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Representation of Lesbian Relationships in 1990s India: An Analysis of
Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzes Manju Kapur's "A Married Woman" (2003) as a pivotal work in the representation of lesbian relationships in 1990s India. Through a critical examination of the novel's themes, narrative techniques, and socio-political context, this research reveals how Kapur's work challenges prevailing heteronormative narratives and contributes to the emerging discourse on queer identities in Indian literature. The analysis uncovers the novel's nuanced portrayal of sexual fluidity, the conflict between personal desire and societal expectations, and the intersectionality of sexuality with broader political and social issues. Findings indicate that Kapur's depiction of a clandestine lesbian relationship reflects the invisibility and lack of social acceptance faced by queer individuals in 1990s India, while also highlighting the emergence of underground queer communities and activism. The study also critically examines the limitations of Kapur's representation, particularly in terms of class and urban-centric perspectives. By contextualizing the novel within the broader landscape of Indian LGBTQ+ literature and activism, this research demonstrates how *A Married Woman* serves as a significant literary intervention in the evolving narrative of queer experiences in India. The paper concludes that Kapur's work not only provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by lesbians in 1990s India but also contributes to the ongoing dialogue about LGBTQ+ rights and representation in contemporary Indian society.

Key Words: Lesbian Relationship, Queer, Sexual Fluidity, Narrative Technique, Heteronormativity.

Introduction

The 1990s marked a period of significant social and economic transition in India, as the country embraced economic liberalization and globalization. This decade saw the emergence of new discourses around sexuality and gender, although homosexuality remained criminalized under Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code. Within this context, literary representations of same-sex relationships, particularly those between women, were still relatively rare and often controversial. Manju Kapur's 2003 novel *A Married Woman* stands out as an important work that depicted a lesbian relationship set against the backdrop of 1990s India. This paper analyzes Kapur's portrayal of the lesbian relationship in the novel and examines how it reflects the status and experiences of lesbians in Indian society during that period. The novel tells the story of Astha, a married woman who enters into a relationship with Pipee, a widow. It is set against the backdrop of communal tensions surrounding the Babri Masjid demolition in 1992, the narrative intertwines personal and political themes. Through a close reading of the text and an examination of its historical and social context, this paper aims to explore how Kapur's work contributes to our understanding of lesbian experiences in 1990s India and the broader landscape of Indian queer literature.

Background on Lesbian Literature and Activism in India

To fully appreciate the significance of Kapur's work, it is essential to understand the historical context of lesbian literature and activism in India. Before the 1990s, there was very limited Indian literature explicitly portraying lesbian relationships. One of the earliest works to hint at same-sex desire between women was Ismat Chughtai's 1942 Urdu short story *Lihaaf* (The Quilt). This story faced obscenity charges upon publication, highlighting the societal taboos surrounding homosexuality (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000).

In the post-independence era, works like Kamala Das' autobiography *My Story* (1976) touched on themes of same-sex desire, but these were often veiled or ambiguous. It was not until the late 1990s that more overt lesbian literature began to emerge in India. A significant milestone was the publication of Ashwini Sukthankar's anthology *Facing the Mirror: Lesbian Writing from India* (1999), which brought together a diverse range of voices and experiences.

The 1990s also saw the beginnings of more visible LGBTQ+ activism in India. The AIDS Bhedbhav Virodhi Andolan (ABVA) filed the first petition challenging Section 377 in the Delhi High Court in 1994, marking a significant moment in the legal battle for LGBTQ+ rights (Rao, 2017). Lesbian activism specifically began to take shape during this period. The term "lesbian" was used openly for the first time at a women's conference in Calcutta in 1990, signaling a new era of visibility and advocacy (Thadani, 2016).

A pivotal moment for lesbian visibility in India came with the release of Deepa Mehta's film "Fire" in 1998. The film, which depicted a romantic and sexual relationship between two women, sparked both protests and activism. Right-wing groups protested against the film, claiming it was against Indian culture, while activists rallied in support of the film and lesbian rights (Bose, 2007). This controversy brought discussions of lesbianism into the public sphere in unprecedented ways. Within this context of emerging visibility, activism, and controversy that Kapur's *A Married Woman* was published in 2003. While set in the early 1990s, the novel reflects and contributes to the growing discourse around lesbian relationships that developed throughout the decade.

Analysis of *A Married Woman*:

Kapur's novel provides a nuanced portrayal of a lesbian relationship in 1990s India through the story of Astha and Pipee. The narrative explores several key themes that reflect the complexities of lesbian experiences during this period.

