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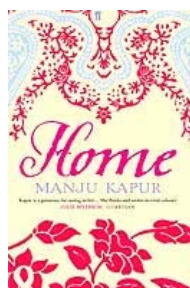
The sari-seller's daughter

Tabish Khair enjoys Manju Kapur's *Home*, a saga of Indian family life



Tabish Khair
The Guardian, Saturday 6 May 2006

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Home

by Manju Kapur

352pp, Faber, £10.99

In her third novel, Manju Kapur takes us through a brisk and strangely captivating account of three generations. Banwari Lal comes to India after partition and, with the help of his wife's jewellery, carves out a sari business in Karol Bagh, Delhi. Success comes slowly, and in the early years he is forced to marry his daughter, Sunita, to a man of dubious credentials. Even as the family gets richer, Sunita is abused and then, perhaps, murdered by her husband - leaving behind a son, Vicky, to be brought up by the Banwari Lals.

Vicky becomes a bone of contention. Banwari Lal, his grandfather, feels guilty about what happened to Sunita and hence responsible for him, but his sons and their growing families have less reason to make space for Vicky. Of the two sons, Yashpal falls in love with the beautiful Sona and employs astute emotional blackmail to get his parents to accept her. The other son, Pyare Lal, has a proper arranged marriage, and all the sons, daughters-in-law and, in due course, grandchildren pull their varying weights in the cramped family house and the family sari shop.

But the times are changing and, in the 1980s, the family is rife with tensions. With the death of the benevolent Banwari Lal, the shop is modernised and the family house changed into self-contained flats. The joint family and even the business are fragmenting; the price of both cohesion and fragmentation being paid in different ways by different characters. Of these, Nisha, Yashpal and Sona's beautiful daughter, bears the brunt of the tensions that are tearing at the family, making home a site of manipulation, repression, even sexual abuse.

Kapur's previous novels have been good at delineating the ways in which women connect to and resist other women. That is her strength in *Home*, too. However, she appears to have extended her art in two ways. Her sketches of the male characters are more convincing than in her earlier novels, and she has some memorable descriptions of spaces outside the immediately domestic, such as canteens and the Banwari Lal shop. "All day the Banwari Lal men nibbled something. Mid-morning snack, evening snack, feeling stressed snack, visitor snack. They worked long hours, six days a week. Their pleasures lay in discussing what to eat, in anticipation as the order was sent out, in the stimulation of the olfactory senses as the packets unfolded, in the camaraderie of sharing. They unwound over fresh, crisp kachoris with imli chutney ..."

Home belongs to what must now be counted as a subgenre of Indian writing in English: domestic fiction, stories of weddings and deaths, arranged marriages and love affairs, cooking and bickering in a joint or an extended family in south Asia or, with signal differences, among south Asian immigrants in the west. This can range from the magnificent breadth of Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* to the narrowly pulp dimensions of Shobha Dé's novels. It can be put to serious literary use, as in some novels by Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande or Bapsi Sidhwa. It can also become a little too dependent on certain clichés. Home, however, carries the reader along with its tender humour, its sparing but effective use of Delhi middle-class English and its subtle retelling of the clichés of north Indian family life. I read it with increasing pleasure.

• Tabish Khair's latest novel is *The Bus Stopped* (Picador). To order Home for £9.99 with free UK p&p call Guardian book service on 0870 836 0875.

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