

A Grumbling Transgression in Manju Kapur's A Married Woman

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Abstract

Literary theorists have given the term 'Transgression' new dimensions in the recent literary theory since the question of transgression can be labelled only in terms of limitation and restrictions. These limitation and restrictions are formulated within the amplitude of culture, economy, language, politics and society. These culture locations and social surroundings make an area of limitation for women. The present paper is an attempt to study the gradual modification in the positioning of new Indian woman who does not teeter on the borders of a labelled identity, but one who advocates her existence, transgresses the stereotypical notions of femininity and destabilizes the standardizing function of society. Following the global image of woman, she has become the part of corporate world, confident in behaviour, comfortable in unisex mode of dressing, and rational in language usage. So, by shedding the feminine mask and by adapting new 'performative tasks and masks', she has transgressed her gender role. This transgressing female in Manju Kaur's *A Married Woman* (2002) is the subject of my present paper.

Keywords: Transgression, Gay, Gender, Lesbian, Margin and Performance.

Etymologically, the term 'transgression' is described "to pass over or beyond, to overpass", as any rule prescribed as the limit of duty, to break or violate. In the Christian tradition it has acquired moralistic tones of judgement (Adam's transgression and his subsequent punishment).

With the influence of deconstruction, in the contemporary era, transgression is an important concept in feminist sphere as it initials the idea of boundary crossing. Female transgression has been pondered by many literary critics philosophers and feminist scholars. In the context of Simone De Beauvoir, female transgression includes spatial transgression which means what place they occupy in the world (Home), what their place should be (Public Domain).

In India, Bankim Chandra Chatterji is considered as the forerunner of Indian female transgressive fiction. He exemplifies his transgression in his first work Raj Mohan's wife (1864). Through the iconoclastic heroine, Matangini, he raises the issues of widow-marriage and wife's extra marital affairs as female transgressions. Post-feministic Indian writers such as Shobha De, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Anita Desia, Shashi

Deshpande, Manju Kapur and other depicted the transgression of women in their novels. The proposed paper seeks to portray this female transgression in Manju Kapur's, *A Married Woman* (2002). Her novels are replete with the ideas of myth-breaking and boundary-crossing by putting forth new iconic image of Indian woman. The theme of transformed morality, identity, subjectivity and sexuality find a comprehensive treatment in Kapur's novels. Not only this, she has also daved to deal with the issues of homosexuality, lesbianism and transgression.

Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002) is focused on the new transgressive woman in the post modern Indian society. During a meeting of a Delhi literary club in 2001, Kapur announced that she was engaged in writing a 'lesbian' novel. Her words sounded sharp and boastful but she kept on them. She publicly announced that here second novel was been written in India on the lesbian nature, where until then scant lesbian or gay writing existed. She also established herself as a mighty pen for transgressive voices.

The proposed paper reflects Kapur's idea of love, both platonic and prohibited, reaching even to the extent of lesbianism through the story of 'Astha', the protagonist of the novel, who challenges the

constraints of middle class family and show courage to break the barrier in finding emotional satisfaction and self-identity. Astha finds her life more meaningful in her lesbian relationship, a safety value provided by post feminist mindset. The present paper will also uncover how the marginal character has rejected this centre and built a new narrative in an orthodox society like India.

A married woman is set against the time leading up to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India in 1992. It also deals with the rises of a middle class woman caught in an unhappy marriage. Astha, the central character, is an educated and working woman of an upper-middle class family in Delhi. She was brought up with traits of a typical Indian family. Astha is a romantic and dreamy girl. She happily agrees to an arranged marriage with an America-returned MBA, Hemant, who belongs to a bureaucrat family.

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.

With the coming of an intellectual theatre personality Aijaz Akhtar Khan, a transition takes place in the calm life of Astha. Aijaz asks Astha to write a script on the burning issue of Ramjanama Bhoomi and Babri Masjid. Writing a script gives her a sense of personal worth. This change makes her life happy as someone has trusted her potential. To get away from the monotonous life, she starts to pen down poems. But in her family nobody appreciates her abilities. It is only Aijaz who motivates her and makes her think about the ongoing socio-political activities which becomes her future interest. Being a mother, she realizes for the first time that other than home and family she can contribute to social issues. By doing so she has transgressed the usual mould of femininity: a satisfied wife, a blessed mother, a comfortable home to live in, an average profession to name, a husband quite understandable, what more

she needs, being judged by the parameters of Indian house wife, she has more than an average middle class woman can claim.

But when Astha gets dreadful news of Aijaz's murder, this untamed relationship is over. Throughout the country, there is a lot of turmoil due to the demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. During one of such procession Astha comes into contact with Pipeelika whose name is pared down to Pipee, Pip and finally P as the intimacy grows, between Astha and Pipeelika and a powerful physical relationship is established between them. They both start to live together and a strong emotional attachment develops between them. Astha is on the verge of losing her conventional marriage. This lesbian relationship fills her life with joy and vibrant health. No longer she feels now herself as worthless. Pipee's proposal is declined by Astha on the ground that she has a family and children so she can not pay a lasting relationship with her. In the end, Pipee leaves for the United States, purportedly for higher studies to do her Ph.D. and Astha comes back to her family.

To be a woman who announces openly herself as a lesbian is to be a rebel, a transgressor ready to take the abnormal course of action. Geeti Thadani relates the phenomenon of lesbian invisibility in India to what she calls the "myth of tolerance." She designates that lesbians do not exist in India at all, though they survive it in the undergrounds. On the basis of above critical principles, Astha's physical intimacy with Pipee can be regarded outrightly as lesbian bonding between two women, even though the word 'lesbian' is not used for either of them and this taboo project has been dealt judiciously.

