

# Manju Kapur's *Custody*: A Clash of Traditions and Modernity

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**Abstract:** Manju Kapur's *Custody* (2011) explores the profound emotional and psychological tensions within a modern Indian family as it grapples with the opposing forces of tradition and modernity. The novel, set against the backdrop of India's post-liberalization era, delves into the complexities of marriage, infidelity, personal autonomy, and the familial and legal challenges that arise in the wake of societal transformation. At the heart of *Custody* lies a deeply personal conflict between two women, Shagun and Ishita, who represent the evolving roles of women in an increasingly modernized society, and the man who stands between them—Raman, a traditional husband who struggles to navigate the changing expectations placed upon him (Bhagat 14-20). This period of social change gives rise to new identities, roles, and expectations, particularly for women who now seek to assert their individual rights and desires in a context that once confined them to traditional roles of wife and mother. *Custody* presents a nuanced critique of these tensions, exploring how women negotiate their personal freedom within the confines of familial duty and societal expectations (Derné 32).

**Keywords:** Modernity, Tradition, Marriage, Women, Custody, Family

**Introduction:** The character of Shagun, in particular, embodies the conflict between tradition and modernity. She seeks to escape the oppressive expectations of her marriage to Raman, engaging in an extramarital affair with Ashok Khanna, her husband's boss. Shagun's actions symbolize a modern rebellion against the conventional structures of Indian marriages, while her subsequent actions highlight the psychological and emotional consequences of defying those structures. This longing for a life outside the familial structure reflects the growing individualism in Indian society, where personal fulfillment is increasingly prioritized. Shagun's affair is a direct challenge to the traditional notion of marital fidelity, one that often holds women accountable for their actions within the confines of family and societal honor. On the other hand, Ishita, Raman's second wife, represents the ideals of the traditional Indian woman—self-sacrificing, nurturing, and dedicated to her family (Foulsham 121-124). Ishita's acceptance of her role within the family, despite her own personal suffering due to infertility, illustrates the persistence of traditional values in a rapidly changing society. The contrasts between Shagun's rebellious quest for independence and Ishita's quiet acceptance of traditional roles mirror the larger societal tensions between the past and the present.

The tension between tradition and modernity is evident not only in the personal struggles of the characters but also in the legal, cultural, and emotional spheres that govern their lives. In this context, *Custody* explores how women's roles in society are being renegotiated in post-liberalization India, where the pull of modernity often conflicts with the enduring power of tradition. Ishita's adherence to familial duty contrasts sharply with Shagun's quest for personal freedom, and the emotional consequences of their choices offer a critique of the societal and familial expectations placed upon them.

The clash between tradition and modernity is central to the plot, particularly in how the female characters, Shagun and Ishita, embody two opposing forces within the family structure. Shagun, the modern woman, yearns for personal autonomy and freedom, rejecting the traditional confines of marriage and motherhood. Ishita, on the other hand, represents the self-sacrificing, nurturing woman whose life revolves around her duties as a wife and mother. The contrast between Shagun's rebellious spirit and Ishita's adherence to traditional values is symbolic of the broader generational and societal shift taking place in India during the post-liberalization period.

This clash of values can be seen through the lens of the patriarchal tradition that both Shagun and Ishita navigate in their respective lives. Shagun's pursuit of independence highlights the oppressive nature of the patriarchy that governs Indian marriages. From the very beginning of her marriage to Raman, Shagun is portrayed as a woman who feels trapped within the constraints of domesticity and societal expectations (Desai 87). She represents the woman who refuses to conform to the roles that society has preordained for her.

As Kapur writes, "She had always felt that her life would begin after marriage, but here she was, trapped in a routine, without any joy. Marriage, which had promised the freedom to be herself, now felt like a cage, and the life she had once dreamed of seemed like a distant, unattainable fantasy. She could not reconcile the two parts of herself—the woman who longed for adventure and the woman who had agreed to be subjugated to the rhythms of domesticity" (Kapur 27).

