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Manju Kapur's Novel 'A Married Women', An Out Cry Against Communal And Religious Frenzy

Received-04.09.2025,

Revised-11.09.2025,

Accepted-17.09.2025

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Abstract: *A Creative writer can not remain untouched by what is going on around him or her in the social, political and religious field. The contemporary happenings in the different fields of life are reflected in the literary works as these happenings affect the authors' imagination and get expression in their writings as literature has been said to be the mirror of society.*

The name of Manju Kapur has been added to the list of famous novelists whose works have brought into light the latest and current social, religious and political issues playing vital role in shaping the real picture of our society. Manju Kapur, the retired Professor of English from Delhi University has five world-wide read novels to her credit which have made her most loving and popular writer. Though the central theme of all her novels is liberty, self dependence, self recognition of women in the middle class Indian society where male-dominance still prevails so far as the issue of woman liberty is concerned, in Indian middle class society women are still treated as subordinate to men and their main role is to breed children, nourish them and remain devoted to their husbands treating them as gods and not to utter a word against them.

Key words: *Creative writer, the mirror of society, current social, male-dominance, woman liberty, novel.*

Though the central theme of her novels is to highlight the status and condition of women and finally she pleads strongly for the empowerment of women which is a great issue in India being discussed in every walk of life, yet the novelist does not ignore the big social and religious controversies which shake and effect the roots of Indian society. Manju Kapur in all her five novels does not forget to give space to the burning contemporary religious, communal and political events as they play a vital role in the background of the main plot and central theme of the novel.

It is through the life and character of Astha, the protagonist, Manju Kapur also highlights Ramjanam-bhoomi Babri Masjid controversy in the background which was the most burning issue (the destruction of Babri Masjid on Dec. 6, 1992). The controversy regarding the birth place of Lord Rama had been running for a long time that the original birth place of Lord Rama was destroyed by Muslim invader Babar and built Babri Masjid on the same spot. This controversy brought communal hatred between Hindus and Muslims and it deeply influenced the Hindu-Muslim mutual understanding in Indian middle class families. Both the communities came on 'daggers drawn'. This situation deeply shocked the intellectual and humanity loving people. This communal hatred was not supported by one section of people who believed in peaceful co-existence in society. This group of the peace-loving people were trying their best to bring harmony in the country.

Astha, the protagonist of the novel belongs to the group of people who want peace and harmony in the country. She is married in a rich middle-class family, as her husband Hemant is the owner of a good and rich business. But Astha wants to do something of her own. She wants to become self-dependent so that she may not look at Hemant for any thing for herself. She starts teaching in a school for being financially independent. She feels "her salary meant she did not have to ask Hemant for every little rupee she spent..."¹ Manju Kapur in her novels pleads for financial independence for women and Astha's joining the school makes her financially independent. Astha was very favourite of the principal who had been in close contact with a person named Aijaz Akhtar, the founder of the Street Theatre Group. He teaches history and during holidays he performs plays in slums, factories, streets and villages for creating social awareness. The principal invites Aijaz to organize a workshop in the school and asks Astha to help in this work. The principal told about Aijaz is "indeed the voice of the unheard under-privileged". Astha is not very much willing to join this workshop, but after discussing with her children and husband, she begins to help in arranging theatrical workshop of Aijaz in the school. Aijaz with the members of his Theatre had been trying to highlight the horrible consequences of the Communal hatred between Hindus and Muslims, taking the issue of Ramjanambhoomi and Babri Masjid through his dramatic performances.

