

## Marital Discord and Pursuit of Gender Equality in Manju Kapur's Custody Novel

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### Abstract

*The landscape of Indian literature has never been found to be equal in contribution from both the genders. It has always been dominated by male writers. It is very fair to say that the aspirations and expectations of Indian women have been largely confined to the ambit of moral and social commitments prevailing in our country. By and large, the Indian women writers in English have come from higher social strata and they do not have felt experience regarding reality of life in India. Despite it, they have started questioning the wisdom of prominent old patriarchal domination and they are no longer willing to play a subservient role to men. They have proved their mettle in literature both qualitative and quantitative wise. In the modern English fiction, the emergence of women centred or feminist approaches have been major developments. For establishing their identity, several Indian women writers have been delving deep into female subjectivity. The image portrayed by these writers regarding women has undergone a complete change. It is due to a paradigm shift in the attitude of the Indian women writers in portraying women as self-sacrificing persons to strong individuals trying to establish their identity. Among the prominent Indian women writers, Manju Kapur has carved a niche for herself by highlighting issues pertaining to patriarchy, family bonding, male –female bonding, inter religious marriage and co-existence of past and present. In 20th century, the works of Indian women writers have been considered as powerful equipment for making modernist and feminist statements. Feminism in India became an accepted doctrine and it was able to gradually set aside the male supremacy prevailing in the society. In fact, the history of feminism in India can be considered in three different phases. The first phase started when the British initiated steps against evil Sati practice. The next co-related with Quit India movement and the third took place after independence when there was a clamour for fair treatment from feminine gender after marriage. This article explains the part played by feminine gender at the domestic front and their willingness to be economically and socially independent and the challenges faced by them in attaining independence in a male dominated society.*

**Keywords:** *Self-actualization; self fulfilment; betrayal; sterility; pregnancy; barrenness.*

### Introduction

In the novels of Manju Kapur, the readers find her to discuss issues like the efforts taken by female in relocating themselves in the current scenario, their self realization and self fulfilment.. The article also explains the manner in which the novelist explores the challenges faced by Indian middle class women along with their desires and aspirations.

Among the Indian writers in English, Manju Kapur has been hailed as Indian Jane Austen. All her novels delve deep into all things pertaining to the modern family and patriarchal society through her stoic female characters, their sufferings and efforts taken by them for attaining liberty. She has found a place among the acclaimed Indian English women novelists such as Arundhati Roy, Gita Hariharan, Shobha De, Shashi Deshpande and Anita Nair.

Manju Kapur has been a leading Indian woman writer in English who lived and wrote in India itself. Although there were some interruptions, all the female protagonists of Manju Kapur hailed from Indian middle class nurturing ambitions for empowerment and leading to a society wherein they are able to establish their individual identity sans any prejudice.

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Discovery of oneself has been a major theme in the novel and it encompasses the quest for liberty and freedom attained by a woman who is tossed up between two extremes with her family on one side and her individual self on the other side. Through the novel *Custody*, the novelist Manju Kapur has reiterated the belief that she is a feminist writer focusing on issues pertaining to women in her writing. In this context, Sunita Sinha observes that, the novels of Manju Kapur emphasize on “the need for self fulfilment, autonomy, self-realisation, independence, individuality and self actualization. ( Sunita Sinha 160) . In fact, Kapur happened to be one of the novelists who had come out with a newer picture of Indian woman who has been neck deep with problems emerging from repressive social customs prevailing in the society with male supremacy.

The novel *Custody* talks about both Indian and Universal concepts. The Indian English writers belonging to post-colonial era have been a product of new education and carry different perceptions regarding the manner in which women have been described in their works. During postcolonial era, the public nurtured a freedom and liberty thought and this aspect was carried out in all nooks and corners due to western education. The women novelists were very much responsible for newer picture of women who have been at the receiving end of exploitive social customs in a male dominant society. The picture visualized in a postcolonial novel has been the one where one can see a crystallized figure of two divergent cultures. The image of woman who is in pursuit of identity is a product of archetype of woman in history.

