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## Marriage à la mode

Julie Myerson is absorbed by Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*, a vivid and tender story of sexual awakening in 1970s Delhi

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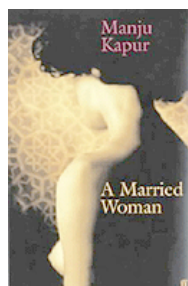
**Julie Myerson**

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### **A Married Woman**

by Manju Kapur

272pp, Faber, £10.99

"Astha was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear."

The bitter opening line of Manju Kapur's intelligent and unsettling second novel perfectly underscores the dark mood of its narrative: apparently well-behaved, but below, quietly and bitinglly furious.

Astha is a good middle-class girl growing up in late-1970s Delhi - artistic, dreamy, sheltered and obedient. Her parents are not wealthy, but they have aspirations. Her likeably progressive father wants to educate her; her mother just wants to see her settled in a safe arranged marriage. Though more sexually experienced than her parents realise - there are some chillingly comic scenes of men going as far as they can in cars - Astha remains intact and finally accepts one of her mother's approved men.

As stranger-husbands go, Hemant is not as bad as he might have been. He's tender, imaginative in bed, and he even shows a genuine if patronising interest in Astha's painting. Something like love develops between them. But as a daughter and then a son are born in quick succession, Astha begins to outgrow some of the more confining aspects of her marriage. Her job at a local primary school - initially encouraged by Hemant because it kept her busy - isn't enough. Eventually she becomes involved with a theatre troupe run by Aijaz, a local political activist.

Much to Hemant's annoyance, Astha's life takes a more volatile turn. As she goes on demonstrations, develops more social and political awareness and begins to dare to take her painting seriously, Hemant wonders where his sweet and biddable wife - who once wore see-through underwear to bed - has gone.

Meanwhile there is appalling tension and unrest in the community. When Aijaz and his troupe are, horrifically, burned alive in their van one night, the shocked and heartbroken Astha joins the protesting crowds. And when, some months later, she finally meets Aijaz's young widow, Pipee, the emotional spark between the two is almost inevitable.

Spending time with Pipee - who is as adventurous and unconventional as Astha is domestically constrained - quickly becomes the focus and delight of Astha's life. She is slow to recognise that it is love but when, slowly, tearfully, shyly, the two fall into bed, the awakening that she experiences is far more than just a sexual one. For the first time

in her life, Astha has found someone who actually wants to know (rather than own) her: "given certain circumstances, there was no aphrodisiac more powerful than talking, no seduction more effective than curiosity".

This is a magnetically alert, deeply readable novel, written with a profound intelligence and a deceptively light touch. But it took me a long time to work out why it so shakes the heart. At first sight, it is in many ways an uncompromising, almost awkward piece of work. Apart from a brief - and slightly less successful - first-person diary section near the end, Kapur writes her tale at arm's length, in a cool third-person narrative. The tone is almost cantankerously matter-of-fact. Yes, she writes well about sex - references to fluids and erections are chucked in with a directness that borders on defiance - but so many other authorial choices she makes would, you'd think, work against her.

Her time-scale, for instance. The two women do not meet until almost two-thirds of the way through the novel. And a great many of those earlier pages are spent laboriously cataloguing Astha's growing consciousness. Added to which, Kapur's enthusiasm for detail seems awesome. Many of the painstakingly described events and conversations seem at first to have no direct bearing on Astha's main emotional story. But it never for one moment matters. Every single page of this book is enthralling, convincing, absorbing. Maybe all the relentless detail is the point: here, you feel, is a real life being unravelled before you.

But Kapur's best and biggest triumph is Astha herself. You know her, you understand her, you just don't want to let her go. Every breath she takes, every word she utters, every feeling she experiences, every dusty scooter ride, every sari in her cupboard - all of them are shatteringly real. Most of all, the even-handed and touching portrait of her marriage - the husband who genuinely cares and wants to be sexy and progressive, but is in fact the uneasy result of a traditional upbringing mixed with western education - is brilliantly done.

Kapur is a generous, far-seeing writer, who knows there are no answers, no conclusions to be drawn. Maybe that's what I most admire: she thinks and writes in vivid colours, but it's the grey areas - life's queasy compromises - that she furiously yet tenderly exposes.