

Dominance of Queer Theory in Manju Kapur's A Married Woman

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Abstract:

"*A Married Woman*," by Manju Kapur's novel, is a literary work that intricately weaves the threads of complex human emotions, societal norms, and the exploration of identity and sexuality. This article delves into the dominance of queer theory within Kapur's narrative, showcasing how the author employs this theoretical framework to dissect the lives of her characters. By employing queer theory, Kapur examines how societal constructs impact the lives of her protagonists, Astha and Peeplika, as they navigate the traditional roles and expectations thrust upon them as married women. This article explores how queer theory provides a lens through which to analyze themes of desire, resistance, and agency, ultimately shedding light on the characters' attempts to break free from the confines of heteronormative structures. Kapur's "*A Married Woman*" emerges as a powerful literary testament to the enduring influence of queer theory in contemporary Indian literature, unravelling the complexities of human relationships and the ongoing struggle for self-discovery and acceptance in a world shaped by convention.

Keywords: Queer Theory, LGBTQ+ Literature, Identity, Sexuality, Societal Norms, Heteronormativity, Desire, Resistance, Self-Discovery, Acceptance, Relationships

Introduction:

"*A Married Woman*," by Manju Kapur, is a remarkable literary work that traverses the intricate terrain of human emotions, societal expectations, and the quest for identity and sexual liberation. This article explores the profound influence of queer theory within Kapur's narrative, illustrating how the author adeptly employs this theoretical framework to dissect the lives of her characters. By embracing queer theory as a critical lens, Kapur explores how societal constructs deeply impact the trajectories of her protagonists, Astha and Peeplika. These women grapple with the traditional roles and expectations imposed upon them as married women in a conservative Indian society.

This exploration unravels how queer theory provides a nuanced perspective for analyzing pivotal themes of desire, resistance, and agency within "*A Married Woman*." The characters' experiences, aspirations, and limitations are placed under this critical lens, revealing their courageous attempts to break free from the constraints of heteronormative structures. Kapur's "*A Married Woman*" emerges as a powerful literary testament, demonstrating the enduring relevance of queer theory in contemporary Indian literature. Through its pages, we witness the intricate complexities of human relationships and the ongoing struggle for self-discovery and acceptance in a world shaped by convention. This article is a journey into

the depths of Kapur's narrative, illuminating how queer theory unveils the multilayered narratives of Astha and Peeplika as they confront and challenge the societal norms that bind them.

Exploring Queer Theory's Influence in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*: Characters and Relationships

The characters in Manju Kapur's novel, "*A Married Woman*," play a central role in illustrating the dominance of queer theory within the narrative. The novel primarily revolves around the lives of two main characters, Astha and Peeplika, who grapple with complex emotions, societal expectations, and their evolving identities. Here, we examine how the characters exemplify the influence of queer theory in the story:

Astha: Astha, the titular "married woman," is a character who embodies the conflict between societal norms and personal desires. She represents the quintessential Indian woman, initially conforming to traditional roles as a dutiful wife and mother. However, as the story progresses, Astha's journey mirrors the essence of queer theory. She questions her sexuality, desires, and her place within the heteronormative framework of her marriage. Her evolving relationship with Peeplika challenges conventional notions of love and gender roles, illuminating how individuals can transcend societal expectations to explore their authentic selves.

Peeplika: Peeplika, the enigmatic and free-spirited artist, represents the liberating force of queer theory within the narrative. She defies societal conventions and openly embraces her queer identity. Peeplika's character serves as a catalyst for Astha's self-discovery, prompting her to question her sexual orientation and challenge the boundaries of her conventional life. Peeplika's unapologetic pursuit of love and authenticity contrasts sharply with the conformist society depicted in the novel, highlighting the power of queer individuals to subvert normative structures.

Hemant: Hemant, Astha's husband, embodies the traditional, patriarchal expectations of a husband in Indian society. His character serves as a contrast to Astha and Peeplika's journey. His inability to comprehend or accept their evolving relationship underscores the societal resistance faced by queer individuals and the impact of traditional gender roles on interpersonal dynamics.

Other Supporting Characters: Various supporting characters in the novel, such as family members, friends, and acquaintances, reflect a spectrum of attitudes and responses to Astha and Peeplika's unconventional relationship. These characters offer diverse perspectives on queerness, shedding light on the complexities of societal acceptance and resistance.

