

**CONJUGAL AND CUSTODIAL CALAMITIES IN MANJU KAPUR'S *CUSTODY***

**P. Jojappa** Ph. D., Research Scholar (Part-Time), PG & Research Department of English,  
MSS Wakf Board College, Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

**Dr. N. Gnanaselvi** Associate Professor, PG & Research Department of English, Sri Meenakshi Govt.  
Arts College for Women (Autonomous), Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India

**Abstract**

This study proposes to study the intricacies of marriage, divorce, and custody battles in contemporary Indian society depicted in Manju Kapur's novel *Custody*. Kapur portrays the legal procedure as influenced by societal norms, cultural expectations, and gender dynamics, which can impact the outcome of custody battles. The novel explores how legal battles can exacerbate tensions between estranged spouses and affect the well-being of children caught in the middle. In "*Custody*," Kapur presents the legal system as multifaceted, reflecting the complexities of real-life custody battles. The process of navigating through legal proceedings is depicted as arduous, time-consuming, and emotionally draining for the characters involved. Additionally, the stigma associated with divorce and single parenthood adds layers of complexity to the legal proceedings, shaping the characters' experiences and choices. The "*Custody*" is a moment of reckoning for the characters, as they come to terms with the consequences of their actions and decisions. It serves as a turning point in the narrative, leading to the resolution of conflicts and the beginning of new journeys for the characters involved. The narrative delves into various conjugal and custodial calamities experienced by the characters, primarily revolving around the central theme of divorce and its repercussions on family dynamics.

**Key Words: Conjugal, Custodial, gender dynamics, infertility, infidelity**

**Conjugal and Custodial Calamities in Manju Kapur's *Custody***

Divorce in the Indian legal system is governed by a combination of personal laws and secular laws, each with its own provisions and procedures. Divorce among Hindus is primarily governed by the Hindu Marriage Act, 1955. Grounds for divorce under this act include cruelty, adultery, desertion, mental illness, incurable diseases and irretrievable breakdown of marriage. In divorce cases involving children, custody, visitation rights, and child support are determined based on the best interests of the child. The court may also decide on the payment of alimony or maintenance to the spouse who is financially dependent.

"*Custody*" is a novel by Indian author Manju Kapur, published in 2011. The story revolves around the intricacies of marriage, divorce, and custody battles in contemporary Indian society. While the novel delves into the emotional and social aspects of these themes, it also provides insight into the legal system and procedures related to custody battles in India. In the novel, the legal system is depicted as complex and often biased against women, especially in matters of custody. It highlights the challenges faced by women in fighting for custody of their children and navigating the legal process, which can be lengthy, expensive, and emotionally draining.

Kapur portrays the legal procedure as influenced by societal norms, cultural expectations, and gender dynamics, which can impact the outcome of custody battles. The novel explores how legal battles can exacerbate tensions between estranged spouses and affect the well-being of children caught in the middle. In "*Custody*," Kapur presents the legal system as multifaceted, reflecting the complexities of real-life custody battles. The process of navigating through legal proceedings is depicted as arduous, time-consuming, and emotionally draining for the characters involved. Through intricate details and courtroom scenes, Kapur highlights the labyrinthine nature of the legal system, where laws, procedures, and societal norms intersect.

Characters experience immense emotional turmoil as they navigate through courtrooms, negotiations, and legal battles. The stress and uncertainty associated with the legal process strain relationships, exacerbate conflicts, and take a toll on the well-being of both parents and children. Additionally, the stigma associated with divorce and single parenthood adds layers of complexity to the legal proceedings, shaping the characters' experiences and choices.

In Manju Kapur's novel *Custody*, the reason for the broken marriages are infidelity and infertility. Two narratives depicting different families run parallelly in the novel, which resonates the marital issues, societal expectations, personal dilemmas, social stigma and so on. The first narrative delves upon the life of Raman and Shagun. Shagun is described as a stunningly beautiful woman who possesses a magnetic charm and allure. Her physical attractiveness often draws attention and admiration from those around her.

Shagun's marriage to Raman, the protagonist, initially appears to be one of convenience rather than love. Despite having children with Raman, Shagun feels unfulfilled in her role as a wife and mother, seeking excitement and fulfillment outside of her family life. Shagun craves independence and autonomy, longing to break free from societal expectations and constraints. Her desire for freedom leads

her to make choices that challenge traditional gender roles and societal norms. Shagun's mother Mrs. Sabarwal is deeply concerned with maintaining the family's reputation and social standing. She is protective of Shagun and her family, often intervening in their affairs and offering advice that is perceived by Shagun as controlling. She advises Shagun to be faithful to her husband. But as soon as Shagun meets Raman, she loses her patience and shouts at him.

Shagun wants to lead her life according to her whims and fancies. Shagun is short-tempered from her Childhood. She was aspiring to become a model. But her mother put an end to her desire. She rejects the stereotypical life of an Indian house wife, like child bearing, child rearing and other typical household chores. She says to her husband, " I'll be thirty, Arjun is just becoming independent, Always I don't want to Start all over again. tied to a child" (18). She feels monotonous in her marital life. She desires to lead her life in a romantic and in a thrilling way. She often says 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). She never cares for the family and never responds to her husband as well as to her in-laws.

