



**PATRIARCHY UNVEILED: A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF RESISTANCE AND
EMPOWERMENT IN MANJU KAPUR'S *A MARRIED WOMAN***

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Abstract

This research offers a feminist analysis of Manju Kapur's A Married Woman, exploring the nuanced themes of resistance and empowerment within the patriarchal structures that define the lives of its central characters. It examines how the protagonist, Astha, navigates the limitations imposed by gendered expectations, societal norms, and marital constraints in her quest for self-identity and autonomy. It focuses on the tension between traditional roles of wife and mother and the desire for personal freedom, highlighting the internal and external forces that shape Astha's journey of resistance. By focusing on her relationships, sexual autonomy, and spiritual awakening, the paper demonstrates how Kapur portrays both the oppressive nature of patriarchy and the transformative potential of feminist consciousness. Findings indicate that women struggle to assert their autonomy under patriarchy, acknowledging the obstacles they face in patriarchal societies while also recognizing their capacity for resistance and self-actualization.

Keywords: Patriarchy, Feminist Analysis, Resistance, Empowerment, Autonomy, Gendered Expectations, Marital constraints, Self-identity, Women's agency

Introduction

We reside in a patriarchal (male-dominated) society where men exert control over all aspects of life, relegating women to marginalization, exploitation, oppression, and alienation (Jabeen & Afzal, 2024). Under patriarchal society, women are assigned subordinate roles, their individuality and femininity confined by rigid, conventional standards. Patriarchy establishes gender-based hierarchies, elevating men to dominant, 'first-class' positions while relegating women to a 'second-class' status, perpetually subservient to men (Qasim et al., 2024).

Patriarchy is a powerful philosophy and structure of male domination and supremacy. It is not new, nor is the recognition of women's demoralized existence well-established patriarchal system and it embraces that there is an inferior position of women since historical period. Patriarchy is a social system in which men use, abuse, control, oppress and exploit women. (Upreti, 2024, p. 10)

Patriarchy, as a dominant social structure, is depicted in literature, which simultaneously serves as a platform for women's resistance against patriarchal norms. Through their works, writers explore the multifaceted dynamics of gender oppression and challenge entrenched inequalities.



Contemporary Indian women writers have brought suppressed voices to the forefront, exploring aspects of women's lives previously absent in Indian English literature. These writers address issues of identity, gender inequality, and exploitation, emphasizing women's demands for equality and freedom. Feminist authors particularly critique patriarchal aggression and advocate for women's empowerment and autonomy. Indian authors, such as Manju Kapur, have critically examined these themes, portraying women's struggles and aspirations for empowerment within a patriarchal framework. "The protagonists of all the novels of Manju Kapur are seen as women struggling against all odds. Manju Kapur has always tried to depict the picture of the sufferings of women at deeper level in her novels" (Janbandhu, 2014, p. 100).

A Married Woman by Kapur addresses gender issues by portraying women with a fresh perspective, highlighting their struggles to challenge male dominance in a patriarchal society. It is a portrayal of the complexities women face within the confines of patriarchy, particularly in the context of marital and societal expectations. It portrays Astha's struggle to reconcile personal desires with societal and familial expectations while seeking identity and autonomy within oppressive gender roles. Astha, the protagonist of *A Married Woman*, hails from a middle-class family. Her father works as a public servant, while her mother, a deeply religious woman, is preoccupied with arranging Astha's marriage. For her parents, the responsibility of securing a suitable match for their daughter is a source of considerable anxiety, as they view her marriage as the ultimate fulfillment of their parental duties. Challenges such as dowry, adjustments within a joint family, and acclimating to a new cultural environment are highlighted as significant sources of hardship in a woman's life. Astha's mother exemplifies the archetype of a traditional Indian woman whose life revolves around adherence to patriarchal norms. She believes unwaveringly in male authority and is deeply influenced by societal expectations regarding gender roles. Her worldview is confined to the conventional boundaries of a patriarchal society, where a woman's primary duty is to fulfill the roles of an obedient wife and accommodating daughter-in-law. She raises Astha with these values, emphasizing the importance of pleasing and obeying her husband, treating him with reverence akin to that of a deity, in alignment with traditional cultural practices.

This paper aims to conduct a feminist analysis of *A Married Woman*, focusing on the themes of resistance and empowerment. By examining Astha's journey of self-discovery, sexual autonomy, and spiritual awakening, the paper will explore how Kapur portrays both the limitations imposed by patriarchy and the potential for female resistance within a patriarchal society. It recognizes that while women's lives are constrained by powerful social forces, the novel also highlights the ways in which resistance and self-empowerment can emerge as transformative acts of defiance against these structures. It seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of how women navigate and, at times, subvert the patriarchal systems that shape their lives.

Literature Review

Feminism is a comprehensive socio-political movement primarily championing the welfare and rights of women within society. Drawing on this ideology, numerous women authors, intellectuals, and critics have established a framework that seeks to identify such representations



in literature. The primary objective of feminist literary criticism appears to be resisting the restrictive patriarchal conventions that have persisted over time (Janbandhu, 2014).

