicts: "In essence women all over the world are the same, we belong to families, we are affected by what affects our husbands, fathers, brothers and children We judge not by what people tell us, but by what we experience in our homes and that experience tells us that where there is violence, there is suffering... History cannot be righted easily, but lives are lost easily, pain and trauma to women and children come easily. (197-98) In the case of women's sufferings, Astha doesn't follow particular religious attitudes, rather thinks of women's sufferings at universal level. She doesn't consider any woman as a Hindu or Muslim, but as a human being. She treats all the women equally for their struggles and their sufferings at private or public places. This denotes Astha's approach to remove gender inequality, caste and religion based inequality. Astha thinks that love, respect, equality and self-esteem are beyond caste, class, religion and gender. Everyone needs all these to lead a recognized life in the family and society. If a woman has a lack of all these forms of recognition, defined by Honneth, She faces misrecognition in the society. Astha wants to reduce this concept of misrecognition, discussing women's needs, their rights and their achievements.

Kapur explains that if someone is following his or her religious practices, it doesn't denote his or her hatred for the opposite religion. Though Astha is free from biased attitudes regarding religion. She is not a dogmatic supporter of any religion, while on the other hand, Sita is fully conscious of her religion and she follows Hindu religion. Sita wants to know how Hindu religion functions in society and how it regulates the domination of women in Hindu society. She doesn't want to stop here, she wants to know how the Hindu religion works beyond materialistic life. She moves to Rishikesh and starts living at an ashram. Sita joins this ashram because it is away from day to day hectic life. She is in search of peace. She is not interested anymore in living a domestic life. She is a widowed woman. This hay day life doesn't attract her anymore. Sita had to follow a role of an ideal wife and mother in her married life. By comparing and contrasting the lives of the three characters - Astha, Pipeelika and Sita, in parallel to Ramjanmabhoomi & BabriMasjid conflicts, Kapur elaborates Indian women's struggles to negotiate their identity, freedom, respect, love and equality. All the women characters are dynamic and in their religious attitudes and in their other field of life. Their ways of resisting norms reflect fluidity of gender roles, flexibility in sexual desires and to be independent economically.

Finally, to conclude the paper, it can be said that the author is not only talking about women, abided by any religion, caste, culture and country, but rather she is talking about women, and their struggle for recognition in their family and society and across cultures. Kapur doesn't want to sympathise with women, but she demands for women's recognition in private and at public places. The author aims to develop the idea of sisterhood, where women support women to achieve their dreams and to create their own identity. She portrays her characters not as hatred of men, but don't want be blind followers of male dominated society. The main motto of Kapur is to make a balanced relationship between men and women & between two religions. In the background of Ramjanbhoomi-BabriMasjid, she discusses the inner turmoil of the country and women both. The aim of this paper is to make readers familiarize with author's notions that a

woman should not be misrecognized or underestimated on the basis of gender, caste and religion, but rather, she should have her own place, identity and individuality in her family and society.

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