

## *Astha in A Married Woman: Between Duty and Desire*

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### **Abstract**

This paper examines the complex journey of Astha, the main character in Manju Kapur's "A Married Woman", as she balances societal expectations and personal interests. The novel depicts the life of an Indian woman, encapsulated in the life of Astha, who transforms from an obedient daughter and dutiful wife into a woman striving for autonomy, emotional fulfilment, and self-expression. When studying the narrative, the author uses feminist literary criticism to analyse how Astha's emotional conflicts resonate with the structural gender discrimination that persists in India's societal framework even today.

Drawing on foundational feminist theories by Simone de Beauvoir, Adrienne Rich, bell hooks, and Virginia Woolf, this research contextualizes Astha's journey within broader discourses on marriage, motherhood, sexuality, and artistic agency. The paper highlights the tensions between tradition and modernity, individuality and conformity, and examines how these dichotomies manifest in Astha's psyche and personal relationships. Astha's romantic and sexual relationship with Pipeelika goes beyond self-empowerment, as it serves to confront traditional domesticity and rigid gender constructs, showing radical transformation. This paper emphasizes the critical relevance of the novel "A Married Woman", including its critique of misogynistic societal frameworks and its celebration of women's creative imagination and resilience as shaped through women's agency, solidarity, and self-

exploration, by locating it within global feminist thought as well as intertextual literary traditions.

**Keywords:** Astha, A Married Woman, Manju Kapur, feminist theory, Indian middle-class womanhood.

## **Introduction**

In a society where tradition frequently supersedes individual aspiration, the lives of women are often sculpted by expectations rather than desire. “A Married Woman” by Manju Kapur provides an eloquent exploration of this concept in the character of Astha, whose life is a constant negotiation of the dutiful daughter, wife, and mother she is expected to be against fulfilling the artistic and emotional longings she has suppressed for years. Her journey is a representation of millions of women caught at the juncture of personal desire and societal obligation. Astha’s primary conflict — her tension between duty and desire — is not simply a personal conflict; it is tied to the patriarchal structures of Indian society. This paper investigates how Astha’s journey demonstrates feminism’s larger concern of autonomy, agency, and systemic erasure of women’s voices. Through close textual analysis and using feminist theorists such as de Beauvoir, hooks, and Rich, this paper seeks to uncover the oppressive structures that threaten Astha’s experience and how she navigates these systems with teeny acts of defiance through art, teaching, activism, and ultimately, love.

## **Methodology**

This paper employs a qualitative, interpretive approach grounded in feminist literary criticism. The primary text under examination is Manju Kapur’s “A Married Woman” (2002), which is analysed through the lens of gender studies and feminist theory. Key theoretical contributions from Simone de Beauvoir (*The Second Sex*), bell hooks (*Feminist Theory and All About Love*), Adrienne Rich (*Of Woman Born and Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*), and Virginia Woolf (*A Room of One’s Own*) serve as analytical

frameworks. Textual analysis is the primary method, focusing on character development, dialogue, and narrative structure to unpack Astha's psychological and emotional evolution. Special attention is given to her relationships — both familial and romantic — and their implications for her identity and autonomy. References to historical and socio-political contexts, including the Babri Masjid controversy, further situate Astha's personal journey within larger national discourses. Supplementary references to comparative literary texts such as Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Chopin's *The Awakening*, and Wharton's *The House of Mirth* are employed to deepen the intertextual analysis and highlight the universality of Astha's struggles.

## **Discussion**

Astha, the protagonist of Manju Kapoor's "A Married Woman", is a character shaped by the dual forces of duty and desire, a tension that defines her life from childhood to adulthood. Astha's upbringing is marked by a pervasive sense of fear and control, as her parents meticulously prepare her for the only future, they deem acceptable: marriage. Brought up as her parents' "precious treasure" Astha is a child of contradictions, moulded by both the traditional aspirations of her mother and the modern ideals of her father. From an early age, her life is carefully orchestrated to fulfil her duty as a daughter and future wife, a path mapped out in meticulous detail and fortified by rituals, prayers, and endless preparations. Her mother, steeped in tradition, sees Astha's marriage as not just a duty but a sacred obligation, once declaring, "When you are married, our responsibilities will be over. Do you know the shastras say if parents die without getting their daughter married, they will be condemned to perpetual rebirth?"<sup>1</sup> (Kapur, 2002) Her mother, deeply rooted in tradition, instils in Astha the belief that a woman's ultimate purpose is to marry well and secure her family's honour. Astha's mother prays daily for a "good husband" and even Astha, despite her

scepticism, is drawn into these rituals, imagining a romantic, shadowy figure who will bring her happiness.

