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Dominance of Self-hood in Shagun, the Mother: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Custody*

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Abstract

Marriage as an arranged one is a religious ceremony. A man and a woman who enter into marital life as husband and wife promise that they will live together till the end of their earthly life braving all the seasons of life. Besides, as husband and wife, they are destined to enter into conjugal relationship for procreation as well as continuation of their posterity on earth. The wife begets children from what her husband gives during their sexual relationship and thus both become blessed parents. The wife as a mother lives only for her children and husband. She never entertains any thought other than dedicating herself to the welfare of her family. The husband as a father provides life, comforts and security to his family. But in the modern days, such established conventions have gone into oblivion because of the absence of understanding and genuine love, the lack of conjugal bliss and the dominance of ego and selfishness between the married ones. Both are tempted to go astray in their ways of life affecting the peace and happiness at home. Men hardly divorce their wives but women do on various unimaginable reasons known only to them. The woman who is selfish to the core never worries about leaving children to their fate just because they are born to him. She either remarries or lives in relationship with another even without marriage to satisfy her selfishness. Her womanliness occupies the entire space of her heart dethroning the spirit of motherhood. Whatever happens to her, she should stay back at her marital home as the mother of her children without any conjugal relationship with her husband but she does not do so because her selfishness to quench her personal interest for sex reigns supreme. This is what Manju Kapur has portrayed through the mother character Shagun in her novel *Custody*.

Keywords- *Conjugal Bliss, Procreation, Dominance, Womanliness, Selfhood, Desertion*

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Introduction

The attainment of motherhood is the blessed identity of a married woman because the motherhood “gives strength and dignity as her clothing, and wisdom and kindness as her character’s inherent traits” (*Family Devotional Study Bible*, Prov. 31:26). If she becomes a mother of a daughter, her motherliness for the daughter remains stronger till the last day of her sojourn on earth. If she becomes a mother of a son, her love for him remains as fresh as ever till another woman enters into his life as his wife. Yet, it never loses its intensity for him. A mother’s feeling of love and affection always revolves around her children in all situations and under all circumstances. She is, in fact, an incarnation of God at home:

God took the fragrance of a flower...
The majesty of a tree...
The gentleness of morning dew...
The calm of a quiet sea...
The beauty of the twilight hour...
The soul of a starry night...
The laughter of a rippling brook...
The grace of a bird in flight...
Then God fashioned from these things
A creation like no other,
And when his masterpiece was through
He called it simply - Mother. (Farnham)

However, the life of reality in modern days offers many exceptions even among mothers. There are Gertrude-like-mothers who do not remain sexually satisfied with their married men. Such exceptions in mothers never hesitate to betray the trust and love of their married men in order to enjoy physical pleasures with the other men of their choice. They enjoy extra marital relationship only to compensate the lack of it at home. “Married women are the new infidels because they thrive on the secret attraction of adultery, knowing full well that they trespass the marital accord” (Pathian, *Outlook* 2 Jan. 2017). Some mothers even divorce their married partners and get married to the men who they think are sexually more attractive. They even desert their children thinking that they will be nuisance to their sexual enjoyment with the new men. Fiction is not completely fictitious and it is based on real life event in human relationship. The writers of fiction use their imagination to bring to light the ugly side of human relationship glitteringly. Manju Kapur is one of such women novelists and she has based her novel *Custody* on the strange behaviour of a woman by name Shagun who belittles her motherhood and wifehood.

The writer of the article has focused his attention to highlight how a married woman with two lovely children, one boy and one girl, goes astray in establishing her individuality. In doing so, she does not mind leaving her two children and her husband to their fate. She is

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more concerned with establishing her individual identity to be a paramour cum legal wife of another person for new sexual experience than remaining satisfied with her traditional marital status and outdated conjugal love. None can find an answer to a question what Shagun really wants other than her happy marital life and the attainment of motherhood. Kendra Cherry in “Freud’s Perspective on Women” acknowledges what Sigmund Freud has said and quotes his saying, “The great question that has never been answered, and for which I [Sigmund Freud] have not yet been able to find an answer, though I have spent nearly thirty years of my life in doing research into the feminine soul, is ‘what does a woman want?’” (18 Sept. 2017). The writer exposes the ugly mentality of a married woman cum mother Shagun and her way of ditching her husband along with her two innocent children for the sake of more exciting physical pleasures.

Analysis

Shagun is the only daughter of her loving and affectionate mother Mrs. Sabharwal. The mother knows very well about the modern tendency of her daughter and her aspirations to be a professional model. She realizes that if she allows Shagun to have her own way, it will spoil her marital and familial life when she becomes a married woman through the arranged marriage. Hence, she is against her daughter pursuing a modeling career. She also informs Shagun that she can fulfill her life’s aspirations after her marriage and with the consent of her husband.

