

MANJU KAPUR'S *CUSTODY*: A SEARCH FOR NEW SPACE

Neetika

Research Scholar (Ph.D)

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities
Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak, Haryana, India
Email: neetikapankaj77@gmail.com

Dr Abnish Singh

Associate Professor and Head

Department of English, Faculty of Humanities
Baba Mastnath University, Rohtak, Haryana, India
Email: abnishsinghchauhan@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur's Custody (2011) deals with the disturbed city life of two families due to marital disharmony, rigid court proceedings, unwarranted child custody, social evils and injustice. It reveals the desires and disturbances of two female characters— Shagun and Ishita, who are in constant search for new space in their troubled lives. They try to lead happy life with their husbands, but could not sustain themselves for long. Consequently, they get divorce from them and are remarried with their men after a big struggle in their lives. Manju Kapur has created almost all her women characters with the same rebellious notions as occasionally perceptible in the fast changing society of modern India. Here lies the greatness of Manju Kapur in creating new space for her characters, especially for her female characters after divorce in this novel, and reflecting new outlook on life with vitality, love and inspiration.

Keywords: Search for new space, City life, Joint family, Marital disharmony, Divorce, Custody, Social injustice

Indian Fiction in English is a lovely train on the Indian literary network. It runs smoothly and rhythmically with its protagonists asserting their themes. The train travels through several attractive places, halting at significant stations right from Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) to the modern sites—Salman Rushdie, Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Vikram Seth, Ruskin Bond, Arun Joshi, Ved Mehta, Amitav Ghosh and Shashi Tharoor via three bright stars—Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao. It also splendidly passes

through the feminine locations in Indian territory marking the glaring view of the novels of Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Anita Desai and Shashi Deshpande. As it goes on, it beautifully touches the impressiveness of the novels of Upamanyu Chatterjee, Amit Chaudhuri, Manju Kapur, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Arvind Adiga, Chetan Bhagat and Rana Dasgupta in the fictional world of India. Like the other celebrated woman authors of her times, Manju Kapur (b.1948) has given a new dimension to Indian Fiction in English. She has chosen the stories of struggling women of the contemporary society of India in her novels like *Difficult Daughters* (1998), *A Married Woman* (2003), *Home* (2006), *The Immigrant* (2008), *Custody* (2011) and *Brothers* (2016).

Manju Kapur has expertise in the art of story-telling. She creates and recreates the story-lines of her characters in her popular novel—*Custody*. She knows the art of creating a new and energized space for her woman characters using the canvas of socio-psychological realism. She is unparalleled in her depiction of the struggling female characters of the middleclass, particularly after getting divorce, in the patriarchal society. She focuses on two significant things in her novel, *Custody*— infidelity and infertility. Shagun's infidelity and Ishita's infertility lead to the collapse of their marriages. They are destined to lead hopeless life. They get divorce to start a new beginning with their new life partners. They are married, divorced and re-married to reclaim their happy space; however, they could not get what they desired for themselves.

Marriage is a legally and socially acknowledged bonding between a man and a woman to live together as members of the society. It can be defined thus:

A non-ethnocentric definition of marriage is a culturally sanctioned union between two or more people that establishes certain rights and obligations between the people, between them and their children, and between them and their in-laws. (Haviland 211)

Marriage joins two souls in Indian culture and it colorfully lasts, in most of the cases, until the last hour of life; but in reality it is often declined by separation or divorce in the contemporary society. Every wedding brings problems and disputes, but it does not mean a man or woman should discontinue his or her life as a conscientious member of the society. A man or woman can easily get divorce in today's time and resettle himself or herself in the society on his/her own conditions. It is often seen that after divorce, a woman faces more challenges than a

man and suffers continuously. Therefore, Manju Kapur gives hopes and aspirations to the readers through her characters— Shagun and Ishita, who also experience the pains of divorce and anyhow survive on remarrying the men of their choices. It reveals their healthy outlook on life along with strength, liveliness and optimism for redefining their new space in the second part of their journey.

The novel begins with the sad notes buzzing in the lives of Raman and Shagun, who have dramatically lost happiness in their married life. They quarrel and blame for nothing. They are in a fix. They do not know how to settle their matters and continue their life as husband and wife. Their “marriage had been arranged along standard lines; she the beauty, he the one with the brilliant prospects” (*Custody* 14). But, the beauty and the brain fail to harmonize and adjust in a time in spite of all material comforts in the capital of India. The problem is that Raman is stupid rather practical in dealing with his disgruntled wife. He does not have time for his wife, for his children and even for himself. He spends his whole time for the growth of a flourishing soft drinks company. His job addiction appears to have spoiled his family life making Shagun realize that there is nothing left joyful in her married life.

