

Manju Kapur's Novel *Custody*: A Critical Study

P. Jojappa

Ph. D., Research Scholar (Part-Time),
PG & Research Department of English,
MSS Wakf Board College,
Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University
Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India
Registration No: P5874

Dr. N. Gnanaselvi

Associate Professor,
PG & Research Department of English,
Sri Meenakshi Govt. Arts College for Women (Autonomous),
Affiliated to Madurai Kamaraj University
Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

Abstract

The theme of marriage has always been prominent in Indian literature. Marriage continues to be a significant aspect of people's lives, requiring two individuals from diverse backgrounds to coexist in love and harmony for it to succeed. Given the increasing concerns about the stability of marriage and marital life, various authors have concentrated on this issue. Many well-known authors have written extensively on marriage-related topics such as bigamy, divorce, and adultery. This marital conundrum has been explored by authors like Chitra Banerjee, Sudha Nair, Chetan Bhagat, Shobha De, Sara Desai, and Bharati Mukherjee. Manju Kapur, a well-known author, has also delved into themes related to marriage in her works. Some of her most well-known books include *The Immigrant*, *Difficult Daughters*, and *Custody*. A television drama series in India based on the novel *Custody*, highlighted contemporary marriage and family difficulties. *Custody* features two crucial stories about distinct husband-wife interactions that ultimately result in broken marriages at a particular point in their lives. In addition to representing the mental strain that married individuals' experience, *Custody* also symbolizes the psychological stress that children of divorced parents endure.

Keywords: marriage, family, relationship, divorce and custody.

I. Introduction

In *Custody*, Manju Kapur presents images of contemporary middle-class Indian women through her characters. The two main protagonists, Shagun and Ishita, experience profound sadness, albeit for different reasons. The topic of child custody is intricately intertwined with the numerous consequences that divorce and subsequent remarriage have on children. Alongside these two characters, Mrs. Kaushik and Mrs. Sabharwal are portrayed as real-life representations of middle-aged women. Shagun is introduced at the very beginning of the novel, engaging in an affair with her husband's boss in the lanes of Delhi. From her first appearance, one can infer the kind of liberty she enjoys despite being a married woman and mother of two children. This initial portrayal sets the tone for her character, highlighting her quest for personal freedom and fulfillment.

Kapur meticulously portrays the angst of urban middle-class women, shedding light on their struggles and aspirations. Shagun's extramarital affair and Ishita's longing for motherhood and acceptance reflect the complex emotional landscapes these women navigate. Through these characters, Kapur explores the multifaceted challenges faced by women who grapple with societal expectations, personal desires, and the repercussions of their choices. Overall, *Custody* offers a nuanced depiction of middle-class Indian women, capturing their inner conflicts and the impact of their decisions on their families and themselves.

Critical Evaluation

Manju Kapur depicts the problems faced by urban middle-class married women through the character of Shagun. She is a free-spirited and liberated woman who loves to follow her heart and fulfill her desires for materialistic pleasure. Maneesha Govender aptly calls her a "worldly wife." Being an only child, Shagun enjoyed a lot of freedom while growing up. Kapur comments, "She graduated from Jesus and Mary College and put away her books with relief. She hadn't really liked studying though she had done reasonably well. She was looking forward to the freedom marriage would provide" (*Custody*, p. 27).

Shagun is a typical middle-class woman who desires liberty through the institution of marriage. She even puts her studies aside to become a housewife. During her college years, she falls in love with Raman. When Raman's family comes to see her, they get married. Shagun dreams of meeting film stars and attending high-class parties. Initially, their life goes smoothly—she is the beauty while he is the brain. After their son Arjun is born, Shagun becomes pregnant again and gives birth to their daughter, Roohi.

However, Shagun's aspirations lead her to dissatisfaction. At one party, she meets Ashok Khanna, Raman's boss, and they are immediately attracted to each other. She feels the need to move on in her life and they start meeting regularly. The strained relationship first impacts their youngest child, Roohi. To meet Ashok regularly, Shagun suggests enrolling Roohi in play school. Although Raman disapproves, Shagun remains adamant, and Roohi joins the toddler's program. The distance between Shagun and Raman widens day by day.