This longing for fulfillment beyond the household responsibilities reflects the growing individualism of modern women in urban India, where personal freedom and fulfillment have begun to rival familial obligations. Shagun's emotional dissatisfaction with her domestic life leads to a desire to escape through an extramarital affair with Ashok Khanna, a man who seems to offer her the emotional fulfillment she lacks in

her marriage (Govender 31). Her affair is not merely a personal indiscretion but a rebellion against the patriarchy's dictates regarding marital fidelity. It is an assertion of her autonomy, albeit one that comes at great emotional cost.

Her affair with Ashok Khanna represents more than just a desire for passion; it is an attempt to reclaim her independence in a world that has conditioned her to be a subordinate wife. As Kapur reveals,

In the brief moments that they spent together, she felt more alive than she had in years. But she also felt a growing guilt, as though her actions had shattered something sacred. Her marriage, her motherhood, her entire life—was this how she was meant to live? (Kapur 123).

This internal conflict mirrors the broader theme in *Custody* of women struggling to balance personal desires with the heavy expectations placed upon them by family and society. The custody battle that ensues after Shagun's separation from Raman is not only about the legal rights over her children but also symbolizes the struggle between personal freedom and familial duty. Shagun's decision to fight for the custody of her children is her final attempt to assert control over her life in a world that continuously seeks to subdue her autonomy. In contrast, Ishita embodies the traditional feminine ideal (Mirza 1061-1070). She is the wife and mother who, despite her own personal grievances, accepts her role without complaint. Ishita's life is defined by selflessness and devotion to her husband, Raman, and his children from his marriage to Shagun. Unlike Shagun, who rejects traditional marital roles, Ishita embraces them, finding fulfillment in her dedication to the family (Sharma 85-92). Her acceptance of these roles can be seen as an embodiment of the traditional values that continue to persist despite the encroachment of modernity. Ishita's character underscores the persistence of traditional family structures, where a woman's identity is predominantly shaped by her familial responsibilities. Ishita's relationship with her husband Raman and his children demonstrates the ideals of maternal and wifely sacrifice that have historically defined the role of women in Indian families. As Kapur poignantly writes,

She had no illusions about her role. Ishita had learned early on that a woman's worth was defined by her willingness to put the needs of others before her own. She had given up on the idea of motherhood for herself, but she had adopted Raman's children as her own, giving them the love and care that she was denied in her own life (Kapur 178).

This passage underscores the idea that Ishita's value is tied to her maternal sacrifice. Her identity is not her own but is defined through the lens of familial expectations. Her role as a mother to Roohi and Arjun, despite being unable to bear children herself, highlights the traditional view that a woman's worth is intrinsically linked to her ability to nurture and care for others. Ishita's quiet acceptance of this role reflects the larger societal norms in India, where women are often expected to fulfill the needs of the family at the cost of their own desires and aspirations (Raman 116-133).

The tension between Shagun's desire for personal autonomy and Ishita's adherence to traditional values comes to the forefront during the custody battle for Roohi. Shagun's inability to reconcile her desire for freedom with her role as a mother complicates her relationship with her children. Her emotional turmoil, exacerbated by her infidelity, leads her to use her children as pawns in her battle for personal independence. As Kapur describes,

In the end, it was not about the children at all. It was about her—about what she had lost, about the life she wanted and could not have. The children became the only leverage she had in a world that had shut her out (Kapur 233).

This quote illustrates how Shagun's personal desires and rebellion against traditional norms manifest in the lives of her children. The emotional manipulation of Arjun and Roohi in the custody proceedings exposes the broader emotional costs of Shagun's pursuit of freedom. In contrast, Ishita's role as a surrogate mother to Roohi represents the idealized notion of motherhood in traditional Indian society (Singh 9). Ishita's relationship with Roohi is one of selfless devotion, a stark contrast to Shagun's emotionally complex and detached relationship with her children. The novel illustrates how women are often expected to embody the nurturing ideal, even when faced with personal hardships (Nair 65). The emotional tug-of-war over Roohi's custody becomes a metaphor for the broader societal expectations placed on women in India, expectations that continue to define their roles as mothers, wives, and caregivers.

