Chapter III

A MARRIED WOMAN

"...local readings [of macro events] ... are often silent or literally unobservable, except in the smallest of passing comments.... They are part of the incessant murmur of urban political discourse and its constant undramatic cadences. But people and groups at this most local level generate those structures of feeling that over time provide the discursive field within which the explosive rumors, dramas and speeches of the riot can take hold."


The chapter examines A Married Woman by Manju Kapur to bring out the debate over Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid as used for a complex and many-sided exploration of the notion of history in the novel. The novel takes history as an important area of dialogue, and interrogates reductive and communalist views of Indian history. It traces the history of the dispute over the Babri Masjid right from the launching of the drive for a Ram Janmabhoomi temple, through the Ram Sila Poojan, the Rath Yatra and the eventual demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992. In the course of the novel, the Babri Masjid is still intact and the protagonist, Astha, even visits Ayodhya, from where a new phase of her life begins; so even on the personal front, Ayodhya, where she meets Pipeelika and forges a new relationship which challenges the traditions and rules laid down in history, becomes historic for her. The chapter analyses the unfolding of the personal history of Astha in the larger context of the changing history of India struggling with the ugly forces of communalism in the novel. It also aims to show through the novel, how a macro level event has serious effects on the ordinary individual at a micro level; and the different effects lead to different perspectives of a controversial issue like the Ram Janmabhoomi—Babri Masjid dispute. The writer brings to light the dispute over history, fusing the lives of ordinary men and women into the Ayodhya dispute leading to the demolition of the Babri Masjid. Various facets of the dispute are brought to fore; the history and politics behind the dispute are presented in subtle ways.
A Married Woman by Manju Kapur is the portrayal of a middle-class married woman caught in the trap of a traditional marriage where she feels suffocated and attempts to reinvent and assert herself as an individual. Kapur dissects the everyday of ordinary life, showing how even the ordinary can be claustrophobic. The writer explores Astha’s longing for a purpose to her life, other than being a wife and mother, against a vividly realized backdrop of Indian sectarian politics. The story is set amid the upheavals of the recent communal uprisings in India in the wake of the Ram Janmabhoomi controversy to reflect the difficulties of Astha’s own life.

Kapur seems to have reservations in discussing the issue loud and clear, and bypasses details at many points. She uses metaphors to make her point. The themes of the protagonist’s paintings reveal Kapur’s opinion and inclination. The writer’s bias is betrayed by a sarcastic tone when it comes to the presentation of the Hindu fundamentalists’ ways and means, and the ideology that guides them. Kapur refrains from using the names of politicians, and, rather sarcastically, prefers to address them as “Leader.” A lot of fictionalization is involved and there are deviations from reality, as will be discussed in this chapter.

The first one third of the book is dedicated to the depiction of Astha’s early life at her parents’ house, and then a few initial years of marriage. Kapur evokes Astha’s teenage dreams and wishes, her father’s hope of a career for his daughter and her mother’s ultimate, wheedling power over her destiny. After two unsuitable liaisons, Astha succumbs to fate and lets her parents choose a suitor for her. She agrees to a marriage with an America-returned MBA, Hemant, who seems the complete antithesis of a traditional Indian man. After a few initial years of apparent bliss, things start falling into the expected pattern of power-relationships in marriage as Hemant reveals his rootedness in Indian orthodox traditions. On the surface of it, Astha cannot ask for more – an educated husband who owns a TV manufacturing factory, a house in a posh Delhi colony, two children and a teaching job. But soon Hemant turns into the clichéd male chauvinist and Astha starts feeling unappreciated, slighted and bored. Her suffering is psychological but starts manifesting in the form of deadly headaches at the smallest excuse. The unrest in her life is mirrored in the communal strife centered on the Ayodhya dispute. The social and religio-political condition, up to the major historical event of the Babri Masjid
demolition in 1992, is entwined with simplicity and understanding into the lives of Astha and other characters in the novel.

Asta’s tryst with history begins in the year 1987 when her teaching job occasions her to meet Aijaz Akhtar Khan, who, in life as well as in his death, changes Astha’s persona forever. He is a lecturer of history and a progressive theatre activist. Aijaz assigns her the tedious task of writing a play on the history of the Babri Masjid, and she realizes, “This whole thing is very complicated” (Woman 108). This is her initiation into the process of being “the Babri Masjid expert” (Woman 113), led by Aijaz who she is sure is more knowledgeable on the issue. Interestingly, Aijaz feels “a fresh perspective” on the issue will be “invaluable”, because he wants to create awareness and, “There may be differences of interpretation, it doesn’t matter” (Woman 110). Aijaz comes across as a liberal, rational historian who wants an unbiased perspective from Astha. He is presented as the voice of secular Muslims who think beyond religious identities. Here it seems important to mention that Kapur, too, echoes the same point of view, which is made obvious through the character of Astha. But nothing is forced on the reader as the novel ends on an inconclusive note, the Babri Masjid already demolished. Thus, history is laid open to interpretations, not only by the characters in the novel, but the reader, too, is required to make his own interpretations in his reading of the book.

The term ‘history’ comes up often in the novel, with respect to the Ayodhya dispute emphasizing the writer’s concern. Astha, the newfound writer of scripts, visits “the history section” of the India International Centre for research. The problem that bothers her is, “How could she effectively present its history, long and tortured, in a manner that was simple without distorting?” (Woman 107). She realizes that the task at hand is tricky because it is “such a tangled history, and leaving one piece out makes it lopsided”. What adds to her difficulty is the knowledge that “it is used for many different political purposes in the present as well” (110). Aijaz, too, starts his workshop by explaining, “The way a man lived in society was politics and this affected everybody” and cites the example of “The Babri Masjid—Ram Janamhoomi controversy” (Woman 104). Further, he makes obvious the interplay of history, faith, and politics in the issue:

The spot where Ram was born thousands of years ago some say is the exact spot where a masjid stands today. Is this fact or faith? If it is faith, is
it sacrosanct? Are there any ways in which faith can be motivated and played upon by political forces ... (Woman 104)

In a way, Kapur shares her own problems in dealing with the controversy, while pointing at not just the multifaceted history, but also the political colouring of the dispute.

Asthा takes the challenge and comes up with a play called “Babri Masjid: Fact, Fiction and You” (Woman 115). Hemant, her husband exclaims, “It sounds like a bloody political tract.” Again, history and politics seem to mingle. The title is striking in another way, too; it implies the possibility of ‘fiction’ as in stories or his-stories, making place for subjectivity, and not just objective ‘fact’ as in history. The attempt is to make it accessible to the common man as in ‘you’. Here, it can be said that Astha represents the layman, what she finds in the history section is facts of history, and the play she writes is fiction.

Again, had anybody else written the play, his perspective of the issue would have seeped in, resulting in a different presentation. The writer, thus, implicitly brings up the question of historical accuracy and its significance which has been debated, especially with reference to the Ayodhya dispute with its far-reaching religio-political overtones.

In addition to the history of the Babri Masjid, the novel attempts to cover the political aspects of the dispute over Ram Janmabhoomi—Babri Masjid in Ayodhya. The reader along with Astha is introduced to the dispute when she starts her research for the play. Astha ponders over the difficulty of the task at hand and realizes the contemporary relevance of the dispute. She awakens to the fact that it is a much debated topic:

There seemed to be no end of fuss around this mosque. Had there been a temple on this site, claimed to be the birthplace of Lord Ram? Had Babar ordered this temple destroyed? Had he compounded the arrogance of conquest by building a mosque bearing his name using materials from the temple? Zealous historians, pursuing evidence and rationality had gone into structure, pillars, stones, inscriptions, had investigated Babar’s diary, his religious and building habits, had cited examples of British divisive policies, but nothing had been able to quiet the controversy. (Woman 107)

The pandemonium over the historicity of the claim that the mosque has replaced a temple to Ram at the precise site where he was born is revealed. Astha, aware of the complications involved, manages to sort out some material and adds in her interpretation to give it the shape of a play. “I thought of starting in 1528, you know when Mir Baqi
decrees that a mosque be built at the highest point in Ayodhya in the name of his most noble ruler emperor Babur” (Woman 110). Her choice of the beginning for the play is important: it seems to indicate there was nothing significant before that, not at least a temple. In the next scene, she jumps straight to

‘...1885. The Muslims think the Ayodhya ruler is showing favors to the Hindus. They claim that the temple at Hanuman Garhi is built on a mosque, they march towards it, the Hindus retaliate by saying the Babri Masjid is built on a temple and they march upon it—’ she paused.

