

Indian Society, Infertility, and Infidelity in Manju Kapur's Fiction Custody

Kuntal Beniwal^{1*}; Dr. Ritu Sharma²

^{1*}Maharishi Markandeshwar (Deemed to be University), Mullana, Ambala, India.

^{1*}kbsbeniwal@gmail.com

^{1*}ORICD-0000-0003-4645-2902

²Assistant Professor, Maharishi Markandeshwar (Deemed to be University), Mullana, Ambala, India.

Abstract

In the contemporary era, women's liberation can be interpreted as the most prevalent phrase in literature. The status and condition of women is constantly changing with the influence of information and education today. Indian society has been referred to as a closed-minded society, yet the women here are able to break those glass ceilings and gracefully handle constraints put by the patriarchal structure in quest of marking a mark for them and create an identity of their own. In the novels of Manju Kapur, we come across female characters that are struggling enough to stand tall as their male counterparts. In her novel, Custody Manju Kapur delivers acumen about the female psyche by raising serious issues like liberalization, globalization, infertility, and meaninglessness in marriages. She also explores the impact of divorce on children. Even after India got its independence, the condition of the women has not changed much in Indian society. Manju Kapur openly discusses the conditions women live in modern times and challenges they face. This is her fifth novel that largely talks about the outlook of both men and women on infidelity and infertility and its outcome and impact. This research aims at the marital relation with a completely new vision.

Key-words: Patriarchy, Liberalization, Infertility, Infidelity, Globalization, and Feminism.

1. Introduction

Manju Kapur is considered as a contemporary female novelist in Indian English literature who has written five popular novels. Custody has been her fifth novel which was published in the year 2011 and became so popular that a television drama was created on this novel. This novel has two main characters, namely Ishita and Shagun. This novel beautifully explains marriage, children, feminism, painful separation, and impact of the same on the Indian society. This novel not only talks about female plight, a man, and a woman relation but also about a man's plight and emotional

journey of children. The emptiness in a modern marriage relation is depicted and all the ups and downs in relations are expressed. This novel feels close to reality in today's era. The impact of broken marriages on children is so beautifully expressed that it gives immense pain to the readers to realize the pain that children go through while their parents decide to separate. All five novels of Manju Kapur have dealt with different societal issues. Her first novel discusses about the partition, whereas her second novel is about communal riots. Her third novel talks about altering fashion in conventional Indian families. On the other hand, her fourth novels deal with aloofness. Her fifth novel, *Custody* is all about the influence of liberalization and globalization of Indian families. She discusses how in the upcoming cities of India; the common man has become the targets and victims of modernism. The novel *Custody* revolves around the middle-class family in India, living in the capital of the country- New Delhi.

Manju Kapur in her novel *Custody* got her leading characters to life by expressing equal woman strength for both Ishita and Shagun. Both the characters have a different vision of life and a very different lifestyle. Also, the heart of the readers ache while reading about the pain the little children go through because of the decisions that their parents make. Per Mithu Banerjee- "Although marriage is well-trodden territory for Kapur, here her possession of the subject is complete. In the accumulation of detail, and her tone of emotional restraint, *Custody* becomes something more than just a social commentary, but a novel that is true to the universal angst of modern marriage, with its burden of individualism".

Her fifth novel, *Custody* depicts the aftermath of globalization and economic freedom on Indian society. In this novel Manju Kapoor reveals the deflection and contemporaneity that have become vital elements of Indian society hey it has hugely impacted cosmopolitan cities and people behave like slaves of modernity. The outpouring of foreign funding in India in the contemporary era has become the period of economic and financial resonance for people of big cities. The funding was appreciated by every section of the society, be it bureaucrats, industrialists, bankers etc. With an ambition to be successful in life, everybody welcomed the new trend. This change brought in competition among people, especially the suburb society took this competition very seriously. The study of *Custody* is about an Indian middle-class family residing in Delhi. The lead characters of the story are also the sufferers of the materialistic lookout and its impacts.

Manju Kapoor in this novel introduces her readers with to strong female leads with very different personalities. The names of this lady leads are Shagun and Ishita. Readers while reading the novel get to analyze different outlook of female spirit. The novel also touches a very sensitive topic of how parents manipulate their children for their benefits. They are so easily manipulated that

readers can feel their pain and express their sorry for the situation. All these critical issues make *Custody* a novel that talks about societal issues, emotions and beyond.

