

# Different Shades of Feminism in 'Custody' by Manju Kapur

Pooja Malik, Dr Parul Yadav

Assistant Professor, Amity School of Liberal Arts, Amity University, Haryana

**Abstract:** Feminism can be regarded as the most popular term in the field of literature in modern scenario. As the world is changing with the impact of education, the situation of women is also changing in society. In Indian society, which is known as a closed society, women are coming out from the restrictions of patriarchal system and trying to make their own identity which is free from the shadow of their male counterparts. In this regard, Manju Kapur is known as a modern feminist who has developed the characters of her female protagonists in her novels in such a way that they can represent all the shades of feminism in themselves. Her 'Custody' is an exemplary novel which provides an insight in her wide and deep perspective of women's psyche. In this novel, she has raised the issues of globalization, liberalization and drastically changing mode of society along with the desire of liberty in women, infertility in women and hollowness of modern marriage. In this she explored the effect of divorce on children also, may they are toddlers or adolescents.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Patriarchy, Globalization, Liberalization, Infertility.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Manju Kapur is well known name in Indian English Literature. She is regarded as modern feminist who has written five novels till yet. Her first novel *Difficult Daughters* is set against the historical backdrop of partition is based on the life of protagonist Virmati. Her second novel *A Married Woman* is about the life of a protagonist Astha. The plight of Astha can be felt by any married woman in an upper middle class Indian society. Her third novel *Home* is the mirror of traditional Indian society in which a girl feels herself shackled on the name of rituals, superstitions and family honour etc. Fourth novel *The Immigrant* is the story of Nina who feels herself alienated in a foreign country after her marriage. Her fifth novel *Custody* was published in 2011 and proved to be a great success for the author. The chief distinguishing element of *Custody* is that while the other our novels are centred to the life of one protagonist (*Difficult Daughters*-Virmati, *A Married Woman*-Astha, *Home*-Nisha, *The Immigrant*-Nina), *Custody* has two protagonists, Shagun and Ishita. Though there is no similarity in their feminine nature but they both play the equally important role in this novel. Infact it also should be said in this regard that *Custody* is not only a feministic novel, rather in this novel the author has touched all those aspects of married and family life in Indian society which are equally painful as well as soothing for everyone. This novel is not confined only to man-woman relationship or the suppression of feminine, rather it has dealt with the life of children of a broken family, may be toddler or adolescent. The hollowness of modern matrimony is described in this novel in a very pathetic way. The impact of family dispute on children is shown with heart-rending intensity.

As her first novel deals with the period of partition, second novel deals with the communal riots,

aroused from Babri Masjid Dispute, third novel deals with the changing trend in traditional Indian families, the fourth novel with the feeling of alienation, her fifth novel *Custody* deals with the impact of globalization and economic liberalization on Indian societies and families. In this novel Manju Kapur discloses the deviations and modernity which have become the leading factors in our society, especially in Metropolitan cities where people have become the victims of modernity. With the surge of foreign investment in India, it was a period for economic and financial boom for everyone. The foreign investment was welcome by every class of society, may be bankers, bureaucrats, industrialists and government officials. Everyone was willing to move forward in his life. This economic and financial boom created a competitive environment in Indian society specially in urban class of people. As *Custody* is set around a middle-class family living in Delhi, the protagonists are also the victims of this materialistic approach and effects of urbanization.

As above mentioned, in this novel Manju Kapur has presented two female protagonists with equal strength in their character. The first protagonist is Shagun and the second is Ishita. Through these two characters Manju Kapur has given two totally different diverges of female psyche. Besides this the novel is heart rending in the exploration of manipulation of the children by their parents for their benefits. The plight of children is too painstaking to make anyone feel pity for them. All these traits reveal that *Custody* is not only a social commentary but much more than this. As Mithu Banerjee writes,

"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.”

The novel gets starts with the story of Raman and Shagun. Raman Kaushik is a sales manager of Mangoh, the foreign beverages brand in India and Shagun, the house wife and mother of a toddler daughter Roohi and an eight years old boy Arjun, is Raman’s wife. From the very beginning, Shagun is very ambitious and quite aware about her beauty. In the words of Manju Kapur, ‘In her colouring, her greenish eyes and her demeanour, she was a perfect blend of East and West.’ (P 4)

The marriage of Raman and Shagun is arranged along with these standard lines when her age was not even twenty-two. ‘she the beauty, he the one with the brilliant prospects.’ (p.14)

Soon after her marriage she gives birth to a baby boy and the heir producing duty is done smoothly. Her son inherits her looks and colour, a further source of gratification. Everything is good and adorable in the married life of Raman and Shagun. When her son Arjun is almost eight years old she gives birth to a baby girl Roohi for which she was not mentally prepared. While Arjun looks like her mother, Roohi is the carbon copy of her father, a plain-featured face.