‘Actually there was more but I have pared it down to the essentials, everybody thinking they have been done in, and asserting their power through temples and mosques.’ (Woman 111)

If Astha’s depiction is to be believed, the dispute over the site began only in 1885 as a tool to show down the other community – a part of the power politics between Hindus and Muslims. Here is the writer’s take on people misusing religious places and symbols to show their might, oblivious of the grave consequences of such tactics aimed at the assertion of narrow identities. She also covers the point that initially there was a dispute over Hanuman Garhi and only later it shifted to the Babri Masjid. This finds mention at another point by Pipeelika: “Hindus and Muslims fought over it too, though that is not so well publicized” (Woman 200). Another point requiring notice is Astha’s discretion in leaving out the time-period between the construction of the mosque in 1528 and 1885 to come “down to the essentials”. It can be taken to imply that there was no cause of a dispute related to the site during that time, nothing significant at least. A “very respected historian” presenting with zeal the case against Hindu fundamentalism to a gathering at Ayodhya denies the presence of any proof that Babur ordered the destruction of the temple:

Do you think Babur, founder of an empire in India, would have to come here to build this little mosque? Yes, there is an inscription inside saying he ordered it, but the close-set writing is of a much later style, carved to strengthen rumours of imperial destruction. The wooden beam below the arch is not a remnant of a temple, but put there by local masons, using local materials, unskilled in building arches. There are others like it in Jaunpur.

…for every bit of evidence used to prove there was a temple to Lord Ram here, there is a counter-argument to prove there wasn’t. (196)
This character bears resemblance to the real world historians at Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, who issued a collective research document titled “The Political Abuse of History: Babri Masjid-Rama Janmabhumi Dispute”. These historians well acclaimed to have secular leanings contended the claims made by Hindu and Muslim communal groups can find no sanction from history based on their findings of probe into the matter. In the novel too, the ‘historian’ highlights the fact that there are no easy conclusions, and one can choose whichever side of the argument with enough evidence to counter the other.

Meanwhile, Astha’s play goes on as she describes it to Aijaz:

A lot of people were killed during this time, Hindus as well as Muslims, and the whole thing became openly political. There was an enquiry committee consisting of Hindus and Muslims, presided over by the British resident. But after 1857 power equations changed, and two years later, the British declared that access to the Babri Masjid would be bifurcated. The Hindus were to enter from the east and the Muslims from the north. (Woman 111)

This account by Astha reveals that the conflict involved large-scale violence and was politically motivated. Violence is an integral part of this dispute right from the beginning but is not reason enough to avoid further bloodshed; instead, it has only paved the way for strengthened hostility. And the British administration ordering ‘bifurcated’ access is in sync with their much-defamed policy of ‘divide and rule’. Much has been said about the British giving the conflict its shape to pose Hindus against Muslims, and using their enmity to advantage. As the script of Astha’s play moves on, the post-independence scenario is presented:

This state continues till the British leave. Then in 1949, some idols appear. The Hindus claim this is a miracle, while the constable on duty states that about fifty to sixty people broke into the masjid on the night of December 22. The next day the District Magistrate declared the area disturbed and locks are put on the masjid. (Woman 111)

Kapur has not strayed from reality in the presentation of these facts. The contrasting aspects are presented with precise information. But she stops at this, not daring to delve into contemporary politics of the 80s. Astha shares her hesitation, “Well
last February the district court ordered the locks open. Rajiv Gandhi is probably involved, but I don’t know how far to go in showing the masjid as a tool in modern political equations” (Woman 111). Thus, history and politics mingle and no definite lines can be drawn. Right from the beginning to the present times, politics has fostered communalism and given the dispute its present shape. Here, Kapur also reveals the anxiety of a creative writer in dealing with an issue of such shape and dimensions. She herself, has been very careful in her attempt in this novel.

Asth a is not the only one throwing light on the historical and political facets of the issue. The ‘historian’ presents his perspective which supports the depiction by Astha:

"For years Muslims and Hindus have lived peacefully together. It is the British who suggested that an ancient temple was destroyed so that Hindu would turn against Muslim. Brothers and sisters, we have seen what the British succeeded in doing. They believed in divide and rule. They ploughed rivers of blood through our country. The same dark forces threaten us now. It is politicians who are creating religious insecurities to get votes. Do not let them succeed." (Woman 196)

The writer does not show any inhibition in blaming the present day vote-hungry politicians as much as the British in the past for instigating mutual hatred and violence between communities. Astha makes a brief reference to the vote politics involved: “The locks on the masjid were opened to appease Hindu sentiments. Then the Muslim women’s bill was introduced twenty-five days later in parliament to appease Muslim sentiments. Basically both communities were pandered to as an election ploy” (Woman 116). Here, Kapur touches upon the much talked about Shah Banu case which ignited protest from Hindus as well as Muslims during Rajiv Gandhi government.

On her way to Ayodhya, Astha ponders over the bleak state of affairs in Uttar Pradesh, “home to eighty million people, many of them leading poor, illiterate, and harsh lives, but ready to leave their fields, villages, and towns to converge upon the Babri Masjid, to protect their faith and motherland, something that would not have occurred to them before” (Woman 193). This shows that even those living lives of penury, are ready to give up whatever little they have when faith beckons—faith suddenly brought to their conscious from the recesses of memory at the call of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, referred to in the novel as “Hindu Samaj Andolan”. And it is not just faith, but motherland too,
that is presented as calling out for help. So it is religious nationalism that is invoked in the masses.

Shock welcomes Astha at Ayodhya -- “Have you come to do Ram darshan at the masjid?” – and so she readies herself to meet history face-to-face (Woman 193). When told that there are “seven-thousand” temples in Ayodhya, she wonders naively, “So many temples and they want one more”; reason dawns soon and she tells herself, “The agitation had nothing to do with numbers” (Woman 194). She is told that so many temples are needed at “Ram’s birthplace” (Woman 194). Here Astha gets to know what the common people are fed on:

‘Ram was born right on the exact spot where the Babri Masjid is. You can even see from the pillars inside that there was a temple there. Eight pillars with Hindu carvings, mango leaves, and goddesses, apsaras, kalash in black stone. Where did they come from? They built the mosque around them to mock us’...‘to remind us that they have the power to destroy our temples.’(Woman 194-95)

It is not just faith spiced up with emotional appeal, but historical evidence as well, that is used to reach out to people. With such conviction imbibed in them, the people of Ayodhya cannot go against the Hindu cause of building the Ram temple. Even Astha’s “The Testimony of the Black Pillars” (Woman 216), does not seem a match for the mighty beliefs of the people:

The un-Islamic black stone pillars within the mosque are not proof that a temple was destroyed on the Babri Masjid site. As they are not load bearing, they were probably taken from a Hindu or Jain temple, ravaged by Shah Juran Ghori and brought for decoration. Seeing their location as a sign of contempt for Hindu feelings is a political interpretation. (Woman 216)

She is unsure of herself; writing a “readable memorandum that would combine historical accuracy with emotional appeal” is a Herculean task. She is to compete the notions inspired by the Hindu fundamentalists and make place for her own: “How could she make the nation care about the fact that no destruction of a temple had been chronicled in Babur, or in any contemporary source, be it Abdul Qadir Badauni of the 16th century, or Goswami Tulsidas, in Ramcharitmanas” (Woman 215). Any amount of
evidence would not help without “a willingness to be converted to a historical point of view” (Woman 196).