Feminism critiques the male-dominated structures that shape women's experiences, actively opposing their systematic exclusion from political, economic, educational, and social opportunities. It also promotes the achievement of equal rights for women in all spheres of life. As a social movement, feminism seeks to empower women by advocating for equal rights and opportunities alongside men. (Qasim et al., 2024, pp. 175–176)

Sasikala (2018) notes that in *A Married Woman*, Manju Kapur boldly deals with the theme of lesbianism, paying less attention to societal norms surrounding such relationships. The novel examines the influence of traditional historical conventions on personal relationships within Indian families, set against the backdrop of globalization. These relationships, however, possess the potential to redefine history, offering glimpses of more inclusive forms of human connection—utopian in their vision, albeit partial and temporary. The novel presents “the changing image of women moving away from traditional norms like self-sacrificing women towards modernity that is self-assured assertive and ambitious women and also provides a medium of self-expression” (Sasikala, 2018, p. 25).

Hariharasudan and Gnanamony (2017) argue that Manju Kapur underscores the need to transform patriarchal norms in order to uphold women's rights and individuality. Through inter-caste and inter-religious marriages, Kapur portrays women's rejection of traditional constraints, emphasizing their pursuit of coexistence, equality, and resistance to oppression in a postmodern context. When their individuality is threatened, these women are ready to confront and challenge the entire system. “Astha, the female protagonist of *A Married Women* who seeks for freedom, transgresses the traditional concept of women's subservience and patience like the holy cow” (Hariharasudan & Gnanamony, 2017, p. 6140). Economic freedom alone is insufficient for women; their individuality must also be acknowledged and respected within the socio-religious framework. Society must grant them the autonomy to make their own choices and recognize the integrity that has been denied to them for generations. Women can no longer endure lives of submission, subjugation, or discrimination.

Mary and Theresa (2021) highlight that Kapur's works feature women who challenge societal constraints and patriarchal norms. Her heroines strive for individuality and independence through education, taking on roles beyond traditional domestic responsibilities. These proactive and determined female characters confront domestic challenges on their own, embodying a new archetype of empowered women. “Though they dare to cross the patriarchal threshold, they are caught into another, where their free spirits are curbed and all they do is adjust, compromise and adapt” (Mary & Theresa, 2021, p. 3022). Gaonkar (2022) argues that *A Married Woman* explores the complexities of man-woman relationships, presenting a variety of experiences. While Astha and Hemant encounter challenges and misunderstandings, Aijaz and Pipeelika share a brief yet harmonious connection. In contrast, the older generation demonstrates the ability to maintain amicable relationships and resolve conflicts effectively. Through these varied dynamics, Kapur highlights the diversity of relationships, ranging from joyful to troubled and harmonious. “Manju



Kapur has given the message that understanding and compatibility forms the foundation of a successful marital relationship between the partners” (Gaonkar, 2022, p. 9).

Existing research on *A Married Woman* has focused on themes like identity, sexuality, and societal expectations under patriarchy, but there is a gap in examining how resistance and empowerment intersect in women’s lives within oppressive structures. Previous studies have often overlooked the complexities of resistance in marital and familial contexts and have not fully explored the intersection of gender, religion, and societal norms in shaping Astha’s empowerment. This study aims to address this gap by offering a feminist perspective that highlights the struggles women face in asserting autonomy and explores the transformative process of self-empowerment.

Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This study employs a qualitative feminist methodology and textual analysis to explore themes of resistance and empowerment in Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman*. Focusing on the protagonist, Astha, it examines her challenges against patriarchal structures, including traditional gender roles and marital constraints, in her quest for autonomy. The research also considers the intersectionality of gender, religion, and cultural norms in shaping identities and relationships. Drawing on feminist theories from scholars including Simone de Beauvoir, and Bell Hooks, the study critically analyzes narrative structure, character development, and thematic elements, highlighting the transformative potential of feminist consciousness.

Feminism is a diverse socio-political movement that champions gender equality, with a primary emphasis on advancing women’s rights and combating various forms of injustice. It emerged from the understanding that women are entitled to equal rights, challenging societal norms and customs that sustain discrimination and subjugation (Andayani, 2023). “It always fights against all types of oppressions on women. It is a procedure that takes attempts to understand and conceptualize gender roles and advocates for the annexation of women’s interests in social organization” (Mohajan, 2022, p. 1) Feminism represents a multifaceted movement dedicated to confronting various forms of injustice and advancing women's rights. Its central goal is to liberate women from diverse forms of oppression and encourage worldwide solidarity among women (Prakanshi, 2024, p.1).

