
Conflict And Conformity: The Dual Consciousness Of Women In Manju Kapur's A Married Woman

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This paper explores the theme of dual consciousness experienced by women in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*, highlighting the tensions between conflict and conformity in the life of the protagonist, Astha. Kapur's narrative portrays a woman negotiating between societal expectations, marital obligations, and her quest for personal and emotional fulfillment. The study examines how socio-cultural and familial ambivalence shapes Astha's identity and influences her psychological state. Drawing upon feminist and postcolonial frameworks, the paper analyzes Kapur's portrayal of modern Indian womanhood as a site of negotiation rather than liberation. The article concludes that Astha's struggle symbolizes the broader predicament of middle-class Indian women — simultaneously bound by tradition and compelled toward self-expression.

Keywords: Manju Kapur, A Married Woman, dual consciousness, socio-cultural ambivalence, feminism, identity, conflict and conformity, patriarchy.

Introduction

The discourse of conflict and conformity within Indian women's fiction has long reflected the paradox of female existence in a patriarchal society. Manju Kapur, one of India's most perceptive feminist novelists, engages deeply with this paradox through her nuanced portrayal of educated, middle-class women constrained by social expectations. *A Married Woman* (2002) exemplifies this preoccupation, tracing the psychological and emotional journey of Astha, a woman whose life epitomizes the contradictions of being both compliant and rebellious. Set against the socio-political backdrop of India in the 1970's and 1980's, the novel situates personal conflict within national and cultural turmoil. The narrative moves from domestic interiors to public spaces - schools, art galleries, and protest sites - symbolizing the fluid boundaries between personal desire and social obligation. This study argues that Kapur's *Married Woman* critiques the oppressive structures of marriage and middle-class morality while simultaneously revealing the limits of rebellion available to women within such systems.

Conflict and conformity: The Feminine condition

Astha's upbringing is steeped in traditional Indian values that define womanhood through sacrifice and service. Her mother's insistence that "a woman's happiness lies in her home" (Kapur, 2002, MW p.15) encapsulates the ideology of domestic conformity. From an early age, Astha internalizes the belief that her worth depends on her ability to maintain familial harmony. Simon de Beauvoir's (2010) assertion that "one is born, but rather becomes a woman" finds apt resonance here; Astha's gender identity is socially constructed through cultural conditioning. Astha's marriage to Hemant, a successful businessman, seems ideal on the surface but gradually exposes the hollow foundations of patriarchal domesticity. Hemant's emotional detachment and pragmatic worldview contrast sharply with Astha's longing for connection and creativity. Their marriage becomes a site of ideological struggle where the expectations of the "ideal wife" suppress the emergence of an autonomous self. As feminist critic Geetanjali Chanda (2008) observes, Kapur's female protagonists "embody the contradictions of education and domesticity", caught between empowerment and confinement (p.42).

Marriage and the Architecture of conformity

In a married woman, marriage operates as a disciplinary institution that enforces conformity through emotional, sexual and economic dependence. Hemant's role as the provider consolidates patriarchal control, while Astha's role as wife and mother becomes her primary identity. Judith Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity illuminates Astha's predicament: her conformity to the script of domestic femininity is a repeated performance sustained by societal approval. Astha's artistic aspirations represent her latent resistance. Painting becomes a symbolic act of self-expression, an attempt to reclaim agency within the confines of domesticity. However, her creative impulses are continually subordinated to household responsibilities. As Lucy Irigaray (1985) argues, women's creativity in patriarchal societies often suppressed or appropriated to serve male defined purposes. Kapur's narrative exposes this suppression through Astha's struggle to sustain her artistic voice amidst the demands of family life.

The Inner conflict: Selfhood and Desire

Astha's internal conflict intensifies as she confronts her emotional dissatisfaction. Torn between societal expectations and personal longing, she becomes increasingly aware of the dissonance between her inner world and external roles. This psychological tension reflects the condition of many Indian women caught between tradition and modernity. Her relationship with Pipeelika - a free-spirited artist and activist becomes the turning point in her journey toward self-awareness. Through Pipeelika, Astha experiences emotional intimacy and sexual fulfillment beyond the confines of heteronormativity. Their relationship challenges patriarchal and cultural taboos, redefining love as a form of liberation. However, the transgressive nature of this relationship also exposes the fragility of rebellion in a society governed by conformity. Astha's attraction to Pipeelika aligns with what feminist theorist Adrienne Rich (1980) terms the "lesbian continuum", a spectrum of woman-identified experience that resist patriarchal definitions of sexuality. Yet, Kapur's portrayal is not merely celebratory; it remains grounded in social realism. Pipeelika's departure to pursue her academic career abroad and Astha's eventual return to her family signify the persistent hold of societal norms. The novel thus underscores that even in transgression, conformity remains an omnipresent force.

Political Context and the Parallels of Conflict

Kapur situates Astha's personal turmoil against the political upheavals of contemporary India-communal tensions, religious fundamentalism and Babri masjid Demolition. The external conflict mirrors Astha's inner fragmentation. The political narrative of intolerance Parallels the personal narrative of repression Both the nation and Astha struggle for identity amidst the forces of conformity and division. This interweaving of personal and political conflict echoes post- colonial feminist perspectives that link the oppression of women to the broader structures of national and cultural Power. Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003) argues that post-colonial women 's narratives often reveal " the intimate connection between the private and the political"(21). Kapur's novel exemplifies this by presenting Astha's story not merely as individual struggle as a reflection of India's evolving gender politics.

The Illusion of Liberation

Despite her moments of rebellion, Astha's liberation remains partial and temporary. Her eventual silence sand return to domestic life suggests a cyclical entrapment within patriarchal boundaries. Yet, this ending is not purely defeatist. Kapur implies that Astha's awareness - her recognition of oppression constitutes a form of resistance in itself. The narrative leaves open the possibility of transformation through consciousness, even if structural change remains elusive. As Radha Kumar (1993) notes, the Indian women's movement has often emphasized " negotiation rather than rejection" of traditional roles (p.88). Kapur's heroine embodies this negotiation, oscillating between submission and assertion. Astha's partial emancipation reflects the complex reality of Indian feminism, which must navigate cultural constraints while striving for autonomy.

Conclusion

Manju kapur's *A Married woman* presents a penetrating study of conflict and conformity in the life of a modern Indian woman. Astha's journey encapsulates the paradox of freedom within constraint. desire within duty and rebellion within conformity. Through her portrayal, Kapur critiques the patriarchal ideology that defines womanhood in terms of domesticity and sacrifice, while also acknowledging the psychological costs of defiance in a conservative society. Drawing upon feminist theory, this paper has shown that Astha's struggle is not merely personal but emblematic of a broader cultural condition. Her oscillation between compliance and resistance reflects the lived reality of many women negotiating between modern aspirations and traditional expectations. *A Married woman*, therefore, stands as both a social critique and a psychological exploration - a narrative woman who, even in silence, articulates the unspoken conflict of gender and identity in contemporary india.

(Note : Quotations taken from Manju Kapur's *A Married woman* indicated as MW)

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