Astha explores Ayodhya with Pipeelika who takes her to a place called “Kanak Bhawan”. What she sees there takes her by surprise:

They saw the room where Ram slept, where Sita played her sitar, where they played chess, where they bathed, where they dressed, the cupboard where those clothes were kept, where Sita got ready to receive Ram in the evenings, where Kekayi did Sita’s muh-dekhayi when she came a bride into this house. (Woman 201)

Asthा cannot keep her amazement to herself when offered the sight of what happened “some thousands of years, BC” but Peepilika soon clarifies, “Nothing here is archaeologically or historically accurate” (Woman 201). At this, the little boy guiding them says, “Who knows what is real or not? ... What matters is the feeling of devotion” (Woman 202). Again, the reader along with Astha is made aware, and in very clear words, that it is a fight of faiths and not facts. And that it is the opinion of a small boy in Ayodhya, is a reflection of the impact of Hindu fundamentalist ideology. History is given a backseat in Ayodhya, literally and figuratively, the historical site that has changed India’s history forever.

Asthа’s rendezvous with Ayodhya carries on and she makes her way to Babri Masjid with Pipeelika. If Astha had the faith that the other pilgrims have “she too would walk barefoot up Ramkot not minding the stones, the heat, the germs, the piss of dogs, the shit of monkeys, the spit of people. Wearing no skin of dead animals to pollute the purity of the place, no leather, no shoes, no belt, no bag, no wallet” (Woman 204). Here, the irony in Kapur’s presentation is obvious. This is clearly a take on the double standards of people. It will not be wrong to interpret that to the common people visiting the site, holiness and purity is walled in a structure symbolic of faith, outside which nothing matters.

Asthа gets to see the mosque that she has seen in a picture, earlier, and thought: “What was it about this monument that had created so much bloodshed and fighting over two centuries? It was not even remarkable, squat and three-domed, surrounded by trees” (Woman 107). She reaches the mosque atop the hill and instantly likes its location “On the highest spot in Ayodhya.” And there “a mild calm breeze blew about, a breeze that
seemed to suggest that there were many ways to worship” sets her thinking again that the
violence over it was uncalled for, and tolerance was the solution (Woman 204). Here,
Kapur emphasizes the need for plural existence suggested by “many ways to worship.”
The reader cannot ignore the intent of her words:

In a mosque built in 1528 there was now a Hindu image. Was this not
ever enough to make it a temple? Courts had declared that Hindus had the right
to worship here. But now the worship had extended beyond the deity, so
that the shape of the enclosing structure had become an obstacle to faith,
and every barefoot pilgrim a warrior. (Woman 204)

Kapur’s tone continues to be sarcastic, and the rhetorical question bears witness to her
secular or at least anti-temple stance. She seems to be suggesting that as per the court
orders, the site—with a Hindu ‘deity’ and a Muslim ‘enclosing structure’ can be used for
worship by both the communities; that there can be mutually peaceful co-existence.

Designating the ‘barefoot pilgrim’ as ‘warrior’ is pregnant with meaning. Firstly, if the
pilgrims are warriors, worship at the temple and the drive for a Ram temple at the site is a
war on a larger scale, by implication. This is a hint at the militant aspect of religion.
Secondly, the ‘barefoot’ status of the pilgrims is stressed; considering Kapur’s
inclination, it can be taken to mean, as she has suggested earlier, that the Hindu pilgrim
‘warriors’ have nothing beyond their blind faith to fight their war. There is no denying
that the writer is unsupportive of Hindu fundamentalism.

In the play that Astha writes, she personifies the Babri Masjid, to bring out the
triviality of fundamentalist motives. In her play, her son playing the role of the mosque
shares his joy on the pride of place bestowed on him. In his childish innocence he is
happy with being the central character whom “everybody wants”, not realizing that his
job is but only to cry when others hit, that he is passive—inactive actor—the receiver of
blows (Woman 112). Astha echoes this feeling looking at the mosque she sees in a
picture, “a mosque that just wants to be left alone thinking each fight will be the last”
(Woman 110). Depicting a mosque that can think and cry is an attempt at an emotional
appeal against tendencies of communal hatred that cause violence and grief. Examining
the dispute crystallized around the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid site she feels:

... controversies need places, disputes need sites, not the other way
around, and the Babri Masjid was one of them. Babri Masjid-Ram
Janamabhoomi. The amount of blood, hate, and passion for ownership these
words evoked bathed each stone with a corrosive mixture, slashing through the surface so that it was no longer an old mosque. It was a temple, a birthplace, a monument to past glory, anything but a disused nesting place for bats. Despite all this, it had endured for over four hundred years. (Woman 108)

Driven by the desire to write a play, Astha is initiated into the history of the Babri Masjid dispute in the year 1987. It takes nothing less than the brutal murder of Aijaz and his Street Theatre Group to shake Astha into the political realities of the dispute. It is from this point onwards that the story of her life mingles with that of the country struggling with the forces of communal strife. The politically charged atmosphere which provides the background to Aijaz’s murder is described:

It was the year 1989, and the bricks were being collected for the Ram Mandir—collected, worshipped, and escorted out of towns, wrapped in silk and saffron, on their way to Ayodhya. If communal disturbances occurred in the wake of these processions, that was not the fault of the bricks, but the fault of the narrow-mindedness of minority communities, who couldn’t bear to feel that their domination in this country was over. (Woman 137)

Kapur depicts the Ram Sila Poojan program of 1989, the drive by Vishwa Hindu Parishad and its allies to collect bricks for the proposed Ram temple. The writer stays away from using the proper name given to the act but the choice of time-frame and other details give the necessary cues. The reader is spared finer details of the program and the ensuing violence. That the political parties involved wash their hands off any blame for instigating communal violence, is shown with due doses of satire by the writer. Kapur raises a finger on the politicians who shrewdly deny any ‘fault of the bricks’ and instead put the blame of violence on the ‘narrow-mindedness of the minority community’. It is in such an atmosphere of uncertainty that a newspaper headlines read: “THEATRE GROUP BURNED ALIVE IN VAN.” The story below looks into the circumstances of the “horrendous incident,” in which ten people are charred to death. “It is surmised that rising tensions between two communities led to this action.” Surprise is expressed at the fact that “in this time of communal unrest he [Aijaz] got permission to stage a piece involving the Babri Masjid-Ram Janamabhoomi controversy.” It is added that the play dealt with
issues of “a sensitive nature” (Woman 138), and the “District Magistrate says he was deliberately misled about the contents”. The newspaper report goes on:

According to our sources, a procession containing bricks for the proposed Ram temple in Ayodhya was routed through a gully adjacent to a minority community mohalla earlier in the afternoon. Despite the presence of the police, slogans were shouted. Untoward incidents were then avoided, but that evening violence, possibly premeditated, broke out during a performance by The Street Theatre Group. Unruly elements in the crowd started heckling the actors. Other elements responded. In the confusion the members of the group were driven away in a van, ostensibly for safety.

This seems to have been a ploy. (Woman 139)

Some points in the report need attention: one, the incident occurs in a communally strained atmosphere of Ram Sila Poojan; two, the police is helpless in taking things in complete control; three, the murder is ‘possibly premeditated’. The fact that Aijaz is a Muslim cannot be ignored; that he is performing at a time and place dominated by Hindu fundamentalists indicates the possibility of the murder being ‘a ploy’. To make things worse, the theme of his play is most likely anti-communal. It is also told that the culprits of the murder are ‘still absconding’ till the time the paper is printed; it may be added that they are not brought to book till the end of the novel. This fictionalized incident is used to throw light on the ground realities of the Ayodhya dispute and its violent manifestations in society.

The violence does not end with the ghastly murder of ten people; it seeps into the psyche of the masses, creating a state of unrest and distrust. This holds true for every such act of intolerance in the society. There are long-lasting effects of violence of any form. This incident of communally motivated violence in the novel is only an example of what goes on in reality when mindless hatred is put to use by bigots. The bigger picture is harsher and the writer uses this imaginary situation which is successful in making the desired impact.

