

Exploring Marital Fragility in Manju Kapur's *Custody*

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Abstract

Manju Kapur, often hailed as the Jane Austen of contemporary Indian English literature, is a globally esteemed novelist. A contemporary author with contemporary beliefs and ideas, Manju Kapur's craft as a novelist is rooted in the socio-cultural fabric of the Indian middle class. Her novels depict the experiences of the Indian middle-class community. They document all aspects that arise over time in a middle-class family—sexual abuse, arranged marriage politics, infidelity, infertility, adoption, divorce, sexual dysfunction, family conflicts, and numerous other concerns. Her main characters boldly challenge the conventional constraints imposed by the patriarchal and traditional structure in society and refuse to conform to the longstanding traditions and norms of a patriarchal society. In Manju Kapur's *Custody*, the portrayal of man-woman relationships shifts away from traditional romantic idealism, focusing instead on the gritty often painful realities of urban middle-class marriages in 1990s India. Set against the backdrop of a liberalizing economy, the novel explores how shifting societal values like individualism, ambition, and pursuit of personal happiness redefine the domestic sphere. Besides she also depicts how infertility in women acts as a catalyst in marital disruption.

Keywords: Man-Woman Relationship, Conjugal Disharmony, Feminism, Existential Crisis, Infidelity and Infertility

Introduction

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the domestic sphere. Besides she also depicts how infertility in women acts as a catalyst in marital disruption. The present paper seeks to investigate how Manju Kapur's narrative reflects the vulnerability of marriage in the face of modern societal pressures, the erosion of trust, and the struggle for personal identity.

Research Methodology

The methodology for this study would be qualitative, employing a close reading of the text to analyze the character's development. Textual analysis would be complemented by secondary sources, including critical essays and journal articles, to situate Manju Kapur's novel within the broader discourse on marital relationships and their complexities in modern Indian society.

Review of Literature

Arthi, M and Dr. C. Arul Theresa's, (2016) "The Evil Side of Divorce in Manju Kapur's Custody" analyzes the destructive impact of marital breakdown on family members, specifically children, in Manju Kapur's novel Custody. It highlights how ego, infidelity, and selfish pursuits in the novel lead to traumatic consequences for the children.

A. Muthu Meena Losini's (2015) "The Disintegration of Family in Manju Kapur's Custody" studies how children (Arjun and Roohi) are treated as pawns in a "game of legal chess" between divorced or separated parents, causing them immense emotional trauma.

Ghosh, Arpita's (2013) "Women, Education and the Indian Scenario: A Study of Manju Kapur's Novels" highlights on how women in the Indian society are bereft of proper education in the name of tradition.

The institution of marriage is central to all forms of human society which are a part of civilization. Marriage is the deepest as well as the most complex of all human relations as it presents a significant challenge for two individuals to share their lives maintaining their independent thoughts and lifestyles. In the context of human society, the expectations surrounding roles in marriage are distinctly defined and institutionalized resulting in women's role within the family being diverse and multifaceted.

In present time, the world is witnessing a new era where marriage is no longer considered necessary or even significant for a relationship. People are changing the traditional roles and are creating their own rules. Subsequently, the rapid changes are changing the structure of the family. Now a days marriage is not a religious ritual but merely a social contract which can easily be broken on the grounds of boredom or some kind of misunderstanding and quest for personal happiness. In the past, there was a pursuit of togetherness, whether it involved compatibility, respect or familial matters. However, in contemporary times, individuals are no longer satisfied with merely being married. They seek marriages that hold significance. They desire respect, emotional security and genuine companionship.

Manju Kapur illustrates the challenges faced by urban middle class married women through the character of Shagun in her novel *Custody*. She is portrayed as an independent and free-spirited individual who places her personal desires and material aspirations above all. As an only child, Shagun enjoys considerable freedom during her upbringing. Manju Kapur notes, "She graduated from Jesus and Mary College and felt a sense of relief as she set her books aside. Academics had never truly captivated her, although she had performed adequately. What genuinely thrilled her was the independence she envisioned." (Kapur 4) Shagun represents the dreams of a typical middle-class woman who sees marriage as a pathway to personal liberation. She willingly sacrifices her academic ambitions to take on the role of a housewife. She is married to Raman Kaushik, an IIM graduate who worked as a Market Executive for an MNC called the Brand. It was a love cum arranged marriage, a union of beauty and bright futures, but Raman's mother was worried about the attractive Shagun, asking, "if such a woman really be a home-