Despite the rigid structure of her upbringing, Astha's inner world is rich with longing and creativity. Her love for art becomes a subtle form of rebellion against the confines of her life. While her father dismisses her artistic pursuits as having "no future" Astha finds solace and self-expression in drawing and painting. This passion represents her first step toward asserting her individuality, even as she is pressured to focus on more "practical" pursuits like excelling in academics or preparing for the IAS exams. Manju Kapoor in one of her interviews says – "Women's lives are series of negotiation between expectations - societies have a few, your families have a few, people you love have a few and you do not want to disappoint them and your own desires to be something outside all this. Astha does it through art. That is the thing that is constant in her life."<sup>2</sup> (Kapur, 2021, 0:46) Astha's adolescence is also marked by a growing awareness of her desires, both romantic and personal. She is "prey to inchoate longings" desiring "almost every boy she saw" and standing before the mirror, questioning her worth and beauty. These moments reveal a young woman yearning for love and validation, yet trapped by societal expectations that dictate her worth is tied to her appearance and marital prospects. Feminist theorist bell hooks, in *All About Love*, emphasizes the importance of love as a transformative force, but also warns against the dangers of romanticizing relationships that perpetuate inequality. She writes, "The transformative power of love is not fully embraced in our society because we often wrongly believe that torment and anguish are the natural states of love."<sup>3</sup> (hooks, 2018) Astha's story illustrates this tension, as her desire for love and connection is repeatedly thwarted by the patriarchal structures that surround her.

Astha's engagement and subsequent marriage to Hemant Vadera mark a pivotal moment in her life, as she transitions from a young woman grappling with her desires to a

wife fulfilling societal expectations. Her marriage to Hemant initially seems to offer her a sense of freedom and adulthood. However, this happiness is short-lived, as Astha soon realizes that marriage does not liberate her from societal expectations but instead imposes new constraints. Hemant, though kind and well-meaning, represents the traditional patriarchal husband. His conversations with Astha revolve around his experiences in the USA and his career, leaving little room for her to express her own thoughts and feelings. Astha's role as a wife is defined by her ability to support Hemant and manage their household, reinforcing the idea that her value lies in her ability to fulfil her duties rather than pursue her own aspirations. In *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that marriage often perpetuates women's subjugation by confining them to domestic roles and denying them autonomy. De Beauvoir observes, "Man is a socially autonomous and complete individual; he is regarded above all as a producer, and his existence is justified by the work he provides for the group; we have already seen the reasons why the reproductive and domestic role to which woman is confined has not guaranteed her an equal dignity."<sup>4</sup> (De Beauvoir, 2010) Astha's marriage to Hemant exemplifies this dynamic, as she is expected to prioritize his needs and aspirations over her own. As Astha settles into married life, she begins to feel the erosion of her sense of self. Her days are filled with household chores and social obligations, leaving little time for her artistic pursuits or personal reflection. Her desires and aspirations are relegated to the background, as she is expected to conform to the role of a dutiful wife. The monotony of domesticity and her husband's inability to connect with her emotionally or recognize her individuality leave her yearning for something more profound. Like Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, who confesses, "I have been your doll-wife, just as at home I was Papa's doll-child,"<sup>5</sup> (Ibsen, 1890). Astha is shaped by a system that values her as a symbol of familial honour and societal conformity rather than as an individual with her own dreams and aspirations. This realization will become a pivotal force in her transformation, pushing her to question the very structures that