Emerging in 19th-century Europe, feminism has undergone significant evolution through multiple waves and ideologies. Its core mission is to challenge patriarchal systems and advocate for women’s empowerment across personal, social, and political realms. Feminism also challenges the notion of gender as a fixed attribute by arguing that gender is socially constructed and fluid. It views gender as a performance, shaped by cultural norms and societal expectations rather than inherent biological traits. It strives to secure rights, power, justice, and dignity for women on a rational foundation, aiming to achieve an equitable and balanced status in socio-economic and political spheres alongside men. “Feminism deals with women’s rights and many other gender related things bothering the female folk in particular and the entire humanity in general” (Chaudhuri, 2021, p. 130). The core issue of gender-based discrimination lies in the feelings and practices that perpetuate inequality, with women historically treated as inferior to men. This has provided a platform for feminist activism, as women have internalized the



ideologies of the dominant male group. Patriarchy, which asserts male dominance over women in all aspects of life, continues to persist, even as women are complicit in maintaining it. Despite various waves of feminism across the world, the system of patriarchy remains entrenched, leading to the ongoing subjugation and exploitation of women, with the issue of gender-based discrimination still unresolved.

Females are still not yet at par with males in almost every sector because there is only a stereotypical assignment of roles and duties to the female folk despite the incessant struggle of many brave and bold women for attaining their dues, getting back their lost power, space, time and privileges. (Chaudhuri, 2021, p. 131)

Feminism challenges the patriarchal structures that influence and define women's experiences, resisting their systematic marginalization from political, economic, educational, and societal domains. It strives to secure equality for women across all areas of life. As a transformative social movement, feminism emphasizes the empowerment of women by championing their right to equal opportunities and participation alongside men. "Feminism tries to dismantle the long-established patriarchal system that subordinates and suppresses women" (Zubair et al., 2020, p.600). The primary aim of feminist literary criticism is to challenge the deeply rooted patriarchal ideologies that have persisted over time. Central to this critical approach are themes such as the marginalization of women, their quest for identity, the struggle for autonomy, and the celebration of the female body (Srinivas, 2022). Feminists actively oppose the assumptions that subordinate women to a secondary status relative to men and reject the limiting stereotypes that confine women to roles such as homemakers, mothers, or passive participants in society. Beauvoir (1949) explains that patriarchy establishes a hierarchical division between genders, relegating women to the lowest strata of society. This pervasive gender inequality and discrimination have fueled the feminist movement, which seeks to address these disparities and advocate for women's equal rights in every sphere of life. According to Beauvoir (1949), patriarchal societies perceive women as the "other," a subordinate group whose influence is secondary to that of men. She highlights that men are identified as "the self," while women are diminished to the role of "the other," reflecting a patriarchal tendency to deem women "inferior" and men "superior." Beauvoir (1949) argues that women endure "a mutilated and frozen existence" (p. 390) within such systems. She rejects the notion of gender inequality, asserting that women can achieve liberation through "complete economic and social equality, which will bring about an inner metamorphosis" (p. 686).

In sum, the above theoretical framework establishes a foundation for analyzing Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* through a feminist lens, emphasizing resistance and empowerment in a patriarchal society. Patriarchy, as described by theorists like Beauvoir, marginalizes women across all spheres, perpetuating inequality despite feminist movements. *A Married Woman* unveils the layered dynamics of patriarchy, portraying the protagonist's struggle for identity and autonomy. It challenges gender stereotypes and aligns with feminist literary criticism, reflecting the quest for selfhood and liberation.

Analysis and Discussion



Kapur (2002) presents a captivating portrayal of the tensions between individual desire and societal expectations, particularly within the framework of a patriarchal society in *A Married Woman*. Astha, the protagonist of *A Married Woman*, hails from a middle-class family where her parents prioritize her marriage as their ultimate responsibility. Her father, a public servant, and her deeply religious mother view finding a suitable husband for Astha as a critical duty, reflecting societal expectations. The novel explores challenges women face, including dowry pressures, life in joint families, and adjusting to new cultural norms. Astha's mother embodies traditional patriarchal ideals, firmly believing in male dominance and adhering to gender roles dictated by societal norms. She instills these values in Astha, emphasizing obedience, accommodating in-laws, and revering her husband as essential duties. These reflect the enduring influence of patriarchal traditions on women's lives. But Astha has no faith in what the traditions say: " 'I don't believe in all that stuff,' said Astha, 'and I think, as an educated person, neither should you' " (Kapur, 2002, p. 1).

Astha resists the gender inequalities rooted in her mother's patriarchal mindset, which prioritizes her marriage over personal growth. In contrast, her father values her education, seeing it as a source of strength and empowerment. This contrast between traditional and progressive parental views shapes Astha's identity, highlighting the conflict between societal expectations and personal aspirations. "At least once a day he said to her, „Why aren't you studying? " How much studying could Astha do to satisfy the man" (Kapur, 2002, p. 2)? Astha's mother is deeply concerned about her daughter's marriage, while her father does not exhibit the same urgency. Despite being a woman herself, her mother fails to recognize the importance of allowing Astha the freedom to make her own decisions. This illustrates the internalization of patriarchal values, where societal expectations overshadow the need to foster personal autonomy. She argues with her husband about the timing of Astha's marriage, expressing fears about societal judgment and the potential risks of waiting too long, asserting that "the girl is blossoming now. When the fruit is ripe it has to be picked" (Kapur, 2002, p. 20). Such remarks highlight the pressure to conform to traditional norms and the prioritization of social propriety over individual choice.