maker?" (Kapur 4) In Manju Kapur's *Custody*, the dynamics between Shagun and her mother-in-law, Mrs. Kaul, exemplifies the enduring conflict between traditional matriarchal expectations and contemporary individualistic aspirations. Mrs. Kaul had hoped to live with her son and daughter-in-law, but she stayed a spectator to her son's life because Shagun had her own romantic idea of her married life: "the two of them running their house on their own." (Kapur 21) The role Mrs. Kaul wanted to play was that of a revered elder whose presence solidified the family unit. However, Shagun did not want to be trained or guided. She found Mrs. Kaul's presence stifling rather than helpful. The young educated men and women fostered by western culture have become individualistic with the result that they do not want their fortunes to be tied down forever with joint family. Besides women have become fully aware of their rights and status in society and are not prepared to submit themselves meekly to their in-laws. Shagun does not want to live under the tight grip of her domineering mother-in-law because she prefers an independent and carefree lifestyle. Being tolerant, Raman complies with her requests and moves with her in a new home. At first their marriage appears to be harmonious. Their family expands with the birth of their son, Arjun, followed by their daughter, Roohi. However, Shagun's growing ambition is fueled by a profound dissatisfaction with the mundane ordinariness of her life as Raman's wife. Despite having a comfortable home and children, Shagun feels her beauty is being wasted in a middle-class setting that values duty over desire. Shagun aspires for a glamorous lifestyle interacting with film stars and attending elite social events. Raman's job requires him to travel frequently, so he spends most of the weeks away from home, leaving her alone. Shagun is forced to spend her time along with her kids in the four walled environment. She feels a sense of emptiness and loneliness in her heart. Shagun says to Raman "I want something else in my life; can't you understand that? We always meet the same people, talk about the same old things over and over. It's boring" (Kapur 45) Raman's attitude towards her complaints of boredom is a mixture of bewilderment, quiet resentment, and lack of imagination. Raman is incapable of understanding Shagun's existential crisis. To him, the sameness that Shagun loathes is actually a sign of a successful, well-ordered life. He reminds Shagun of their social standing, healthy children and his steady career. This internal void makes her vulnerable to the allure of Mr. Ashok Khanna, Raman's boss whom she meets at the Oberoi Hotel. She develops an intense crush on him. The older and more urban Ashok Khanna is also drawn to her. Ashok Khanna represents everything Raman is not. He is wealthy, cosmopolitan, and part of high-powered corporate world that prizes individual success. Ashok Khanna, realizing his love for Shagun, becomes relentless to have Shagun at any price. He experiences a type of love he has never felt for anyone else. He gives her a chance to appear in a 30-second commercial for Mang-oh, which ignites her ambition. Shagun is attracted towards him not just for his physical presence but for the reflection of herself she sees in his eyes- a woman who is glamorous and worthy of a grander stage, rather than just a mother or a daughter-in-law. Their relationship blossoms and progresses as they begin meeting in secret and engaging in sexual activity. Shagun begins to focus on herself instead of her husband and kids, and her soul-satisfying relationship with Ashok becomes her main focus. The strain in her marriage first manifests in their youngest child, Roohi. She insists on enrolling Roohi in a play school, despite Raman's objection. In the absence of her son-in-law, Shagun's mother notices a newfound radiance and distraction in Shagun that transcends the typical behaviour of a housewife. She notices Shagun's obsession with her appearance, detachment from the needs of her children and a cold indifference toward Raman. She keeps asking her daughter the same questions, but she never receives a response. Upon learning of the daughter's extramarital affair, she is deeply troubled. She tells the daughter about her suffering and cautions her to be afraid of society's wrath. To her daughter, she says: 'Shagun, I couldn't sleep all night. What will happen to you? To the children? And Raman? His family is everything to him' (Kapur 40). Because of her extramarital affair with Ashok, Shagun is under a lot of stress. She is terrified and feels guilty about her secret meetings with Ashok: "All her energy is spent in keeping secrets. She had to be constantly vigilant, continuously invent excuses and convincingly justify absences from home, phone calls, even a preoccupied expression." (Kapur 33) Her marital relationship is impacted.

