Chapter 4
A Married Woman
The last decade of the twentieth century witnessed a sudden spurt in feminist writing in Indian English fiction. A group of Indian women novelists in their hybridism of thought and multicultural, multi-lingual and multi-religious social dimensions have contextualized the women problems in general and middle class and upper class women in particular. While the gynaecritic think that so many women in so many countries speak the same language of silence, some Indian women novelists like Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Meena Alexander and Manju Kapur have tried with sincerity and honesty to deal with the physical, psychological and emotional stress syndrome of women. A Married Woman is a work of investigative reporting on the most controversial and political issue of the demolition of Babri Masjid and a woman’s obsession with love and lesbianism. The novel is a kind of narrative on a woman’s incompatible marriage, resultant frustration and the contemporary political turmoil in its historical context. Like unusual human relationships as premarital relationship in Nayantara Sahgal’s Storm in Chandigarh, adulterous relationship in Shashi Deshpande’s Roots and Shadows, second marriage for bigamous relationship in Sahgal’s Rich Like Us and Alan Sealy’s The Trotter-Nama, Kapur’s A Married Woman deals with lesbianism. It is an honest and seductive story of love, passion and attachment. The purpose of the novelist seems to be uni-dimensional with the idea of love what can really drive a woman into such a relationship. In her interview with Nivedita Mukherjee, Kapur says,

It is an attempt to inject an element of artistic and emotional coherence. Actually a relationship with a woman does not threaten a marriage as much as a relationship with a man. (1)

The novel exposes the domestic terrain where a woman explores the space in her domestic relationship. Kapur has been very truthful in presenting the women and the challenges they face in their personal, professional, religious and socio-political levels. Taking into account the complexity of life, different histories, cultures and different structures of
values, the woman’s question, despite basic solidarity, needs to be tackled in relation to the socio-cultural situation. The impact of patriarchy of the Indian society varies and therefore stream of feminism is grounded in reality. While Kapur, the socialist, conveys the message that communal riot is a terrible disease that kills God in man and commits murder in the cathedral, Kapur, the feminist, refers to three forms of misogyny, sexism or discrimination against women, patriarchy or male supremacy at institutional and individual level, and phallocentrism or discrimination at the conceptual level. She desires to prove through her woman protagonist that-

A woman should be aware, self-controlled, strong-willed, self-reliant and rational having faith in the inner strength of womanhood. A meaningful change can be brought only from within by being free in the deeper psychic sense. (2)

She seems to bring out the implicit fallacy in Aristotle’s dictum that man is a social animal, in the present socio-cultural context of India in which people fail to realize the futility of violence, and the necessity of peaceful existence for all. She apprehends the approach of an apocalyptic social climate with the rise of the fundamentalists and fanatics in nation’s spurious polities who take religion to be ultra-patriotic. Like Difficult Daughters, A Married Woman also has a sophisticated plot. The story is of love told with honesty. Set at a time of political and religious upheaval it is narrated with sympathy and intelligence for anyone who has known life’s responsibilities. The novel is a sincere confession of a woman about her personality cult in the personal allegory of a bad marriage. Astha, the protagonist of the novel, is brought up in a middle class family of South Delhi by an enlightened father and an orthodox mother. She is sensitive and becomes a housewife, teacher, painter, and a lesbian in her status of a married woman. She fights for her self- assertions sharing her feelings:
We should struggle with her, agonize together with her about her choices, and weep with her once she’s made them. (3)

Astha’s family affairs are not good and nothing is right with her. Hemant doesn’t prove to be a suitable boy and she too fails to be a desirable daughter-in-law. Driven by a powerful physical relationship with a much younger woman, Astha ventures to lose the acquisition of her marriage and safe family. In the novel, Kapur has taken writing as a protest, a way of mapping from the point of a woman’s experience. Kapur negotiates different issues emerging out of a socio-political upheaval in the country. In a realistic way, she has described the Indian male perception of woman as a holy cow even though women are not very interested in history and those in power trying to twist and turn historical facts to serve their own purposes. As a writer of new generation in an atmosphere of the nation’s socio-political flux, Kapur has recorded the truth in her fictional narrative. With the zeal to change the Indian male perception, she describes the traumas of her female protagonists from which they suffer, and perish for their triumph. She is shocked at the growth of fundamentalism and the rise of religious zealots to uplift and elevate the country by a crusade and establish paranoia by presenting evil as a historical necessity. Kapur describes the polities of genocide as an important fabric in India’s unique experience of democracy. She is sincere and naive as a sociologist in exposing the bizarre paradox of rationality that underlines a sentiment of antipathy sheltered under political support and social approval. She resonates with her feminine assertion, hatred for violence, blood, death and ill-feeling in the name of God and religion, and her feminine assertions remains untouched by history, politics and human interpretations.

In the world of Saas Bahu social dynamics, Astha does not want to be heavily *sindoored*, bejeweled and walk around the basil plant every morning and offer a mandatory prayer. As a married woman she becomes an enduring wife and sacrificing mother. Her temperamental
incompatibility with her corporate thinking husband compels her to play the role of mother and father for her children. This denies her self fulfillment and leads to the collapse of the institution of marriage. Discontentment leads her to defiance and restlessness. Her anxiety, discomfort, loneliness and isolation do not encourage her to give voice to her unhappiness over her troubled relationship, rather it prompts her to develop the feelings of guilt, negativity and lack of self-esteem in facing the challenges of her life. Restlessness drives her to confront absolute loneliness, a sort of entrapment by the family, its commitments, and its subtle oppression. Consequently she yearns for freedom. In the midst of a family and its hard earned income, expenditure, rights, responsibilities, knowledge, discontentment, restlessness and dependency, Astha meets the fate of the poorest. She is suffocated with the growing needs of her family and remains always adjusting to them. Astha understands a married woman’s place in the family is that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death in her Indian status. Kapur’s preoccupation with the female revolt against deep-rooted family values and the institution of marriage is followed through this novel. It is a story of an educated, upper middle class, working Delhiite woman Astha who-

Was brought up properly, as befits a woman, with large supplements of fear. One slip might find her alone, vulnerable and unprotected. The infinite ways in which she could be harmed were not specified, but Astha absorbed them through her skin, and ever after was drawn to the safe and secure. (4)