Astha's experiences reflect the complexities of youthful attraction and the societal pressures surrounding relationships. By the age of sixteen, Astha, influenced by "mushy novels and thoughts of marriage" (Kapur, 2002, p. 8), often imagines a romantic and handsome dream boy who will "hold her in his strong manly embosom" (Kapur, 2002, p. 23). It is during this time that she meets Bunty, a handsome soldier who frequents her house, and she becomes infatuated with him. Day and night, she thinks of him, and fueled by the belief in "love at first sight," she expresses her emotions and sends him letters at his boarding school. After a few exchanges, however, her flirtation comes to an abrupt end when her mother finds out about it. Astha later realizes, much to her chagrin, that it was her mother who was resisting her friendship with Bunty. When Astha is in college, her mother continues to focus anxiously on the family's primary parental responsibility—arranging her marriage. Meanwhile, Astha becomes emotionally involved with Rohan, and they engage in a physical relationship. However, Astha remains concerned about her marriage prospects, directly asking Rohan, "Do you want to marry me?" to which he replies, "Isn't it a bit early to decide that? ... I'm not the type to let a girl



pregnant” (Kapur, 2002, p. 23). This exchange highlights a common gender difference in the perception of relationships: while Astha views their bond as potentially leading to marriage, Rohan sees it as a transient affair. Astha eventually realizes that Rohan does not love her, and the relationship ends when he goes abroad. These failed love affairs leave Astha mentally and physically weakened, and she reflects on her mother’s remark: “You cannot tell about a person before marriage, no matter how many times you meet him” (Kapur, 2002, p. 33). Astha later marries Hemant, a bank manager, and experiences “the pain of a mother at parting, the joy of a mother at her duty successfully completed” (Kapur, 2002, p. 36). The early days of their marriage bring some happiness, with Hemant caring for her and providing material comforts. During their honeymoon in Kashmir, Astha realizes the deeper meaning of marriage. In the beginning, Hemant gives her love, security, and material convenience, and “Astha’s heart was as full of love as the lake was full of water” (Kapur, 2002, p. 42). In the early days of her marriage, Hemant appreciates Astha’s artistic abilities, commenting, “I see you are a writer,” as he looks through her notebook, “as well as an artist” (Kapur, 2002, p. 41). This recognition of her creative talents brings Astha joy, as she believes that her husband understands her aspirations. “Astha heard him with satisfaction. Her husband was going to encourage her writing. Maybe she could become a poetess as well as a painter. Her life was opening up before her golden vistas” (Kapur, 2002, p. 42).

As Astha begins teaching, her desire for independence grows stronger. However, during her first pregnancy, she and her husband both hope for a daughter, while her mother is fixated on having a grandson. Hemant expresses progressive views, remarking, “In America there is no difference between boys and girls. How can this country get anywhere if we go on treating our woman this way?” (Kapur, 2002, p. 57). Astha reflects on the physical changes she undergoes during pregnancy, pondering why such experiences are uniquely female. She questions the gender inequality that seems to be divinely ordained, thinking, “Astha had heard men were revolted by the way women looked when they were pregnant, but not Hemant” (Kapur, 2002, p. 57). Their first child is a girl, named Anuradha, which brings with it the old superstition: “Girls who look like their father are lucky” (Kapur, 2002, p. 58). In the meantime, Hemant decides to leave his job at the bank and start manufacturing television sets, a decision that significantly changes the family’s financial situation. However, this shift also leads to a growing sense of distance between them, as Hemant becomes increasingly preoccupied with his business, leaving Astha feeling neglected. As the family’s financial status improves, Hemant continues to make decisions with the family’s well-being in mind. Yet, despite his initial progressive stance on gender, his desire for a son resurfaces when Astha becomes pregnant for the second time. He understands that the sex of the child is beyond Astha’s control, yet he longs for a male heir. This reflects a deeply ingrained societal mindset, where despite education and changing circumstances, the preference for sons remains pervasive. Astha and Hemant’s situation reflects the enduring gender biases that shape societal expectations, even in educated families. During Astha’s pregnancy, Hemant revealed his preference for a male child, declaring, “I want to have my son soon.” When Astha asked, “How do you know we will have a son?” he replied confidently, “Of course we will have a son, and if we don’t we needn’t stop at two (Kapur, 2002, p. 61).” Astha, taken aback, asked, “I



thought these things didn't matter to you. What if we don't have a boy" (Kapur, 2002, p. 61)? Hemant rationalized his belief by explaining that the sex of the child depends on the man's chromosomes, adding, "With two sisters in your family, it may be a girl" (Kapur, 2002, p. 61). His remarks, rooted in traditional patriarchal thinking, reveal the lingering societal preference for sons, even among those who claim modern values.

