

**BONDING OR BONDAGING: CONTESTING THE QUESTIONS OF
FAMILY, MARRIAGE AND WOMEN IN RATIKA KAPUR'S *THE
PRIVATE LIFE OF MRS SHARMA*.**

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Abstract

*"Her father protects (her) in childhood,
her husband protects (her) in youth,
and her sons protects (her) in old age,
a woman is never fit for independence"*

Manusmriti Ch 9:3; Bulher's translation

The above mentioned quote is from the book Indian Women: Broken Words, Distant Dreams (2007) by Sanchari Roy Mukherjee. Bible states that woman was made from the rib of man and that makes woman inferior than man. The need of woman was felt later. So this makes women the second gender and less important. And this concept has given license to term woman as 'inferior'. In the context of Hinduism; women in the form of deities are worshipped but when it comes for real women, they are often considered as an object. The concept of woman as inferiors prevails in the society. Marriage for women is given priority in many Indian cultures. Often very young girls are married off. Since the construct of the society is as such and women are to fit in the frame constructed by the society. Women are objectified by the cultural conditioning of society. Subjectivity of woman is lost trying to fit in the frame constructed by the society. The inferiority complex and the societal frame for women is somewhat naturalized and internalize by women. They have become like a caged bird. Being in cage for so long that it has lost its ability to fly. And it is made to believe that it cannot fly.

Key words: *Women, Family, Marriage, Sexuality, Society*

Introduction:

This research paper tries to study the questions emanating from the contesting issues of family, marriage and women focusing on Ratika Kapur's *The Private Life of Mrs Sharma* (2015). The questions taken for critical analysis are fundamentally based on the complex issues related to marriage, sexuality and societal complexities encountered by women in Indian context. The paper concentrates and derives its content from discourses orienting from Indian literary, social and philosophical thoughts. The ideologically driven and culturally conditioned images and roles of

women are centre of critical analysis and examination in this paper. The paper also attempts to understand various forms of difficulties that women encounter in their married life. It will also take into account the struggles of middle class family and the impact of globalization. It also discusses the woman's quest of subjectivity and its impact on family and married life. The paper also concentrates on the ethics of society and the restriction for women which still prevails in the contemporary era. The paper will also try to highlight the oppression on women by the patriarchy. The novel chosen for study is Ratika Kapur's *The Private Life of Mrs Sharma*.

Family, Marriage and Women:

The concept of family is different in every culture. There is no homogenous concept of family. And also the role of woman varies according to the cultural differences. However, woman in most of the cultures has very important role to play. Woman is seen as source of love and care; and is often viewed as the backbone of family. Woman is often made to hold the domestic responsibility in the family. In many Indian cultures, marriage is seen as the outmost goal for woman, and her life starts only after marriage. The concept of woman as 'laxmi' of house prevails in many parts of India. Even though woman is a central figure; yet woman is not as significant as the role she plays. It is just the role that a woman plays matter instead of individuality. The quote from Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (2010) "one is not born, but rather becomes a woman" is rightly proved in the society. The societal construct or the frame for woman governs the concept of being woman. The whole construct of woman is there already and woman is made in such a way that she has to fit in the frame designed by society. Since woman are considered second gender and the inferior ones since the time immemorial, and many religions appropriate it. Women are still considered to be weakling after all the roles she played in home and society. There have been various discussions about the inferiority of woman in society and many questions have been raised but it has not been fruitful since such bias still prevails in the society. There are various steps taken for the empowerment of women by the government in the field of education and workplace and many more sectors. But the process is very slow. Woman is empowered only to the extent that society wanted to empower them. And also in the patriarchal society like India it is not so easy to consider women equal to men. It is not just male domination towards women but also the construct of society that woman too wants other woman to fit in the frame that society invented for woman. Since the construct is age old beyond the memory it is not easy to do away with it.

Women even in the contemporary age of technology and development are not free from the bondage of society. Education and empowerment for women are there in written form as it is not implemented in practice. The societal construct is naturalized by women and they are not able to free themselves from the oppression of the society. Helen Cixous “écriture feminine” talks about the language of women which differs from the language of men. Women are not able to express themselves in the language of men.