Amidst all these conflicts, Shagun falls in love with stylish Ashok Khanna, the boss of Raman. The love affair creates a big chasm between the husband and wife leading to separation, divorce, re-marriage and a custody battle for their children—Arjun and Roohi. Raman, who is egoist and stoic by nature, wants to treat his wife like a doormat; whereas Shagun, who is somewhat bold and also unsubmitive, wants to enjoy her life filled with romance. Being dissatisfied with her married life, she wants a big change and, therefore, does not bow down before the circumstances. The novelist remarks: “The dissatisfaction that occurs in most marriages was not allowed dissipation; instead, she clung to reasons to justify her unfaithfulness” (2). Even at this stage Raman fails to understand his wife and finds aloofness in her behaviour. “May be it was the baby she hadn’t really wanted, may be it was all the travelling he had to do, had always had to do” (9).

Shagun takes her life in her own ways. She does not want to waste her life in child bearing and child rearing and other typical household activities. She wants liberty and social justice. Once she frankly told all this to her husband: “I’ll be thirty, Arjun is just becoming independent, I don’t want to start all over again. Always tied to a child” (18). She wants to do something else—

something romantic, something lively in her life. She feels lonely all the times. She communicates it to Raman: "I want something else in my life, can't you understand that? We always meet the same people, talk about the same things over and over. It's boring" (47). Shagun becomes introvert. She does not even give proper response to her husband and his parents. Raman loses his patience on finding his wife not showing respect to his parents. The mutual bond between the husband and the wife seems to be broken at this stage. Raman is furious. He does not know what to do. Shagun does not care for anything. She does not want to continue her marriage with Raman. She wants Ashok's company and perhaps it is her destiny to re-marry with him.

Shagun gets this rebellious temperament from the very beginning of her life. She had dreams for her life and career before marriage, but she was never allowed to do what she wanted to do in her life. Her desires and dreams were shattered in the patriarchal society. She had a strong desire to become a successful model, but her mother did not allow her lovely daughter. Her mother advised her to fulfill her dreams after marriage, but just after the marriage she conceived a child and was engulfed by the household works. Raman fails to understand the dreams and desires of his wife. He fails to give her proper space to grow and flourish. He fails to identify and acknowledge the significance of his wife, not only in his life, but also in the public. Even he does not have faith in his wife: "Raman didn't trust the world when it came to his wife" (31). He finds out the infidelity of his wife with the help of a spy, consequently becomes infuriated and eventually wants to take revenge at any cost. He feels defeated at this moment. He contemplates: "No protest, however strong, could get back the security he had lost. He remained bent over his desk simulating work, as the office slowly emptied" (88). He feels dejected and rejected on knowing of betrayal from the two most significant persons from home and his office. Shagun is shocked to know that her husband used a spy to track her relation with Ashok. This sudden revelation creates a feeling of hatred in her towards her husband. She feels as if she is challenged by the male-dominated society. She is advised by her mother to be faithful to her husband. Therefore, she plans to change her mind; but when she observes the face of her husband, she loses her patience: she "made a thousand resolutions; be wife-like, be good, docile, compliant, but the mere sight of him sent these decisions out of the window" (49). Meanwhile, her lover Ashok also moulds her mind and wittingly removes her fear of the traditional value-system of Indian society. He consoles her thus— "that's why you are afraid. But it will be all fine,

fine. Trust me, darling” (84). Shagun listens to the voice of her heart, desires for divorce from Raman and gets on a new life with her lover. Now the battle for custody starts flamingly. Shagun begins the battle first. She muses: “You know I hated all this hole-in-corner stuff. If you have to get a divorce, fight for the custody, let’s start now” (94). It casts a bad impact on Raman. Raman suffers with a severe heart attack. But, this incident could not unite the husband and wife. Raman becomes enraged and does not want to give divorce to her. He uses his children to win the battle. On the contrary, Shagun herself is not willing to sacrifice her joys. She wants to be successful, to be independent and to be satisfied. She wants to create her own space in the patriarchal society.

Raman is distressed to find the changed attitude of Shagun. Being panic, he sobs for the whole night. He blames his wife for creating problems in his life. He even curses his fate for all this. His broken bonds with Shagun become nightmarish for him. He wants to get relief from this bereavement. He decides to make distance from her so that he can safeguard his honor as a man in the society. Now his divorce is inevitable; but he has the strong desire to take custody of his children. Suddenly, a new thread adds to his painful story—one evening Shagun takes away the children sneakily. He is bewildered; whereas the children, suffering at the hands of their own parents, do not know what is good and what is bad. They become the play cards of the game going on between the husband and the wife. Though they start legal fight to take the custody of the children, they do not know that, “the law was a cut-and-dried business, once you got swamped in outrage, indignation, grief and anger, you are nowhere” (121).

Shagun had a dream to become a model and wanted to lead a happy life after divorce. But, her lover Ashok fails to give her proper space in his life and proves himself the worst caretaker of her children. His academic qualification could not make him socially sensitive and cultured. His business experience could not effectively connect him with his beloved and her children. It spoils the simple joys of the innocent minds. Roohi, the daughter of Shagun, experiences a slight nerve disorder. So is the case with Arjun, the son, who could not properly perform in his studies. The son lives with his mother, who frequently alters and controls his mind. As a result, he could not connect himself with his father. Moreover, Raman does not get the opportunity to love and counsel his children. Raman is left on his toes when his son is admitted in a boarding school. The judiciary system also could not do justice to Raman who is given the only right to visit his son every weekend. Last but not least, Raman and Shagun are divorced,

and Raman comes out from his fascination for Shagun. He hums, “It would be prudent to forget her existence as quickly as possible. From now he would devote himself to his children” (257).

