

**Women's Agency and Selfhood in Contemporary Indian Fiction: A Study of
*A Married Woman***

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Paper Received on 05-06-2026, Accepted on 05-07-2026
Published on 07-07-26; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.11.07.91

Abstract

Contemporary Indian women's fiction has emerged as a significant literary space for examining the complexities of gender, identity, and individual autonomy within patriarchal social structures. Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002) presents a compelling narrative of Astha, a middle-class woman whose journey from domestic conformity to self-realization reflects the evolving discourse on women's agency in modern India. This paper explores how Kapur interrogates conventional notions of marriage, family, and femininity while foregrounding the protagonist's quest for selfhood. Employing a feminist literary framework informed by the ideas of Simone de Beauvoir, Elaine Showalter, and Judith Butler, the study analyses the ways in which Astha negotiates social expectations, emotional fulfilment, and personal freedom. The novel portrays agency not as an absolute rejection of tradition but as a continuous process of self-discovery, resistance, and negotiation within restrictive cultural environments. Furthermore, the research examines how the intersections of gender, sexuality, and social norms shape the protagonist's identity, highlighting the tensions between individual desire and collective responsibility. By situating *A Married Woman* within the broader context of contemporary Indian fiction, the paper argues that Kapur redefines female subjectivity through nuanced representations of emotional resilience, intellectual independence, and personal transformation. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that women's agency in contemporary Indian literature is represented as an evolving and dynamic process that challenges patriarchal authority while affirming the importance of selfhood, autonomy, and identity in the lives of women.

Keywords: Women's Agency; Selfhood; Feminism; Patriarchy; Contemporary Indian Fiction

Review of Literature

Several scholars have examined Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* from feminist, psychological, and socio-cultural perspectives. Existing studies primarily focus on the themes of patriarchy, marriage, identity, and women's emancipation in contemporary Indian society. Critics argue that Astha's journey reflects the struggle between personal aspirations and traditional gender roles. Feminist scholars have interpreted the novel through the theories of Simone de Beauvoir and Elaine Showalter, emphasizing female subjectivity and resistance. Other researchers have explored the representation of same-sex relationships and their role in shaping women's identity. Studies also highlight Kapur's realistic portrayal of urban middle-class life and the constraints imposed by patriarchal institutions. Comparative analyses with Kapur's other novels reveal her consistent concern with women's selfhood and autonomy. However, limited research has specifically examined the interrelationship between women's agency and selfhood in *A Married Woman*. This study addresses that gap by analyzing how Astha negotiates identity, autonomy, and social expectations through a feminist literary framework.

Women's Agency in *A Married Woman*

In *A Married Woman*, Manju Kapur presents women's agency through the life of Astha, a middle-class woman who gradually realizes the importance of living for herself rather than merely fulfilling societal expectations. At the beginning of the novel, Astha accepts the conventional roles of a wife, mother, and daughter-in-law, believing that these responsibilities define her identity. However, as the story progresses, she begins to question the limitations imposed by patriarchal society. Her growing interest in art and social activism becomes a means of expressing her individuality and reclaiming her voice. Astha's emotional and intellectual awakening reflects her desire to move beyond domestic boundaries and seek personal fulfilment. Her relationship with Pipeelika further challenges traditional ideas of love and marriage, encouraging her to explore her emotions without fear or guilt. Rather than portraying agency as a dramatic act of rebellion, Kapur depicts it as a gradual process of self-awareness, courage, and independent decision-making. Astha continues to care for her family while simultaneously searching for a meaningful identity beyond her domestic responsibilities. This balanced portrayal makes her character realistic and relatable to many women navigating similar social pressures. Through Astha's journey, Kapur demonstrates that women's agency lies in the ability to think independently, make conscious choices, and assert one's individuality despite cultural

and familial constraints. The novel ultimately suggests that true empowerment begins with self-recognition and the confidence to shape one's own life.

