Existentialist Themes in Manju Kapur's A Married Woman – A Critical Study

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the existentialist themes in Manju Kapur's A Married Woman. In this attempt to study and examine this novel, the researcher has examined the existentialist themes such as freedom of choice, Bad faith, guilt, alienation, anxiety and despair. In this study, an attempt has been made to explain the key philosophical ideas of the important existential philosophers like Sartre, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Marcel, and Camus. The main philosophical ideas of these philosophers find expression in Kapur's A Married Woman. Like the existentialist, Kapur sees man/woman as a free agent who is free to choose his/her action but this freedom is tied with responsibility. This paper has analysed the predicament of the protagonist in Kapur's A Married Woman from an existentialist perspective. The protagonist starts her journey with the freedom of choice. She searches for new meaning in this quest for self-discovery. Thus, this paper centres on existentialist themes in Kapur's A Married woman,

KEY WORDS: EXISTENTIALIST THEMES, FREEDOM OF CHOICE, GUILT, ALIENATION, AND RESPONSIBILITY.

INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur is mainly concerned with the existentialist predicament of her protagonists. They are tirelessly searching for their identity and make an earnest attempt to know the purpose of their existence in this universe. Man/woman is dejected to see nothing but chaos, confusion and disorder in the society in which he/she exists. Her protagonists start their journey with the freedom of choice. They search for new meaning in this quest for self-discovery. Existentialism is twentieth-century European philosophy. It is a philosophical and literary movement that included Kierkegaard, Sartre, Nietzsche, Camus, Heidegger, Marcel, Jasper, and Kafka. The term 'existentialism' was coined by Gabriel Marcel in 1943. Existentialism is the philosophical theory which maintains that man is a free agent responsible for his own action. It is not just an analysis of the human condition, but it is a passionate quest for authentic existence. J.L. Styan writes,

"Existentialism proposed that man was a lonely creature of anxiety and despair living in a meaningless world, and that he was merely existing until he made a decisive and critical choice about his own future course of action. By such a choice, a person would acquire an identity, a purpose and dignity as a human being. For preference, existential man should adopt some social or political cause in order to acquire this dignity and purpose." (118). The basic idea of existentialism is that human beings are free to choose for themselves what is good or bad, right or wrong. Women writers not only wrote about women's issues, but also about their existential predicament. Kapur's main idea is that everyone is free to choose.

It is this choice that defines the individual. But everyone's choice comes with responsibility. Sartre in Existentialism and Humanism writes, "when a man commits himself to anything, fully realising that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind –in such a moment a man cannot escape from the sense of complete and profound responsibility" (30). Macquarrie writes, "One does not first exist and then become free rather to be human is already to be free". In other words, we are "condemned" to be freedom. We cannot blame others for the choices we make. We have to take responsibility for our lives. Sartre in his Being and Nothingness writes, "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of human being is suspended in his freedom" (qtd. in Crowell 211).

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Themes Of Freedom Of Choice And Bad Faith: A Married Woman is a seductive story of love, ambition and passion. It traces the physical and emotional growth of Astha -- from a young girl to a middle-aged woman -- matured by experience. She was the only child of her parents. They were worried about their daughter's education, marriage and her future. Her mother often declared, "When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Every day in her temple corner in the kitchen, she prayed for a good husband for her daughter" (1). She was a pious lady. But failed in her responsibility of choosing a partner for her daughter. Instead, she whole heartedly depended on her prayer.

But according to her husband, Astha's future lay in her hands. He insisted on the importance of education. The general principle of existentialism is that the meaning and purpose of life depends on our choices that we make. Astha decided to go for higher education and got admission in a college. This was the first important choice that she made in her life. Her parents were anxious about her marriage. After her break from Bunty, Astha found her new love in the arms of Rohan. But when he decided to go to Oxford for his higher studies the relationship between them did not continue. Rohan's decision changed not only his life but Astha's as well. Thus, she failed in her second choice that she made in her life.