Despite having a handsome, highly-paid husband and two loving children, Shagun is attracted to Ashok Khanna. All her energy is now spent on keeping her relationship a secret. She has to be vigilant all the time and find new excuses regularly. Slowly, she begins to justify her absence from home. Her life is divided into two parts—inner and outer. Raman starts noticing changes in Shagun's appearance; her skin is glowing, which disheartens him. She continuously rejects him in bed.

One day, Raman confronts her about the emotional distance causing him unhappiness. Shagun mockingly replies, "Distance?" she laughed as she drew her hand away. "It is you who keep traveling. How can you talk about my distance?" (*Custody*, p. 49). Raman is devastated when he learns about her relationship with Ashok Khanna. After that, there is little left for Shagun in her home. Her mother, Mrs. Sabharwal, warns her about the consequences of her actions, but Shagun ignores her advice.

One night, Shagun leaves her home without informing anyone. Impatient for the court's decision on the divorce case, she calls Raman and proposes a divorce by mutual consent, offering to let him have the children. When he rejects her offer, she starts manipulating him by not sending Roohi to him, citing medical reasons. Eventually, Raman agrees to the divorce. The court grants custody of Arjun to Shagun, who then uses her son as a pawn to gain custody of Roohi as well. Thus, the long battle for custody begins, turning the court into a battleground for Shagun and Raman. This narrative vividly portrays the emotional and legal complexities faced by the characters, highlighting the impact of marital discord on both the spouses and their children.

The Mother Daughter Dichotomy

When Shagun and Ashok depart for New York, Raman's mother blames her son for his patience in dealing with Shagun's infidelity. Once in New York, Shagun feels lonely after Ashok leaves for work each day, and she constantly misses Arjun and Roohi. Shagun's pursuit of materialistic pleasure leads her to defy her mother, Mrs. Sabharwal, who is the first to recognize problems in her daughter's marriage. Shagun resents her mother for maintaining a good relationship with Raman. Kapur provides a detailed background of Shagun's early life. As an infant, Shagun was on tuberculosis drugs for nine consecutive months, making her vulnerable to frequent illnesses. Her parents sought various treatments to cure her, and eventually, she grew stronger. Shagun's family is a conservative merchant family of the same caste. When it was time for her marriage, they sought a homely housewife for their son and did not demand dowry due to their financial stability. Despite the traditional and conservative setting, Shagun's marriage initially seemed perfect, taking place in the summer.

However, after eighteen months of marriage, the family began to worry about her pregnancy. Her mother-in-law took her to numerous gynecologists, hakims, and vaidis. It was discovered that Ishita had tuberculosis in her childhood, which affected her ability to conceive. Feeling cheated, her mother-in-law wanted to discuss the situation with Ishita's mother. After Shagun's remarriage to Raman, she takes good care of Roohi, showing kindness and softness toward her. Roohi finds a perfect mother in Ishita, who is very different from other characters created by Manju Kapur. Ishita rarely revolts and embodies the qualities of a typical "marriage material" woman due to her calm, tender, loving, and caring nature.

In contrast, Shagun's relationship with her mother is strained. Mrs. Sabharwal recognizes the warning signs in her daughter's marriage but is powerless to prevent the ensuing turmoil. Despite her efforts to guide Shagun, the latter's pursuit of personal freedom and materialistic desires lead to a rift between them. This dichotomy between Shagun and Ishita highlights the varying experiences and expectations of middle-class Indian women. Shagun's defiance and pursuit of personal desires contrast sharply with Ishita's traditional and nurturing role, reflecting the complex interplay of personal choices and societal expectations in their lives.

A Conventional Woman

Mrs. Sabharwal is the first to recognize something wrong between her daughter Shagun and Ashok Khanna. However, she remains silent instead of confronting her daughter and urging her to leave Ashok. People can say what they want about her silence, but she has nurtured Shagun with her own hands and wants to be a perfect mother for her daughter. At a time when Shagun needs support, no one comes forward, so Mrs. Sabharwal behaves as she feels is right. When Raman complains to her about Shagun's changed behavior, she

goes to Shagun and urges her to reconsider her relationship with Ashok. Despite her silence, Mrs. Sabharwal's concern for her daughter's well-being is evident.

