Chapter - III

A Search for Interest, Togetherness and Respect in
A Married Woman
A Married Woman by Manju Kapur appeared in 2002. After successful and award-winning difficult Daughters in 1998, this is the second fiction of Manju Kapur which deals with the issue of woman’s life. All her novels present a vivid portrayal of contemporary Indian female life and A Married Woman stands in the list with similar interest. The women characters in Manju Kapur’s novels are authentic representatives of Indian women. Indian society is firmly set on the ground of patriarchy and the women are always considered as second genders who are supposed to follow and live accordingly the set standards for them by the society and family. Kapur’s women characters are revolting in terms of these set customs and standards but they do not come out firmly rejecting the familial values and attachment towards husband, children and other family members; rather they emerge as independent citizens of modern and democratic India, demanding and playing their significant role in society equal to men. They appear as modern individuals establishing their separate identity in terms of education, society, religion and nation rather than confining themselves in the narrow roles of domesticity. Discussing characteristic features of Kapur’s novels, Kavita rightly says that Kapur’s fictions present a picture of woman’s mind and the struggle that constantly continues in it against male supremacy.

The title A Married Woman is an indication to the life-story a woman named Astha who is married to Hemant and lives in Delhi. Astha stands for average Indian women who pass through similar predicament and plight in their lives. In addition to dealing with Indian femininity, the novel also throws light on sensitive issues like communal conflict between Hindus and Muslims and the issue of lesbian relation. Kapur becomes the first ever female writer in India who dares to explore the controversial issue of physical relation between women in a society that is conventional in its approach. Commenting on the central theme and aspects of A Married Woman, Ajay Kumar writes:

A Married Woman is a novel with a social purpose. It deals with three issues – reinterpretation of history, political ideologies and feminist views in the present context. The pointed references to life and delicate dealing with political activities of the time are presented with the historical backdrop of Babri Masjid- Ram Janmabhoomi episode. This gives the story a tangible shape with the articulation of emotional issues, communal hatred and women concerns. (292)
A Married Woman is well written on the background of two chief historical events in India: Babri Masjid Demolition and Ayodhya Yatra. Ayodhya Yatra was led by Bhartiya Janta Party leader Lalkrishna Advani to create awareness and to build a marvelous temple of Shri Ram, Hindu deity, at Ramjanamabhumi premises in Ayodhya. Babri Masjid demolition and Ayodhya Yatra both the major historical incidents in India are much more controversial as they brought fragmentation and communal chaos between Hindus and Muslims. Thus, the narrative appears as a multi-dimensional work of literature that not only depicts the womanly issues but also creates an in-depth discussion about such type of controversial and communal issues. The text also becomes distinct as it puts towards the much debated topic like lesbianism. Hence, as a master of literary narration, Manju Kapur succeeds in creating a wonderful work of art that discusses varied but well connected themes. The protagonists in Kapur’s novels exhibit independent thinking and approach towards life. Discussing Kapur’s protagonist in A Married Woman, Dr. Sanjay Kumar Swarnkar and Arti Gupta write:

The novelist has portrayed her protagonist as a woman caught in the conflict between the passions of the flesh and a yearning to be a part of the political and intellectual movements of the day. The writer addresses many issues that are related to the middle class women. Whether or not a girl has the right to make her own choices in life is an issue dragged this way and that, for a long time in our country. (354)

As the novel begins, the reader comes across Astha’s childhood days. Astha is the protagonist of the novel through whose life Kapur discusses various issues in the novel. The opening and ending lines in Kapur’s fictions are always remarkable and eye-catching. Almost in all her novels the opening depicts a lot about the fiction, its theme, central idea etc. and A Married Woman is not an exception in this sense. Commencing the fiction Kapur writes:

Asth was brought up properly, as befits a woman with large supplements of fear. One slip might find her alone, vulnerable and unprotected. The infinite ways in which she could be harmed were not specified, but Astha absorbed them through her skin, and ever after was drawn to the safe and secure. (A Married Woman 01)
Kapur’s words clearly indicate that young girls in India are brought up with the mindset of fear and stress of sexual harassment. When the girls reach to the adolescence period, they are trained to keep distance from boys. Right from the beginning the girls are raised in a certain framework of behavior wherein they find comparatively very less freedom compared to boys. This gender partiality gets highlighted in the fiction as Astha’s mother imposes certain restrictions on her. During her school days, Astha comes in contact with a beautiful and handsome boy named Bunty. Manju Kapur highlights him as “Bunty the beautiful” (A Married Woman 08). As a common Indian adolescent girl, Astha gets attracted towards Bunty. It is the gender attraction which is very normal at this age in her life. The mental unrest of Astha caused due to her infatuation towards Bunty is nicely shown by Manju Kapur. She writes:

Bunty the beautiful, Bunty whose face never left her, Bunty whose slightest word, look and gesture she spent hours nursing to death.

(A Married Woman 08)

But the initial attraction towards Bunty does not last long due to her mother’s timely interference. Astha is taught to write a personal diary from her childhood. In the diary she also notes down her feelings and attachment towards Bunty, which finally is known by her mother when she reads it. Astha’s mother, Sita is a conservative and traditional Indian woman who stands for the first generation Indian women who observes a woman’s life only through the perspective of family, children and domestic duties. Sita secretly treats Bunty in such a way that he stops visiting Astha’s house. Though Astha waits for Bunty after the holidays but he never returns and thus Astha’s first love-story ends leaving her sad and desperate. Later on she comes to know about her mother’s role in her break-up.

In college Astha comes closer with Rohan and now onwards she hides her new friendship and doesn’t make her parents know about it. But her intimacy with Rohan is presented in her diary which provide enough evidence to her mother to interfere and that eventually ends the affair. The failure of her relation affects her habit of writing diary and she stops expressing her feelings in it. In the final exam Rohan gets good result and goes to Oxford for further studies. She waits for his reply and reaction but she doesn’t get any correspondence from Rohan. Astha’s miserable condition is
presented by Manju Kapur. She writes, “Rohan went abroad and Astha enrolled in MA, bored and enthusiastic” (*A Married Woman* 31)

The first part of the fiction sets the background for the further development of the plot. In this part reader comes to know about the background of the protagonist and her parents. Astha’s father is depicted comparatively liberal than her mother who is depicted typically as a first generation woman who makes Astha follow the values and tradition. When she is in final year of post graduation, her parents begin to discuss the marriage proposals that arrive for her. Sita becomes much more conscious about her marriage. Sita presents her hidebound mentality when she says that if the parents die without marrying their daughter, they are surely bound to rebirth. She believes that the ultimate salvation to parents of a girl child is possible only if their daughter is married prior to their death. Sita’s beliefs not only show the conservative approach of Indian women but also stands as an evidence of how much superstitious the temperament of Indian women has developed due to lack of education. It shows the typical Indian conservative sensibility for the marriage of a girl child.

The different perspective of Astha’s parents also highlights the difference of opinions of a mother and father for their daughter. On the one hand where Astha’s mother comes out as a staunch supporter of tradition her father appears as an educated person who wants to see his daughter independent and self-reliant. Thus, a woman’s perspective towards other woman is different from male perspective. The typicality of Indian parenting is beautifully outlined in this fiction by the novelist.

During the conversation about Astha’s marriage proposals, Sita presents her motherly concern to her husband:

There is time for everything. The girl is blossoming now. When the fruit is ripe, it has to be picked. Later she might get into wrong company and we will be left, ringing our hands. If she marries at this stage, she will have no problem for adjusting. We too are not so young that we can afford to wait. (*A Married Woman* 20)

The motherly concern that is shown in above lines not only presents the traditional approach of a mother towards her young daughter, but it also denotes the prudence of a mother who wants to make her daughter adaptive to the congeniality of
When Astha is in her final year of M.A. a marriage proposal arrives from an educated boy named Hemant. Hemant is depicted as a foreign-returned MBA who has settled down in Delhi with his family and has begun the business of manufacturing of TV sets. The education, economic and social status of Hemant’s family becomes the major factor behind approval of Astha’s parents. When Astha is asked for an opinion, initially she rejects saying she doesn’t know him but upon parents’ inducement, she selects Hemant as her life partner.

