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RESEARCH ARTICLE

FEMININITY IN A MARRIED WOMAN: SOCIETAL INFLUENCE AND NORMS

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Abstract

Manju Kapur's novel "A Married Woman" explores various aspects of femininity including societal forces and evolution of characters. Astha's journey challenges her struggle to reconcile societal expectations with her personal fulfillment, reflecting the inner conflict faced by many women negotiating individual desires and traditional roles. Further, it supports empowerment of women's sexual agency while highlighting aspects of femininity among various generations. This study also examines the impact of Western ideals of femininity on Indian society.

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Introduction:-

"A 'Married Woman' explores the gender issues of patriarchal society, which lowers the position of women in general. The protagonist of novel Astha, challenges the stereotypical; gender roles, that lenders her quest for independence and self-recognition among oppressive traditional norms. Self-Identity of women is that main concern of Manju Kapoor's novels. Astha is trapped within the societal expectation as her parents seek a self-match for her marriage. Astha is more interested in education, independence, and self-identity in a male dominated society. Her family members constantly force her for marriage her mother also remains unsympathetic towards her, hardly concerns about her wishes, needs, and desires. After marriage, Aatha constantly suffers into the hands of her in-law's and husband, who ignores and hardly pays attention towards her. All her hopes dissolve and remain unfulfilled within her heart, also her challenge against traditional norms of patriarchal society. Due to her constant struggles at her In-law's, she decided to work as a teacher in a school and finds peace and solace in this job. Different activates provide her sense of liberation like workshops, reading clubs and theater groups. She gets fascinated and attracted towards Aijaz's personality. Her involvement with "Stoat Theater Group" made her realize about self-identity and develops a kind of attractions between them during workshops. She finds peace in his company only.

Aijaz is murdered by members of radical group. His death forced her to take part in rallies, establishing herself as a social activist. Although her husband and in-laws opposite to her plan visiting Ayodhya as a part of her activism, Astha persists in her fight against patriarchal dominance and male chauvinism. In Ayodhya, she meets Pipeelika, and visits various temples along with her with their continuous meetings, Astha fondness towards Pipeelika grows more and more with adds new dimension of self-discovery. Their interaction results in illicit relationship and find peace and solace in each other arms only. Astha struggles between her own desires of independence and family obligations. She realizes that her relationship with Pipeelika is dearer to her than her husband. Their intimacy makes their relationship more strong. This closeness also fosters Astha to leave her husband, but a scholarship for Pipeelika

from abroad brings their close relationship to an abrupt end. Manju Kapur's explores sexuality and desires for women, particularly homosexuality. Astha is bound within the expectations of society, where family, husband and children are more important than her own wishes and desires. This conflict teaches her to recognize her own identity in general, by challenging societal norms. Many women want to break these bad norms to seek freedom and independence. Finally, Astha returns back to her husband despite she tried hard never to go back to be limited by the chained world, never to go back. She knows that there are many hardships and struggles implemented on women in their family.

"A Married Woman" tackles all the hardships and struggles that are forced on women in a patriarchal society. Astha breaks all the stereotypical gender roles that hinder her quest for self-identity and recognition in a male-dominated society. Astha finds herself within the construct of societal expectations, as her family are very eager for her marriage. Astha is more concerned about education, independence, freedom than marriage. But no one is interested in her desires, nor her father neither her mother. Her parents remain unsympathetic towards her. Astha's struggles and hardships begin once she got married, facing dominance and neglect from her husband. This results in shattered dreams, confined within in her heart. She opts to work as a teacher in a school, finding temporarily excitement and happiness as she remains away from her husband's ruthless laws and rules imposed on her. She made herself busy there in theater groups, workshops and reading clubs. There she gets more attracted towards Aijaz's personality and charisma. Her involvement in "Street Theatre Group" pays way for her to know about her own identity as a whole in a society and during workshops a close association blossoms between Astha and Aijaz. She finds peace and solace in their connection.

Aijaz is murdered alongside members of his troupe. His death channels her grief into activism. She establishes herself as a social activist, started participating in rallies. Her in-laws and husband were totally opposite of her practices as being part of activism. Without paying any heed towards them she visits Ayodhya to fight against male oppression of woman. In Ayodhya, she comes in contact with Pipeelika, and a close association is made between them. She finds herself deeply in love with her, and their bond grows stronger with each passing day. They prioritize spending time in each other's company without any fear. With their close association, she comes to know that Pipeelika is more important for her than her husband. They even get intimate, fostering completeness in each other's company. Astha decides that she will leave her husband and stay with Pipeelika, but a scholarship came from America for Pipeelika, bringing their relationship to an abrupt end. Manju Kapur explores women's sexuality and their desires, particularly homosexuality. Astha is grabbed in the frame of traditional expectations where women are often prioritized their husband, family, children and home over their own desires and identities. This internal conflict made her challenge societal norms and patriarchal society while navigating forbidden relationships. Despite Astha's attempts to break familial ties, she returns back to her husband, knowing she has to resign herself to a life of submission in a patriarchal society.

