



Perspectives of Culture and Conflicts in Manju Kapur's Custody

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Culture is the characteristics and knowledge of a particular group of people, defined by everything from language, religion, cuisine, social habits, music and art. Like literature, culture is a contested phenomenon which is understood to mean different things by different groups. Culture is the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour. Culture embodies languages, ideas, belief, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, consists of shared values, beliefs, knowledge, skills and practices that underpin behaviour by members of a social group at a particular point in time. It is creative expression, skills, traditional knowledge and resources. It is generally accepted that culture embodies the way human live with and treat others and how they develop or react to changes in their environments

Generally people say that India's culture rests essentially on a vision and a value base that is fundamentally spiritual and ethical, i.e., based on dharma. The building up of this spiritual, ethical, dramatic base of Indian culture has had many contributors over the past centuries and as a result, the culture of Indian has also undergone changes over its long history. Father Kunnunkal in "The Rebirthing of Indian Society" expresses "Through the Indian culture has been experiencing change over the centuries and has come under great stress in our recent history, there are certain fundamentals, bedrock values and mindsets that we want to preserve, in order to maintain our fundamental identity as Indians"(66).

Religion and culture are, of course, related to each other. Its two components are faith and knowledge which have made significant contributions to both values and development. Look at the horizons and values in the various cultures and religions of India: the universal vision and unity in diversity that is expressed in the Hindu perspective, the stress on fellowship and prayerfulness of Islam, the courage of Sikhs, the compassion and non-violence of the Jains and Buddhists and the forgiveness and self-sacrificing love that Christians foster. Father T.V. Kunnunkal says "All these have contributed and have coalesced into forming the present rich mosaic of what we call Indian cultures. To this has been added the contributions from the many 'little cultural traditions'" (66). If the past contributions have made us what we are today, we must ensure that our future also reflects and is anchored on our past.

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Kapur's fifth novel, *Custody*, highlights the new emerging Indian society especially in cosmopolitan culture in which everything has been reversed from the cultural and moral fabric of Indian society. This novel contains a variety of characters and its characterization provides a unique opportunity to the writer to observe the transformation which is rapidly replacing the age-old tradition and moral fabric of India life. This novel opens with the description of the arranged marriage between Shagun and Raman: "Raman and Shagun's marriage had been arranged along standard lines, she the beauty, he the one with brilliant prospects" (14).

Raman works hard to give her a good life. She has two lovely children Arjun and Roohi and everything she has wanted. Despite all this, Raman is denied the central position in his life. She is searching for something like passion. Then she falls in love with Ashok, Raman's boss in the beverage company. In the essay "Treatment of Infidelity and Infertility in Manju Kapur's *Custody*", Asha Sharan comments "This affair gives her a delightful experience and teaches her to be self-reliant, confident, powerful, independent and resourceful as she pursues sexuality, equality and self-independence" (68). Only to marry with him, she wants divorce from Raman, and when it is rejected she kidnaps the children. Shagun does not hesitate to establish physical relationship with Ashok and that is not allowed in the great culture of Indian womanhood.

Kapur being shrewd observer of everyday, happenings in modern life, does not hesitate to present how women in modern society are eager to spend their lives according to their will and desire. Shagun is surprised to hear his salary "that at one seemed unimaginable 40-50-60 lakhs a year, plus bonuses" (16). They spend weekends with family, friends, clubs and parties. But Shagun feels unhappy about her married life. Soon after she meets Ashok Khanna, he tries to seduce her. Then a curtain is drawn between her normal life and another secret one.

Shagun's secret life with Ashok which brings her happiness. "In the beginning it was wonderful, her sense of power experienced differently now that she was thirty two" (26). Shagun does not want to become Sita or Savitri or Parvati, rather she has western model of free-life and openness. In the article "Fractured families," Madeline Clements comments, "The individual experience of Shagun, Raman and Ishita point to society's traditional attitudes and values with regard to marriage, childbearing and education, particularly in relation to women. Yet they also reflect social change to India (21). Here we find a great loss of cultural sense in modern life. In *Contemporary Literary and Cultural Theory*, Pramod Nayar comments "New Historicists see cultural form as shaping actual social conditions, contributing to or subverting social relations of power and representing society in particular ways...(207).

