

'To build or to destroy': History and the individual in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman*

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ABSTRACT

The theme of South Asian individuals being caught up in and having their lives reshaped by major collective historical events (such as Independence and Partition) has been a constant in postcolonial Indian Writing in English, in such key works as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* or Manju Kapur's own *Difficult Daughters*. In *A Married Woman* (2002), the second of her three novels and the only one so far to incorporate public concerns into a contemporary setting, Kapur focuses on, among other themes, the Hindu-Muslim conflict as crystallised around the Ayodhya/Babri Masjid issue. This novel has attracted attention for its frank depiction of a love affair between two women, but less attention has been paid to the historical and political context in which that relationship develops. Kapur boldly returns to the Ramayana's sense of a beginning by initiating the transgressive relationship in Ayodhya, in the wake of an anti-communalist rally, and by making one of the pair the Hindu widow of a secularist Muslim. The tale that thus unfolds powerfully explores how, in a still-traditionalist India entering the age of globalisation, evolving personal relations on the microsocial level are shaped by wider historical forces, yet can in their turn reshape that same history in an adumbration, potentially utopian even if partial and temporary, of new and more diverse forms of human relationship.

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'History can be used to build or to destroy' (*A Married Woman*, 196)

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A Married Woman, published in 2002, is the second novel by the Delhi-resident writer Manju Kapur (the others to date are *Difficult Daughters*, 1998, and *Home*, 2006). It is the only one of the three to combine a setting near-contemporaneous with the time of writing with the head-on examination of public issues. Set in an India of the late 1980s and early 1990s poised on the verge of its globalisation-powered take-off, it explores two evidently controversial subjects: Hindu-Muslim confrontation and same-sex intimacy between women, against a backdrop of respectable middle-class Delhi life. The theme of Indian or South Asian individuals being caught up in and having their lives reshaped by major collective historical events (such as Independence and Partition) has been a constant in postcolonial Indian Writing in English, in such key works as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* or Kapur's own *Difficult Daughters*. In *A Married Woman*, history enters the contemporary setting through the presence of a highly charged symbol of ancient India today appropriated for new purposes, namely the city of Ayodhya. Kapur uses a celebrated, indeed notorious, recent event - the demolition by Hindu extremists of the Babri Masjid mosque in Ayodhya - as a significant part in the backdrop of the life-stories of her two women protagonists, and does so with a fine sense of documentation and detail. *A Married Woman* has been greeted by some readers as a direct contribution to the same-sex cause, but such a categorisation appears problematic¹: this is not a novel emanating from India's same-sex

¹ For the novel's same-sex dimension, see Subhash Chandra, review of *A Married Woman*, [Intersections: Gender, History and Culture in the Asian Context](#) (electronic journal, Perth, Australia), 14, Nov. 2006,

community as such, nor is it linked to the recent campaign spearheaded by Vikram Seth to overthrow the legal prohibition, dating from the Raj era, on same-sex intimacy. In addition, the same-sex relationship occupies only the last third of the novel. An alternative reading of *A Married Woman* may be suggested which views Kapur's novel as, inter alia, a dense exploration of the making of history in two different senses: the contemporary appropriation of the artefacts and symbols of the past; and the attempt to forge new kinds of human history here and now, in the construction and exploration of a discourse of modernity that stands in an uneasy relationship to a still-hegemonic tradition.

Astha Vadera, a schoolteacher with an MA in English, lives a comfortable, conventional Delhi Hindu middle-class life, within an arranged marriage with her businessman husband, a self-satisfied materialist who sells South Korean TV sets, and their two children, until she meets Aijaz Khan, a secular Muslim involved in a progressive theatre group. Their nascent friendship is cruelly brought to an end when Aijaz perishes tragically, burnt to death by a Hindu mob in the wake of the Ayodhya dispute. Yet it is, later, in Ayodhya itself that Astha first encounters Pipeelika (Pipee) Khan (née Trivedi), a woman qualified in sociology and economics, who works for a Delhi NGO and who, though raised a Hindu, turns out to be Aijaz's widow, having boldly married him across the religious divide. Against all social norms, the friendship between the two women develops into a fully intimate same-sex relationship, clandestine but deeply intense. The relationship reaches its highest point when Astha and Pipee visit South India together, but finally it breaks up with Pipee leaving for a doctorate in the US and Astha left with no option but to return full-time to her marriage.