In the novel, as in reality, voices of protest are heard from some sections of the society that come together for the common cause against “crimes deliberately stoked by the forces of communalism” (Woman 140). Kapur’s secular bent is palpable, but it is not just communal forces that are blamed. Authorities are also taken to task for being biased
towards sectarian forces. People exercise their right to speak against fascist forces in democracy and demand to be heard:

Neutral voices are seen as threatening, the voice of secularism is not tolerated. Can ten men be burned alive, taken from the full view of everybody without connivance from the authorities? What has the state done so far, what have the police done so far to apprehend the criminals? Is this the message for the citizens of the country, live in fear, do not raise your voices for they will be stifled by fire, murder and violence. (Woman 140)

What drives some people to protest is not their acquaintance with the ten murdered men, but also the fear of ‘Today them, tomorrow us’. The purpose of the protest is to awaken the “anaesthetized public” to show resentment over the loss of innocent lives and draw the attention of authorities. The incident makes one wonder, “This is what the state provides, this lawlessness, this disregard for life, this brute force. This is its protection for its citizens” (Woman 141). This sense of being vulnerable brings strangers together in protest. But this is the reaction to just one of the many acts of violence motivated by communal hatred, many others pass unnoticed.

Another event which is a part of the movement for a Ram temple at Ayodhya, the Rath Yatra undertaken by BJP leader L. K. Advani in 1990 is depicted, though indirectly. The Rath Yatra is covered by Astha in one of her paintings titled “Yatra”. Kapur, again with a hint of satire in her comments, describes the event:

The journey a Leader was making across the Hindu heartland in the name of unifying the nation. Like the religious leaders of old, he drove a chariot, identical to Arjun’s in the serialized Mahabharata, familiar to millions of viewers. That the chariot was really a DCM Toyota was a necessary concession to the 10,000 kilometers to be done in thirty-six days. His journey was to start from Somnath, one of the first places to be destroyed by Muslim marauders (Mahmud of Ghazni) in 1025, and end in Ayodhya, where Lord Ram was born, the hallowed spot that needed to be reappropriated to assuage the feelings of 700 million Hindus. It was also a journey to political prominence. (Woman 157)

This description is significant in bringing history and politics together using comparisons. That the journey is made ‘in the name of unifying the nation’ is an oblique way of saying
that actually it is meant for some other purpose, which is later clarified as ‘political prominence’. That the chariot is actually a modern motor vehicle can be taken to imply that appearances can be deceptive, in this case the purpose of the journey. The reference to ‘serialized Mahabharata’ makes the actual act mock-heroic. The ‘Leader’ making the journey for the cause of his Hindu brethren is ‘identical’ to Arjun, the warrior fighting the wicked for the welfare of Pandavas. It will not be far-fetched to stretch the comparison to the extent that, strikingly, both are fighting against their own people, Muslims and Kauravas, respectively. To extend the comparison further, Arjun resorted to falsehood and cheating to win his war; what the contemporary ‘Leader’ does is anybody’s guess. However, the facts and figures given are close to the reality. Having witnessed the real picture, Astha envisages her painting, and the grim and gory picture of a nation smudged in communal dislike disguised as nationalism is unveiled through her imagination:

On one end was a temple, on the other was the Babri Masjid, on its little hill. Between the two the leader travelled, in a rath, flanked by holy men, wearing saffron, carrying trishuls, some old, some young, their beards flowing over their chests. Besides the rath on motorbikes were young men, with goggles and helmets, whose clothes she painted saffron as well, to suggest militant religion. She sketched scenes of violence, arson and stabbing that occurred in towns on the way, people fighting, people dying; she showed young men slashing their bodies, and offering a tilak of blood to the Leader; she showed the arrest of the Leader as he approached Ayodhya. (Woman 158)

Probably, Kapur finds it preposterous to include so much violence in her novel, and so the whole journey with its imposing savagery is compressed in Astha’s canvas. The leader travelling between a temple and a mosque is symbolic of the purpose of the yatra. The rest of the painting is descriptive and little details are included to present a comprehensive picture. Everyone in the procession is coloured in the same spirit of militant religiosity. The painting depicts the violence that accompanies the yatra wherever it goes. The violence in the way of the yatra takes many lives. The young men sporting ‘goggles and helmet’ are soaked in religion, offering their blood to the ‘Leader’ as a token of their devotion to the cause is an indication that the ‘Leader’ has a mass following. The arrest of the ‘Leader’ depicted in the painting brings it even closer to reality. Again, Kapur is cautious in dealing with a ‘controversial issue’ and keeps the proper identity of the ‘Leader’ anonymous.
The depiction of ‘Leader’ without a proper name, but a capital ‘L’ signifies that the name actually does not make a difference. It can be anybody, irrespective of personal identity or party affiliation, so long as the motive is the same. It can also be taken as a satire on the destination to which the ‘Leader’ is leading. The masses are readied to be led even in the further course of events, using the yatra only as a hegemonic tool. They are reassured of their redemption in supporting the cause of their faith, led by the ‘Leader’ who invokes their pride in the greatness of their religion.

Later in the novel, another ‘Ekta Yatra’ (Woman 246) is conducted by “…one Leader trying to replace another by doing his own journey” (Woman 251). Pipeelika believes “…it’s a political stunt, yatras like this create nothing but trouble” (Woman 246). Further, “She is full of this as a political ploy, the Hindu vote bank under the pseudo-secular banner of national unity, the Rath Yatra last year, the increase in communal tension, the rise in violent incidents, the number of towns under curfew” (Woman 250-51). This is again, more or less, a panorama of a leader making loud assertions of “the pride every Indian must have in his nation, the pride that has been trampled upon in the past” (Woman 257). He reiterates the unity in diversity of the country with his “cavalcade of temple, [and] houseboat” and demonstrates it:

He describes the water he is carrying with him, the water of all of India’s sacred rivers; the soil he is carrying belonging to the birthplaces of India’s noble sons. He allows them to have darshan of the vessels in which the water and the soil is kept. Amazingly they want to. They rush to touch them, to put tikka on them, to garland them. They also want to touch the leader’s feet, but this the security men do not allow. (Woman 257)

In the light of this description, the whole event looks like a farce, put together for gaining public attention for political ends.

The saga carries on with “the Hindu Samaj Andolan decision to construct a temple at the site of the Babri Masjid” towards the end of 1990, a year after “the massacre of The Street Theatre Group” (Woman 171). Again, the writer avoids using the real name of the party; though, to the reader it is obviously Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the forerunner for the movement for Ram temple at Ayodhya. Kapur describes the atmosphere that follows the call for the temple:
Waving saffron flags, Hinduism marched across the country in the following months, marched in time to film songs converted into bhajans, to leaders trying to convince the masses that the glory of an ancient land could be resurrected by their united hands. Young men, show your manhood, rescue mother India from the influence of the Muslim invaders, whose long shadow falls over us even now. The wrongs of the past have to be righted. (Woman 184)

The ‘saffron flags’ are reminiscent of the colour of militant religiosity depicted by Astha in her painting of the Rath Yatra. Amusingly, ‘bhajans’ are rendered more hummable when based on the more popular medium of ‘film songs’, and their appeal increases.

The male-female, powerful-powerless, exploiter-exploited binaries are invoked to set the commoners at the task of righting the wrongs of the past. Surely, the politicians know how to penetrate the psyche of the people, especially the youth. The portrayal of a powerless mother-India, a female figure, who needs to be rescued from aliens who keep her in captivation, is not new. Such a binary was used during the freedom struggle, though the identification of the exploiter is now with the Muslims. But the appeal to undo history shows that it is not just the ‘Muslim invaders’ of the past but the Muslims in the present who are seen as posing a challenge to the Hindu ‘manhood’.

