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## The Disintegration of Family in Manju Kapur's Custody

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### Abstract

Manju Kapur's fifth novel *Custody* (2011) is largely set in the thriving, upper-middle-class colonies of Delhi in the mid -90s, against the backdrop of the initial surge of foreign investment in India. Kapur's fiction 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. Although marriage is well-trodden territory for Kapur, here her possession of the subject is complete. *Custody* is a novel that is true to the universal angst of modern marriage with its burden of individualism.

*Custody* by Manju Kapur is an excellent example of a broken marriage and its consequences on children who are played like pawns in a game of legal chess. The disintegrated family has separated or divorced parents where children under the pretence of legal rights and parental ego battles are shuttled between those two individuals, who in the very first place were supposed to give them a happy, carefree and contended childhood.

**Keywords:** Disintegration, Family, Manju Kapur's Custody.

### 1. Introduction

Manju Kapur's fifth novel *Custody* (2011) <sup>[1]</sup> is largely set in the thriving, upper-middle-class colonies of Delhi in the mid -90s, against the backdrop of the initial surge of foreign investment in India. Kapur's fiction 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. Although marriage is well-trodden territory for Kapur, here her possession of the subject is complete. *Custody* is a novel that is true to the universal angst of modern marriage with its burden of individualism.

### Broken Marriage and Its Consequences

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*Custody* narrates the story of Raman and Shagun, a married couple with two children, eight year old Arjun and three year old Roohi, who enjoyed a privileged life. Soon Shagun meets Ashok Khanna, Raman's boss, and they immediately fall in love. When Raman discovers their love affair, Shagun has to decide what she wants to do, or what she can do. She asks Raman for a divorce but he turns into a vengeful person. In another part of Delhi is Ishita whose marriage collapses because she cannot have children of her own. She tries to find some satisfaction and a sense of identity in social work but she abandons it when she meets the divorced Raman. Since she is drawn to him she believes she can be happy as a step mother. In the second half of the novel, the story focuses on the custody of the children, the bitter legal battle and the price of freedom.

At the beginning of the story we see Raman in his traditional role of father and husband, of head of the family who goes out to the world to fight and make money, who has to be looked

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after when he comes back home, but also does not care much for his own wife or children. His professional career is more important than them.

He seems to be married to his job and company. His parents would never question him. They assume that a woman's selfhood, status, respectability and realization lie in wifehood and motherhood. The household functions as a producing and reproducing unit. The husband produces and goes out into the public sphere and wife gives life to children and takes care of them at home in the private sphere.

Amid the demands of the four grown-ups Raman, Shagun, Ashok and Ishita 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 side-effects of the bitter fight for their custody, the tyranny of blood and their trauma, torn between two mothers, two homes and two countries.

### **Cause for the Disintegration**

The disintegration happens in *Custody* due to the extramarital affair of the parent, the in-laws treatment of a woman who cannot conceive and the changing parenting scenario in middle class Indian homes.

Shagun, the green-eyed beautiful wife of Raman, falls in love with his charismatic, handsome boss Ashok Khanna, who has never been in love before and is determined to possess the woman he now loves. It does not matter to him how but he goes about conquering Shagun's mind, body, and soul like a seasoned, persuasive marketer. He represents everything that a woman of today would find difficult to resist. The pace of the story gains momentum as their affair begins to become more fiery, daring and passionate. Shagun has no regrets about lying to her husband or to her own mother. The extent of her selfishness and ability to be cruel is visible in the choices she makes. For example, she leaves her kids with her mother to go off for weekend trysts with her new found lover. Yet she convinces herself all the time that she is a devoted mother to her children. She goes to all lengths to brainwash her children against their own father, knowing that this would be use to negotiate her terms of divorce when it is finally time.

The story skirts out closest to the society's traditional norms and conventions. Manju Kapur demonstrates her intrinsic level of detailing with tiny social observations such as how Shagun's mother does her best to coax her to remain faithful to her husband and in retaliation Shagun threatens to completely stop confiding in her mother if this is how she is going to take sides. It is evident that marital life in India is fast disintegrating and being shaped by foreign elements such as extra marital affairs, materialistic pursuits, and so on. As a parallel story, the plot swerves to troubles of Ishita, who is the daughter of Raman's mother's friend and neighbour. Reflecting the dismal marriage scenario that prevails in most middle class Indian families, Ishita's problems begin when she is unable to conceive. Her mother-in-law and sister-in-law who doted on her and acted as though they were all dear friends changed overnight when they realize that Ishita is medically pronounced as unable to have children.

### **The Mentality of Family**

Without being judgmental or preachy, Kapur conveys the typical middle class mentality of Indian families, particularly in tackling situations like this. The well-knit story reveals the layers of dirt that are hidden behind the happy family

syndrome among middle class families. An example: Ishita's mother-in-law holds detailed discussions with the doctor to dig deep into understanding the medical cause of this condition. Everyone's curiosity is satiated when the doctor clarifies that it is Ishita's fault and that this happened because she had contracted an illness in childhood that had damaged her system.

