

Lesbian relationship in the life of Astha of A Married Woman by Manju Kapur

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AMarried Woman(2002) created a sensation after its publication. This novel deals with the sensitive issue of lesbian relationship. Women are now becoming aware of their status. This novel has been written in the background of the controversy of BabriMasjid and Ram Janam Bhoomi. Even a fresh idea of a relationship is put forward in this novel. It has changed the entire atmosphere of India. Once again the protagonist of this novel plays the role of an ultra modern woman, who wants to have her own space and identity, breaks the old traditions of the society.

Astha, the protagonist of the novel is the only child in her family. Born in a modern family and being well educated and attractive, she always dreams of a young man who is handsome enough to hold her in his manly embrace. She gets attracted by Bunty, an Army Cadet at NDA, in her teenage. She is always dreaming about him and they always write letters to each other. But Astha's mother comes to know of this relationship, and she complains about this to Bunty's parents. After this complaint, their relationship ends. Her parents keep an eye on her and control her outings. Soon the episode ends and Astha starts doing her routine works.

After sometime she gets attracted towards Rohan and gets involved with him. She is very passionate in love making. Rohan and Astha kiss each other, and get ready to do anything. She has to gratify her feelings of love, and her hunger for love is described in the following lines,

“All she wanted was for him to start, so that the world could fall away, and she be lost. This is love, she told herself, no wonder they talk so much about it.”(AMW,28)

Again this relationship ends because of Rohan's going away from the country to Oxford for higher studies. Astha is fond of writing diary; her mother gets the diary and reads all

entries. She always writes about her meetings with the boys whom she has an affair with. On being asked by her mother, Astha answers her mother very cleverly that she is writing about her feelings, imagination, and nothing else. After reading her diary, her mother thinks that Convent Education has spoiled her daughter's mind. After Rohan's departure to Oxford this relationship also ends.

Astha's father wants her to go in for competitive exams and sits for an IAS. But Astha doesn't take it seriously. So her parents start finding a boy for Astha. The family gets Hemant, an M.B.A. from abroad. After sometime Astha gets married with Hemant, belongs to a bureaucratic family. They live in Vasant Vihar, a posh colony in New Delhi. She has all the facilities available in the house, and starts enjoying her life fully. But after some time she starts making complaints of being alone. Even after having all the comforts of life she gets bored with the daily routine and starts a teaching job. Her in-laws also approve of it as a good time pass. She is a good painter and a true artist too, but her husband never praises her for the talent. She is very happy with her job. Astha has two children raised in the family; she always remains busy in her job and doing duties of children. On other hand Hemant starts his own business. He has no time for the family and children. Astha has to accomplish all the responsibilities alone. For Astha Manju Kapur has said,

“She found this soothing, and later scolded herself for being so demanding. Hemant was busy. Hemant was building their future, she had to be adjusting, and that was what marriage was all about.” (AMW,71)

She tries her best to adjust between her job and household works. Once she thinks of leaving the job but knows the value of independence, so she abandons her idea to leave the job. She tries her best to perform her duties well. Her family also expects of her to perform all the responsibilities. At this Satish Kumar writes about Astha,

“She has to learn to adjust with over bearing husband, interfering mother-in-law and disapproving mother. Her children, husband, parents-in-law and increasingly passionless marital sex take up most of her life. She finds herself trapped in a suffocating traditional society which

frowns upon any expectation of change in the domestic chores of responsibilities.” (Harit,102)

Astha is happy in doing her job of school, and maintains her home in a better way. There is a two day workshop held in the school by The Street Theatre Group. Aijaz is a stage artist; he has come with his group to hold the workshop. Aijaz traces the talent of Astha. He praises her paintings and encourages Astha to write poetry also. Astha gets impressed with the multifaceted personality of Aijaz, and starts taking interest in him. Manju Kapur has described the appearance of Aijaz thus:

