

## **BROKEN FAMILIES AND BRITTLE RELATIONSHIPS IN MANJU KAPUR'S CUSTODY: A SOCIAL PERSPECTIVE**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Manju Kapur's novels, especially *Custody*, have been critically reviewed by many from different perspectives. The present paper discusses the societal implications of divorce and the consequent breaking up of family; the trauma the children have to undergo; how relationships are strained and affected; and stigma attached to infertility and inferences made from the study.

A child is born. The first relation it comes to know instinctively is its mother. Then, as it grows, it learns about its father and siblings; and, in some cases, the grandparents. As it grows up further, it knows about relatives, friends and neighbours. How strong are these relationships purely depends on the individual. Of these relationships, parental affection is foremost, especially that of the mother. If the bond between the child and the mother is strong and the parents bring up the child with love and careful guidance, then the child grows into a confident, caring, loving and useful member of the society. As one grows up and settles in life, one gets another important relationship, viz., spouse. For many, this is a turning point in life. An ideal relationship between the husband and the wife will have following elements: love, affection, understanding, mutual trust and mutual respect, which ensure peace and harmony in the family.

**KEYWORDS:** Manju Kapur's Novels, Custody of Manju Kapur

### **INTRODUCTION**

Traditionally, in India, in joint families the relationships are carefully maintained and nurtured, even when there are fissures and frictions, they are often covered up. A major element in safeguarding relationships is compromise and at the other end is ego, which is often the cause of split and fissures. In modern nuclear families, the relationship is easily strained and due to western influence, the tolerance limit is less. Individualism and independence are given so much importance and become the guiding spirit in today's life. Hence people are very sensitive and touchy about these two. The major relationship in a nuclear family, namely that of husband and wife, when disturbed often ends in separation and divorce. This affects not only the individuals concerned but everybody else, like their parents, children and in a way the society also.

*Custody* is Manju Kapur's fifth novel and is about upper middle class families in Delhi. The story is supposed to have happened during the 1990s. Kapur's novels in general depict the travails, tribulations, pains, difficulties, etc faced by modern educated women in upper middle class families. In *Custody*, Shagun and Raman are brought together by an arranged marriage. Things go smoothly and they beget two children: a boy and a girl. Both of them love their children deeply. Then fissures begin to appear in the relationship. As Raman, who is ambitious, is always busy in his work and Shagun feels discontented, limited, ignored and bored. Then there appears Ashok, who feels attracted towards Shagun.

He takes advantage of Shagun's frustrations in her married life and seduces her. Shagun, who is bold and highly individualistic, feels the relationship with Raman is stifling and allows no scope for her self-expression and fulfillment. Shagun's mother opposes Shagun's action and feels she is bringing down the name of the family. She does not pay heed to her mother's objections and protests: "The house rests upon a woman. In your children happiness, your husband happiness, lies your own. Anything else is just temporary" (*Custody* 79).

She brushes aside the ideas of conventional morality and her own inner conflict of mind, whether to lead the life of a traditional wife or daringly choose a path impelled by her heart, and unmindful of the scandal and social stigma of her act, leaves Raman and starts living with Ashok and gets a divorce. Thus, she has chosen a rebellious path, unmindful of what happens to her own children and other relatives. All she wants is to assert her individuality and independence. But what Shagun seems to have missed is that the price she will have to pay for her freedom and the consequences of the break-up. Then there is also the problem that who is to take custody of the children. They go to court in an endless legal battle. Meanwhile, Shagun's son comes into her care, while the girl, Roohi, goes to Raman. All of the members of Raman's family, in addition to Shagun's mother, are distressed and pained by the separation and divorce.

The ten year old boy Arjun goes to Shagun and the three year old Roohi goes to the father, Raman. The grandparents feel very much about losing their grandson to Shagun. So they, in their anger, see Shagun as a villain. In the same apartment complex, there is a south Indian family. Their younger daughter, Ishita, is a dentist. When it is learnt that Ishita is infertile and can bear no children, the husband divorces her. As Adrienne Rich says in this world, "Motherhood is not only a core human relationship but a political institution, a keystone to the domination in every sphere of women by men" (Qtd. in Singh : 193). Ishita returns to her parents where she meets Raman's daughter, Roohi. They become fond of each other. This puts the idea of getting Raman and Ishita married into the heads of both the parents and they are married, after initial scuffle between Raman and Ishita.

The book relates the story of the breakup of two marriages, second marriages and the willingness of adults to manipulate and use their children's emotions to obtain custody. It shows the slow, tortuous progress of custody cases in Indian courts and the misery of parents. It reveals the ugliness that surrounds the battle over kids - the exaggerations, the lies and distortions that are involved in Indian court cases. (Singh Web)

In this novel, the two main female characters are Shagun and Ishita. Though both are educated and modern and both come out of failed marriages, in many respects, they are also diametrically opposite. While Shagun is self-centered and ultra modern with much western influence, Ishita is traditional and self-sacrificing and desires to have peace and harmony in the family more than anything else. Shagun who goes after her heart and wants to assert her independence and individuality is on one side and Ishita who tries her best to embrace all the relationships in the family with love and affection. After the divorce, begins a crude battle for the guardianship of their children; a lethal game where the innocent children get trapped and are torn between their two sets of parents... Each character has a mind set, unique in its own way, reflecting the modern virtues that we have been adapting. The author manages to create a sublime atmosphere that reveals the various tragedies that a family can go through. The future of the children is at stake. There is screaming, yelling, and all the possible melodrama.[...] does our culture and traditional thinking change drastically with time as well? In a fierce battle of wills and clash of egos, would you want your children to suffer the consequences? (Bale Web)

Shagun always keeps her wishes and desires first and foremost and fails as a mother, whereas Ishita is selfless and looks after Roohi with love and care. Readers find her character more mature and sensible. But in the second half of the

novel there is a change in her and she tries very hard to replace the biological mother. To the infertile Ishita, Roohi is her world and she becomes very possessive and lives in a constant fear of losing Roohi. The persons most affected by the divorce and legal battle of Raman and Shagun are their children, Arjun and Roohi. "It is the children who show the effects of the failed marriage. Arjun does poorly in his studies and stops going to school. Roohi shows the classic signs of insecurity like thumb sucking, bedwetting and clings to her stepmother Ishita" (Bhaskar Web).