In Kapur's novel, the personal histories of the two women unfold in the larger context of a changing India and the rival interpretations placed today on key elements of the country's history. Here, Kapur places herself in the ranks of those contemporary writers who have interrogated reductive and communalist views of Indian history, as in Salman Rushdie's satire on Bal Thackeray in *The Moor's Last Sigh* or Githa Hariharan's exploration of Hindutva tendencies on Indian campuses in her *In Times of Siege*. If Rushdie sees Hindu sectarianism as negating Bombay's long tradition of pluralism and Hariharan explores ideologically motivated re-readings of ancient south Indian history, Kapur boldly takes on no less a subject of historical and political controversy than Ayodhya and the Babri Masjid issue.

Ayodhya² (or Awad, or Oudh)³ is, today, a small city of some 50,000 inhabitants, located some 550 km from Delhi on the banks of the Gogra (or Sarayu) river in Uttar Pradesh state. It is also, of course, much more than that, as a city with major symbolic resonance as both a mythical space of the Hindu cultural heritage and a very contemporary post-Independence trouble-spot. In the *Ramayana*, Ayodhya is Rama's birthplace, the city where he should have been made regent but from which he is expelled to the forest, and to which he returns in triumph having won Sita back

<http://www.she.murdoch.edu.au/intersections/issue14/chandra_review.htm>, and Ana García-Arroyo, *The Construction of Queer Culture in India: Pioneers and Landmarks*, Barcelona: Ellas Editorial, 2006, 162-164. Chandra, in particular, goes so far as to call *A Married Woman* a 'lesbian narrative' (surely a dubious label to put on it in view of its multiple themes). Chandra also makes comparisons with *Fire*, Deepa Mehta's controversial film on same-sex intimacy between women (though a relevant point of comparison, in view of the character Pipee's status as a Hindu widow, might also be *Water*, the same director's exploration of the plight of widows).

² For the history of Ayodhya, see: Henry Yule and A.C. Burrell, *Hobson-Jobson: The Anglo-Indian Dictionary* [1886], Ware, England: Wordsworth Editions, 1996, entry 'Oudh, Oude' (647-648); Louis Frédéric, *Dictionnaire de la Civilisation Indienne*, Paris: Robert Laffont, 1987, entry 'Ayodhya' (145-146); Michael Wood, *The Story of India*, London: BBC Books, 2007, 143-153; Wikipedia entries, 'Ayodhya', <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ayodhya>; 'Babri Mosque', http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Babri_Mosque;

'Ram Janmabhoomi', http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ram_Janmabhoomi. For Ayodhya today, see Mark Tully, *India in Slow Motion*, London: Penguin Viking, 2002, 1-29.

³ *Hobson-Jobson*: 'Oudh, Oude (...). Awadh: properly the ancient and holy city of Ayodhya' (647).

from Ravana's clutches, to inaugurate a legendary golden age, the Ram Rajya. It is also in Ayodhya that the sage Valmiki is believed to have composed the original Sanskrit *Ramayana* (and there too, that centuries later, Tulsidas began his celebrated Hindi version). Valmiki's *Ramayana* describes Ayodhya under Dararastha, Rama's father, as an ideal city, an earthly counterpart of the heavenly city of Indra: 'And his town like Indra's city, - tower and dome and turret brave - / Rose in proud and peerless beauty on Sarayu's limpid wave / ... Fathers with their happy households owned their cattle, corn and gold / Galling penury and famine in Ayodhya had no hold'⁴. After Rama returns as king, in triumph with Sita, from his fourteen-year exile, the city becomes even more of a utopia as the Ram Rajya begins: 'And 'tis told by ancient sages, during Rama's happy reign, / Death untimely, dire diseases, came not to his subject men, / .. Rains descended in their season, never came the blighting pale, / Rich in crop and rich in pasture was each soft and smiling vale'⁵.

