

Transcending Gender Binaries: Exploring Manjukapur's "*A Married Woman*" and "*The Immigrant*"

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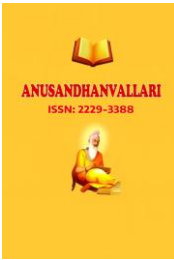
Abstract: Gender studies speak of gender exploitation gender stereotypes and gender equity. The whole issue hinges on sex differentiations, which is natural and its variance from gender differentiations, patriarchy has ruled the roost side-lining women as the 'second sex'. Nature does not permit any differentiation among the sexes based on gender roles. But for generations, women have been victims of oppression, exploitations and denial of rights. In fact, they have become complicitous in their own subjugation by passively accepting and fulfilling stereotypical roles of self – denial, self - sacrifice and spiritual suicide. So, one feels the time has come to de -gender ourselves and be classed as 'humans' capable of conscious living and intelligent thinking. This is the solution implied in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002) and *The Immigrant* (2008) the two novels have been chosen as test cases. Both the protagonists undergo a metamorphosis in the white heat miserable, familial and social existence. Astha though, she returns to family - life is a different person at the close of the novel. She has seen the bitterness of both sites of life, inner and the outer, the familial and the experimental and become sadder and wiser. Nina in the final chapter of *The Immigrant* is 'Arthanari' having become semi – man expecting a new opening in a new land. The novel portrays her odyssey from India to Montreal and from a helpless immigrant to a militant citizen of the world.

This paper analyses the two novels in this perspective.

Keywords: Gender, de-gender, patriarchy, stereotypes.

Introduction

Manjukapur is one of the most prolific and successful of contemporary Indian novelist in English. Her *A Married Woman* and *The Immigrant* focus in mainly on the changing socio -political scenario and its impact on the plight of Indian women caught in the conflicting waves of patriarchal hegemony and feminist experimentation. Her novels touch on various episodes in national history from the independence struggle, the partition, the crises in Indian politics, the emergency, the assassination and incidents like the demolition of Babri masjid, the Delhi riots etc. Thus Kapur studies the familial and social predicament of Indian women struggling to get out of the conflicting forces of tradition



and modernity. Her canvas is broad but her perceptions are keen and penetrative. We find in her novels a close interaction between the microcosm and macrocosm, the home and the world. The two locates are not exclusive but interweave into a complex web in which the feminine self seeks protection and the same time freedom and self fulfillment. In Kapur's novels gender issues are discussed with a creative objectivity that points to the need for a new type of humanism, in which gender will be de-gendered and the common humanity of man and woman will be re-asserted. It is in this light that this paper makes a study of two representative novels of Kapur *A Married Woman* and *The Immigrant*.

In this perspective *A Married Woman* records the emotional Odyssey of Astha. She is a post-graduate in English language and literature. She is also an artist, much interested and talented in sketching and painting. She is this an aesthetic. She is romantically susceptible and has had two affairs before her marriage - one at school, with a boy named Buntty and another with a middle aged professor Shankar. "She felt trapped, caught in a web of expectations, with no escape." (*A Married Woman* p123)

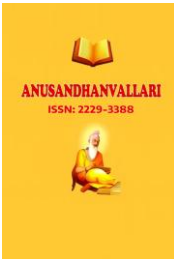
But once jilted by her teacher lover. She settles for an arranged marriage with Hemant, an Indian businessman with overseas wings. He has all the veneer of a cosmopolitan citizen of the world, but is quite narrow in his approach to women.

Astha has a happy married life till the birth of her daughter, but the daughter is considered a burden and she is under pressure to beget a son, the birth of a son ceases things for Astha but her husband overseas trips unsettles her. She feels left alone though the children and the in-laws are there. They may be read as immaturity in a mother with the two children, of a tender age. "The more she conformed, the more she lost herself." (*A Married Woman* p201)

But Astha's temperament is that of the possessive dependent wife and when she sees evidence of marital disloyalty in Hemant, her suspicion is aroused, she becomes disillusioned with men. She thinks they are all of the same stuff. They cannot cherish the sanctity of conjugal relationship, they devalue a woman's emotions as sensual passion beyond which they themselves cannot move. So Astha accepts a teaching post in a near - by school, gets interested in social service, seeks to enlarge her interest from home to the world. This reckons her life further. She has a meeting with Aizis, a social political activist, whose apparently progressive ideas hold her in a metamorphic grip. The two become close and they traveled together in social service. Trying to bring relief to the victims of the communal riots, that erupted on the demolition of Babri masjid. She is in a sense brain - washed into ideological partnership with Islamic fundamentalists. Soon Aizis falls a victim to a rioting mob and Astha is throwing the company of Pipeelika Trivedi, the inter - religious widow of Aizis, who is a researcher in public affairs. Her fate is identical, with that of Astha. The way they get attracted by Aizis is identical.

