

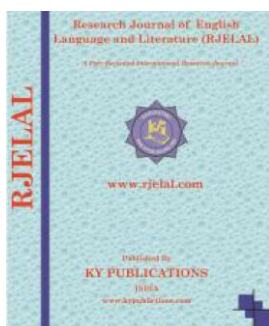


MARITAL DISSONANCE AS A MOTIF IN MANJU KAPUR'S NOVELS – A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF 'CUSTODY'

SHAZIA MERAJ

sbuchh2007@gmail.com

doi.org/10.33329/rjelal.7219.416



ABSTRACT

Manju Kapur, a contemporary Indian English novelist, though hates to be called as a feminist writer, but through all her fictional works she projects the feminist concerns. Her main foothold is the exploration of the deep recesses of human psyche, going beyond the skin into the constant struggles, raging the soul of human beings at a conscious level and describing the atmosphere of the mind. She delves deep into the intricate issues of life, identity crisis, personal relationships, ideologies, alienation, isolation, escapism, subjugation and chief among them is the marital relationship. She has very deftly interwoven the stories of married woman, their struggles and sufferings into the fabric of her fiction. In all her fictional works, marriage is the pivot and her every novel open with a live discussion on marriage.

The objective of this conceptual paper is to present to the scholarly world how Manju Kapur delineates the marital dissonance as a motif in her novels (especially with reference to her novel, Custody) and brings out the trauma, sufferings and exploitation that her female protagonists undergo after their marriage. They find themselves at crossroads of duties and passion which have been influenced by western ideas of autonomy and liberty. The paper will also put forth the aftermath of divorce on different stakeholders of a family- the wife, husband, in-laws and above all children and how Manju Kapur gives us an insight to go deeper into the hearts of children who are torn between the crude and shrewd battle of their custody and in this battle of ego's suffer physically as well as psychologically.

Keywords: Marriage, Family, Marital dissonance, Trauma, Suffering, Individuality, Infidelity, Infertility, Custody, Chauvinistic, Patriarchal.

Manju Kapur, considered to be the Jane Austen of modern Indian English Literature, born in 1948 in the city of Amritsar, is a daughter of a veteran educationist Raghuvansha Kishore Kapur, who was Vice Chancellor of Sambalpur University. She completed her B.A Honours in English literature from Miranda house college for women at Delhi. Then she went to Canada to take her M.A in English at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia. After

completing her M.Phil at Delhi University, she joined her alma mater- Miranda House college as a lecturer in English. She taught English literature for almost 30 years, and then took voluntary retirement from her services and is now a full-time writer settled in Delhi with her industrialist husband Gun Nidhi Dalmia.

Manju kapur has established herself as a novelist of international repute. With six critically acclaimed novels to her credit- 'Difficult Daughters',

'A Married woman', 'Home', 'The Immigrant', 'Custody' and 'Brother's she stands out from the rest of the writers of her age. She won the prestigious commonwealth prize for her debut novel, *Difficult Daughters* (1998). *A Married Woman* and *Home* both were shortlisted for the Hutch Cross Word Prize for Fiction and *The Immigrant* was shortlisted for DSC prize for South Asian Literature. These novels are translated into many foreign languages such as Dutch, German, Italian, Portuguese and Spanish in addition to Indian languages like Tamil, Marathi and Hindi.

Marital Dissonance is one of the recurring motifs in contemporary English literature- be it British, American, Indian or any other origin. A number of powerfully talented women writers like Jane Austen, Daphne du Maurier, Gloria Naylor, Margaret Atwood, Angela Carter, Alice Walker, Doris Lessing etc have reflected different facets of marital dissonance through their works. Jane Austen comments in *Pride and Prejudice*,

"Happiness in marriage is entirely a matter of chance".

Marital dissonance is one of the central themes in the works of Indian writers as well. R.K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Anita Desai, Shashi Deshpande, Arun Joshi, Kamala Markandaya, Nayantara Sahgal, Ruth Praver Jhabvala and others, though the factors leading to marital dissonance have been diverse indeed. Similarly the motif of marital dissonance holds a great fascination for Manju Kapur. Her novels are chronicles of the Indian middle class educated urban society and they capture the politics of arranged marriages, adultery, infidelity, infertility, custody and many more issues in an artistic manner. Manju Kapur sincerely broods over the fate and future of contemporary woman particularly in the patriarchal society and her annihilation at the altar of marriage. Kapur's female protagonists enter into marriage with the hope that the marriage would provide them respect, security, happiness, company and status in the society but unfortunately, they get disappointed, subsequently disillusioned and thus the marital dissonance.