Asthia is the only child of her parents who are very anxious about her education, her character, her health and her marriage. These are their burdens as they belong to upper middle class. They are very conscious of their liabilities and never forget Astha to realize it. Her father is a government employee and mother, a house wife, is very religious minded and believes in the tradition, customs and the old ways of living life and
as such expects her daughter to conform to traditions. The whole family worships daily. Whatever meal Astha’s mother cooks is first offered to the gods before the family eats. On the other hand the belief of Astha’s father is modern in his approach. He wants that his daughter should study so much that she may get a good job and match for her. Both husband and wife take her everyday for a morning walk to the India Gate which Astha complies though reluctantly. After coming back from a fresh walk they also do Pranayam together. All this shows a life of typical traditional Hindu family. They have many difficulties but one problem is about their own home. They count their pennies carefully and talk too much about this matter but find no way to tackle this problem as they have less money to buy a house or a plot. Amid so much hardships of life, the family does not miss to go for a treat on Sunday to the Bengali Market chaat shop. They enjoy whatever they like. After such an outing they come back home but still owning a house hovers in their minds day and night:

By the time Astha was sixteen, she was well trained on a diet of mushy novels and thoughts of marriage. She was prey to inchoate longings, desired almost every boy she saw, then stood long hours before the mirror marveling at her ugliness. (5)

Then Astha meets Bunty who lives in a nearby house and is now home for the holidays. He is away in Kharakvasala in the defense academies. Like a common teenager school going girl Astha often imagines of a romantic and handsome young man holding her in his strong manly embrace. In her adolescence she falls in love with Bunty:

Day and night the thought of him kept her insides churning; she was unable to eat, sleep or study. Away from him her eyes felt dry and empty. Her ears only registered the sound of his voice. Her mind refused to take seriously any thing that was not his face, his body, his feet, his hands, his clothes. . . . Hours were spent in
planning accidental meetings, how to bump into him . . . how to die at his doorstep. (6)

Asta finds unable to talk to him. She, therefore, takes help of her friend Gayatri who suggests her to see a movie with him. Bunty agrees but during the whole movie he does not pay attention to Astha at all. It irritates her. She wishes his holidays would quickly end. Nursing the illusion of love at first sight, she pens her emotions and sends to Bunty at his boarding school. After an exchange of a few letters, the affair meets its tragic end. The minute her mother comes to know of this, she goes to Bunty’s house and from there on Bunty and his family refuse to have anything to do with Astha. In this regard Binod Mishra says,

Asta discovered later that the elders of both the families had nipped their relationship in bud. Yet she felt pride in concocting stories about her love in her friend circles. Her mother’s interference in her intimacy tightens her chest with grief. (7)

Her parents’ dream to buy a house gets fulfilled as they find a land across the Jamuna. Though they are not pleased to see the surroundings, they feel satisfied at having their own plot after all. Now Astha is in college. Her mother focuses anxiously on their primary parental obligation. Every Sunday she scans “the matrimonial pages meticulously, pencil in hand circling ads.” (8) The day comes when her mother finds a suitor but Astha rejects him.

She collapsed against the bathroom door, tears falling, crying, crying for Bunty, crying for the lack of love in her barren life, crying because she did not want to see a dull stolid man in the drawing room who advertised for a wife and asked about sports. (9)

Her mother was terribly upset at this. Both had different wave lengths. Astha remained in the bathroom long after the suitor had left. Manju Kapur sarcastically writes, “The bathroom represented her future; she had
better start getting acquainted with it now.” (10) After a month another boy appears whose name is Rohan, a senior student of university. She feels attracted towards him and develops a physical relation with him. In the final year of her college she is deeply involved with Rohan. They miss classes, lie at home, haunt for isolated meeting places. It starts with kisses. He kissed her fingers, nails, palms and Astha felt something flow inside her as she started at his bent head. She had never been aware of her body’s separate life before. At this point Dr. Binod mishra remarks:

Astha’s aching heart finds greater relaxation in the luxurious ambience of Rohan whom she met in her college. Permitted by her mother to take exercises in fresh air, Astha makes it a routine to roam freely with Rohan. Under the pretext of exercise she arranges tête-a-tête with her new boy friend. Rohan’s old Vauxhall car roofs the two and Astha loses no opportunity to ask if he was interested in marrying her. Initially discomfited though, Rohan kindles and fondles with her, the impatient youngsters forget all restrictions and help each other culminate in the name of love. Astha longs for such furtive meetings and responds to numberless kisses in the car. Astha is least bothered about public. (11)

She now starts living in the world of her own making. For her every thing that is not Rohan is superficial and devoid of any joy. This phase can be said to be her most romantic phase of life she ever cherishes. As has been in the case of Bunty, Astha again falls a prey to her weak heart. Her romantic fury can be realized here:

All she wanted was for him to start so that the world could fall away and she be lost. This is love she told her self no wonder they talk much about it. (12)

But it too gets over as Rohan goes abroad for further studies. Soon Astha realizes that he did not love her and was toying with her emotions. She
departs from Rohan with a frustration and this is evident from her avoiding her mother’s questioning. She wants to seclude herself and is-

Going to lock herself in the bathroom, free from everything except the terrible feeling, because Rohan did not love her, Rohan had lied to her (13)

Eventually she enrolls in M.A. “bored and unenthusiastic.” (14) As Astha is going to be a post graduate, a good proposal for her marriage comes. He is an M.B.A., foreign returned, son of a bureaucrat and lives in the posh colony of New Delhi. There seems no problem in Astha’s marriage with Hemant as her father says, “Their sole interest is the girl, her looks, her education, her qualities” (15) and Astha is fit for all. Both meet together at Astha’s house and a few weeks later the engagement between Astha and Hemant Vadera is decided upon. After some time, according to Hindu marriage tradition both unite into one and Astha becomes Astha Vadera. They enjoy their honey moon in Kashmir, and conjugal relationship warmly, enthusiastically and happily. After coming back to Delhi Astha submerges herself in the role of daughter-in-law and wife. She leads a typical Indian married life of a woman. She does work in the kitchen, washes clothes, arranges them and shops. But she is not able to deceive herself very long. The mechanical, imbibed emotions give way to reality. It takes just a few months for her to realize the dullness lassitude in life. Soon she is fed up with it as Hemant deceives all her romantic notions and shatters her expectations. Hemant has been a man of work, a thorough professional and as such engages himself in his work. He seems to be sparing little time for her. As a result of it-