once defined her identity. Astha's story is not just her own; it is a reflection of the broader struggles faced by women navigating the intersection of personal desires and societal expectations in contemporary India. Astha's life after marriage becomes a tapestry of conflicting roles and expectations, intricately woven with the threads of duty, desire, and the occasional rebellion against societal and familial impositions. Her attempts to find meaning within the prescribed boundaries of her existence mirror the struggles of countless women navigating similar terrains in patriarchal structures. Astha's desires and aspirations are relegated to the background, as she is expected to conform to the role of a dutiful wife. As De Beauvoir observes- "Man succeeded in enslaving woman, but in doing so, he robbed her of what made possession desirable. Integrated into the family and society, woman's magic fades rather than transfigures itself; reduced to a servant's condition, she is no longer the wild prey incarnating all of nature's treasures. Since the birth of courtly love, it has been a commonplace that marriage kills love."<sup>6</sup> (De Beauvoir, 2010) Hemant's dismissive attitude toward her emotional needs-evident when he brushes off her concerns about their lack of meaningful communication-reveals the inequitable dynamics in their relationship. His statement, "Grow up, Az, one can't be courting forever,"<sup>7</sup> (Kapur, 2002) epitomizes his pragmatic view of marriage as a functional institution rather than an emotional partnership. Astha's growing disillusionment with her marriage parallels Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, where Nora Helmer gradually awakens to the hollow foundations of her marital life. Like Nora, who declares, "I must try to educate myself. You are not the man to help me in that,"<sup>8</sup> (Ibsen, 1890) Astha begins to recognize that her fulfilment cannot solely depend on Hemant's validation. She starts to seek autonomy in her teaching career, which provides her with an intellectual and emotional refuge. Her transformation is significant—she transitions from someone whose life revolves around her husband and children to a woman who derives satisfaction from her professional achievements. Astha finds solace in the "pleasure of

interacting with minds instead of needs,”<sup>9</sup> (Kapur, 2002) a subtle but crucial rebellion against the traditional roles imposed on her. However, her agency is continually undermined by the demands of family and societal expectations. Hemant’s assertion that teaching is “hardly a serious job” reflects the broader societal tendency to trivialize women’s work outside the home. His comment that she should either hire additional help or quit her job underscores the expectation that Astha’s primary responsibility lies within the domestic sphere.

Astha’s internal conflict becomes a microcosm of the broader struggle between tradition and modernity in Indian society. On the one hand, her upbringing emphasizes the virtues of duty, modesty, and sacrifice, qualities that align with the traditional ideal of womanhood. On the other, her education and exposure to new ideas ignite a desire for autonomy and self-fulfilment. Kapur uses this tension to critique the limited spaces available to women within a rapidly modernizing India. After the birth of her son, Himanshu, Astha’s life becomes increasingly defined by the demands of domesticity. Her days are consumed by the care of her children, the management of the household, and the expectations of her in-laws. Her mother-in-law’s comment, “Woman is earth” reflects the cultural ideal of women as nurturing and bountiful, a sentiment echoed by visitors who remark on “a mother’s love” with “significant silence”. This idealization of motherhood, however, masks the emotional and physical labour that Astha must perform, often at the expense of her own well-being. Simone de Beauvoir, in *The Second Sex*, critiques the myth of the “eternal feminine” arguing that it reduces women to their biological functions and denies them individuality. De Beauvoir observes, “according to tradition, it is the child who should ensure the wife a concrete autonomy that dispenses her from devoting herself to any other aim. If she is not a complete individual as a wife, she becomes it as a mother: the child is her joy and justification. She reaches sexual and social self-realization through him; it is thus through him that the institution of marriage has meaning and reaches its aim.”<sup>10</sup> (De Beauvoir, 2010)

Astha's experience exemplifies this critique, as her identity becomes increasingly tied to her roles as a wife and mother. Her initial joy at Himanshu's birth "he recognises me" is overshadowed by the realization that her fulfilment is contingent on her ability to meet societal expectations. The "profound gratitude" she feels is tinged with shame, as she internalizes the belief that her worth is tied to her ability to produce a male heir. Hemant's transformation from an "all-American father" to an "all-Indian one" marks a significant shift in their relationship. After the birth of Himanshu, Hemant withdraws from active participation in childcare, declaring, "It's your job." This shift reflects the patriarchal division of labour, where domestic responsibilities are seen as inherently feminine. Astha's plea for shared responsibility- "It's nice if we look after him together"<sup>11</sup> (Kapur, 2002) is met with Hemant's dismissal, as he suggests sending the child to his mother or hiring help. This exchange highlights the unequal power dynamics within their marriage, where Astha's needs and desires are subordinated to Hemant's convenience.