In order to overcome her failure and forget the past she aspired for higher studies, got herself enrolled in an MA program. This was the third important decision that she made in her life. Kapur writes, When Astha was in her final year there was a marriage proposal for her. He was working as an assistant manager in a bank. Astha's first meeting with Hemant resulted in her approval to their marriage. This was the fourth importance choice that she made in her life. At times she thought about Rohan, but then she scolded herself, "Rohan had abandoned her. Hemant had married her, he valued her, he thought her pretty" (38). She hoped to enjoy life in the arms of Hemant. After a few months, dullness began to creep into Astha's life.

She tried to find her identity in the society and decided to work as a teacher. She got an opportunity to work at St. Anthony's School. She had the freedom of choice to work in the school. Kapur writes, "Being a teacher she had to get up early and go to work. She had exercises to correct, and lessons to prepare. She started a reading club, a writing club, a painting club, directed by the principal's suggestions and followed through with her encouragement. Life was shaping up nicely, with her mind and heart gainfully employed" (48). At the same time Hemant resigned his job and established his own business. The choice that he made in his life changed the entire situation in their family. Now Astha could see Hemant in his new avatar. Hemant was building their future. So, she had to adjust and that was what marriage was all about.

Existentialism observes that most human beings do not remain true to their own decisions due to external pressures, the materialist world and its values. Accordingly, in A Married Woman, Astha's mother blindly followed the words of Swamiji. One evening after dinner Astha's father experienced chest pain and died of heart attack. After the shocking incident Astha's mother met Swamiji for consolation. She persuaded her daughter to meet Swamiji and seek his blessing. But Astha disliked her mother's idea. Even Hemant considered it nonsensical.

Thus, the protagonist Nisha stands as an existentialist by not falling prey to bad faith. The vacuum created due to the lack of love and understanding led Astha towards Aijaz and further towards Pipeelika. Her principal invited Aijaz Akhtar Khan, the founder of the Street Theatre Group, to hold a workshop in the school. Their meeting proved to be a turning point in the life of Astha. He entrusted Astha with the task of writing the script of the Ram Janmabhoomi - Babri Masjid controversy. This led her to think about the social, religio-political issues surrounding the nation. He elevated her from her mundane life of domesticity and encouraged her to have her views on the issues impacting the nation. Astha felt dignified because for the first time she had been valued for her existence. Thus, Astha had freedom of choice to involve herself in social activities.

When Pipeelika completed her MA, her brother wanted her to go to the US and do her Ph.D. But she decided to join an NGO. She said, "I do not wish to join the diaspora. Instead, after a brief teaching stint, she joined an NGO run by women, dealing with alternative education for slum children" (120). She has the freedom of choice to involve herself in the social work and dedicated herself for the education for slum children. In this context Sartre in Existentialism and Human Emotions writes, "Man being condemned to be free carried the weight of the whole world on his shoulder, he is responsible for the world and for himself as a way of being" (52). Aijaz fell in love with a Hindu girl Pipeelika Trivedi. In spite of her mother's opposition, Pipeelika decided to marry Aijaz.

The sudden death of Aijaz shocked Astha. She wanted to participate in the movements organized by different organizations to protest the murder of artists. She exercised her freedom of choice to involve herself in socio-political activities. When she decided to go to Ayodhya, her mother-in-law resisted, "What is the need to leave your family, and roam about like a homeless woman on the streets of some strange city?" (186). Her journey to Ayodhya against the wishes of her family gradually distanced her from her family. It was at this juncture that Pipeelika entered Astha's life and an instant rapport was established between them. Their friendly relationship acquired serious dimensions. Gradually both the women developed a strong sexual relationship. Later Astha realized that Pipeelika has no responsibility. On the other hand, Astha has her husband and two children. Astha said to Pipeelika, "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 Oh Pipee, I'm sorry I am not like you" (242).

Pipeelika decided to go on Ekta Yatra along with Astha for one month. Hemanth could not tolerate any further. He burst into anger and shouted at her. In spite of her husband's opposition, she involved herself in social activity. On her way back she realized the importance of family and children. She went to the church nearby and prayed, "Teach me how to live, God", I prayed, 'I am not asking for happiness, but I would welcome some stability, so I need not run all over the place looking for love and confirmation. Give me substance, God, give me a life that has not been lived for nothing. And protect my children'" (252).