In the fifth century CE, under the Gupta dynasty, what is present-day Ayodhya (previously called Saketa) was first officially designated as identical with the mythical city of the *Ramayana*⁶. Saketa had earlier been a major centre of Buddhism: Gautama the Buddha himself is believed to have discoursed there, there are said to have been more than twenty Buddhist temples, and today's Ayodhya is still a sacred city for Buddhists⁷. Under the Guptas and as the dynasty's capital, the renamed city became a major Hindu power centre and locus of symbolism. Around the same time, it became (and remains) a holy city for another religion, Jainism: several Jain Tirthankars are said to have been born there⁸. The city came under Muslim rule in 1194, conquered by Mohammed of Ghor, and acquired a new name, Awad, and, eventually, a highly symbolic Muslim identity, with the construction, in 1528 under the first Mughal emperor, Babur, of the Babri Masjid mosque, named after the ruler himself. The mosque was erected on the Ramkot hill overlooking the city, the site, or so many Hindus claim, of the Ram Janambhoomi, an ancient temple to Rama, which itself had been raised on the exact spot of the birthplace of the seventh incarnation of Vishnu himself⁹. In the eighteenth century the city and surrounding territory became known as Oudh: first, and now effectively independent of the Mughals, under a Muslim Nawab (formal independence was declared in 1819), and then under the British.¹⁰ From 1856 until Independence, Ayodhya was part of the administrative division, under direct British rule, known first as the North-Western Provinces and, from 1902, as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh. Independence saw Ayodhya become part of the new state of Uttar Pradesh, within the district to which the nextdoor city of Faizabad gives its name.

Ayodhya has been a major place of worship for many religions, not just Hinduism, and it is said that under the British at least up to the 1857 Rebellion, it was common for Hindus and Muslims to worship side by side within the Babri Masjid complex¹¹. All in all, the chequered narrative of Saketa-Ayodhya-Awad-Oudh-Ayodhya objectively suggests a heterogeneous and not a monolithic view of history. Nonetheless, Rama's city has been the subject of ideologically motivated appropriations in support of precisely such a monolithic conception. It has been a locus of

⁴ Valmiki, *The Ramayana*, in Romesh C. Dutt, tr., *The Ramayana and the Mahabharata: Condensed into English Verse*, London: Dent (Everyman's Library), 1910, repr. 1969, 2 (slokas from Book I).

⁵ Valmiki, tr. Dutt, *The Ramayana*, 145 (slokas from Book VI).

⁶ Michael Wood, *The Story of India*, 152: 'The first inscriptional evidence for Saketa as the history of legend comes from the year 436'.

⁷ See Frédéric, 146.

⁸ Including the first, Shri Rishabh Dev; the Tirthankars are generally considered as legendary by non-Jains.

⁹ The tradition identifying the temple with Rama's birthplace appears to be relatively recent: according to the Wikipedia 'Ram Janmabhoomi' article, it is first mentioned in 1788.

¹⁰ Of which the capital was Lucknow. Concerning the identity of the names Oudh and Ayodhya, *Hobson-Jobson* quotes Amar Khusra (1289): 'Oudh (Ajudhya) on the banks of the Ghagra'; and for Awad, Ibn Batuta (c. 1335): 'The territories to the west of the Ganges ... were then governed by 'Ain-ul-Mulk ... and among their chief towns we may name the city of Awad' (647-648).

¹¹ Faizabad District Gazeteer (1905), quoted in Wikipedia 'Babri Mosque' entry.

communalist readings of history, as in the emblematic case of the mosque's black basalt pillars, claimed by Hindu scholars to be relics of the former temple. Most recently, it has acquired notoriety as the location where, on 6 December 1992, an army of several thousand Hindutva militants (kar sevaks) tore down the Babri Masjid with their bare hands, brick by brick,¹² and where Hindu activists have since tried through the courts, thus far unsuccessfully, to gain authorisation to build a new temple to Rama, on the site which they believe marks the former location of the Ram Janambhoomi.

Ayodhya is thus a signifier of both ancient and contemporary India, of both the coexistence and the antagonism of the Hindu and Muslim faiths. As Michael Wood has recently put it, it is 'the theatre where myth has been translated into modern metaphor'¹³. It is a symbol of both beginning and ending: of the beginnings of Indian history through the quasi-historical legend of Rama, and, through its appropriation as an emblem of Hindutva, of a kind of Hindu-Raj 'end of history', an ideologically inspired copy of Rama's Golden Age after whose foundation, presumably, nothing culturally new would ever happen again in a uniformly Hindu India. Here, Ayodhya is perceived as an exemplary city, an iconic space to be exempted from all criticism; indeed, its very name is said to mean in Sanskrit 'impregnable' or 'not to be warred against'¹⁴. Nonetheless, objectively the Hindutva Ayodhya is *not* the only Ayodhya: Rama's city is also, across time, a space of multiple identities, Hindu, Buddhist, Jain, Muslim and British¹⁵, and can thus *also* be seen as a microcosm of an India that is not monolithic but multiple, complex and eluding all one-dimensional definitions. Equally, if for Hindutva Ayodhya is a symbol of an unquestioned and absolute truth, to others the same city appears as an emblem of the provisional, if not subjective, nature of truth: thus, among Kapur's peers both Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, writing on the Babri Masjid issue, have seen the identification of today's city with Rama's mythical capital as essentially pseudo-historical and ideological. Ghosh argued in 1994 that 'a legendary world-besriding hero can only be diminished if his birthplace continues to be confined to a circumscribed geographical location'¹⁶; while Rushdie, writing in 2002, went so far as to affirm that 'there's little reason to believe that modern-day Ayodhya stands on the same site as the Ramayana's fabled realm'¹⁷.