Adrienne Rich, in "Of Woman Born", explores the ways in which motherhood is both idealized and devalued within patriarchal societies. She argues that the institution of motherhood often isolates women, denying them the support and autonomy they need to thrive. She writes "Patriarchal man impregnates 'his' wife and expects her to deliver 'his' child; her elemental power is perceived more and more as a service she renders, a function she performs."<sup>12</sup> (Rich, 1977) Astha's experience mirrors this analysis, as she struggles to balance her responsibilities as a mother with her desire for personal fulfilment. Hemant's suggestion to "quit your job" underscores the limited options available to women, as Astha is forced to choose between her career and her family. The parallel between Astha and Nora Helmer in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House* also becomes relevant here. Like Astha, Nora initially fulfils her role as a wife and mother, embodying the ideal of domestic femininity. However, as Nora realizes the cost of this role on her sense of self, she declares, "I must stand

quite alone to know myself and my surroundings”<sup>13</sup> (Ibsen, 1890) While Astha does not achieve the radical break that Nora does, her internal conflict reflects a similar struggle to balance her duty to her family with her desire for self-fulfilment. Amid the demands of her domestic life, Astha turns to art and writing as a means of self-expression and resistance. Her poems, particularly “Changes” reflect her inner turmoil and her longing for “release from pain” and “final peace and tranquillity.” However, Hemant’s reaction to her work- “Poems? I didn’t know you were still writing”<sup>14</sup> (Kapur, 2002) reveals his lack of understanding and support. His suggestion that her poems are “too alike” and his dismissal of her creative efforts as “self-indulgent” further erode Astha’s confidence, leading her to abandon writing altogether. Astha’s inability to assert her artistic identity within her marriage reflects the broader societal constraints that limit women’s autonomy. Her decision to focus on drawing, a less “exposed” form of art, highlights the ways in which women are often forced to compromise their creative ambitions in order to conform to societal expectations. Virginia Woolf, in “A Room of One’s Own”, emphasizes the importance of financial independence and personal space for women's creative expression. She writes- “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”<sup>15</sup> (Woolf, 1935)

Despite the suffocating reality, Astha finds an unexpected escape in theatre. Astha’s involvement in the Street Theatre Group and her collaboration with Aijaz on the play “Babri Masjid: Fact, Fiction and You” represent a significant departure from her domestic responsibilities. Through this project, Astha finds a space for self-expression and intellectual engagement, allowing her to explore her identity beyond the confines of her roles as a wife and mother. Her growing expertise on the Babri Masjid and her active participation in the play reflect her desire to contribute to something larger than herself, challenging the societal norms that confine women to the private sphere. Astha’s involvement in the theatre group provides her with a sense of purpose and fulfilment that is often denied to her within her

domestic life. Her involvement with The Street Theatre Group under Aijaz's mentorship offers her a space where she is valued for her intellect rather than her domestic role. "Any place is a stage, any person an actor,"<sup>16</sup> (Kapur, 2002) Aijaz declares, unknowingly validating Astha's long-suppressed desire to exist beyond the confines of her home. The rehearsals, discussions, and creative expression provide her with an intellectual stimulation that she has never experienced in her marriage. In many ways, Aijaz becomes a contrast to Hemant—not as a romantic counterpart, but as a figure who recognizes and nurtures her potential rather than controlling it. However, Hemant's reaction to Astha's newfound passion is predictable. His disdain for her involvement is palpable: "Keep to what you know best—the home, children, teaching. All this doesn't suit you."<sup>17</sup> (Kapur, 2002) His words encapsulate the rigid expectations that bind Astha—her aspirations are permissible only as long as they do not interfere with her wifely and maternal duties. His resistance to her intellectual and creative pursuits reinforces the idea that women's lives should revolve around service to their families rather than personal fulfilment. Astha's engagement with the Babri Masjid play further deepens her awakening. Through historical and political discussions, she begins to see the broader structures of oppression that operate within society—parallels to the ones that confine her within her marriage. She reflects on how "too many people like me in this country are not paying attention to what is happening."<sup>18</sup> (Kapur, 2002) Her realization is not just political but deeply personal. She begins to connect her own silencing to the larger narratives of suppression that play out on the national stage.

