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Manju Kapur's Shagun: Conflict between Individual Freedom and Patriarchy

Dr. Mangesh Madhukar Gore
Head, Dept .Of English,
Sundarrao More ACS College,
Poladpur, Dist – Raigad, M.S.

Abstract

Manju Kapur's novel, *Custody* (2011) reveals some of the significant aspects of human relation such as the conflict between husband and wife and its dimensions. In recent time, the notion of human relationship is under the process of change due to various striking and contradictory factors that lead them to separation. The issue of an independent identity leads husband and wife in conflicting situation. The narrative leads with the tension of human relation against the issues like education, modernity and humanity. A feeling of discontent, shock and fear, misunderstanding, lack of dedication, unfaithful nature, miscommunication and constant quest of identity are portrayed in *Custody*. It is through the character of Shagun Manju Kapur deals with conflict between individual freedom aspired by the modern women and patriarchy that imposes limitations on personal space in the family.

Keywords – *Patriarchy, Conflict, Space, Subjugation*

Custody is a projection of a revolutionary woman against male-domination rather than a mere description of an obedient Indian woman. The woman in the novel rebels against social, economic, cultural and sexual hierarchy in male subjugated society. The conflict between husband and wife puts under observation the issues like family, marriage, morality and humanity. Shagun is the character presented by Manju Kapur through this novel *Custody*, revolts against patriarchy to create her own space and existence. Mother of two children, Shagun tries to enjoy her freedom by establishing post- marital relationship with her husband's boss. The anguish of the metropolitan middle class women is depicted in a detailed manner by Kapur. Kapur attempts to portray the problems faced by urban middle class married women through the character of Shagun who seems a free minded woman. She does everything to carry out her wish for worldly enjoyment. She is brought up by her mother, Mrs. Sabharwal, an only child of her parents. She enjoys a liberty in her grown up years. Kapur comments as:

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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)

A typical middle class ambitious Shagun wants to have liberty through the rout of marriage. She even puts her study aside for getting married. During her college, she falls in love with Raman. When Raman's family comes to see her, Mrs. Kaushik, Raman's mother, says, "Even after you marry, I do not see this woman in the kitchen." (*Custody*, p 22) After the marriage Shagun is obsessed and wants to meet film stars and to be present at high-class parties. Her prettiness is the main source to pull her in modeling while her husband Raman is a money minded man who uses his brain in job. Shagun gave birth to two children Arjun and Roohi.

A meeting of Shagun with Ashok Kahanna, boss of Raman in the party changes the platform of their married life and the magnetism brings them nearer to each other where Raman is totally sidetracked by Shagun. A 'New Woman' of Manju Kapur does not seem to be a subaltern even in married life. Shagun is completely at ease in venturing out of her conjugal role by keeping secrete relationship with Ashok in their meeting. She ignores the responsibility as a mother and remains outside in the house. The stress and tension in the relationship resulted in the conflict between Shagun and her family where Raman starts objecting her wife's behavior but this does not stop Shagun to meet Ashok regularly. Shagun suggests Raman to put Roohi in the play school which is unfair thing to any infant so Raman rejects the idea. Finally Roohi joins the toddler's which makes her more serious child in her early age. In this way the gap of communication between husband and wife relations is clearly seen. The distance and conflict between them make separated to never meet again in their life. The following lines portray the same condition; "at night when he tried to pull her towards him, she again resisted, 'I am really tired.' 'We haven't done it for weeks, That's not fair, Shagu, If anyone should be tired, it's me.'" (*Custody*, p 47)

In spite of good family, having exceedingly paid husband, handsome two children, Shagun feels scarcity of something in her life even after twelve years of her marriage. When she comes to know the impossibility of fulfillment her desire due to the busy schedule of Raman, she decided to fill the gap by developing physical relation with Ashok. She suddenly becomes ready to break the bondage of family life in sense of morality and honesty. Along with the responsibility of family, she gives priority to fulfill her physical hunger, but in the course of time the family gets neglected as she spends more time with Ashok. Raman suspects the attitude of his wife so he keeps watches to find out the truth. When he comes to know the reality, she never reacted in traditional way as a typical husband as he knows that somewhere he is also responsible to the situation. He is aware that he always has been preoccupied by his satisfaction and never thought about her satisfaction. Raman should have

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understood that salary, children and handsome husband are not only the parameters of Shagun's satisfaction as a human being. Her physical satisfaction seems to be neglected which makes her to react in this way. It may be expected that Shagun should have told Raman about her unsatisfied state of mind, but in Indian socio-cultural context woman is suppressed on the issue of modernity, so she has to be silent or secretive on the issue of sex. This is one of the possibilities forced Shagun to develop secretive relation with Ashok.

Raman frequently tells Shagun about the detachment that causes his sadness and creating a problem to their children. Shagun mockingly says: "'Distance?' she laughed as she drew her hand away 'it is you who keep travelling. How can you talk about my distance?'" (Custody, p 49) Now it is common thing that men have to travel for business that makes women lonely in the home. A sort of this feeling makes Shagun to attract towards Ashok to find out an alternative for fulfillment. She overhears Mr. Sabharwal's advice about the results of this illegal relationship. Shagun leaves her home without a single thought of her children and her husband. Shagun cannot wait for the court to announce the consequence about the divorce and calls Raman to propose a divorce by mutual approval offering him to take the children with him. Blackmailing proofs by Shagun shows a woman's reaction against exploitation and suppression. She departs Raman to meet Roohi citing medical causes. Finally the divorce takes place and the custody of Arjun is given to Shagun and Roohi to Raman by court. Thus the long battle and conflict for custody is portrayed and the court becomes the battle field for both Shagun and Raman to fight in the novel.

Shagun is happy with Ashok but at the same time she misses her children when they have been living in New York. It shows women are finding their place in some option but the frustration is always there related to so many issues. Shagun feels alone in the absence of Ashok in home and she notices the weakness in her second marriage also. In a letter to her mother Shagun repents about leaving Raman and children for Ashok. She wants her children back so that she can make up for her mistakes. Shagun too experiences a subaltern state because now she completely depends on Ashok as a secondary creature. Raman's endurance is an interesting thing which hardly seen in any Indian family context. In the search of worldly enjoyment Shagun also defies her mother, Mrs. Sabharwal who always cautions her about wrong conduct and its effects on her conjugal life. The mother - daughter dichotomy is described through their relation when Shagun dislikes her mother's good relation with Raman.

Through the novel *Custody*, Manju Kapur describes the pungent fight between husband and wife for custody of the children and also the problems that creep into the middle class family with the entry of money. Kapur unfolds the clash between the 'Traditional Indian Values' that women have to render and the manifestation of an Indian woman for her identity.

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