In Kapur's novel, Ayodhya as symbolic space is closely linked with a complex and many-sided exploration of the notion of history. Indeed, both *Ayodhya* and *history* are among this novel's keywords. The timespan of *A Married Woman* begins at a moment in the 1980s when the Babri Masjid is still standing; the reader is allowed to visit the mosque with the protagonists; but by the end, it is 1992 and the kar sevaks have reduced it to rubble. History irrupts into the text as a key signifier in the sequences around Aijaz Khan. Aijaz is, indeed, despite his thespian bent, a history lecturer by profession: 'He teaches history, and during the holidays he performs' (103). When his Street Theatre Group is invited to hold a workshop at the secondary school where Astha is a teacher, Aijaz becomes her initiator into Indian history as crystallised around Ayodhya. The workshop is aimed at the school producing a play on, precisely, the history to date of the Babri Masjid / Ram Janambhoomi controversy. Kapur's own view on the issue is clearly the sceptical, secular position also adopted by Rushdie and Ghosh – to quote from the text of *A Married Woman* itself, 'the protest that it was not possible to really place the exact spot of a man's birthplace so many thousands of years ago' (105). Aijaz, as a secular Muslim, takes a similar line, and it is from a

¹² Mark Tully gives an eyewitness account of the event in *India in Slow Motion*, 1-3.

¹³ Michael Wood, *The Story of India*, 147.

¹⁴ Louis Frédéric, *Dictionnaire de la Civilisation Indienne*, entry 'Ayodhya' (145-146), 145. *Hobson-Jobson*, 647.

¹⁵ It was even claimed at one point that 'two Jewish priests lay buried in Ayodhya' (Abdul Fazi, *Ain-i-Akbari*, 1598; quoted in Wikipedia 'Ram Janmabhoomi' article).

¹⁶ Amitav Ghosh, 'The Fundamentalist Challenge' [lecture, 1994; first published 1995], in *The Imam and the Indian: Prose Pieces*, New Delhi: Ravi Dayal, 2002, 268-286 (280).

¹⁷ Salman Rushdie, 'The *Baburnama*', 2002, in *Step Across This Line: Collected Non-Fiction, 1992-2002*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2002, 188-194 (189).

neutral, rationalist vantage point that he asks Astha to write the text for the play. To do so, she goes to research the subject at Delhi's India International Centre, 'in the history section' (107), and thus Aijaz takes her on a voyage through history. She stares at a picture of the then still standing Babri Masjid and asks herself: 'How could she effectively present its history, long and tortured, in a manner that was simple without distorting?' (107). Indeed, Aijaz has set Astha a major historian's task: to provide a non-'distorting' perspective on a 'tortured' issue: she takes up the challenge until she feels it is she, not he, who is 'the Babri Masjid expert' (113).

The play goes ahead, under the title *Babri Masjid: Fact, Fiction and You* (115). Astha's son Himanshu, a pupil at the school, in a touch reminiscent of the 'wall' character in Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, plays the role of the mosque (thus proleptically placing his mother at the heart of the Ayodhya issue). Three days after the performance, the newspaper headlines scream out: 'THEATRE GROUP BURNED ALIVE IN VAN'. Aijaz and his co-actors, performing the same play in a mohalla, have been dragged off the stage by an unspecified band of militants, abducted and burned to death (138-139). History, in its darkest and bloodiest manifestation, has caught up with the history lecturer. In death he becomes a part of the Ayodhya story – as, in life and in surprising fashion, Astha, the married woman, will soon too become.