In "*A Married Woman*," Manju Kapur uses the characters of Astha and Peeplika, along with the supporting cast, to explore the dominance of queer theory. Through their journeys, Kapur illustrates how queer theory can be a powerful lens for examining the intricacies of desire, resistance, and agency within a society steeped in heteronormativity. The characters' experiences and interactions serve as a vehicle for challenging and deconstructing the norms that constrain their identities and relationships.

Dominance of Queer Theory:

Queer theory, a post-structuralist discipline that emerged in the early 1990s originated from queer studies and women's studies. This theory challenges conventional notions of gender and sexuality, particularly the idea that heterosexuality is the normative and 'normal' sexual orientation. Instead of accepting essentialist perspectives on sexuality and gender, queer theorists analyze these concepts as social and cultural constructs, dissecting the categories, binaries, and language used to portray them.

In the context of India, a nation known for its rich cultural heritage, traditions, and values, the prominence of queer theory may challenge these deeply rooted customs. Questions arise regarding the reasons behind this emergence. Is it due to a perceived erosion of traditional values, the inadequacy of the education system in imparting these values, a growing individualistic approach to life, or external influences from other nations? These questions underscore the complex interplay between tradition and contemporary thought in India.

In the fictional work "*A Married Woman*," the protagonist Astha is married to Hemant, and they lead a contented and prosperous life, as vividly depicted in the narrative. Their journey begins with the birth of their daughter, Anuradha, and Astha subsequently embarks on a teaching career. Later, they welcomed their second child, a son named Himanushu. Having completed his education abroad and aspiring to be with his family, Hemant secures a job in India, ultimately establishing a commendable reputation in both his professional and personal spheres. Bhatia Bena and Chauhan S.G.Dr. in their research article, state the research article *Mirroring of Women in Manju Kapur's A Married Woman and Bharati Mukherjee's Wife* reveals:

Pipeelika works with the NGO named Ujala, run by three women. She is a career-oriented woman aspiring to pursue a PhD from the USA and Delhi School of Economics student. After her husband's death, she is alone, and Astha also longs for a companion in life, as a result of which they both establish a bonding with each other. They feel a sense of satisfaction in the company of each other. (235)

In the narrative of "*A Married Woman*," Astha encounters a significant turning point when she befriends Pipeelika, an employee of a non-governmental organization (NGO) and the wife of Ajiroz, a stage artist with whom Astha had developed a deep admiration when he was still alive. This connection between Astha and Ajiroz blossomed during a pivotal period in the story, coinciding with the demolition of the Babri Masjid, marking a moment of change and complexity in the narrative. Patel Dr.Aloka. Misra .K.D.Dr. and Guru Amruta, in their research article *The Search for a Distinct Identity*, The highlight of the book is Manju Kapur's description of 'Astha and Peeplika's relationship. Pipeelika is a widow of Ajiroz. Their loneliness and need to bring them closure here to fall into an inescapable situation'. (543).

In Manju Kapur's novels, the pivotal female characters play a vital role in the narrative, showcasing the author's deliberate intent to craft and manipulate these characters to convey her intentions and desires within the stories. These women often serve as conduits for Kapur to explore intricate themes of societal norms, identity, and the evolving role of women in contemporary Indian society. Through her characters, Kapur challenges traditional gender roles and offers nuanced insights into the complexities of female experiences in a rapidly changing world.

Manju Kapur deftly weaves a complex web of relationships in "*A Married Woman*," including the portrayal of Astha's bisexuality. Beyond her connection with Pipeelika, Astha's relationship with her husband, Hemant, is also explored. Kapur delves into Astha's past, revealing her deep affection for Rohan, a male friend and former classmate. Astha's fondness for Rohan developed during her school years, characterized by their shared moments of joy and connection. Astha's willingness to open herself emotionally to Rohan is palpable, and their close friendship includes moments of intimacy, often occurring during car rides. Kapur's narrative provides a nuanced exploration of Astha's multifaceted desires and the complexities of her relationships:

Astha had volunteered to go with him in the car. Her body had registered excitement when he had parked in the dark lane. When he bent close to her, she had been overcome with dread and longing. There was no going back. She offered her lips, trying not to shrink into the seat. (AMW 23)

Subsequently, Rohan embarked on an overseas journey to further his education. Initially, his memory lingered in Astha's thoughts for a brief period. However, as time passed and her life circumstances underwent a transformation, Rohan's presence in her mind gradually diminished. Rohan's memory faded entirely from her thoughts after her marriage to Hemant. Her husband Hemant played a pivotal role in her life, providing her with a fulfilling and satisfying intimate connection that made Astha feel cherished and content within their marital relationship. Rohan embarked on an overseas journey to further his education. Initially, his memory lingered in Astha's thoughts for a brief period. However, as time passed and her life circumstances underwent a transformation, Rohan's presence in her mind gradually diminished.

