

[Back](#)

Finding oneself, more or less

How does a middle-class woman, raised to be selfless, explore independent selfhood? There is rich material in *A Married Woman* but it is undaringly spun, says PADMINI MONGIA.



*Jack and Jill went up the hill,
to fetch a pail of water.
Jack fell down and broke his crown,
and Jill came tumbling after.*

A GREAT deal happens in these four lines, but you know nothing really about Jack, Jill, or the pail of water. Why did Jack fall down? Was the pail to blame for Jack's broken crown? Did Jill break her crown as well? What happened to the pail? Did it also tumble down? You'll never know. And let's be honest, you don't really care.

Like the nursery rhyme, Manju Kapur's second novel, **A Married Woman**, is also heavily plotted. The novel traces the life of Astha from her young adulthood through her early middle years. In the process she marries, discovers the joys of intimacy with her husband, grows distant from him, struggles to become a painter, becomes a social activist, falls in love with a woman, and finds herself — sort of, more or less, almost. All these stages in Astha's life are interesting in and of themselves; yet the reader hardly cares for her. One regrets such rich material produces so little impact.

The packaging of the book leads you to believe that its central focus is the relationship between the two women. It isn't. The novel is both much more and much less than this

relationship. Astha's life contends with pressures much greater than those exerted by her attachment to Pipee, a woman she meets halfway through the novel and her life's journey. At the same time, Kapur refuses to allow Astha to fall in love with Pipee. Neither Kapur nor Astha is able to imagine the love between women as real, despite what the words in Kapur's novel assert. Kapur's words can claim passion, but the reader feels none and neither does her central character, Astha. How else can we understand Astha's comment: "So far as her marriage was concerned, they were both women, nothing was seriously threatened."

I'm not prescribing what Astha should or shouldn't do or what she should feel. Yet, if we readers are to feel interest in Astha, we have to be made to care for her and her concerns. We should struggle with her, agonise together with her about her choices, and weep with her once she's made them. Kapur is so distant from her characters and their passions that even when one of them is brutally burnt to death, you calmly turn the page to see what lies next.

The novel's greatest strength is its rich social context. Astha emerges as a socially committed painter against the backdrop of the Babri Masjid debacle. By the time the Masjid is torn down, the reader has learnt, through Astha's own history lessons and paintings, a great deal about the changing shape of "secular" India. Astha's gradual politicisation is matched by the converse in her husband, their different responses convincingly traced by Kapur.

However, the most interesting feature about Astha is not her paintings (which are conceptually tiresome), but her headaches. I wish her author had been able to explore them further and go the length of the difficult journey they demand. How does the middleclass woman, raised to be selfless and good, begin to explore her independent selfhood? How does this woman, when she develops an artist self, balance the conflicting claims of the artist, the wife, the social activist, and the mother? Had Kapur actually dared to take on these issues, her novel would've disturbed us. Instead, we have a great deal of rich raw material, undaringly spun.

Does Kapur take on too much in this novel? Perhaps. Or perhaps she takes on too little? I would've been perfectly happy absorbed in Astha's slow discovery of her differences from her husband. I would've been happier had Kapur really explored Astha's surprisingly easy move into a physical and emotional relationship with a woman. I would've been happier still if Kapur didn't suggest that women turn to women once they've reached the limits of their emotional and physical passions with men. Best of all, it would've been refreshing if Kapur had dared to allow Astha to fall in love with Pipee, with herself, or with her art. Only then would Kapur have done justice to her protagonist, although she might have risked — in the process — losing Astha to joy, or death, or madness, or liberating creativity.

A Married Woman, *Manju Kapur, IndiaInk.*

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