Her desire receded. She felt cold, dreary and distanced from him. She had been waiting for him all day, thinking of their being together but nothing of this was reciprocated. He was a criminal destroying her anticipation, ruining her happiness. Her subservient position struck her. She had no business kneeling, taking off his
shoes, pulling off his socks, feeling ecstatic about the smell of his feet. (16)

Thus her days pass with household chores and nights with Hemant’s love. It is noticeable that the same life routine goes dull and meaningless irrespective of its being very good. She craves for some other work beyond house hold. Her mother suggests her to take a job of teaching. She finds a job at St. Anthony School and now she plays twin role– as a housewife and a working woman. Astha’s father’s retirement is very near. She is very anxious about her parents. But Hemant being a good husband, and a good son-in-law says, “We’ll help them all we can.” (17) Astha’s parents move to a new flat and pass over a year. But one evening after dinner her father complains of a slight chest pain and dies at night. Now the responsibility of Astha’s mother falls upon the shoulders of Astha and her husband. They want to take her with their home but she refuses saying that it looks unwholesome. Astha replies with a grieving heart to her mother:

I wish you wouldn’t be so stick in the mud, Ma. Why didn’t you have a son to look after you when you were old, if you cannot take anything from your daughter? Why did you stop with me? (18)

Asta envies Hemant and his straightforward relationship with his parents. Her life as depicted by Manju Kapur reveals her torrential quest for equality, for considering her an equal being and a worthy member of society. Astha becomes very emotional for the books of her father that express her devastated and outburst anger. When she learns that her books have been donated to a library, she quarrels with Hemant and shouts at her mother: “Why did you do that? They were mine as well. I loved them.” (19) She feels shattered as she was not consulted before taking any major or minor decision and this very feeling further disillusion her when her mother sells her plot and gives the balance to Hemant to manage. We find that this type of behaviour considering women weak and
inferior further aggravates her. It is not that Astha wants to take the position as a man; she accepts her duties at home but at the same time expects to be a partner in sharing all the undertakings and managements. This aspiration makes her a new woman. Her statement testifies it when she says, “Really, Ma, don’t you think women can be responsible for their own investments?” (20) This urge to be treated as an equal being is fully imbibed in each of her remarks. It appears that the novelist, through the medium of Astha, demands the niche which is equal to man in a society. Astha sadly finds fault in her father who thought her mother inferior in managing money matters. She finds fault in her mother-in-law who brought up her son never to “regard women as being so to be consulted in their own lives.” (21) It is not so that Hemant is not very caring and loving husband. When Astha is pregnant, he himself chides his mother who hopes the child to be a son and insists her that he wants a daughter. He asserts-

In America there is no difference between boys and girls. How can this country get anywhere if we go on treating our women this way? (22)

It is no denying the fact that Hemant loves Astha and even promoted her for teaching but at the same time treats her as an Indian wife, a second being after her husband. He himself later on discriminates between a boy and a girl. When Astha is pregnant for the second time, Hemant’s mother engages a priest to perform rituals to ensure that she gives birth to a son:

Like every married woman, no doubt she has a liking for motherhood but she does not like a sex subjugation of her in-laws. She is surprised at the reaction of her family in society when they are cypheric of Anuradha’s birth but gets an overwhelming approval of motherhood after the birth of Himanshu. (23)
In addition to it Hemant’s Indian male ego is also outpoured when Astha considers her job important. He talks of teaching in derogatory terms:

What is there in teaching? Hardly a serious job, you just go, talk to some children about poems and stories, organise a few clubs and come back. (24)

Thus Astha is hurt again and again by the male dominated treatment. With new born baby two changes also occur in their life. They shift in their new house at Vasant Vihar and Hemant plans to start a business of manufacturing TVs. He sets up a factory for this in Noida and with this his business increases day by day, but somehow between Anuradha’s birth and Himanshu’s, Hemant is changed from being an all American father to being an all Indian one. Now Astha swings between her two children, her husband and her in-laws. As a married woman she becomes an enduring wife and sacrificing mother:

Her temperamental incompatibility with her corporate thinking husband compels her to play the role of mother and father for her children. (25)

This denies her self-fulfillment and leads to the collapse of the institution of marriage. When Astha asks for his help in household works, he says firmly, “It is woman’s work. . . . Hire somebody to help you or quit your job.” (26) Though she feels fulfilled as she-

Often looked at her family, husband, daughter, son. She had them all ... her in-laws frequently commented, ‘Woman is earth’, and it is true she felt bounteous, her life one of giving and receiving, surrounded by plenty . . . she had partaken of the archetypal experiences marked out for the female race. (27)

Beleaguered by her job, small children, husband and household responsibilities, Astha sometimes thinks of resigning from the school, but
between her marriage and the birth of her children, she too was changed from being a woman who only wanted love, to a woman who valued independence. Her salary means she did not have to ask Hemant for every little rupee she spent. And so the once looked down-upon job becomes dear to her. She can not leave it. But this overexertion makes her sick. Job anxieties and family stresses make her worse. In such physical and mental state she starts sketching and writing poetry but finding no refuge, she gives them up. She should do it herself or hire somebody to help her. If needed, she may quit her job. Now we see that a woman is treated in the same manner anywhere, anytime. The increasing sale of TVs. makes Hemant happy. Now he frequently goes abroad for dealing and comes back with foreign things for every member of family. On the other hand with the business of her husband, Astha’s loneliness increases. She becomes more a lady of the world. She is not a woman who wants only love; she seeks freedom for herself as well. So she does not leave her job as “there is the pleasure of interacting with minds instead of needs.” (28) In the school she feels to be doing very well and becomes quite indispensable for her principal. She is also paid for the extra work which her principal asks to do. There her salary is meant for her daily need which earlier she had to beg from her husband. Her small salary gives her economic independence and satisfaction. She hires a maid named Mala who manages work very skillfully. In the meanwhile Astha suffers from migraine which occurs repeatedly. Slowly her life changes to accommodate her headaches. Her mother takes her to a homeopath but her husband is timid at this idea. Later on she is taken to an ENT specialist. A surgery is recommended for her nose so she is admitted in the hospital. Her husband takes care of her lovingly. She comes back home after her operation but her headaches never leave her alone till the end of the novel. She seeks solace but a noisy void is there. She wants something but nothing is suggested in her bleak mind. Eventually she finds the fulfillment of her supposed and inexplicable
yearning in drawing and composing poetry. Dr. Shalini rightly says in this connection:

Astash finds an escape in her writings and her sketching. Her emotions take wings and pour into poetry but this is also futile as the bleakness of the poems was not appreciated by the husband. (29)

However, composing poetry fails to be her cup of tea and she decides to give up poetry composition. She devotes her full time to drawing. Her married life suffers pangs not only because of her self-indulgence but also because of the callous treatment given to her by her own people. She understands that a married woman’s place in the family is that of an unpaid servant or a slave and the thought of divorce brings social and economic death in her Indian status. She realizes for herself that “a willing body at night, a willing pairs of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth” (30) are the essential prerequisites of a married woman. She contemplates marriage a terrible decision as it puts her in a lot to deal with bouts of rage, pain and indecision. During this stage of mental abeyance Astha’s school principal invites the Street Theatre to hold a workshop to aware the people about their social condition and perspective especially the feud over the Babri mosque. And a turning point in Astha’s life takes place. The principal asks Astha to work with Aijaz Akhtar Khan, the head of the group. He is a history lecturer but it is his passion to do such type of work. He dramatizes social issues like unemployment, poverty, atrocities against women and communalism etc. He performs at schools, at factory gates, outside offices, at bus stops. Despite her husband’s annoyance Astha participates in this workshop and agrees to work with him. In fact-

Like the blowing of a gentle breeze on a warm humid day, Aijaz Akhtar Khan entered into the uneventful and arid life of Astha. (31)
At home her husband and children are not pleased at all. Astha motivates her kids to see the drama at the school which they comply. Aijaz asks her to do research over the history of Babri Masjid. First she refuses but later on she starts to work upon taking the help of her daughter Anuradha. Aijaz also expects Astha to write a script of the drama Babri Masjid. She works very hard and finds a lot of appreciation from Aijaz, the director of the play. During this workshop she finds that a tender feeling is developed between them. This relationship is deep-freezed as the workshop is over. They go to the library where they search and collect the matter. She shows those papers to Aijaz. He convinces her that she is doing well. Finally, the script is ready to be performed. Her painting also appeals Aijaz. He likes her drawings and encourages her to go on further.

Aijaz is like Narayan’s Raju (The Guide) who recognizes the hidden sparks which later create holocaust in Astha’s life. (32)

The day comes when the play entitled– Babri Masjid: Fact, Fiction and You is performed. Hemant also watches this. He meets Aijaz Khan and after the performance they all come back to their home.

If we take Aijaz into our consideration, one more character is also liable to be paid heed who projects herself to be emerging woman; it is Pipeelika, Aijaz’s beloved wife, Honours degree in Sociology and MA in Economics and works with an NGO named Ujjala. For the very first time Pipeelika met Aijaz at a conference and found that she had similar tastes as far as political awareness in educational institutions is concerned. Their courtship took six months and finally they decided to marry but the religion looms large between the two. As Pipeelika is a Hindu girl and her mother Mrs. Trivedi frowns upon the idea of-