The masses take the challenge and show their “determination to die if necessary for the cause entrusted to them,” ready with “swords” and “tridents”. Once “a date is fixed for the event” of constructing the temple “on the sacred soil of Ram’s birthplace, burdened for so many years by a mosque”, the followers of “militant Hinduism” start gathering at Ayodhya. The entry to the town is under vigilance, especially, “any leader suspected of creating trouble is carefully watched.” The locals are seen helping the leaders by providing food and shelter and “there are leaders to hide in the lanes of Ayodhya to mastermind the breaking of the cordon around the city, there are officials in the state police who feel it their duty to personally assist all those similarly inclined” (Woman 184). Kapur doesn’t leave anything to imagination. Here is a clear exposition of the intentions of politicians—“the leaders”—and the involvement of the authorities, specifically ‘officials in the state police’. With sympathies of those in power on their side, nobody is able to stop the “kar sevaks” from attacking the mosque:
Neither guns nor bullets can stop them. They prove this when in defiance of all barriers they climb the mosque, plant a saffron flag on the highest dome and claim it for their own. They are fired upon by the police, hundreds of them injured, many are killed. Videos are made of this, and are later shown around the country as an example of the threat to Hinduism. (Woman 185)

The writer’s presentation of the crises again reveals her latitude. She conveys that there was a gap between reality and its representation through ‘videos’ that covered only selected parts of the situation to present a biased version. Violence is again resorted to, this time by police to control the Hindutva brigade. The mosque is rescued in time, “but only for the time being, promise the forces for Hindu restoration in India”. The demands of the Hindutva forces now extend to other places too:

Give us three places in India that is all we want Ayodhya, Varanasi, and Mathura where the Muslim invader built mosques on our sacred sites. If necessary we will bathe these mosques in blood. Why should Hindus give up their position of dominance in the only Hindu country in the world? If it is mosques the Muslims want, let them go to the many countries where Islam is the official religion, we are not stopping them. (Woman 185)

It turns out to be a power game; in the words of the fundamentalists, all they want is ‘position of dominance’ which can be reached by showing their muscle through militant religion. Such rhetoric of religious fanaticism is not easy to suppress. The “Ramjanambhoomi Nyas pamphlet” which gives account of the “struggle” for the restoration of Ramjanambhoomi, reads,

Pseudo-secularists want the mosque declared a national monument forgetting that Ram was an Indian and Babur an invader. It is a national dishonour if a symbol of invasion is so declared:

‘Now Ask Yourself!’

Can even the most tolerant, most reasonable and peace-loving Indian run away from his pride—the reason of his being? The time has come to fight for our threatened faith.

‘Hindus unite! Act as one.
Not against anyone!
But in defence of our motherland.’

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One is tempted to ask against whom the ‘motherland’ needs ‘defence’; or is it the ‘threatened faith’ that needs to be defended? The native-colonizer binary is again used to stir the ‘pride’ of the Hindus to fight back to take revenge on their history.

Such activities of mass mobilization catch attention, and there are bound to be different reactions from various sections of the society. In the novel, the Sampradaykta Mukti Manch, an anti-communal forum, raises its voice of dissent against the rising head of sectarian forces in the country:

The Sampradaykta Mukti Manch, and the teacher and artist community were united in condemning both the BJP and the Congress in encouraging fascist forces in the country, and in failing to take quick action against the threats to the Babri Masjid. Were these threats actualized, secularism would be at grave risk, and communal hatred unleashed on a scale that would be difficult to control. To take no action was tantamount to encouraging social divisions along religious lines. Weaker sections would suffer. This was not to be tolerated. We appeal to the government to do something before it is too late. (Woman 174-75)

It is noteworthy that Kapur is putting the blame on the two leading political parties in India. There are rumours that the Congress government at the Centre gave hidden support to the BJP led movement for the temple at Ayodhya.

But, the goal of the Hindu fundamentalist forces is not yet achieved and so, another attempt is made to claim the disputed site by resorting to violence once again. Astha gets to know of this when she is holidaying with her family in America; “At home trouble was part of the atmosphere, outside it assumed more sinister proportions,” comments the writer. The news is aired on BBC, showing visuals of the Babri Masjid, around which “six thousand pilgrims” are “cleaning the ground, laying the foundation for the temple,” without a break (Woman 279). The commentator briefs, “Things are tense in this temple town,” and further,

The kar sevaks swear that this time they will rather die than stop. There have been protest marches by groups concerned with saving the Babri Masjid but so far the laying of the temple’s foundation continues at a lower spot on the hill. The Prime Minister has called Hindu holy leaders to Delhi to discuss the issue. (Woman 279)
The news being telecast on an international channel bears testimony to the wide publicity of the issue as a national calamity. When Astha returns home Pipeelika apprises her of the current situation: “For ten days total frenzy, policemen jeered at, control rooms smashed, loudspeakers blaring out prayers and bhajans—in such an atmosphere—pandemonium at the building site, and kar sewaks all over.” The scenario leads Pipeelika to believe, “They are going to build the temple in the masjid area. That kind of energy, so deliberately stoked doesn’t go away. It’s only a matter of time” (Woman 280). She is proved right at the expiry of the four-month period during which the Prime Minister promises to “solve the Babri Masjid problem”:

Thousands of kar sevaks were again mobilized for what was termed symbolic kar seva, starting 6 December. The central government sent 135 companies of its security forces to Ayodhya and Faizabad despite the protests of the U.P. government, who claimed the law and order of their state was their responsibility. (Woman 290)

The seriousness of the issue is apparent and the government is in anticipation of the disaster on the fixed date. Although at other places, Kapur has not given exact timings of the chain of events in the wake of the dispute, she could not afford to be vague about the date when India’s history changed forever, though the reader is left guessing the year. Meanwhile, “Religious leaders issue press statements declaring that religion is above politics, above nation, above courts and any restraining orders passed” (Woman 290). On the other hand, “The BJP declares that no harm will come to the masjid, the kar seva will only be symbolic.” The state government’s claims are seen licking the ground, soon, as “there it was” in the newspaper of 7 December, “waiting to be read, digested, somehow understood” (Woman 291). “A NATION’S SHAME: BABRI MASJID DEMOLISHED” read the headlines. The story follows:

Centre sacks Kalyan Singh’s government. 500,000 kar sevaks armed with pickaxes, crowbars, pipes and uprooted barbed wire barricades, attacked the disputed site yesterday. All domes collapsed under the onslaught, …50 people injured. Hundreds of kar sevaks carted away bricks, pillars, and large stones. BJP leaders urged restraint through megaphones.

Angry kar sevaks singled out photographers and foreign correspondents beating some brutally with sticks and leaving them bleeding on the road. (291)
And the Babri Masjid becomes a thing of the past, a part of history which takes a new shape here on. The reader is reminded, “History can be used to build or to destroy. We choose the lessons we wish to learn from it,” but in vain (Woman 196).

Kapur seems to have picked the news report from a newspaper verbatim; similar reports followed the demolition of the Babri Masjid on 6 December 1992. In the novel, she goes on to describe the aftermath: “Curfew in many U.P. towns. Muslim MPs seek the Prime Minister’s resignation. Muslim houses set ablaze. Kar sevaks not allowing fire engines in many places. Army alerted in six states” (Woman 291). The blame-game starts and doubts are expressed, “It must have been planned, such a thing cannot happen without careful planning” (Woman 292). Again, protests and demonstrations follow. Astha and Pipeelika join the demonstration at “the BJP office” where “throng of weeping men and women” are present (Woman 293). There is pain and resentment fuming in the gathering:

Journalists were there, TV crew, academics and activists, all shocked and numb. They shared their information in broken sentences: paramilitary forces hand in glove with the kar sevaks—the police were helping—the leaders shouting on megaphones don’t destroy the mosque—but pre-arranged that such messages should be ignored—many killed in the falling rubble—absolute pandemonium with 500,000 kar sevaks—the situation going to worsen—the government in U.P. had no political will to protect the mosque—only a matter of time before something like this happened—. (Woman 293)

The writer seems to be giving the clue that people have “information” regarding what happened—all the HOWs and WHYs, and there is no place for doubts anymore. The trick of a “pre-arranged” double-play used by the leaders is discussed. Fingers are raised at the political integrity of the U.P. government.