Engagement is planned as per Indian rituals and both of them go on date several times prior to marriage. All these incidents occur in a normal traditional manner with a conventional approach. After their marriage, Astha feels contentment of being married in a well-to-do family. She also feels a sense of security when they travel to Kashmir on honeymoon tour. The novelist writes:

A deep seed of happiness settled in the pit of her stomach, she was anxieties any longer. She was now a homemaker in her own right, a grown woman experiencing her first plane ride. (A Married Woman 37)

After marriage Astha sets herself perfectly in the roles of wife, daughter-in-law and an ideal housewife. She happily looks after the house and cares for her in-laws. She enjoys the marital bliss. Her conjugal life with Hemant is full of pleasure at the initial marital stage. Manju Kapur depicts the sexual relation between Astha and Hemant. She writes:

Sex. There was so much of it. The pain Astha felt between her legs was never quite absent. She could only thank God they never spent that much time actually doing it. Hemant attacked the whole thing with great urgency, gazing at her a little anxiously after each time, while she uncertainly smiled back to a look of satisfaction that came over his face. (A Married Woman 38)

The above lines present an evidence of ample sexual pleasure between the newly married couple. Moreover, one point of discussion which becomes apparent here is Manju Kapur’s effective and minute description of sexual activities of her protagonists with their male counterparts. The above quotation also proves as an
evident in this regard. Sexual description with minute details is seen in almost all the fictions of Kapur. As a master of narrative art, Manju Kapur seems well aware about the significance of sexual narration in fictions which are based on women’s life. Sex is an important drive in a person’s life and its narration automatically highlights in a fiction which narrates a woman’s personal life. But it has to be noted here that the sexual description and feelings portrayed are not obscene or vulgar.

Actually, to bring out the authentic reality of a female protagonist, the writer has to delve into the personal life and explore the issues like sex, mindset, cultural and thought background etc. Thus, description of sexual relation of the protagonists with their partners, whether male or female, becomes important as it brings out the hidden problems that the characters in the fiction suffer from. Moreover, Kapur’s narration of physical relations of her protagonists is decent and normal. Any type of vulgarity does not appear and more accurately it can be said that it meets the requirements of an outstanding and authentic fiction written on women’s life.

The initial period of her married life passes through her contentment as a happy married woman who has an educated husband, father in-law, mother-in-law and a sweet house made up of them. After sometime, Astha becomes a mother of two children named Anuradha and Himanshu. Now Astha becomes much more busy in bringing up the children and on the other side Hemant starts spending more time in business to flourish it. With two children to take care, Astha’s life takes an opposite turn as she becomes totally busy and involved in domesticity only. Astha is born and brought up in such surroundings that women do not keep themselves trapped in narrow roles of familial duties. Astha has seen women coming out of their families and making identity of their own. As a modern woman she doesn’t want to keep herself limited to home. In addition, over burden of household chores and children’s responsibility make her life monotonous and charmless. A natural affinity for doing something worthwhile in life is noted in Astha’s character.

To prove her potential and create an identity of her own she joins as a teacher in St. Anthony School where she finds respect for her noble profession and recognition as a self-reliant woman. Apart from commencing her job as a teacher, Astha also develops her painting art. Painting has remained as her one of the major hobbies from childhood but Astha finds its right manifestation only after marriage.
She spares times from her daily routine and frequently engages herself in painting. The two major steps taken by Astha, job as a teacher and development as a painter, directly pose her as a modern woman of new India who comes out from home and stands by men as equal to them. Manju Kapur’s women characters are symbolic to modern Indian women and Kapur presents her protagonist as evidence that women in India are no more subjugated to conventional norms and they come out with confidence to live independently proving their abilities and talents.

Engagement at more than one front makes Astha tired and busy all-time. She doesn’t find any room for herself in her life. Additionally, Hemant doesn’t spend enough time with her as he remains absorbed in his business and its promotion. He often comes home late, tired and exhausted and the intimate moments between the couple remain absent eventually. Once Astha asked him to help in taking care of younger son, Himanshu, but Hemant rejects the idea on the spot considering it as a woman’s task. Many times Astha complained him about over-burden of her tasks and demands his help, at which Hemant advices to leave the job or keep Himanshu to Astha’s mother’s house to bring him up. What Astha needs at this stage of life is only companionship of her husband and warmth that can assure her of being loved. She doesn’t want to be only an object of sexual satisfaction; instead she needs time, love and affection from Hemant which unfortunately he doesn’t realize and resultantly that brings Astha’s engagement outside the house.

One issue that needs to be clarified here is married women’s confinement in the domestic duties. It is seen as a general male tendency in Indian society that a wife is expected to look after her husband’s parents and children. Many times it is seen in Indian families that husband needs someone to take care of his parents and house. After marriage the married woman appears fulfilling this duty. A typical Indian wife happily fulfills this duty but along with that she also wants attention and love from her husband and if these two elements are missing in a couple’s life, a marital rift occurs gradually that threatens the foundations of marriage.

In Astha’s case the above discussed issue appears relevant and it gets highlighted in a conversation between the couple. Astha knows that Hemant lived in USA and got higher education there, so once after they get married she asks Hemant that why did he not marry an American girl? The answer is very significant which
showcases Indian male sensibility of having a quintessential Indian wife who doesn’t cross the set limitations. Hemant says:

I had responsibilities to my parents. I am the only son, and I wanted someone who would fit in with our family life. American women are too demanding. Their men have to cater to all their whims and fancies.

(A Married Woman 40)

Hemant’s conversation with Astha regarding the reason of his getting married to an Indian woman exposes Indian male mentality to keep the wife confined in the domesticity and deprive her to be independent. Marital harmony is maintained as far as the wife keeps herself involved in familial tasks but as soon as she stops this and steps outside to engage in activities other than family, the marital concord gets affected adversely.

The gradual increasing split in relationship of the couple is nicely presented by the novelist. Hemant always appears worried about his business, increasing prizes and approval of loans. Thus, lost in material gain, he ignores Astha’s feelings and requirements. Astha, at this stage is presented as a typical Indian married woman who is victimized by husband’s over-involvement in business gains. She feels lonely and isolated, waiting eagerly the company of her husband. Hemant’s frustration and Astha’s consolation is well captured by Manju Kapur in the following lines:

Hemant deflated. ‘When I think of how my classmates are doing, how much money they are making - with an American MBA you can do anything, but there are no opportunities in this bloody country, none. Sometimes I wish I had never come back.’

‘Money isn’t everything darling. Look, you have your family, me, our parents.’ (A Married Woman 50)

Hemant shows a strong concern for his parents for whom he decides to settle down in India but doesn’t realize that his wife too necessarily require his interest, love and care. Absorbed in business troubles, he seldom passes quality time with his wife. Lack of intimacy and developing distance result in conjugal rift between Astha and Hemant. Astha’s agony and pain is beautifully exposed in the fiction. Kapur writes that Astha’s desire dwindled and she begins feeling cold and distanced from her
husband. She waits for Hemant throughout the day. His returning home, she expects his company and warmth and wants eagerly to pass quality time together but she is disappointed as Hemant is almost lost in business, totally indifferent to her aspirations.

One facet of Astha’s marital life which is showcased here by the novelist is her being used as a sex object only. Tired and exhausted Hemant demands quick sexual pleasure during the nights and leaves Astha after the physical fulfillment. Hemant doesn’t appear respecting Astha for her job, appreciating her for wonderful paintings and valuing her as a beautiful and understanding wife. As an average wife she needs husband’s love and attention towards her. She wants to spend time with Hemant but that doesn’t happen because mostly he arrives very late and tired from work.