She rejects Raman's advances and his attempts to make love to her. Raman finds her actions perplexing which disturbs him and makes him suspicious. She seems distant from him. Raman had lost faith in Shagun, so he sets up a spy for her to keep an eye on everything she did and report it to him. Only through a spy did Raman learn of Shagun's extramarital affair with his boss, Ashok. When Shagun learns that her husband has employed a spy to monitor her relationship with Ashok, she is shocked. This news devastates her, and she began to despise Raman above all. Raman says to his wife: "This was what was behind all that acting in the ad films. Not your natural talent, though your talent for acting, yes, for acting, is worth an Oscar. Month after month to pretend to be my wife, and yet-all the time - all the time - Shagun, how could you? I trusted you. If there was something wrong, why didn't you tell me? I was working so hard – for whom do I work but my family? - and you." (Kapur 88) Manju Kapur uses sexual freedom as a tool of resistance to challenge patriarchal ideals and myths. She opposes the patriarchal, male-dominated systems of control and surveillance. The common reasons for adultery are physical or emotional distance when the spouse stays away for longer duration for work, dissatisfied sexual life, physical intimacy and lack of communication. Women may seek extramarital affairs not simply for sexual gratification, but as a reaction to the structural constraints and emotional neglect often found in traditional, patriarchal marriages.

Raman is shocked and suffers a heart attack. "The aftermath of the collapse found Raman in an ICU, with two stents in his chest, and the company poorer by 5 lakhs" (Kapur 97). However, Shagun was entirely swayed by Ashok and was relishing the independence that he offered her. Actually, Ashok made Shagun believe that his life is incomplete without her, "he wanted to hear more about her: what did she do with herself, how did she spend her day?" (Kapur 14) Ultimately, she requests a divorce from Raman, leaving him heartbroken. He responds aggressively, feeling his male pride injured and bruised like a shamed champion. He declines to resolve the issue peacefully, leading to a contentious fight in the courtroom. Manju Kapur uncovers, neutrally, the strength of an extramarital relationship that can dissolve even a strong marriage. Shagun struggled for the freedom she had desired for so long, but it came at the expense of her children and a joyful marriage. She ventures to step out of the safe space of the serene family structure. Her wish to escape the confines of her marriage is a metaphor for the growing individualism in Indian society. In a country with long standing traditions and cultural norms, people view the union of two people as sacred. What happens still, if this holiness gets violated by both the husband or the wife. The outcomes strangely never turn out similar. With remorse or an apology, a man may deceive and still get accepted back into the family. But if a woman joins the trend, she is called shameless and characterless. 'Men are fragile' such statement is used frequently in Indian homes to excuse a husband's adultery. Society attempts to justify the man's deception instead of holding him answerable. Society doesn't give a woman an extra chance after she commits adultery, not even once. Kate Millet has rightly stated, "Because of our social circumstances, male and female are really two cultures and their life experiences are utterly different." (31) "In Ashok's arms, Shagun found the freedom she had always craved. She was no longer a wife, a mother, or a dutiful daughter. In those stolen moments, she was simply a woman—free, alive, and unburdened by the expectations of others" (Kapur 145). For Shagun, her relationship with Ashok is casual and temporary. She has never planned to leave her husband and children: "When she started her affair, she had thought a love would add to her experience, make up for all the things she had missed having married straight out of college. She had heard of other women who took lovers- their whole life didn't change." (Kapur 82) Before Ashok, Shagun's life with Raman was, by societal standards, perfect. She had a stable home, two children and a husband who adored her and took care of her mother. Leaving a marriage in the Indian middle- class context of the 90s was a societal death. She never thought of divorce. When Ashok wants to inform his Company about his relationship with Shagun, she asks him not to bother saying, "You will finish and go. I have to stay for my children. How will they like it when they grow up and realize their mother is a divorcee?" (Kapur 81) She wants to keep her extra-marital relationship a secret, not because it will hurt her spouse but because it will affect her school-going children. It is important to note that the shift from casual affair to divorce

wasn't just Shagun's idea. Ashok did not want to share. He used his resources to convince Shagun that she deserved more than a mediocre life with Raman. Manju Kapur explores the conflicts and issues that arise as a consequence of divorce. Family structure disintegrates and breaks apart with divorce. The author illustrates the sacrifices Shagun must endure for her independence. It represents a dissolution of contemporary marriage along with its weight of individualism.

