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## Exploring space in relationships



### **Manju Kapur's** new book

A Married Woman was recently released in Delhi. Published by IndiaInk, this is her second novel. The first,

Difficult Daughters, was published to critical acclaim some years ago and received a Commonwealth Award.

Manju Kapur teaches English Literature at Miranda House, Delhi University. Excerpts from an interview with **IRA PANDE**.

**In one sense this book starts where your last one had ended. The story of Virwati in**

**Difficult Daughters ended some time in the 1960s and this one starts roughly there. Is there a continuum that you are interested in tracing?**

PERHAPS it would be more appropriate to say that I am exploring the space that women occupy in domestic relationships. It is a world I know and understand.

The mother-daughter nexus is only one of the many manifestations of the Indian woman's roles. She is a wife, a mother, a daughter-in-law — in fact there are so many aspects of a woman's life that I still need to write about that. My next two books are also about women seeking their space in life.

**In both your novels, the historical background of the times has an important link with the narrative. Does this hamper you sometimes and do you feel that it interferes with the rhythm of your story?**

I have used the Babri Masjid episode in this novel partly because it is an episode that I feel very strongly about and partly because it gives the story a body that I felt it otherwise lacked. So while at one level, it became a way of articulating my concern at the growing communalisation of the country, it also provided me with a device with which to push the life of Astha, my heroine, towards an awareness of political matters, and to a world outside the confines of an unhappy marriage.



**Did you have to work hard to keep the historical details correct?**

Oh yes! I spent hours in libraries, poring over microfilms and data and also travelled to Ayodhya. My Faber editor and my Indian publisher both urged me to work hard on this aspect and I am glad that I put in that research.

**There are some very pointed references to the life and times of a particular group of political activists in your novel. Did that pose any problems?**

I have tried to remain as truthful about this as was possible. I have some personal reservations about the nature of such activism and its efficacy and I think that this comes across in the book. Like me, Astha also realises the futility of preaching to the converted: yet, like me, she too wants to register a protest. I used Astha's growing interest in political activism as a device

to make her grow and become a woman, using her unhappiness at the secret support for fundamentalism among people around her. Several women I know who are involved with political activism have stories not unlike Astha's behind them. Other than that, I do hope that my use of the group's activities does not offend anyone simply because my use of it has in that sense been strictly honorable.

**I would say that this is a particularly daring book in that it deals with issues of sexuality with an honesty that is seldom encountered. Your heroine, in her quest for a more meaningful life, develops a lesbian relationship. Now, although such a relationship has been written about by non-English language novelists, I cannot remember reading an English novel by an Indian writer that deals with a lesbian relationship. How did that happen? Was it because as a teacher of English literature, you thought this was uncharted territory? So was there a deliberate use of a lesbian relationship to make your novel a first in this sense?**

You know, although so much has been made of this lesbian relationship, it occupies only about a third of the total novel. Astha's relationship with her husband is actually the main story. As long as she remained chained to the role of a dutiful wife, mother and daughter-in-law, Astha was in danger of lapsing into such a whinging creature that I had to do something to propel her life forward. This relationship suggested itself to me as an interesting means of making Astha mature and change. An affair with a man would have been the classic cliché and so I ruled it out and tried out a same-sex affair. I don't know how successful I have been, nor is this based on any real-life relationship. It is, as I said, a writer's experiment with a plot.

**Finally, what is your next novel about?**

I am working on two at the moment and both are again being written with strong female characters. I am almost through with the first draft of one and am working on the other. **A Married Woman**

*(IndiaInk, 2002, Rs. 395)* took about four years to see print, perhaps the next two may have an earlier break.

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