Invisibility and Lack of Social Acceptance

One of the most prominent themes in the novel is the invisibility of lesbian relationships and the lack of social acceptance for same-sex desire between women. Astha and Pipee's relationship is conducted in secret, hidden from their families and society at large. This secrecy reflects the broader invisibility of lesbians in 1990s Indian society, where same-sex relationships between women were often unacknowledged or denied.

As Giti Thadani notes in her work on Indian lesbian history, the social and cultural context of the time "gives no validity and social space for autonomous lesbian women" (1996, p. 121). Kapur's portrayal of a clandestine relationship underscores this lack of social acceptance and the absence of visible, openly lesbian identities in public spaces. The characters must navigate a society that does not recognize or validate their feelings, leading to a sense of isolation and internal conflict.

Conflict with Heteronormative Expectations:

The novel explores in depth the conflict between same-sex desire and heteronormative expectations. Astha, as a married woman and mother, struggles to reconcile her feelings for Pipee with her socially prescribed roles. This internal conflict illustrates what Adrienne Rich termed "compulsory heterosexuality" - the societal expectation that women will form relationships with men and fulfill traditional family roles (Rich, 1980).

Kapur's portrayal of Astha's journey from a conventional heterosexual marriage to a same-sex relationship challenges these norms, highlighting the tension between individual desire and societal expectations. The novel depicts the emotional toll of living a double life, as Astha attempts to balance her duties as a wife and mother with her growing feelings for Pipee. This conflict is not merely internal but is also reflected in the reactions of those around her, particularly her husband Hemant, whose response to the idea of homosexuality is one of disgust and dismissal.

Sexual Fluidity and Identity

Kapur's portrayal of Astha's sexual awakening touches on the concept of sexual fluidity. Astha's transition from a heterosexual marriage to a passionate relationship with Pipee suggests that sexual orientation is not always fixed or binary. This representation challenges simplistic notions of sexual identity and reflects more nuanced understandings of sexuality that were beginning to emerge in academic and activist circles during the 1990s.

The novel's exploration of sexual fluidity aligns with the work of scholars like Lisa Diamond, who have argued for a more dynamic understanding of sexual orientation, particularly in women (Diamond, 2008). By presenting Astha's sexuality as something that evolves and changes over time, Kapur challenges essentialist notions of sexual identity and provides a more complex portrayal of the lesbian experience.

The intersection of Personal and Political:

One of the most striking aspects of "A Married Woman" is how it intertwines the personal story of Astha and Pipee with the broader political and social tensions of the time, particularly the communal violence surrounding the Babri Masjid demolition. This narrative choice draws parallels between personal and political upheavals, suggesting that individual experiences of sexuality and identity are inextricably linked to larger social and cultural contexts.

The political backdrop also provides a cover for Astha and Pipee's relationship, as their involvement in activist work allows them to spend time together without arousing suspicion. This aspect of the novel highlights how lesbians in India often had to navigate complex social situations to maintain their relationships, finding spaces of freedom within the constraints of a heteronormative society.

Homophobia and Social Attitudes

Kapur addresses the prevalence of homophobia in 1990s Indian society through various characters' reactions to homosexuality. Astha's husband Hemant, despite being portrayed as relatively liberal and educated, displays clear homophobic attitudes. When Astha suggests attending a gay and lesbian film festival, Hemant responds with disgust: "Are you out of your mind, Az? ... I'm not interested in homosexuals" (Kapur, 235-236).

This reaction reflects the widespread societal prejudice against LGBTQ+ individuals and the lack of understanding or acceptance of diverse sexualities. By including these attitudes in her novel, Kapur provides a realistic portrayal of the social climate of the time and the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in gaining acceptance and understanding.

Limited Future Prospects

The limited future prospects for same-sex relationships in 1990s India are poignantly illustrated in the novel's conclusion. Pipee's departure for the United States and Astha's return to her married life suggest the lack of possibilities for long-term, open same-sex relationships in India at that time. This ending reflects the reality that many lesbians in India faced: the need to conform to societal expectations or seek opportunities abroad to live more openly.

The novel's ending raises questions about the possibilities for lesbian relationships in India and the personal costs of societal non-acceptance. It also touches on themes of transnational queer identities and the idea of the West as a space of sexual freedom, a common trope in South Asian queer literature (Desai, 2004).

Literary Techniques and Narrative Structure:

Throughout the novel, Kapur employs several literary techniques that enhance her portrayal of the lesbian experience in 1990s India. The use of parallel narratives, juxtaposing Astha's personal journey with the broader social and political changes occurring in India, effectively illustrates how individual experiences of sexuality and identity are shaped by and interconnected with larger societal forces. The Babri Masjid demolition and subsequent communal tensions serve as a metaphor for the upheaval in Astha's personal life, highlighting the fragility of both social structures and personal relationships.