The novel *Custody* discusses the confrontation taking place between parents who wish to possess their children on one side and the aspirations of modern Indian women regarding her independence. Kapur gives a telling account of sorrows and solaces experienced by two characters namely: Ishita and Shagun as well as the efforts taken by them in fulfilling their objectives. In the novel, Shagun happens to be the female protagonist who very daringly leads an epicurean lifestyle for creating her own space and she fears no one. She is married to a middle class gentle man who works as a corporate advertiser. In spite of being a mother of two children, there is a vacuum space in her married life which makes her experience boredom, alienation and attraction towards modernity. This vacant part in her mind stimulates her to fall in love with Ashok Khanna who happens to be her husband’s boss and a leading sales executive. From her childhood days onwards, she had come across several boys and she was looking forward to the freedom marriage would provide.” ( Kapur 2011, p. 27).

### **Marital Discord**

The novelist Kapur very diligently presents two contradictory features of female embodiment namely: betrayal and sterility. She delves into the manner in which a woman has been cultivated as an individual and major issues of conflict restraining her freedom. Shagun, a character in *Custody*, has been a reflection of modern women who try to play a vital part in the society. The unholy sexual relationship developed between Shagun and her husband’s boss Ashok Khanna has been employed by her to overcome the resistance offered by the society in terms of values and patriarchal myths. Shagun is a revolutionary character who rejoices her sexuality and it became a dome of happiness and outfit wherein she enjoyed employing her body for herself. Thereby, she daringly goes against the male subjugated patriarchal system and its restrictions as well as breaks the shackles of her wedding with Raman which was solemnized with the following lines, “ she the beauty , he the one with brilliant prospects.” ( kapur 2011, p. 14). She attains pregnancy in the very first year of her married life and delivers a male baby becoming the centre of attention of their family. “Her son had inherited her looks and colour, a further source of gratification.” ( kapur 2011, p. 16). Yet, her life gets derailed after delivering her second child, a female baby. She became the mother of another child when she was mentally not ready for it. Moreover, the second baby was a carbon copy of her husband in physical features. During the period of martial disharmony, Shagun gets enticed by the sweet words of her husband’s boss Ashok Khanna and slowly it develops into an unholy relationship breaking the barriers of marriage. Despite her sexual adventures with Ashok Khanna, her marital status keeps haunting her every now and then. In the words of the novelist, “ in the beginning , she had so brave and matter of fact, now she was more fearful.” ( kapur, 2011, p.80). She reels under suspicion as whether to succumb to social conventions or be a dissenter of them. Her mother being an orthodox lady, warns her daughter not to break the sacredness of married life and entertain extramarital affair. The remarks of the mother enable the readers to understand the manner in which the society treats women who commit infidelity. From Shagun’s perspective, it can be argued that she was trying to set things rights that have

gone wrong in herself due to her marriage with Raman and now she is trying to find her individual self in the company of Ashok. This very idea makes her cheerful and offers a kind of independence and strength to be self governed. Shagun develops a powerful and very convincing reason in her mind for justifying her unholy love towards Ashok and she examines, analyses and acknowledges herself. She is convinced by Ashok who states that it is : “ Traditional versus modern values , individual versus society.” ( Kapur, 2011. P. 81).