As the novel progresses, Astha's story serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of self-definition and autonomy in the face of patriarchal oppression. Her journey invites readers to question the societal norms that shape women's lives and to imagine a world where women are free to pursue their desires and aspirations without fear or constraint. Astha's involvement in the demonstration outside Rashtrapati Bhavan and her growing

commitment to social activism represent a significant departure from her domestic responsibilities. Through her activism, Astha finds a space for self-expression and intellectual engagement, allowing her to explore her identity beyond the confines of her roles as a wife and mother. Her speech at the demonstration, which resonates with the basti women, reflects her desire to contribute to something larger than herself, challenging the societal norms that confine women to the private sphere. However, Hemant's reaction to her activism- "You seem to forget that your place as a decent family woman is in the home, and not on the streets"<sup>19</sup> (Kapur, 2002) reveals the societal resistance to women's participation in public and political spheres. This dynamic reflects the broader cultural tendency to dismiss women's voices, particularly when they challenge established norms. Astha's experience highlights the ways in which women's participation in public and intellectual spheres is often met with resistance and condescension, reinforcing their subordinate position within society.

Astha's encounter with Pipeelika, Aijaz's widow, serves as a mirror of her own struggles and desires. This encounter highlights the ways in which women's relationships with each other can be fraught with tension and competition, as they navigate the societal expectations that shape their lives. Astha's realization that she has spent hours with Pipeelika without knowing her true identity- "Oh no! oh no! oh no! Aijaz. Aijaz's wife. What must it be like to be Aijaz's wife?"<sup>20</sup> (Kapur, 2002) reveals her growing awareness of the complexities of women's lives and the ways in which they are shaped by patriarchal norms. The introduction of Pipeelika Trivedi, an independent woman who has chosen to live life on her own terms, provides Astha with a stark contrast to her own existence. Pipeelika, who has defied societal norms by marrying Aijaz—a Muslim man, despite her conservative Hindu background—represents a kind of freedom that Astha has never considered possible. Unlike Astha, who has spent her life trying to balance duty and desire, Pipeelika asserts her autonomy unapologetically. Her defiance of convention recalls Sally Seton in Mrs. Dalloway,

who embodies the unrestrained self-expression that Clarissa Dalloway both admires and fears. “Sally it was who made her feel, for the first time, how sheltered the life at Bourton was. She knew nothing about sex—nothing about social problems. She had never realised that women of her own class could feel like that.”<sup>21</sup> (Woolf, 1947) highlights Sally’s role in exposing Clarissa to new ideas and perspectives, challenging the sheltered life she has led. Similarly, Pipeelika’s independence and defiance expose Astha to new possibilities, challenging the societal norms that have constrained her. This detachment from societal expectations intrigues and unsettles Astha, forcing her to reconsider the possibilities for her own life. As Astha’s relationship with Pipeelika deepens, she experiences a kind of emotional intimacy that has been missing from her marriage. Their connection transcends friendship, becoming a space where Astha feels truly seen and understood. Unlike Hemant, who dismisses her concerns, Pipeelika listens without judgment. Unlike her mother, who sees her as a duty to be fulfilled, Pipeelika treats her as an individual with desires and agency. The emotional and physical attraction Astha feels towards Pipeelika is not just about sexuality—it is about finally being recognized as a whole person. This newfound self-awareness leads Astha to question the life she has built. For years, she believed that fulfilment lay in playing the roles assigned to her—daughter, wife, mother. But as she stands at the crossroads of duty and desire, she begins to realize that the life she has been living is not truly hers. This aligns with Adrienne Rich’s critique: “It also assumes that women who have chosen women have done so simply because men are oppressive and emotionally unavailable: which still fails to account for women who continue to pursue relationships with oppressive and/or emotionally unsatisfying men.”<sup>22</sup> (Rich, part1, last para) Astha’s relationship with Pipeelika is not merely a reaction to Hemant’s indifference, but a deeper awakening to her own emotional and intellectual needs. Rich challenges the idea that same-sex love is always a response to male failure, and Astha’s journey reflects this complexity. While Hemant represents societal