The portrayal of maternal sacrifice and the feminine ideal in *Custody* highlights the tension between tradition and modernity in the Indian family. Shagun's rejection of traditional roles and her quest for personal autonomy challenge the status quo, while Ishita's adherence to traditional values represents the continuation of patriarchal ideals. Through these two characters, Kapur offers a critique of the limited roles that society has

historically prescribed for women. While Shagun's rebellion may be seen as an act of liberation, it also comes with profound emotional and familial costs (Mukherjee 200-218). Similarly, while Ishita's self-sacrifice may seem virtuous, it also reveals the limitations and emotional toll of conforming to traditional gender expectations. The emotional and psychological toll of maternal sacrifice is particularly evident in Ishita's character. Her inability to conceive children leads her to adopt Raman's children as her own, a decision that both fills the void in her life and reinforces the societal belief that a woman's primary role is to care for others. As Ishita reflects,

Her life was not her own; it belonged to the family, to Raman, to the children. But in giving up her desires, she had found a kind of peace, a peace that was grounded in duty and selflessness (Kapur 214).

This passage highlights the internal conflict that Ishita faces—while she embraces her role as a mother, it comes at the expense of her own personal identity and desires. In many ways, Ishita represents the ideal woman who lives for others, a figure who remains tethered to traditional values that demand her complete devotion to her family. *Custody* portrays the clash between tradition and modernity through its exploration of women's roles in the Indian family. Shagun's rebellion against traditional values and her quest for personal freedom are juxtaposed with Ishita's adherence to self-sacrifice and familial duty. Through these two characters, Kapur critiques the societal expectations placed on women, examining the emotional and psychological costs of living within rigid familial structures. The tension between personal autonomy and familial obligations serves as the heart of the novel, offering a poignant commentary on the evolving roles of women in contemporary Indian society.

Shagun's marriage to Raman, once built on love and mutual respect, becomes a reflection of the broader societal changes that are occurring in India. As modernity reshapes the roles of women in the family, it also alters the way that relationships function. The marriage between Shagun and Raman slowly deteriorates, not just due to Shagun's infidelity but also because their values begin to diverge. Raman, firmly entrenched in traditional values, is unable to understand Shagun's desire for freedom and autonomy. As the conflict deepens, Shagun's affair with Ashok Khanna becomes the symbol of her rebellion against the domesticity she finds stifling. As she reflects, "I don't want to be the woman who stays behind, silently enduring. I want to live for myself, not just for others" (Kapur 189). This statement encapsulates the emotional and psychological divide

between Shagun's quest for individuality and Raman's attachment to the patriarchal values that define his role as a husband.

Conclusion: Manju Kapur's *Custody* is a poignant exploration of the evolving dynamics within the Indian family, where the clash of tradition and modernity shapes the lives of its characters. Through the emotional struggles of Shagun, Raman, and Ishita, Kapur paints a vivid picture of how women navigate the complexities of identity, marriage, and motherhood in a rapidly changing society. The novel highlights the emotional costs of personal freedom, the impact of divorce on children, and the societal pressures that dictate women's roles within the family structure. In contrast, Ishita's marriage to Raman reflects the continuation of traditional values in modern times. Ishita's role as a mother and wife is marked by self-sacrifice and devotion, and her acceptance of these roles provides a sense of stability and continuity in a world that is increasingly fractured by modern desires and individualism. The contrast between Shagun's rebellion and Ishita's acceptance highlights the tension between modernity and tradition within the Indian family. Ultimately, *Custody* serves as both a critique of traditional patriarchal norms and a reflection on the challenges of reconciling individual desires with familial obligations.

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