Lack of marital fulfillment directs Astha outside the home to do something productive and worthwhile as a human being. Detachment from Hemant and over-burden of domestic duties worsen Astha’s condition. Along with the stress of her job, she also tackles her two children, takes care of Hemant’s parents and handles the household work and servants. Handling of domestic duties and work pressure result in her headaches that grow more stronger with passing of time. With her mother-in-law she visits a homeopath and takes the medicine too but the headaches don’t stop and stay for the longer time. Astha’s headaches are beautifully described by Manju Kapur. She writes:

Soon it became clear that her headaches had arrived to stay. Stress made them worse, going out in the sun made them worse, sleeping too little, too late made them worse, eating the wrong kind of food made them worse, slowly her life changed to accommodate her headaches. She learned to dread each small twinge, was it going to be bad or medium? May be she was tired, should she lie down and rest? Or may be it was anxiety, should she meditate, shut her eyes, ignore the throbbing, clear her mind of images, and focus on a spot of light between her eyebrows? The last was the most difficult, but her GP had said there was nothing physiologically wrong with her, it was all in her mind. He prescribed some painkillers, but they only gave momentary
relief, making her dull and drowsy, with greater chances of having a headache the next day. (*A Married Woman* 75–76)

Along with paintings and teaching in school, Astha also occasionally writes poems which are very meaningful and exhibit the gloom and anguish of her life. One of the poems is titled as ‘Changes’ which highlights Astha’s agony. Hemant also comes to know about this poem and once he reads it aloud. Some of the lines are very significant that reveal Astha’s inner feelings:

**Changes**

The eventual release from pain
In the tearing relentless separation
From those in habit loved

Can come so slowly
It seems there will never be a day
Of final peace and tranquility

Who promised me, that if I
Did gaze upon reality
Accept it, embrace it, befriend it

I would never suffer again
But no matter how many times
I heave the doorways of my soul

To let the chill light in
The darkness grows silently
To hide me in the break of the day. (*A Married Woman* 80-81)

The above mentioned poem stands as an evident of Astha’s poetic art and presents an authentic account of her loneliness and anguish. The poem is remarkably well used by the novelist to give a poetic touch to the fiction. It not only highlights the intensity of Astha’s emotions but also supplies an effective example of Manju Kapur’s narrative art. In the art of story-telling, Kapur is an outstanding master and
the use of poetic beauty to magnify the effect of protagonist’s plight increases the artistic value of the narrative. ‘Relentless separatism from those in habit loved’, signifies that the feeling of mental separation from her family members becomes constant and increasing and due to this separation from loved ones she aptly describes, ‘It seems there will never be a day of final peace and tranquility.’ This shows the utter desperate condition of Astha’s mind. The next lines are also reveling and penetrating to the heart and mind of the reader. Astha denotes that as per her parental teachings, she behaved realistically and fulfilled all her familial duties, but eventually what she finds is only, ‘darkness grows silently’ in her heart. The predicament of a married woman is beautifully highlighted which clarifies the major issue of the novel that is isolated self of the protagonist.

Meanwhile, Astha’s father dies and after sometime Astha’s mother Sita goes to Rishikesh to a swami’s ashram to find peace of mind. She stays for a much longer period there and from ashram she communicates to Astha through letters. In one of the letters, she explains the preaching of Shri Bhagwad Gita and advises her daughter to compromise and adjust. She advises Astha to learn adaptability. She writes:

I am sending you two books that Swamiji has written. Read them everyday. In ourselves alone is peace. Even when we know how difficult it is to change ourselves, still we expect others to change, and are unhappy when our expectations are not met. Remember that. It will help with your headaches also. (A Married Woman 83)

The quoted lines are not only relevant to Astha’s problems but can work out as a basic solution of day today difficulties in one’s life. As per Shri Bhagwad Gita’s message, expectation is the root cause of any problem. Rather than changing others for one’s pleasure, the person should modify oneself and adapt to the situations he or she is in and focus on one’s goal. It rightly signifies that eternal peace lies within us and it is long lasting and real peace compared to the momentary happiness that a person finds upon small fulfillment.

For her domestic problems also Astha’s mother presents valuable teaching. Sita writes:
Accommodation and acceptance keep families together. What you cannot change accept gracefully, cheerfully as prasad for the lord. Create a home where you are. Such a person is free from sorrow. Every understanding requires composed mind. Worst thing in life is anger. Read Gita, especially chapter xiv. *(A Married Woman 84)*

The best solution for family problems is captured by Astha’s mother. Prudence of maturity highlights in her words. As a mother she feels her responsibility to guide Astha in a right direction. She is aware about Astha’s troubles and headaches and as she has brought her up she is much more aware about her daughter’s nature and personality. As a mature married woman Sita advises Astha for adaptability and adjustment in married life and claims it is as source of real peace and contentment.

Manju Kapur gives a new dimension to the narrative through including the characters of Swamiji and Sita, Astha’s mother. Sita, when she visits the ashram of Swamiji, she likes the environment and decides to settle there itself. She invites Astha to visit Swamiji’s ashram and once Astha goes to Rishikesh and passes several days with her mother in the ashram. The character of Swamiji is significant in the sense that it not only presents before the readers Sita’s connection to the ashram, but also reveals the truth of human nature and essence of life. Through the inclusion of Shri Bhagwad Gita, Manju Kapur succeeds in giving the novel a philosophical touch and effectively highlights the critical truths of human life. Shri Bhagawad Gita is believed the best known scripture of Hindu religion in which lord Krishna imparts to Arjuna the real and ultimate knowledge of human life, universe, Karmyoga, Bhaktiyoga etc.

Through the character of Swamiji, Manju Kapur brilliantly represents the philosophical ideas of Hindu culture. During her stay at the ashram, Astha and Sita attend swamiji’s speech. Through the character of Swamiji, Kapur presents the philosophical aspects of human life. Swamiji’s episode is well included by the writer that imparts philosophical dimension to the text. Swamiji says:

‘There is pain and suffering in every life. When the burden becomes intolerable, we seek distractions, which in turn trap us. We develop a craving for pleasure and sensation, till finally we are at the complete mercy of our desires, which out of ignorance we have encouraged to grow into monsters.'
With desire comes dissatisfaction, and a dissatisfied man is full of misery, even if he has at hands the pleasures that the world can give him.

We mistake gratifying our senses for living in the world. We act in order to be happy, and then we are surprised that the happiness does not last, and we look for other things, and the same pattern is repeated. Discontent is the cause of restlessness.

All our pleasures are connected with our deeds. They have a beginning and an end. The fruits of our actions similarly have a beginning and an end. They are transient and can therefore never quench our longing.

We breathe to live, but every breath draws us one step nearer to our end. In our body is our decay. We cannot alter this decay, the richest man in the world shares the fate of the poorest.

It is only in a state of self-realization that we can draw from the reservoir within to gain happiness. If we find contentment within ourselves, we will find good in all things. As the sun shines so shall the contentment within us light our lives and the lives around us.

We protect our feet with shoes; we protect our body with cloths. We cannot be harmed by the stones in our paths, nor by the sun or the rain that falls on us. Similarly, those who have achieved self-realization are contented in all circumstances. The troubles they encounter on their journey through life cannot hurt them. (A Married Woman 95-96)

Swamiji’s philosophy of life and its vivid narration give the fiction a philosophical dimension that not only becomes interesting for the readers but also indirectly provides a solution of protagonist’s problems in life. Through Swamiji’s episode, Kapur successfully inculcates the fundamental ideology of Hindu culture. As Swamiji’s preaching and ideas are relevant to all human beings, the novel also develops a universal appeal that affects each and every person living in the world.
In her school Astha comes in contact with a theatre group named Street Theatre Group. The group organizes a theatre workshop in school premise and Astha is given the charge to work as a volunteer in the workshop. As she is a painter and also writes poems, theatre is a kind of favorite sphere for Astha. In the theatre group, she meets Aijaz, the theatre artist and director of the group. Astha and Aijaz get tuned easily as both belong to field of art. Aijaz is basically a history lecturer but he is having a keen interest in drama. He has also written his own plays and songs. Besides being a writer of his own dramas, he has also adapted Brecht, Shakespeare and Greek tragedies into Hindi. Aijaz has performed at several places and presented many plays on varied issues like unemployment, crime against women, urban poverty etc. Kapur presents Aijaz as a voice of the deprived.

Aijaz is much different from Hemant. When Hemant doesn’t appreciate Astha’s poems and paintings, Aijaz shows a great admiration for her art. He values her, admires her for her creativity, motivates to develop the art and remains attentive towards Astha and asks her opinions on different issues. Thus, when Hemant is completely busy and absorbed in the business, ignoring and neglecting his wife; on the other hand Aijaz appreciates and spends time with Astha. At this stage, Astha needs companionship of someone who can understand and value her creative talent. So she easily gets attracted towards Aijaz and likes his company. This diversion of her emotion and relation takes place because along with being a wife and mother of children, she is an individual who has her own aspirations and interests and when a person, whether man or woman, doesn’t receive the due credit for his or her work and talent inside the house, he or she always diverts to others outside. The same case absolutely happens with Astha and she is turned towards Aijaz for her artistic fulfillment and satisfaction. Aijaz’s attachment with Astha is beautifully captured by the novelist. She writes:

He looked at her, he wanted her opinion even when it wasn’t necessary, he smiled when there was no occasion. Perhaps she shouldn’t think of him so much, but soon it would be over, where was the harm, it made her happy, and that in itself was worth something.

