

# Social Isolation of a Woman: A Critical Study of the Novel A Married Woman by Manju Kapur

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## ABSTRACT

The Indian female English novelists have made an incredible mark in the world of writing by contributing significantly to Indian English literature. For past few decades, the contribution of Indian women writers was underestimated because of ungenerous non acceptance. Women were confined to their homes and never regarded as expressive writers until India was introduced to some enriching experience by women writers like Manju Kapur, Kiran Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Kamla Markandya and many more. Since, this paper is on the selected novel of Manju Kapur, who needs no introduction, and her work speaks volumes. The thought that women are only meant to marry and manage household besides treating husbands next to God has been challenged in her novels. Her work is inspiring and urges every female to cross the threshold and look beyond family life. Her novels combat intermixes of tradition and contemporary spirit of womanhood. This research paper delves into details of Manju Kapur style of writing and the identity crisis question raised by protagonists in her novel – A Married Woman. In this novel, the female character goes through extreme challenges, struggles and alienation in her life. The protagonist of the novel is always in the quest of true love. This research paper is about how the faith of the lead character is questioned time and again.

## Keywords

Alienation, Struggles, Patriarchal, Relations, Desires, Self-Growth

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## Introduction

Existentialism is a philosophical outlook to life and emphasis more on experience and existence of human beings. It is just not the phenomena of thinking but also actions and feelings. According to the theory of Existentialism, a human is characterized based on feelings like anxiety, aloofness, disorientation, confusion, absurdity and so on. This primary thought of an existentialist is authenticity. Per this theory, every individual is responsible for giving a meaning to their own life and deserves to have a passion to live with authenticity. This theory became quite popular during the times of World War II. The term “Existentialism” was termed by Gabriel Marcel in the mid 1940’s.

As per this theory, it is always my existence, your existence, his/her existence, and this is the sole issue of mere existence. Hence, it becomes a reason to find the true meaning of “being”. This theory helps and individual to find the reason and meaning of existence – to have a reason for it, to have awareness of one’s physical and mental surroundings, to interact with others around and most importantly to understand self. To have an essence is to be able to define self-existence: “Essence” or “nature” is simple words is our existence in the world. Therefore, it will be correct to say that human’s nature is created by what he chooses from life and not because of nature or uncontrollable circumstances. We, human, hence, develop our own nature by the choices we make. It will not be wrong to say that existentialism is a term that belongs to intellectual history. To understand this theory deeper, let us discuss the themes of it.

There are basically seven themes of the theory of Existentialism that provide us with sense of overall unity.

## Philosophy as a way of life

Philosophy is something that only concerns a few and is generally considered as an attempt to understand the world and the self. It is something that connects the self with the society. According to Sartre, a life can be lived in a philosophical manner without even having an iota of information about the technical aspects of philosophy. The philosophy as a concept is a method to manifest a desirable life by existentialist thoughts in numerous ways. The most important question that this philosophy generates is “what does it mean to be existing on this earth?” This question leads to several philosophical explanations like the right and the wrong between all the moral chaos taking place. There is also realization that “to be an individual” it takes a great courage to have an oriented life.

## Anxiety and Authenticity

Many existentialist writers stressed upon feelings of a being. Mood play a major role in the choices that an individual makes. According to Heidegger’s discussion about “mood” – it is also a reason why existentialism had an influence on psychology. Anxiety is a feeling that is felt by any individual at any given point of time, especially when being on its own in difficult circumstances. The concept of authenticity is quite closely associated with anxiety. Any authentic individual can acknowledge and affirm the nature of existence in the world.

## Freedom

The next important theme of existentialism is freedom, which comes in hand with anguish and a freedom to make decisions in the existentialist world. If a being has freedom

to take decisions and make choices, it naturally entails a sense of responsibility for oneself and one's decisions. In given situations and circumstances of a being as recognized by feeling of anxiety and sense of freedom. The freedom and responsibility must stretch over time to understand the human existence, that means when a human exists with authenticity, there comes a responsibility to lead a good free life. Many existentialist writers take freedom as autonomy, which means living by a law, but that law has been given by self-acknowledgement and self-assigning of responsibilities.

### **Situatedness**

Since freedom is an absolute achievement, it always takes place in a context. It all comes with a physical body and its characteristics, circumstances, past experiences that weigh upon freedom in situations. This brings meaning to what we call freedom. If a being is unable to freely take decisions, his freedom is addressed as illusory or naive. Hence, it will not be wrong to say that situations play a vital role in decision making, sense of freedom and ability to take responsibility of self in the society.

