



**A TALE OF FAMILY DISHONOUR AND SOCIETAL ETIQUETTE IN CUSTODY
BY MANJU KAPUR**

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ABSTRACT

In the contemporary literary landscape, the family might be regarded as the most prevalent phrase. As the world changes due to the impact of education, so does the position of women in society. In Indian civilization, which is characterized as a closed society, women are emancipating themselves from the constraints of the patriarchal system and attempting to forge an identity distinct from their male counterparts. In this regard, Manju Kapur is known as a contemporary feminist whose female protagonists in her works represent all shades of feminism inside themselves. Her exceptional work 'Custody' reveals her expansive and in-depth understanding of the female psyche. In this work, she addresses globalization, liberalization, and the radically changing style of society, as well as women's longing for freedom, infertility, and the hollowness of modern marriage. In this article, she examined the impact of divorce on children, whether they are infants or adolescents, and how it impacts family honor and social etiquette.

Keywords: Feminism, Family, Societal Etiquette, Liberation, and Modern World.

INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur, a prominent figure in contemporary Anglo-Indian literature, is commonly referred to be the Jane Austen of India. Her writings explore every aspect of the contemporary family and patriarchal

culture [1]. Her novels paint a contemporary portrait of the modern woman who is yearning to escape the confines of the home and create her own world. Her works introduce us to a new

lady who seeks her own identity. At the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the 1980s, a large number of women authors began addressing issues linked to women's family difficulties, domestic abuse, the law, the household, health care, education, their work, and their working circumstances.

Manju Kapur is an author whose protagonists are one step ahead of the others when it comes to contemporary topics such as lesbianism, infidelity, infertility, divorce, and adoption, among others. The purpose of this thesis is to highlight Manju Kapur's thoughts on family dishonor and social decorum in her novel *Custody*. In this story, Manju Kapur exposes the aberrations and modernity that have come to dominate our society, particularly in metropolitan areas where individuals have become victims of modernity. As practically all of Manju Kapur's novels are set against a historical or social backdrop, globalization and economic liberalization also inform *Custody*. With the influx of foreign investment in India in the 1990s, the economy and finances of everyone flourished. Bankers, bureaucrats, industrialists, and government officials were all enthusiastic about foreign investment. Everyone was eager to move forward in their lives. This economic and

financial expansion fostered a competitive atmosphere in Indian society, particularly among the urban classes.

As *Custody* focuses on a middle-class Delhi family, the protagonists are also victims of materialism and urbanization. In this regard, the four primary characters of the narrative are interdependent. The most striking aspect of Manju Kapur's novel *Custody* is the presence of two female protagonists with similar character strengths. Shagun is the first protagonist, followed by Ishita. Through these two personas, Manju Kapur demonstrates two distinct female psyche divergences [2]. In addition, the work is heart-breaking in its examination of parental manipulation of their children for their own profit. The predicament of children is too painful to inspire pity from anyone.

All of these characteristics indicate that *Custody* is much more than social criticism. The story of Raman and Shagun is the beginning of the work. Raman Kaushik is the sales manager for the foreign beverage company Mang-oh in India. His wife, Shagun, is a housewife and the mother of a toddler daughter, Roohi, and an eight-year-old son, Arjun. Shagun has always been extremely ambitious and self-aware of her beauty. During her undergraduate years, she

desired to be a model, but her mother Mrs. Sabharwal, a traditionalist her entire life, forbade her. As her sole responsibility, she desires that her daughter settle down in an ideal marriage, much like a traditional Indian mother.

Raman and Shagun's marriage is planned according to these norms, despite the fact that she was not quite twenty-two years old. Soon after her marriage, she gives birth to a son, and the responsibility of generating an heir is accomplished efficiently. Her son inherited her appearance and complexion, which is an additional source of happiness. Everything in Raman and Shagun's wedded life is wonderful and endearing. When her son Arjun is about eight years old, she becomes pregnant again despite not being mentally prepared. This time, she delivers a baby girl named Roohi [3]. While Arjun resembles her mother, Roohi has her father's face, which is devoid of distinguishing features.

