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FREEDOM, RESPONSIBILITY, AND THE OTHER: SARTREAN EXISTENTIALISM IN MANJU KAPUR'S A MARRIED WOMAN

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ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur is mainly concerned with the existentialist predicament of her protagonists. They are tirelessly searching for their identity and make an earnest attempt to know the purpose of their existence in this universe. Man/woman is dejected to see nothing but chaos, confusion and disorder in the society in which he/she exists. Her protagonists start their journey with freedom of choice. This study provides a detailed commentary on Manju Kapur's a Married Woman, using existentialism, particularly Sartre's notions of freedom, responsibility, and 'the Other' as a frame of reference. Existential authors like Sartre, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Marcel, and Camus inform this study where Kapur's heroine is placed in an existential crisis cross-and self-metamorphosis. The main character of the novel bears the burden of choice within a given structure grappling to feel deserving of unconditioned existence. The paper addresses how the heroine's experiences epitomize existentialism, focusing on free will, human detachment, anxiety, deception, and ethics. The protagonist pursues a self-directed journey both emotionally and socially after fighting for her own agency in a heavily patriarchal and restrictive culture. This study illustrates how her self-imposed slavery of unbound freedom came as a burden of personal responsibility.

Keywords: Existentialism, Freedom of Choice, Bad Faith, Jean-Paul Sartre, Manju Kapur, a Married Woman

1. INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur's novels reflect a deep concern with the existential predicament faced by her protagonists. Her characters are often engaged in a restless quest to understand their identity and the meaning of their existence within a society marked by chaos, confusion, and moral disarray. Whether man or woman, the individual in her narratives is often shown struggling to find purpose and direction amidst societal expectations and personal dilemmas. The journey of Kapur's protagonists begins with the assertion of freedom—the freedom to choose, act, and redefine their lives. However, this freedom comes with the weight of responsibility and the burden of existential guilt.

In this context, existentialism becomes a relevant philosophical lens. As a twentieth-century European movement, existentialism addresses the condition of human freedom, choice, and individuality. It is both a philosophical and literary tradition, shaped by thinkers such as Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, Martin Heidegger, Gabriel Marcel, Karl Jaspers, and Franz Kafka. The term "existentialism" was first coined by Gabriel Marcel in 1943. At its core, existentialism maintains that man is a free and conscious being, fully responsible for his actions in a world without inherent meaning.

Rather than being a detached philosophical system, existentialism is a passionate engagement with life's dilemmas. It insists that individuals must create meaning for themselves through authentic choices and personal responsibility. Kapur's protagonists embody these very struggles, making her fiction a compelling exploration of existentialist themes.

In postcolonial India, where traditional roles and societal expectations still dominate many aspects of life, existentialist ideas have found a compelling echo in the works of modern Indian women writers. These writers, especially those writing in English, have often grappled with questions of identity, autonomy, and resistance within patriarchal and heteronormative frameworks. Among them, Manju Kapur has emerged as a significant literary voice, offering nuanced portrayals of women negotiating personal freedom within deeply conservative and often repressive social structures. Her novel A Married Woman (2002) explores the story of Astha, a middle-class woman who moves from conventional domesticity to a more self-aware, politically and sexually liberated self. Through Astha's journey, Kapur captures the existential tension between societal expectations and individual freedom, and more profoundly, the burden of choosing one's path in a world where such choices come at a personal cost.

Sartre's existentialism revolves around three essential concepts: freedom, responsibility, and the Other. The idea that "man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" is central to understanding Astha's transformation. In a society where women are often conditioned to find purpose and value through roles assigned by others—daughter, wife, mother—the assertion of selfhood becomes a radical, even subversive, act. Astha's growing disillusionment with her marriage, her emotional and intellectual engagement with political activism, and ultimately, her same-sex relationship with the artist Aijaz's widow, Peeplika, reflect her existential evolution. She begins to assert her freedom in choosing how to live and love, but this freedom is never without consequences. As Sartre states, "when a man commits himself to anything, fully realising that he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind…", the act of choice is not merely personal but moral and universal. Astha's choices reflect a quiet revolution against not only her personal circumstances but also against the oppressive structures of heteronormative and patriarchal order.