Astha, who had never desired multiple children solely for the sake of having a male child, is nevertheless pressured by societal and familial expectations. Despite her own concerns, her mother performs special rituals, or *pujas*, to ensure the birth of a male heir, and even Hemant, despite his Western education, does not oppose this practice. Astha contemplates the pervasive desire for a son and, during her pregnancy, speaks to her unborn child: "Baby, it's you they want to be a boy," Astha would whisper sometimes, "are you a boy or a girl? I'll love you no matter what" (Kapur, 2002, p. 68). Eventually, she gives birth to a son, Himanshu, and the family's joy is immense. In traditional Indian society, a woman's worth is often tied to her ability to bear a male child, securing her respect in the family. Astha reflects, "She had partaken of the archetypical experiences marked out for the female race" (Kapur, 2002, p. 69). However, as Himanshu grows, Hemant becomes increasingly focused on his son's care, neglecting Astha's needs. Though Astha becomes exhausted caring for both children, Hemant dismisses her fatigue, telling her, "It's woman's work... Hire somebody to help you, or quit your job" (Kapur, 2002, p. 70). Astha, frustrated by this attitude, asserts, "This is our son, the one you wanted so much. It's nice if we look after him together." Despite this, Hemant continues to prioritize his business, leaving Astha to handle her responsibilities alone. Her health deteriorates, and despite being advised to undergo surgery, Hemant remains emotionally distant. Although he arranges the operation and cares for her afterward, Astha still feels neglected, especially when he leaves for business trips, leaving her alone in her recovery. "If that nurse could see her now, her envy would be greatly diluted, thought Astha as she fretted over absent husband, and often absent children as well" (Kapur, 2002, p. 77-78). Astha's emotional isolation intensifies. Her children are either at school or with their grandparents, and Hemant's continued absence makes her feel even lonelier. She expresses her frustration, saying, "What about me? As it is when I am in school Himanshu is upstairs. When I come home I want the children. I hardly have you, I should have them" (Kapur, 2002, p. 78). In her solitude, Astha turns to writing and sketching, creating two hundred poems with the hope of having them published. She longs for Hemant's support and admiration, but his response is one of disinterest and distaste. Despite his earlier encouragement of her artistic pursuits, now he dismisses her work, leaving her feeling rejected. In frustration, Astha says, "I want to bang my head against the wall because you never understand anything. I thought you might help me in deciding what to do with them, she said tense and calm" (Kapur, 2002, p. 81). As a result, Astha abandons her writing, silencing the creative voice within her. The disapproval from her husband in this male-dominated society stifles her artistic expression, and she resigns herself to neglecting her passions. Ultimately, Astha turns to sketching, an activity she pursues as a means of self-expression, yet one that remains largely unrecognized by those around her.



Following her father's death, Astha's mother is left feeling isolated and lonely. Astha, her only child, wishes for her mother to live with them, but traditional Indian customs do not permit a married daughter to have her parent stay with her. This highlights a broader societal issue in which families, particularly in Indian culture, often long for a male child, as sons are believed to have a rightful place in the family and are expected to care for aging parents. In contrast, a daughter, despite being raised and educated by her parents, is not granted the same rights or responsibilities. Astha, being both educated and independent, challenges these societal norms. She refuses to adhere to these restrictive traditions and asserts her belief in the equality of her role in her parents' lives. She declares, "It is my house too. If people mind it is just too bad. I don't believe in all this shit about parents being the responsibility only of the sons" (Kapur, 2002, p. 94). Through this statement, Astha rejects the gendered expectations imposed upon her by society, asserting her autonomy and the right to care for her mother as much as any son would be expected to do. Eventually, Astha's mother decides to move to an ashram in Rishikesh, selling her property and entrusting the proceeds to her son-in-law, Hemant, to reinvest. She believes that women are incapable of managing financial matters, a view that Astha challenges: "Really, Ma, don't you think women can be responsible for their own investments?... but even if he was the man of business, she wanted to participate in any decision concerning the money her mother chose to give her" (Kapur, 2002, p. 97).

Astha questions her husband about the investment, expressing a desire to gain experience in managing money. However, Hemant misinterprets her query, feeling that his wife lacks trust in him. Astha clarifies, "She meant nothing personal. She didn't want to feel dependent, that was all. Surely equals could relate better than master and slave?" (Kapur, 2002, p. 99). This reflects the deep frustration a woman experiences when she is dependent on a man, despite having a seemingly comfortable life. Astha's yearning for independence and self-exploration, however, leaves her feeling unsatisfied. She laments, "What kind of fool had she been to expect Hemant to understand? She had a good life, but it was good because nothing was questioned" (Kapur, 2002, p. 99). Astha grapples with the internal conflict of reconciling the privileges of her life with a deep yearning to break free from the limitations imposed by her gendered role. Hemant's growing indifference marks a shift in their marriage, with the initial warmth and affection giving way to neglect. This change leaves Astha increasingly disturbed and dissatisfied, as Hemant frequently criticizes her for perceived inefficiencies despite her diligent efforts to manage the household. Astha longs for the love and care Hemant once showed but feels powerless to bridge the growing emotional distance. Struggling with grief and dissatisfaction, she turns to creative outlets like sketching and writing poetry. These pursuits become her solace, enabling her to cope with isolation and externalize her emotions amidst her unfulfilled relationship.