With the passing of time, Raman indulges more and more in his work. The competition of corporate sector which aroused out of the liberalized policies of Indian economy, starts to effect Raman’s family. Travelling becomes a frequent thing in his job and he has to stay away late night from his house often. All these things make Shagun a frustrated one. She gets tired of looking after the children and home alone. She is the one who once wanted to be a model but after marriage her life is changed.

‘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.’ (P 11)

Her life is suddenly changed with the arrival of Ashok Khanna. Ashok Khanna comes as Raman’s boss and is appointed in India for a limited period by the cold drink company. Though he himself has a dynamic personality, but gets attracted towards Shagun when he looks at her for the first time. He immediately decides to own her, to win her.

It was the impression of Ashok that Shagun starts to feel herself unhappier in her life than ever. Finally, Ashok gets success in seducing her and Shagun indulges in love relations with Ashok without caring for the morality, society and her family life. The opening scene of the novel is about the love making of 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.’ (P 1)

Betrayal of Shagun towards Raman reveals the infidelity and hollowness of a modern marriage where one’s self is more important than anything else. While every need is being fulfilled still there is a wild goose

chase in each matrimony which leads to extra-marital relations. Though Shagun has a lot of potentialities in herself to form her career, to live a dynamic life but she is trapped in responsibilities because of getting married at an early age. Though at the time of her affair with Ashok she is a matured one of thirty-two years yet she cannot resist her suppressed spirit. She is aware of her guilty sense and her conscience checks her at every step which she takes.

‘She believed that the spirits of the universe at the service of the betrayed partners were tracking her movements, keeping note of incriminating times and places.’ (P 1)

Though Raman is a very caring husband in true sense but he cannot understand the changing mode of his wife’s life suddenly which is the impression of Ashok. Shagun has never thought of divorcing Raman or leaving her children. She accepts affair with Ashok only as a compensation for her marriage at early 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 college.’ (p.86)

But Ashok is determined to marry her and take her away to New York. Eventually Shagun decides to give divorce to Raman. By the Raman also has sensed something wrong in his relationship with Shagun. He hires a private detective and finds out the reality. Raman gets a major heart attack because of Shagun’s infidelity and her demand for divorce. Raman’s illness arises a strong sense of guilt in Shagun.

‘That evening Shagun walked slowly to the colony Park. She needed to be away from the house, it was too full of her husband. Raman must have struggled to forgive her; how many men would have been so generous? Ashok did not have this gentle, forgiving streak, he would rather kill both her and himself before he let her go. She was a fool for preferring him, a fool. One day she would be punished.’ (p.109)

Raman is also ready to forgive her and forget everything but the intensity of Shagun’s passionate nature and her love for Ashok drags her to extent of forgetting her guilt and deciding to divorce Raman. Shagun comes to live in Ashok’s house. Now the bitter fights take place in the court first for divorce and then for the custody of both children, Arjun and Roohi. About this desire of Shagun for freedom and to live life in her own manner Jaidev says in his article *Problematizing Feminism-*

‘Indeed, any sophisticated system today operates not by a direct and visible exploitation of people but by making them retain an illusion of freedom and free choice, by making them willingly give into its imperatives, and by subtly ensuring that they do not see that they are dupes or victims.’ Shagun demands divorce from Raman and is ready to leave the custody of children in exchange. Divorce affects the life of children adversely. Not only their present life but future life also. Dr Jann Gumbiner, who is a well-known psychologist and daughter of a divorced mother, shares

her own experience in her article *Divorce Hurts Children, Even Grown Ones* – “During the 70s, when the psychological literature first discussed the effects of divorce on children, the general view was that divorce doesn't have to harm 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 didn't care what became of me. Perhaps, the kid is stuck with a depressed mother who can't leave her room, clean up the kitchen, or take the child to school. This child is ashamed to invite friends home from school and friendships suffer. My brother couldn't play Little League because there was no one to drive him to games. Extra-curricular activities suffer.”

In ‘Custody’, the author gives a realistic and heart touching description of the manipulation of the children by their parents for the sake of their custody rights and divorce. When Shagun gets the court notice about the custody of children, she is full of rage and in her furious stage she tells Roohi about the notice in these words, “It is a little message from your father. He is trying to kill me.” (p.144)

Roohi clings to her mother at this unpleasant and bad feedback against Raman and gets worried about her mother who actually wants a divorce from Raman in exchange of her children. At the time of hearing in court, Shagun prepared Arjun for the statement before the judge and manipulates him also for her own sake.

“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.” (p213)

Shagun is impatient for divorce. She again offers Raman to have children for ever and give her divorce. After Raman's denial, she does not let him meet Roohi. Roohi is the one who makes Raman's life complete and he can't live without seeing her anymore. Lastly Raman agrees to give divorce to Shagun and gets the custody of both children. Shagun gets the visitation rights. Now they are free to marry anyone they like.