Ishita also comes between Roohi and Shagun. After her Marriage with Ashok, Shagun wants Raman to send Roohi during her vacation to America where she resides. But Ishita refuses to send Roohi. It is always better to end than drag. But this concept doesn't seem to work on relationships. Quitting a relationship is not that easy and, in fact, it brings new complications.

Kapur clearly wants to stress that Indian child-custody cases drag on for years - but unfortunately, this means her book drags on as well. The last quarter becomes increasingly repetitious as Shagun and Raman continue to have the same inconclusive conversations with their parents, their children, their new partners, their lawyers - and occasionally even each other. (Akbar Web)

In this novel, the main relationships portrayed are: Shagun-Her mother, Shagun-Raman, Shagun-Ashok, Shagun-Arjun, Shagun-Roohi, Shagun-Ishita, Ishita-Raman, Raman-Arjun, Raman-Roohi, Ishita-Roohi, Ishita-Arjun, Roohi and Arjun-Raman's parents and Ishita-Her parents. Shagun reveals her craving for individuality, independence and fulfillment in all her relationships. She would not sacrifice them for anybody. Raman is a typical husband. He loves Shagun and their children and all the other members of his family. But when Shagun ditches him, his love for her, turns into hatred. Though initially there the relationship between Ishita and Raman is lukewarm and it grows into love and affection. Ishita, by her noble character and actions, endears herself to Raman and his family. As for Roohi, she thinks her biological mother does not love her and craves love, which she finds in Ishita. Ishita, who is denied motherhood, finds that priceless relationship she missed. Hence her relationship with Roohi is strong and powerful and she heaps her love on the child. In her own words: "Ever since marriage I have put her welfare above everything. I think of her as my flesh and blood. If anybody is like a stepmother it is this lady. To be a mother you need a heart" (*Custody* 212).

The relationship between father and son i.e. Raman and Arjun is strained due to the influence of Shagun and Ashok. Raman who deeply loves his son, feels pained and expresses his pain to his son in the following words: "I keep wondering how you are. You hardly write to me, and then such short letters, there is nothing to say. Just studies and games, still I worry about you. As it is, there is hardly any contact between us" (*Custody* 329).

The relationship between Arjun and Roohi is strained as both of them find themselves in the opposite camps, which is a tragedy. Thus Arjun misses a sister's love and affection and Roohi, that of a brother. Ishita's family is a close-knit and cherishes traditional values and morals. Almost similar to that is the Bhalla family i.e. Raman's. By disapproving Shagun's actions, her mother proves to be a traditional woman. The Bhalla family (Raman's) and the Iyer family (Ishita's) lead a normal, happy and contented life till the bomb of divorce bursts upon them.

The Bhalla family, especially Raman, wants the custody of his children and is prepared to fight any length for it. Shagun also equally adamant in taking possession of her children and she is supported by Ashok, who wants to snub Raman. The ego, in addition to, of course, affection, on both sides makes no compromise possible. So the obsession to possess the children causes the legal battle turn bitter and venomous.

*Custody* is the riveting story of how family love can disintegrate into an obsession to possess children, body and soul, as well as a chilling critique of the Indian judicial system. Told with nuance, sympathy, and clear-sightedness, it confirms Manju Kapur's reputation as the great chronicler of the modern Indian family. *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. (Lau Web)

To conclude, the following inferences are made:

A divorce, which is an extreme step, is more often a tragedy, causing pain and suffering not only to the persons concerned, but also to all the family members. This is the case in *Custody*.

If the divorce is with the understanding and mutual consent of the parties concerned, without any rancor, bitterness or anger and if they part as friends, then the pain is bound to be much less. This is not the case in *Custody*.

If there are children, then it becomes even more painful, as it affects the lives of the children in a great way. Even in the western world, this is the case. It is not easy to assuage the pain and suffering caused to the children. Arjun and Roohi are standing testimonies for this.

There is no point in blaming anybody for the divorce and family break-up. Because it is purely subjective. Remaining docile, submissive and putting up with all insults and suffering may be considered as virtues in the past. But, from feminist perspective, Shagun's actions to get out of a caged-in life may seem perfectly normal and her efforts to become individualistic and independent are praiseworthy. There may be others who may decry her actions as selfish and heartless, as the divorce causes so much suffering and pain to so many. In other words, the perspective may differ from reader to reader and critic to critic.

Ego, impatience, suspicion, arrogance and self-centeredness spoil relationships, while love, kindness, compassion and broad-mindedness cement and strengthen relationships. Joint family system which nurtured all relationships and strengthened the ties of family is getting weakened, if not dying. With the disappearance of the joint family system, which fostered values like respect for elders, love, kindness and compassion, values may also easily get eroded in the future society.

Children of the future may have to face many such challenges as small nuclear families are the order of the day. Hence, self-centeredness may replace common good and individual aspirations replace the concept of living for others and common welfare. As a consequence, love and affection may be there only in a limited sense, confined to a very small circle. As for sharing and caring, it may totally disappear. There may not be uncles or aunts for the children of the future as many modern families do not want to have more than one child.

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