“He was of medium night, his body compact. His face was the clear delicate luminous brown of freshly rained-on earth. His lips were a darker brown than his skin, and his eyes were black and narrow. While working he rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, allowing Astha to view at her leisure his round strong arms, hairless, smooth, and muscular. He had prematurely grey hair, which, thick and springy, fell about his face and neck in ways that suggested a good barber.”(AMW,117-118)

She gets attracted toward Aijaz and finds excuses to be with him all the time. While working with Aijaz she feels sensation when he touches her on her knee,

“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 rights before her eyes.”(AMW, 119)

But this doesn't continue for long because the workshop ends in two days. After some days Hemant reads in a newspaper that Aijaz and his group is burnt alive during a stage show. After the Ajodhya Masjid demolition there is a great turmoil going around in the whole India. This has given Astha a great shock. After the incident Astha gets busy to avoid the memories.

During the riots, Theatre groups play a great role in India to create religious and communal harmony. A social integration association also comes forward campaigning for peace. A

group called The Street Theatre group comes into existence. Pipeelika is the member of this group. Astha comes into contact with Pipeelika and finds that she is the widow of Aijaz. She gets attracted towards Pipee, enjoying her company and gets physically involved with her. Astha wants to live with Pipee all the time. She even ignores her house, children and husband. She doesn't care who will look after the children when she decides to go to Ekta Yatra from Kashmir to Kanayakumari with Pipeelika. Their relationship grows stronger during the Yatra. But Pipee has other lesbian partners too, Neeraj and Sameera. Astha comes to know about this relation and she feels bad and deceived by Pipee. At this moment Astha feels trapped in the longings of freedom and in the household responsibilities. She shares her feelings with Pipee and says,

“I love you, you know how much you mean to me, I try and prove it every moment we have together, but I can't abandon my family, I can't. Maybe I should not have looked for happiness, but I couldn't help myself. I suppose you think I should not be in a relationship, but I had not foreseen.....

Oh Pipee, I'm sorry I am not like you.”(AMW, 248)

Astha is feeling hurt and puzzled. She wants to live with Pipee but can't be detached from her family. A new problem is waiting for Astha. Hemant suffers from a heart attack. It shakes Astha's mind also as she has to take care of Hemant even more. Doctor suggests Hemant to live a healthy lifestyle, and warns the entire family against giving any kind of stress to him. Astha's in-laws ask her to be with her husband all the time and go for a walk early in the morning with Hemant for the betterment of his health.

On the other hand she comes to know that Pipee is going abroad for doing her Ph.D. Finally Pipee goes to the US and Astha remains alone again. Now she puts in her efforts to maintain a good environment for Hemant's good health. She gets busy with her duties again. The perplexed state of her mind is described thus:

“Was this where her life had led her, this the space she had travelled between those walks and these? Striding briskly to still the thoughts in her head, speaking to mask the feelings in her heart. She looked at Hemant, swinging his arms, concentrating on getting his heart rate up. Perhaps he was

disappointed too; perhaps he had looked for something different in marriage. They didn't talk about such things, she would never know.”(AMW, 289)

At last Astha comes back to her family and devotes her life to the house. But this novel has created a new approach in the life of women. They become more conscious and eager to have equal freedom in life as men have in the society. Manju Kapur has highlighted the hidden desires of love, romance and homosexuality through this novel. As Ashok Kumar has said,

“In *A Married Woman*, the age-old themes of marriage and politics are coupled with lesbian relationship, in the narrative making Kapur the first Indian English Novelist to highlighting women's desire for homosexuality.” (Kumar, 138)

At the end of the novel Astha comes to accept the values of family traditions and of Indian culture that never ever allowed anyone to be detached from her culture and family. This proverb ‘**East or West; Home is the best**’ comes true in the life of Astha. At last Astha also realises whatever she did earlier was just out of affection, and that home is the right place to live in and comes back happily and joins her family.

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