In her debut novel, *'Difficult Daughters'*, marital dissonance is depicted through three female protagonists- Kasturi, Virmati and Ida. All the three women belonging to three different generations suffer because of their marriage and are exploited in the male chauvinistic society. Kasturi suffers because of the socio-cultural background at her times. She was just reduced to a child bearing machine with no life of her own. Virmati suffers due to her affairs with a married man which was not acceptable to the society and Ida is single and childless and suffer because of being too radical. Astha in *'A Married Woman'* suffers because of her husband's negligence and emotional incompatibility. Marital dissonance has been aptly used as a motif by Manju Kapur in this novel, Astha is metamorphosed from a good and obedient wife to Lesbian and becomes negligent not only to her husband but to her children as well. Nisha in *'Home'* longs for meaningful career but is forced into waiting for marriage. She loses her economic freedom and independent identity and she is the specimen example of the victim of the marital discord and the gender inequality in the patriarchal setup. Nina in *'The Immigrant'* suffers because of her husband's sexual impotency and inadequacy. She becomes dishonest and feels alienated in an alien land. Similarly, Kapur's main female character in her recent novel *'Brothers'* find herself trapped in marriage. Tapti undergoes suffering because of the insecure, inferior nature of her husband, Mangal Singh Gaina. Lack of love in married life leads Tapti towards infidelity and thus the final catastrophe- Mangal's killings his own brother.

Thus, in all her novels, Manju Kapur uses marital dissonance and discord as a motif and brings forth the sufferings, pain, distress and torment that the contemporary women go through in their marital life.

"A broken marriage is as distasteful and horrifying as an attack of leprosy". (Kamala Das in *My Story* 4)

Manju Kapur's fifth novel *'Custody'* confirms her reputation as the great chronicler of the modern Indian family. It is told with nuance, sympathy and

clear sightedness. It is impressive in its skill and poignant in its honesty. It is not just a social commentary but a novel that is true about the universal angst and anguish of modern marriage. It is a tale of marriage crippled by a socially unacceptable romance upon which the concept of individualism has been designed. It mirrors the reality of modern society as well as discusses the dissolution in marriage. Manju Kapur gives us vivid account of two marriages that disintegrate and intertwine with cruel and heart-rending consequences. The novel describes the marital life and marital dissonance of two protagonists – Shagun and Ishita – giving minuscule details. One of the characteristic features of Manju Kapur is that she delves deep into the psyche and lives of middle class well educated urban married woman and lay bare the harsh and biting realities hidden behind so called charming married life. In all her novels marital dissonance is used as motif. Same is true with the novel under discussion 'Custody'.

Manju Kapur has brought out two important aspects and causes of marital discord in this novel – Infidelity in case of Shagun, and Infertility in case of Ishita. Kapur explores the hollowness of modern life. The novel is set in the backdrop of urban upper middle-class family of Delhi and presents the story of four adults and two children. It is a true depiction of the plight of children who are caught in a web of marital discord and with the result are shattered and fragmented. Manju Kapur has also presented Indian legal system through the tale of child custody.

Manju Kapur presents her female protagonist, Shagun who leaves her husband, Raman Kaushik to go with her husband's boss, Ashok. Despite having two children she abandons her husband. Yet she fights for her children's custody. Shagun, a beautiful green-eyed woman is represented as a victim of illusion that marriage casts. Manju Kapur comments about Shagun:

"She had been brought up to marry, to be wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She had never questioned this destiny, it was the

one pursued by everyone she knew". (Custody 26)

She apparently seemed to be the happiest woman on the earth. Her marriage "had been arranged along standard lines, she the beauty, he the one with the brilliant prospects". (Custody 14)