The novel opens with a story of Raman and Shagun. Raman works as a Sales Manager for a foreign beverage brand in India and Shagun is a housewife. They both are parents to a young girl child who they named is Roohi and a son called Arjun. He is an eight-year-old. Shagun is an ambitious woman who is confident about her beauty. They both have an arranged marriage when Shagun is merely twenty-year-old. Post her marriage with Raman; they both are blessed with a baby boy Arjun. Her son inherits her features and his fair complexion. This family like any other family looks happy. When Arjun turns eight, they are blessed with a daughter and they name her as Roohi. Shagun never wanted a second child but under family pressures she had to give up. Roohi inherits the features of a father and is an average looking girl child. To provide a happy life to his family, with time Raman gets busier with work and the professional competition starts to impact from him and his family. He must often travel for his job and stay away at work until late. This brings frustration in Shagun as she feels lonely being a housewife and raising her two children. She wished to be a model in her life but after her marriage the circumstances altered. – “But after marriage there had been a child. Then the claims of husband, family and friends made a career hard to justify, especially since money was not an issue” (*Custody* 11).

There comes a change in the lives of Raman and Shagun when they meet Ashok Khanna. Ashok Khanna is Raman's boss and has been appointed by his company in India for a brief period. He is a dynamic personality and when he is introduced to Shagun, he is charmed by her beauty and decides to win her by his charisma. Looking at the appealing personality of Ashok Khanna, Shagun feels more isolated and unhappy as she imagined living a life like him. One fine day he succeeds in seducing her and both get into an extra marital affair. In the initial phase of the novel there is a scene of love making between Ashok and Shagun. – “The couple lay among stained sheets and rumpled quilts, eyes closed, legs twisted together like the knotted branches of a low growing tree” (*Custody* 1).

Her betrayal to her husband depicts how hollow the modern marriages are where couples give priority to individual needs over family happiness and togetherness. All these over ambitious needs are leading a family to extra-marital affairs and are weakening family ties. Shagun has the potential to build a career if she decides to but she feels trapped in her household responsibilities and been put in a marriage at a very early age. When she is involved in an extra marital affair, she is aged thirty-two, but she gives up to her lust as her soul suppressed soul years. She feels guilty of her acts and her morality questions her at every step.

These incidents bring in a lot of changes in Shagun that confuses Raman who is a very loving and caring husband. However, Shagun never wanted to leave her husband and her children but for her paramour she surrenders to her affair with Ashok taking it as a compensation of getting married at a very premature age. “When she started her affair, she had thought a lover would add to her experience, make up for all the things she had missed having married straight out of the college” (*Custody* 86).

Ashok chooses to marry Shagun and gets back to New York along with her. Shagun gives up and agrees to divorce Raman. During these times Raman could sense that all was not well in their marriage and he hires a private detective to know the truth. He ultimately finds out the truth and suffers a massive heart attack after he gets the news of Shagun's infidelity and asks her for a divorce. This makes Shagun feel guiltier of her deeds.

For the good of the future of his children, Raman decides to forgive Shagun and start life all over again. But she is so passionate about Ashok that she decides to divorce Raman and move with Ashok at any cost. She starts living with Ashok and an ugly fight begins in the court for having a divorce and for the custody of the two children - Arjun and Roohi. Shagun claims for a divorce and Raman for the custody of his children. All this becomes painful for children and adversely affects them a lot. A well-known psychologist- Dr. Jann Gumbiner, who is the daughter of a divorced mother writes about her experience in the article- *Divorce Hurts Children, Even Grown Ones* – “During the 70s, when the psychological literature first discusses the effects of divorce on children, the general view was that divorce doesn't have to harm to the children. But it does. Children, even intelligent ones, or older ones, often think it is their fault. There is a lot of self-blame. Grades suffer. I lost my motivation in school. My grades went down. Not studying was a form of rebellion, anger, and apathy. I really did not care what became of me. Perhaps, the kid is stuck with a depressed mother who cannot leave her room, clean up the kitchen, or take the children to school. This child is a shame to invite friends' home from school and friendships suffer. My brother could not play Little League because there was no one to drive him to games. Extra-curricular activities suffer”.

In the novel, *Custody*, Manju Kapoor portrays a very real and heart rendering description of how children are manipulated by their parents to claim their custodial rights. After Shagun receives a court notice for the custody of her children from Raman, she manipulates Roohi saying, “It is a little message from your father. He is trying to kill me” (*Custody* 144). Roohi feels hurt and hugs her mother listening to the statement against her mother by her father. Least does she know that Shagun is trying to manipulate her to seek divorce in exchange of the custody of the children. She also succeeds in manipulating her son Arjun and asks him to give a statement in favor of her in the court.

“Above all, no information about their private life. Nothing about uncle. Officially they stayed with Naani in Alaknanda. The court did not understand that people could change, no, they had to go on living with the same person till they died. They had the power to take away her children, put her in jail. This was a very hypocritical country narrow-minded and censorious. The judge would probably ask him who he wanted to live with. In this unfair system, fathers had greater rights over male children so he had to say very, very clearly he wanted to live with his mother, and even then they would consider, though it was so obvious that he was part of her, he looked like her, everybody said so” (*Custody* 213).