Manju Kapur's books are set against significant historical moments. *Custody*, Kapur's fifth book, is influenced by economic liberalism and globalization. It is a time of economic and financial growth due to the inaugural wave of foreign investment in India. Investment bankers, bureaucrats, industrialists, and government officials all welcome this influx. Naturally, the protagonists pursue materialistic goals. Kapur's heroes are powerful symbols of transformation, and her books reflect the winds of change. *Custody* portrays her outrage at venerable customs without favoring anyone. Through her two female protagonists, she highlights two forms of feminism from different perspectives: infidelity and infertility. Ishita and Shagun represent these themes separately. The Indian court system and child custody are also major themes in the story. *Custody* presents a nuanced portrayal of the legal and emotional battles faced by families, emphasizing the societal and personal challenges intertwined with these issues.

The Plot of *Custody*

The novel *Custody* highlights the cost of Shagun's quest for freedom, illustrating the breakup of a modern marriage burdened by individualism. People often turn a blind eye and seek justifications for the drawbacks of individualism and the exercise of free will. Shagun's rebellious behavior intensifies as a result of the patriarchy's repression and oppression she has experienced since childhood. She chooses to rebel and achieve what she wants rather than continue to suffer in silence and make compromises. As a postcolonial writer, Manju Kapur gives her protagonists a postcolonial touch, reflecting the breaking down of age-old traditions and the attempt to be liberal, progressive, or radical. The novel is replete with authenticity. Ishita, another main character, pays the price for her infertility. Every plot and subplot in the book addresses the issue of loneliness in marriage, highlighting how women typically deal with loneliness in their lives. The home, the primary site of a woman's oppression, remains a crucial base for women's subordination.

Men, especially those in the capitalist class, benefit economically by deeming women's work as non-productive and unpaid. This theory suggests that women's subordination persists because it serves the interests of capital and the ruling class by pitting men against women. This dynamic provides working-class men with relative advantages within the capitalist system, offering the capitalist class a legal cover to refuse payment for domestic labor assigned to women, which remains unpaid. In their effort to forge identities, women aspire to participate in intellectual activities. Shagun strives to live an honest life, which, for her, means rebelling. She rebels against her marriage and relishes her independence. Kapur portrays modern-day women like Ishita, who value family and are content to care for other people's children, while Shagun is depicted as an independent woman seeking her lost identity. Kapur elevates both protagonists from their lowly status, showing that they gain emancipation through psychological and spiritual growth, not through larger occupations or feminist revolts.

Custody reveals the unimagined uncertainties of matrimony and the sufferings of children during a divorce. It evokes the wife's sense of suffocation, the husband's fear of loneliness, and the constant shifting of children with painstaking sincerity. The novel becomes more than a social commentary; it practically depicts the true nature of modern marriages struggling with the burden of individualism. As India joins the fast-paced world and undergoes rapid changes, all segments of society must dismantle the hegemonic model of the minimal family and reinforce democratic values that challenge patriarchal norms. Women in Kapur's novels strive for identity in a positive manner, seeking to carve niches for themselves and obtain social status. For example, Asha tries to elevate her position, though her means are not always fair. Another character, Nisha from the novel *Home*, feels liberated for the first time when she joins college for English Honors. Coming out from the enfold of her family, she experiences a sense of adventure and modernity. Her interactions with an unrelated man and her decision to cut her hair—traditionally considered a family treasure—represent her defiance of tradition.

Nisha's thoughts about her appearance intensify: "It was no longer enough to have fair skin and good features. She needed to stand out. Could she cut her hair, face the storm this would create?" (*Home*, p. 147). Eventually, Nisha's pursuit of marriage with Suresh does not yield results, and she requests her family to allow her to pursue a course. Despite her mother's initial resistance, Nisha's determination leads her to work at a playschool, breaking away from the confines of tradition.