Raman gets a new path in his life when an ill-fated divorcee Ishita joins him on the advice and consent of his parents. Ishita is infertile and wants to restart her life on declining of her first marriage. Her marriage is broken for the reason that she could not produce children of her own. She remarries Raman for setting her life in the contemporary society. In this regard, the following observation is noteworthy:

Modern marriage markets are characterized by high turnover; men and women divorce more but also remarry more than in the past. However, different individuals have different marital histories; they marry, divorce, and remarry at different rates. To explain this variation it is crucial to understand the two-sided aspect of marriage markets. Marriages form and dissolve based on preferences and expectations of two different individuals who operate in a “marriage market” with many competing agents. (Bruze 2)

Knowing the expectations of her in-laws, Ishita makes all possible efforts to continue her marriage. She even gets a number of agonizing and mind-numbing medical treatments for her infertility. At this, she wretchedly feels: “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” (*Custody*65). One day she finds the truth in the gynecologist’s office that she cannot conceive; whereas her husband SK decides not to love her anymore. Her mother-in-law has a rigid and outdated point of view when she ironically remarks: “For us money is not as important as family. But beta, it is essential that Suryakanta have a child. As the only son, he has to make sure that the bloodline of his forefathers continues. And now... I need to talk to your mother” (69).

Ishita is too much upset on hearing all this from her mother-in-law. She is helpless. Suddenly, she gets a new space as a social worker in Mrs. Hingorani’s NGO. To engage herself she works there. She even thinks of adoption of a child, but she could not gather courage to take this step for changing her life. She thinks of her parents, in-laws, husband, society and their honour and this mere thought makes her feel dejected and gloomy: “If only she could tear out her whole reproductive system and throw it on the road. She hated her body, hated it. Everybody in

the building must know why she had come back. Return to sender” (127). She suffers because of her husband’s cowardice and imprudent expectations.

The novelist presents her women as weak and strong, dependant and independent, non-educated and educated, unemployed and employed and rejected and accepted in the socio-psychological scenario of the country. Shagun tries to explore new grounds for herself; whereas Ishita makes efforts to find solutions to her problems through social work. However, Ishita renounces her social services on meeting with the divorced Raman. She willingly joins Ratan and his household activities and tries to find delight as a stepmother to Roohi, the daughter of Raman. Perhaps this is the only solution to her troubles.

Ishita is happy to become the stepmother to Roohi, but Shagun is upset to see all this. Shagun continues her fight with Raman for the guardianship of Arjun and Ruhi; whereas Raman is adamant not to leave his children. Raman struggles and suffers a lot in the process of custody. The pain of separation from his children also pinches him. In reality, both Raman and Shagun face the problems and are denied custody of their lovely issues. Even their divorce could not bring joy and peace in their fragmented lives. Raman has his daughter, which Shagun misses badly; whereas Shagun has hold over her son, who could not perceive the love of his father. In this embarrassing situation, Ishita is in the great loss as she has neither Raman as a whole nor she could build space in the heart of Arjun. No doubt, Ishita remains very serious to become a replica mother to the daughter of Raman, but she feels insecure for the reason that Ruhi might be snatched away one day by her mother. She expresses her fear thus: “I think my heart will break. I cannot bear this half-here-half-there. I have given her everything—not because of you, but because of her— I feel this constant tension in my head with the fear of losing her” (359). This is the outcome of modernization in the 21st century.

Both in rural and urban social systems the quest for the economic and social modernization has triggered cultural forces, which also foster disvalues like fanaticism, acquisitiveness, opportunistic utilitarianism, revivalism, communalism, casteism and regionalism. This has resulted from social modernization in Indian society during the past years after Independence. (Chauhan 26)

Manju Kapur is sophisticated and sharp in the depiction of her characters, particularly the female ones. She provides significant space to Raman, Ashok, Shagun and Ishita in her fictional

world. In fact, the new space provided to Ashok and Shagun could not bring satisfaction and enduring peace in their lives. So is the case with Raman and Ishita, who are tormented with fears and frustrations in their lives. The child characters—Arjun and Ruhi are destined to become the bones of contentions and hopelessly survive in the novel. SK and his mother are typical Indians who do not know how to balance life in the fast changing social-structure of India. Thus, in Manju Kapur's *Custody*, the search of all these characters for new space fails to lead to a life of delight and fulfillment. In spite of that, something is always left—faith, hope and love in the human journey.

Works Cited

Bruze, Gustaf, et al. "The Dynamics of Marriage and Divorce." *The Institute for the Study of Labor (IZA)*, IZA DP No. 6379, 2012, pp. 1-52.

Chauhan, Abnish Singh. *The Fictional World of Arun Joshi: Paradigm Shift in Values*. New Delhi: Authorspress, 2016.

Haviland, William A, et al. *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing, 2010.

Kapur, Manju. *Custody*. New Delhi: Random House India, 2011.