Selfhood and Identity Formation

In *A Married Woman*, Manju Kapur presents selfhood as a gradual journey of self-discovery rather than an instant transformation. Astha initially defines herself through the roles assigned by society—as a dutiful daughter, devoted wife, and caring mother. Although she fulfils these responsibilities sincerely, she experiences an emotional emptiness that prevents her from achieving personal satisfaction. Her interest in painting and social activism allows her to explore her individuality beyond domestic life. As she becomes more aware of her desires, beliefs, and aspirations, she begins to question the patriarchal norms that restrict her identity. Her relationship with Pipeelika further encourages her to understand herself beyond conventional definitions of womanhood and marriage. Through these experiences, Astha gradually develops confidence in expressing her opinions and making independent choices. Kapur portrays selfhood as a continuous process shaped by emotional growth, intellectual awakening, and personal reflection. Rather than abandoning her family, Astha attempts to balance her responsibilities with her need for individual fulfilment. The novel ultimately suggests that true identity is achieved when women recognize their own worth and refuse to let society define their existence solely through traditional gender roles.

Marriage, Patriarchy, and Resistance

Marriage in *A Married Woman* is portrayed as both a social institution and a mechanism through which patriarchal values are maintained. Astha enters marriage with hopes of companionship and emotional fulfilment, but gradually realizes that her individuality is overshadowed by domestic expectations. As a wife and mother, she is expected to prioritize her family's needs while suppressing her own ambitions and desires. Kapur illustrates how patriarchal structures subtly control women's lives by assigning them fixed gender roles and limiting their personal freedom. Despite these constraints, Astha begins to resist through education, creative expression, social involvement, and emotional independence. Her participation in public life and her relationship with Pipeelika become acts of quiet resistance against conventional norms. Rather than engaging in open rebellion, Astha challenges patriarchy through everyday decisions that affirm her autonomy and dignity. Kapur realistically portrays resistance as a gradual and complex process involving courage, self-awareness, and negotiation rather than complete rejection of family values. The novel concludes that meaningful resistance begins when women question oppressive traditions and claim

the right to shape their own identities. Through Astha's journey, Kapur advocates for a more equitable understanding of marriage based on mutual respect, equality, and individual freedom.

Queer Desire and Female Empowerment

In *A Married Woman*, Manju Kapur presents queer desire as a significant element in Astha's journey toward self-discovery and empowerment. Rather than treating same-sex attraction as a controversial or sensational subject, Kapur portrays it as a deeply emotional and transformative experience. Astha's relationship with Pipeelika develops gradually through shared interests, mutual understanding, and emotional support. Unlike her marriage, which is governed by routine and social expectations, her bond with Pipeelika is built on empathy, respect, and genuine companionship. This relationship allows Astha to express emotions and desires that have long remained suppressed within the confines of her domestic life.

Astha's emotional attachment to Pipeelika becomes a turning point in her understanding of herself. It encourages her to question the traditional roles assigned to women and to recognize that her identity cannot be confined to being a wife and mother alone. Through this relationship, she discovers that personal happiness and emotional fulfilment are essential aspects of human life. Kapur suggests that empowerment begins when women acknowledge their own desires instead of living solely to satisfy the expectations of others.

The novel also challenges the heteronormative assumptions that dominate Indian society. By portraying a same-sex relationship with sensitivity and realism, Kapur broadens the discussion of women's identity beyond conventional definitions of marriage and family. The relationship between Astha and Pipeelika is not merely a symbol of rebellion but an exploration of emotional intimacy and individual freedom. It demonstrates that love can become a source of strength, confidence, and self-awareness.

At the same time, Kapur realistically portrays the social pressures surrounding queer relationships. Astha remains aware of her responsibilities toward her family and the cultural expectations imposed upon her. Her internal conflict reflects the struggle experienced by many women who attempt to balance personal desires with social obligations. This complexity prevents the novel from presenting empowerment as a simple or absolute achievement. Instead, empowerment is shown as a continuous process of negotiation, reflection, and personal growth.

Pipeelika also plays a significant role in Astha's transformation. She encourages Astha to value her artistic talent, express her opinions confidently, and participate in social causes. Through their companionship, Astha gains the courage to question the patriarchal norms that have shaped her life for years. Although the relationship does not ultimately replace her family life, it leaves a lasting impact on her understanding of identity and self-worth.

