



Self-Discovery in A Married Woman"

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Abstract

This research paper analyses Manju Kapur's novel *A Married Woman* through feminist literary criticism, with particular attention to the protagonist, Astha, and her pursuit of self-discovery and identity within the constraints of Indian society. Through an examination of primary textual evidence and relevant secondary sources, the study investigates the cultural, social, and psychological influences that shape Astha's development. The discussion addresses the effects of traditional gender roles, the emergence of individual desires, the transformative potential of relationships, and the negotiation between personal autonomy and familial expectations. By positioning Kapur's work within the broader discourse on gender and identity in contemporary Indian fiction, this paper highlights the persistent challenges and achievements of women striving for selfhood in patriarchal contexts.

Keywords: Tradition, feminist literary criticism, psychology, challenges.

Introduction

Indian English fiction has long documented the evolving dynamics of gender, tradition, and modernity. Within this tradition, Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* offers a nuanced exploration of the challenges women face in defining themselves within a patriarchal society. The novel follows Astha, whose journey is shaped by subtle acts of resistance, internal struggles, and a continuous pursuit of selfhood amid cultural expectations.

A clear separation between personal desire and societal obligation defines Astha's environment. Conformity, ingrained from childhood and reinforced in adulthood, dictates her roles as daughter, wife, and mother. Beneath this outward compliance is a persistent longing for creative expression and emotional fulfilment. Kapur effectively illustrates the nuanced tensions that shape Astha's experience, portraying her as both a product of her environment and a subtle challenger to its constraints.

Kapur uses Astha's narrative to examine the complex relationship between tradition and individuality, showing how entrenched social norms can provide stability while also imposing limitations. The novel avoids



simplistic conclusions, instead highlighting the ambiguity and resilience that characterise women's pursuit of identity. Scholars have acknowledged Kapur's impact on feminist literature, noting that her works "interrogate the politics of domesticity and the constraints of marriage" (Singh, 2010, p. 92), providing a framework for analysing the ongoing negotiation between selfhood and societal expectations in contemporary India.

Objective

The objectives of this research paper are as follows:

- Analyse the representation of women's quest for identity in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*.
- Explore the influence of traditional gender roles and societal expectations on the protagonist's self-perception and actions.
- Investigate the role of personal relationships in Astha's journey toward self-discovery.
- Examine the negotiation between autonomy and familial or societal obligations depicted in the novel.
- Contextualise Kapur's narrative within the broader framework of feminist literary criticism and Indian women's writing.

Confinement within Traditional Roles

Astha's formative years unfold under the vigilant gaze of her parents, for whom obedience is synonymous with virtue. The opening lines of the novel resonate with the weight of inherited expectations: "Good girls did not question their parents, did not argue, did not think for themselves" (Kapur, 2003, p. 5). With these words, Kapur encapsulates the silent, pervasive process by which daughters are shaped—moulded into vessels of compliance from an early age. This environment, where affection is often conditional on adherence to prescribed norms, leaves little room for individuality or dissent. As Chaudhuri (2011) points out, such socialisation is not limited to a single household, but is woven into the fabric of Indian society, repeated in countless homes across generations.

Within this familial structure, the home becomes a paradox—simultaneously a sanctuary and a site of gentle coercion. Astha finds comfort in the predictability of her surroundings, yet the very walls that shelter her also constrain her. The family's honour is held above personal fulfilment, and deviation from established roles is quietly, but firmly, discouraged.

Marriage, rather than offering liberation, tightens these invisible bonds. An unspoken contract marks Astha's union with Hemant: her identity must be subsumed beneath the duties of wifehood and motherhood. "Her days ran into each other, marked only by the duties she performed for others" (Kapur, 2003, p. 23), Kapur writes, evoking the monotony and self-effacement that define Astha's daily existence. The rhythm of her life is dictated by the needs of those around her, leaving her own aspirations to wither in the shadows.

This narrative of sacrifice and stifled ambition is a familiar one, as Nair (2012) notes—the "double bind" that frames women as indispensable nurturers while systematically denying them autonomy. Kapur's depiction is unflinching, illuminating not only the constraints imposed by tradition but also the subtle, everyday ways in which women are taught to accept and internalise their own confinement.



Emergence of Individual Desires

Beneath Astha's seemingly placid exterior, a current of restlessness begins to surge, subtly fracturing the façade of perfect conformity. Kapur intricately reveals Astha's mounting sense of dissatisfaction, writing, "She felt as if she were living someone else's life, the script written by others" (Kapur, 2003, p. 39). This moment of self-awareness is both jarring and liberating—a silent rebellion that marks the genesis of Astha's pursuit of authenticity. It is here, in these unspoken questions and quiet yearnings, that the novel's central theme takes root.