Four wives, large families, instant divorce, inter-community marriages, the religion of babies from such unions. (33)
On the other hand, Aijaz also thinks that his parents would not also accept this marriage. But in spite of Mrs. Trivedi’s disapproval and deliberate ignorance of Aijaz’s parents, both Pipeelika and Aijaz get married in Tees Hazari court. The newly wed couple goes to Bangalore as Pipeelika’s mother lives there at Siksha-Kendra. Mrs. Trivedi feels glad to see her son-in-law which indicates her acceptance of a Muslim son-in-law. They spend ten days there. They move everywhere in the campus as it was associated with Pipeelika’s childhood. Later on Pipeelika’s mother comes with them to Delhi and spends two weeks with them. She returns to Bangalore after having a notion that Aijaz is a very good boy. It is almost a year after their marriage that Aijaz makes a casual announcement that they have to go to Shahjehanpur, his parents’ house as they want to see her. They go there and for the very first time, Pipeelika realizes that she has married a Muslim. Everything is strange here; the dishes, the food, their dress, and even their greeting style. But in spite of all these things Aijaz’s mother accepts her as her daughter-in-law. It is the year 1989, and bricks are being collected for the Ram Mandir and in this upheaval of the country Aijaz along with his theatre group goes to Rajpur, 50 km outside Delhi, to put up a play. As Rajpur is a sensitive area, Pipeelika forbids him to go there but Aijaz says, “One has to do what one has to do.” (34) He goes to Rajpur and what happens there is horrible even to think, to write. Aijaz and his seven members of the group are burnt to ashes. It shakes the whole country with its root. The man did not do any harm perhaps; he only wanted to do good for the people but still he met this fate. After a few days Astha reads the news of Aijaz and his troupe members’ murder while staging a play on Babri Masjid– Ram Janambhoomi controversy. She sobs rocking to and fro with rage and grief and seems visibly shaken. A peaceful procession is organized. She participates in the condolence meeting and funeral procession as a tribute to the departed ones. She also joins the massive protest rally organized by Sampradayakta Mukti Manch. She meets one of Aijaz’s group members by the name of Reshana Singh, a classical singer
from an old and established family. She wants to meet all those who had worked with Aijaz, Astha is one of them. She is told that Aijaz has left behind a widow. She wants to meet her and share her agonies. Hemant on the other hand is very much worried and puzzled to see his wife’s concern for such an activist. When she cries on Aijaz’s death, he says, “Why are you crying? What was he to you?” (35) A few days after this horrible happening, a forum is set up in the memory of the Street Theatre Group by Sampradayak Mukti Munch. It is decided that painters should donate a painting for an exhibition devoted to worker unity and secularism. Reshana asks Astha for painting to which Astha agrees. Now she makes herself dead busy in paintings, despite her severe headache. Her husband questions her about this but she listens to nothing. She continues painting and after a six months’ hard labour, the exhibition is ready to be held. Her painting costs ten thousand rupees which prove a good start for Astha. Now Astha and Reshana are firm to lead the works of Aijaz which he wanted to do. Astha balances her personal and working life but sometimes it becomes unbearable. One day when she gets late, she remains thinking all the time about her children’s home work, their meal and her husband’s annoyance. After returning home, her husband does not speak even a single word. A very miserable condition of a woman is reflected here which only a woman can understand. Astha continues her sketching. Now she does not find much time for household work. It makes her in-laws annoyed. After her first painting ‘Women Travelling’ Astha decides to paint an image of Rath Yatra and finishes it too. This time Rashana prices this painting at 80,000 rupees. Again Reshana proves right. It is sold before the end of the exhibition. Astha feels rich and powerful. She earns thirty thousand rupees by selling two paintings in a year. Hemant congratulates her. In summer vacation her sister-in-law Sangeeta comes to her maternal house with her family. Astha enjoys the holidays along with them. The summer is over. They all go back to the US. Monsoon comes but Astha’s loneliness is still secured which is her only comrade. “Her solitariness not only scourges her but
also soothes her.” (36) She wishes she could share her feelings with someone but it is none’s business to care. Hemant brings a surprise visit to Goa for Astha. To hear this she is not much pleased because Hemant wants to spend her money on this trip and she cannot mention it. They all go to Goa by air. There in a shop while purchasing Astha sees an antique silver box priced at five thousand rupees. It is so beautiful she falls in love with it. She requests her husband to buy it as a memento of Goa tour but he rejects the idea abruptly. Astha requests again, “I also earn. Can’t I buy a box if I want, even if it is a little overpriced?” (37) Both the tone and the refusal hurt her. After all she is also an earning woman and when she asserts, Hemant snorts. Astha drops the idea of buying it. The children enjoy the trip and they come home. Astha assures herself that “their money spending was decided by him, not by her.” (38) For the rest of the trip she is badly disturbed emotionally, mentally and physically. Astha feels being a woman she is sick of sacrifice. She does not want to be pushed around in the name of family. She is fed up with the idea of womanhood. In this connection Dr. Shalini says,

The convention of a patriarchal society decrees that money matters are managed best by men; that women do not need to be consulted about anything, and the men are the sole decision makers. (39)

But Astha’s education gives her wings to question such a system, to want to be treated as an equal entity by her husband. However her husband slabs down her feebly worded request vigorously:

Asth sat stunned. What kind of fool had she been to expect Hemant to understand? She had a good life, but it was because nothing was questioned. This boat cannot be rocked. She should paint that on a canvas and put it up on the wall, and stare it day and night, so that its message burnt its way through her brain into her heart. This boat cannot be rocked. (40)
Asta starts going to her school. Meanwhile her daughter Anuradha starts menstruating. Astha consoles her affectionately. One year has passed as it is the time of anniversary of the massacre of the street theatre group. It is also a protest against the Hindu Samaj Andolan’s decision to construct a temple at the site of the Babri Masjid. As it is eve of New Year, Hemant wants to celebrate it but Astha desires to go to attend the demonstration. When he gets to know of her intention, he exhorts her not to go there, but Astha in return assures him that she will be back in time. Astha goes there and comes back before getting too late. She reaches home in time. Hemant was there. Both get ready and go to celebrate New Year’s Eve with their style. Thus the old year went, New Year comes. Astha rises, makes herself a cup of tea and goes out. She thinks to do something new in this New Year. She decides to quit the job of teaching and devote her whole time in painting.

On the other hand after Aijaz’s death, Pipeelika confines herself within the four walls. She goes to her in-laws and feels the traces of Aijaz on every face and finds herself in more tolerable condition. Thus she thinks better to stay back at home. Neeraj, her colleague, always motivates her to restart her life. Her mother too wants her to join the NGO again. Her brother Ajay insists her to do Ph.D. which he can sponsor. With these thoughts, in front of the heater, eating her dinner of scrambled egg on toast, Pipeelika passes into the New Year at her own house in Vasant Vihar. The wrong of the past has to be righted. With this notion Hinduism is spreading all over India. Its supporters want to demolish Babri Masjid. The Sampradayakta Mukti Munch is doing what they could in the face of resurgent communalism as the government has been dismissed. They prepare pamphlets, organize marches with other left groups and decide to go to the banks of the Saryu to talk directly to the people of Ayodhya to count the growing rhetoric of religious fanaticism. Reshana always inspires Astha to be with the Munch and for this purpose she will have to go to Ayodhya. She decides to go to
Ayodhya for a protest against fundamentalism. Astha goes into familiar distress. She wants to lead her life at her own wish but for a married woman it would not be that easy to go to another city leaving home, children and family. But this time Astha is firm to go. Her mother-in-law disapproves her going as-

You know I never try and stop you from doing anything. Even when you neglect the children, and are busy in your paintings and meetings, I do not say anything. I am not the type to interfere . . . but it is my duty to point out that you are going too far. (41)