A newly politicised Astha takes part in a rally in Delhi to protest the killings (for which no-one is ever brought to book), and she becomes an active member of the Sampradayakta Mukti Manch, 'a forum set up in memory of the Street Theatre Group' (147) to fight communalism and defend secularism. In 1989, the Manch decides to hold a rally in Ayodhya itself, to affirm its pluralist view of India past and present, precisely at the time when the Hindu supremacists are turning up the pressure on the Babri Masjid issue and planning to march on Ayodhya, bricks in hand, to restore the fabled temple. History thus brings Astha to Rama's city at a time when the communalists are dreaming of a 'Hindu Restoration' (185) that would mark the end of history – and yet, also, at a time when Ayodhya might seem a space more open to a multiple vision of history than it does today, or even by the end of the novel, for Kapur has her protagonist visit Ayodhya at a moment when the Babri Masjid is, poignantly, still there on the Ramkot.

Here as before in defiance of her husband, who has little time for what he calls her 'rabble-rousing' (212) and if anything sides at least passively with a watered-down Hindutva line, Astha plunges herself into living history by joining the Manch on its strategic visit to Ayodhya. She takes the train from Delhi alone, and boards with her Manch fellows at a guest-house in Faizabad. 'Not far from the banks of the Saryu' (196), across the river from the old town, her secularist group holds its rally. The first speaker is 'a very respected historian' (197), his profession recalling Aijaz, who declares forcibly that 'history can be used to build or to destroy' and that 'there is no evidence ... that Babur ever came to Ayodhya, let alone declared a temple' (196). He is followed by Astha herself, and her own speech places her at history's heart, even as she strives to reshape the whole notion in less ideological and more human terms: 'History cannot be righted easily, but lives are lost easily' (198). Then and suddenly, the narrative takes on a whole new dimension, as there in Rama's city, not at the Babri Masjid but in view of it, Astha's eyes light on 'someone staring at her' (198), an unknown woman whom she will go on to meet in a full-blown Ayodhya epiphany.

That 'someone' is Aijaz's widow Pipee, who is there in Ayodhya to attend the rally, she too having come from Delhi to escort a group of basti women for her NGO. The two talk after the rally and meet the next day to tour Ayodhya's monuments, the Babri Masjid included. In Delhi, they meet again, and the remaining third of the novel centres on the vicissitudes of their relationship, its blossoming, consummation and final slow, painful dissolution. The relationship may of course be read in and for itself as a manifestation of same-sex identity, but the very circumstance that it begins in Ayodhya may also point to a broader reading. Both Astha and Pipee may be best described as

bisexual; both have been in love with Aijaz, and with him Pipee has been 'a married woman' quite as much as Astha. Before Aijaz she was involved with a woman, a schoolmate called Samira (presumably also Muslim from her name): Pipee 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 categorisation into rigid sexuality-based compartments. This utopian sense of open-endedness is reinforced by Pipee's status as a Hindu widow (albeit to a Muslim) and her total rejection of the norms of withdrawal and internalised guilt that all too often govern Hindu widowhood¹⁸. The fluidity that characterises the life-story of both women (more successfully in Pipee's case) contrasts with the normative rigidity that marks Astha's husband, the pseudo-modern, eminently traditional Hemant.

If this final part of the novel centres on the two women, at the same time Ayodhya constantly reappears as a leitmotif. Astha continues to inherit Aijaz's mantle of unofficial historian of Ayodhya, asked by the Manch to 'prepare a readable memorandum that would combine historical accuracy with emotional appeal' (215) – a pamphlet entitled *The Testimony of the Black Pillars*, in which she states that 'the black stone pillars ... are not proof that a temple was destroyed'. As she writes, she 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' (216). When the two women escape briefly to South India, ostensibly to join an anti-communalist yatra, Pipee, she too following in Aijaz's footsteps, organises 'a street play around interpretations of history', using Astha's pamphlet as a source (262). Finally – it is now 1992 - history in its absolutist Hindutva mode catches up on the two women even as the utopia of their relationship starts to fall apart. Abroad on a compulsory holiday with her family, in London Astha watches the BBC and witnesses the build-up to the kar sevaks' onslaught on the Babri Masjid. Back in India, she finds that Pipee had actually gone back to Ayodhya and witnessed the latest goings-on in person – an experience that will become source material for her American Ph.D on 'the politics of commmualism' (288). The inevitable cannot now be postponed, and as the novel draws to an end and Pipee prepares to leave for the US, Astha picks up the newspaper and reads the headline: 'A NATION'S SHAME: BABRI MASJID DEMOLISHED' (291). All the work, intellectual, cultural and pedagogic, done by Aijaz, Astha and Pipee 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 Pipee, she also has to handle Hemant's post-demolition dismissal of her, his wife, as a 'Muslim lover' (292). Temporarily at least, the monolithic view of history seems in the ascendant, and alternative possibilities, both personal and political, contract and close up.