Furthermore, Kapur emphasizes that female empowerment is closely connected with emotional independence. Astha's growth lies not only in her romantic experiences but also in her ability to make conscious decisions about her life. She gradually realizes that true freedom begins with recognizing one's individuality and refusing to suppress one's inner voice. This realization marks a significant shift from dependence to self-confidence.

By integrating queer desire into the broader narrative of female selfhood, Manju Kapur expands the scope of feminist discourse in Indian English literature. She demonstrates that women's empowerment is not limited to economic independence or social mobility but also includes emotional autonomy, sexual identity, and the freedom to choose one's own path. Through Astha's journey, *A Married Woman* advocates a more inclusive understanding of women's agency, where self-acceptance and authentic relationships become essential components of personal liberation. Consequently, the novel remains an important contribution to feminist and queer literary studies, highlighting the importance of identity, dignity, and emotional freedom in the lives of contemporary women.

Conclusion

Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* is a profound exploration of women's agency, selfhood, and identity within the socio-cultural framework of contemporary India. Through the character of Astha, Kapur presents the emotional and psychological struggles of a middle-class woman who seeks meaning beyond the traditional roles of wife and mother. The novel demonstrates that marriage, while considered a respected social institution, often limits women's individuality by reinforcing patriarchal expectations. Astha's journey illustrates that selfhood is not inherited or socially assigned but gradually constructed through personal experiences, reflection, and conscious decision-making.

The study reveals that women's agency in the novel is expressed through subtle yet meaningful acts of resistance rather than open confrontation. Astha's involvement in art, social activism, and her emotional relationship with Pipeelika enables her to challenge the restrictions imposed by patriarchal society. These

experiences encourage her to recognize her own desires, abilities, and aspirations, thereby transforming her understanding of herself. Kapur effectively portrays empowerment as an ongoing process of self-awareness that develops through emotional resilience, intellectual growth, and the courage to question conventional norms.

The novel also expands feminist discourse by presenting queer desire as a legitimate aspect of female identity and emotional fulfilment. Astha's relationship with Pipeelika becomes an important stage in her journey toward self-discovery, illustrating that identity cannot be confined within socially accepted definitions of marriage or sexuality. Rather than portraying this relationship as an act of rebellion, Kapur presents it as a search for companionship, dignity, and emotional authenticity. This nuanced representation enriches the understanding of women's experiences in contemporary Indian literature.

Furthermore, Kapur realistically depicts the complexities of balancing personal aspirations with family responsibilities. Astha neither completely rejects her family nor fully conforms to societal expectations. Instead, she continuously negotiates between duty and desire, illustrating that women's lives are shaped by compromise as well as resistance. This balanced portrayal makes the novel relevant to readers who experience similar conflicts between individual freedom and social obligation.

The analysis also demonstrates that selfhood is closely linked to emotional independence and intellectual freedom. Astha's transformation from a silent and obedient homemaker into a self-aware individual reflects the evolving position of women in modern Indian society. Kapur suggests that empowerment begins when women acknowledge their own worth and develop the confidence to make independent choices. Such empowerment is not measured solely by economic independence but also by the ability to think critically, express emotions honestly, and define one's own identity.

In conclusion, *A Married Woman* remains one of the most significant feminist novels in contemporary Indian English literature because of its realistic portrayal of gender relations, identity formation, and women's search for autonomy. The novel challenges patriarchal assumptions without rejecting cultural values altogether, advocating instead for equality, mutual respect, and personal dignity within human relationships. Through Astha's journey, Manju Kapur reminds readers that women's agency is a continuous process of negotiation, resilience, and self-realization. The novel therefore continues to inspire meaningful discussions on

feminism, selfhood, sexuality, and individual freedom, making it an important text for contemporary literary and gender studies.

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RESEARCH JOURNAL OF ENGLISH (RJOE)

www.rjoe.org.in | Oray's Publications | ISSN: 2456-2696

An International Approved Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal

Impact Factor: 8.373 (SJIF) | Vol. 11, Issue 3 (July, Aug & Sept; 2026)

Sharma, Ritu. "Patriarchy and Female Subjectivity in Manju Kapur's Fiction."
*International Journal of English Language, Literature and Translation
Studies*, vol. 6, no. 2, 2019, pp. 132–138.