Astha's daily existence, meticulously ordered and externally unremarkable, becomes the ground on which her suppressed desires struggle to surface. The narrative poignantly foregrounds this gradual shift: "Her needs and desires lay buried beneath the daily grind of duty and obligation" (Kapur, 2003, p. 47). Each chore, each unacknowledged sacrifice, adds to the weight pressing down on her sense of self. The slow, almost imperceptible emergence of her own voice stands as a challenge to the deeply embedded myth of the 'ideal woman'—a construct that, as Krishnaswamy (2013) observes, must be questioned for true self-realisation to occur.

It is through art that Astha finds a clandestine space for resistance. Her engagement with painting and poetry is more than a pastime; it becomes an act of self-assertion, a way to imagine possibilities beyond the narrow roles assigned to her. "In her art, she saw glimpses of the person she might become, unrestrained and bold" (Kapur, 2003, p. 58). These creative acts are quiet declarations of independence, allowing her to inhabit a world shaped by her own desires briefly. Banerjee (2014) aptly describes such creative expression as a "sanctuary for women's repressed ambitions." For Astha, it is within these moments of artistic freedom that her journey toward selfhood truly begins.

Relationships as Catalysts for Change

The arrival of Pipeelika in Astha's life marks a profound turning point—a moment when the boundaries of her world begin to shift and expand. Pipeelika's presence is not merely that of a confidante or companion; rather, she becomes the mirror through which Astha glimpses facets of herself long suppressed or unacknowledged. Within the contours of their growing relationship, Astha discovers "a space where she could express feelings she had never named" (Kapur, 2003, p. 112). This newly found intimacy is layered and complex, offering Astha both comfort and challenge as she navigates unexplored emotional terrain.

Kapur resists the temptation to romanticise this relationship as a straightforward escape from marital dissatisfaction. Instead, she constructs it as a site of negotiation—a place where Astha must grapple with her own desires, fears, and the competing claims of identity. Through Pipeelika, Astha experiences the unprecedented sensation of being recognised for who she is, beyond the limiting labels of wife and mother: "With Pipeelika, Astha felt seen—not as a wife or mother, but as herself" (Kapur, 2003, p. 120). In this recognition, Astha's journey toward selfhood takes on a new urgency and depth.

This dynamic echoes contemporary scholarship, which argues that "same-sex relationships in Indian fiction often function as acts of resistance against normative sexual and gender roles" (Dutta & Roy, 2015, p. 67). The bond between Astha and Pipeelika becomes a subtle yet powerful form of defiance—a challenge to the invisible strictures that dictate what is permissible for women.

However, intertwined with this liberation is a profound sense of vulnerability. Astha's emotional and physical connection with Pipeelika forces her to reconsider deeply ingrained notions of love, fulfilment, and loyalty. The stakes of such a relationship are high, as Astha confronts not only her own uncertainties but also the spectre of social ostracism. Kapur captures this tension with poignant clarity: "She dreaded the consequences



of a life lived openly, outside the boundaries drawn for her” (Kapur, 2003, p. 145). In choosing to explore this relationship, Astha embarks on a journey that is as fraught with risk as it is rich with possibility, underscoring the novel’s central concern with the costs and rewards of self-discovery.

Negotiating Social and Familial Boundaries

Astha’s quest for selfhood unfolds within a labyrinth of expectations, obligations, and deeply rooted loyalties. Her journey is not a linear progression toward freedom but a continual process of balancing her burgeoning autonomy with the persistent demands of family and society. The tension that defines her daily existence is succinctly captured in her admission: “I am always torn between what I want and what is expected of me” (Kapur, 2003, p. 155). In this single line, Kapur distils the psychological weight of living between worlds—one shaped by inner desires, the other by inherited duties.

Kapur’s narrative deftly explores the emotional turbulence that accompanies Astha’s negotiations. Determination and resolve flicker within her, but so too do moments of hesitation and self-doubt. The push and pull between asserting herself and upholding her responsibilities is rendered palpable, giving readers an intimate view of the cost exacted by such internal conflicts.

These personal struggles are mirrored and magnified by the broader socio-political unrest that forms the backdrop of the novel. As the characters confront the chaos of communal violence and the fervour of political activism, Astha’s awakening is given new context and urgency. The shifting landscape outside her home becomes a metaphor for her own transformation: “The world outside her home was changing, and so was she” (Kapur, 2003, p. 178). Sharma (2017) observes that Kapur “intertwines the personal and political, suggesting that women’s emancipation is inseparable from broader social change” (p. 48). Astha’s individual journey thus resonates with a collective call for liberation, underscoring the interconnectedness of the private and public spheres in shaping identity.

However, even as Astha becomes increasingly aware of her own needs and aspirations, the pull of her familial roles remains strong. “Her children’s needs were always present, a reminder of the ties that bound her” (Kapur, 2003, p. 160). Motherhood and family continue to anchor her, acting as both a source of meaning and a barrier to complete self-abandonment. Kapur portrays Astha’s challenge not as a choice between self and others, but as an ongoing negotiation—one marked by compromise, resilience, and the enduring complexity of women’s lives.