Pipeelika's decision to go to the United States for her doctoral studies changed the life of Astha. Now she established herself as a painter and gave her art the required time and energy. She produced a series of paintings which drew the attention of people. Kapur writes, "As her brush moved carefully over the canvas, her hand grew sure, her back straightened, she sat firmer on her stool, her gaze became more concentrated, her mind more focused. A calmness settled over her, tenuous, fragile, but calmness nevertheless. She thought of her name. Faith. Faith in herself. It was all she had" (299). Every one present in the hall appreciated her efforts. Astha's decisions were self-centered and self-oriented. Her involvement in social activities was good but it consumed her time and energy and drew her away from her family.

Kapur's protagonists did not fall a prey to bad faith. In this novel Astha, tried to find her identity and decided to work as a teacher. She had the freedom of choice to work at St. Anthony's school. Even though her parents were under the influence of Swamiji, she disliked her mother's idea of seeking Swamiji's blessing in her life. Astha's mother and her in-laws had strong faith on God. They were under the influence of pundit and so did not remain true to their own decision and choice. Towards the end Pipeelika went to the United States to pursue her Ph.D. Thus, she had the freedom to educate herself. Thus, Kapur finely delineated the freedom of one's choice through her protagonist, Astha. It is associated with the dilemma of taking decisions and a search to provide oneself a meaning to one's life. The protagonist Astha was free to choose her career and her involvement in social activities, and her lesbian relationship. She was in a dilemma while she was making her choice.

Themes Of Anxiety And Despair: Anxiety is a human phenomenon. It is one of the major problems of human beings. Man lives with anxiety. The English word 'anxiety' originates from the ancient Greek *angh*, which can be found in ancient Greek words meaning 'to press tight', 'to strangle', 'to be weighed down with grief', 'load', 'burden', and 'trouble'. In the mid-20th century in the work of the Danish philosopher Soren

Kierkegaard the concept of Angst became prominent. It is an anguished dread triggered by the awareness of both our freedom to act and our responsibility for those actions. Kierkegaard stresses freedom when he talks about anxiety. Sartre analyses anxiety in the context of freedom and nothingness.

Gordon Marino writes, "Anxiety 'is not a peripheral threat that I can take or leave it is always a threat to the foundation, to the center of my existence'" (45-46). Thus, anxiety is a peculiarly human phenomenon. Anxiety is not related to fear which comes from outside. Anxiety arises when man distrust himself and his actions. Marino remarks, "Kierkegaard describes anxiety as the dizziness of freedom. In anxiety I can come to understand that I am free, that I am a creature fraught through and through with possibilities. That freedom, the necessity to constantly make choices, to realize this possibility and close down another, is a font of anxiety" (44).

Anxiety is different from worry. Worry is concerned with ordinary things. When a man is worried, there is always something about which he is worried. Some object is the focus of concern. Wartenberg writes, "Anxiety is about a fundamental fact about what it is to be human: its object is the fact that we have to make decisions that 'make all the difference', but have nothing to rely on in making them. Anxiety is a reflection of this aspect of our situation" (78). For example, when a man is placed with the possibility of choosing his career what will be his source of anxiety? He is aware that he has only one life to live, which will be shaped by his decisions. He may be confused with many questions that arise in his mind. All that he experiences before making his decision is Angst, the existentialists' favorite terms for anxiety.

The word 'despair' is derived from Latin word 'desperare' meaning 'without hope'. Despair is the term Sartre used to describe the realization that we are free to act but our actions are often in vain. As a consequence, we act without hope. In existentialism, despair is generally defined as a loss of hope (Wikipedia). Alastair Hannay writes, "The general notion of despair that Kierkegaard appeals to is one that implies the 'vanity' of trying to do something. He would then be claiming that despair is trying to prevent something, namely, being or becoming oneself, when either 'deep down' or quite consciously we know that this is impossible" (330). For existentialist thinkers, despair is one of the most significant human emotions. Evans writes, "Human beings have despaired because they have become strikingly conscious of their alienation from themselves, other people, and nature is only too true. To say that an individual is in despair because he is experiencing that alienation may also be true" (93). Despair is commonly defined as total hopelessness revealed from within.