In Ishita's story there is nothing shocking but what is clearly absent is her in-laws lack of sympathy or understanding to the girl who could have been seen as daughter instead of daughter-in-law. And thus, Ishita's husband who had proclaimed never ending love to her becomes the obedient son to his parents. The coldness, the cruel indifference and finally the rejection of a wife solely because she cannot bear a child is portrayed in a heart rending way. Even domestic pets are treated better than a daughter in law in some Indian families. A divorced, socially isolated Ishita finds the courage to volunteer and teach underprivileged children. She loves children and they love her back. Gradually, she finds hope in the process, her own sense of individuality.

In the second attempt Ishita marries Raman and thus returns to the status so rudely snatched from her, the status of wifehood and motherhood which endows her with legitimacy. Her marriage to Raman elevates her to her husband's social position. Ishita's union to Raman empowers her and gives her strength to fight for the household's common target: the custody of his children. Some women like Ishita, Raman's second wife, may be fully satisfied being guardians of her family. But Shagun's spirit, like that of so many other women, is different. She has never been able to guide her life. Everything has been decided by her parents, family and cultural customs.

### **The Effect of Disintegration on Children**

In Kapur's novel the children become the family's material stakes. Ishita convinces her husband to manipulate events invent lies over Roohi's illness. She exercises power over the small child by teaching her what she has to say in court in order to win the custody of the little girl. Their lawyer, a friend of the family does not oppose to Ishita and Raman. Their unscrupulous behavior undoubtedly manifests that the more the members of a normative patriarchal family confines themselves to its social internal structures to maintain power over others and have control of their possessions the more they transgress ethics and democratic laws.

More appreciative was the insight into the difficult situation divorce puts the children in. Through Arjun and Roohi we are shown how a perfect childhood can get messed up and how the care takers egos and their personal desires can take a toll on the innocents. Some of the most well chapters were those involving the kids and how the adult's fiddling with their mind cannot only coerce them but as well leave a lasting impression that eventually make them into adults with troubled emotions.

Ishita cannot dominate the boy who is older and capable of discerning her dishonest behavior, but she can control the little girl, Roohi, to whom she gives a new name, Roopi. This new name represents that the child is hers and not Shagun's. To a certain extent the readers feel compassion for the barren Ishita who still suffers from the reminiscences of her past frustrations and social ostracism. As she is under society's constant supervision she needs to demonstrate to herself and to the others that she is a good loving mother for Roohi. Entrapped in such suffocating family, her egoistic love

compels her to break whatever democratic ethical agreements set.

As a victim of the norms of patriarchal normative households, Ishita turns into the worst oppressor: She never speaks to Shagun; nor does she make the effort to understand her as a mother and woman who also wants to be happy. Roohi's custody constitutes Ishita's last chance to cure her past frustrations and be accepted as a good mother and exemplary wife among those dictate or abide by patriarchal socio- cultural norms.

### **The Custody of Children**

While the parents are embroiled in a legal battle for custody of the children, they do everything they can to make the children feel worse. Their son is a replica of Shagun's selfish, cruel and indifferent to anything but his own satisfaction and their daughter is a miniature of Raman, who is very loving, understanding and generous. The children find their own ways to tackle the crisis because they are confused and feel divided loyalties swarm around them, throwing them into tough, emotionally disturbing situations with their parents. And for any child, having to choose between parents is the toughest and most emotionally devastating thing to contend with.

Their lives are catapulted and crushed by the ever slow, grinding wheels of the rigid legal system in India. This is when the quiet, reliable cousin Nandan steps in to help Raman who is totally clueless about how the legal system works in India. Worst of all, he begins to realize that marriage to Shagun whom he had loved blindly had been a big mistake, one for which his children too would pay a heavy price. Who will get custody of the kids?-that becomes the question for Raman and Shagun. Their legal battle turns inevitably ugly.

Throughout the novel, a true story of modern marriage that exists around us. This is true in today's world. The book highlights the voice of the children and sheds light on their situation when parents are replaced by lawyers and lovers. It is story of marriage that disintegrates and intertwines with cruel and heart-rending consequences. Once lovers and companions, husband and wife become enemies locked in an ugly legal battle over their two children.

Manju Kapur is known to write books on women centered themes takes on end of long term marriage, divorce and the subsequent custody battle. She shows how a modern house wife can think of not wanting to stay in a relationship and look for liberation and happiness outside her home and even that did not make one wants to hate her for her choices. Achieving this balance is art and *Custody* did that.

### **Conclusion**

Kapur's novel reveals not only of the disintegration in the family but also the life of women, their struggle for basic rights, quest for identity and survival. She portrays how women are suffering from economic and socio-cultural disadvantages in the male governed society. They have been deprived of their basic rights, their aspirations to their individuality and self-reliance.

*Custody* is the riveting story of how family-love can disintegrate into an obsession to possess children, body and soul, as well as a chilling critique of the Indian judicial system. The story represents an emerging group of young, successful, educated Indians who can choose the direction of their destiny so easily no matter what the underlying moral

implications are like. Kapur's narrative in *Custody* deals with the marriages that collapse, social hypocrisies and battles for children that intertwine with anguish and conflict in order to depict a worldwide reality of politics of possessiveness and unequal power relations in normative patriarchal families which is a site for constraint, oppression, violence, possessiveness and disintegration.

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