Nonetheless, alternative ways of seeing remain, and a further interesting element of Kapur's novel is the way that, at least to an extent, it could be read as adumbrating aspects of the two women's story as a kind of scenario for an alternative *Ramayana*. The great narrative that begins in Ayodhya is, of course, 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 recently, TV versions. R.K. Narayan has said, in his introduction to his retelling of the Tamil version by Kampan: 'I am prepared to state that almost every individual ... in India is aware of the story of the Ramayana in some measure or other'¹⁹. Sita, in particular, is traditionally seen as the archetype of the perfect 'married woman': as Romesh C. Dutt puts it, she is 'the ideal of a faithful woman and a devoted wife'²⁰. The text of *A Married Woman* includes specific reference not only to Ayodhya but to the epic itself: mention is made of the late 1980s televised version, whose viewing

¹⁸ As in Deepa Mehta's film *Water* (already mentioned) or in the Telugu-language short story 'Vitantavu' ('Widow') by Chalam (1925); and as actively contested in Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938).

¹⁹ R.K. Narayan, 'Introduction' to *The Ramayana: a Shortened Modern Prose Version of the Indian Epic (Suggested by the Tamil Version of Kampan)*, New Delhi: Penguin India, 1971, ix-xi (ix).

²⁰ Dutt, 'Translator's Epilogue', 155.

becomes for Astha's family, as for so many real ones, an act of devotion: 'Ever since the Ramayan was serialised, viewing it had become a ritual, insisted upon by the grandparents and strongly supported by Hemant' (104);²¹ and Astha challenges her husband with her own, non-communalist reading of the epic's message: 'Ram would have hated what was going on in his name – a man who sacrificed everything to keep his father's honour, who left his home, his palace, his kingdom ... he would be the last to appreciate the fuss over his birthplace' (108).

There exists a pan-Indian tradition of alternative female *Ramayanas*, or, indeed, *Sitayanas*²²; and one may tentatively point to elements in the Astha-Pipee narrative that might partially constitute it as such a women's *Ramayana*. Not only does their story begin in Ayodhya, but Pipee, South Indian on her mother's side, could be seen as a female Ravana, to be interpreted positively: coaxing Astha-Sita away from Hemant-Rama, and succeeding in the relationship as her epic counterpart does not. This would not seem entirely far-fetched if we consider that in south Indian renditions of the *Ramayana* such as Kamban's, Ravana, spiriting Sita from the Aryan north southwards through the Dravidian lands to Lanka, tends to be presented in a more positive light than in Valmiki's canonic northern/Sanskrit version. Astha's journey south with Pipee takes them through Chennai to Kanyakumari (the former Cape Comorin – which, if not exactly opposite Sri Lanka, is India's southernmost point) and then up to Bangalore and the boarding school where Pipee's mother lives and works – perhaps an alternative version, for the two of them, of Ravana's palace in Lanka. Hemant would then appear as a singularly unheroic Rama who does nothing to 'rescue' his wife; and Astha's return to the family bosom would be the result not of a monkey army's deeds but the work of a Hanuman within her head, an internalised notion of family duty that ultimately triumphs over dreams of an alternative lifestyle.

At the end of the novel, with Pipee's plane winging her to the US, Astha – in the concluding sentence – 'felt stretched thin, thin across the globe' (307). As India hurtles into the age of globalisation, what has won out for the moment is not the open-ended future of multiple choices embodied in Pipee, but the bitter cocktail of the kar sevaks' communalist neo-traditionalism 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 individual and nation, within an emerging pluralist global order.

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²¹ For an account of the televising of the *Ramayana* (over 78 weeks in 1987 and 1988), see Mark Tully's chapter 'The Rewriting of the *Ramayan*', in *No Full Stops in India* (London: Viking, 1991), 127-152.

²² These include the Telugu version by Molla and the Bengali version by Chandrabati (both 16th century CE), as well as numerous women's worksongs in multiple languages offering an alternative version of Sita's story. For an account of this worksong material in Bengali, Maithili, Marathi and Telugu, see Nabaneeta Dev Sen, 'Lady Sings the Blues: When Women Retell the *Ramayana*', *Manushi: A Journal about Women and Society*, No 108, Sept-Oct 1998, www.indiatogether.org/manushi/issue108/nabaneeta.htm

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