Astha, the protagonist, was brought up in a traditional middle-class family. Astha's parents wanted to make her life secure and stable. They saved some amount for their economic security and Astha's marriage. In this context Kapur writes, "Over these smaller worries, loomed the

larger one, their unbuilt house, the place they would go to when they retired, the shelter that lay between them and nothingness. It was towards this end that they counted every paisa, weighed the pros and cons of every purchase with heavy anxiety" (6). Their constant effort to make their life secure resulted in anxiety. US psychologist David Barlow rightly says, "Anxiety is a future-oriented mood state in which one is ready or prepared to attempt to cope with upcoming negative events. If one were to put anxiety into words, one might say, 'That terrible event could happen again and I might not be able to deal with it, but I've got to be ready to try'" (qtd. in Freeman 11).

Astha fell in love with Bunty who lived in the same area. When her mother prevented their love, Astha was not able to shed memories of Bunty. She was desperate throughout the day and was unable to eat, sleep or study. Kapur writes, "The holidays passed. Astha suffered daily. Neither drawing nor reading could engage her. Her heart felt like lead, her mind like stone. She couldn't get Bunty on the phone; he was always out" (14). She tried to forget Bunty but felt more desperate.

After a few years, Astha got admission in a college. Her parents became anxious about her marriage. Kapur points out, "Now that Astha was in college her mother focused anxiously on their primary parental obligation. Every Sunday she scanned the matrimonial pages meticulously, pencil in hand, circling ads. Later on, she would show them to the father" (19). Thus, her mother was very anxious about choosing a life partner for her daughter. Finally, they found a suitable bridegroom for their daughter. But Astha refused to meet the man dressed in khaki and humiliated her mother in front of the stranger. Kapur writes, "Dread filled Astha . . . 'I can't', she whispered hopelessly, 'I can't meet anyone like this'. The mother finally gave up, leaving Astha collapsed against the bathroom door, tears falling, crying, crying for Bunty, crying for the lack of love in her barren life . . ." (21). Thus, the choice that the mother made for her daughter left her in an existential crisis.

When Rohan decided to go to Oxford for his higher studies, the relationship between them did not continue for a long time. In existentialism, despair is generally defined as a loss of hope. In this novel when Astha realized her condition she sat in silence and realized that "the hands that he had used on her body were now clenched around her heart, slowly squeezing, slowly hurting" (30). During the following days Rohan neither called nor sent her any secret messages. Astha felt desperate over her condition; every day was agonizing for her. She was constantly reminded of Rohan in the Coffee House and felt desperate and anxious. When Astha decided to marry Hemant, she was quite nervous. She began to recollect her past, especially her relationship with Rohan. The choice that she was going to make, made her feel dizzy. After a few months when dullness began to cast its shadow on Astha's life, she tried to find her identity. She joined St. Anthony's School as a teacher. At the same time Hemant also established his

own business. Thus, both husband and wife had their own freedom of choice. Their decision changed their family life completely. Since Hemant had many responsibilities, the transformation in him was inevitable.

In the absence of her husband, Astha was unable to manage her work. At this juncture she experienced hopelessness. As a result, she started having headaches. Kapur writes, "She learned to dread each small twinge, was it going to be bad or medium? Maybe she was tired, should she lie down and rest? Or maybe 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?" (75-76). Her mother took her to a Homeopathy doctor in her neighbourhood in Jangpura. He observed, "Tension the disease of modern life. The secret of health is a balanced mind" (76). After the operation also the headache persisted. So, it was related to mental affliction, for nothing was wrong with her physically. The decision that she made to find her own identity resulted in existential angst.

