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Feminism in Manju Kapur's *Custody*

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Manju Kapur a well known name in modern Anglo-Indian Literature is widely known as the Jane Austen of India. Her novels deal with everything that is related to the modern family and the patriarchal society. Her novels present the contemporary picture of today's woman who is eager to break free from the domestic walls of their house to build a world of their own. Her novels present before us a new woman who wants an identity for herself. By the late seventies and eighties many women writers emerged with the issues related to women dealing with their family problems, domestic violence, the law, the household, health care, education, their work and their working conditions. Manju Kapur is one novelist who takes her protagonists one step ahead of the others with the burning issues of modern world varying from lesbianism, infidelity, infertility, divorce, adoption etc. The present paper aims to bring out the feminist views of Manju Kapur in her novel *Custody*.

Manju Kapur, known as the Jane Austen of modern Anglo-Indian literature, is a novelist of international repute. With five critically acclaimed novels to her credit- *Difficult Daughters*, *A Married Woman*, *Home*, *The Immigrant*, and *Custody*, she stands out from the rest of the writers of her age. She was awarded the prestigious Commonwealth Award for first fiction from the Asian region in 1999 for *Difficult Daughters*. *A Married Woman*, *Home* were both shortlisted for the Hutch Crossword Prize for fiction, and *The Immigrant* was shortlisted for the DSC Prize. A modern writer with modern views and notions, she knows that today's women are far more intellectual and mature than their predecessors. Her novels are chronicles of the Indian middle class society. They capture everything that comes in the course of time in a middle class family - sexual abuse, the politics of arranged marriages, infidelity, infertility, adoption, divorce, sexual dysfunction, family battles and many more issues. Her protagonists are today's women who are not ready to submit to the age-old traditions and customs of patriarchal society.

Manju Kapur was a teacher of English Literature at Delhi University. Hence her protagonists are also well-educated and their education leads them to independent thinking. It helps them to take a bold stand against the society which is ready to tie them down with patriarchal rules and regulations. They understand the value of education as it is the only way to self-reliance. All her novels speak volumes with their language, style and narrative techniques. Her canvas is always larger than life capturing the minute details of everything she sees in life through the prism of family.

Each and every novel of Manju Kapur is set in the backdrop of an important historical event. Manju Kapur's fifth novel *Custody* was inspired by globalisation and economic liberalisation. With the initial surge of foreign investment which stormed in India, it was a period of economic and financial boom. The deluge was welcomed by investment bankers, bureaucrats, industrialists whether big or small, along with Government officials. The protagonists quite

naturally have materialistic pursuits. The novels of Kapur are like fresh pages depicting the winds of change and her protagonists are strong images of change. She has quoted,

"I obviously write about the things I know well - I wouldn't be able to write about them otherwise. But my novels are imaginative reconstructions. I feel uncomfortable writing about recognisable situations. The one exception was my first novel where I used some of the details from my mother's life, but this was with her permission."

Custody depicts her revolt at the age-old traditions without being partial to anybody. She has brought out two aspects of feminist perspectives in her novel - infidelity and infertility in the form of her two female protagonists, Shagun and Ishita respectively. It is also a tale of child custody and the Indian legal system. Kapur captures the lives of wealthy, urban middle-class Indians with their unsettling secrets, dysfunctional relationships, their yearning for wealth, freedom and peace.

The plot of *Custody* is set in the backdrop of urban upper middle class family of Delhi who despite being affluent are impoverished in values and morals. Kapur explores the hollowness of modern life as the story revolves around Raman and Shagun who are couple along with charismatic Ashok Khanna, Raman's boss and Ishita, a childless divorcee. Kapur uses the institution of marriage in this novel to present the story of four adults and two children. A series of dispute follows along with arguments, heated discussions, exposing the evil side of divorce.