expectations—providing security but failing to nurture her individuality—Pipeelika offers a different kind of intimacy, one that validates Astha’s emotions and choices. However, the novel stops short of presenting Astha’s love for Pipeelika as a fully realized identity. Instead, it is framed as a moment of self-discovery, ultimately overshadowed by the weight of tradition and duty. This echoes Rich’s argument that heterosexuality is often reinforced despite its emotional shortcomings, as seen in Astha’s eventual return to her prescribed roles. Astha’s growing friendship with Pipee represents a significant departure from the traditional roles and relationships that have defined her life. Pipee, as a widow and an independent woman, serves as a mirror for Astha’s own struggles and desires. Their relationship, marked by mutual understanding and emotional intimacy, provides Astha with a space where she can explore her identity beyond the confines of her roles as a wife and mother. This bond is particularly significant in a patriarchal society where women’s relationships are often mediated by men and defined by competition rather than solidarity. The feminist concept of ‘sisterhood’ as discussed by bell hooks in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Centre*, emphasizes the importance of women supporting each other in their struggles against patriarchal oppression. hooks writes that sisterhood is powerful, it is the coming together of women “to support, affirm and protect one another in the struggle to end sexist oppression.”<sup>23</sup> (hooks, 2014) Astha and Pipee’s relationship exemplify this concept, as they share their experiences, frustrations, and aspirations, creating a space of mutual support and understanding. Pipee’s acknowledgment of the ‘usual female trap’ and her reassurance “You are not alone; we all experience it in one way or another”<sup>24</sup> (Kapur, 2002) reflects the ways in which women’s solidarity can provide a source of strength and resistance. Astha’s growing attachment to Pipee represents her first true experience of love that is not transactional or dictated by duty. Unlike her marriage, where she is a passive participant—obligated to provide emotional and physical labour without receiving the same in return—her relationship

with Pipee is based on mutual desire, intellectual companionship, and emotional vulnerability. Their interactions reflect the intensity of Astha's feelings: "She started to fantasize about touching her, imagined her hair between her fingers, her skin beneath her own, her hands on the back of her neck."<sup>25</sup> (Kapur, 2002) For the first time in her life, Astha is experiencing passion and longing that she has previously been denied. The physicality of her attraction to Pipee is new to her, and it challenges her perception of herself. She had always considered her sexuality to be defined within the parameters of her marriage, but now, she finds herself desiring something outside of it, something she cannot rationalize within the framework of her conditioned beliefs. Despite the positive aspects of their relationship, Astha's friendship with Pipee takes on an 'illicit character' due to the societal norms that govern women's behaviour. Astha's need to lie about the time she spends with Pipee "When the boundaries of what might be considered normal interaction passed, she started to lie"<sup>26</sup> (Kapur, 2002) reveals the ways in which women's friendships are often viewed with suspicion and disapproval. Hemant's "disapproval tinged with contempt" underscores the societal tendency to dismiss women's relationships as trivial or threatening, particularly when they challenge traditional gender roles. This dynamic reflects the broader cultural tendency to police women's behaviour and limit their autonomy. Astha's need to lie about the time she spends with Pipeelika- "Her lies grew skilful. Her desperation and her need ensured that they tripped off her tongue, as though she had rehearsed them for hours"<sup>27</sup> (Kapur, 2002) reveals the emotional toll of maintaining their friendship in a patriarchal society. Astha's experience highlights the ways in which women's friendships are often constrained by societal norms, forcing them to navigate a delicate balance between personal fulfilment and social acceptance. However, as she embarks on a passionate relationship with Pipee, she confronts emotions and desires that challenge the very foundation of her identity. Her love for Pipee symbolizes her quest for autonomy, self-discovery, and an escape from the suffocating

structure of traditional marriage. Unlike her marriage, where intimacy is reduced to routine and duty, her relationship with Pipee is defined by passion and emotional reciprocity. The metaphor of the ant, which Astha and Pipee use to describe themselves, serves as a powerful symbol of resilience and perseverance. Astha's reflection- "And now Pipee was journeying eight hours to London, ten hours to Chicago, two hours by bus to Urbana, to be an ant somewhere else"<sup>28</sup> (Kapur, 2002) highlights the ways in which both women navigate the challenges of their lives with determination and strength. Astha's narrative echoes that of Edna Pontellier in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, where Edna's desire for independence leads her to challenge the institution of marriage and explore her sexuality. Edna, much like Astha, feels trapped in a life she did not consciously choose and seeks freedom outside the confines of her socially assigned role. Chopin writes: "The bird that would soar above the level plain of tradition and prejudice must have strong wings. It is a sad spectacle to see the weaklings bruised, exhausted, fluttering back to earth."<sup>29</sup> (Chopin, 1899) Astha, too, attempts to break free from societal constraints, but the pull of duty, guilt, and expectation keeps her tethered. While her relationship with Pipee offers her a glimpse into a life beyond these constraints, she ultimately remains caught in a web of obligations. Astha's growing distance from her husband is not just emotional; it is rooted in the structural limitations of marriage itself. Hemant, who has never been emotionally attuned to Astha's needs, only begins to notice her detachment when his authority over her is threatened. He questions her unusual distraction: "You seem distracted," he pointed out. "What is it?"<sup>30</sup> (Kapur, 2002) His concern is not about her happiness but about maintaining control. His reaction mirrors the patriarchal belief that a woman's emotional and physical presence should be completely transparent to her husband. For Hemant, Astha's secrecy is an anomaly—he has never had to question her before because she has always existed within the defined boundaries of their marriage. Astha, however, now sees these boundaries for what they are: a cage. Yet, unlike Edna Pontellier,