Shagun's defiant behavior intensified due to the oppression and repression of the patriarchy throughout her childhood. Before her marriage, she envisioned a future filled with dreams for her life and career, but she was never given the opportunity to pursue her own wishes. Her aspirations were dismantled by the patriarchal society in which she lived. She yearned to be a successful model, yet her mother forbade her cherished daughter from chasing that dream. Her mother recommended that she should achieve her dreams post-marriage, but shortly after the wedding, she became pregnant and was consumed by household duties. Raman barely gave her dreams any thoughts after their marriage. Her aspirations were dashed by the patriarchal, male-dominated society. She refuses to be a quiet victim and accept her fate or make any compromises. Instead, she fights for what she desires now. Raman and Shagun have nothing in common, nor do they seem to possess any hope of a promising future which can guarantee a happy life. Raman's practicality puts the marriage at stake. He spends long hours in his office working for a flourishing company that manufactures soft drinks. At the beginning of the story, we see Raman in his traditional role as father and husband; as the head of the family who goes out to struggle and make money; as one who has to be taken care of when he comes back home, but also who does not bother much for his own wife or children. Simone de Beauvoir best known for her ground breaking ideas surrounding feminism, *The Second Sex* marked the beginning of second wave of feminism across the globe. She argues that throughout history women have been classified as other, which has allowed women to remain oppressed. She famously writes "One is not born woman, but becomes one." (283) suggesting that gender is a social construct not a biological identifier. Beauvoir outlines women's difficulty in liberating themselves economically, politically and sexually. She gives references from ancient myths and Bible to establish the connection between history and myth. She talks extensively about the myth of the eternal feminine, a notion that creates unrealistic standards for women and traps them in the pursuit of an unachievable image. She argues that this myth is a pervasive problem in society, perpetuating male dominance by defining women solely by idealistic feminine traits. As a result of these myths, women were split between pursuing their ambitions and aligning with the passive, repetitive lifestyle that reflected the traditional situation of women. Shagun realizes that her marriage has become a dead end for her personal identity. She perceives her life with Raman as a repetitive cycle of domesticity that offers no excitement or intellectual stimulation. After her divorce from Raman, Ashok reassures her that everything will be alright and convinces her to get married again. Shagun remarries Ashok after getting divorced, and ensues a legal fight with Raman for her kids 'custody. After a grueling and bitter court battle, Shagun is successful in getting the custody of Arjun. Manju Kapur shows how the harsh and abrasive family conflict unfolds on the innocent minds of the children and ultimately devastates their lives. The two charming kids—young teen Arjun resembling Shagun and three-year-old Roohi are treated like property to be won, which leads to a profound erosion of their mental and emotional well-being. Manju Kapur illustrates in a realistic way how the indifferent parents fail to comprehend, recognize, and value the perspectives of their children. In *Custody*, everyone must pay a cost for their desires. It is tragic that husbands and wives turn into strangers, highlighting the emptiness that modern families face in today's materialistic society. Marriage is meant to be a loving, intimate, selfless relationship between spouses. A balanced marriage involves spiritual, emotional, and physical closeness. Marriage, for many, is spending the rest of your life with your best friend, the person you love wholeheartedly. Marriage can be a sacred, legal, and binding union of two people to journey through adult life as partners in a personal relationship of love, companionship, and fulfillment; and to produce offspring. Marriage is the foundation of family, and family is the fundamental unit of

society — even today. While marriage as an institution may not be as revered as it once was, most enter into their marriage vows to believe their spouse will be faithful to them and their children. Affairs and infidelity usually lead to divorce. While the pain of spousal betrayal is extremely traumatic to the betrayed spouse, it is even more traumatic to the children. Regardless of their age, children whose parents have been unfaithful often react with intense feelings of anger, anxiety, guilt, shame, sadness, and confusion.