Shagun is a paragon of beauty and the cynosure of the neighbouring eyes. Although with her extraordinary and vivid beauty; the glittering future of her husband and their two adorable children – eight years old Arjun who looks like her and two-years-old Roohi who looks just like her father - the couple appears to have everything but she is "unhappier than she realized" (Custody 26). She is "sick and tired of being alone". Shagun lacks happiness, feels bored, alienated and here Manju Kapur presents the sense of displacement often felt by woman in the traditional institution of marriage and family. Shagun is dissatisfied with her husband, Raman. He is the stereotypical depiction of hard-working man known for his perseverance and dexterity and a kind of trophy in the family arranged alliance. He is portrayed in his traditional role of husband & father; of the head of the family who goes out to the world to fight and to make money. Although sincere, devoted and hardworking but he does not care much for his own wife or children. For him, his professional career is more important than them. Like many men, he seems to be married to his job and company. He knows nothing of his children's friends, school and progress. Neither does he know about what his wife wants and how she feels. Raman could not realize the simple thing that he did not own the whole of Shagun; her desires, her longings and her expectations which she wanted to be realized and respected. Shagun's dream was to be a model, but marriage, child, the claims of husband, family and friends made a career hard to justify. Her second pregnancy drifts her dream career further away from her. She feels "There might have been empty spaces in her life, but this is not how she chose to fill them" (Custody 17)

This dissatisfaction makes Shagun think that nothing is promising in her married life. A traditional mind like Raman's, his parents would

never question this. They would automatically assume that a woman's selfhood status, respectability and realization lie in being good, obedient and dutiful wife. Shagun unearths herself stifled and trapped by the confines of an organized marriage to a man who, she discovers is rigidly conservative and absolutely indifferent to her goals. She starts to experience utter loneliness; subjugation and isolation. This is unacceptable to Shagun who was searching for something like passion. Thus, the resultant discord and dissonance was evident. Shagun was a perfect blend of west and east so her thirst for self-fulfillment and self-realization ended up with an extra marital relationship with her husband's superior and the company's wonder man, Ashok Khanna.

Ashok is reputed for his ability to get the best out of people. He is portrayed as a suave, worldly and brilliant who went to Ivy League schools and is a business wizard of the international soft drinks organization called "The Brand". Ashok Khanna- a real marketer has never failed. When he realizes he is in love with Shagun he becomes ruthless to achieve his target, Shagun at any cost. He feels this kind of love he had never experienced before with anybody else. He proceeds to capture the mind, body and soul of Shagun & feels happy like a proud conqueror even if it means to destroy someone else's seem- to- be happy married life.

With the taste of love, Shagun rebels for freedom which was long denied to her. She took the road not taken and refuses to be stifled under oppressive restrictions. She demands for her rightful place, recognition and respect. Manju Kapur in the character of Shagun portrays a woman who wants her individual worth realized and breaks the sufferings that traditional society offers. She is a type of woman who celebrates her beauty and re-appropriates its generative principle through a deliberate contradiction of patriarchal morals. Shagun due to her association with Raman's dynamic boss Ashok became indifferent to Raman. She boldly forsakes her husband, though in Indian society, husband is like a sheltering tree, a bower without which life of a wife becomes complex, cumbersome and tedious.

In the beginning Shagun never thought of breaking the marital relationship but her indifferent and changed attitude sowed the seeds of suspicion in the mind of Raman, as a result of which Raman kept a vigilant eye on Shagun's activities. Shagun's intense desire for change for something else in her life resulted in frequent episodes of quarrel between the husband and wife. Shagun felt her life is boring and monotonous she says:

"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" (Custody 46)

Raman hired detective from Lovely Detective Agency to know about Shagun's lack of interest in him and his family. He asks the agency for a brief report of Shagun's movements for a few days and after knowing Raman's activity, Shagun's indifference and coldness towards Raman changed to hatred. She got upset as her extra marital relationship got exposed. She expresses her anguish.

"Why were things moving so fast? When she started her affair, she had thought a lover would add to her experience making up for all things she had missed having married straight out of college. She had heard of other woman who took lovers. Their whole lives didn't change" (Custody 82)

Shagun wanted to continue her role in the family as well as with Ashok. But he encourages the divorce & assures that his love for her is constant and not wavering. He promised her that he is ready to do anything not only for her but for her children as well. Shagun is enticed by his loving words and sterling elegance. She also realized that her heart and mind is with him only and no longer with her husband. She confirms:

"It is hard to be the wife, when your heart is somewhere else. If only I were not a mother how easy it would be to leave him, to live with you, just be happy". (Custody 84)

Shagun faces a dilemma, a conflict as she neither upholds the strong stoic and self-sacrificing image of her predecessors nor curbs her dangerous feminine desires. Whether to sublimate herself as social conformist or strike out as rebel is a dilemma for her. Her mother who has internalized the subtleties of patriarchy views her as a sexually erring wife, who must be chastised and brought back into the orbit of conventional social morality..But Shagun became morally depraved so much that she retaliated to any kind of moral argument from her mother or anyone else. She became almost impervious to any plea. She decided that her marriage was over as both Raman and she has lost faith in each other. She no longer loves him and now her relationship with Ashok was no more a secret as Raman has confirmed her infidelity & extra marital affair through a detective agency. She took a bold decision to leave her husband and remain with Ashok.

