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Book Name:- [The Private Life of Mrs Sharma](#)

Book Author:- [Ratika Kapur](#)

Despite atrocious violence in recent months, India's vibrant publishing industry has discovered some fantastic writers, and occasionally some of those success stories become one of the country's most brilliant exports. Fresh off the gravy train of success from her debut novel, *Overwinter*, which was longlisted for the Man Asian Literary Prize, Kapur brings us the story of a middle-class Indian housewife whose life's focus is her family and their well-being, until she meets a handsome stranger on the train.

"Other men played with their phones or looked down the train tunnel or walked up and down the platform or stared at women, but Vineet always stood calmly in one place, like a statue of some great man, waiting for the train."

Mrs Sharma's husband is away, working in Dubai. But she is not lonely; she works hard to support her son and in-laws, holding up the roof with her careful control over every aspect of their lives. From choosing a husband for her sister-in-law to buying a suit for her future businessman son, Mrs Sharma has everyone's lives planned out, with their best interests in mind. However, the pressure can be exhausting – doesn't she deserve a little holiday from it all? She finds this escape in the calm, mysterious presence of Vineet, the stranger on the train. Bringing modern ideas of love, marriage and sexuality into conflict with traditional ideas of her duty to her family, Mrs Sharma struggles to reconcile what she wants with what she thinks is right. If only everything would just go according to her plans... But her son wants to be a chef, not a businessman, and that's the least of her problems. Her husband will be home in a few months; then it will all be sorted.

"But I should say here that I am not a cheap woman. I hail from a good family, a well-educated family, my father actually had a BSc in Botany, and I don't talk to men without reason. From time to time men come up to me. Some will offer me a smile, some will try their level best to talk to me and some, I have seen, will allow their eyes to roam all over my body. But I just walk away each and every time."

Mrs Sharma is instantly likable. Reading her words feels like sitting down to tea as she tells you her secrets. She's as unreliable as any person in her situation may be – desperate to live up to her opinion of herself, she finds justifications for everything she

does. She tries not to boast, but shows pride in her son and her own achievements. Even better, she is frank about her sexuality and her desires, and does not shy away from shocking the reader with her honesty. Her unreliability comes from her hypocrisy; while she desires freedom and makes excuses for going after her own desires, she refuses to accept the desires of her son, who wishes to leave school to become a chef. It's not part of her plan, so it just won't do. She's manipulative and controlling, but she is still a sympathetic character as almost everything she does is out of love and devotion to her husband and her son.

"I know all about sex. I have been married a long time. I even know about porn. Bobby thinks that I am a fool, he thinks that I have no idea that he looks at porn on the Internet. But I know that he does, and I know a lot about those dirty photos and videos and stories that he looks at, the types of things that all boys, and all men, even my own husband, look at these days. Man on top, woman on top, this style, that style, doggy style. I was not born yesterday."

Kapur skilfully brings to life the flavors and contradictions of modern India. A woman wants to become a Biologist but is trapped in an arranged marriage. A housewife scams office suppliers to supplement her income. Polite, well-educated and hard-working Mrs Sharma has an affair with a virtual stranger. Weaving a tricky story of the control that desire has over Mrs Sharma's life, and her desire for control over the life of her son, the reader is fully wrapped around Mrs Sharma's little finger. You're on her side, rooting for her, even though this couldn't possibly turn out well for anyone. But even at the most dramatic and intense moments, you are suddenly surprised by the hilarity of a particular way Mrs Sharma phrases something, or a sudden thought that pops into her mind that is both completely inappropriate and completely realistic.

"From time to time everybody has to take a little holiday from his life, from all the big and small everyday things. Maybe that is why I enjoyed that evening alone at home when everybody went for the cricket match. Maybe that is why I enjoy meeting Vineet. During those times, all the small, little difficulties of everyday seem far away. When I am with Vineet, it seems that I can just forget everything, everybody, just like that."

Kapur's use of language is also excellent, as Mrs Sharma talks of things being timewastes rather than a waste of time, and so on. Her voice is genuine, sincere and frank. She is completely relatable, even at her most ridiculous, or most tragic moments. Perhaps especially at those moments; those are the times that she is her most human. She clings desperately to her dignity and self-respect, refusing to let her sexuality be anything but a natural urge, and one of which she is in control. Despite her role as a wife and mother, she seizes power over her own life, through her work, and through her blossoming relationship with Vineet. She is a strong woman who doesn't take any

nonsense from anyone; she is a force to be reckoned with; so too Kapur is a writer to be reckoned with.

"This time it was not about my family but about my body. I decided to free my body. I decided to free my body of suffering, another type of suffering, obviously, but actually it is not that different. It is still the type of suffering that comes from the pain of need."

In the conservative setting of India, where the caste system still holds sway over relationships and others' opinions are deeply central to your sense of self respect, Kapur presents a heroine who is ordinary in her abilities, but extraordinary in her sense of self. She tries to control her life; she tries to fill the role of wife and mother and daughter-in-law, holding the reins of the fates of her family, but it is exhausting. Doesn't she deserve a little fun? Doesn't she deserve to come out of her shell? Mrs Sharma is a flawed, complex and thoroughly likable character, and her story is moving. From her highest to her lowest, the reader is carried along. I could not put this book down, and it merits a solid 5/5.

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