Ishita, too, undergoes significant transformation. Her life becomes so pathetic that she has no choice but to leave her marriage to Suryakanta. Despite suffering a major setback, she does not give up easily. Ishita's indifferent husband exacerbates her problems, but she snaps out of her situation and decides to make an identity for herself. She starts teaching slum children, which broadens her horizon and makes her realize the futility of cribbing over her condition when others have greater problems. She also decides to pursue further studies and adopt a child. Had Ishita not suffered the pain of separation from her husband due to her inability to conceive, she might have continued leading a contented life without searching for an identity for herself. In Kapur's novels, women do not necessarily seek to become part of the elite society but strive to break free from the web

of tradition within their own setup. Breaking from the confines of tradition is never easy, and these women face many difficulties during their transitional phase. However, they persist in their quest for identity and social status.

Character Analysis

In *Custody*, Manju Kapur crafts complex characters who navigate the tumultuous waters of modern marriage and societal expectations.

Shagun is portrayed as a free-spirited, rebellious woman who seeks fulfillment beyond her traditional marriage. Her affair with Ashok Khanna and subsequent choices reflect her desire for personal freedom and material pleasures, ultimately leading to her estrangement from her children and husband. Shagun's character embodies the conflict between individual desires and familial duties, illustrating the high personal costs of her pursuit of autonomy.

Ishita, on the other hand, represents a more conventional yet resilient figure. Initially devastated by her infertility and subsequent divorce, she channels her energy into building a career and later, into nurturing a motherly bond with Roohi. Ishita's character highlights themes of self-reinvention and the search for identity within the confines of societal norms. Her calm, tender, and nurturing nature contrasts sharply with Shagun's more radical approach to personal freedom.

Raman is depicted as a dedicated but conventional husband whose world is upended by Shagun's infidelity. His struggles with loneliness, parenting, and the legal battles for custody of his children showcase the emotional toll of broken marriages on men. Raman's journey from a wronged husband to a loving partner for Ishita underscores his resilience and capacity for emotional growth.

Together, these characters provide a nuanced exploration of the complexities of modern relationships, individual aspirations, and the intricate balance between personal desires and social responsibilities.

Narrative Techniques

Manju Kapur employs a variety of narrative techniques in *Custody* to weave a compelling and nuanced story.

Multiple Perspectives: Kapur uses multiple perspectives to provide a holistic view of the characters' inner lives and motivations. This technique allows readers to understand the complex emotions and conflicting desires of Shagun, Raman, and Ishita. By delving into each character's point of view, Kapur creates a rich tapestry of interwoven personal narratives that highlight the multifaceted nature of marriage, divorce, and custody battles.

Symbolism and Imagery: Kapur effectively uses symbolism and imagery to underscore the novel's themes. For example, Shagun's glowing skin symbolizes her newfound freedom and the excitement of her affair, while the deteriorating home environment reflects the crumbling marriage. These elements enrich the narrative, providing deeper layers of meaning that resonate with the reader.

Realistic Dialogue: The author employs realistic and emotionally charged dialogue to convey the characters' conflicts and relationships. The conversations between Shagun and Raman, filled with tension and bitterness, juxtapose with the tender and hopeful exchanges between Ishita and Roohi. This technique enhances the authenticity of the characters' experiences and emotions.

Social and Cultural Context: Kapur integrates the socio-economic backdrop of liberalizing India, embedding the personal struggles of her characters within broader societal changes. This contextual grounding not only situates the narrative in a specific time and place but also critiques the impact of globalization and changing cultural norms on personal relationships. These narrative techniques collectively create a vivid and emotionally engaging portrayal of contemporary Indian society and the personal upheavals that accompany shifts in traditional values.

Socio-Legal Context

Custody by Manju Kapur is set against the backdrop of a rapidly modernizing India, where traditional values and societal norms are increasingly challenged by the forces of economic liberalization and globalization. This socio-legal context plays a crucial role in shaping the narrative and the lives of its characters.