It is important to lay out the details of the event and its aftermath as depicted in the novel, to place it in comparison with the real incident on which Kapur has based her book. It is of common knowledge that all such things happened in reality, and now on, the writer makes no effort to maintain ambiguity earlier experienced in the reading of the novel.
In response to the rumours blaming political parties doing the rounds, politicians express their take on the disaster facing the nation. Leaders from “the Congress, from the Left parties,” and activists who witnessed the demolition, come on a common platform to share their reactions with the public:

They expressed anguish, regret, sorrow, they issued warnings, predicted consequences:

What had happened was a betrayal of trust. Millions of Muslims would now feel insecure in their homeland. The assurances of U.P. government had meant nothing, the assurances of the central government had meant nothing.

The law had been blatantly, openly flouted, what was going to prevent it from being flouted again? What was going to prevent the two disputed sites in Kashi and Mathura from going the way of the Babri Masjid? Was this a government or a passive instrument in the hands of thugs? Without delay the government should acquire all the land around the Babri Masjid.

It behoved every citizen in the land to be vigilant so that anti-communal forces did not gain ascendancy. How was it possible to demolish a masjid in broad daylight in little over four hours? And that too with home-made tools, pickaxes, crowbars, the implements of farmers and peasants. No. there was organization and planning, there was the connivance of the authorities. (Woman 295)

It is also contended that the arrest of some leaders is “all for show, like the security forces that were sent to protect the Babri Masjid, and helped in its destruction” (Woman 295). There were, in reality, similar reactions after the demolition of the Babri Masjid. It can be said that the writer’s presentation looks like a video-shoot of the post-demolition scenario, and that too, without any special effects.

In the novel, after the demolition the peace and the harmony of the nation shatter, as “Nationwide, 1,801 people were murdered in communal clashes in the next two months. 226 places in 17 states and 1190.18 lakh people were affected by curfew” (Woman 296). Countries like Pakistan, Bangladesh, the United Kingdom, and Afghanistan too, face retaliation from Muslims as temples and properties belonging to Hindus are attacked. Hemant points this out to Astha arguing that Muslims are no less in perpetuating violence. “The fact that shrines are desecrated there, doesn’t make it
acceptable here. It’s not a Muslim thing, it’s a secular thing, a human thing,” contends Astha (Woman 293).

The dispute over the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid site is constituted by interplay of history, politics, and religious identities, and society cannot stay untouched by an issue of such magnitude. Like any other controversy, it elicits different reactions from various levels of society. These reactions from groups and individuals are in turn determined by the way it affects them, and is affected in turn. There are individual differences in ways of perceiving, knowing, understanding and interpreting the issue. The portrayal of such differences is one of the main concerns of the writer in this novel.

Most characters in the novel blame it on politics—the dispute and the unrest it entails. But still there are underlying differences, chiefly, about the Hindu-Muslim dichotomy, and religious allegiance within a community. Differences arise from the positioning of an individual in the religious, political, economic structure of society, and family structure and gender on a more personal level; these affiliations and identities determine the way an individual is affected by such crises. One forms perceptions and interpretations based on these interactions with life and circumstances and so, the history of the times comes to impinge on personal history of the characters.

Barring Aijaz, all the important characters in the novel are Hindu, but there are striking differences in the way each of them responds to their religion. These differences start surfacing after the character of Aijaz, a Muslim, is introduced in the novel, which serves as a turning point, particularly for Astha’s life, which she is used to living “with large supplements of fear,” since childhood (Woman 1). She is presented as suffocated in her married life. The tension of an increasingly passionless marital life and the monotony of playing the role of a mother simmer in her, surfacing from time-to-time as paralyzing migraines. But this is only until Aijaz comes as a whiff of fresh air in her life devoid of love and longing. The hitherto submissive and docile married woman, Astha, suddenly comes out of her passivity and starts asserting herself as an individual with feelings and opinions of her own. Aijaz initiates her into the history of the Babri Masjid, but inseparable as it is from politics, he arouses Astha to the political realities of her times. Astha, who finds religious beliefs incompatible with violence, realizes that religion is exploited by “Power-seekers on both sides...quite blatantly” (Woman 108). She expresses her dismay at the mixing of religion and politics of self-interest:

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Ram would have hated what was going on in his name—a man who sacrificed everything to keep his father's honor, who left his home, his palace, his kingdom in order to make sure his brother inherited, he would be the last to appreciate the fuss over his birthplace. (Woman 108)

This boldness on the social front influences her personal life and alienates her further from her husband, who holds views different from hers. For him, there is nothing in "an abandoned mosque" and the problem lies in the fact that "The government is too bloody soft on these Muslims." His approval of the cause of Hindu fundamentalism is obvious: "We are preserving his [Ram's] honor as it needs to be done now"; and Astha wonders "Was he agreeing that people should be killed in the name of god?" (Woman 108). Astha feels "revulsion" towards Hemant at his reaction to the news of Aijaz's death: "He was a Muslim, he should have kept to the issues within his own religion" (Woman 139). For Hemant, Aijaz's religious identity is reason enough to "have no feelings" towards the ten men murdered viciously (Woman 140). While, for Astha, Aijaz's being a Muslim never seems to make a difference and she never pays any attention to this aspect unless pointed at by her husband, repeatedly.

Hemant has no qualms about the violence involved in the cause of a temple at Ayodhya. When told in America, that there is trouble back home, "Hemant relaxed. Oh, the temple. 'These politicians keep stirring things up,' he replied, uninterested" (Woman 279). Whatever interest he takes, leads him to take an anti-Muslim stand. Even after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Astha discusses her concern for Muslims with him:

...the police are actually firing on the innocent, making false arrests, and refusing to register complaints. How can Muslims have any security or protection when the forces of law are among those who beat and kill? Go back to Pakistan they keep taunting, when were they ever in Pakistan, that they should go back? And nothing is done, nothing. What kind of country can these people feel part of? To be a Muslim here is a curse. (Woman 296-97)

Asta has been witness to similar feelings of prejudice against Muslims expressed by the widow at Ayodhya. She says that the Muslims of India "have their allegiance somewhere else," which she supports by her understanding that in cricket "they want Pakistan to win," because "this is not their soil" (Woman 195). Hemant, of the comparable mindset
on this issue, is unflinching in his dislike for Muslims, advocating the militancy resorted to by Hindus to demolish the mosque and even afterwards—“After the Babri Masjid fell they were the ones who first took to stoning temples in Bombay. What did they expect, that this is the time of the Muslim rulers, where Hindus will sit down and not retaliate?” (Woman 297). It is of importance to note here that Hemant does not refer to the Babri Masjid as demolished, denying any outside agency, but ‘fell’, as if naturally. This gives him the advantage of blaming Muslims as the initiators of violence and placing Hindus at the receiving end, if only to ‘retaliate’. Clearly, Astha and Hemant stand poles apart on the issue of communalism.

The common prejudices against Muslims come to a head in the Pipeelika-Aijaz marriage too, bringing out differences of perception between mother and daughter. Pipeelika’s mother does not want her to marry a Muslim because she believes “It’s part of their religion,” to “… marry four times,” and “…everybody knows that all they have to do is say Talak, talak, talak, and the girl is out on the streets” (Woman 117). She accepts that “…he must be nice” but is not moved from her stance. Pipeelika retaliates: “he’s intelligent, sensitive, socially committed, a history lecturer, a theatre activist, but all you can see is a Muslim …” and later marries him challenging societal norms (Woman 118). Even about the Ayodhya dispute, her stance is largely secular: “It makes me sick the way Ram is being associated with Hindu-Indian-nationalism” (Woman 202).