Scope:-

This paper explores the theme of femininity in Manju Kapur's Novel A Married Woman, focusing on how societal norms, patriarchal constraints, evolving cultural values shape the agency and identity of women. It examines struggle related to self-identity and marital expectations, including her romantic and emotional journey beyond the traditional heterosexual norms through the character Astha. It also highlights the influence of western ideals on Indian society and contributes to on-going address in gender and feminist literary studies.

Literature Review:-

A Married Woman is a very popular novel of the year 2003. This novel explores different issues prevailing in society like inequality, freedom, recognition, inner peace, self-identity which are lacking in male dominated patriarchal society, also guiding individuals to live life to the fullest. According to Mishra, a fracture in the personalities of future generations of women is evident in the lives of married women. Despite their high levels of education and exposure to the outside world, they find themselves yearning for something new to satisfy their aspirations. However, in their pursuit, they often fall prey to deceptive allurements, leading them to neglect their true responsibilities and fostering a sense of detachment. Eventually, disillusionment sets in as they strive to align their lives with their aspirations (Mishra 2005,24). (Kumar 2008, 163-164) argues that Manju Kapur's portrayal of a woman's longing for love and exploration of lesbianism is a contentious and unresolved issue. With a goal of reshaping Indian perspectives, Kapur narrates the suffering and sacrifice endured by her female protagonists, who defy societal norms even at the cost of their lives. She expresses alarm over the surge in fundamentalism and the

ambitions of religious extremists aiming to elevate their nation through crusades, instilling fear by depicting evil as an inevitable historical force. In contrast, (Varma et al. 2007, 51-56) contrast Hemant's approach to marriage, centered on fulfilling societal expectations, with Astha's view, which sees marriage as a commitment to active participation and open dialogue with her partner. Prema and Shanthi explore the challenges faced by novel protagonists in asserting their individuality (Prema and Shanthi 2016, 1-4). Ajay Kumar delves into the various life stages of women, both before and after marriage (Ajay Kumar 2017, 292-294). Guru et al. analyze the quest for a distinct identity, particularly in the context of Manju Kapur's "A Married Woman (Guru et al. 2021, 540-543)." Divya and Ricky depict a woman's journey toward self-discovery in "A Married Woman (Divya and Ricky 2020, 1981-1986). In (Srivastava and Singh 2016, 1-7) discuss "A Married Woman" as a narrative focused on domestic relationships. Kumar M. and Rajkumari highlight the perception of women as subordinate to male authority, noting their struggle for recognition and identity in a society that confines them to domestic roles.

They also acknowledge the evolving role of women, who now play significant roles both within their households and in the workforce, contributing substantially to their families' livelihoods as societal norms evolve (Kumar M. and Rajkumari 2018, 2027-2032). The changing patterns of femininity in the novels of Manju Kapur seen through a feminist lens of today, it reveals women balancing tradition and their individuality. The women's potential and consciousness at the center as reacting to the social environment that continuously change (Shabnum et al. 2024, 89-92). The development of femininity in *The Immigrant*, the focus being on the themes of migration, cultural alienation, and identity creation, as changing female subjectivity and emotional independence (Shabnum, et.al 2023, 2852-2855). The story of personal discovery with an emphasis on the limitations of marriage and the domination of patriarchy. The secret of the main characters' dilemma and the slow recognition of one's identity in society are presented as a societal context ((Shabnum, et.al 2023, 748-754). The protagonists battle against the society and the family situation is traced in *Difficult Daughters*. It points out education and personal decision as the main driving forces behind the protagonist's journey for freedom (Shabnum and Zargar 2022, 940-943).

Summary:-

A "Married Woman" explores female identity of the 20th C. Astha, the protagonist of the novel undergoes transformation journey of womanhood. She plays a vital role of devoted wife and mother follows the traditional norms of society alongside Hemant. However, as time progresses, she begins to question and challenge these norms along with conventional dynamics of marriage. Her obedience to social norms also leads to dissatisfaction and unfulfilled wishes and desires. She wants to free herself from social conventions only for her own identity to recognition in society. Astha's relationship with Aijaz symbolizes the women's quest for independence, freedom also highlights the struggles women face asserting their sexual agency and pursuing their desires. The narrative also captures the effect of western ideals on Indian society. Astha's interactions with Aijaz also reflect existence of traditional and modernity within society.

Conclusion:-

Manju Kapur's novel, "A 'Married Woman' is exploration of Astha's transformation in her desires, needs and personal aspirations. Also, sheds light on some issues like gender norms and feminism. Kapur also insights into the roles of women in society making a significant contribution to the field of gender studies in literature.

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