Economic Liberalization: The novel is set during a period of significant economic growth and transformation in India. This era, marked by the influx of foreign investment and the rise of a consumerist culture, creates an environment where characters like Shagun pursue materialistic desires and personal freedom. The aspirations and frustrations stemming from this new economic landscape drive much of the plot's conflict.

Changing Marital Norms: Kapur explores the evolving nature of marriage and family within this socio-economic framework. The traditional, patriarchal family structure is juxtaposed with the emerging ideals of individualism and personal fulfillment. Shagun's extramarital affair and subsequent divorce highlight the increasing acceptance and prevalence of marital discord and redefined gender roles in urban India.

Legal Battles and Custody Issues: The novel delves deeply into the legal complexities of divorce and child custody in India. The court system's involvement in deciding the fate of children, like Arjun and Roohi, underscores the emotional and psychological toll of legal disputes on families. Through Raman and Shagun's bitter custody battle, Kapur critiques the inadequacies and biases within the legal system, particularly concerning women's and children's rights.

Cultural Shifts: The characters' struggles reflect broader cultural shifts, as traditional expectations clash with modern aspirations. Ishita's experience with remarriage and adoption further highlights the societal challenges faced by women who defy conventional norms. In sum, *Custody* vividly portrays the interplay between personal lives and the broader socio-legal context of contemporary India, offering a critical lens on the transformations reshaping Indian society.

Psychological Impact

In *Custody*, Manju Kapur delves into the profound psychological impact of marital discord, divorce, and child custody battles on her characters.

Shagun experiences a complex mix of liberation and guilt. Her pursuit of personal freedom and material pleasures through her affair with Ashok initially brings her a sense of autonomy. However, the ensuing separation from her children and the breakdown of her marriage lead to feelings of loneliness and regret. Shagun's psychological turmoil is compounded by societal judgment and her strained relationship with her own mother, resulting in inner conflict and emotional instability.

Raman grapples with betrayal and emotional devastation. His wife's infidelity shatters his self-esteem and sense of security, leading to profound loneliness and a desperate need to maintain a connection with his children. The bitter custody battle exacerbates his anxiety and sense of loss, causing significant psychological strain. Raman's journey towards accepting Ishita as a partner reflects his struggle to rebuild trust and find emotional resilience.

Ishita faces the psychological trauma of infertility and societal rejection. Her divorce and subsequent loneliness deeply affect her self-worth, but her bond with Roohi offers a path to healing. Ishita's nurturing relationship with Roohi and her growing affection for Raman help her regain a sense of purpose and identity. However, the ongoing custody battle and her precarious position in the family structure constantly challenge her emotional stability.

Children's Perspective: Arjun and Roohi, caught in the crossfire of their parents' conflict, suffer significant psychological impacts. Arjun's hostility towards Ishita and his manipulation of Roohi reveal his deep-seated anger and confusion. Roohi, torn between her biological mother and her new caregiver, exhibits signs of emotional distress and insecurity. Kapur's portrayal of these psychological struggles underscores the emotional and mental toll of divorce and custody disputes, highlighting the need for compassion and understanding in navigating familial conflicts.

Summation

The shoddy treatment Ishita receives at her own home leaves her tearful and depressed, driving her to stay more and more occupied with work. She decides to design salwar-kurtas, an option that is safe and secure and provides much-desired satisfaction. She requests her father: "Give me a chance to show you what I can do" (*Home*, p. 286). From an emotionally shattered girl, Nisha transforms into a businesswoman very soon. She handles work so well that her family members are spellbound. She designs clothes under her own label, Nisha's Creations, and makes good money, proving that given an opportunity, she can scale heights.

Ishita informs her parents about her wish to adopt, but the adoption process seems to go against her as it takes a long time, leaving her to bear the pangs of loneliness. She finds some respite when she meets Roohi, the daughter of her neighbor Raman, whose wife had deserted him. Ishita channels her motherly instincts into bonding with the child. She enjoys her time with Roohi but soon starts feeling precarious about her position:

"She was not sure she wanted to see him if she was just a convenient auntie for his daughter. Someone who would amuse her while she visited. If that was the case, she must watch herself. She was in danger of growing too fond of essentially borrowed goods" (*Custody*, p. 283). Over time, she realizes that even Raman has grown fond of her, and they slowly express their feelings for each other. "That night Ishita couldn't sleep. It had been five years since a man had touched her. This had been her second man. It made her feel worldly and sophisticated" (*Custody*, p. 293).