As time passes, Raman becomes increasingly absorbed in his task. The competition in the corporate sector, which resulted from the liberalization of the Indian economy, begins to impact Raman's family life. His job requires him to travel frequently and frequently keep him away from home till late at night. All of these circumstances frustrate Shagun.

She is weary of caring for the children and being at home alone. She had aspired to be a model, but her life has been radically transformed by marriage. After marriage, a child was born. The demands of her husband, family, and friends made it difficult to justify pursuing a job, especially since money was not an issue. Shagun recognises her responsibilities and strives to fulfil them with integrity. She takes care of Arjun's school affairs, Raman and Roohi's requirements, the house, and everything else.

However, her existence is abruptly altered with the entrance of Ashok Khanna. The cold drink business has named for a limited time Ashok Khanna as Raman's temporary boss in India. Even though he has a dynamic personality, he is immediately attracted to Shagun upon first seeing her. He decides quickly to possess her and win her over. Shagun becomes certain that Ashok Khanna is attempting to seduce her immediately after meeting him.

“During Shagun's eleven years of marriage, numerous men had ogled her, but none had crossed the marital line”.
(Kapur, 35)

As a result of Ashok's impression, Shagun begins to feel more discontent with her existence than ever before. Ashok finally succeeds in enticing her, and Shagun engages in sexual encounters with him without regard for her morality, her society, or her family life. The opening scene of the novel depicts Ashok and Shagun making love. Shagun's betrayal of Raman demonstrates the adultery and hollowness of a modern marriage in which the individual is prioritised above all else. While every demand is met, there is still a wild goose chase in every marriage that leads to extramarital affairs. Even though Shagun has a great deal of potential to build a career and live a dynamic life, she is shackled by duties due to her early marriage. Even though she is a thirty-two-year-old woman at the time of her affair with Ashok, she cannot control her suppressed spirit [4]. She is conscious of her sense of guilt, and her conscience guides her every action. She believed that the universe's spirits, in the service of the betrayed partners, were tracking her activities and recording incriminating times.

Through the character of Shagun, Manju Kapur demonstrates that a woman's ignorance of the world makes her susceptible to manipulation. Ashok is intent to possess Shagun from the first day

they meet, and Shagun is easily stuck in a relationship with him due to his ability to influence others. He gets an urge to possess Shagun. Despite the fact that he is aware of the complexities of a relationship with Shagun, as she already has a husband and two children, he is determined to pursue her. Although Raman is a very devoted husband in the truest sense, he cannot comprehend the abrupt change in his wife's lifestyle due to Ashok's influence.

Shagun has never considered separating from Raman or abandoning her children. She accepts Ashok's affair solely as restitution for her early marriage. However, Ashok is determined to marry and relocate her to New York. Ultimately, Shagun decides to divorce Raman. By this point, Raman has also detected a problem in his connection with Shagun. He employs a private investigator to uncover the truth. Raman has a severe heart attack after learning the truth about Shagun's infidelity and divorce demand. Shagun develops a profound sense of remorse because of Raman's condition [5].

Raman is also willing to forget and forgive her, but Shagun's passionate temperament and love for Ashok compel her to ignore her remorse and decide to divorce Raman. Shagun moves into Ashok's home, which is intolerable for

Raman. Now, intense court battles are fought first over the divorce and subsequently over the custody of Arjun and Roohi. Raman seeks the assistance of his cousin Nandan, a renowned attorney. He files a petition for his children's custody. Now, he is resolved not to divorce Shagun and remove his children from her care. He wishes to instruct her in a lesson.

Through the events that transpire in the novel, Manju Kapur illustrates the inconsistency of relationships. Nandan overcomes the disadvantages of the Indian judicial system, which may cause a lengthy wait in the case, but at least he will have visitation rights with his children after filing the case. When a court summons is sent to Mrs. Sabharwal's address, she views Raman as an adversary. Throughout the years of their marriage, he has always treated her as a son.