Thus, she leaves behind the essential constraints of marriage and flouts its sacredness through sexual transgression. There is no looking back. She asked her husband to accept divorce on mutual consent at which he is distraught. He reacts violently with his male-ego hurt and wounded like a dishonoured hero. He refuses to solve the matter amicably and the matter turns into a bitter battle in the court and finally ends up with Shagun just winning the visiting rights on her children, leaving the custody of the children to her husband. In a story carrying echoes of Ibsen, Shagun gives preference to her love relationship over the relationship in which she is bound by the institution of marriage. R.K Tandon in his book 'Status of woman in contemporary world' holds the opinion that

"With growing individualism, one thinks of what is acceptable to one self, not in terms of what is acceptable to society. This attitude obviously makes room for divorce". (Tandon 156).

Shagun defines her desire, choice & sexuality as she inspects, recognizes & accepts herself. She believes in Ashok who declares her as his "little wife". At one point when Raman has sudden heart attack her

passion for Ashok dwindled but then again, she feels ecstatic with her reunion with Ashok on the eve of his arrival in Delhi. She felt that if she resumed her life with Raman then again it would be devoid of love and any marital relation. She does not even take into consideration the anticipated plight of her two innocent children. She does not believe in the traditional belief that all sacrifices are to be made by woman. She considers this outlook as a "part of the Indian disease.... The great Indian family which rested on the sacrifices of its women". (Custody 99)

Shagun overrides all dogmas that a society confers upon a human being as a part of family system and asserts her individualism. For Shagun, her broken marriage is a past which by its very implications needs to be forgotten. She is no longer an old traditional patriarchally subjugated woman who is willing to suffer and sacrifice for her family, but she is ready to dismantle the family in pursuit of her personal contentment. She is not an incarnation of virtuous and self-sacrificing woman but a representative of the 21st century urban middle class educated Indian woman who is ready to defy social conventions and traditional moral standards.

In 'Custody', parallel to Shagun's story runs Ishita's story which also depicts marital dissonance. In case of Shagun, infidelity is the cause of marital dissonance but Ishita's marital dissonance is due to her infertility. Ishita is presented as a middle class more average (in all ways) Indian woman, who is not strikingly beautiful but is wise, kind and generous. Ishita is happily married to Suryakanta and finds her highest contentment in the role of wife and daughter-in-law but her happiness in her life slowly starts fading away when she was diagnosed as infertile. Her family's behaviour changes towards her. Ishita's mother in law begins to call her shameless, the sisters in laws and husband avoided her and she ends up being a divorcee.

Ishita is described as a victim of "spineless husband, pressurized into divorcing a wife just because she had a womb that did not function". Manju kapur treats the gendered body as both empowered and disempowered, subject and object, a source of rejection and celebration. As Germaine

Greer points out that a woman's body becomes the "battlefield where she fights for liberation. It is through her body that oppression works reifying her. Her physicality is the medium for others to work on..."

Ishita's mother-in-law says:

"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 blood line of his forefathers continues. And now I need to talk to your mother" (Custody 66)

Thus, Ishita's mother-in-law forces Suryakant to divorce her. She is not ready to spend more money on her treatment and finds an easy way out-divorce. In spite of being a woman herself she fails to understand Ishita. Manju Kapur artistically brings out the oppressive and gender discriminating patriarchal norms and the subjugation of women in the male-dominated social set up. She presents the aftermath of divorce on Ishita who started hating herself. The arrogance of men makes her feel much inferior, weak and psychologically distorted. She feels:

"smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than dust in the sunlit air, smaller than drops of dew caught between blades of grass in the morning" (Custody 62)

She is socially ostracized, indulges herself in self-pity, undergoes stress and trauma and mental torture but there is a twist and turn when she remarries Raman. She is given the position of being a mother to Roohi. In spite of worrying about her past bitter life, she restarts her new life and showers all her motherly love upon Roohi. She regains her wifehood and secures her motherhood. Thus Ishita negotiates infertility and emerges triumphant against social determinants that subjugates her.