The two women get fused into a sort of uni-sex relationship. And Pipeelika becomes the 'persona fatal' to Astha. It is a kind of witchery that enslaves Astha into forgetting her old in - laws and young children. Justifiably Hemant is angry with her, he expects her to be the domesticated wife, but when she earns a prize for a painting, he does not hesitate to spend it on a pleasure trip to Goa. That shows that he is not beyond making use of his wife's earnings, though he himself is not ready to make any compromises or share household burden. "She felt like a bird in a gilded cage, beautiful but trapped." (*A M W* p 78)

Pipeelika and Astha become too close and finally there is God sent release for Astha from the mouse-trap. Pipeelika receives a research grant and is on her way to pursue her research work - overseas and Astha returns to the family fold, sadder and wiser for having tasted both bondage and freedom brings. Thus we find Astha de - gendered and re-gendered. She rebels but unable to face life alone. She returns to the family as a self conscious, metamorphose, being



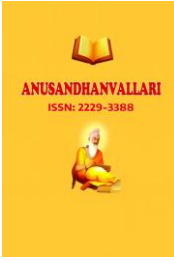
who can put up with the paradoxes and contradictions that are inevitable in human life. "She learned to navigate the complexities of relationships, and to find her own voice." (*A M W* p 312). Manju Kapur maintains an eloquent silence on Astha's thought and feelings on her return. The implication is the prodigal has come back to the family fold. "In the end, it was not the role that defined her, but her own sense of self." (*A M W* 342)

In *The Immigrant* (2008) the presentation of the female predicament in the contemporary socio-political scenario and the atmosphere of changed, rather muted familial - dynamics is presented on an extended canvas. Nina and her mother have had taste of diasporic experience at U S. with Mr. Shankar Batra. Their life in the Europe green in their memory. They speak of their joys and sorrows, after their return to India on the death of Mr. Batra. Batra's mother is kind to them but she cannot fill the gap caused by the dislocation and cultural shock. Nina has higher secondary education at Lucknow and later shift Delhi. Their the mother and daughter are close knit pair with Nina assuming emotional charge of the widowed mother. Nina completes her post-graduation at Miranda House, College Delhi, she becomes a part of the department of English. Soon in keeping with the normal behaviour of the typical Kapur protagonist, she was an illicit affair, with a married professor Rahul, which proves a fiasco. "She was the only human. Only human, she assured herself, as she witnessed her youth ebb and her courage ebb" (*The Immigrant* p 49). So Nina decides to migrate and her mother feels an overseas husband will be the ideal route. So she arranges the marriage of Nina to Ananda, a dentist in Halifax, Canada. He himself is an unsettled a superfluous addition to his uncle's family. He tries to overcome the immigration blues by switching over to Canadian ways of dress and food. He feels female Canadian connection will accelerate his acculturation. But he is happy to have an Indian educated English speaking wife, who will help him socialising Canada.

However Nina's experience on her first landing in Canada puts her off. Ananda is late in coming to receive her. The immigration counter gives Nina a really tough time, checking up her document with undue meticulousness and commenting on her Indianness in colour and demeanour. This tastes perceives Nina although her early Canadian days. The bitterness gets further intensified, when she realises impotency of her husband. "There was a storm inside he, created by raising the possibility of infertility in front of a group of women and finding her fears were real. Helpless, loss of control and a lack of confidence in her femininity. That was a sterile woman's profile". (*The Immigrant* p 165) And his extra-marital relationships with Mandy and his casual attitude towards the Indian identity visa-vis, Canadian fusion. She sees him as a rootless, fruitless drone. This drives her to take of a course in Library Science, soon we find her developing an intimacy with Anton, a classmate himself a married man. When Anton goes beyond the limits Nina reaches the breaking point. She knows all men are unconscientious, sensualist, who look up of women as decorated dolls for masculine consumption. Her mother's death de - roots her. She thinks about her life. And finally decides to find her own way by getting job in Canada. She reaches a stage, where, she assume responsibility for herself and she seems to see her way with confidence and a spirit of healthy adventure. "She hoped independence would facilitate her thought process. She looked down the path on which there would be no husband and saw difficulties, the pain, the solitude. Nevertheless treading it was not imaginable" (*The Immigrant* p 329). She has come to terms with life. She is neither man nor woman. But a human being eager to live, a life of honourable work or service. "When something failed it was a signal to move on. For an immigrant was not going back" (*The Immigrant* p 330)

Conclusion

Thus the two novels show evolution of the protagonist from tentative dependent experimentation to independent acceptance of what life has to offer. Astha returns to the family a far-better person than she was. She is ready for compromises knowing that one cannot dictate terms to life. Success lies in positive acceptance not confused rejection.



Similarly Nina too realises that one cannot rely on others to make one feel, life is worth living. One's life is one's own business, meaning in life something one can find only through one's own effort.

“ The continent was full of people escaping unhappy pasts. She too was heading towards fresh territories, a different set of circumstances, a floating resident of the Western world. When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow roots and move. Find a new place new friends, a new family”. (*The Immigrant* p 330).

Towards the close of the novel Nina is human individual, who has no doubts about her life. She is ready to wait for her chance which, she feels, will surely come.

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