“Her daughter would not succumb to fear. It was Ashok's idea to take the children if only to bring Raman to the negotiating table. She had asked for a divorce and was willing to make

sacrifices, but the man refused to acknowledge the marriage was gone and slammed the phone down on her. What else could she do?
(Kapur, 235)

Divorce negatively impacts the lives of children. It impacts not only their current but also their future. Their child psyche is severely affected, regardless of whether they are young children or adults. Even though Shagun abducts children from Raman's home, she is unable to settle all of the concerns arising from her dysfunctional relationship with Raman. As the separation of parents is regarded as a disgraceful condition in Indian culture [6], Arjun stops attending school because he believes it to be disgraceful to be the child of a single parent. When he observes other youngsters enjoying their vacations, attending school functions, or going on outings with both their mother and father, he feels deprived. It is a dire situation for the child when he must choose to live with only one of his parents. It is not just the loss of a parent, but also the loss of a home, a neighborhood, neighbors, and an entire joint family. Parents are expected to be accountable for their children's correct

development when they are dependent on minors. But the divorce of their parents thrusts them into difficult life situations, and the irony is that, as youngsters, they are unable to express their emotions and become the sole victims.

In Custody, the author provides a genuine and heartfelt account of the manipulation of children by their parents for custody rights and divorce. As Shagun is unwilling to leave Ashok and rejects all idealistic social standards in order to fulfill her ambition of living a lavish and adventurous life with Ashok, divorce is her ultimate objective. Ashok wants to take her to New York, therefore divorce is inevitable for her, whereas Raman desires his children at all costs. Shagun is enraged when she receives the court notification regarding child custody, and in her wrath, she tells Roohi,

***“It’s a message
from your father.
He is attempting to
murder me.”
(Kapur, 266)***

Upon hearing this negative criticism about Raman, Roohi clings to her mother and becomes concerned about her mother, who desires a divorce from Raman in exchange for their children. While Roohi is fearful of her mother, Arjun

begins to complain of stomach and leg problems. Although he has always been a brilliant student, his academic performance is declining. Finally, he denies attending school, and Shagun holds Raman accountable for all these issues. Shagun also seeks divorce from Raman. Now there is a succession of charges against each other, and both parties are aware that more than half of these allegations are false, but they must proceed in order to achieve their objective [7]. Both Nandan, Raman’s attorney, and Madz, Shagun’s attorney, make it apparent to their clients that they will have to wait a long time for the court’s decision.

Even Ashok and Madz discuss the bribing system in the Indian judicial system, but only for the purpose of postponing the verdict, which Ashok does not desire. Raman dislikes this plan for Arjun, but he does not wish to place Arjun in an unusual circumstance. The separation of parents also has an effect on Roohi. She begins night-time thumb sucking and bedwetting. The court grants Raman visitation privileges, allowing him to see his children on weekends. In addition, the court permits Shagun to enroll Arjun in a boarding school. Now Raman has a few weekends to spend with his children before Arjun and Shagun depart for DPA. At the

time of her separation from Arjun in DPA, she briefly misses Raman.

Now Shagun is eager for her divorce. She offers Raman once again to have children forever and to divorce her. But after Raman's refusal, she denies him access to Roohi on the basis of bogus medical certificates and fraudulent medical explanations. They both understood that a medical certificate was not worth the paper it was printed on and that any quack could sell you one. Roohi completes Raman's existence, and he can no longer survive without her presence. Raman finally decides to divorce Shagun and gains custody of their two children. Shagun is granted visitor privileges [8]. They are now free to marry whoever they choose.

This novel has two protagonists: Shagun and Ishita. Ishita is the figure through which Kapur addresses the topic of female infertility. In Indian culture, infertility is viewed as a curse, and Ishita falls victim to this way of thinking. She is the sole offspring of Mr. and Mrs. Rajora. As traditional Indian parents, Mr. and Mrs. Rajora want Ishita to get married as soon as they locate a suitable proposal, but Ishita's modern way of thinking compels her to first obtain employment.