Ratika Kapur and *The Private Life of Mrs Sharma*:

Ratika Kapur in her novel *The Private Life of Mrs Sharma* (2015) takes the theme of Indian wife and the construct of marriage in society. Society considers marriage for woman as most important duty. It is often considered as religious duty of the parents to marry off their daughter. Woman is to stay under protection of her father before marriage and after her marriage her husband takes in charge of her. The traditional form of marriage which often considers woman as the property of her husband is prevalent in many societies. And woman is made to fit in the frame of good wife that society designs for woman. In the novel, Renuka Sharma the protagonist is a woman who is built up to fit the frame that define woman. It also serves as lesson for woman who falls off the rail. Her distraction from her married life becomes her way to the downward spiral. The distraction is nothing big but her desire and need as a woman. Physical intimacy is sanctioned only after marriage with husband. Sex has always been taboo in most of the culture around the globe. Physical intimacy with other man outside the marital premise is considered to be unwanted and sin. Societal construct says that physical intimacy is not appropriate desire that women should have. Women are allowed only to have physical intimacy with their husband. The concept of “sati” and “savitri”; loyal wives who considered their husbands above all is still prevalent in the society. The concept of pure woman who can take ordeal for her chastity is also one of the trends that society follows even in the twenty first century.

Renuka Sharma is a married woman who has fifteen years old son and lives with her in laws. With her husband abroad she does her duty like every other wife. She is a loving mother and dutiful daughter-in-law. She takes care of her house and her child. With her husband away her in-laws lives with her. The concept of good daughter-in-law comes in to play. Though she works in doctor’s clinic yet she also fulfills all her domestic duty. Woman is more associated with her duty and devotion towards her family and in-laws. The distinction of a woman is done according to duty she fulfills. The concept of good and bad woman is based on her availability to her in-laws

and her husband. Her subjectivity does not matter as long as she does her work as demanded by her husband and in-laws. The concept which was prevalent in the ancient times and the oppression of women still prevails in many societies. She is to fulfill all the required criteria that are defined in the age old text which frames the good definition of woman. *Kamasutra of Vatsyayana* (2009) translated by Sir Richard F. Burton in the chapter “On Marriage” states that:

She should be born of a highly respectable family, possessed of wealth, well connected and with many relations and friends. She should also be beautiful, of a good disposition, with lucky marks on her body, and with hair, nails, teeth, ears, eyes, and breasts, neither more nor less than they ought to be, ... but at all events, Ghotakamukha, a girl who has been already joined with others (that is no longer a maiden) should never be loved, for it would be reproachful to do such a thing. (135)

Even in the contemporary age, it is always about man and man’s desire that are given more preferences. Women are often considered to be asexual or the passive object without desires. Renuka being a good and loyal wife finds no fault in her husband. She thinks that her husband is very good man as every wife thinks about her own husband as a perfect human being. The concept of husband as god is set in her mind so she sees no evil in her husband. The way she is made to think about her husband as a god and the one whom she is relied upon makes her sum up all his cons and ignore it. Renuka fits as the perfect women on the frame that society has designed for her. She is good daughter-in-law and very loving mother. She is twenty first century woman who works in the doctor’s clinic and is very hard working woman. With a teenage kid at home and her in laws she manages to do all her duty. She does not blame anyone but the situation.

Poverty is a type of punishment. And like so many other families, the poverty that my family suffers from is punishment for a crime that we did not commit. It is jail, a jail. Now when you are stuck in this jail, you have two choices. You can just keep sitting, quietly sitting and suffering inside the four walls of your cell, or you can stand up and try your best to break those walls down. Both choices bring their own difficulties, bring their own pain. (45)

Ratika Kapur’s novel brings life like character and represents every middle class married woman and her married life. Renuka Sharma is also one the woman among many women who is spending their life for the sake of other. Their own identity is lost somewhere between husband and family. When she owned a title of Mrs Sharma, she changed herself into someone new. Her old identity

as Miss Renuka is lost. She is wife, mother and daughter-in-law of someone and is bound by the responsibility and duty. Renuka does not complain about her life and the loneliness that she feels. She is always worried about her husband and her son and their future. When her son gets sick because of alcohol poisoning she does not tell anyone. She also understands that her son needs his father but there is very less she can do about it.