Mrs. Sabharwal, Shagun's mother, notices that something is wrong with her daughter's activities. Therefore she invites Shagun to stay with her as Raman is out of station. She further says "Whenever I phone you, you are out" (35). Shagun has rejected her mother's offer. Instead she requests her mother to stay with her children for two days as she has to move out to visit a friend in Bareilly. Thus she lies to her mother to meet Ashok in Bombay when Shagun has returned, the radiance in her face sounds an alarm in her mother's mind. Shagun's mother advises her as follows: "The house rests upon a woman. In your children's happiness, your husband's happiness lies your own. Anything else is just temporary" (80). But Shagun is not in a position to hear her mother's valuable advice. Again Shagun develops illicit relationship with Ashok and places herself in the world of glamour, charm and fascination. She thereby disregards the sacredness of marriage, motherhood and other values associated with the great traction of womanhood. So culture plays a very important role in stopping such illicit relations in society.

Shagun's infidelity leads to her complete rejection of her children at daytime and husband at night. Kapur portrays pathetic condition of kids such a fractured family as follows:

"Arjun spent as much time as he could in his friend's houses and Roohi reflected the brokenness of the family in constant loud wails which grated on all their nerves. In Shagun's absence, Raman began taking her to his bed at night, where she would settle down, snuggling into his sucking desperately on her they (96).

It is of course child suffers a lot in the absence of their mother. In the essay "Motherhood: Two versions-A Scrutiny of Manju Kapur's *Custody*" Sri Devi expresses "Thus the mother's world is more occupied by her lover than by her kids" (376). In India or in any country, mother is a symbol of sacrifice and mother does everything for the moral upliftment, cultural development and welfare of her Children. The role of mother in the shaping of child is extremely important for many reasons. There is a great tradition of motherhood in India. But in *Custody*, Amma's role in her children's life is quite opposite to the traditional and cultural demands. Shagun gives much importance to her lover and at the same time she explores the changing scenario within the Indian family system.

Kapur visualizes the inevitable transformation in each and every aspect of life. After the liberation, it prevails a liberal attitude every where people want to live according to their own choice. Madan Singh, lawyer, asks Shagun to think of instances of cruelty in her marriage but nothing will come in her mind. Kapur shows Shagun's psychology as follows: "Why do I have to say all this It's not true and he can call witness to prove he never beat me, or denied me money, or insulted me in public" (149).

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Then the lawyer asks the question to Shagun, “‘Why do you want a divorce, then?’ ‘Because I love some one else.’ Not a good enough reason” (150). *Custody* is the disturbing story of a woman who leaves her first husband out of sheer boredom and marries her first husband's boss, Ashok Khanna for the sake of more exciting and fulfilling life. Actually divorce is not a good solution which projects a lack of commitment of the partner and the attitude of self sacrifice is totally disappearing. It is true that the chief sufferers are the children who are caught between the custody battles of the parents.

This novel conveys that the family as an institution in India has a resilience that is a hall mark of Indian culture. In the novel, *Custody*, Shagun is very conscious of her emotional needs is striving for self-fulfillment, rejecting the existing traditional and social set-up and longing for a more liberal and unconventional ways of life. When Shagun marries Ashok Khanna she begins a new chapter of her life. She evolves into an extremely independent woman in charge of her own business, very confident and sophisticated. Raman asks her son about Shagun

“Your mother ? Working ?”

‘She stayed up rights doing stuff on the phone mostly – something to do with clothes’.

‘Was it garment import - export? Quite a lot of that goes On between Indian and the US.’”(360)

It is unthinkable for Raman to imagine Shagun is working and running a business. The point to be noted is that these changes are taking place in the upper middle class but this sort of change is definitely beyond our cultural values. In the essay “Feminism in Manju Kapur's *Custody*” Pew Maji says

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.(3)

Shagun wants to become independent not only psychologically but economically and emotionally. Thus the theme of exploitation and suffering, marriage, custody, divorce, independence of women in every step of life are discussed in this novel with required frankness and shrewd observation.

Kapur, being a shrewd observer of social, moral and cultural changes which are occurring rapidly in our society has not given much importance to the traditional and cultural aspects of the human life. Thus, in Kapur's portrayal of woman, we find an inevitable counteraction between culture and conflicts and her character's disrespect for traditional and cultural framework of society is quite apparent. Kapur's last two novels have given more importance to the theme of extra-marital or post-marital relationships. Here her women characters are represented as wives do not belong to the category of Savitri or Sita, rather they are the representative of new women who are free from all the moral and cultural responsibilities in their lives. Wifely devotion, submissiveness and sacrifice which are the features of cultural and moral aspects of human life have importance in Kapur's presentation of wives in her last two novels, Nina in *The Immigrant* and Shagun in *Custody* do not hesitate to go beyond the cultural and moral values by establishing extra-marital relationship with other men. Here they cannot be blamed completely. She believes the fact that everything is in the state of transformation and it is impossible for the people living in modernity to be stick towards set doctrines and dogmas.

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