(A Married Woman 113)

The lines direct towards Aijaz’s growing interest in Astha and Astha is conscious about this. Once when she shows her drawings Aijaz’s fist touches her knee
for a while and the sudden male touch excites her for a moment and her interpretation of the momentary incident is presented by the writer which shows a model reaction of an average married woman. Kapur writes:

> 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, but she was a married woman, with two children and those right before her eyes. (*A Married Woman* 114)

When Astha returns with her children from the practice of proposed drama, her daughter Anuradha casually asks her whether Aijaz liked her drawings. Astha’s answer to the question denotes her own devaluation of her art and she passes the tradition of devaluing woman’s talent to her daughter. Kapur writes, “There is nothing much to like”, said Astha, teaching her daughter how to devalue her work, and passing on the tradition from woman to woman.” (*A Married Woman* 114)

Along with the character of Aijaz Akhtar Khan, the reader also gets familiarize with the character of Pipeelika. After Astha, Pipeelika is another major and well portrayed woman character in the fiction. It is Pipeelika’s character through which Manju Kapur treads on a least explored aspect of a woman’s life, which is lesbian relationship. Additionally, Kapur becomes the first Indian novelist ever to discuss such a sensitive and one of the most controversial and debatable issue of sexual relation between women. Pipeelika Trivedi lives alone in Delhi and runs an NGO which is related to alternative education. She is graduated from prestigious Miranda House, Delhi and earned MA degree from well known Delhi School of Economics. She dreams to pursue a Ph.D. from an American university.

Pipeelika Trivedi stands for the third generation woman who doesn’t follow any constraint in her development. She symbolizes modern Indian woman who is much advanced in terms of education, way of thinking, society, marriage etc. Pipeelika is depicted as an educated new woman and through this character, Manju Kapur signifies that modern Indian women are well educated and always enthusiastic to pursue higher education like Ph.D.

Aijaz Akhtar Khan and Pipeelika Trivedi happen to meet in a conference. Both of them present papers on divergent issues. Pipeelika’s paper is based on effects
of communalism on education of Muslim children and Ajiaz reads a paper on use of street theatre in the dissemination of social and political awareness in educational institutions. Both of them share similar interests. Their friendship strengthens due to their similarity of thoughts and thinking. After initial period of friendship they come closer to each other and eventually Pipeelika decides to marry Aijaz. As both belong to different religions, their marriage is not agreed by both the families. Pipeelika goes to her mother to take permission for the marriage.

When Pipeelika informs and asks permission for marriage with a Muslim, her mother Mrs. Trivedi gets horrified by the idea. At this stage in the fiction, the reader comes across the character of Mrs. Trivedi. She is another female character who is described with some details by the writer. Reader is informed about Pipeelika’s mother’s history. Pipeelika’s mother, Mrs. Trivedi widowed at the early stage in her life. She is described having two children, Ajay and Pipeelika. Both of them are brilliant in study. Being a widow she feels it more difficult to bear the cost of living and education of her children in a city like Delhi. She searches out a school where she can work as a teacher and live in the school premise with her children. Fortunately, she gets a job of a teacher in Shiksha Kendra, a school based on ideas of a philosopher S. Swaminathan. The school is located in forest area surrounding the natural environment and Mrs. Trivedi is offered teacher’s job and boarding by the school authorities. Both of her children study in the same school amid the atmosphere of natural environment.

Her son Ajay appears studious and always stands top in the class. Brilliant in study, he easily gets admitted in ITI and the high rank in IIT helps him to get a fellowship at MIT, USA. Competitive and enthusiastic Ajay turns to US and studies in MIT, a world renowned educational institute known best for its high standards of education. He never returns after immigrating to America and so Pipeelika remains the only child from whom Mrs. Trivedi keeps expectations.

Conflict in mother-daughter relationship which is evident in many novels of Manju Kapur, highlights here too between Mrs. Trivedi and Pipeelika. One more point of discussion that emerges here is that woman becomes a hindrance in other woman’s life. Instead of understanding the predicament of the same gender, many mothers defy the decisions of their daughters. Instead of standing by their side and
providing them mental support, they pull their legs and frighten them in their efforts of making advancements. This stereotype quality of Indian mother finds best representation in Kapur’s novels.

It can also be viewed that when a married woman becomes a mother of a daughter, she turns conservative in her approach and applies restrictions to the young daughter. This is a general scenario in Indian society with several exceptions wherein modern mothers allow complete freedom to young daughters in many aspects. The physical relations with men and inter-caste marriage are still strongly restricted on the ground of social traditions and customs.

This issue also gets highlighted in case of Mrs. Trivedi in the fiction. Mrs. Trivedi herself had married as per her choice and against her parents’ wish to a Delhi University teacher, twenty year her senior. But being a mother she advises Pipeelika not to marry Aijaz. She thinks that Aijaz will leave her in long run and will marry mother woman. Actually, Pipeelika’s mother is concerned about marital tradition of Muslims and religious permission for four marriages. Mrs. Trivedi rejects Aijaz as he is a Muslim. The conversation between mother and daughter is very interesting as it reveals the cultural difference between Hindus and Muslims in terms of marriage. Kapur writes:

Her mother was horrified when she learnt of her engagement.
‘You can’t do this’, she told her daughter.
‘Why not? You’re the one who is always going on about me getting married?’
‘But not to a Muslim.’
‘He’s sweet. So what if he’s a Muslim?’
Her mother clicked her tongue. ‘They marry four times’
‘How do you know?’
‘It’s part of their religion.’
‘Do you, you personally know any Muslim who has married four times?’
‘How is that relevant?’
‘It shows you are speaking out of prejudice. Meet him and then decide.’
'It has nothing to do with meeting him. You like him, he must be nice. But everybody knows that all they have to do is say Talak, Talak, Talak and the girl is out on the streets.'

'She is not.'

'How do you know?'

'The Qu’ran says.'

'How do you know?'

'Aijaz says.'

'It’s not true. He is lying.'

'Does he know more about the Qu’ran or do you?'

'I know more about the world’, said the mother, tight and tense.'

*(A Married Woman 117)*

The dialogue throws light on multiple issues. It presents an authentic account of a mother’s concern for her young daughter. It also shows the difference in both the religions and their marriage traditions. The conversation not only highlights marital norms and customs of Muslim culture, but also presents an indirect indication that assimilation of young Muslims and Hindus through marital bond appears troublesome due to unjustifiable social norms like Talak. Thus, issue of Aijaz and Pipeelika’s marriage can be seen as a need of concord between both Hindus and Muslims through alterations of social and religions norms from both the sides.

Furthermore, the issue of Talak itself presents unjust male dominance over woman. As per this norm a wife is easily divorced by a male Muslim husband just through utterance of Talak word three times. It can be viewed as a best example of exploitation of women who are abandoned by the in-laws without any legal procedure. Talak is such type of social norm in Muslim community which stands for an extreme case of female subjugation to male dominance. Recently, with the help of central government, Supreme Court of India has banned this inequitable custom which can be remarked as a commendable work to equalize the social structure.

In spite of her mother’s adverse remarks for her planned marriage, Pipeelika and Aijaz decide to marry. As, Pipeelika is a Brahmin Hindu girl, Aijaz’s family is also against his marriage. Therefore, in absence of family members they marry in Tees Hazari court, Delhi in presence at several friends. They neither adopt Hindu marriage ceremony nor they follow Muslim marriage rituals. After their marriage the
couple visits Mrs. Trivedi and takes her blessings. After several months they go to Shahjehanpur to meet Aijaz’s family members.

Pipeelika’s reaction to Aijaz’s family is significant. Aijaz’s family at Shahjehanpur is a stereotypical Muslim family and it was Pipeelika’s first experience of having this much proximity to Muslim culture. Kapur nicely captures Pipeelika’s feelings in the following lines:

In the days that followed Pipee realized for the first time she had married a Muslim. Everything was strange, the large haveli, the dishes they ate from, the food they ate, their paan making, the way they dressed.

They were a world complete into themselves so different from anything she had known while growing up. Occasionally when eating in the long dining hall, she would gather as many as she could within a single glance and feel a great longing for the day when she would be completely accepted as one of their own. (A Married Woman 136)

Along with Pipeelika and Aijaz’s marriage reader also comes across communal incidents and activities. Communal awareness and conflict between Hindus and Muslims also comes out as leading theme in the novel. Through imparting varied factures like communal tension between Hindus and Muslims, lesbian relationship, feminist concerns like Astha’s struggle to fill the marital void, Communal concord through Pipeelika and Aijaz’s marriage and relating Manju Kapur creates a really commendable piece of literature which spread many messages for the society and its people.