Then there is Hemant’s mother, who for once comes up with her perspective while showing her displeasure at Astha’s going to Ayodhya for the cause:

This is all politics, you should not get involved. Besides have you thought about what you are going to protest? Lord Ram’s Janamsthan is in Ayodhya, is there any country in the world where the birthplace of their god is not honoured? Hindu tolerance does not mean you accept everything and anything. Is this the pride we have in ourselves? (Woman 186)

Here is another one rubbishing it as politics. But her reasoning for the cause is different from that given by the others. But, Astha is not to be satisfied, and gives her own logic for opposing the movement for a temple: “…if the temple is constructed, thousands of people will die agitating over it. Why they could feed hundreds of poor children on the money they are collecting for the bricks” (Woman 186). Astha’s commitment is more on
humanitarian grounds than anything else. She represents a woman’s interpretation of the situation at hand. This comes out in the speech she makes at Ayodhya where she invokes women who “stand to lose the most” (Woman 185) to think in terms of the welfare of their family:

In history many things are not clear, the same thing that is right for one person is wrong for another, and it is difficult to decide our path of action. We judge not by what people tell us, but by what we experience in our homes. And that experience tells us that where there is violence there is suffering, unnecessary and continuous suffering. When we look to righting wrongs committed hundreds of years ago, we look to the past. But that past cannot feed us, or give us security. History cannot be righted easily, but lives are lost easily, pain and trauma to women and children come easily. Tomorrow your sacrifice will have been forgotten because the duty of life is towards the living. (Woman 197-98)

She tries to reach out to women advocating emotional perspective to weigh the pros and cons of the choice they want to make. In doing this, she suggests explicitly that there are many ways of looking at something, specifically in history. So, history is denied the status of a monolith and is made open to ‘interpretations’ in the novel, both explicitly as in this case and also implicitly in dealing with some other related issues.

In the realm of personal relationships, too, Kapur confronts history. The depiction of a Hindu-Muslim marriage in times of rankling communal hatred is her way of facing up to the crises as she juxtaposes for comparison the lives of two married women, Astha and Pipeelika. While Astha is married in a traditionally accepted set up, Pipeelika has to confront her mother, prejudiced against Muslims. But, Pipeelika puts an end to her mother’s constant questioning of Aijaz: “Is he your son-in-law or the whole Muslim community dating from Babur’s time to now?” (Woman 132). To a layman like Pipeelika’s mother, a Muslim tends to represent the whole community in the contemporary scenario of intolerance. When she visits her in-laws with Aijaz, “… Pipee realized for the first time she had married a Muslim” (Woman 136). Strikingly, in the family of Muslims she feels like a minority and longs for “the day when she would be completely accepted as one of their own” (Woman 137). Through this role reversal, Kapur wants to show that minority-hood is a relative position. It depends not on the physical state but the state of mind.
Kapur has portrayed Pipeelika as rebellious and defiant; where relationships are concerned, not only is she a Hindu marrying a Muslim but is also a lesbian by choice. Astha, on the other hand, is meek and compliant. The writer compares and contrasts the two women whom history brings together at Ayodhya; and whose lives change forever because of the ongoing communal mayhem. While Astha is unhappy in her traditional Hindu marriage, Pipeelika enjoys bliss, even though she is married to a Muslim. The writer seems to be affirming that religion is no hindrance in relationships.

Further, the timid Astha sheds her cocoon and starts on as a more gregarious and socially responsible person as a result of her confrontation with communal violence that takes the life of Aijaz and his troupe. Contrarily, the free-spirited Pipeelika, working with an NGO “Ujjala”, secludes herself from the society ridden with brutality that has made her a widow, bringing dread and bitterness to her life. The same incident affects the two women differently causing them to respond in divergent ways. Though, both remain opposed to the widespread politically motivated sectarian hostility and the drive for a Ram temple at Ayodhya, they deal with it differently.

Asthā gets actively involved with the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch set up in the memory of Aijaz. The Manch organizes rallies, protest marches, distributes pamphlets, and holds exhibitions to create awareness against rampant communalism in the nation. Through the Manch Astha is “…exposed to detail after detail of atrocities perpetrated in the name of religion” (Woman 185-86). When her husband, who believes that rallies are of no use because “Goondas hire people from neighbouring villages at ten rupees a day to come and make trouble, block traffic and show their muscle,” protests, Astha tries to clarify: “It’s not the political, made-up kind of rally. We want to draw attention to what has happened. How does one speak so that one is heard?” (Woman 142). Hemant merely says that no-one bothers about rallies. But he is actually bothered as he shares his frustration: “The traffic arrangements were terrible as usual,... ‘Arre, you want to protest, protest, who is stopping you? Let the ordinary tax-payer lead his life, that’s all I ask, but no.”’ (Woman 145). Astha is different from her husband who puts self-interest before everything. She is unswerving in her participation in the rallies and demonstrations organized by the Manch; she even contributes her paintings for the collection of funds for the Manch. Astha finds catharsis in being a part of the demonstrations: “down the road, shouting slogans, they marched, blocking traffic in a way that Astha found most
satisfying. Cars were standing still, motorists were fuming, and people were getting late because of her” (Woman 143). There are mixed reactions from those caught in the traffic jam because of the protest: “Compressed into half the road, cars were inching along, staring at them, curious, sympathetic, frustrated, annoyed” (Woman 144). Again, it is emphasized that there are many ways of looking at a thing. Even Pipeelika, Aijaz’s widow stays away from it; she has her reasons: “It’s so elitist, and Aijaz was nothing if not one of the people” (Woman 203).

The Manch and its activities form an important part of the novel. As discussed above, it is the platform on which Astha stands up to contend her feelings which are so far submerged in the chaos of her personal life. She gets to hone her painting skills and finds solace in the activity. The themes of her paintings are a creative materialization of her inner revolt against communalism, at the same time providing a vent for the frustrations of her own life. For her first painting for the Manch, she prefers to paint a procession over a funeral, because to her mind “there would be more colour and interest in a procession” ; she chooses to paint an experience that moves her emotionally (Woman 147). Her desire for more colour in the painting can be taken as a way to compensate for the dullness in her life. In another painting, titled “March for Justice” the “dark” canvas signifies the gloom suffusing the atmosphere, and “Rashtrapati Bhavan, which loomed remote and massive in the background” suggests that the seat of power is only ceremonial; it is there only to overshadow everything else. The “bright spots” of hope in this bleak scenario in the canvas is provided by “candles the marchers held”—the enlightened few in the lingering “shadow” of unrest (Woman 180). The last of a series of six paintings on the theme of the Babri Masjid depicts “… a bare hillock, a trishul and a saffron flag planted on empty earth amid scattered stones, a peepul tree hanging forlornly on one side. They are—as Hemant puts it, “obvious symbols to say obvious things”—vigorous in their collectivity (Woman 303).

But both Hemant and Pipeelika look down upon the Manch as a sham. There appears some logic in their opinion, because even till the end of the novel, the activities of the Manch are all in vain: murderers of Aijaz and his group are not caught and the Babri Masjid stands demolished amid a lot of aggression. The purpose of any protest organized by the Manch seems to zero down to a mere handing over of a memorandum. There is a lack of consensus among the members of the Manch regarding the objectives and the
ways to achieve them. While some want to earn “international recognition” through “a film that would document communal atrocities in the villages of north India,” others suggest “doing the kind of things Aijaz had done,” still others desirous of bringing “anti-communal activists and academics together,” and so on (Woman 150). All these appear to be ways of gaining vain attention. Some in the Manch feel that they should work “towards bringing the killers to book” who are still at large and point out “the complicity of the police in communal riots and murders” (Woman 151).

Through such a picture of the Manch, Kapur apparently wants to put across the futility of such forums in general. There is a lingering doubt about the response of the masses to the activities of the Manch. They are lured into listening to what the Manch has to say: “...gathered through posters and advertisements, with the promise of entertainment and songs, ...though it was debatable whether they had come for a spectacle or from a willingness to be converted to a historical point of view” (Woman 196). All the protest marches, the sloganeering against communalism, the sloganeering for glorification of unity in diversity in the country, and all the memorandums presented bear no fruit. Hemant’s observation regarding the disruption caused to public life by such demonstrations appears to be holding true; after the demolition of the Babri Masjid, Astha too finds herself thinking: “What was the use of forcing motorists, passengers and pedestrians to listen to the voice of tolerance and peace? It had not prevented anything. Maybe the true victory of fundamentalism was the total despair of the secularists” (Woman 295). Thus, the novel presents a critique of such forums which fumble in the dark for a purpose of their existence, not being able to make any positive contribution to society. But it is because of Astha’s deep engagement with the Manch and its aims that she goes to Ayodhya, a visit which gives her life a new turn because it is here that she meets Pipeelika.