As a matter of fact, Shagun’s husband Raman has been exhibiting extreme interest in his profession at the expense of his family life. Shagun’s disinterest in married life and Ashok’s elegant and pleasing approach created dramatic changes in the mind set of Shagun. She finds herself at loggerheads in fulfilling her role as lover, mother and wife. She ventilates her feelings as , “... Was it true he was a marketing genius ? Had he managed to produce results so far? Where was his wife? How come he was not married?” ( Kapur 2011, p. 11). Frequent interaction with Ashok aroused her tender feelings and very soon she felt crazy. Ashok is equally excited in his meetings with Shagun because “ ... he knew he had been destined for. In her coloring, her greenish eyes and demeanour , she was a perfect blend of east and west.” ( Kapur 2011, p. 4). Ashok becomes mad with the budding relationship with Shagun. And starts calling her as ‘little wife.’ ( kapur 2011, p. 113). Shagun had come to a stage wherein she is ready to do any sacrifice so as to lead a happy life with Ashok and opines that her relationship with Ashok has opened new vistas of joy and happiness . In the words of the novelist, “ If she were to die tomorrow, it would be as a fulfilled woman.” ( Kapur 2011, p. 113). Shagun squarely blames her husband “ for her predicament , thinking of the years she had been satisfied with his love making, tender attentive, pedestrian and so much waste of time. “ ( Kapur 2011, p. 34-35).

In the novel, Ishita is the second leading female protagonist who longs to attain freedom and she suffers from dissolute stepmother condition. Her condition became pathetic due to faulty marriage and she is not the kind of individual to fall in love with any man. By means of practising family values, she tries to find happiness and freedom. Her parents ensured good education to her and were in turn expecting her to attain plum posting in Govt. service. The novelist is of the firm belief that the women of the present generation need to establish their own career and have a source of income on their own. Her thinking matches with Virginia Woolfe who in her easy titled *A Room of One’s Own* observes that “ a woman must have money and a roof of her own if she is to write fiction.” (12). The factual side of the recent marriages have been shown as they are through Ishita, Raman and Shagun who feel a kind of hollowness and detachment in their married life.

To be in all fairness, Ishita is known for her simplicity and she nurtures a simple wish of leading a peaceful life with her spouse Suryakanta. She is also one of the poor victims of Indian patriarchal set up . Her married life had been barren for one and half years. She had been at the receiving end of various taunts from her in laws. She is unable to fathom the reason for not being able to conceive. She incurs the displeasure of family members as well as the society. Even after freedom, the society has not changed much in its views regarding freedom to women. It is widely believed that barrenness in married life is due to the fault of thee women and not the men. On one side, Ishita has been seeking Divine’s intervention for making her married life fructify. On the other hand, the birth of second child creates discord between Raman and his wife Shagun. The attitude displayed by Ishita and Shagun have been contrasting. Ishita has been a kind of woman who does not wish to suppress anything from her husband. On the contrary, Shagun is a woman who tries to screen everything from her husband. She decides to take the bull by its horns as more often she is tossed up between two options namely: desire and duty. She gets infuriated by the fact that she needs to be “ constantly vigilant, continuously invent excuses, convincingly justify absences from home, phone calls even a preoccupied expression.”( Kapur 2011, p.35). In the perception of Shagun, her erotic affair with Ashok has taken place so as to fulfil all unfulfilled desires of her youth hood. Due to constant pressure from her in laws, Ishita is compelled to seek the expertise of a gynaecologist to attain fertility in her married life. After careful diagnosis, the gynaecologist comes out with the finding that there are number of blocks in her fallopian tube. This finding only adds fuel to the fire and no member belonging to Ishita’s family takes pity on her. Her inability to get conceived brings curtains to her married life. She becomes a poor victim of emotional abuse, social disgrace and psychological stress. Ishita feels that her entire life had slipped under her feet. The novelist says, “ already clouds were entering her soul and shedding heavy drops of unworthiness and such was the weight she couldn’t even hold his hand and tell him that she loved him

more than life itself.” ( kapur 2011, p. 35).Ishita was the apple of the family’s eyes earlier. But now, the entire family is aware of her inability to get conceived and now she is viewed with utmost contempt. While in the hospital , she considers herself, “ smaller than the ant on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in the sunlit air, smaller than the drops of dew caught between blades of grass in the morning, was Ishita sat in the gynaecologist’s office with her mother-in-law, watching as the doctor sketched out, the messages concealed in her body.( kapur 2011,p. 65) .