### **Existence**

The theory of Existentialism takes its philosophical name from the word "Existence". There have been several discussions over it but one of agreement is that we as humans should be more concerned about human existence over just any existing thing. There is a lot of difference between human existence and any other existence and hence existence is an object of knowledge and cannot be ever compared to any other existing matter. Any human existence consists of forever being oneself and inherit life by the past circumstances and situations.

### **Irrationality/Absurdity**

Absurdity is an important theme of existentialism. Human existence, many a times is considered as "absurd" as many existentialists argue that nature completely has no design and reason for existing. The basic sense of human existence is because of its confrontation with mute irrationality. Absurdity is closely related to the theme of 'being on its own'. Even if one chooses to follow a law that has been created by one own self, it will sometimes appear absurd even to self. A free action once taken is never considered free and becomes a part of the world. Hence, absurdity of human existence comes as a fact of being free and make free choices even if it looks absurd.

### **The Crowd**

A dimension of social or political aspect can also be associated with Existentialism. So many existentialist writers use terms such as 'Crowd', 'Horde', 'masses', 'Herd', which portrays humanity in bulk. The theme of crowd poses questions like how collective form of existence ever be anything other than inauthentic.

Existentialism has had an enormous influence on the movement of 'Expressionism' that originated in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany. But the

postmodern Indian English novelists through their novels have well explored the existential issues faced by the contemporary man in relation to social-cultural circumstances. The readers of the research paper shall read through how the theory of existentialism is implement in the selected novel of Manju Kapur.

### **Marriage and Isolation**

Marriage is considered a pious alliance and holds a great importance and faith in Indian tradition. It is regarded as an association of two souls for eternity. It runs on the trust, loyalty, co-operation, compatibility, commitment, sacrifices and understanding of two people that get into this alliance to run a married life efficiently and swiftly. Traditionally, all these qualities and home bound responsibilities were meant for women only, who were confined to the four walls of their homes. Slowly and gradually, the well-educated Indian women felt suffocated and some became rebellious and revolted against the male dominating society where she was just treated as a puppet. This resulted in evolution of numerous literary stars in the world of English literature. The work of these female writers left indestructible imprint in the society. The Indian women novelists have really struggled hard to have made a place for themselves and via their work proved that females are not condemned to silence and that their expression of writing can empower people and society and make women realize and aware of their needs, desires, demands and self-expression, hence rewriting the history of the country, reconstructing stereotype images and reassuring a dignified status of women in the society.

Manju Kapur, in her novels expresses women issues and comprehends a female as an individual under pressure of obvious and indistinguishable context. She traverses the life of an Indian middle-class woman and her identity in her society besides her struggle for self. In the novels of Manju Kapur, the role of a woman has gone under a significant alteration. Her writing strongly puts emphasis on an analysis of female character and her cultural identity. Her female characters are close to reality. She subtly depicts the inner beauty of womankind and displays a great sense of understanding of women psyche. The women of her novels are personified as a present-day female who faces her struggles against all social evil customs. The lead characters of her novels try to break traditional silence, experience distinguishable absurdity, and try their best to nourish the alienated self in the meaningless and chaotic environment. Her style of writing expresses human suffering that leads to intensity and gives depth to her thought of writing.

Women in male controlled society are subject to too much pressure and social ostracism, hence resulting in discrimination and biased behavior considering them a weaker gender. How women live and struggle in an oppressive closed society has been well expressed in the novels of Manju Kapur. He brings her women characters close to real and incredibly reflects how they struggle to strike a balance between self and society. She explains the exploration of a disturbed mentality of an Indian woman by laying emphasis on the crucial elements of like aloofness, alienation, and loneliness. Her novels bring such women to life that are hypersensitive and are on eternal quest of a meaningful happy life. Her lead female characters deeply

suffer due to their futile attempt to look for emotional contact who comprehends to understand them and respond. In her novels, she expresses her worries about Indian women who go through immense sufferings in the married life.

The women of Manju Kapur's novels do not want to give in to the pressures of patriarchal notions that impose domesticity on them. They want to conquer self-reliance via education and carve an identity for themselves. They cultivate the thought of being independent and lead their lives on their own terms. Kapur brings to light such factors that kills their freedom to live, grow and channelize herself just the way how men do in our society. The women are asked to live claustrophobic and circumscribed lives and they are conditioned in a way since their childhood to accept the status of being less than a male in the society and all these aspects are inherited in them by religious and traditional myths. These female protagonists in Manju Kapur's novels resist and overcome this ideology of suppression. They reinvent themselves in a meaningful way. In this way, her novels play a significant role in contributing to the realm of Indian English literature and female psychic. Manju Kapur, in her novel "*A Married Woman*" shares all about an experience of a married woman in the society, her ups and downs in the marriage alliance and how a woman deals with a bad marriage. The novel brings to light the issues like homosexuality in a challenging way, which no one in the society wants to talk about but does exist and people pretend to ignore it.