Assertion of Autonomy

Astha’s journey, marked by hesitation and longing, ultimately leads her to a crossroads where she must confront the boundaries of her own agency. Her declaration—“I have a right to my own life, to my own happiness” (Kapur, 2003, p. 221)—resonates with both determination and uncertainty. This statement, while not an outright rejection of her circumstances, signals a significant shift in her self-perception. It is a moment of self-recognition in which Astha claims ownership of her desires and acknowledges her capacity for independent thought.

Kapur, however, resists any temptation to offer Astha, or the reader, a neat resolution. Instead, she depicts autonomy as a complicated, often ambiguous achievement. “Freedom was never absolute; it came with consequences and costs” (Kapur, 2003, p. 239). The narrative recognises that every assertion of selfhood in a patriarchal society entails difficult choices and inevitable compromises. Astha’s partial emancipation is nuanced—she does not abandon her family, nor does she sever the ties that have defined her existence. Rather, she learns to carve out spaces of independence within the familiar structures of marriage and motherhood.



This complexity reflects broader patterns in Indian women's writing. Sunder Rajan (1993) argues that such narratives are "frequently defined by negotiation rather than rebellion," a dynamic that Astha embodies as she navigates her dual commitments to self and family. Her decision to remain within her marriage, while quietly asserting her right to personal fulfilment, mirrors the lived realities of many women who must mediate between tradition and transformation. As Nair (2012) observes, "women's agency is often exercised within, not outside, the structures of family and tradition" (p. 104). Astha's story, therefore, does not conclude with total liberation but with the hard-won recognition of her own worth and the ongoing struggle to honour it amidst the complexities of her world.

Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* emerges from, and contributes to, the dynamic and evolving tradition of feminist literature in India. At the heart of this tradition lies the recognition that narrative itself is a powerful instrument for articulating women's lived realities and for contesting the patriarchal structures that have historically shaped—and often silenced—those realities. As Chaudhuri (2011) emphasises, stories become vehicles for resistance, enabling women to voice their struggles, desires, and strategies for survival within societies that too often dictate the terms of their existence.

Kapur's novel extends and complicates this tradition by focusing not on grand acts of rebellion but on the subtle "everyday acts of resistance" (Krishnaswamy, 2013, p. 29) that constitute women's agency. Through Astha's journey, the narrative draws attention to the small but significant moments—choosing to paint, forging a relationship outside the bounds of conventional marriage, or quietly asserting her right to happiness—that collectively challenge the status quo. These acts, while seemingly modest, accumulate into a powerful critique of the limitations imposed by gender roles and social expectations.

Moreover, *A Married Woman* is distinctive in its nuanced portrayal of intersectionality. Astha's experiences are not shaped by gender alone; they are deeply inflected by her social class, her roles as wife and mother, and her evolving sexuality. The novel situates her struggle for identity within the broader context of postcolonial Indian society, where questions of tradition, modernity, and personal freedom intersect in complex ways. As Dutta and Roy (2015) argue, "queer subjectivities in Indian fiction highlight the limitations of mainstream feminist discourse, calling for more inclusive models of analysis" (p. 72). Kapur's depiction of Astha's same-sex relationship with Pipeelika pushes the boundaries of what has traditionally been included in feminist literary analysis, inviting readers and critics alike to reconsider the scope and possibilities of women's narratives in contemporary India.

By weaving together issues of gender, class, and sexuality, Kapur not only deepens the portrait of her protagonist but also challenges readers to recognise the multifaceted realities that inform the quest for selfhood in postcolonial societies. In doing so, *A Married Woman* stands as both a testament to and a reimagining of feminist literary tradition.

Conclusion

A Married Woman masterfully encapsulates the intricate processes of female identity formation within the shifting landscape of contemporary India. Through Astha's nuanced and often tumultuous journey, Manju Kapur reveals how the search for selfhood is rarely straightforward, but instead shaped by a continual negotiation between deeply rooted traditions and the yearning for individuality. The novel does not offer easy answers or idealised emancipation; rather, it acknowledges the ambiguities, compromises, and moments of quiet resistance that characterise women's lives.

Astha's evolution—from dutiful daughter and wife to a woman tentatively claiming her right to happiness—reflects the broader struggles faced by countless women navigating similar cultural and familial expectations.



The courage she musters to question, to desire, and to carve out moments of autonomy, even within confining structures, becomes emblematic of the resilience required to transcend inherited boundaries.

In rendering Astha's story with such honesty and complexity, Kapur not only gives voice to an individual's quest for meaning but also challenges prevailing cultural narratives about gender, conformity, and agency. The novel stands as a testament to the transformative power of self-discovery, illustrating how acts of personal courage can ripple outward, reshaping both personal destinies and the collective fabric of society.

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