Custody starts with the very first scene involving a love scene of a couple but the ironic side of the story is that it is not the love affair of husband and wife as it looks, but the love-making scene of a wife with her husband's boss. Shagun, the beautiful green-eyed wife of Raman had fallen in love with her husband's boss, Ashok Khanna. In a very short time Shagun finds herself struggling to define herself in the role of a wife, mother and a lover altogether. Finally, she asks Raman for divorce 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. The book starts with the problems that married couples encounter and experience when there is no love lost between them. Kapur reveals without taking anybody's side the power of the extramarital affair which can break up even a solid marriage. Morals and ethics don't work or to say have no place when it comes to love. Ashok Khanna is a real marketer who has never failed. When he realises 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 and feels happy like a proud conqueror even if it means to destroy one's seems-to-be happy married life. With the taste of love Shagun rebels for freedom which was long denied to her. She fought for the freedom she had long wanted but it was at the cost of her children and a happy married life. She dares to come out of the protective environment of the peaceful family setup. Kapur very artistically weaves the plots and the sub-plots and throws light on the fate of the children in such marriages. Kapur says,

"And here I have been thinking that although none of the characters come out wholly shining, you do sympathise with them all! Misery, anxiety, tension does bring out the worst in us - that

would apply to any conflict situation. Where children are concerned, ones deepest feelings are at stake, and this provokes all kinds of extreme behaviour."

Manju Kapur presents the tensions and problems that follow as the aftermath of divorce. Family structure crumbles and falls apart into pieces with divorce. The novelist shows what Shagun has to bear as a cost of her freedom. It is a break up of modern marriage with its burden of individualism. The funny thing is, when it comes to the downsides of individualism and the freedom of will, people suddenly tend to turn a blind eye and look for excuses and justifications. Kate Millet asserts,

"Woman is still denied sexual freedom and the biological control over her body through the cult of virginity, double standard, the prescription against abortion, and in many places because contraception is physically and psychically unavailable to her."

Shagun's rebellious attitude aggravated as a result of the oppression and suppression of the patriarchy since her childhood. She doesn't want to be a silent sufferer and submit herself to her fate and compromise any more instead she rebels to get what she wants now. Kapur being a post-colonial writer gave her protagonists the same post-colonial touch which they deserved after the breaking down of the age-old traditions and trying to be liberal, progressive or radical. It is a novel reeking of authenticity. Kapur refrains from being partial and judgemental to any of the characters. Manju Kapur's ability to present all the minute details with fineness gives the novel an authentic touch. She is a keen observer of women psychology and thus has presented both Shagun and Ishita with equal importance. The cruel and rude domestic dispute takes its course on the innocent mind of the children and finally ruins their lives. The two adorable children--young teenager Arjun who looks just like Shagun and three year old Roohi who looks just like Raman are "torn between two mothers, two homes, two countries". The dirt and hatred that lies hidden under the expensive carpet of the upper-middle-class drawing rooms comes out with just one brushing. The concept of family shame and social propriety is kept at the background and Shagun's infidelity is not scandalized. The selfish and ignoring sides of the parents is revealed. How the callous parents fail to understand, acknowledge, and respect the views of the children is brought out by Manju Kapur in an realistic manner. Shagun's selfishness shocks Raman who is a sincere, devoted husband. He is a hard working man trying to reap the benefits of economic boom of the financial market but his hard work costs him his wife. Both the children of Raman and Shagun are separated from each other. Manju Kapur states,

"The family is where I see the impact of what is happening in Indian society. In my earlier novels, it was women who negotiated this relationship. Here it is everybody - the children, the father, the wives. If you live free, you pay the emotional price."

In *Custody*, everybody has to pay a price for what they want. The fact that Husband and wife become strangers to each other is pathetic and brings to the surface the hollowness which the modern families experience in this materialistic world.

Born in the city of Amritsar in post-independence era when the nation was rising up after two centuries of colonial rule, Manju Kapur had seen the growing up of India. Along with her growing up it was India growing up with its people- men, women, children, families altogether.

It was quite natural for her to focus on the most important aspects of a nation- its values, morals, and ethics. In *Custody*, parallel to Shagun's story runs Ishita's story who has been deprived of her rights. Kapur through Ishita's life exposes the shallowness of marital life where a woman is stigmatised because of her infertility and the fact that she can't carry forward the family name. She is subjugated to severe mental torture with no one to take her side. Even her husband who had declared his undaunted love for her supported his parents. Ishita's mother-in-law is the typical mother-in-law of the Indian patriarchal society where a daughter is treated as a daughter and a daughter-in-law as a daughter-in-law. Being a woman she failed to empathize with Ishita's condition. When Ishita's mother-in-law takes a detailed discussion with the doctor to go to the depth of the matter to see the medical cause of failure, her curiosity is satisfied as it is not her son who is impotent but her daughter-in-law who is infertile. The novelist brings out the callous nature of the mother-in-law who fails to understand and respect the same gender kind. In one type of feminism we can find that the root cause of all problems is the patriarchal system and men's domination to women. The system also exposes the set up where a woman dominates another. Many writers and feminists have poured their expression about women and their various problems. This woman's question has been the source of question and controversy all over the world. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels located the origin of women's oppression in the rise of class society. Marx in his *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848 had clearly written,

"The bourgeois sees in his wife a mere instrument of production. He hears that (under communism) the instruments of production are to be exploited in common, and, naturally, can come to no other conclusion than that the lot of being common to all will likewise fall to women."