Astha finds solace in drawing and painting, which become her primary outlets for expressing her pain and loneliness. Her poems and paintings vividly convey her anguish and grief, reflecting her inner emotional turmoil. Astha embodies the plight of Indian women struggling for autonomy in a patriarchal society that deprives them of agency. She is likened to a caged bird with clipped wings, unable to soar freely. Traditional norms confine women, expecting obedience to fathers before marriage and to husbands and in-laws afterward. This oppressive structure symbolizes the



enduring struggle of women against patriarchal dominance, a persistent reality in society. “Indian society like a number of ‘classical’ societies is still patriarchal. Patriarchal values regulating sexuality, reproduction, and social productions are expressed through specific cultural metaphors” (Sivakumar & Manimekalai, 2021, p. 427). Kapur (2002) poignantly portrays the gender issues that persist, shedding light on the restricted position of women and their fight for identity and equality. In the narrative, Astha’s relationship with Hemant exemplifies the dynamics of a patriarchal marriage, where the wife is expected to revere her husband almost as a god, while her own feelings and perspectives are disregarded. Hemant’s disregard for Astha’s sentiments highlights the lack of emotional reciprocity in their marriage. Astha’s mother, too, embodies the traditional Indian woman who unconditionally follows patriarchal norms. She believes firmly in male authority, internalizing the notion that family decisions should rest in the hands of men. This is evident when she chooses to entrust a large sum of money to Hemant, rather than to Astha, believing that he, as a man, is better suited to handle financial matters. When Astha questions this decision, her mother justifies it by saying, “He is a man, he knows about money. He will invest it for you and the children” (p. 135). The contrast between Astha and her mother is striking. While her mother embodies the typical Indian woman who has accepted her subordinate role in a male-dominated society, Astha represents a new woman, one who is striving to break free from these constraints in search of her own identity and happiness.

Indian women are comparatively unaware about their legal rights and social status. They feel economically, socially, and prestigiously inferior to that of man. Though many efforts have been undertaken by government and social reformers, the condition of women is not satisfactory in the society. (Babbar, 2022, p. 118)

Astha strives to assert her voice against male dominance while fulfilling her roles as a wife, daughter-in-law, and mother. Despite her longing for independence, she remains committed to household responsibilities, balancing her personal aspirations with family duties. Kapur illustrates Astha’s struggles to carve out her own space amidst frequent instances of male dominance. During a family holiday in Goa, Astha admires a silver box but cannot purchase it without Hemant’s permission. Hemant dismisses her request as frivolous, leaving her deeply affected. This moment underscores the emotional toll of living under her husband’s control, highlighting the pervasive suppression of her autonomy. Despite her own work and contribution to the family’s finances, she is still not entitled to make financial choices independently. This scenario reflects the situation of many working women in India, who, despite being financially contributing members of their families, do not have the autonomy to spend their earnings on their personal desires. The underlying issue of patriarchal control over women’s financial independence is clearly highlighted in this situation, underscoring the continued inequality that many women face in both private and public spheres.

The tone, the refusal both hurt her. She was an earning woman, why couldn’t she have a say in how some of their money was spent? She never said anything when he chose to squander money on airline tickets, why couldn’t she buy a box she liked? Maybe it was too expensive, but she was sure if they bargained, it would become cheaper I also earn. Can’t I buy a box if I want, even if it is a little overpriced? You earn! Snorted Hemant,



what you earn, now that is really something, yes that will pay for this holiday.” (Kapur, 2002, p. 165)

The denial of the silver box by Hemant starkly illustrates the entrenched male superiority within the family structure, where men wield the power to make decisions. For Astha, this rejection not only reflects financial control but also deeply wounds her self-respect and dignity. Scholars Sharma and Maheswari aptly observe that Astha’s understanding of a married woman’s place in the family often equates to that of an “unpaid servant or a slave,” while the prospect of divorce represents “social and economic death in Indian status” (Sharma and Maheswari 145). This commentary encapsulates the predicament faced by women like Astha, who grapple with societal expectations and the suppression of their individuality within patriarchal norms. Astha’s life takes a significant turn when she meets Aijaz Akhtar Khan, a history lecturer and committed social worker. Aijaz introduces Astha to street theatre, where she becomes involved in a performance addressing the sensitive and divisive issue of the Babri Masjid demolition. Aijaz, a Muslim from Uttar Pradesh, is married to Pipeelika Trivedi, a Hindu woman who shares his passion for social work through her involvement in Ujala, an organization promoting communal harmony. The street theatre group’s performance on communal tension not only engages with the socio-political realities of India but also provides Astha with a platform to step beyond the confines of her domestic life and express herself on larger societal issues. This encounter with Aijaz and her participation in socially relevant theatre marks a critical moment of awakening for Astha, enabling her to explore her identity and challenge the limitations imposed by her patriarchal environment. Through this narrative, Kapur sheds light on the intersections of gender, religion, and politics, offering a nuanced exploration of a woman’s journey towards self-discovery and empowerment amidst societal turbulence.