The writer has shown these sexual matrix forcefully, where reader's sympathy gets settled upon Astha, who is like a sex doll but bereft of the boon of love other than physical with her husband. Being a love-lorn, she seeks this fulfillment in Pipee, a vibrant young girl.

Under the lesbianism, both ladies enjoy being together and revel in each other's bodies and celebrate this notion privately. The narrator describes this, 'they had been skin on skin, mind on mind with nothing in between' (Kapur 303). A mere touch is enough to give orgasmic delight : [Pipee]

closed her hands over me, and I could scarcely breathe with the pleasure, effuses Astha (Kapur 256). This behaviourism finds an echo in the works of lesbian theorist Catharine R. Stimpson for whom, 'Lesbianism represents a commitment of skin, blood, breast and bone' (Stimpson 197-212).

Although Astha and Pipee have spent a lot of time together during their love making yet this relationship is not allowed to cross the expected trajectory. At the end of the novel, Pipee leaves for U.S. to pursue her Ph.D. is a narrative technique which Patricia Juliana Smith calls 'lesbian panic'. Smith defines lesbian panic : 'In terms of narrative, lesbian panic is, quite simply, the disruptive action or reaction that occurs when a character-or conceivably an author is either unable or unwilling to confront or reveal her own lesbianism or lesbian desire.' (Smith 78) Caught in this state, the female character involves in an action which causes physical or emotional harm to herself or others. This catastrophic reaction may be as sensational as suicide or homicide or as vague as a generalized neurasthenic depression.

The more Astha resists the conventional feminine role, the more frantic the narrative voice gets. Through the assertive expression and derogatory maxim, Hemant tries to disown the changing order, such as the following an extreme statement even at this time: "Please Keep to what you know best, the home, children, teaching. All this doesn't suit you." (Kapur 116).

This line shows that inferior position of women in society is a created one, not a biological fact Civilization defines what is feminine, determines how women should behave and perpetuates the oppression of women. The male world imposes unlimited controls on women. Civilization has assigned the role of women inferior to that of men. However, Kapur in 'A Married Woman' empowers her protagonist. Astha to give a strong resistance to patriarchy by denouncing the prescribed norms of a society. This novel is a feminocentric protest against the phallogocentric patriarchal culture.

The process of spatial transgression on the post of protagonist can be traced through Astha's visualization of an ideal space of homoerotic desire: "Astha : I have a fantasy..... I have a room, small but private, where my family pass before my eyes. It is

very light, before me is a wall which divides the house, but I can see my children, that satisfies me, though to them I am invisible, that satisfies me too. This room will be our room, you with me, living in harmony. Our lives are separate, different things call to us, different demands are made on us, but always that solid base beneath as, like two flies caught in a sticky pool they can not leave." (227)

Is A Married Woman a transgressive text? The answer is vague being a transgressive heroine, Astha's character is humdrum and controversial. She is not rebellious. All she wants is to marry a rich and romantic guy. Her sudden change in life and move to political acting is due to Aijaz Akhtar Khan, who alerts her to the growing religious, fundamentalism in India. Her transformation is farcial. Her intimacy with Pipee shows her bisexuality. After the separation from Pipee, her heterosexuality is further reinforced by her steadfastness in continuing with her husband and family irrespective of her meaningless existence.

To the fullest, she wants to bestride both the worlds- the heterosexual world becomes mandatory and the lesbian world a personal choice. She is neither ready to acknowledge her double sexuality to the world by 'coming out' nor is she prepared to give up on her children and husband and home. On the other hand, Virmati, the protagonist of 'Different Daughters, is a more consistent character. Astha isn't here I would like to refer to what Renee C. Hoogland thinks of Alice Walker's the color purple (1982). According to Hoogland, inspite of the subtle lesbian code in the title and in spite of Celie being a lesbian, the color purple is not a lesbian text because lesbian sexuality is de-politicized and reduced to a 'matter of private preference (which) implies that... (it) has no significance outside the privacy of the bedroom!' (Hoogland 21)

For Astha, family means the conventional heterosexual union, as enacted by patriarchy- an exploitative and suppressive institution. On one hand, Pipee suggests family a union of two women, an equalitarian and symbolic lesbian relationship, on the other hand, Astha prioritizes the traditional family. Since the relationship between Astha and Pipee remain private, Rich's concept of 'lesbian continuum' does not apply. Although the novel approaches the 'woman-identified experience' of

which Rich writes, but the narrative ultimately fails to liberate the women or at least Astha from compulsory hetero sexuality. (Rich 648-49)

The novel ends on a note of defeat for Pipee, and for transgression. It is interesting to know that Kapur's creative art has given birth to New Women in the realm of social, economic, cultural and sexual aspects like Virmati, Astha and Nisha, who shook the domain of feminism and transformed the very terminology of woman's life.

These transgressive women characters gave a jolt to the male oriented society that has oppressed and victimized women since long. Though this new change in thought has its variables, the results are relative depending upon the individual. These female characters revolt silently but fiercely and unlock the shackles of slavery which protect them from being the part of global world, ruled by men. With new attitude and confidence they enter into the long prohibited territory of men's world. Their new way of thinking and attitude give them new identity and social worth as an individual.

Admittedly, if viewed through the prism of western lesbian theory, 'A Married Woman' unmatches the requirement of a lesbian narrative. Astha steps out her house in reach of happiness and freedom. She finds that her homely married life is pregnant with 'Nos' so she goes for 'Yes'. In her married life, she expects her husband's appreciation in painting or poems, give an equal consideration in every decision making process but she is totally denied. Eventually, she rejoins the same house though more self assured and developed now.

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