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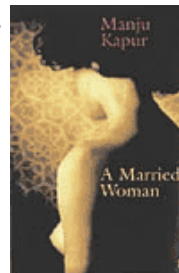
BOOK REVIEW

A tale of two women

A Married Woman, by Manju Kapur

Reviewed by Shailaja Neelakantan

Manju Kapur's second novel, *A Married Woman*, is set in the time leading up to the destruction of the Babri Masjid in India in 1992. It deals with the crisis of a middle-class woman from Delhi caught in an unhappy marriage.



Aastha has had her share of schoolgirl heartaches, but once over them, she looks forward to married life with a nice, romantic dream boy. She happily agrees to an arranged marriage with an America-returned MBA (master of business administration), Hemant, who seems the complete antithesis of a traditional Indian man. When Aastha is pregnant, the couple inform her mother, who hopes the child will be a son. "But Ma, I want a daughter ... In America there is no difference between boys and girls. How can this country get anywhere if we go on treating our women this way?" says Hemant, to Aastha's (and her mother's) amazement.

Aastha does have a daughter and the family prospers until her husband inexplicably transforms into a cliché of the male chauvinist pig, in one throwaway sentence: "Somewhere along the way Hemant's attitude to Aastha changed. She told herself it was only slightly, but it oppressed her." Hemant now wants the second child to be a son. When Aastha tells Hemant that his mother has engaged a priest to perform rituals to ensure she gives birth to a son, Hemant sees nothing wrong with it. Aastha wonders aloud what would happen if she has another daughter. "Don't worry, sweetheart, then we will try again, it's perfectly all right," he says. She protests, saying she can't keep trying because it would be difficult for her to continue her teaching job if she were constantly pregnant. "Oh-ho, what is there in teaching? Hardly a serious job, you just go, talk to some children about poems and stories, organize a few clubs and come back. If you do feel it is so important, all the more reason not to mind if Mummy does some puja. Who knows, it may yield good results."

Women caught in the traditional-versus-modern bind are familiar terrain for Kapur, whose debut novel, *Difficult Daughters*, has a rebellious heroine who becomes the second wife of a man she loves, even though her family turns against her. That novel, which won the 2000 Commonwealth Writers Prize for the best first book (Eurasia), has a fluid narrative, vivid historical details and a credible protagonist. Unfortunately, Kapur's second book has a tardy narrative, no believable characters and spotty grammar.

When Hemant transforms into a bad guy, Aastha starts to feel unappreciated, condescended to, and bored. Aastha, like Gloria Steinem once said, doesn't breed well in captivity. But Aastha's angst is tiresome and problematic to the plot. Aastha was never the rebellious sort and all she wanted to do was marry a romantic,

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rich guy. Her father is more of a feminist than she is. Even more troublesome is Aastha's sudden makeover into a political animal, by virtue of her meeting a political activist, Aijaz Akhtar Khan, who alerts her to the growing religious fundamentalism in India. Aijaz and his street-theater troupe are burned alive by a fundamentalist mob and the incident makes Aastha more committed to the cause. Her transformation into a flag-waving, protest-marcher fighting sectarianism is farcical. Virmati, the heroine of *Difficult Daughters*, is a consistent character. Aastha isn't.

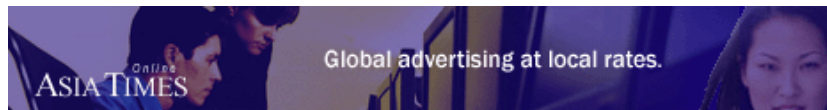
It gets worse. In a strange plot twist, Aastha and Aijaz's widow Pipeelika start having a torrid affair. Pipeelika keeps taunting Aastha for not leaving her husband and says more than once, "Why did I think it would be different with a woman?" Why indeed? In the brief description the reader gets of Pipeelika's married life, there seems nothing chauvinistic about Aijaz. Pipeelika was annoyed that Aijaz delayed telling his parents they were married (he is Muslim and she Hindu), but that is hardly gender-specific behavior. Aastha's and Pipeelika's affair ends, as does, thankfully, the book.

The destruction of the Babri Masjid as the backdrop to the novel is ineffective, because it is inconsequential. Long tracts about Hindu-Muslim relations make their appearance in the novel, but they are stilted and seem out of place. Some of the paragraphs sound as if they have been lifted straight out of a pamphlet.

A Married Woman, at its best, is a weak, proto-feminist novel, and at its worst is a pulp romance. Gloria Steinem once said, "A woman without a man is like a fish without a bicycle." Steinem got married three years ago. Aastha returns to her husband.

A Married Woman by Manju Kapur, Faber and Faber, 2002.
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