Astha did not find any solace in the company of her husband. She had shown a lot of concern for social activities but that was not welcomed by Hemant. He expected Astha to be a housewife which was rejected by her. She liked to participate in movements organized for communal harmony. She had the freedom of choice to involve herself in social activities. But it resulted in anxiety and despair in her life. Sunita Rao Bhaduri writes, "As a writer of new generation in an atmosphere of the nation's socio-political flux, Kapur has recorded the truth in her fictive narrative. With zeal to change the Indian male perception, she describes the trauma of her female protagonists from which they suffer and perish in utter hopelessness" (82).

Astha met Pipeelika, Aijaz's wife, in Ayodhya. She was attracted towards Pipeelika's speech. They became very close. When Astha decided to go to Ekta Yatra, Hemant warned her about the consequences of Ekta Yatra. He could not tolerate that she did not care for him, and their children and neglected household responsibilities. During her Ekta Yatra, she began to think about her prospects in life. During Ekta Yatra, Astha was concerned about her children. She realized the importance of human relationship, especially mother-son-daughter relationship. She was worried about the progress of her son and daughter, their health, etc. Kapur writes, "I wonder how Anu and Himu are managing. I cannot tell on the phone. Their school is opening today. Did they finish their holiday homework? Does my mother manage to get them up and off in time? Are they all right?" (263). She was anxious about her children's future and was worried about them.

Themes of Guilt and Alienation: Man is supposed to face guilt and alienation. Evans writes, "The decisive expression of alienation lies in the phenomenon of guilt" (91). Abnish Singh in his article entitled "Sense of Guilt and Alienation in Arun Joshi's *The Foreigner*" writes, "Guilt is a cognitive and emotional experience

that takes place when an individual realizes or believes that he has violated a moral standard and is responsible for his acts. Or sometimes, he cannot help the suffering person or fails in his efforts to relieve that person; he experiences the sense of guilt. The term alienation refers to a person's estrangement from his own self, his community and others in general. (1) There is an apparent difference between the theistic and atheistic existentialist ideas. Theistic existentialist believe that sin alienate man from God whereas atheistic existentialist believe that alienation refers to alienation from one's own being. The term 'alienation' is usually thought to be modern European origins. Existentialists inherited the concept of alienation from the nineteenth-century philosophers George Hegel and Marx. But they converted it into a more personal sense of feeling separated and alone.

In the twentieth century, the notion of alienation was further explored particularly in the schools of phenomenology and existentialism, which included thinkers such as George Hegel, Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. Macquarrie writes, "For the existentialist, alienation is understood chiefly in inward terms. It is the existent's alienation from his own deepest being" (204). The philosophical discussion of alienation was in French. F.W. Dillistone remarks, "For Hegel the estrangement was to be found within the very structure of life universal. For Marx, it was to be found within the structure of man's conditions of labor which compelled him to be alienated from his work, from himself, and from his fellow men" (qtd. in Macquarrie 204).

Manju Kapur's second novel *A Married Woman* is a seductive story of love ambition and passion. The existential themes such as guilt and alienation are predominant in this novel. It presents a sensitive portrayal of woman's quest for identity and voices their frustrations, disappointment, and alienation. The novel acquires significance when read from the point of women's struggle for identity and their existence. Malathi in her article "The Intricate Journey of a Dutiful wife in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*" writes, "The present novel highlights boldly the sufferings caused in the life of women. Various forms of silence, repression, exploitation, sense of aloofness, compromise, conflict and confrontation and psychological complexities distort the serenity of their inner recesses" (38).

A Married Woman unravels the life of Astha, her emotional story, her guilt, alienation, etc. Astha, the protagonist of this novel, was portrayed as a middle-class Indian woman who is highly modern in her opinions on love, sex and marriage. It brings out her search for her identity as a married woman. After marriage, when they enjoyed physical relationship, her guilty consciousness recollected her memory of Rohan. When they made love, "Unbidden thoughts of Rohan came . . . Then she scolded herself, Rohan had abandoned her. Hemant had married her, he valued her, he thought her pretty" (38). Thus, she was alienated from herself and felt guilty about her past life.