Listening to this, Astha was struck dumb. Her mother-in-law had never spoken so openly before. And as usual, she finds herself torn between her desire for freedom and duty towards her family. Her husband too reacts fiercely: “As my wife, you think it proper to run around, abandoning home, leaving the children to the servants?” (42) But neither of them is able to shatter Astha’s unconquerable will. Hemant leaves for Bombay and Astha has to set out for Ayodhya leaving her children with her-in-laws. Astha stays in a guest house which the Munch has booked for the members. The owner of the guest house is a lady who entertains her, gives food, talks and enlightens her with the history of Ayodhya. Reshana comes and gives the news about the Babri Masjid that Karsevaks are escorting a fresh lot of bricks into Ayodhya. A meeting is held near the bank of Saryu. One by one, the members of the group deliver their speech. Astha also delivers her speech. In that process a face seems to be staring at Astha. She is Pipeelika. She appreciates her speech. Astha thanks her. Both talk together and promise to meet again the next day. The next day they meet at their appointed place and go forward to visit Ayodhya. They go to see Ram Janmbhumi and Babri Masjid. They talk about the current issues but Astha constantly notices a serene seriousness on her face but says nothing. Both visit the disputed place and its adjacent streets and finally exchange their phone numbers and take separate rickshaws to go to their separate guest houses. Back in the
guest house, Reshana informs her that it was Aijaz’s wife whom she was talking to. Astha wishes she had been able to recognize her whom she had been longing to meet since Aijaz’s death. In this mental condition, she comes back to Delhi, her children hug her warmly. Hemant too is back from his Bombay tour. Both husband and wife talk warmly and earnestly. Hemant advises Astha not to involve again in such a rabble. Astha who is busy in unpacking his suitcase, finds a condom which disturbs her. Many questions arise in her mind and instigate her to enquire about this. Hemant clarifies that one of his dealers offered him with a girl but he rejected, and she can check that it is still unused if she has further suspicion. Astha forces herself to be content with this as it is too dangerous to venture further. After one week Pipeelika makes a phone call to Astha. Astha regrets for her behavior that she could not recognize her. Both become friends and start to prepare their future planning for the Munch. Astha shows her paintings to her and Pipeelika shows her writing. They begin to meet more often as Pipeelika’s house is nearby. They meet on weekends. A powerful emotional relation develops between them despite objections from her husband and children. Astha falls in love with Pipeelika. A strong sexual relationship is established between them within a few meetings as the latter manifests very keen interest in having a similar sex relationship. Astha’s husband catches a whiff of this new interest in his wife’s life. Both the women phone regularly. Hemant even goes to the extent of calling it “mind fucking.” (43) One day Pipeelika excites Astha to do sex with her. Pipeelika kisser her, hugs her, and comforts her whenever she needs.

Both of them fulfill female bonding in passionate and intense fantasies of love-making with their overwhelmed body and sexy mouth. (44)

Asta gloats herself in flirting by justifying lesbianism as a component of larger human urge, as pleasure is an important element in sexual activity. As Joytimaya Tripathi observes that their sexual conduct shows-
That an alternative exists and that is not less enjoyable, that sexuality does not mean pulverization of the female principle and lionization of a dominant male. It proves that sexuality is a pleasure not a power structure. (45)

Asta spends most of her time with Pipeelika. Her meetings with Pipeelika increase-

Who is as adventurous and unconventional as Astha is domestically constrained– quickly she becomes the focus and delight of Astha’s life. (46)

Besides Astha plays her role as a mother very honestly. She attends her children’s PTM and talks to their teachers about their studies and discusses their problems. Anuradha blames her for her poor marks as she needs a tutor and Astha feels her inability to pay attention in this matter. Soon Astha arranges tuition for her. After all she is a mother and she cannot escape from her responsibilities. On the other hand Astha just can not help in her love with Pipeelika. Day and night Astha thinks only about Pipeelika as she seeks comfort for her loneliness in her company in the absence of her husband. Pipeelika becomes a substitute for her husband. Astha tries to disclose her relation to her husband but dare not do it. There is a lesbian film festival. Pipeelika wants to see those movies with Astha. Astha refuses as her husband will not allow for this. Pipeelika insists Astha to take Hemant but he does not respond. Ultimately keeping the old taboos of an ideal homely wife aside and adapting a new mode of living a life of her own, Astha, without her husband’s full consent, goes to see those movies with Pipeelika. Astha is back before time. She is very much worried about her children’s home work and food. Pipeelika gets busy with her work and does not find much time to spend with Astha. Astha feels her absence every minute. Ajay, Pipeelika’s brother, goes on with his old refrain of her Ph.D. now and then. But Pipeelika does not want to leave Astha at any cost. In fact-
Any relationship, even that between a woman and another woman becomes demanding, after a length of time. (47)

She wants to live with Astha in a separate house and compels her to leave her husband and children. Astha too wants to live with her but not at the cost of abandoning her husband and children:

She wants to sail in both boats, keeping these two important parts of her life separate from each other. (48)

In this mental agony, the days pass. Hemant is busy in his factory work. Anuradha and Himanshu are busy in their studies. Astha is busy in her household work and love with Pipeelika, and Pipeelika is busy in her slum people’s problem. In spite of all these, Astha always thinks about Ayodhya issue. Pipeelika wants more intimacy, therefore she asks Astha to go with Ekta Yatra for three weeks. At first Astha is speechless. She does not understand what to say. Though she wants to go yet it is impossible to leave children, husband and family. Hemant hardly feels any ground to believe his ears when Astha tells him her wish. Hemant does his best to dissuade her from going there but she does not listen to anything. She calls her mother to look after her kids. Her mother too, frowns at her tour. She makes her realize that she is doing wrong but of no avail. When she informs her children that she is leaving them for three weeks, Anuradha seems indifferent but Himanshu, innocently says, “Go Mama, we should learn to be without you.” (49) Her condition is so pathetic. Astha is not able to understand her duties. She is so restless. She fails to locate where her fault lies and where she is wrong. These questions loom before her without any answer. She is on the verge of losing her conventional marriage with Hemant and traditional family life. She lives in a haze. Her roles of mother and wife are on litmus test. She decides to leave her home, husband and family for Pipeelika. As on the one hand Astha cherishes a new mode of living a life of her own but at the same time she also shares the disillusioned fate of a new woman. Torn between
her duty and desire she finds herself nowhere. In every family there is the same condition less or more. Husbands are busy in their business and wives are busy in their job sparing nobody to look after the children. They will lastly adapt themselves at their own will. Time to time Pipeelika enquires Astha about the fate of their relation. Lastly both manage the whole thing before leaving their houses. Astha takes her kids to a restaurant to have a dinner. The day comes when Astha leaves for Kanyakumari with her lady lover sitting side by side touching the bodies each other. Both enjoy at the beach of Kanyakumari. They are together, they are happy having some moments of peace and privacy.