“Ishita had no intention of getting

married. She was aware that it was in her future, but she desired to work first”. (Kapur, 292)

In accordance with her parent's wishes, she weds Suryakanta, an engineer from Delhi College of Engineering. As a newlywed, Ishita initially enjoys the sweetness of her wedded life, but this could not stay forever. As the months passed, there were no pregnancy indicators. Ishita's in-laws believed that she was responsible for her inability to conceive after two years of constant mental stress. Ishita is injured. Her mother-in-law sends her to the gynecologist for medical examinations because she wants to know the exact root of the problem and a quick solution to it. When the nurse calls them into the doctor's office, Ishita must endure a painful fertility therapy that proves ineffective. As a result of her infertility, which was inflicted by nature, Ishita's once-delightful marital existence had ended.

Still, her mother forces her to live in her husband's home, but she refuses. Finally, she divorces her husband Suryakanta, and returns to her parent's home. Ishita eventually recovers from her sorrow and begins to teach the slum youngsters 'Jeevan' with tremendous

dedication. She is also willing to adopt a child. Due to the closeness between her mother and Raman's mother, she comes into contact with Raman and Roohi over time. Though she begins caring for Roohi to satiate her yearning for motherhood, her charming, simple, and innocent demeanor enables her to win Raman's, broken heart [9]. Raman develops a fondness for Ishita despite the fact that she is not as attractive as Shagun, due to her kind behavior toward Roohi.

Through the role of Ishita, Kapur depicts a lady who, like a wife, shares everything with her husband, whether it be drinking, worrying, enjoying, or life's problems. Being victims of circumstance and having mutual wants, Raman and Ishita grow closer and develop an intimate relationship. Raman proposes marriage to Ishita, and she accepts. Their marriage is performed in court, and she presents to her parents the court marriage documents. Shagun, who is now living in New York following her divorce from Raman, uses her visitation rights to invite Roohi and Arjun to visit her, which causes friction between Raman and Ishita, and Arjun. Shagun is able to earn Arjun's devotion more than Raman by appealing to his maternal love, and she manipulates him against Raman. Raman is troubled by Arjun's indifference to himself. Except for

this, Arjun tries to convince Roohi that Shagn is her only mother and not Ishita, which Ishita finds intolerable because she loves Roohi more than anything else in the world.

Ishita is unwilling to send Roohi to New York due to Roohi's psychological issues resulting from her prior trips to New York and her own feelings of insecurity, and she prepares an excuse for Roohi's admission to a prestigious school. However, this is not a one-time occurrence. Shagun saw Raman and Ishita's refusal to send Roohi to her during the next two or three summer holidays as a betrayal, but Ishita fears that Shagun will not return Roohi to India. Because of this, she disregards Raman's cautions regarding Shagun. Shagun's longing for Roohi has produced difficulties in her relationship with Ashok. As Raman and Ishita do not send Roohi to Shagun, she sends Arjun back to Raman from New York right before he leaves for school. This time, though, Ishita is now embroiled in the conflict between Raman and Shagun over the children. Ishita, who has so diligently settled home with the love of a husband and a daughter, is unwilling to let anyone steal her happiness and love.

Shagun begins to threaten her return to India in order to reopen the children's custody lawsuit after nearly two

years have passed. Ishita is really distressed, but she also wants to end all of this uncertainty since it is intolerable for her. Approximately three years have passed, and Roohi has not visited Shagun. Raman learns that Ashok is heading to South East Asia as the region's leader and would be stationed in Singapore. It was simple for Shagun to go from Singapore to India for legal formalities and to reopen the custody issue. In order to strengthen their case, Raman and Ishita file a lawsuit in court against Shagun, alleging that sending Roohi to her real mother will cause her psychological harm because she is overly attached to her stepmother and that her separation from Ishita will be cruel. Shagun responds by filing a contempt of court lawsuit for refusing access to the kid (Roohi) and requesting custody of both children. Ishita feels as though she is walking on eggshells [11]. She prepares and manipulates Roohi to answer the judge's question in the courtroom. Now that Roohi is seven years old, she must answer the judge's questions in the courtroom. Shagun accompanies Ashok to India for the hearing.