Astha’s evolution into an empowered individual is strongly influenced by her interaction with Aijaz. Unlike her husband, Hemant, who consistently undermines her abilities, Aijaz recognizes and admires her creative and intellectual talents. His encouragement boosts Astha’s confidence and fuels her engagement with social issues. When Aijaz appreciates her script on the contentious Babri Masjid and Ram Janmabhoomi issue, Astha feels validated in ways Hemant never offered. This stark contrast between Aijaz’s encouragement and Hemant’s neglect intensifies Astha’s dissatisfaction with her marital life and compels her to seek fulfillment beyond the domestic sphere. Aijaz’s tragic death at the hands of anti-social elements while performing a play on communal harmony profoundly impacts Astha. His demise becomes a catalyst for her transformation into a social activist. She channels her grief into action, participating in rallies and social justice movements, and contributing through her art by donating paintings for an exhibition in memory of Aijaz’s street theatre group. Despite the physical and emotional toll of these activities, Astha finds a sense of purpose and worth, further alienating her from Hemant, who disapproves of her involvement. Hemant’s rigid patriarchal views—exemplified by his statement, “A woman is in the home, and not on the streets”—clash with Astha’s growing need for autonomy and self-fulfillment.

Astha’s quest for independence is symbolized by her yearning for physical and creative space. When she requests her sister-in-law’s room as a personal studio, Hemant dismisses her, labeling



her selfish and trivializing her aspirations. This rejection underscores the systemic suppression of women's desires within patriarchal households. Despite his belittlement, Astha's sale of two paintings grants her a sense of financial independence, marking a significant step in her journey of self-realization. Her participation in the Sampradayakta Mukti Munch protest in Ayodhya signifies her defiance against societal and familial expectations. Astha challenges communal violence and patriarchal oppression, using her speech to reflect on women's struggles, emphasizing that personal experiences often shape their perspectives and expose the suffering caused by violence. Astha's defiance against communal violence and patriarchal constraints is a powerful assertion of her commitment to justice and equality. During her speech at the protest, she reflects on the shared struggles of women, stating, "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" (Kapur, 2002, p. 197). She highlights how personal experiences, particularly those rooted in domestic life, shape women's understanding of societal issues, asserting, "Where there is violence, there is suffering, unnecessary and continuous suffering" (Kapur, 2002, p. 197). Astha critiques the fixation on historical wrongs, pointing out that "the past cannot feed us, clothe us, or give us security" (Kapur, 2002, p. 198). She highlights the futility of dwelling on history when it comes at the expense of lives lost and the pain endured by women and children, noting, "History cannot be righted easily, but lives are lost easily; pain and trauma to women and children come easily" (Kapur, 2002, p. 198). Through Astha's speech and actions, Manju Kapur vividly portrays the courage and resilience of women who challenge entrenched patriarchal systems while advocating for equality and justice.

Astha's encounter with Pipeelika Khan in Ayodhya marks a transformative phase in her journey of self-discovery and resistance against patriarchal norms. Pipeelika, as Aijaz's widow, embodies strength and independence, defying societal expectations by marrying a Muslim man and living by her own values. Her self-assuredness and autonomy starkly contrast Astha's constrained existence, making her an inspiring figure in Astha's life. The bond between them deepens as they share their pain and struggles—Astha, disillusioned with her indifferent husband and patriarchal marriage, finds solace in Pipeelika's empathetic understanding of her turmoil. Their shared experiences of loss and marginalization nurture a profound intimacy, culminating in a lesbian relationship. For Astha, this relationship signifies a bold rejection of conventional roles and an embrace of emotional fulfillment outside heteronormative boundaries. It challenges the traditional portrayal of women in Indian literature, offering an alternative narrative centered on female bonding and solidarity. Astha and Pipeelika's connection highlights the essential qualities of reciprocity, understanding, and equality in relationships—elements missing in Astha's marriage to Hemant. By exploring this bond, Kapur (2002) critiques rigid structures of gender and sexuality, presenting a nuanced narrative of empowerment, emotional liberation, and the complexity of identity within a patriarchal society.

Astha's journey critiques the societal expectations imposed on women, particularly within the confines of traditional Indian womanhood. As an ideal housewife, she fulfills her familial roles, embodying the traits of a "catalyst"—essential yet invisible—leading to emotional exhaustion and marital dissatisfaction. Hemant's traditional mindset stifles her individuality, using cultural