What makes A Married Woman an apt text for existential analysis is Kapur's subtle yet forceful portrayal of Astha's inner conflict—the anguish of freedom, the fear of the unknown, and the weight of responsibility. Sartre's claim that "to be human is already to be free" Macquarrie, J. (1972) underscores the fact that freedom is not a privilege, but a condition of human existence, whether one acknowledges it or not. Kapur presents a protagonist who is thrust into the realization of her freedom, and with it, the inevitability of responsibility. In embracing her choices, Astha simultaneously confronts "the Other"—the gaze and judgment of society, family, and even her own conscience.

This article examines A Married Woman through the lens of Sartrean existentialism, focusing on the interconnected themes of freedom, responsibility, and the role of the Other. It aims to explore how Kapur's protagonist exemplifies the existential condition and how her journey underscores the philosophical premise that freedom is both a gift and a burden—an inescapable part of being human.

2. EXISTENTIALISM, AS A PHILOSOPHICAL AND LITERARY MOVEMENT

Existentialism, as a philosophical and literary movement, emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries as a response to the disillusionment brought about by war, industrialization, and the decline of traditional religious beliefs. It posits that human existence is fundamentally characterized by freedom, choice, anxiety, and personal responsibility. Rather than being born with a predetermined essence or purpose, existentialist thinkers argue that individuals must create their own meaning in life through authentic actions. This idea radically shifts the basis of human existence from a theistic or essentialist worldview to one that emphasizes subjective experience and the individual's role in shaping their destiny.

Among the leading voices of existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre stands out as a central and revolutionary figure. Sartre's contributions, especially through his seminal works like Being and Nothingness and Existentialism and Humanism, offer a detailed philosophical framework that explores human consciousness, freedom, and moral responsibility. His assertion that "existence precedes essence" encapsulates the core of existentialist philosophy. According to Sartre, individuals are not born with a fixed nature or purpose. Instead, they define themselves through their choices, actions, and commitments. He contends that human beings are thrown into existence and are "condemned to be free"—they must choose their path and bear full responsibility for those choices, without relying on external authorities or deterministic excuses.

Existentialism emphasizes that man is a solitary being, often burdened by anxiety and despair, living in an indifferent or even meaningless world. This philosophy suggests that human existence gains meaning only when one makes a decisive and conscious choice about their life's path. It is through such decisions that an individual acquires identity, purpose, and dignity. The existential man, ideally, should align himself with a social or political cause to affirm this sense of purpose. As expressed in the idea: "Existentialism proposed that man was a lonely creature of anxiety and despair living in a meaningless world, and that he was merely existing until he made a decisive and critical choice about his own future course of action…"

A core principle of existentialism is the notion of personal freedom—each individual has the autonomy to choose what is good or bad, right or wrong. This freedom is not without consequence; it is closely tied to responsibility. Women writers, including Manju Kapur, have explored this existential dilemma, particularly through the lens of women's lives and identities. In her narratives, Kapur highlights that every individual, especially women caught in traditional roles, has the right and the burden to make choices. As Sartre notes in Existentialism and Humanism, "when a man commits himself to anything…he is not only choosing what he will be, but is thereby at the same time a legislator deciding for the whole of mankind…"

This assertion reinforces the idea that human freedom is inescapable and absolute. Macquarrie captures this when he says, "One does not first exist and then become free rather to be human is already to be free." In Sartre's words from Being and Nothingness, "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible;

the essence of human being is suspended in his freedom" (qtd. in Crowell 211). Thus, existentialism teaches that we are not victims of fate or society alone—we are the sum of our choices, and in those choices lies both our freedom and our accountability.