But in the most intimate moments of that Astha spends with Pipeelika she cannot help worrying about her kids. (50)

Next day they have to walk many kilometers on foot for the unity of Hindu and Muslim. One by one, day by day, The Ekta Rath Yatra moves town to town and village to village. Lastly they come to Bangalore and to Delhi. They spend their trip happily, cemented by their nights and words together. After twenty one days they are in Pipeelika’s flat. Pipeelika goes to Ujjala, Astha makes bed, dusts, cleans the cob webs and cooks the lunch. In Pipeelika’s house, Astha thinks about her kids’ homework, their food and their routine. She comes back to her own house without leaving any note to Pipeelika. After a few days she suffers from jaundice. Pipeelika comes to visit her. She feels sorry for not informing her. Her children wish her to get well soon. Hemant also shows his concern warmly. Pipeelika as usual manifests Astha her actual condition in the family that she is still separated in her own house. She says that she cannot deal with her life; she wants a safe place, a warm place, and a lovely place which in her opinion Astha does not have. Astha’s mother goes back to Rishikesh and she starts her work as usual. Astha analyses her relation with Pipeelika. She feels exhausted and depressed but she is the only one who understands her feelings; other family members consider it her fragile state of health. On the other hand her husband
faces strike problem in his factory. Even after a great effort to tackle the situation of strike, factory workers do not come on work. They threaten the owner. Hemant has to tight the security of his factory. He suffers from chest pain. The doctor diagnoses hypertension and advises him to change his food habits, quit smoking, cut down drinking, exercise everyday and avoid anxiety. In fact he needs a change. Therefore he decides to visit his sister Seema in the US. Neither of Astha and Pipeelika is pleased to hear this news. However, Hemant along with Astha and his children goes to the US. They enjoy with Seema’s family. Hemant takes advantage of this trip. He wants to come closer to Astha. But she asserts her new mode of thinking saying, “You think marriage in just sex.” (51) But still interest, togetherness and respect which she lacks in her life with Hemant does not leave her. During their holidays an undesirable thing happens. The BBC announces the demolition of Babri Masjid. When Astha hears this, she wishes to go home immediately because-

Her political self, her intelligent self, functioned best there, here she felt isolated, saturated with this rather than thoughts. (52)

She thinks about Pipeelika’s reaction to this occurrence. Pipeelika goes to Ayodhya in such a horrible condition. Astha gets worried but Pipeelika says,

One can’t always be safe. It was not more dangerous for me than for all those other poor women there. Besides I wanted to go. I am thinking of a conference on how families are affected in communal riots. (53)

As Pipeelika is doing Ph.D., she had to collect the matter also. Astha sees it always with a curbed eye as Pipeelika will leave her and go to her brother Ajay to do Ph.D. Astha and Pipeelika continue to see each other, but there is now carefulness between them.
Everything Pipee said was a distortion... For Astha everything became dull, the grass looks ordinary, the sky looked bleak, the paint on her canvas colourless. (54)

Meanwhile the strike is resolved after six months but Hemant’s health, gradually becomes worse. The whole family is alarmed. As for Astha, a brief survey of the literature on heart disease establishes that permanent changes are required in their living habits. She changes her family’s way of eating. Hemant is bad tempered about having to give up his favorite foods but he has no choice. Astha spends a lot of time thinking about herself wondering,

Was she a traditional wife as Pipee had alleged? She flinched at the idea, but she was certainly doing what devoted wives did, putting a great deal of efforts into protecting their husband’s insides. (55)

The rainy season comes and Pipeelika is determined to do Ph.D. She has collected much material on her topic as she is very keen to do it. Astha is amazed at how much work Pipeelika devoted to applying for a Ph.D. Her admission becomes confirmed. She feels pangs of separation very much but cannot do anything. By the end of the year, there is plenty of material being generated for Pipeelika’s thesis.

Ayodhya is witnessing the unprecedented influx of thousands of Kar Sevaks from all over the country. Religious leaders issue press statements declaring that religion is above politics, above any kind of notion, above courts and any restraining order that passes. By 5 December the city is swelled up by 200,000 Kar Sevaks in spite of much security and assurance by U.P. Govt. To the nation’s shame Babri Masjid is demolished. Both Astha and Pipeelika fall silent as their own lives get dwarfed by what is happening around them. Now both have nothing to do. Their efforts go waste after the demolition. People nationwide and other neighboring Muslim countries witness the destruction of temples and mosques and massacre on a very large measure. Pipeelika ends up
making several trips to distressed areas. Astha organizes an exhibition for her paintings. Pipeelika goes to Shajehanpur to meet her-in-laws. Astha’s exhibition is held at the Tagore Arts centre. Astha has painted her and Pipeelika’s images. Nobody would be able to understand this as faces of both ladies are hidden. Astha has made her relationship immortal. The day comes when Pipeelika has to leave this country for ever. Astha sees her off at the Indira Gandhi International Airport. Pipeelika gives her last kiss and departs. Astha returns her home with heavy heart. She does not reply to Hemant’s questions. She says only that she is tired. Her mind, heart and body feel numb. With the departure of Pipeelika, Astha is back to her husband, kids and family. She is again lonely, devoted to her duties and obligations though she finds a soul mate in Pipeelika:

Asthā thought that if husband and wife are one person, then Pipeelika and she were even more so. She had shared parts of herself she had never shared before. She felt complete with her.

(56)

This way it is evident that Astha turns out to be a round character and projects herself in every situation in a different way influenced by different circumstances. Her newness is revealed to the forefront in her indulging in an unusual physical relationship with Pipeelika. Kapur shows Astha growing and evolving through this relationship. Yet such a relationship can continue only between two people who are firm and strong and totally resolved to live together. Astha, however, is not a strong woman. She could never be bold enough to leave her marriage and live with Pipeelika and so ultimately Pipeelika leaves for the USA and the relationship breaks up.