Shagun wants a divorce at the earliest and offers Raman the custody of the two children in exchange of a divorce. When Raman denies her of her demands, she does not let him meet Roohi. He is very close to his daughter and gets a feeling of accomplishment when she is around. Not getting to see her makes his situation worst. At last Raman gives into the demands of Shagun and to attain the custody of his children, he is ready to sign a divorce paper and hence Shagun gets to the visit rights for her children. And this is how they move on in life on a new journey without one another by their sides. As mentioned before, there are two strong female lead characters in the novel. Now second female leads come in the picture. Her name is Ishita. She is a contrast personality to that of Shagun. Through her character, the novelist discusses the issues of infertility in females. Since infertility is considered as a taboo in the Indian culture, Ishita becomes a sufferer of this cruel humanity. She is the sole daughter of her parents. They marry her as per the traditional values of Indian culture. After being in a marriage for two years, she is informed by her doctors that she has a problem in conceiving a child and this makes her in-laws go harsh on her and blame her as a reason of their happiness. This hurts her a lot.

“Smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in this sunlit air, smaller than drops of dew cord between blades of grass in the morning was Ishita as she sat in the gynaecologist’s office with her mother-in-law, watching as a doctor sketched out the messages concealed in her body. Here where the tubes, here the eggs, here was where conception occurred. The loss of normal anatomy meant fertilization couldn't take place without intervention” (*Custody* 65). Asha Sharan expresses in her article ‘*Treatment of Infidelity and Infertility in Manju Kapur’s Custody*’ – “Ishita undergoes internalized exile where the body feels disconnected from it as though it does not belong to her and she has no agency. She is considered a failure by her culture, and worse, since this failure is internalized, she believes it herself. She is doubly exiled from her body – once as a woman, an outsider to patriarchal power, and next as an infertile woman who cannot fulfil her

biological destiny. So, this problematic, natural and essential zed assumption of motherhood is imposed on her body”.

All this leads to a divorce for Ishita from her husband Suryakanta. She begins living with her parents. To overcome the agony she went through, she starts educating students from the slum. She crosses path with Roohi and Raman. Out of a love for children, she takes care of Roohi and gradually her simplicity wins heart of Raman. Though she is not as beautiful as Shagun, she wins all hearts around her with her honesty. Raman starts liking her a lot and hence they marry one another in the court premises. Shagun is now settled in New York with her then husband Ashok. She invites Arjun and Roohi to spend some days with her. She is close to her son Arjun which drifts him away from Raman and, he does not like Ishita. When Ishita gets to know about the invitation, she does not want to send Roohi as her love for her make her insecure. Shagun does not like this and overreacts. This brings rift between her and Ashok. “Perhaps I was foolish to believe, but he did promise to keep me happy forever not that I have reproached him with anything. Our life together would not have been possible if I had regretted my pass till. What happened to that promise? I guess when you are in love, you experience some momentary delusions, then the glow fades and things look ordinary again. Of course, I adore my life here, but sometimes I feel its foundation are fragile” (*Custody* 391).

There begins another between Raman, Ishita and Shagun for children. “Day by day she enveloped Roo in a fierce and fearful love. The child was hers, if there was justice in the world, she would remain hers. To this end she fasted, to this end she turned religious, to end she surreptitiously visited astrologers and numerologists. Her fingers sprouted myriad gems glinting from which gold settings: topaz, moonstone, ruby, and amethyst. She, who had objected to the pearl her mother, had forced her to wear during her first marriage” (*Custody* 381). This leads Shagun filing a case in the court for denying an access to Roohi, who is a minor and hence asks for custody of both her kids. Ishita try to manipulate Roohi so that she answers in the court in her favour. On being asked by judge, Roohi responds by saying that she considers Ishita as a mother. After this judge passes the order and gives away Roohi's care to Raman and Ishita and Arjun's guardianship to Shagun until they turn 18 and are mature enough to take their own decisions. After this decision from the courts, Ishita is relaxed but feels bad for husband, Raman. “Somewhere in the depths of the lower courts, he was mediating his past and present lives. This was something he had to do alone. Meanwhile she was carrying most prestigious part of the marriage with her. She stretched out a hand and clutched her daughter’s fist firmly in it” (*Custody* 415).

2. Conclusion

In this novel, Manju Kapoor takes readers through different characteristics of a woman's personality. She has showed different aspects in the same novel via her tool lead female characters Ishita and Shagun. This novel expresses the desires of a woman and how they vary from woman to woman. Shagun has all the right to live her life on her terms but not at the stake of a husband and children. Whereas Ishita who went through worst because of infertility issues is seeking love from child and her husband. She loves them so much that she scared to lose them to anyone. Both characters- Ishita and Shagun are poles apart and as expressed by Jasbir Jain in the article *Gender and Narrative Strategy*, 'This is not merely a story; it is a battlefield of sorts that tears your heart and soul apart because of its masterful narrative and honesty. Read it but be ready to cry'.

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