Kate Millet in her *Sexual Politics* had asserted,

"One of the chief effects of class within patriarchy is to set one woman against another, in the past creating a lively antagonism between whore and matron and in the present between career woman and housewife. One envies the other her "security" and prestige , while the envied yearns beyond the confines of respectability for what she takes to be the other's freedom, adventure, and contact with the great world. Through the multiple advantages of the double standard, the male participates in both worlds empowered by his superior social and economic resources to play the estranged women against each other as rivals. One might also recognise subsidiary status. Categories among women not only is virtue class, but beauty and age as well."

Kapur is successful in exposing the fact of how a daughter-in-law is discarded from the household and the family for only one reason. Ishita has to bear the cost of her infertility. The theme of loneliness in marriage is running throughout the novel in every plot and subplot. Mostly women have to bear the burden of loneliness in life. Simone de Beauvoir draws the conclusion,

"One is not born, but rather becomes a woman."

Woman has been reduced to a meek and docile animal today. The home is the crucial site of a woman's oppression. According to Marxist feminism, Classicism is the main base of women's oppression. Men, specially men in the capitalist class, benefit economically in the form of address women's work as nonproductive and women's unpaid. On this account women's

subordination is a function of class oppression, maintained (like racism) because it serves the interests of capital and the ruling class; it divides men against women, privileges working class men relatively within the capitalist system in order to secure their support; and legitimates the capitalist class's refusal to pay for the domestic labor assigned, unpaid, to women (childrearing, cleaning, etc.). Some socialist feminists do not think that the oppression of women is based only on the economic system and they suggest that patriarchy and capitalism are combined into one system. Kapur's Ishita is only body neither mind nor soul for her relatives. Female body is just a body and nothing else.

Simone de Beauvoir in her *The Second Sex* argues that society only permits women to be "being-in-itself" an object, while men are "being-for-themselves". She states,

"Woman has always been man's dependent, if not his slave; the two sexes have never shared the world in equality. And even today woman is heavily handicapped, though her situation is beginning to change. "

Kapur's *Custody* is a tale of female woes, sufferings as well as their happiness, their way to fulfill their desires and aspirations. The novel takes us through a series of events and incidents with separation, divorce, remarriages of the four adults and with it follows a series of ugliness with the legal procedure or the custody battle with the emotions of the children at stake. The pain and loneliness of the two children of Shagun is well portrayed by Manju Kapur. The story can be termed as a legal drama of the Indian society. Kapur's women are bold enough to face the cruel and slow turns of the Indian judiciary and the way it functions.

Manju Kapur's women are no longer confined within the four walls of the family and traditional values. They dare to break down the conventional perceptions and dogmas of the patriarchal society or the bonds of incompatible marriage. In their quest for identity the bold women characters of Kapur are presented by her as real women of flesh and blood who have their own emotions and sentiments. They also yearn to be a part of the intellectual movements of the day, trying to establish their identity. Shagun tried to be honest with her love and life which means to revolt. She revolted against her married life and enjoyed her freedom. Feeling of guilt tormented her but she goes ahead to enjoy her new love life. Ishita on the other hand, stigmatised of infertility hopes to find a new life in Raman's broken family. With nothing but emptiness in her life, she revives her life by marrying Raman and seeks fulfilment in life. She unhesitatingly accepts Raman's daughter Roohi as her own child and showers love on the small child. Kapur doesn't hesitate to tell that women like Ishita also exist in today's world who believe in showering love to family and remain happy being the guardian of other's children. On the other hand Shagun's character is projected as an independent woman who dared to stray for her lost identity. Kapur tries to bring both her protagonists from the marginal position assigned to her. They do not achieve liberation through wider occupations or feminist revolts, but through deviational behaviour pattern depicting a process of psychological and spiritual aspect.

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