Subsequently, during Astha's initial night spent with Hemant, their intimate encounter triggered a recollection within her. She found herself reminiscing about her earlier romantic involvement with Rohan during her student years. The memory of Rohan's presence during her academic life resurfaced in her thoughts, intertwining with her experiences with Hemant on this particular night, revealing the complex tapestry of her romantic past.

Ajiaz, a prominent theatre artist, holds a significant place within the narrative, and Astha's connection with him is not unique. Astha's introduction to Ajiaz occurred during her tenure as a schoolteacher. Their relationship was characterized by an unspoken yet profound understanding and affection they shared for each other, rooted in a deep and silent language of love.

These lines unveil the inception of a romantic involvement between Astha and Ajiaz; What did it mean? Did he like her? Did he want to have an affair with her? Why had she been so startled by his hand on her knee? Why hadn't she responded? She was a married woman with two children, and those rights before her eyes. (AMW 113)

However, before Astha could fully delve into this love affair, Pipeelika married Ajiaz. Despite the complex circumstances, Astha found herself deeply moved by the idea of participating in a protest against Ajiaz's tragic demise, marking a turning point in the narrative that underscores the intricate web of emotions and connections within the story. Suksham Ahluwalia (2017), in her research article titled "*Man-Woman Relationship in A Married Woman* by Manju Kapur", conveys the same:

This was the most gregarious choice to assert one's identity. She outdoes all the societal norms of heterosexuality by choosing a lesbian partner. She had an emotionally satisfying relationship, and the ultimate physical fantasies were also realised. She was so satisfied with Ppeelika that sex with Hemant became a mundane activity. (889)

Consequently, in Ajiaz's passing, Astha finds solace and distraction by engaging in various protests and expanding her social circle. During these events, she connects with Pipeelika, admiring her personality and physical attributes, mirroring how Astha feels. Pipeelika, like Astha, experienced the loss of her husband shortly after their marriage, deepening their emotional connection. As Pipeelika begins to express her affection, Astha reciprocates, and the two embark on a journey together as a lesbian couple. Their relationship is marked by joy and closeness, and Pipeelika envisions a future where they continue to share their lives in each other's company as long as they live.

On one occasion, Hemant departed for a conference associated with his television company. Upon his return, Astha noticed a condom in his bag, which prompted her to inquire about it. This discovery led to questions and concerns within their relationship. Astha also grappled with a sense of disconnection from her relationships with Pipeelika and Rohan during this tumultuous period, perceiving them as potentially morally questionable decisions within the context of her marriage. Manju Kapur says that:

‘Brothers and Sisters,’ she started, ‘In essence, women all over the world are the same. We belong to families and are affected by what affects our husbands, fathers, brothers and children. In history, many things are unclear; the same thing that is right for one person is wrong for another, and it is difficult to decide our path of action. We judge not by what people tell us but by what we experience in our homes. (AMW 195)

These lines provide a profound insight into Astha's temperament and attitude, clearly understanding her character. Astha's personality and disposition consistently reflect her decisions throughout the narrative. This transparency allows readers to understand who Astha truly is, how her character shapes her choices, and the paths she navigates within the story.

Conclusion:

Manju Kapur's novel "*A Married Woman*" explores human relationships and the dominance of queer theory within its narrative. While the story does highlight the prevalence of extramarital affairs and complex heterosexual dynamics, it also delves into the depths of Astha's character and her unconventional choice to engage in a same-sex relationship with Pipeelika. Astha's decision reflects the profound impact of queer theory, challenging societal norms and revealing her longing for a different kind of connection. This narrative underscores that individuals like Astha and Pipeelika are drawn to the complexities of queer theory, and it highlights the nuanced interplay of emotions and desires within the context of a marriage as strong and sincere as Hemant and Astha's. Ultimately, "*A Married Woman*" is a testament to the ever-evolving landscape of relationships and identities, where queer theory plays a dominant and transformative role in the characters' lives.

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