As discussed in the starting, there are two protagonists in this novel, Shagun and Ishita. Ishita is the character who serves as contrast to Shagun and through whom Kapur deals with the issue of infertility in women. Infertility is regarded as a curse in Indian society and Ishita becomes a prey of this thinking pattern. She is the only child of her parents Mr. and Mrs. Rajora. As a traditional Indian parents, Mr. and Mrs.

Rajora get her married as soon as they find a suitable proposal. After two years of marriage, it was clear that Ishita had some problem in conceiving and her in-laws considered her responsible for this. Ishita gets hurt.

“Smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in the sunlit air, smaller than drops of dew caught between blades of grass in the morning was Ishita as she sat in the gynaecologist's office with her mother-in-law, watching as the doctor sketched out the messages concealed in her body. Here were the tubes, here the eggs, here was where conception occurred. The loss of normal anatomy meant fertilization couldn't take place without intervention.” (p.65)

As Asha Saharan says 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 assumptions of motherhood is imposed on her body.”

Lastly she gets divorce from her husband Suryakanta and comes back to live with her parents. After some time Ishita recovers from her agony and starts to teach the slum children with great dedication. Gradually in the course of the novel, she meets Raman and Roohi. Though she starts to look after Roohi just to quench her thirst of motherhood yet she has the power to win Raman's wounded heart by her sweet, simple and innocent nature. Ishita is not as beautiful as Shagun but because of her sweet behaviour with Roohi, Raman starts liking her. Their marriage takes place in the court.

By the time Shagun is also settled in New York and she calls Arjun and Roohi there for some time by using her visitation rights. She is successful in winning Arjun's affection more than Raman. That is why Arjun is indifferent for Raman and he does not like Ishita also. But for Roohi, Ishita is not ready to send her to New York because of her own feeling of insecurity as Shagun is her biological mother. Shagun takes it as a betrayal to herself. Her restlessness for Roohi has created problems in her relations with Ashok also.

“Perhaps I was foolish to believe, but he did promise to keep me happy for ever not that I have reproached him with anything. Our life together would not have been possible if I had regretted my past still. 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 foundations are fragile.” (p.391)

There is again a fight between Raman and Shagun for children but this time Ishita is also involved in this fight.

“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.” (p.381)

Shagun also files a case for contempt of court for denying access to the minor (Roohi) and demands custody of both children. Ishita manipulates Roohi against Shagun to answer the question of judge in court room. When Roohi is questioned about her mother, she answers the judge that Ishita is her mother and she wants to live with her. Lastly the custody Roohi goes to Raman and Ishita and custody of Arjun goes to Shagun till the time the kids become eighteen years old and decide on their own. Visitation was possible only with the willingness of children.

Ishita is relaxed from the core of her heart but at the same time while going back to her home with Roohi she thinks about her husband also.

“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 precious part of the marriage with her. She stretched out a hand and clutched her daughter’s first firmly in it.” (p.415)

## II. DISCUSSION

So, after having a complete glance of Custody, we find that Manju Kapur has given the immense shades of feminism in this novel. She has given so many aspects of feminism in this novel that they cannot be explored by one character. That is why she has developed the characters of two protagonists, Shagun and Ishita. Though as a human being, Shagun also has right to live her life as per her own wish but before moving forward on her way, she should have considered about her family also where she has a loving husband and two innocent children. On the other hand Ishita who has received rejection in her first marriage due to her infertility, embraces the love of Roohi and Raman in the depths of her heart and becomes possessive also for Roohi. She is afraid of losing Roohi. Ishita and Shagun are completely different from each other. As Jasbir Jain says in her 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.”

## III. REFERENCES

- [1]. Banerji, Mithu. A Review of Custody by Manju Kapur, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/27/custody-manjukapur- review>, accessed on 19th March 2014.
- [2]. Jaidev; —Problematizing Feminism. *Feminism and Recent Fiction in English*. Ed.

Sushila Singh, New Delhi: Prestige Books International, 2013, p. 48.

- [3]. Gumbiner, Jann. Divorce Hurts Children, Even Grown Ones. <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-teenage-mind/2011/10/divorce-hurts-children-even-grown-ones>, accessed on 29th Oct. 2013.
- [4]. Saharan, Asha. Treatment of Infidelity and Infertility in Manju Kapur’s Custody, [http://www.tjells.com/article/354\\_Asha%20saharan.pdf](http://www.tjells.com/article/354_Asha%20saharan.pdf), accessed on 16th July 2014.
- [5]. Jain, Jasbir. —Gender and Narrative. *Gender and Literature*. Ed. Iqbal Kaur, Delhi: B.R. Publishing, 1992, p. 54.
- [6]. Kapur, Manju. *Custody*, Faber and Faber, 2011