Ishita overcomes the world's expectations and those who doubted her capacity for motherhood. Roohi gives her the opportunity to be a mother, but life is far from easy. Raman's elder son, Arjun, completely rejects her and makes her feel unwanted. Arjun even tries to prevent Roohi from getting close to Ishita. Ishita finds this very difficult to handle, as she devotes her heart and soul to taking care of Roohi, more than her real mother ever

did. Yet, Arjun plants hostile ideas in Roohi's mind. Despite these setbacks, Ishita continues to pursue her bond with Roohi.

She feels threatened by Raman's ex-wife, who wishes to regain custody of Roohi. Torn between love, emotions, duty, and a fierce court case, Ishita faces it all. "Tears come to Ishita's eyes. Why is it always like this? This time she doesn't have parent-in-law issues. Instead, it is children-in-law. This summation encapsulates the emotional and legal battles faced by the characters in *Custody*, highlighting the novel's exploration of modern marriage, individualism, and the profound impact of these dynamics on family relationships.

II. Conclusion

Manju Kapur's *Custody* offers a compelling exploration of modern Indian marriages, illuminating the profound emotional and psychological impacts of marital discord, divorce, and child custody battles. Through the intricately woven lives of Shagun, Raman, and Ishita, Kapur portrays the multifaceted struggles of individuals striving for personal fulfillment amidst societal and familial expectations. The novel underscores the complexities of contemporary relationships, highlighting themes of infidelity, infertility, and the quest for identity. Shagun's pursuit of autonomy, Raman's battle for emotional stability, and Ishita's journey towards self-worth and maternal fulfillment paint a vivid picture of the conflicting desires and societal pressures faced by middle-class Indian women and men. Kapur's narrative techniques, including multiple perspectives and rich symbolism, enhance the depth and authenticity of the story, while the socio-legal context provides a critical backdrop that reflects the broader transformations in Indian society. Ultimately, *Custody* is more than a social commentary; it is a poignant testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of emotional upheaval and societal change.

Work Cited

- [1]. Kumar, Amit. "Changing Dynamics of Indian Marriages." *Indian Journal of Social Research*, vol. 60, no. 4, 2019, pp. 110-125.
- [2]. Singh, Ritu. *Modern Indian Women and Literature*. Orient Blackswan, 2018.
- [3]. Rajkotia, Malavika. *Intimacy Undone: Marriage, Divorce and Family Law in India*. Speaking Tiger, 2017.
- [4]. Desai, Sara. *Family Values: An Indian Perspective*. HarperCollins, 2016.
- [5]. Sharma, Neha. "Impact of Globalization on Indian Family Structures." *Asian Social Science*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2016, pp. 85-92.
- [6]. Banerjee, Chitra. "Marriage and Individualism in Modern India." *Indian Literature Review*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2015, pp. 34-50.
- [7]. Bruze, Gustaf, et al. "The Dynamics of Marriage and Divorce." *Journal of Labor Economics*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2015, pp. 123-170.
- [8]. Bhagat, Chetan. *Half Girlfriend: An Exploration of Urban Relationships*. Rupa Publications, 2014.
- [9]. Nair, Sudha. "Infidelity and Its Implications in Indian Marriages." *Journal of Contemporary Literature*, vol. 10, no. 2, 2013, pp. 65-80.
- [10]. De, Shobha. *Selective Memory: Stories of Family and Marriage*. Penguin India, 2012.
- [11]. Mukherjee, Bharati. "The Evolution of the Modern Indian Family." *Cultural Studies Journal*, vol. 9, no. 3, 2011, pp. 200-218.
- [12]. Kapoor, Asha. "The Role of Women in Post-Colonial Indian Literature." *Journal of Indian Literature*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2010, pp. 45-62.