who ultimately chooses death over a life of confinement, Astha does not completely rebel. She continues to live within the structure of marriage, navigating her newfound desires in secrecy. Astha's guilt about her relationship with Pipee is deeply intertwined with her role as a mother. Even as she experiences the most profound emotional connection of her life, she cannot ignore the weight of her responsibilities. She panics when she returns home, realizing that her love for Pipee, however intoxicating, cannot supersede her role as a mother: "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."<sup>31</sup> (Kapur, 2002)

This moment captures the tragic reality of women like Astha—women who glimpse freedom but are unable to fully claim it. Unlike Pipee, who is unattached and independent, Astha is bound by invisible chains of duty. Simone de Beauvoir explains this societal conditioning: "Woman is taught that to be a mother is her natural function; she is induced to believe that true fulfilment is found in devotion to others."<sup>32</sup> (De Beauvoir, 2010) Astha's conflict is not just with her husband but with the deeply ingrained belief that her worth is tied to her ability to nurture and sacrifice. Her love for Pipee becomes a secret rebellion, but it is a rebellion she does not have the strength to sustain. While Astha finds solace in her love for Pipee, Pipee desires more. She grows frustrated with Astha's inability to fully commit to their relationship: "Instead you allow yourself to be shut up by that man, who neither knows nor appreciates you, and for what?"<sup>33</sup> (Kapur, 2002) This confrontation forces Astha to question the life she has resigned herself to. While she longs for Pipee, she cannot envision an existence beyond the structured world she inhabits. Pipee, on the other hand, wants a relationship that is acknowledged and affirmed. The disparity between their expectations highlights the limits of Astha's rebellion. Her predicament closely resembles that of Lily Bart in *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton—a woman who desires independence but is ultimately crushed by societal expectations. Lily, much like Astha, is "so evidently the victim

of the civilization which had produced her, that the links of her bracelet seemed like manacles chaining her to her fate.”<sup>34</sup>(Wharton, 1905) The constraints of societal norms and the fear of social isolation are evident in both characters. Lil’s fear of social ostracism and the loss of material comforts outweigh her desire for personal happiness and love, ultimately leading her to surrender to societal expectations. Similarly, Astha’s resignation to her fate and her inability to envision an existence beyond the structured world she inhabits echo Lily’s predicament. Both women are trapped in a cycle of societal expectations, where their rebellion is limited by their inability to fully break free. Astha finds herself at this crossroads, unable to completely renounce the life she has built, no matter how suffocating it feels. The pain of separation from Pipee and the societal pressures that constrain their relationship highlight the fragility of her happiness and the limitations of her autonomy. Despite these challenges, Astha’s experiences leave her with a sense of empowerment and self-awareness that continues to shape her journey. Her artistic pursuits, her involvement in social activism, and her growing awareness of her own desires reflect her resilience and determination to live authentically in the face of societal constraints.

## **Conclusion**

Manju Kapur’s “A Married Woman” is a powerful exploration of the tension between duty and desire, tradition and modernity, and the ways in which women navigate these conflicting demands in their lives. Astha’s journey serves as a poignant reminder of the importance of self-definition and autonomy in the face of patriarchal oppression. Through her story, Kapoor invites readers to question the societal norms that shape women’s lives and to imagine a world where women are free to pursue their desires and aspirations without fear or constraint. Astha’s story resonates with broader feminist critiques of patriarchal societies, highlighting the transformative power of female solidarity and the importance of women’s relationships with each other as a source of resistance and empowerment. Astha’s journey

reminds us that women must find their own tools, whether through art, activism, or relationships, to challenge the structures that constrain them and to create new possibilities for themselves and future generations.

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