Ishita, Raman, Roohi, and Shagun arrive at the Tees Hazari Court on the day of the hearing, but Ashok does not accompany Shagun, which becomes deadly for her case, as he is preoccupied

with business-related matters. When questioned by the judge about her mother, Roohi states that Ishita is her mother and that she wants to live with her. Roohi is entrusted to Raman and Ishita, while Arjun is entrusted to Shagun until the children reach the age of eighteen and can make their own decisions. Children's consent was required for visitation to be permitted. Ishita feels completely at ease, but she also wonders about her husband as she returns home with Roohi. After viewing Custody from beginning to end, we obtain an accurate depiction of the hollowness and selfishness of the modern marriage.

Almost every relationship in this work ends, which evokes sympathy in the readers, especially for the predicament of children. Even though Shagun is the protagonist of this work, she cannot be considered a heroine due to her many flaws. Though, as a human being, she has the right to live her life according to her own preferences, she should have also considered her family life, where Raman truly loves her and tries his best to provide her with all the comforts, as well as her two children, who were quite young at the time of her affair with Ashok. When deciding the price of her independence from her first marriage, she is willing to give up her parental rights in exchange for divorce from Raman. She desires to

exercise her visiting rights after her marriage to Ashok and relocation to the United States, but she avoids pursuing a case of contempt against Raman since she is unwilling to keep Roohi with her forever due to the difficulties associated with Roohi's youth. She manipulates Arjun against Raman, as well.

Ishita, on the other hand, manipulates Roohi against Shagun since she is infertile and cannot have children. Roohi gives her life purpose and completion. When Shagun files contempt of court lawsuit against Raman and attempts to get custody of both Roohi and Arjun, Ishita prepares for a fight and puts out her best efforts to win custody of Roohi. She convinces and trains Roohi so that she identifies Ishita as her mother and refuses to accompany Shagun. It is also a win for Ishita's boundless devotion to Roohi [11]. She also recognizes that Shagun is Roohi's biological mother and that Roohi may prefer to go with her, which is why she effectively manipulates Roohi's child psychology against Shagun and wins custody. On the other hand, Shagun is also aware of the reality of her current situation.

Especially after a huge argument with Ashok over Roohi's custody and her trips to Shagun, her illusions are dispelled. There are numerous instances in which

Shagun believes she needs Raman by her side. In her letters to her mother, Shagun acknowledges that she has made mistakes, but she also recognizes that she cannot return to the past and that she must accept the present as it is. The novel's two female protagonists, Shagun and Ishita, are characterized by vitality and a touch of realism, according to this overall analysis. Shagun desires to give her life a new direction, so she leaves Raman and her family. Ishita desires to live with self-respect and in accordance with her fundamental right to be happy. She leaves Suryakanta's home and accepts Raman's proposition due to her natural cravings and feminine nature.

CONCLUSION

Infidelity, infertility, love, corruption, suffocation, alienation, and the hollowness of contemporary Indian marriage and family are explored in Kapur's *Custody*. Shagun and Ishita's personalities provide as a contrast to one another. While Shagun is dissatisfied with her married life to Raman despite having everything she needs, Ishita is the victim of her husband and in-laws' narrow-mindedness. Shagun desires a covert romance with Ashok to make up for her early marriage, but she soon finds herself bound in this relationship. Shagun, who is exceptionally attractive and desires to

become a model, feels trapped by her household responsibilities due to her early marriage and two children. However, when Shagun has the potential to advance in her life, she disregards all social norms and restrictions. She cannot wait to divorce Raman and go to New York with Ashok so that she can live a life full of excitement and adventure. Manju Kapur's "Custody" is a literary masterwork that conveys to the reader the emptiness of modern marriages and the anguish of the children of a broken family. In this work, Manju Kapur explores the heights of women's mind. In her article Gender and Narrative Strategy, Jasbir Jain argues that women's and men's narrative strategies differ. Shagun and Ishita are ideal examples of this in the context of custody.

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