This novel is about Astha, and her life pre and post her wedding. Looking at the traditional aspects, her parents want to set her in wedlock at the earliest. According to the opinion of Astha's mother –

"There is time for everything. This girl is blossoming now. When the fruit is ripe, it must be picked. Later she might get into wrong company and we will be left, ringing our hands. If she marries at this age, she will have no problem for adjusting. We too are not so young that we can afford to wait" (Kapur, 20).

Throughout the novel, Astha drifts like a diminished soul for the sole reason that she is a 'woman' and hence has ever since remained a depreciated unity of the society. Even while going through a lot, she never gave a permit to make her feel reduced and she fought for her identity in every possible way. She inherited a rebellious tendency that of a man to keep her spirits high even though she was at the hands of the higher kingship group. She goes against the patriarchal ideology when it came to stand by her opinion and rights. Her mockery for idol worship and dislike for the showoff of religious conviction was way beyond the thought process of a common man when compared to and concurrent to existentialist who kicks against the esteem stature of God too.

Astha, beyond being married, desires to fulfill all her lust for self-gratification and thus can be regarded as 'Lady Sisyphus' with her misapprehension about romanticism and her temerity about its importance for a happy, long lasting married life. She probably has an overambitious convention for civic rules and the "diet of her mushy novels" (8). Which fulfills her with the longing to fly higher, Kapur writes that Astha "was prey to inchoate longings, desired

almost every boy she saw... [and wondered] would true love ever find her?"(8).

Astha's story undertakes with her juvenile infatuation with Bunty and later with her college friend named Rohan, both relations fail in due course of time. Her heart broke many a times as she failed in love and surrendered herself in her ivory tower of solitary and quitting, preceding her shunning by Peeplikha too. She had desires for bodily pleasures since she was young. Binod Mishra states about her pre-nuptial collaboration:

She created 'delicious images of a romantic, somewhat shadowy young man holding her in his strong manly embrace'. Her hedonistic longings force her to pursue Bunty (studying in Kharakvasla national Academy, and one of her neighbors whom she saw and fancied. But their parents nip their relationship in the bud. Later, her aching heart finds greater relaxation in the luxurious ambience of Rohan whom she met in her college. He kindles and fondles her in his old Vauxhall car and Astha longs for such furtive meetings with him frequently and rejuvenates to feel her body's separate life. Flouting all conventions, she not only struggles but also surrenders herself before Rohan. But it too gets over when Rohan goes abroad for further studies. (206)

The failure in love habitual Astha after Rohan abandons her and she evolves as a habitual who indulges in such infatuations. Sometime later, her mother finds her a match and she wed Hemant, who works as an Assistant Manager in a Bank in Delhi and is an MBA graduate from America. The initial days of her marriage are full of promises, ecstasy, and privilege but slowly all this fades away as they become parents to a daughter and a son. The castle that they build about their married life starts to fall because of lots of responsibilities on them. To give a secure future to his family, Hemant is busy working and gives less time to his children and lesser time to his wife, Astha. To deal with this loneliness, Astha joins St. Antony School as a teacher. There are times when she wanted to quit her job as a teacher, and it is when she felt it was getting difficult for her to handle a job, children, husband and home but by then she was a changed woman and she just did not want someone to love her but also valued her freedom and independence. And hence, her job becomes the most important part of her life. She feels alienated as days pass by as her husband gets busy with his job and children gets more attached to their grandparents.

In one of his articles, Victor Frankl states "*Logotherapy and the Challenge of Suffering*" (1961), elucidates that most of the suffering in humans erupts from a lack of meaningfulness in life. He maintains that people, never really despair because of any suffering in itself! Instead, their despair stems in each instance from a doubt as to whether suffering is meaningful. Man is ready and willing to shoulder any suffering as soon and if he can see a meaning in it. (94)

Astha has a lonely heart and her existence becomes meaningless for her. Hemant, her husband does not realize her enthusiasm and compassionate perceptions. Since, he is a man of a materialistic bent; her search in him for romance goes in vain. Hemant is busier in providing better financial status to his family. And, in this journey, both Astha and Hemant drifts apart, leaving her behind all by herself and filling her life with incomprehensible solitude. As a result of

this, Astha becomes psychopathic and her desires to have a soul mate and not just a spouse fulfilling his responsibilities become stronger. To overcome her anxiety about her job and pressures from her family, she started writing poetry and sketching but soon gives up on these hobbies as she finds no refuge in doing them. The pain and soreness of a heart break for Astha is in similar fashion as that of Sisyphus, whose wife could not maintain her virtue and he miserably failed to have a perfect soul mate. Similarly, Astha finds herself a failure in searching for a soul mate and realizes that she is a “willing body at night, a willing pair of hand and feet in the day and an obedient mouth.” (108)