A Married woman depicts the incident of Babri Masjid demolition that took place in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh in 1992. The whole even is narrated with some details and the aftermath communal riots are used in the plot to link the storyline. With communal riots of Babri Masjid another major national event, Ayodhya Rathyatra, is also mentioned in the fiction to discuss the communal issue. Ayodhya Rathyatra in the novel symbolizes Ram Rata Yatra initiated by Bhartiya Janta Party leader Shri Lalkrishna Adwani in 1990.
Inclusion of both the major political and national events of modern India, apply a socio-political element to the novel. Preparation for the proposed Ram Mandir is narrated by the writer with some details. Bricks are carried and transported to Ayodhya to build up a magnificent temple of god Shri Ram. Communal tension and the activities are nicely narrated by Kapur. She writes:

> It was the year 1989, and bricks were being collected for Ram Mandir collected, worshipped, and escorted out of towns wrapped in silk and saffron, on their way to Ayodhya. If communal disturbances occurred in the wake of these processions, that was not the fault of the bricks, but the fault of the narrow mindedness of the minority communities, who couldn’t bear to feel that their domination in this country was over. *(A Married Woman 137)*

The above lines present a clear picture of communal environment during these incidents. Amid this tense social situation, Aijaz plans a street drama based on Babri Masjid’s theme at Rajpur, a town fifty kilometers from Delhi. In spite of Pipesika’s refusal to organize the drama in communally stressed situation, Aijaz is determined to enact the play. He also took permission from local authority for its organization hiding the real theme and story of the play.

Under the possibility of Hindu Muslim violent agitation Aijaz departs for Rajpur along with his Co-artists. At the street, when they are about to begin the drama, loud noises and cries come out from the audience and soon violent attacks start from the audience. Within no time the condition turns worst and chaotic Aijaz and his group artist are forcibly carried into a vehicle and burnt alive. Reader comes to know about the incident in the farm of a news article. Hemant makes Astha known about the incident three days later presenting before her news paper article. Manju Kapur narrates it as below:

> A horrendous incident took place here last night, in the township of Rajpur. Aijaz Akhtar khan, noted theatre activist, and his troupe were dragged from the site of their performance, and taken away in a Matador. Later the charred remains of the Matador along with the bodies were found near the river. The culprits are still absconding.
It is surmised that rising tensions between two communities led to this action. Aijaz Akhtar Khan, leader of the well known street Theatre Group was in town to perform in the mohallas. The issues dealt with were of a sensitive nature and it is surprising that in this time of communal unrest he got permission to stage a piece involving the Babri Masjid, Ram Janam Bhoomi controversy. The District Magistrate says he was deliberately misled about the contents.

According to our sources, a profession containing bricks for the proposed Ram temple in Ayodhya was routed through a gully adjacent to a minority community mohalla earlier in the afternoon. Despite the presence of police, slogans were shouted. Untoward incidents were then avoided but that evening violence, possible premeditated broke out during a performance of street Theatre Group. Unruly elements in the crowd started heckling the actors. Other elements responded. In the confusion the members of the group were driven away in a van, ostensibly for safety. This seems to have been a play. Aijaz Akhtar khan has left behind a wife. (A Married Woman 139)

Aijaz’s death not only affects Pipeelika but also affects adversely to Astha. Astha and Aijaz were good friends and due to their similar interest in art they had developed in intimate friends. In Aijaz, Astha found a true companion who valued her identity as a self-reliant woman artist. Aijaz’s death brings a through change in Astha’s personality and thinking. She becomes a social activist and with the help of her theatre artist friends she setup a union named Sampradayakta Mukti Manch. Through the activities of this union, she emerges as a social worker and organizes different activities regarding social awareness.

The sharp difference in thinking between Astha and Hemant is exposed nicely in the fiction. When Astha wants to be a part of a rally against death of innocent theatre artists, the opposition of the ideology between Astha and Hemant surfaces clearly. Kapur writes:

Four days later a massive protest rally was organized from the Red Fort to the Prime Minister’s house.
'I shall be late coming home from school today’ said Astha to her husband that morning. Her tone was cold; she had still not forgiven him.

‘Why?’ he asked busy with his own preparation for the factory. Where are you going?’

‘To a rally to protest the circumstances of ten men’s deaths.’

Hemant looked at Astha. Astha returned the look.

‘Whenever did rallies do any good? Goondas hire people from neighboring villages at ten rupees a day to come and make trouble, block traffic and show their muscle’

‘It’s not the political, made-up kind of rally. We want to draw attention to what has happened. How does one speak so that one is heard? You tell me a better way.’

‘Rallies!’ shorted Hemant ignoring the question. No matter how big - who cares - who remembers what they are about?

(A Married Woman 142)

Asta’s expectations from her husband of recognition and acceptance of her opinions and beliefs do not meet with. She observes her as a woman who can have her own claim over her life and can have an independent opinion on different aspects of life whereas Hemant behaves as a stereotype husband who becomes sometimes possessive towards Astha. He observes Astha as an average other women who are contented within domesticity. He fails in recognizing an element of independence which prevails in Astha’s personality. Astha’s search for identity and independence is well acknowledged by Reena Sanasam. She says:

A Married Woman concerns with the Indian woman who strives to gain space in life and socio-cultural domains. The female protagonist Astha is a middleclass educated married woman who is in search of her identity against the existing patriarchal set up and appears as an independent woman. (2)

Eventually their perspectives of different aspects differ and this difference of opinions affects their married life adversely. For Hemant Astha is his wife, mother of his children, daughter-in-law of his parents and a care taker of his house. He also views her as an object and their marriage as a license for sexual satisfaction. This is a
typical orthodox attitude towards woman in a patriarchal dominant culture and society.

Hemant underestimates Astha’s talents and potential. He never shows any concern for Astha’s job, poems drawings and social activities. Hemant fails to realize that a married woman is basically a human being who can have her different opinion and he cannot understand that to have divergent thinking and to set up an individual identity through one’s potential in valid aspects is fundamental, moral and democratic right of any individual, irrespective of man or woman, in the Republic of India. But the traditionalist always overweighs in Indian husbands, particularly in case of their wives.

Upon hearing the news of Aijaz’s death, the opposite reaction of husband and wife is beautifully captured by Manju Kapur. She writes:

There followed a list of the other members of the theatre group, along with their survivors but Astha could not read further for the tears in her eyes. What a way to die, what a horrible, horrible way to die- and for what? Because the man was trying to reach people and do some good. She hadn’t even known he was married. She turned away her head to cry some more.

Hemant, watching her, immediately lost his temper. ‘Why are you crying?’ he demanded. ‘What was he to you?’

‘Some murderers trap and burn a whole theatre group in a van you ask me why I am crying?’

‘This kind of thing happens all the time, I don’t see you wasting your tears.’

‘I can’t weep for the whole world, only when it means something to me. May I am deficient, but 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?’ she sobbed rocking to and fro with rage and grief. (A Married Woman 139)

After Aijaz’s death Astha actively participates in the activities of Sampradayakta Mukti Manch. She comes in contact with Reshana sing who used to sing during the drama performances of street Theatre Group. The members of the
Manch decide to raise the funds for activities of social awareness. Astha is asked to contribute through her paintings. Astha willingly prepares many paintings and Reshana Sing organizes an exhibition for Astha’s paintings. Astha’s masterly art is admired by the people and the exhibition succeeds in collecting handsome amount for social welfare activities. After Aijaz’s death, Astha devotes most of her time in Sampradayakta Mukti Manch. She forgets about being a wife being a mother of two children and forgets too her domestic role of daughter-in-law. Allotting the domestic tasks and responsibilities to family servants, she explores her feminine spirit and plays a role of a social activist. Urge of femininity becomes that much strong in Astha’s character that she forgets about everything else except social welfare through Manch’s activities.

Out of thirty thousand from sale of her paintings in exhibition she gets Rs. 10,000 as her share. Astha’s engagement in paintings, her job, social activities of the Manch and domestic responsibilities makes her schedule hectic and she hardly finds any time for Hemant. She attempts to be with him but at the end of the day, she finds herself completely tired and exhausted. Uttar involvement in these activities results only in increase of her headaches and Hemant’s loneliness. A marital rift develops between the couple and the reason behind it is not only Astha’s engagement in other activities but the difference of perspective and ideology between the husband and the wife.