Renuka's physical intimacy with Vineet a man whom she met on subway and befriended is entirely different from her familial life. Renuka's relation with this man is physical only. She does not build any sort of feelings for him. It is just her physical need that she satisfies with this man. This split in woman is entirely different level. She says:

See, what did I do? I had sex with Vineet. This time it was not about my family but about my body. I decided to free my body. I decided to free my body of suffering, another type of suffering, obviously, but actually it is not that different. It is still the type of suffering that comes from the pain of need. (115)

Vineet becomes a means of fulfilling her physical need as woman while her husband is away. But society views it differently and woman who keeps extra marital affairs is considered as woman with low virtue and basically termed as "whore". Renuka moved out from the frame of society and fulfilled her bodily desire with other man in the absence of her husband. Though she loves her husband and family she still has need of her own which she fulfilled through the means which is not socially sanctioned. Yet she feels that she is still respectable woman.

Still, everything will be fine. Anybody is free to call me bold or mad or both, but nobody can point a finger at me and say that I am not still a respectable woman. And I think that Vineet is also still a respectable man. Both of us have duties to our families that we fulfill, duties to our jobs that we fulfill, and we fulfill each and every one of them without fail. (116)

Renuka gives her explanation why she did what she did and why is she still a 'respectable' woman. The step she took is not just for the pleasure but for the search of her own existence. She was just a woman who had dedicated her life to her family and husband. And her subjectivity was missing. By the step she took and the subjectivity she tried to assert she is not yet free from the construct. The panoptical gaze of society is always upon her. And she feels that she has made mistake and she explains herself. Her explanation can also be seen as her desire to come back to the fold. When she calls herself "bold" she is trying to assert herself in the society which never let woman to

become bold. So when Renuka did something which society considers as undesirable she feels guilty. And she feels like explaining herself which is seldom fruitful. Even though her relationship with Vineet is physical only and does not have emotional attachment yet she suffers when Vineet asks her to marry her. For Renuka, Vineet is a means to satisfy her desires and needs. Vineet as she considers him is just a phase in her life. As the title suggests “private life” Renuka tries to split herself into two personalities but at the end she is not able to keep doing. Her life as wife, mother and daughter-in-law gets mingled with the woman who tries to assert her individuality. Being married and being mother she is supposed to fall back into the fold of her family. Her physical intimacy with other man does not change much for her as she is still loving mother and dutiful daughter-in-law who take care of her son and her husband’s family. She considers herself to be the same woman she was before. but the twist of fate, Vineet is killed by her when he intrudes and forces her to elope.

Renuka steps out of the frame and she gets herself into the problem. Her bodily desire leads herself to the place where she has never thought of. She crossed the limit set by the society and got herself into problem. The concept of Sita crossing the line and getting kidnapped comes into the story. The inside of the line is the limitation of for woman and when she crosses it there is nothing but her damnation. Same way when Renuka crosses the threshold and tries to mingle outside, she is damned. Ratika Kapur has very carefully wielded the story of middle class woman and the oppression of woman by the society. The limitation of women and the societal fold where she eventually has to come back to is dealt in the novel. Renuka tries to assert her individualism and her identity but she is doomed at the end. Her life which she tried to keep private and hidden eventually came out in the light.

The continuous assertion of Renuka as ‘respectable woman’ even after her intimate relationship with other man is the outcome the society which always gazes on woman. It is often considered that a good woman does not have any physical desire. She is supposed to abstain from such desire and devote herself to her family and her husband. Though there are various changes in society but when it comes for the chastity of woman than it is always the subject of debate. Woman is often expected to remain virgin till her marriage. The concept of virginity as treasure still prevails in many societies. Sexuality for woman is something that is not discuss in public. When a woman gets married she is owned by her husband. There is not much change except the

ownership of woman. Before marriage her parents own her and after marriage the ownership goes to her husband and her in-laws.

The constant struggle for the women empowerment for centuries and the various steps taken for the empowerment of women and still there are millions of women who are oppressed in millions of different ways. Even in twenty first century women are not free from the oppressive patriarchal norms and rule. Though women are considered to be important in society yet there are various limitations in being women. And the moral police and the ethics constantly build a hindrance for women.

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