Sartre also introduces the concept of "bad faith" (mauvaise foi), where individuals deceive themselves to escape the anguish of freedom and responsibility. For example, a person might conform blindly to social roles or institutions to avoid confronting the freedom to choose otherwise. Sartre criticizes this inauthentic existence, advocating instead for a life lived with honesty, awareness, and commitment to personal values, even in the face of uncertainty and despair.

Furthermore, Sartre's existentialism emphasizes the idea of "the Other"—the notion that our sense of self is shaped in part through the gaze and judgment of others. This relational aspect deepens the existential dilemma, as individuals constantly negotiate their freedom while being seen, judged, and defined by others. Thus, freedom is not lived in isolation but in a complex interplay of individual will and social interaction.

In particular, women writers such as Simone de Beauvoir, a close intellectual companion of Sartre, extended his ideas into feminist philosophy. In The Second Sex, de Beauvoir elaborates on the existential condition of women who have historically been denied the right to define themselves. Following this trajectory, contemporary authors like Manju Kapur have also explored existential themes in the context of Indian women's lives. Her protagonists often grapple with identity crises, societal expectations, and the quest for self-definition, echoing Sartre's emphasis on freedom and authenticity.

3. FREEDOM OF CHOICE AND BAD FAITH IN A MARRIED WOMAN

Manju Kapur's a Married Woman delves deeply into themes of autonomy, emotional growth, and individual struggle within a rigid social framework. It portrays Astha's journey from a protected girl to a conflicted woman grappling with her identity. As the only child, Astha was raised in a conservative household where her future was imagined in domestic terms. Her mother, religious and resigned, believed marriage was the ultimate solution. Every day, in her prayer corner, she sought divine intervention: "When you are married, our responsibilities will be over." But in her devotion, she failed to take concrete steps, leaving Astha's fate to faith rather than reason.

Astha's father, however, encouraged education, believing that her life's direction depended on her own actions. In line with Sartrean existentialism, which posits that individuals define their essence through choices, Astha opted for higher education — her first significant decision. This step toward independence alarmed her parents, whose concerns were mostly about marriage. After her brief relationship with Bunty ended, Astha entered into another romantic connection, this time with Rohan. But when Rohan chose to go to Oxford, their bond dissolved. His choice affected not only his future but changed Astha's trajectory too. Her second major decision had failed her.

To recover and redefine herself, Astha made her third significant life choice: she joined an MA program. Education became a means of reclaiming agency. During her final year, a marriage proposal arrived — Hemant, a bank assistant manager. After meeting him, she agreed to the proposal, thus making the fourth important choice of her life. Though memories of Rohan lingered, she convinced herself: "Rohan had

abandoned her. Hemant had married her, he valued her, he thought her pretty." She tried to embrace the life her marriage offered, hoping for emotional satisfaction.

However, disillusionment crept in. Astha, filling the void in her domestic life, sought a sense of self beyond her roles as wife and mother. She chose to work and joined St. Anthony's School as a teacher. This decision marked another moment of personal agency. As Kapur notes, "Being a teacher she had to get up early and go to work. She had exercises to correct, and lessons to prepare." She built a new identity in the classroom, starting creative clubs and engaging with students. These efforts brought meaning to her days. Professionally, she was respected and mentally engaged.

Meanwhile, Hemant decided to quit his job to begin a business. His decision changed the dynamics of the household. Now the family's future rested on his ambitions, forcing Astha to adjust her priorities. She saw a different side of Hemant — a man absorbed in material aspirations. Though she was working and independent to some extent, her freedom became relative. Kapur subtly questions the nature of marital compromise. Astha's choices seemed hers on the surface, but they were continually shaped by external expectations — family, society, and her husband's ambitions. This reflects Sartre's concept of "bad faith," where individuals deny their freedom to conform to social roles. Astha's journey, though shaped by several important decisions, reveals the tension between personal choice and imposed destiny — a central theme of existential struggle in A Married Woman.