Asthaw knew Aijaz from her school’s drama workshop, but se meets his wife Pipeelika only after his death. It is during her Ayodhya visit that she meets Aijaz’s widow Pipeelika, for the first time. Within no time they become good friends. Astha’s social avatar comes out during her Ayodhya visit. A guest house is booked for the women participates who arrive at Ayodhya to attend communal awareness camp organized by Sampradayakta Mukti Manch. The incident that is mentioned in the fiction is Ram Janambhoomi Nyas at Babri Masjid site in Ayodhya. Manch’s social workers march towards Ayodhya and Astha, as an active leading member of Manch, is about to present a speech to the gathered mass.

Asthaw’s speech does not only indicate the negative effects of violence but also throws light on women’s life and involvement. Astha says:
“Brothers and sisters,” she started. “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. In history many things are not clear, 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. And that experience tells us that where there is violence, there is suffering, unnecessary and continuous suffering. When we look to righting wrongs committed hundreds of years ago, we look to the past. But that past cannot feed us, clothe us, or give us security. History cannot be righted easily, but lives are lost easily, pain and trauma to women and children come easily. (A Married Woman 198)

Asth’a’s speech throws light on two major issues; that are harm to woman’s life due to massive violence and alternates in historical faults inviting harm to people. Through protagonist, Manju Kapur indicates that a woman’s life is connected by males. The speech is also indicative to female subjugation and it makes clear that any incident or action that affects male, also subsequently affects woman because woman is solely dependent on man as per social structure.

The speech is also direct indirection to Babri Masjid- Ram Janambhoomi controversy. Through the medium of fiction, Manju Kapur imparts the message that any type of pampering of historical records and monuments only brings communal violence and resultantly it destroys thousands of innocent lives of men and women. Ultimately it brings a great loss to thousands of woman who lose their husbands, fathers, brother or children. And so the novelis redirects that women are affected by males of their family. Eventually, it can be noted that Manju Kapur does not advocate for violence in any sense and condemn it severely throughout the narrative. Many pages in the fiction are filled with narration of communal disturbance and discussion on most debatable and controversial historical incidents of Babri Masjid demolition and Ram Janambhoomi Nyas.

A married woman’s engagement as a social welfare activist is also discussed by the writer through the conversation of Astha and her mother-in-law. The appropriateness of Astha’s involvement in activities for communal harmony is
challenged by her mother-in-law when she is informed about Astha’s visit to Ayodhya. She appears argumentative with Astha over the whole issue. Kapur writes:

So far her mother-in-law had not commented about her activities. But Astha’s going Ayodhya was a different matter. ‘You know I never interfere in whatever you decide to do. Today young people feel they must live their own lives. But there are times when it is necessary to listen to the advice of elders. What is the need to leave your family, and roam about like a homeless woman on the streets of some strange city?’ *(A Married Woman 186)*

Asth’a’s mother-in-law shows her prudence and debates further on appropriateness of Ram temple in Ayodhya. She justifies the demand of Hindus for the proposed temple during her conversation with Astha. She says:

This is all politics, you should not get involved Besides have you thought about what you are going to protest? Lord Ram’s Janamsthan is in Ayodhya, is there any country in the world where the birthplace of their god is not honored? Hindu tolerance does not mean you accept everything and anything. Is this the pride we have in ourselves? *(A Married Woman 186)*

Manju Kapur discusses the controversy over the Babri Masjid, Ram Janambhoomi issue through the characters of Astha and her mother-in-Law. To her mother-in-Low’s opinion of appropriative of Hindu’s demand for the temple Astha agrees and sang she is only worried about the violence that might result in loss of thousands of lives. When Astha says that the money which is being collected for Ram temple bricks could have been used to feed thousands of children who are poor and helpless. The mother-in-law’s next reply raises further discussion about dos and don’t of a woman on a woman’s role in life. The mother-in-law prudently says, ‘It is not a woman’s place to think of these things.’ *(A Married Woman 187)*

The reply clearly indicates that woman should detach themselves from these types of issues like politics and national matters. The argument strengthens the notion of woman’s role limited to family, home and personal matters. The conversation between the two goes on and her mother-in-law admits of being liberal and helpful to
Astha in household matters. She also admits that being kind-hearted, she never interferes in Astha’s duties and work; but she feels her duty to alert her daughter-in-law if she is diverted to a wrong track. Her mother-in-law says to Astha:

You know I never try and stop you from doing anything. even when you neglect the children, and are busy in your paintings and meetings, I do not say anything. I am not the type to interfere. I am glad my daughter-in-law does not feel she has to sit at home. Till I have the use of my hands and feel I will help you but it is my duty to point out that you are going too far. (A Married Woman 187)

Looking at her children who appear nervous of her mother’s absence from home, Astha declares that this time she will take her children with her to Ayodhya to make them known the current scenario. Upon this statement the mother-in-law loses her temper. She says:

Don’t you care about your children or husband? But he is too good, he will say nothing if you were living in the conditions Sangeeta is, you would better value what you have. I hope you never regret this.

(A Married Woman 187)

When Astha discusses with Hemant about her going to Ayodhya, she knows from Hemant that he is also out of the stadium for two days. Astha worries about her children and then the response that she receives from her husband affirms the patriarchal notion fixed in Indian male psyche from thousands of years. For children, Hemant says; ‘That’s your responsibility’, he replied ‘I have work to do, a factory to run, I can’t be both mother and father.’ (A Married Woman 189)

Involved and active at multi fronts like being a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law, a teacher, a painter and a social activist makes Astha get confused over her roles and priorities in life as a woman. Satendra Kumar’s observation of Astha’s character is truthful. As per his opinion, the present fiction is a model example of an accurate depiction of a nation’s gradual growth including its strengths and weaknesses. Kumar also adds that the narrative presents an account of a woman’s anguish, caused through the search for her identity in a male-dominated society.
The balance between her domestic roles and her outer roles is disturbed completely and she rethinks her decision of going to Ayodhya lying in her bed. Kapur writes:

That might she couldn’t sleep. Her mind refused to rest, roaming restlessly among the things that made up her life, her home, children, husband, painting, the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch. Was it too much for a woman to handle; was her mother-in-law right? But why? Her children were well taken care of, she had trustworthy servants, she had someone who cooked better than she, she had left her teaching. And yet she was chained. (A Married Woman 190)

Asth’a Ayodhya visit adds a new dimension in her life. Pipeelika, whom she meets in Ayodhya, gradually turns a close friend of Astha. After her speech in the rally, Astha and Pipeelika visit several places in Ayodhya. Through their visits of religious places in Ayodhya, Pipeelika’s ideas, beliefs and opinions are narrated by the novelist. Pipeelika herself declares that she does not believe in any religion. After returning to Delhi, they frequently meet at several places. Both of them have their own problems. Astha feels marital void due to Hemant’s negligence own his underestimating Astha’s creative talent and identity whereas Pipeelika, leading a widowhood, forces loneliness. Both stand as modern women who do not keep themselves limited to domestic duties only. Both of them have proved their separate identities. Astha has been a teacher, a painter and social worker, whereas Pipeelika is also a self dependent educated woman running on NGO and aspirant for further study in USA

Their relationship doesn’t remain limited to normal familiarity but it gradually develops in lesbian contacts. Actually the signal of Pipeelika’s lesbian urge is given very early in the fiction by the novelist. During their honeymoon tour Aijaz and Pipeelika share their history. They discuss about their first love. Pipeelika says:

‘There was nothing to tell’
Aijaz ignored this. ‘Who was he?’ he went on
‘She’
‘She?’
‘Her name was Samira.’
Manju Kapur uses Pipeelika’s character to explore the issue of lesbian relation. Physical relation between women is something like forbidden in Indian society which is firmly set up on values and traditions. But many times we come across the lesbian contacts in the society. In conventional society like India where a woman is adorned as Devi or Narayani, an idea of physical relations between women is itself abnormal. But the effect of western culture has brought many changes in social perspective of Indian people.

Furthermore, there may be many causes behind emergence of this type of unnatural physical relations between women. The reasons may be varied like absence of male partner in life, surrounding environment, heredity, ideology, extreme hatred for opposite gender marital complications etc. In ‘A married woman’ it is Astha’s marital dissatisfaction and Pipeelika’s isolated widowhood that results in their physical proximity. It has to be noted that both of them are mentally detached from their family members and strongly attached to each other through their mental and physical needs. Developed marital rift leads Astha towards Pipeelika in search of an emotional companion. And her growing intimacy with a young and beautiful widow results in such type of physical engagement with a woman that raises several questions against her character.