Astha was happy during the early days of her marriage. But as time passed, she felt lonely. Because her husband launched a new business venture and initially was very busy with his office work. As a result, Astha felt lonely, marginalized and disturbed. She was stuck in a dull, loveless married life with Hemant. So, in order to reduce her tension, she joined a school. She gave her full attention to school. Still, she felt lonely and alienated. F.W. Dillistone remarks, "For Hegel the estrangement was to be found within the very structure of life universal. For Marx, it was to be found within the structure of man's conditions of labor which compelled him to be alienated from his work, from himself, and from his fellow men" (qtd. in Macquarrie 204).

Astha was a creative writer as well as a good painter. She resumed writing poems and drawing sketches to have some temporary relief. She started doing that to express her anguish and alienation and got some relief as well. All her poems were about love, rejection, desire and longing, cages and birds and mice and suffering in various situations. Thus, she was in search of true love and the meaning of her existence. As a result, she was drawn towards her friend Pipeelika, a widow. Astha-Pipeelika relationship affected the relationship between Astha and Hemant. All the time Astha began to think about Pipeelika. Now she devoted more time in the company of Pipee and less in her own house.

When she thought about the consequences of her relationship with Pipee, she suffered from a sense of guilt. It was unorthodox for her to satisfy the physical impulse of another woman. Ashok Kumar in his article "Portrayal of a New Woman: A Study of Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*" observes "Her anxiety, discomfort, loneliness and isolation don't encourage her to give voice to her unhappiness over her troubled relationship, rather it prompts her to develop the feelings of guilt, negativity and lack of self-esteem in facing the challenges of her life" (197).

Aijaz recognized her talent and motivated her. As a result, she was attracted towards him. The sudden death of Aijaz, shocked Astha. Astha felt guilty over her desire to have an extra-marital affair with him. But she always kept it in the hidden caskets of her heart without disclosing it to the world. After the death of Aijaz she wanted to participate in the movements organized by different organizations to protest the murder of artists. So she spent less time in the house looking after her children. Her love and affection towards her children got diminished. As a result, the children felt alienated from their mother. The relationship between Astha and Pipeelika also had a bad impact on her children. They were deprived of the company of their mother. As a result, her children did badly in their examinations.

The relationship between Astha and Pipeelika became intimate. At times she suffered from a sense of guilt. Finally, she was in the bedroom of Pipeelika and ready to fulfil her strange emotions. Astha found herself in a dilemma. She thought that she was not as free as

Pipeelika. The conflict between her different roles as wife, mother and lover made her feel guilty. Kapur writes, "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" (231).

Astha and Pipeelika had experienced loneliness in their lives. Their longing for love and togetherness brought them closer. Mutual understanding, emotional attachment, love and respect for each other, are the prerequisites of any successful marriage. Ironically, all these elements were found missing in Astha's marital life. When days passed her life became gloomy. She pondered over her past deeds, especially her companionship with Pipeelika. Kapur writes, "when she was with Hemant she felt like a woman of straw, her inner life dead, with a man who noticed nothing, with whom for that very reason it was soothing to be with. Her body was his, when they made love, it was Pipee's face Astha saw, her hands she felt. She accepted the misery of this dislocation as her due for being a faithless wife (287). Thus, she felt alienated from her own self. Hemant missed his wife, who was not there with him even when she was physically present.

CONCLUSION

Astha felt isolated and dejected When Pipeelika went to the United States of America for her Ph.D. Pipeelika got an opportunity to start her new life. On the other hand, Astha decided to return to her family and her routine. Kapur explains the turmoil in Astha's mind, after she dropped Pipee at the Indira Gandhi International Airport. She returned home: "Mechanically she changed, brushed her teeth, put cream on, got into her side of the bed, pulled the sheet up, and turning to the very edge lay absolutely still. Motion of any kind was painful to her. Her mind, heart and body felt numb" (307). Thus, she was alienated from her own self and felt guilty about the way she led her life. Macquarrie writes, "For existentialist, alienation is understood chiefly in inward terms. It is the existent's alienation from his own deepest being" (204). Thus, the existentialist theme of guilt and alienation is presented in *A Married Woman*.

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