Astha has already been thinking to do something that may provide her own recognition and self-dignity Astha was sick of sacrifice... She was fed up with the ideal of Indian womanhood, used to trap and jail".²

Astha agrees to help in organizing the theatrical workshop of Aijaz in the school at the advice of her principal and thus she came in contact with Aijaz who had been arranging dramatic performances to awaken



people against communal hatred between Muslims and Hindus arising out of Ram Janambhoomi and Babri Masjid. Astha also gets interested in knowing the cause of dispute of the Ram Janambhoomi and Masjid. She goes to library and reads history and comes to know that the religious frenzy of both the communities had been very injurious to the people. She reads how Muslims claim that the Hanuman Garhi temple was built on a mosque while Hindus retaliate by saying that the Babri Masjid is built on a temple". She also came to know - "A lot of people were killed during this time, Hindus as well as Muslims, and the whole thing became political. There was an enquiry committee consisting of Hindus and Muslims presided over by a British Resident. But after 1857 power equation changed and two years later, the British declared that access to Babri Masjid would be bifurcated. The Hindus were to enter from the east and Muslims from the north".³

Astha believed that taking this issue there should be no social disharmony and communal ill will. The communal disharmony between Hindus and Muslims continued till the British left. Astha also joins Aijaz by writing the scripts for his plays. Her script entitled 'Babri Masjid: Fact, fiction and you' was performed on the stage under the direction of Aijaz and it was highly appreciated. Aijaz Akhtar had in his mind to maintain an atmosphere of mutual understanding as the dispute of Controversy of Ram Janambhoomi and Babri Masjid had clearly divided society into two groups. But Aijaz puts an example of communal harmony by marrying a Hindu girl named Pipee and he himself asserts- "My marriage is a strike for communal harmony".⁴

The whole country was filled with vicious atmosphere. The novelist describes how the bitterness was being created by the religious frenzy of the Hindus who were bent upon building Ram Mandir - "It was the year 1989 and bricks were being collected - collected, worshipped and escorted out of towns, wrapped in silk and saffron, on their way to Ayodhya. If communal disturbances occurred in the wake of these processions, that was not the fault of the bricks, but the fault of the narrow mindedness of the minority communities, who couldn't bear to feel that their domination in this country was over."⁵

In such vicious atmosphere and conditions in the country, Aijaz is busy in performing and plans to give a show in Rajpur fifty kilometres outside Delhi. His wife, Pipee asks him not to go there as it is a 'sensitive area. It is not safe' (136). Aijaz does not heed to her advice and goes to Rajpur to perform his show with the Theatre Group. The next day Hemant tells the tragic incident occurred in Rajpur with the whole Theatrical Group- "Theatre Group burned alive in a van."⁶ It is given in the paper about the whole incident - "A horrendous incident took place here last night in the township of Rajpur. Aijaz Akhtar Khan, noted theatre activist, and his troupe were dragged from the site of their performance, and taken away in a Matador. Later the charred remains of the Matador along with the bodies were found near the river. The culprits are still absconding."⁷

Astha is shocked to hear this shocking news and feels that it is the result of tensions between the two communities. The contents of the play were of sensitive nature involving Ramjanambhoomi and Babri Masjid Controversy. It was heart shocking for Astha, as she had been associated with Aijaz by writing scripts and thus she was also a strong supporter of communal harmony. Manju Kapur has thus described the grief and shock of Astha - "But Astha could not read further for the tears in her eyes. What a way to die, what a horrible, horrible way to die - and for what? . . . She turned away to cry some more."⁸

Thus it is obvious that Astha's painful cry is against communal frenzy which arises out of religious frenzy. Neither of the two communities were serious and gentle to solve this controversial issue harmoniously which could stop such tragic and horrible incidents as the tragedy of burning alive the members of Street Theatre Group along with Aijaz Akhtar who had been to sacrifice his life for the sake of Communal harmony in the country. Astha was broken at heart while her husband was least affected rather he asks Astha seeing her tears "What was he to you?". Hemant could not realize Astha's sentiments for Aijaz and for his sacrifice. She was always serious and worried about the present communal bitterness due to Ramjanambhoomi and Babri Masjid issue. She was a strong supporter of communal harmony for which Aijaz had been working and finally sacrificed his life.