One matter that needs clarification here is that if man is engaged in extramarital affair after marriage, society or family doesn’t react that much cruelly as it happens in case of a woman. If a man is engaged in any affair with another woman or man, he doesn’t suffer that much in society because sexual code and conduct are unjustifiably applied to woman only in pretending society. Even a slight deviation in terms of physical relations is taken very seriously in case of women. In the fiction, Hemant openly discusses the condom issue with Astha and even admits that he was offered a girl by the business party to which he denied. As the condom was found unused in his suitcase, Astha trusts Hemant’s explanation without further queries.

But Astha can’t even discuss her physical engagement with Pipeelika to her husband and family members. She is a mother, a wife and a daughter-in-law and if her engagement with another woman is exposed in her family, it may certainly bring blemish to her character that can destroy her whole life. Astha keeps her relation with
Pipeelika a secret and fortunately her in-laws are not exposed to this truth of their daughter-in-law’s life.

As a woman writer in a conventional society like Indian, it is rather a challenge to tread on a topic like lesbian relation and the bigger challenge lies in describing it in detail. Manju Kapur appears daring and bold enough to depict explicitly the sexual communication of her protagonist with another woman. After the initial communication in Delhi, both of them meet frequently outside Astha’s house. Actually, it is Pipeelika who arouses sexual passion in Astha. Astha herself never dares to advance in sexual interaction with Pipeelika.

Once when Pipeelika visits Astha’s house she creates sexual desire in Astha. Pipeelika says:

‘So this is the marital bed’. said Pipee, Surveying Astha’s room, full of doubt bed. ‘The marital bed in the marital room’

‘Like in most people’s houses’, replied Astha, not particularly liking Pipee’s tone.

‘I knew’ It’s how I used to live. Are you happy here? Do you have good sex?’

‘Good enough, I suppose.’

‘Don’t you know?’

‘Well, he was my first, and only.’

‘You’re joking.’

‘Not really.’

‘What about the other two?’

‘They were crushes. One I kissed a lot, with the other there were only letters.’

‘Have you ever wanted more lovers?’

What could Astha say? She was living, the way people like her lived, where was the question of more lovers, or love for that matter?

(A Married Woman 222)

The ending lines here denote the artificiality of Astha’s life. There is a void of thrill, sensation and interest in her life. The familial duties and her domestic roles are like compulsions for Astha. She has lost charm in the married life.
Strong connection of Astha and Pipeelika is further elaborated by the novelist. Manju Kapur writes:

Her meetings with Pipee increased. When she was alone in the home in the mornings Pipee dropped by on her way to work, she phoned her at least five times a day, short brief conversations, but which drew each of them firmly into the nitty gritty of the other’s life. And the days when she didn’t see or talk to her were dang with something missing, and not even the extra hours at the canvas could till the vacuum. Astha felt. She started to fantasize about touching her, imagined her hair between her fingers, her skin beneath her own, her hands on the back of her hands on the back of her neck. *(A Married Woman 225)*

Asth and Pipeelika’s relation is not only controversial but the distinctive feature of Kapur’s Novel. Commenting on the complexities of Astha and Pipeelika’s relation Alka Singh rightly says:

Manju Kapur in her latest novel *A Married Woman* brings forth those hard facts that will go a long way in demystifying marriage. Through her protagonist, she exposes those half truths, the traps, the losses, the hard realities, the anxieties, the depression and the dangers associated with it. The experience as women and the experience as people form the basis of conflict of these two divergent states. Through the personal private lives of these characters Manju Kapur exposes the existing tension and the oscillation of the self between the two states of mind.

(164)

After the death of Astha’s father her mother decides to live and settle in Swamiji’s ashram in Rishikesh. Astha’s mother sells her house in Delhi and gives the amount to Hemant which he invests for his children’s future. When Astha and Pipeelika discuss the need of car for Astha, Pipeelika advises her to buy a car for her own use. At her house, during a conversation with Hemant Astha demands a separate car for herself. The conversation is well captured by the novelist. Kapur writes:

‘But why? The car is there for you whenever you want it.’
‘Please, Hemant, I am thirty six. I need to be independent. I am always adjusting to everybody else’s needs.’

‘And the money?’

‘We could use what my mother gave.’

‘You know I have invested that for the children, and in five years the amount has grown nicely.’ Hemant looked satisfied. Astha had heard all these before, heard when dividends came, when the debentures were bought, heard as it doubled trebled quadrupled. There was no question of touching it, she knew that. Only somewhere surely there was money she could touch? She said as much.

Hemant looked at her ‘who is putting these ideas into your head?’

(A Married Woman 227)

At this stage Manju Kapur presents a very sensitive issue: a married woman’s money. Astha even can’t use her own money for herself which her mother has given and which legally she has right for. Hemant appears as a stern patriarch who claims her wife’s money and derives her of that. How it justified it he had deposited Astha’s money into her account and had he given the full control to his wife for its use. Actually he uses Astha’s money as a dowry. Even other being a foreign educated MBA, Hemant behaves as a typical Indian male who claims her wife’s money and becomes restrictive in its use. One major tendency of Indian family life that gets highlighted here is decision authority. Male only holds the power to take decisions in terms of money, code and conduct for women etc. It shows the possessiveness of Indian male psyche that deprive married women to live their own life and from being self reliant.

If Astha objects fiercely and demands her money back anyhow, it will definitely crate a bigger split between the couple which ultimately will harm her married life. So to save the married life, she compromises and adjusts. It can also be noted here that adjustment and compromise is done more through women compared to their husbands to sustain the marital life. It is also highlighted through the novelist that it is woman who supports or encourages the female servitude. Astha’s mother, Sita instead of giving money to her daughter gives it to her son-in-law. As previously
notes she only advises Astha to compromise and adjust with whatever she has. The scenario of woman against woman is well captured by Manju Kapur.

Alienated from her husband and family Astha finds solace in Pipeelika’s company. Pipeelika, a completely free-mined, young and beautiful widow who is devoid of sexual pleasure by fortune, drags Astha into lesbian relation. Astha, already unhappy in her married life, become an easy target for Pipeelika to devour her body. The erotic scenes of their physical activities are well portrayed by the novelist. Manju Kapur depicts it with minute details. She writes:

They were standing slowly Pipee put her arms around her she could feel her hands on the narrowness of her back, on the beginning spread of her hips. Gently she undid her blouse books, and her bra, looking at her face as she did so and slowly she continued, feeling her back with her palms, feeling their softness, especially where the nipples were, feeling them again and again in no hurry to reach any conclusion. They were enclosed in a circle of silence, the only sound the sound of their breaths, close together and mingled.

In the small bedroom, Astha tense with nervousness. She was afraid, yet there was no going back. Sensing how she felt, Pipee took her time, touching every crevice of her body with her mouth. The sweaty patches of her armpits with small stiff hair beginning to poke out, the soft fold of flesh where the arms joined the torso, the hard bony part behind the ears, the deep crease between her buttocks, the hairiness between her thighs.

In between they talked, the talk of discovery and attraction, of the history of a three month relationship, the teasing and pleasure of an intimacy that was complete and absolute, expressed through minds as much as bodies. (A Married Woman 131)

After the sexual deed, when Astha reaches her house, she feels a clash between her desire to be free and her domestic roles. Kapur captures Astha’s feelings cleverly. She writes:
She returned home in a daze. As she neared her house she succumbed to panic, she was a mother, nothing should disturb that. For a brief and guilty moment she wished she was like Pipee, alone and free, but she checked herself. A large part of her belonged to her children, that was how she lived her life. She couldn’t imagine any other way.

She was a wife too, but not much of her was required there. 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.