Raman's wife, Shagun, develops an illicit affair with Raman's boss Ashok at work. The modern society's alarming rise in extramarital affairs is evident from the novel. With a lot of uncertainty and being the parents of two children, both the husband and wife go through an upheaval which causes a great turmoil in the family. Shagun and Ashok's relationship in "Custody" is characterized by tension, conflict, and emotional complexity as they navigate the challenges of marriage, parenthood, and personal fulfillment in the context of contemporary Indian society. Kapur also throws light on the other characters involved in this upheaval. Due to Shagun's marital conflict, nobody has suffered more than Shagun's mother, Mrs. Sabarwal. She regards Raman as the kindest and most caring son-in-law. Having gone through the agony of separation, she could not choose the best side for herself. She attempts to persuade her daughter to reconsider her decision. She tried numerous ways to convince Shagun.

Her lover Ashok manipulates her to forsake the family and not to stick on to the Indian traditional values. She fights the battle within her heart and decides to divorce Raman. Shagun is ambitious and restless, constantly seeking excitement and fulfillment beyond the confines of her marriage and family life. She feels unfulfilled in her role as a wife and mother and longs for independence and personal fulfillment. Raman distances himself from Shagun. One day she takes her

children away from her husband without his knowledge. The children who are innocent, do not know as what to believe and to whom to believe.

The custody case was filed "The law was a cut-and-dried business, once you got swamped in outrage, indignation, grief and anger, you are nowhere" (121). The Children are with Shagun, Ashok is a worst caretaker of her children and he never gives space for Shagun to grow. Her daughter Roohi suffers from a mild nervous disorder. Her son Arjun is not able to concentrate in his Studies. Shagun always brainwashes them and tell things against Raman. Raman got visiting rights to see his children in weekends. Next comes the question of custody, "You know I hated all these hole-in-corner stuff. If you have to get divorce, fight for the custody, let's Start now" (94). "You know, counselling is not such a bad idea,' went on Mrs. Sabarwal carefully. ' After all, it is question of your whole future, along with that of your children" (94). Shagun was well aware of her mother's true motivations for persuading her Raman had been very good to her mother and had shown her much love and care.

In India, settling a divorce with money is a terrible social practice. How can we make money to compensate for the people who are broken? Money is not the best way to find balance Furthermore, when people attempt to compensate with money, can they rely on the appropriate criterion for the amount of money that the husband provides to the wife? In the case of the divorce of Raman and Shagun, Shagun was not in favour of any financial settlement. She said, ""Don't make it harder. I have left you best part of the marriage. Surely my freedom is not too much to ask in exchange?" (109)

In the second example, Kapur discusses Ishita's shattered marriage due to her inability to bear children. Her husband divorced her due to her infertility. After all, divorce brought on by infertility is a significant concern today. Some people commonly marry in order to have offspring who will continue their family line. A woman is considered unfit for marriage if she cannot have children. Kapur writes,

Two and a half lakhs were to be handed to Ishita on the first signing of a mutual consent divorce. Two and half more would be given six months later when the final proceedings were over. The interim six months was a period meant for reconciliation process. What process thought Ishita drearily, what process? There was never a chance. (Kapur 72)

Meanwhile, the life of Ishita is deranged because of her infertility. Though she undergoes many medical procedures and treatments, she could not conceive. She feels herself as a dust "Smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the moles of the dust in the Sunlit air, smaller than drops of dew caught

between blades of grass in the morning" (65). Her mother-in-law an Outdated Woman tells her son " 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 engages herself with a job as a Social Worker in Mrs. Hingorani's NGO. This gave her a breathing space. She feels hopeless at times, thinking about the society. "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). Finally, she gets divorce from her husband.

Ishita meets Raman in her Workplace finds solace in helping him with his household Chores. Raman has taken the custody of Children. Ishita who is infertile, becomes a good step-mother to Raman's Children. Shagun Still fights for Custody. Roohi is with her father and Arjun is with his mother. Ishita feels sad for this fragmented life of Raman. Banerji writes in her review "Custody becomes something more than just a social commentary, but a novel that is true to the universal angst of modern marriage, with its burden of individualism" (*The Guardian*).

The climax unfolds when the court grants custody of the children to Shagun, the mother, despite Raman's efforts to gain custody. This decision deeply affects Raman, who had hoped to have custody of his children and rebuild his relationship with them. However, Shagun's manipulative tactics and societal biases work in her favor, leading to the court's decision. The climax also sees the culmination of Ishita's character arc, as she becomes increasingly involved in Raman's life and the lives of his children. Ishita's support for Raman during the custody battle highlights the complexities of their relationship and her growing feelings for him. Overall, the "*Custody*" is a moment of reckoning for the characters, as they come to terms with the consequences of their actions and decisions. It serves as a turning point in the narrative, leading to the resolution of conflicts and the beginning of new journeys for the characters involved.

The narrative delves into various conjugal and custodial calamities experienced by the characters, primarily revolving around the central theme of divorce and its repercussions on family dynamics. Following their divorce, Raman and Shagun engage in a bitter custody battle over their two children, Arjun and Roohi. The custody proceedings exacerbate the emotional strain between the parents and have a profound impact on the well-being of the children. The legal complexities and societal biases surrounding custody decisions intensify the calamities faced by the family. In the article "The Portrayal

of Women in Manju Kapur's *Custody*" the researcher comments on Manju Kapur's novel *Custody* as, "The very features that differentiates Manju Kapur's female protagonists is their attitude towards tradition and modernity" (Subathra 1998).

The custodial calamities in the novel also manifest in the form of parental alienation, wherein one parent seeks to alienate the children from the other parent. Shagun's manipulation and attempts to turn the children against Raman contribute to the psychological distress experienced by all parties involved. Throughout the narrative, the characters grapple with intense emotional turmoil resulting from the conjugal and custodial calamities they face. Raman's feelings of betrayal and longing for his children, Shagun's guilt and insecurity, and the children's confusion and distress all underscore the profound impact of divorce on familial relationships.

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