The married life of Ishita runs into rough weather and there is hardly any tender relationship between husband and wife. In this context, it is pertinent to note that in a society thick with traditions, a woman who leads a barren life after marriage incurs disgrace from the family and the society. Her husband who showered enormous love and affection on her is now ready to give her divorce. She is forced to leave the house as a punishment for her inability to conceive. Life becomes hell for her and there is hardly anyone in her in-laws family who shows some human consideration on her. Her husband became so cold towards her . In the words of Ishita, “ in bed all she saw was his back . And last night he moved into his parent’s bedroom. She felt degraded , a nonperson, certainly a non woman. He was determined; there should be nothing left between them.” ( kapur 2011, p. 71). Between Shagun and Ishita, what is common is a divorce which is inevitable in their life. But, their married lives have been contradicting. One is productive whereas the other is unproductive. One is pleasure seeking whereas the other is pain receiving.

Between Shagun and Ishita, Shagun has been very vocal in her demand. She tells her husband point blank that , “ Don’t make this harder. I have left you the best part of the marriage. Surely my freedom is not too much to ask in exchange?” ( kapur 2011, p. 109). Shagun ditches Raman and moves away from the matrimonial bonding. Both being strong individuals having jumbo sized egos, a divorce becomes unavoidable. In the words of Raman, “ she could not continue with this strain. It was better to make a clean break.” ( kapur 2011, p. 112).. Likewise, Ishita also is ready to accept divorce and opines, “ I can’t go home, I can’t stay here” ( kapur 2011, p.73). The hardship faced by Ishita is quite similar to the one faced by Smirti in *The Day in Shadow* by Nayantara Shagal. In the novel, Smirti is a married lady who is forced to give up her seventeen year relationship. At that juncture, for her, “ nothing important, nothing to quarrel about, but building up into a frightening situation-herself a cog in a machine-with which it had become impossible to live.”(*The Day in Shadow* , 38).

### Attaining Gender Equality

After getting divorce, Ishita feels alienated from everything and there is a sense of insecurity in her. Her parents render her all kind of support so that their daughter is able to withstand this psychological onslaught and develop a positive attitude towards life. After initial struggles, Ishita ventures into newer expeditions like pursuing her higher education so that she finds some kind of employment. She makes herself involved in several social activities in the interest of the society and it gives her some kind of comfort and solace. She accidentally meets Raman who also suffers from broken marriage. Their common sorrows bond them and a relationship develops between them culminating into a marriage. So far, Ishita has not experienced any kind of liberty with her body, but her relationship with Raman gives her a kind of bodily liberty. Ishita showers motherly love and affection on Roohi who is abandoned by her mother. Though Raman is the second man in her life, she feels him to a perfect gentleman. Both feel secured in each other company. Raman compares and contrast the nature of his previous wife Shagun and Ishita. Shagun is also in a buoyant mood and shows her delight and exuberance to her mother by stating that, “ sometimes I feel so happy mama, I wonder how I am the lucky one... Everybody was screaming and dancing-Ashok and I danced too, he said he would never have gone to such a tamasha if it hadn’t been for me.” ( kapur p 284-85). In this context, it has to be remembered that there has been a constant battle between aspirations and determinations in all individual’s life. Both the protagonists were found to be adoring and sentimental earlier. But, of late, they are compelled to make reasonable concessions. Being a dutiful woman known for endurance, Ishita turns out to be a sincere wife and affectionate mother to Roohi. On the contrary, Shaun leads a life full of freedom and flexibility. Hence, it can be safely concluded that the female protagonists namely: Shagun and Ishita have been personifications of newer women in *Custody* novel.

### Summation

The novel *Custody* talks about both infertility and divorce along with dichotomy of modern society and the relationship existing between children and parents. In fact, the novel is a realistic representation of modern Indian women who are persistent in their efforts to fulfil and maintain their self as individuals and they are no longer interested in being as attachment to some male life.

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