Mrs. Sabharwal chooses Raman, an executive, working in the marketing section of a global drinks company. She gets her daughter married to him in a traditional way. If Shagun had any second opinion about her arranged marriage, she should have declined it but she did not. She accepts Raman as her prospective life partner and marries him as per the wishes of her mother. Raman feels very happy to be the husband of Shagun because he finds her extraordinarily beautiful. After her conjugal relationship with her husband:

Shagun becomes pregnant and [after expected period] she first gives birth to a [male] child [whom she has christened as Arjun]. Her husband being affluent, money for her is not a big issue. However, claims of husband, child, family and friends have not allowed her dream of becoming a model. Her aspirations remain only as a dream. Moreover, she has never been able to guide her own life [individually]; everything such as marital, familial and societal relationship has been decided by her parents, family and cultural habits. (11)

As years go by, Shagun becomes a mother of a female child and names the child as Roohi. As a mother, Mrs. Sabharwal is more concerned with the marital happiness and security of life of her daughter with Raman. She feels that as long as Raman is happy, her daughter will be comfortable in her life with him. Hence, she showers her love and affection on Raman as if he were her own son. Shagun is used to making fun of the love between her mother and Raman, saying “You two are like love birds” (25). In making this comment,

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Shagun unwittingly reveals her inner self and her weakness. This kind of negative attitude about her husband's relationship with her mother is a kind of motivation for her to find ways and means to enjoy life outside independently.

Shagun's womanliness, which remains dormant accepting what she gets from her husband through conjugal relationship, finds its outlet on seeing her husband's boss Ashok Khanna. She also finds him more attractive than her Raman sexually. As a married woman with two children, she should not have entertained such thoughts in her heart on seeing a third person and stranger but she has done that. Her frailty for sexually attractive features of Ashok Khanna surfaces and she begins to assert individuality and independence. Like the feelings of Shakespeare's Ophelia in *Twelfth Night* on seeing disguised Viola, her bodily desire needs to be satisfied without any further delay. She begins to love him and wants to marry him too. Ashok Khanna equally responds to her in his love even though he knows who she is.

Shagun considers her love for Ashok Khanna as a way out from the clutches of her unpleasant, unsatisfactory, and irregular conjugal relationship with Raman. In her love for Ashok Khanna, she finds him more equal and democratic than her husband. She also feels that her love making with Ashok Khanna will be more satisfying. As and when she is with Ashok Khanna, she thinks badly of her husband. She realizes that Ashok Khanna is more suitable to her taste and temperament as her life partner. She is determined to dethrone Raman from her heart and to crown Ashok Khanna as the new king of her heart. Raman's suspicion about his wife's love for his boss and their togetherness during his absence becomes true. He meets his wife and expresses his feeling to her indirectly:

He holds her hand in his and informs her that he feels some distance in their relationship and that this feeling makes him unhappy. Drawing her hand away from him, Shagun laughs at him for his mention of the word 'distance.' She replies that it is you who keep travelling and remain distant to me for days together. How can you talk about my distance? (48)

Mrs. Sabharwal is also suspicious of her daughter's unusual behaviour whenever Raman is away from home on business. She goes out soon after her children have gone to school. She expresses her concern to her daughter stating, "Shagun, you and the children should stay with me for a few days while your husband is away travelling and attending to his duty. I hardly see you nowadays. I try to contact you over phone, but I learn that you are out" (36). She appears to be a protective mother of Shagun but she is helpless. She knows about her daughter's adultery with Ashok Khanna outside her marital accord. She feels very much upset for being ineffective in changing her daughter's mental make-up. She cannot but muse over what her married daughter cum mother of two children has done:

What choice she [Mrs. Sabharwal] as a mother has? She has to keep silent, without having accomplished her goal of making Shagun follow the path of virtue. Now she has been

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an accomplice to the crime [of her daughter's adultery]. Society could point its finger at her and say [that as Shagun's mother, she has known and she has done nothing. (41)

Shagun never looks bothered about her mother's worry about her outing. Her personal interest is more important than her family concern. When she brings her decision to divorce Raman and desert her children to be with Ashok Khanna as his loving wife, her mother-in-law begs not to bring disgrace to the family in order to satisfy her selfish interest:

You think [that] all wives love their husbands? But they stay married. You are idealistic. You do not think about the long term. What about the society? What about your children? The house rests upon a woman [and her societal reputation]. In your children's happiness and in your husband's happiness lies your own. Anything else is just temporary. (78-80)