In *Custody*, alongside Shagun's tale is Ishita's narrative, who hails from a middle-class family and is married to an upper-class household. Initially her marriage is full of happiness and harmony. However, as the years pass by pressure from the elders in family to have a child mounts. Despite Ishita and her husband's effort to conceive, they fail to meet the expectations of the elders. This prompts round of tests and it is discovered that she could not conceive. Ishita's health condition becomes the primary hurdle to bear a child. This revelation tipped off avalanche of questions. She endures intense psychological torment with no one supporting her. Even her spouse, who had professed his unwavering love for her, backed his parents. Ishita's mother-in-law embodies the typical mother-in-law of Indian patriarchal culture, treating her biological daughter as a daughter and her daughter-in-law as merely a daughter-in-law. As a woman, she could not understand Ishita's situation. During a thorough conversation with the doctor, Ishita's mother-in-law delves into the specifics to uncover the medical reason behind the issue, her curiosity being piqued as she learns that it is not her son who is infertile, but rather her daughter-in-law who is unable to conceive. The author highlights the ruthless character of the mother-in-law who cannot comprehend or appreciate her own gender kind. Soon things go downhill. Ishita experiences a considerable transformation. Her life becomes so miserable that she feels she has no choice but to leave Suryakanta. Ishita's unresponsive husband worsens her challenges, but she eventually breaks free from her situation and chooses to establish her own identity. They are legally divorced by mutual consent on the ground of being a barren woman. Infertility is an issue that extends beyond its medical or demographic implications. An aberration from that role can result in social stigmatization and ostracization in household and even divorce. It often leads to husband abandoning their wives, sometimes remarrying. Ishita starts underestimating herself. A woman facing divorce due to infertility often experiences a profound, compounded trauma that combines the grief of losing a marriage with the devastation of unrealized motherhood. This situation is frequently described as a "silent grief" or "disenfranchised grief," as it involves invisible losses that are not always acknowledged by society, making the emotional pain harder to bear. Ishita gets a fresh lease in her life as a worker in NGO run by Mrs. Hingorani. She begins teaching children in impoverished areas, which broadens her perspective and helps her recognize the futility of complaining about her own situation when others have even greater difficulties. She also decides to continue her education and consider adopting a child but her psychological weakness and her frequent exposure to an atmosphere where women are considered as procreators and protectors of the family make her loathe herself: "if only she could tear out her whole reproductive system and throw it on the road." (Kapur 127) Had Ishita not experienced the pain of separation from her husband due to her inability to conceive, she might have continued to lead a happy life without seeking her own identity. Manju Kapur effectively reveals how a daughter-in-law is rejected by the household and the family for a single reason. Ishita must endure the expenses related to her infertility. The motif of isolation within marriage permeates the novel across all its main and secondary storylines. Primarily, it is women who carry the weight of loneliness throughout life. Ishita finds some respite when she meets Roohi, the daughter of her neighbour Raman, whose wife had deserted him. Ishita channels her motherly instincts into bonding with the child. Ishita enters the lives of Arjun and Roohi not with the authority of a replacement mother, but with the quiet persistence of someone who understands the pain of being discarded. Having been rejected by her own in-laws for her infertility, Ishita channels her thwarted maternal instincts into healing Raman's children. Ishita's approach is a stark contrast to Shagun's growing detachment. Ishita recognizes the deep psychological trauma the children face during the bitter divorce. She enjoys her time with Roohi. For Roohi, who is younger and more vulnerable, Ishita becomes a

sanctuary. She fills the void left by Shagun's absence with genuine affection, treating Roohi's needs as her primary mission. Ultimately, Ishita gets Roohi by effectively erasing Shagun's footprint. She uses her own societal failure as a strength, proving to the court and to Raman that because she cannot have children of her own, her devotion to Roohi is absolute and unwavering.

Manju Kapur's *Custody* narrates a story of women's struggles, pains, and joys, highlighting their journey to achieve their dreams and ambitions. The story unfolds a sequence of events involving the separation, divorce, and remarriages of four adults, accompanied by the ensuing turmoil of the legal process and custody disputes, impacting the emotions of the children involved. Manju Kapur portrays marriage not as a romantic union, but as a rigid social institution that demands the erasure of individual identity, especially for women. Marriage, for Shagun was a cage of boredom and repetitive domesticity that failed to acknowledge her beauty and ambition. She successfully breaks free from a stagnant marriage and moves into a world of immense wealth and global mobility with Ashok. She wins Arjun and takes him to America proving that a woman can prioritize her own desires and still exert power over her past. Her victory is one of individual agency over traditional self-sacrifice. Ishita on the other hand wins by navigating the patriarchy from within. Ishita wins 'the battle for heart' for Roohi replacing Shagun. She gains maternal status she was previously denied. By the end, she is the mother in the eyes of the law and the child, even if she isn't the biological one. Manju Kapur openly states that women like Ishita still exist today, who believe in giving love to their families and find joy in caring for others' children. On the other hand, Shagun's character is depicted as a self-sufficient woman who dared to explore her lost sense of self.

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