Kapur's use of Astha's art as a means of self-expression and liberation is another significant aspect of the novel. Astha's paintings become an outlet for her suppressed desires and a way to navigate her complex emotional landscape. This portrayal suggests the importance of creative expression as a form of resistance and self-discovery for marginalized individuals, particularly in contexts where open expression of non-normative identities is restricted.

The novel's narrative structure, which follows Astha's journey from a conventional married life to her relationship with Pipee and back again, mirrors the circular nature of many queer narratives in Indian literature. As Gayatri Gopinath notes in her work on queer diasporic culture, such narratives often "resist closure and the logic of reproductive futurity" (Gopinath, 15). Kapur's open-ended conclusion aligns with this tradition, leaving the reader to contemplate the future possibilities for Astha and lesbian relationships in India more broadly.

Chosen Family and Queer Community

While limited by the constraints of their society, Astha and Pipee's relationship represents a form of chosen family that exists outside traditional kinship structures. Their involvement in activist circles and attendance at the gay and lesbian film festival hint at the emergence of queer communities in urban India during the 1990s, even if these communities remained largely underground.

This aspect of the novel reflects the importance of chosen families and community networks for LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly in contexts where familial and societal acceptance is limited. As scholars like Naisargi Dave have noted, the 1990s saw the beginnings of more organized LGBTQ+ communities in urban India, often centered around activism and support networks (Dave, 2012).

Representation and Its Complexities

In her depiction of Astha and Pipee's relationship, Kapur avoids sensationalism or exoticization, instead presenting their bond as deeply emotional and intellectually stimulating. This nuanced portrayal challenges stereotypical or one-dimensional representations of lesbian relationships, offering a more complex and humanizing depiction that was rare in Indian literature of the time. However, it's important to critically examine the limitations and potential problematic aspects of Kapur's representation. As Gayatri Gopinath argues in "Impossible Desires" (2005), even sympathetic portrayals of queer subjects can sometimes reinforce certain normative ideas. For instance, the novel's focus on educated, middle-class women may not fully capture the diversity of lesbian experiences in India, particularly across class and caste lines.

Furthermore, the use of terms like "lesbian" in the Indian context requires careful consideration. As Ruth Vanita (2002) has explored, applying Western-origin terms to Indian contexts can be complex and potentially limiting. While Kapur's use of these terms reflects the growing adoption of such language in 1990s India, it's worth considering how this terminology shapes our understanding of same-sex desire in the Indian context.

Critical Reception and Impact

A Married Woman received significant attention upon its publication for its frank portrayal of a lesbian relationship. Critics praised Kapur's sensitive handling of the subject matter and her ability to interweave personal and political themes. However, some reviewers also noted the novel's potential to be controversial given its subject matter (Mittapalli & Piciucco, 2010). The novel's impact on subsequent Indian LGBTQ+ literature is notable. It helped pave the way for more open discussions of same-sex relationships in Indian literature and contributed to a growing body of work exploring queer themes. In the years following its publication, there has been a significant increase in Indian literature featuring LGBTQ+ characters and themes, both in English and in regional languages (Dasgupta & Gokulsing, 2013).

Conclusion

Manju Kapur's "A Married Woman" provides a nuanced and complex portrayal of a lesbian relationship in 1990s India, offering valuable insights into the challenges and experiences of lesbians during this period of social and political transition. Through its exploration of themes such as invisibility, conflict with heteronormative expectations, sexual fluidity, and the intersection of personal and political realms, the novel contributes significantly to our understanding of queer experiences in India. The novel's significance lies not only in its representation of same-sex desire between women but also in its contextualization of these experiences within the broader social, cultural, and political landscape of 1990s India. By intertwining Astha and Pipee's story with the communal tensions of the time, Kapur highlights the interconnectedness of personal and societal struggles. While *A Married Woman* marks an important moment in the representation of lesbian relationships in Indian literature, it also raises questions about the limitations and complexities of such representations. The novel's focus on urban, educated women and its use of Western-origin terminology prompt us to consider the diversity of queer experiences in India and the challenges of representing these experiences in literature.

As India continues to grapple with LGBTQ+ rights and representation, works like Kapur's remain relevant for understanding the historical context of these ongoing struggles. The novel serves

as a testament to the existence and resilience of same-sex love in India, even in times of social and legal repression, and contributes to the growing canon of Indian queer literature that challenges heteronormative narratives and expands our understanding of love, desire, and identity in the Indian context.

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