Shagun is very firm in giving concrete shape to her selfhood by giving up her marital life and motherhood and marrying Ashok Khanna because she believes that "it is only the social set up which always prefers traditional values to modern ones and societal norms to individual freedom and this set up makes [all senior women like her mother and mother-in-law who are rooted to their cultural habits] to be afraid of" (84). She is not ready to listen to anyone and her lover Ashok Khanna also motivates her to do as she pleases:

[She should not follow the advice of her mother and mother-in-law] She must follow the dictates of her own heart as [Princess] Diana [the wife of Prince Charles] did. We have only one life and everybody wants to live it in the best way they can follow. A lover would add to her experience, and make up for all the things she has missed for having married straight out of college. (85-86)

Shagun follows her lover's advice and decides to marry him for the satisfaction of self in her which has been starving for want of sexual expression, satisfaction and fulfillment for many years. To make her decisions take a physical shape, she enters into a sexual act with him, and feels triumphant:

[After her excited and satisfactory sex with him], she sinks down next to her lover [cum her prospective second husband] feeling greatly satisfied [but without any traces of regret for the violation of her marital accord]. She has the feeling that if she happens to die tomorrow, she will not feel very sad to die because she has now become a sexually fulfilled woman. (113).

Soon after her sexual enjoyment, she also apprises Raman of her leaving him once for all as his unsatisfactory wife in order to begin her life anew as the wife of Ashok Khanna.

Raman understands his situation and realizes that there is a limit to anything. He knows well that he cannot continue to live with a woman who has given away her body to another man just for sexual satisfaction. He informs her that he gives her the much wanted divorce on condition that she should claim that she is the mother of her two children. He asks her:

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Do it quickly, whatever you have to do. My life is a nightmare as long as you stay with me but your heart with someone and somewhere [thinking of only sex and nothing but sex]. It is a hard [for me] to be a husband to you in such situations. If only I were not a mother, how easy it would be. To leave him, to live with you, just be happy. (87)

Shagun's motherliness meets its Waterloo in her selfhood. She does not care about leaving her children and giving up her relationship as their mother. Her only priority in life is to be with the man of her love and enjoy sex as and when she wants. In her craving for frequent sex and for the fulfillment of her selfhood, she considers her children as an obstacle to her enjoyment of uninterrupted sex if they are with her.

Conclusion

A woman can sacrifice all the worldly riches because such riches are as temporal as the human life is. She can also give up any human relationship such as daughter, wife, daughter-in-law but not her relationship with her children as their mother. As a mother, it is a woman who shapes cultural habits of her children. Motherhood is an embodiment of sacrifice, selflessness, caring, patience, self-confidence, and assertiveness. It is the crowning glory of a woman. A mother's love and emotional attachment are very important for the growth and development of her children as cultured ones. No woman as a mother should give preference to her physical pleasures and enjoyment of life as an independent individual. But at the same time one cannot deny the fact that there are mothers like Shagun in the modern days. As there is no smoke without fire, Manju Kapur has based this novel on seeing a mother like Shagun in real life.

A mother like Shagun is a disgrace to motherhood. As a married woman, Shagun has got everything for her happy marital life. She should have remained satisfied with conjugal relationship but she cannot. She wants more excitement and thrill in sexual relationship even though she has become a mother of two children. As a wife and mother, she does what a married woman cum mother should not do. She falls flat for the love of her husband's boss Ashok Khanna just because he is sexually and in his physical features more attractive than her husband. She leaves her husband and children for the immediate fulfillment of her love. She marries him too against societal conventions and divine intention only to satisfy her selfhood by sacrificing her motherhood, wifehood and traditional brought up.

Marital relationship between a husband and wife should be something divine. It has to be based on mutual understanding and reciprocal conjugal relationship. Both know each other's personal desires and try to fulfill themselves at home itself without searching for it outside their house. If either of the two fails to cater to needs of the other, the failure will make them face unexpected and unwanted consequences in relationship. This is what has happened between Raman and Shagun. There is a time bound period for everything in the marital relationship. Till a child is born, the wife considers her husband as her child and

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showers her conjugal blessings on him. As soon as a child is born, her love is transferred to her child. But Shagun's hunger for sexual desire is something unimaginable even after her having become a mother of two children. The fault for Shagun having crossed her marital limit rests on Raman too. Regarding the failure of Raman to cater to the sexual needs of his wife, Simran Khurana attributes Raman's lack of understanding of what relationship is:

Relationship among [the marital partners] is like sand. Both the partners in life and conjugal love should respect, honour and handle each other carefully. If either of them clinches the other tightly, the relationship becomes strained. If either of them holds the other loosely, there is a chance for the other to slip out the grasp. But both of them should mould their relationship with genuine love, and if they do, they can build castles of joy. (qtd.in Jaisre, *Thesis* 191)

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