Amid the demands and hysterics of the four grownups in this tale of broken marriages, the children remain quietly in the background until the novel's second half. It is then that we begin to see the disastrous and traumatic impact of marital discord and divorce on the life of two children Arjun

and Roohi. The parent's discord, their subsequent separation and remarriage with other person ruins the lives of children both physically as well as psychologically. They undergo a trauma and turmoil while their parents fight for their custody. Parents are least bothered about the adverse effects of their action on the young and innocent minds of their children and thus children are the ultimate sufferers. They are torn between two mothers, two homes and two countries.

Kapur believes that the consequences of the events are more important than the event itself. The divorce between Raman and Shagun has different consequences on different people. Shagun's mother (Mrs. Sabharwal), Raman, his parents all are impacted because of Shagun and Raman's divorce but the most affected in this battle are the two innocent and naive children Arjun and Roohi who became just play things or puppets. Whosoever willed took them. Even before their divorce their youngest child, Roohi became the first target of their marital dissonance. Shagun decides to send her to the toddler's and Raman hates the idea as he feels there was no need to take away her childhood. In spite of Raman's refusal, Shagun sends Roohi to toddlers.

After the divorce children got split and shared between their parents without gaining complete love from any one of them. Arjun spends much of his time in his friend's houses while as Roohi reflects the shift with her loud wails. Instead of basking in the love of both the parents they have to choose from either of them. This is really a traumatic experience for the kids. They realized that the coziness and the feeling of security is no more going to be with them. They moved towards isolation and depression and develop into angry bodies and souls which metamorphosed them into disobedient beings. They have lost the innocent and carefree nature of a child and their fears, rejections and insecurities left scar on their minds which was not easy to be erased. The whole trajectory of their lives is profoundly altered due to the divorce of their parents. They felt themselves to be caught in the web of helplessness as they are completely torn and shattered between their parent's love & hatred.

Gradually and subsequently they lost trust on other people near them. The daily absence of one parent while living with the other also created a challenging circumstance.

Arjun just ten years old is deeply affected by the change in his family. He stops going to school, feels embarrassed as everyone in his school knows about the impending divorce. Remarriage of mother affected him, he refused to get up even if his mother dragged him off the bed, he refused to brush his teeth or have a bath or put on his clothes or eat his breakfast. Each step was a battle. He misses his father, whom he is being kept away from and consequently his grades begin to slip. As he remained with his mother, he also underwent brain wash on the part of his mother, consequently he became almost indifferent to Raman. Arjun is sent off to boarding school, Ashok's alma- mater in fact after Ashok uses his connections to get him a seat there Thus the end of Arjun's relationship with his father.

Arjun was more impacted due to his parent's divorce than Roohi as she was young at the time of her parent's divorce but Arjun's life got completely changed. Roohi was a little lucky as Ishita (step mother) gets involved in her role as mother but Ishita was also pretty vile to Arjun, who only sees his father during school holidays. Roohi a shy and dingy girl of three is coerced into believing that her birth mother loves her no more.

Kapur thus reveals the unimagined uncertainties of matrimony. The wife's sense of suffocation, the husband's fear of loneliness and the constant shifting of the children, like commodities from one home to the other are evoked with painstaking sincerity. Protagonists of this novel moves well beyond Kapur's earlier protagonists who struggle to reconcile themselves with discontentment within marriage. They move boldly into the relatively new and uncharted territories of Indian divorces, custodial battles for children and into the new world of ex-spouses and step parents.

Thus, Custody is true depiction of the universal agony and angst of modern marriage and Manju Kapur has dexterously used marital

dissonance as a motif in 'Custody' to present her views about the shallowness of marital life, its problems, its causes and consequences and has put forward divorce as the final tragic denouement. She aptly exposed the ugliness of divorce and how it shatters the life of all the people associated with the family especially the children who become mere pawns in the great divorce drama through which their parents unleash their fury on each other.

References

1. De Beauvoir, Simone. *The Second Sex*, Trnas. & ed.H.M. Barshley, Hamondsworth: Penguin. 1983.
2. Germaine, Greer. *The Whole Woman*, London, Transworld Publishers Ltd., 1999.
3. Tandon, R.K 'Status of woman is contemporary world" Neha Publishers & Distributors (2000)
4. Kapur, Manju. 2012 *Custody*, Random House India, London, UK.
5. Naik, M.K. *Twentieth Century Indian Fiction*. New Delhi: Pencraft International publication, 2004. Print
6. Saharan, Asha, *Treatment of Infidelity and Infertility in Manju Kapur's Custody*, 2014.