*(A Married Woman 231)*

Commenting on the major issues in “Validation of Sexual Diversity in Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman*”, Poonam Sharma says:

Manju Kapur’s *A Married Woman* brings into the issue of self-realization and women emancipation. In spite of many achievements, much remains to be done to improve the status of women. Equal sharing of housework is still a dream for working women. Women find that household chores and rearing of children is still largely their task. The status of a woman in a society cannot be secured by her financial independence alone. It depends on customs and traditions of the society too. Woman should be empowered with equal rights in a family. Her decisions and opinions should be valued and followed. (7)

Asthā’s engagement with Pipeelika gradually develops stronger and she feels herself in full different worlds; inside the house her world of domestic rules and outside the house in exciting company of Pipeelika. As Pipeelika is a woman, Astha doesn’t feel any real risk for her married life. But even then she knows that she is engaged in such type of relation which is unacceptable in a society like Indian. Moreover, her in laws and her husband can never accept her lesbian involvement. Being a married woman, this unknown aspect of her life may bring blemish to her image among relatives and family members. She is aware that she is hiding her relation with Pipeelika and to keep it a secret, she begins to tell lies in her house. Astha’s feelings are well captured by Manju Kapur:

Fed by right minded parents, Astha had believed that never, ever must one lie. There was a Pinocchio lurking in her moral self, waiting and watching. Her nose would grow, her eyes cross themselves in vain
attempts to hide the gruesome deed, her skin would turn yellow and pimples sprout all over her. Her inner ugliness would be reflected for all to see. (*A Married Woman* 233)

Asthा and Pipeelika plan to watch a gay film together on a weekend. The proposal is offered by Pipeelika and accepted by Astha because she knows that he will be at house during this time and her absence on weekend can create a trouble. Hemant is amazed getting the news of watching a gay movie and from this time he comes more watchful of Astha’s behavior and actions. Kapur narrates:

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Go with you and Pipeelika khan to a gay film show? Are you out of your mind, Az?’

‘I’ve promised Pipee.’ She said

‘So? Unpromise her ’

‘May be next saturday, but not this’

A sullen look settled on Hemant’s face. Astha could see resentment, and she felt sorry. But not half are sorry as she would feel if she didn’t go, didn’t sit next to Pipee in a dark hall, with their arms, hands, knees touching. (*A Married Woman* 236)

It needs to be noted that in their relationship, it is Pipeelika who takes the initiatives and the void of marital understanding between Astha and Hemant becomes responsible for Astha’s involvement in Pipeelika. The need of Astha is very clear. She needs a companion who respects her, takes interest in her activities and spares time for her. All these three elements are missing the couple’s relationship. Hemant hardly appreciates any creative talent of his wife; whether it is painting, her job, her poems or social activities. He never exhibits any respect for Astha and never passes any quality time with his wife as mostly he remains out of house for business travelling, reaching always late at night. Isolated and trapped in domesticity, Astha finds a ready companion in Pipeelika who draws her in lesbian interactions. Through the course of the novel, it appears that it is Pipeelika who each time arouses sexual urge in Astha and takes initiative for physical relations. Thus, Pipeelika comes out as a perfect lesbian woman in the fiction whereas Astha protects herself later on and saves her married life.
Amid the lesbian contacts of these two women, the reader comes across the Ekta Yatra planned by a BJP leader. The Yatra symbolizes the Rath Yatra for shri Ram temple led by Lalkrishna Advani, which moved from Kanyakumari to Kashmir. Pipeelika and Astha decide to join the Ekta Yatra with a motive of being together for several days and to fulfill their sense of social work. As she is leading an independent and free life, Pipeelika does not need to take permission from anyone but as Astha is a married woman she passes through many hurdles for the approval. Astha knows that if she asks for approval, it will be denied, so she declares her decision of going for the Yatra for fifteen days and presents it as important assignment given by the Manch mall psyche is highlighted here for the protection of woman. When Hemant is informed, he asks:

‘Who will protect you? Suppose you get raped?’
He doesn’t care how low he hits.
‘Why would I get raped?’ I asked after a moment.
‘Anything can happen. All these yatras have goondas attached to them. You think everybody who is going is so moved by the desire to unite our country? our country is better untied by you staying at home, so that there is one less incident to cope with. (A Married Woman 249)

Asth a calls her mother and requests to live in her house to take care of her children until she comes back from the Yatra. Astha and Pipeelika leave for the Yatra and spend time together. After returning from the Yatra, Astha is struck in jaundice and finds very hard to recover. Then Hemant’s business matter is mentioned by the novelist. Hemant faces a big strike by the workers of his factory and it results in stoppage of production. Hemant gets badly affected by the business problems that create the health issues like chest pain blood pressure etc.

It is decided by Hemant’s family elders to send the couple and the children for a short vacation to Hemant’s sister Seema in U.S. When Astha informs Pipeelika about her family holiday, she insists Astha to stay in Delhi to accompany her. It is seen here that Pipeelika gradually becomes possessive and demanding towards Astha. Through her interactions it is observed that she wants Astha to break all her relations with her in-laws and to live with her ever as a sexual companion. The intensity of their relation and sexuality gets highlighted in Pipeelika’s behavior.
Women in India are respectful enough as far as marriage is concerned. Hardly they deviate from the set standards even if any deviation occurs, it stays momentarily only. They always select tradition, culture and home above all. J.S.Mill says:

That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes . . . the legal subordination of one sex to the other is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other. (n.p.)

The couple and children pass the holidays pleasantly visiting Disneyland Park and other places. Returning from USA when Astha meets Pipeelika she feels distanced through her reactions. The extreme possessiveness of Pipeelika highlights when they talk about sex. When she knows that Astha and Hemant had sex during the holidays, she gets so much angry and uses the rude language with abuses. Through her reactions, it appears evidently that she wants Astha as a sex partner for lifetime. Pipeelika says, “You were away with your family that was bad enough and I didn’t say anything, because it’s no use and then you do this, why have me?” (A Married Woman 281)

During their stay in USA, once when they talk about marriage and sex Astha reveals her expectations to Hemant. Their conversation is finely captured by the novelist. Astha says:

‘You think marriage is just sex’
‘Of course I don’t what do you want that I don’t give you’?
‘Interest, Togetherness Respect’
‘Baby, I respect you’ said Hemant soothingly
‘You are my wife. As for togetherness, that’s just what I want’

(A Married Woman 275)

Asth’a’s realization of Hemant’s developed understanding, love and care for her brings her close again to her family ties. Moreover, she realizes that Pipeelika wants her as a full-time partner which being a careful mother and a loyal wife she doesn’t find correct for her. Gradually, she allows the distance that is created between her and Pipeelika.
Gradually the marital void that had been created between Hemant and Astha begins to fill with understanding, love and sense of responsibility from both the sides. Distanced from his wife, Hemant understands the necessities and expectations of Astha and Astha, on the other side, from selfish lesbian connection returns permanently towards her home, husband and children. On the prescription of doctors, she takes utmost care of Hemant’s health. She herself cooks low-cholesterol food for Hemant and takes care about other health issues. She cleans the house herself as an ideal housewife and many times gets involved in paintings too during her free time. Julie Myerson rightly summarizes Kapur’s talent as a writer in her review in The Guardian. She says:

Kapur is a generous, far-seeing writer, who knows there are no answers, no conclusions to be drawn. Maybe that's what I most admire: she thinks and writes in vivid colours, but it's the grey areas - life’s queasy compromises - that she furiously yet tenderly exposes. (n.p.)

The novel ends with two major occurrences. The first one is demolition of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya and the second is Pipeelika’s departure to USA for Ph.D. She scores well in GRE and her published journals help her get admission. The demolition of Babri Masjid is narrated with some details like presence of karsevaks, political leaders, the failure of Kalyan Singh’s government to protect the mosque etc. After the demolition rallies and protests are organized wherein Astha and Pipeelika witness people’s rage. The last incident which is narrated is Pipeelika’s departure to USA. Astha goes with her to the airport and farewells her most intimate companion for the last time. The separation of the closest friend leave Astha’s mind, heart and body feel numb. It was felt like, “Stretched thin, thin across the globe.” (A Married Woman 307)

The novel appears as a wonderful piece of literature that evokes many facets of a woman’s life. Along with Astha’s portrayal as a major protagonist, the reader comes across several significant women characters like Sita, Pipeelika, Astha’s mother-in-law, Mrs. Trivedi etc. who reveal varied aspects of a woman’s life in modern Indian patriarchal structure. Undoubtedly, as per the title of the fiction, the major concern of Kapur seems here to expose the predicament of Indian married woman and the anguish she suffers from even in modern times.
Indirectly it is highlighted that times can change and we can talk of modern woman but the recognition and relevance of being a wife, a mother and a care taker never changes for a married woman. Time can change and life-style and methodology may change but the significance of family but a woman’s relevance in it can never be modified. If it changes the fundamental values of family and marriage will definitely alter and the freedom that it brings may create adverse effects on family, culture and society. Finally, Astha returns to her family thinking significance of her life in terms of family and home. Along with a married woman’s issues, Manju Kapur beautifully merges the other significant issues like communal disturbance in society and a much controversial and debatable topic like lesbian connections of woman. Hence, A Married woman is a fiction presenting a multi dimensional view of woman’s life and society.


