



REVIEW

She Said, He Said

A provocative treatise on power: how it's traded and withheld in our society.

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A Married Woman
By Manju Kapur
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There's a sub-genre of Indian fiction in English that reads like the true confessions in the first person Savvy used to publish, which a (male) author once irreverently dubbed the genre of Women Weeping About Their Bad Marriages. Like the true confessions, this sort of writing has a certain appeal: a rawness, an honesty that many readers can identify with.

Good intentions do not a good novel make, which is probably why so many books in this genre are just bad literature in a banshee wail. Once in a while, a writer like Anita Desai, or Anjana Appachana, or Manju Kapur transforms the uniformly drab landscape of a difficult marriage with a blend of insight and acute wit. These are authors who understand (as Vikram Seth and even Amit Chaudhuri do, if you're wondering about the absence of writers with a Y chromosome) that the apparently narrow span of the wedding band can be a gateway to a variety of landscapes, as vast and

strife-ridden as a battlefield, as intimately revealing as a travel diary.

A Married Woman returns us to the domestic terrain of *Difficult Daughters*, Kapur's first novel. Though decades have passed since the time of *Difficult Daughters* and the contemporary setting of this book, Astha is a complete contrast to the rebellious, questioning protagonist of the earlier work. Unlike the stereotypically oppressed woman, Astha's education, pointing her squarely in the direction of the ultimate goal of marriage, is undercut by her father's attempts to make her think for herself. But her father, an honest official whose life is circumscribed by the size of the small, remote flat that is all he can afford, cannot prevail against the "anatomy is destiny" line that she has assimilated.

She has early, furtive, incomplete relationships, riddled with guilt; she learns to be passive (in fact, she's a natural at it); and she contracts the perfect marriage, with a man who will not only teach her about sex but build her a bigger, better house than her father. At one point, it appears that Hemant will depart from the convention of the husband as mcp and oppressor in chief, but it's only the form that has changed—instead of beating his wife, he keeps her on a financial leash, instead of bitter quarrels, politics drives the pair apart.

Writing in the time of the Babri Masjid, Kapur could have ignored the issue or faced it head on: she chooses the latter, with mixed success. Astha's gradual evolution from a humble teacher (a suitable job for a woman) to a feted painter and a fledgling activist is believable, as is the reason why she's drawn into a lesbian affair with Pipee, the widow of a murdered theatre activist. Many readers will find the characters of Aijaz and Pipee instantly identifiable: the echoes between the late Safdar Hashmi and Aijaz are so strong as to be deliberate. But the fictionalising of the Hashmis is deeply problematic: a clearer line needed to be drawn between fiction and reality, and Kapur is too seasoned a writer to be unaware of the questions her account raises. Perhaps a

graver problem is that Pipee's gender is almost irrelevant, except as a convenient plot device: her role in the relationship is masculine, classically butch. Change the "she said" to "he said" and surprise, it's a conventional man-woman relationship.

If *A Married Woman* grows on you, it has less to do with its apparent themes of marriage, politics, and more because this is a provocative treatise on power: how it's traded and withheld in our society, how it's used to purchase a house, a temple, or human affection. That's what gives this second novel, less compelling than the first but still resonant, its narrative thrust. Too bad it runs out of juice in the last lap.

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