ideals to suppress her autonomy. Seeking emotional intimacy and deeper connection, Astha finds solace in Pipeelika, whose independence and understanding offer her validation. Their bond transcends physical intimacy, evolving into a relationship rooted in shared ideologies and emotional support, representing Astha's quest for personal fulfillment and liberation from patriarchal constraints. For Astha, Pipee represents liberation from her oppressive roles, offering her a sense of self-worth and identity. Kapur's (2002) portrayal of their relationship is groundbreaking in Indian feminist literature, addressing same-sex love with sensitivity and depth. Pipee's love allows Astha to feel "beautiful, worthy, and most wanted" for the first time, emphasizing the transformative power of their bond. However, Astha's internal conflict persists as she navigates her roles as a wife, mother, and lover, reflecting the relentless societal pressures that constrain women despite their pursuit of individuality and fulfillment. This duality manifests in her lies and deceptions, which signify the tension between societal expectations and personal fulfillment. Astha's realization that "marriage is not just sex but also togetherness and respect" marks a turning point in her journey toward self-awareness and empowerment. Her assertion to Hemant—"Do I have to give it just because you are my husband? Unless I feel close to you, I can't, I'm not a sex object" (Kapur, 2002, p. 202)—is a bold rejection of patriarchal entitlement and a demand for mutual respect in her marriage. Through this, Kapur (2002) critiques the commodification of women in marital relationships and advocates for a redefinition of marriage as a partnership built on equality and emotional intimacy. Kapur's (2002) narrative highlights the struggles of women to reconcile their societal roles with their personal desires, ultimately questioning the traditional constructs of womanhood and highlighting the need for a more inclusive and empathetic understanding of female identity.

Astha's journey towards self-discovery and independence is portrayed in *A Married Woman*. Pipee's encouragement for Astha to buy a car represents a symbolic step towards Astha asserting her autonomy. This act, initially met with hesitation, reflects her inner struggle to break free from patriarchal norms. Astha's eventual confidence to assert her need for independence, supported by her inheritance, marks a pivotal moment in her transformation. The narrative explores the profound impact of Astha's relationship with Pipee, which brings emotional fulfillment, creativity, and a sense of purpose. Pipee's presence revitalizes Astha's life, diminishing her migraines and reigniting her creative energies. Their bond, both physical and emotional, provides Astha with a sanctuary from the stifling constraints of her marriage to Hemant. Astha's involvement in the Ekta Yatra with Pipee further signifies her growing rebellion against traditional expectations of wifehood and motherhood. Hemant's criticism of her departure, framed through fears of crime and safety, exemplifies the societal pressures used to confine women to domestic roles. Astha's journey reflects her resistance to patriarchal dominance as she prioritizes personal fulfillment and her bond with Pipee over traditional familial roles. Her growing disinterest in Hemant, marked by emotional and physical detachment, signifies her rejection of conventional marital norms. However, societal stigma prevents her from fully embracing her relationship with Pipee. Astha's struggle embodies the feminist fight against male dominance, societal taboos, and entrenched gender inequalities. Her defiance of traditional roles



and pursuit of self-fulfillment reflect the core themes of empowerment and resistance in Kapur's (2002) narrative.

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 every reason it was soothing to be with. Her body was his, when they made love it was pipe's face Astha saw, her hands she felt. She accepted the misery of the dislocation as her due for being a faithless wife. (Kapur, 2002, p. 287)

When Astha usually went to meet Pipee, she faced significant trouble with transportation. Recognizing this, Pipee suggested that Astha buy a car and encouraged her to embrace independence in this aspect as well. Pipee herself exemplified independence through the use of her personal scooter. Initially, Astha hesitated to discuss this matter with Hemant, but eventually, she became confident in her desire for a car, especially since she had her mother's money to support her decision. "Please, Hemant. I am thirty-six. I need to be independent. I am always adjusting to everybody else's needs." (Kapur, 2002, p. 227). Astha's life began to change for the better, filled with joy, love, and renewal, particularly through her connection with Pipee. The bond they shared, both physical and emotional, helped her find a supportive environment and rediscover her creative confidence. Her migraines subsided, and she gained the courage to embark on the Ekta Yatra, a fifteen-day journey away from her family. Hemant criticized her decision, accusing her of lacking "a sense of home, duty, wifehood or motherhood." Despite his objections, Astha remained resolute, reflecting on how calm her relationship with Pipee had made her. She thought, "How calm my relationship with Pipee has made me! There was a time when if he said half so much, I would have started crying" (Kapur, 2002, p. 248). Hemant tried to instill fear in her, warning her of the dangers women face, particularly the possibility of rape. Despite his manipulative attempts, Astha's sense of independence and self-worth grew, and she remained firm in her decision to pursue her own path. Despite such challenges, Astha felt immense happiness with Pipee and often thought about staying with her forever. Gradually, her priorities shifted toward Pipee, sometimes even over her family and children. Although she enjoyed the relationship, Astha hesitated to openly acknowledge it due to societal constraints. Her actions and choices symbolized her protest against male dominance, societal taboos, and gender inequality. Astha's disinterest in her husband, both emotionally and physically, highlighted her growing resistance to traditional marital roles and expectations.

Conclusion

A Married Woman focuses on women's struggles against patriarchal structures, highlighting their resilience, resistance, and pursuit of empowerment. Through Astha's journey, the novel explores the challenges of defying societal norms and traditional gender roles, emphasizing that true empowerment involves recognizing individuality and autonomy within cultural and religious frameworks. Addressing themes of intersectionality, the narrative underscores the interplay of gender, religion, and culture in shaping women's paths to self-empowerment. Ultimately, the novel critiques patriarchal norms while envisioning coexistence and equality, contributing to feminist literature and the ongoing fight for gender equity.

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