During such a lonely phase of life, Aijaz Khan marks a presence in her life, who is the Director of the Street Theatre Group and who is there to do a play with the propaganda about Babri Masjid in her school. His presence is like, “the blowing of a gentle breeze on a warm day” (218) for Astha. Aijaz acknowledges her talent as a writer and painter and with his constant uplifting her, she begins to progress. After meeting Aijaz, her stamina to deal with life gets back and she feels lively again. Aijaz evokes a spark in Astha and give wings to her creativity. She gets infatuated for him and begins to enjoy writing poetry and painting all over again. She starts looking forward to visiting Sampradayik Mukti Manch and happily participated for a social cause to spread awareness against animosity among people on the name of religion. As the play comes to an end, Aijaz leaves and Astha feels lonely again.

All this time, Astha was just a non-resistant contributor to how her life was unfolding. She surrendered to the circumstances of her life and only occasionally put forward any refusals. But, post the horrifying demise of Aijaz Khan, who was burnt alive in a van with a few of his friends, she gets a shock of her life and the courage to participate in the events creating awareness against communal activities. She begins to paint her feelings and via these paintings, conveys a message of peace and fraternity. She also ears highest regards of her husband once she starts making income out of these paintings. On her visit to Ayodhya, which was for a social cause, she happens to come across the widow of Aijaz Khan, Peeplikha. They click and feel connected and this leads Astha to open herself to her. This lets Astha experience the adventure of true love and giving in a relation as she was making love “to a friend instead of an adversary” (231). She revolts all civic obligations by getting into a relation that is not acknowledged in the society and living a relation of a lesbian with Peeplikha. One reason for Astha’s attraction for Peeplikha is that she was associated with Aijaz, the man who made her believe in herself and she gained confidence only by his constant praise and encouragement, a year before. As it is said that humans are encouraged by praise, acknowledgement, and commendation for their work, so was Astha.

For years, women have remained as a marginalized entity of the society and hence Astha felt the same. But later she conducts a war against her marginalization. Thus, in all the novels of Kapur, we come across rebellious characters with a tendency inherent in man against everybody rising towards his marginalization. Similarly, Astha stands for herself in the patriarchal society and confidently puts forward her thoughts on matters associated to her. Her disrespect for idol worship and the prerogative of religious precept over

common man is comparable and coeval with her unruly hunch. She tells Pip, the titular character of the novel that even though the meaning of her name is ‘faith’, she has never experienced it. “I don’t know if I have been touched by it. The faith in my family centers around my mother and her swami” (199). When one of the devotees takes the parikrama of the shrine and rings the bell at Hanuman Garhi she retorts, “If only I could feel like that, looking on the expression on some of their faces... I wish I had something more in my life, I wish an end to this hollow feeling” (202). She unconventionally gives charity to the beggar man on the sidewalk and desires something in exchange of it. She expresses, “There are many hollows in my life, and I want them filled” (202). In some way or the other, the characters of Kapur’s novel experience an “existential” discovery that life is all about suffering. The suffering that Astha is exposed to is more of a self-created than being a result of external forces. All this was a result of an overwhelming emotional desire for acknowledgement.

*A Married Woman* is a vibrant novel written by Manju Kapur, where life is caught up in the delusion of leaving the marital refuge for love. This love is demanding, full of guilt, no commitment and feeling of alienation when this love must let go because of the worldly pressures. The protagonist, Astha in *A Married Woman* is a character that has a deep guilt. She counters her sins in the least effective way by coming back to her family and leading the same semi-unbalanced life. She was often questioned by her family members about her whereabouts and her requirement in the house at many a circumstance. Astha balances her life by taking a refuge into insanity of washing and cleaning. This activity is symbolic of cleansing of her sins and adultery. Astha comes to realize that she has no future with Peeplikha and she can no longer withstand it and therefore, comes to a conclusion to handle her guilt and accountability by putting herself completely in service of her husband and her family.

It will be right to conclude that Manju Kapur express her concern about India women and their struggles via her novels. She speaks about different feministic issues through her novels, like financial independence of women, female education, and empowerment. She expressed about alienation and aloofness in the lives of the Indian women. Manju Kapur, through her novels speaks about the right to education, dignity, honor, confidence, desires, and empowerment of women in Indian society. According to her, education plays a vital role in the upliftment of women in a society. And many a times, it helps women break free from the shackles of a male dominant community, social milieus, and different preconceptions. It also gives them wings to fly free, question that is not acceptable by them and reconstruct their own lives. The novel, *A Married Women*, makes a reader experience the struggles of females in a patriarchal society and her fight to carve her own identity.

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