The torrid relationship between Astha and Pipeelika makes an important aspect of the novel. When they first meet, Astha is unaware that she is Aijaz’s widow. Pipeelika appreciates her speech at Ayodhya and shows her around the town. A rapport is quickly established between them, like-minded that they are. On coming back to Delhi, Astha’s usually-controlling husband for once allows her to cultivate the friendship which keeps her busy and keeps her headaches at bay. The friendship between the two women blossoms into a love affair, which Pipeelika, with a history of a lesbian relationship with a
school friend, initiates. The last one-third of the novel focuses on the vicissitudes of their relationship woven into the turmoil facing the country. The novel catches Astha on the psychological plain, her inner conflict—an outcome of the same-sex relationship which in turn is facilitated by the commotion in the world around her. The writer builds up on the intensification, consummation and finally dissolution of the relationship parallel to the communal drama which culminates, sadly, with the demolition of the Masjid. Both Astha and Pipeelika may be best described as bisexual; both have been in love with Aijaz, and with him, Pipeelika has been 'a married woman' quite as much as Astha. Pipeelika thus shifts partners from female to male and back again. Both women may be seen as adopting de facto a fluid rather than fixed model of sexual and emotive relations that resists categorization into rigid sexuality-based compartments. The book ends on a note of inconclusive compromise as the two women find their own ways, knowing they cannot have a future together. Astha’s short stint of love meets an end just like the Babri Masjid—both fall prey to conflicting aspirations.

The relation cannot stand the test of time as Pipeelika seeks complete commitment which Astha, ‘a married woman’, cannot give. Astha’s preference to her family over Pipeelika can be seen as a consequence of wanting to fit in the Sita-like traditional archetype of the perfect ‘married woman’. This inference follows the fact that the Ramayana is indelibly written into the consciousness of virtually all Indians, literate or otherwise, if not through the countless texts in multiple languages, then through the endless stage, cinema and most importantly, TV versions. A Married Woman includes specific reference to the epic itself: mention is made of the late 1980s televised version, whose viewing becomes for Astha’s family, as for so many real ones, an act of devotion. It is because of its reach at the grass-roots level that the serialized epic aids in the formation of specific ways of appraising the contemporary societal set up relative to the one shown in the serial:

Week after week they agreed, this was the golden age of India, this is our noble heritage, now thoroughly debased, when a king showed responsibility towards his people, when duty, honor, devotion, truth and loyalty had a place in Ram Rajya. And today the birthday of this king, our lord, is occupied by a mosque, the shame of it, dismissing as nonsense the protest that it was not possible to really place the exact spot of a man’s birthplace so many thousands of years ago. (Woman 105)
Though Astha holds on to an anti-communal stand, contrary to the message her family takes from the serial, it may be derived that ‘Sita’ of the epic stands imbibed somewhere in the recesses of her mind and leads her to go back to the accepted, if only oppressive, relationship of marriage.

In keeping with the focus of the present research, details of the relationship between Astha and Pipeelika are not taken up for discussion in the chapter. However, the intricacies of the relationship between them lead the reader to the understanding that both women come close together, instinctually, because they are on the same wavelength concerning the turmoil around them, which strikes their personal life as well, though differently. They are the victims of their circumstances, and to fight their battle they seek support from each other, though they have to digress from historically inherited traditions to forge this relationship. Their taking resort to a ‘queer’ relation bears testimony to the severity with which each of them is affected by the lingering sectarian violence that hits them straight with the cold-blooded murder of Aijaz and his troupe. Finally, history in its absolutist Hindutva mode catches up on the two women even as the utopia of their relationship starts to fall apart. The demolition of the Babri Masjid is followed by their relationship falling apart, as Pipeelika leaves for the U.S. to do her Ph.D. All the work, intellectual, cultural and pedagogic, done by Aijaz, Astha and PEEE to fight communalism with secularist and pluralist arguments seems now no more durable than the two women’s unsustainable love-relationship; and as Astha resigns herself to losing Pipeelika, she also has to handle Hemant’s post-demolition dismissal of her, his wife, as a “Muslim lover” (Woman 292).

Asth a and Pipeelika are not the only sufferers of the communal strife crystallized around the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute. The characters in the novel are affected in different manners and degrees. Through Astha’s speech at Ayodhya, the writer tries to display that the effects of violence, whatever its purpose, are far-reaching. Astha puts forward the bigger picture showing the pain that violence causes to the survivors of the victims. It may be said that Pipeelika, widowed as a result of brutality on the part of hate-smitten fundamentalists, identifies with the intent of Astha’s speech and approaches her with the hope of compatibility of thoughts and emotions. The writer’s emphasis on showing the various ill-effects of communalism on society is reinforced by the choice of topic for study by Pipeelika. When she first meets Aijaz at a conference, she reads a paper
on “the effects of communalism on the education of Muslim children in the basti”, where she works for Ujjala, an NGO. She wants to show that “They were discriminated against, made to feel stupid and backward, were told their loyalties were to Pakistan, and looked upon with suspicion” (Woman 120). This shows that there are innumerable ways, however trivial they may appear, in which communalism, not only in the form of physical violence but psychological too, comes to impinge on individuals.

Pipeelika’s academic engagement with the repercussions of communalism rampant in her times is also reflected in the choice of topic for her Ph. D thesis. She wants to work on “The politics of communalism and how it is represented” for her doctoral research. She explains her reasons: “It might also help me come to terms with things in my life. If you realize you are not alone …” (Woman 288). She has devised a purposeful technique to face her state of affairs, but in the fictional world of the novel as well as the real world, not many can. Pipeelika’s commitment to the cause is absolute and she does not hesitate in risking her security when it comes to take a first-hand view of the riot-hit Ayodhya or even Bombay, after the Babri Masjid demolition. Her realization that “It was no more dangerous for me than for all those poor women there,” leads her to Ayodhya at the time of demolition. She even expresses her desire to organize “a conference on how families are affected in riots” (Woman 280). Through Pipeelika’s selection of topics of discussion and research, the writer gives words to her emphasis in the novel. But amid all this, Pipeelika reflects: “The only trouble is there are so many aspects, all of such relevance that it is a bit hard to choose a specific area” (Woman 289). The writer seems to be pointing at the fact that communalism and its ramifications are incomprehensible, perplexing in their entirety.

To sum up, it can be said that the novel successfully presents the complexities of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute—its history, politics, the resulting sectarian violence and how it shapes the perceptions and reactions of individuals in society. Astha, who has inherited Aijaz’s mantle of unofficial historian of Ayodhya, perceives history as something not fixed but relative: “She had to go on sifting, sieving, fact from fact, fiction from fiction, and in the end not be sure of anything” (Woman 216). Pipeelika too, following in Aijaz’s footsteps, organizes “a street play around interpretations of history”, using Astha’s pamphlet as a source (Woman 262). It is Aijaz, the liberal historian, who introduces both the women to the idea of history being open to interpretations, implying
thereby that it is not absolute. The Babri Masjid is razed down, despite secular and pluralist voices raised to avoid the disaster. The Astha-Pipeelika relationship challenging the dictates of history and tradition receives a fatal blow with Pipeelika going to America, leaving Astha behind. Temporarily at least, the monolithic view of history seems in the ascendant, and alternative possibilities, both personal and political, contract and close up. What has won out for the moment is not the open-ended future of multiple choices embodied in Pipeelika, but the bitter cocktail of the kar sevaks' communalist neotraditionalism and the pseudo-modern, TV-and-Disneyland discourse of Hemant. Despite all this, perhaps Manju Kapur's biggest stroke of genius in this novel has been to locate the two women's meeting, adumbrating, as it does, a utopian future of open-ended choice, in an Ayodhya where the Babri Masjid is still standing. Her text, thus, reappropriates the fabled city hijacked by the communalists and returns it to its broader identity as a symbol of Indian heterogeneity – of multiple possibilities and new beginnings, for both the individual and the nation, within an emerging pluralist global order.