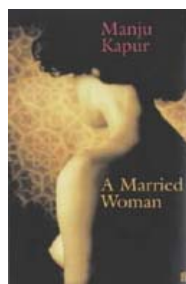


Lesbian passion forged in a land of turmoil

The riots on the streets mirror the emotional unrest of Manju Kapur's protagonist in her second novel, *A Married Woman*

Mithu C Banerji
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A Married Woman

by Manju Kapur

Faber £10.99, pp272

A major preoccupation in recent Indian women's writing has been a delineation of inner life and subtle interpersonal relationships. In a culture where individualism and protest have often remained alien ideas, and marital bliss and the woman's role at home is a central focus, it is interesting to see the emergence of not just an essential Indian sensibility but an expression of cultural displacement. Manju Kapur has joined the growing number of women writers from India on whom the image of the suffering but stoic woman eventually breaking traditional boundaries has had a significant impact.

Manju Kapur lives in Delhi, where she teaches English at a women's college at the University of Delhi. Her first novel, *Difficult Daughters*, was set against the historical background of India's partition. It is the story of a young woman who falls in love with a married man, a hitherto condemned passion in her narrow social circle. Kapur's preoccupation with the female revolt against deep-rooted family values and the institution of marriage is followed through to her second novel, *A Married Woman*.

It is the story of Astha, a young woman brought up in Delhi in a typical middle-class household. Astha succumbs to her parents finding her a husband in the traditional arranged manner. Within the bounds of marriage, she discovers a latent sexuality, which is driven by love and passion for her husband. She leads a seemingly blissful life finding her feet in the teaching profession as well as bearing two children. Yet somehow, underneath all this, lies a life of repression and anguish.

Against the backdrop of communal unrest in India with the Hindu-Muslim conflict over sacred ground in Ayodhya, Kapur develops the unrest within Astha's life. Her marriage becomes questionable after she involves herself in the outer world of rebellion and protest.

She meets the grieving widow of a Muslim protester whom she had admired and who died in the violence in Ayodhya. There follows a torrid affair between Astha and Pipeelika Khan: two women crossing social boundaries to find solace and understanding in each others arms. Kapur writes about sexual encounters without any literary inhibitions. Her descriptions are unnerving and passionate at the same time. The book ends on a note of inconclusive compromise as the two women find their own

ways, knowing they cannot have a future together.

In depicting the inner subtlety of a woman's mind, Kapur displays a mature understanding of the female psyche. Most of all, Kapur manages to blend the personal with the external. She speaks as some-one who has lived through the unrest of the communal riots, which in some way affected the lives of all Indians. They were a major historical event and Kapur has entwined them with simplicity and understanding into the lives of Astha and Pipeelika. She shows an India which is relevant both to those who stayed on in their country to face the aggression of Western influences and heightened competition, and also those who opted to view the country from Western climes.

However, occasionally Kapur's rendition of a lesbian relationship sometimes distracts the reader from the tensions of the situation and the core sensibilities of the characters. Nevertheless, *A Married Woman* is a well-balanced depiction of a country's inner development - its strengths and its failures - and the anguish of a woman's unrest, which is as complicated as the social and political upheaval going on around her.

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