4. FREEDOM AND RESPONSIBILITY IN A MARRIED WOMAN

In A Married Woman, Manju Kapur presents a deeply introspective journey of a woman navigating between tradition and personal awakening. The protagonist, Astha, begins her life deeply entrenched in the roles ascribed to her by Indian middle-class patriarchy. She is the archetype of the dutiful wife, obedient daughter, and nurturing mother. Her life is governed by expectations that society deems ideal for a woman—obedience, silence, and conformity. However, Kapur subtly unravels this normative existence, placing Astha in the heart of an existential crisis. As Astha begins to experience dissatisfaction with her role and the emotional void in her marriage, she gradually confronts the absurdity of her existence as defined solely by others.

Astha's decision to pursue a relationship with Pipeelika, a fellow woman and activist, becomes a pivotal point in her existential awakening. This bold and unconventional choice shatters the socially constructed boundaries around her and demonstrates Sartre's concept of existence preceding essence—Astha defines her essence not by what society dictates she is, but by what she freely chooses to become. Sartre believed that in choosing for oneself, one also chooses for all humanity. Astha's affair, though deeply personal, is a radical assertion of her autonomy in a society where such freedom is heavily sanctioned for women.

However, this freedom is not without cost. Sartre's notion of existentialism places a strong emphasis on responsibility. Astha cannot simply make a choice and escape its consequences. Her decision leads to emotional guilt, societal rejection, and internal turmoil. She experiences a painful reckoning with the realization that true freedom is intertwined with profound responsibility. Astha must answer not just to her conscience, but to her family, to Pipeelika, and to the social norms she challenges. This is precisely what Sartre articulates in Existentialism and Humanism: when one chooses, one does so fully aware that one's actions affect not only oneself but represent a moral stance on behalf of all humanity.

5. THE OTHER AND ALIENATION

Sartre's philosophical concept of "the Other" plays a central role in Astha's existential journey. Her identity is constructed largely through the perception and judgment of others—her husband Hemant, her children, her parents, and society. This aligns with Sartre's view that the gaze of the Other reduces the individual to an object, stripping them of subjectivity. Astha is not merely a woman; she is a wife as seen by her husband, a mother as seen by her children, and a daughter as seen by her family. Her selfhood becomes secondary to how others define her. This alienation becomes the crux of her crisis—she is aware of her internal self but is perpetually distanced from it by the roles imposed upon her.

The pressure to conform renders Astha emotionally fragmented. She oscillates between her private desires and the social mask she must wear. Her relationship with Pipeelika, while liberating, also further isolates her because it places her in direct opposition to heteronormative expectations. The gaze of the Other now becomes even more oppressive; she is no longer just judged as a conventional woman, but as a transgressor.

In this light, A Married Woman becomes more than just a narrative of female emancipation—it is a study in existential alienation and the human struggle to find authentic being amidst overwhelming societal definitions. Astha's journey captures the anguish, freedom, and responsibility of choosing one's path in a world that insists on dictating it for you.

6. CONCLUSION

Manju Kapur's a Married Woman serves as a powerful literary canvas upon which the themes of existential freedom, responsibility, and the gaze of the Other are vividly explored through the protagonist Astha's psychological and emotional journey. Drawing upon Sartrean existentialism, the novel depicts how an individual must make authentic choices in a world governed by social norms, moral expectations, and rigid gender roles. Astha's decision to pursue a life and love outside the boundaries of heteronormative society is not merely an act of rebellion—it is an assertion of her existential freedom. Yet with this freedom comes the inescapable weight of responsibility, as Sartre asserts, not only for one's own life but symbolically for all of humanity. Astha's struggle to reconcile her selfhood against the objectifying gaze of "the Other" reflects the existential crisis many women face in a patriarchal and conformist world. Her awakening represents the movement from passive existence to conscious being—a journey of becoming. Through Astha, Kapur illustrates that true liberation lies not in external validation but in the courage to choose one's path, face its consequences, and embrace the anxiety of freedom. Thus, the novel affirms that in the face of alienation and despair, authenticity remains the highest human pursuit.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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