Astha goes to attend the condolence meeting. She wanted her children to be present there as they were also acquainted with Aijaz. She wanted her children may also know the political realities and also the fatal consequences of religious and communal frenzy. Astha's inner pain and painful out cry has been realistically described by the novelist - "We are witnessing crimes deliberately stoked by the forces of Communalism. The voice of secularism is not tolerated. Can ten men be burnt alive... What has the state done so far, what have the police done so far to apprehend the criminals? Is this the message for the citizens of the country, live in fear, do not raise your voice..."⁹



Astha saw the cremation with a heavy heart, remembering the moments she had also been with Aijaz. Astha also joins the rally which was organised to protest the 'circumstances of ten men's deaths' inspite her husband's strong opposition. The people who believed in communal harmony were sad and hurt at heart. Their agitation burst out in slogans like - "Sampradaykta, Down Down, Down, Down."

Communalism will not succeed, will not succeed".¹⁰

The novelist makes Astha the symbol of strong opposition against Communalism and Communal frenzy which results into the most brutal crimes in the form of burning alive the members of Street Theatre Group. Astha's painful utterance shows her deep sorrow and anger at the tragic death of Aijaz Akhtar - "why did they have to die like this... he who had lived for others. How was there any fairness in the world when such a man be murdered so brutally. Tears came to his eyes, but tears were not an adequate tribute to Aijaz..."¹¹

After the brutal killing of Aijaz and his colleagues, a forum was prepared in the memory of Aijaz to pay tributes to him at his death anniversary. The forum was named "Sampradaykta Mukti Manch". This Manch will work against communal hatred in the country and also maintain peace and harmony among the people. The different people participated in the activities of this forum with different methods of paying tribute to Aijaz. Astha got busy in preparing paintings on canvas which referred to the communal frenzy and the tragic death of Street Theatre Group members. Hemant did not like it and asks her to leave her job which she could not do as it made her financially and socially independent, self dependent. All the peace-loving people, the supporters of Aijaz, were very frustrated for the passivity of the police as no serious action has been taken against the culprits. This manch had been constantly agitating and protesting against the brutal killing of Aijaz. There have been protests and demonstrations for and against Ramjanambhoomi and Babri Masjid. Some of them stood for secularism and against Communalism while some others were demonstrating for the demolition of Babri Masjid.

Thus the whole atmosphere of the country was very injurious as any thing fatal could happen and the demolition of Babri Masjid by some over enthusiastic Hindus and Ram Bhakts had been the result and the great violence which followed the demolition of Babri Masjid.

It shocked the peace-loving people, like Astha, on the other hand, the Sampradaykta Mukti Manch was doing what could stop the horrible consequences of communal hatred and religious frenzy. Reshna, one of the members of Street Theatre Group asked Astha to join the protest organized by the Manch in Ayodhya. Reshna also asks her to address the gathering of people against the violence on the issue of Ramjanambhoomi and Babri Masjid and also to high light how the women can play their role as peace makers and bring Communal harmony.

Astha has to undergo the bitter scolding of her mother-in-law and strong opposition of her husband at her proposal of joining the protest organized by Sampradaykta Mukti Manch in Ayodhya. But she goes as Astha was pained and hurt at the brutal killing of Aijaz and the members of the Street Theatre Group. She strongly speaks against the religious frenzy and which has resulted in to violence in the country. Her painful out cry thus expressed - "Brothers and Sisters... history can be used to build or to destroy... For years Muslims and Hindus have lived peacefully together. It is the British... they believed in Divide and Rule... It is the politicians who are creating religious insecurities to get votes. Do not let them succeed... And that experience tells us that where there is violence, there is suffering.. Gandhiji was a devout Hindu... But he knew the true meaning of religion... All men are brothers. Hatred between communities led to his death..."¹²

Thus, besides the theme of woman liberty and woman empowerment, Manju Kapur also strongly argues against communal and religious frenzy which arose out of the controversy of Ramjanambhoomi and Babri Masjid through Astha, the protagonist of the novel 'A Married Woman' Astha is an educated and well-awakened woman so she fights against the traditional norms imposed by male-oriented society on women. She is married in a rich family but still she struggles for woman liberty, financial independence and empowerment. Astha's strongly opposing communal disharmony and religious frenzy and her painful out cry against these social and religious vices has been realistically presented by Manju Kapur in her novel 'A Married Woman'.

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