In her treatment of women Kapur has emphasized on the real portraiture of the married life of a woman but she becomes the first Indian novelist who highlights women’s desire for homosexuality. Various elements of feminism are clearly visible in the novel. Astha faces
biological subjugation in her relationship: with the mother in the childhood, and with husband in her married life. Her inability to buy an art piece in Goa exhibits her economic dependence in spite of being an earning member of the family. Her mother and father constantly remind her that she is vulnerable and unprotected and so is their liability. Later her husband and in-laws also make her realize that as a bride, wife and mother she is not independent and her any act is challengeable in family life. All these circumstances force her to make a lesbian relationship with Pipeelika and make her struggle for an emotional freedom from the scourge of the nation. She develops psychosomatic symptoms of stress and depression balancing between existing and living. Astha’s slow discovery of her differences with her husband, her change from a tender and hopeful bride to a battered wife and her meeting with Pipeelika Trivedi lead her to realize the other state of woman in their “familiar distress.” (57) This leads her to an immoral, rather amoral, guilt consciousness of lesbian love rationalizing her outmoded morality. Being marginalized by the affluence of her family, vicious social atmosphere, sheer hysteria of communalism and quarrel of two communities for God over a small thing, she is disillusioned in the empirical study of man’s nature and his framing of social values. There is evolution of a romantic fantasy in her lesbophobic imagination for her definition and self reliance. Astha’s marriage to a Pan-American and Pan-Indian husband in her parents’ choice is a miscalculation. Hemant’s foreign education, banking profession, and money minting addiction do not make Astha happy for a long time. Hemant’s resignation from the banking job and joining in T.V. manufacturing business, Astha’s joining as a teacher, her giving birth to Anuradha and Himanshu bring enough change in her life. Her impression proves wrong that with good job comes independence and she “seemed very pedestrian.” (58) By giving birth to a son on the one hand, she proves herself no socially inferior and enjoys the gratitude of her family members for whom “the family is complete at last” (59) and on the other she expresses commitment to her profession. Like every married woman,
no doubt, she has a liking for motherhood but she does not like the sex-subjugation of her in-laws. She is surprised at the reaction of the family and society when they remain cypheric of Anuradha’s birth but gets an overwhelming approval of motherhood after the birth of Himanshu. In her feminist assertion Astha does not appreciate superstition, sex-subjugation and pride and prejudices of having children just for their discriminated sex in the Indian perception. Being “caught up in the web of daily life” (60) she develops restlessness, anxiety and tension, “the disease of modern life,” (61) She remembers her mother’s words “woman is earth,” (62) and that, duties, responsibilities and obligations help a married woman to understand the grandeur of Hinduism ‘Vasudhaev Kutumbkum’. She does not believe that only a woman can bring purity and peace to the family. She becomes serious for man’s ignorance at woman’s suffering and asserts her rights with the knowledge that “religion a choice as much as other things.” (63) Astha differs from the male in their perception of woman as a holy cow. She contemplates marriage a terrible decision as it puts her in a lot to confront the bouts of rage, pain and indecision. The inhospitable family and hostile social atmosphere due to Babri Masjid-Ram Janamabhoomi issue have made her realize the other state of a woman’s life. Pipeelika’s, a Hindu Brahmin girl, marrying a Muslim Aijaz Akhtar Khan, a sensitive, socially committed history lecturer and theatre activist, appeals her. Astha appreciates them for the ideals of their conjugal life and their secularist vision. Like a modern feminist she appreciates Aijaz’s aesthetic and creative genius and for his working on slum life and sufferings of underage girls. She admires Pipeelika’s asserting her rights to marry against her mother’s desire and against society’s recommendation. Astha, like Virmati in Difficult Daughters, desires to have a break from dependence syndrome and proceeds on the path of full human status that poses a threat to Hemant and his male superiority. She is, not a lesser mortal for her sex and like her male counterpart, takes interest in political activism and fundamental issues of human life. Though Astha finds herself trapped in the pressures of a modern developing
society and shackles of ancient biases, she sets the parameters of living her life on her own condition. Such type of treatment of a woman is well depicted in Manju Kapur’s novel ‘Difficult Daughters’ in which Professor Harish’s first wife Ganga does all these works despite her husband’s second marriage. To some extent Virmati also wants to do claiming herself as a Harish’s complete wife but later she raises her voice to escape from this condition.

To conclude Kapur has given free rein to her imagination and brought her characters and situations alive. Almost all the female characters are educated, aspiring individuals cased within the confines of a conservative society. Their education leads them to independent thinking for which their family and society become intolerant of them. They struggle between tradition and modernity and develop the awareness of the new woman. Thus Astha and Pipeelika are her new women. Like Shashi Deshpande, Dina Mehta, Anita Desai, Bharati Mukherjee, Kapur expresses her concern for women-

With a missionary zeal and seems to suggest that a married women’s job is not complete wifing, child-bearing and housekeeping but to do something more. Her Astha appears to be an Ibsenite who raises her voice against the ages old customs and trends. (64)
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Chapter-5

Home
Manju Kapur’s ‘superb’ novel *Home* is about the intricate dance of manners that is joint family life. Their marriages augmented, their habits conserved – this is the principle upon which the family home is built. Children are brought up to protect the same values. All is well as long as they follow the track. For those who rebel, for the knives that wound, and once the damage is done, justice is swift and accurate. In her emblematic novel, the seemingly tranquil world of a joint family is discernible.

Manju Kapur’s *Home* is different from her earlier novels. But the soul of the novel is same i.e. the exploring of the life of a woman in the male dominated society. As Kapur herself says,

I do write about women. I find women’s lives fascinating, the way they have to negotiate public and private spaces. They have to do many things, they have to play so many roles, there’s a lot of stuff to say about women and it is also what I know. (1)

In an interview with Shubha Mishra, Urmila Dabir, and Vandana Pathak, she expresses the same feelings:

I am a woman. I teach in a woman’s college and I live in a joint family. I have an agenda about women’s issues, their freedom, their constraints, and how they are constricted by their personal problems, their spaces, their findings of themselves. I look at that in book after book. (2)

Being an Indian, Manju Kapur knows this very well:

In India Home is the centre of every family and importance of the home cannot be negated. But home is the site where conflicts take place. A lot of women accept these conflicts, compromise with the situation. (3)

Such is the theme of the novel *Home* in that Manju Kapur has treated her women characters naturally as Sunita Sinha has quoted: