

DEPICTION OF MARRIAGE AND FAMILY IN MANJU KAPUR'S *CUSTODY*

PRAMOD KUMAR

Research Scholar

Department of English

School of Humanities & Arts

Maharishi University of Information

Technology - (MUIT) Lucknow

ABSTRACT

There has always been an unending and insolvable debate as to which life situation- love marriage or arranged marriage- is better and more befitting. If we talk about the former, in many cases love remains love, so called romantic love, before the couple gets spliced in conjugal knot. Unfortunately it seems to be almost dormant, and if not that, rests the principle of "why should I alone step down or compromise" (Custody 14). Both husband and wife seem to wage an endless strife of male chauvinism versus feminine assertions resulting in the question of their individual identity and their acknowledged say in each other's life. The vagaries of love marriage do not end here; the outside society comprising the families of both sides and taboo proclaiming external elements loom large before the couple frightening them of their easy going existence.

Keywords: Custody, Disintegration, Explanation & Family.

ManjuKapur's 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 other side of the coin i.e. arranged marriage also reveals its horrifying manifestations before the couple in no time. In the country like India, traditionally, arranged marriages have been preferred, and are considered the fortune destiny of a person following or celebrating the maxim, "marriages are destined in heaven. The feminist Simon de Beauvoir also opines almost similarly in the following statement, marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to woman by society." (Beauvoir 444)

The relationship of a man and woman gets recognition in a society through arranged marriage. Two different persons, brought-up in different environment, customs and temperaments, are thrown together, and are expected to live in peace and harmony. In the olden times, no doubt it was possible as the woman had to compromise greatly not only with her desires and temperament, but also with her belongings and emotions. That was all because the woman was mostly illiterate and dependent on the man. In contrast, in today's modern era of globalization and liberalization with the spread of education, and with an easy access to cherished opportunities, there has developed a sense of realization of the individual identity in both the genders, particularly the fair sex. The lady seems to acknowledge herself on the equal footing with man. She is equally qualified and performing at par or better than a man. And if both the people have financial freedom owing to the lucrative situations in their professional arenas, the hope of compromising, enduring and adjusting living and sharing seems to be hazy. Consequently the two people tend to have clashes of ideologies and of the standards of their own lives. The situation even aggravates when the inconspicuous tinge of male dominance starts showing its presence. The tiny bits of familial clash and unwittingly erupted differences take the final shape of dissolution of the so called established social institution of marriage. As a matter of fact the marriage is an idea of uniting the two people, and is very personal, and should flourish between a husband and a wife. The moment it becomes public, its success is jeopardized and the end, inevitable.

Coming to Manju Kapur a marriage preceded or fragmented by a socially unacceptable romance has emerged again and again in her novels. It is also discernible in her latest novel, *Custody* (2011). The novel deals with marriages that collapse, social hypocrisies and battles for children that intertwine with anguish and conflict depicting a worldwide reality of the politics of possessiveness and unequal power relations in patriarchal families. Here the common myth that conceives the family as a unit for emotional and economic security, sense of community, identity and social status, is belied and exposes the family as a site for constraint, oppression, violence, possessiveness and disintegration.

The story unfolds the subject of matrimony is at its most intolerable followed by the emotional fall-out of the break-up of one wealthy extended Delhi family. The protagonist couple is introduced just as their troubles come to fore. Their relationship comes to a juddering end

when Shagun, the beautiful wife of Raman, falls in love of his far more charismatic boss and hot-shot sales executive, Ashok Khanna. The affair ignites the book's ferocious momentum as it follows them through separation, divorce, re-marriage and a crescendo of a custody battle in all its legal chicanery and psychological ugliness. The two children, Arjun and Roohi, become the pawns through which their parents unleash their fury on each other. It is a relationship where the husband is egoist and stoic; who wishes to treat her like a doormat, and the wife, a woman less than docile and subservient, aspires for a life that soars to the zenith of romanticism. She does not want to accept the treatment as her fate which seems to be lifeless in totality. She has almost created or finds herself in a situation which fails to be benefitting any member of the family. The worst hit, are the children, whose childhood is stunted in a stifling atmosphere of the house. Such a relationship is nothing but a chaos, and leads to either a disaster or a miserable and pathetic end. The collapse of this marriage is explored from multiple angles making for a nuanced rendition of the situation. From the beginning of the story one perceives that a marriage like this is bound to fail. The novel starts at the point where both Raman and Shagun have nothing in common, nor do they seem to possess any hope of promising future which can guarantee a happy life ahead. Though their "marriage had been arranged along standard lines, she the beauty, he the one with the brilliant prospects" (Custody 02) but these prospects make Raman rather practical, and put the marriage on stake. He spends long hours working for a successful company that manufactures soft drinks. It is the beginning of globalization, and rising Indian enterprises are projecting their business round the country and abroad. Raman is the stereotypical depiction of the hard-working man and a kind of trophy in this family-arranged alliance for his perseverance and dexterity. At the beginning of the story we see him in his traditional role of father and husband; of the head of the family who goes out to the world to fight and make money; of one who has to be looked after when he comes back home, but also who does not care much for his own wife or children. His professional career seems to have screened his familial life in the clouds of uncertainty. It made Shagun realize within no time that there was nothing promising in this married life. As a result of it the marriage fell into unanswerable questions,

"The dissatisfaction that occurs in most marriages was not allowed dissipation; instead, she clung to reasons to justify her unfaithfulness"(Custody 03).

Daily both of them started their life disinterestedly having some complains that did not mean to be heard, and sensing the seeds of dissolution of their nuptial tie. In the very starting of the novel the marriage has been revealed to be devoid of any zeal. Only an inconspicuous tinge of guilt was there in their minds.

"The woman left first; she believed that the spirits of the universe at the service of betrayed partners were tracking her movements, keeping of note of incriminating times and places"(custody 04).

It looked as if Raman had already considered this impending separation as their destiny, a kind of fate that he did not even wish to evade. Perhaps the kind of work that Raman did demanded his attention more than in anything, and as such drained him of his interest in his wife. The lack of enthusiasm Shagun suggested in him was also because of this only. Both of them expected each other to initiate and understand their plight but both failed. As a result of which the breach kept on widening,

"Raman thought of his wife and the distance he had begun to feel between them. May be it was the baby she hadn't really wanted, may be it was all the travelling he had to do, had always had to do"(custody 05).

With the passage of time this ingrained a sense of aloofness in her, and with the same pace it became a matter of feminine assertions which Shagun did not fail to discern. She starts considering her life in her own terms which should not acknowledge the male chauvinism. A sense of liberty in the terms of decision of her life began to manifest itself more forcefully. Even child bearing and child rearing seemed to have put shackles in her feet confining her life to mere the boundary of a typical household. A desire to cherish the prime time of her life dawned on her, and took the shape of clash with Raman when the latter asserted that she should devote herself to their son. "It's not that. I'll be thirty, Arjun is just becoming independent, I don't want to start all over again. Always tied to a child"(Custody 06). Feminism expects her to lead her life

in her own direction without any other consideration. She even asserts this to Raman making him realize how lonely and monotonous life she has to endure.

"I want something else in my life, can't understand you that? We always meet the same people, talk about the same things over and over. It's boring"(Custody 07).

"She urges that he does not wish her to have a life of her own. When she turned inwards where her life was waiting to be examined, she blamed Raman for her predicament, thinking of the years she had been satisfied with his lovemaking, tender, attentive, as so much wasted time" (Custody 08).

Ashok's (Raman's boss) looming large before her and her falling in his love clearly suggests that even fate also wills her life in this way only. A curtain is drawn between her normal life and another secret one, more charged than anything she knew previously. She stops using Raman's name. It seems too intrusive. By now she has understood that he is a man of narrow and intense passions; one who lives, sleeps and eats only business.

The complication aggravates when Shagun does not show any deep regard for Raman's parents. This irritates him, and kills all the feelings she could spare for her for the sake of his parental family. The common link between them seems to be snapped. Raman's rage and bewilderment are both understandable, but it is equally clear why any woman might not wish to stay married to him. Raman's tedious self-righteousness grates, and is only occasionally relieved by a flash of personality. He fails to understand what his wife wants, and how she feels. His traditional mind like his parents' would never question this. They would automatically assume that a woman's selfhood, status, respectability and realization lie in wifedom and motherhood. He knew,

"His mother expected respect, deference and love from her daughter-in-law plus an undisputed supremacy in her little grandson's heart, all she was never going to get."(Custody 09)

Actually the kind of atmosphere she received from her mother ingrained in her a revolting instinct from the very beginning. She was deprived of what she wanted to be in her life.

Her spirit, like that of so many other women, was different. She could never be able to guide her life in her own way; everything was decided by parents, family, cultural customs. She wanted to be a model, but her mother strongly opposed to a career that would allow all kinds of lechery near her lovely daughter. Her mother suggested that whatever she wanted to be she could be after marriage but then there had been a child quite early. Then the claims of husband, family and friends made a career hard to justify, especially since money was not an issue Shagun' mother found the tinge of the evil consequences of her violating the family norms in leading her life on her own. Even she warned her when she revealed her feminine assertions,

"You think all wives love their husbands? But they stay married. You are idealistic, you don't think about the long term. What about the society, what about the children?"(Custody 10)

Raman could not realize this simple thing that he did not own the whole of Shagun; her desires, her longings and her expectations from her life had to be realized and respected. He did not try to come to the terms with the fact that in this world where each sex requires space to co-exist and flourish, he had to break out of the age-old shell, and accept, and recognize the importance of woman, not only in his life and house but also in the society. The main trouble with Raman was that he swallowed her up, leaving no space to breathe. He began to suspect her, and even got her tracked. "Raman didn't trust the world when it came to his wife." He discovers the faithlessness of his wife with the help of a detective, and is so enraged that he is determined to take his revenge at whatever cost. In this situation of the house one can hardly conceive the idea of ease in the household when its head has been offended; his honour has been insulted, and his powerful male chauvinist instincts cannot allow this public affront. But the result suggests something else as at the detective's it sounded so horribly intimate. He sat in shamed gloominess as he felt the sanctity of his family violated."The (Custody 12) horrifying aftermaths of his getting his wife tracked vanquished him even more than anything else ever in his entire life. He could not help ruminating that,

"No protest, however strong, could get back the security he had lost. He remained bent over his desk simulating work, as the office slowly emptied"(Custody 13)

Bitterness filled him, and he could not help chiding himself as to how stupid he was to be betrayed by the two most important people at work and at home. The breach between Raman and Shagun even gulfed rather widely when Shagun became aware of her being chased by her husband. The disclosure that he had had her followed all of a sudden made her hate him. She felt like challenging the male dominated and patriarchal mechanisms of surveillance and control. When her mother advised her to be faithful to her husband, she pondered over this matter expecting to make amends. In the absence of Raman she, "Made a thousand resolutions; be wife-like, be good, docile, compliant, but the mere sight of him sent these decisions out of the window" (Custody 14).

The doubts in her mind about her being faithless to her husband, society, children and her mother's fears, and her being schizophrenic were repelled by Ashok (her lover) when he suggested that, "Traditional versus modern values, individual versus society this narrow social set-up is all you know that's why - you are afraid. But it will be all fine, fine. Trust me, darling" (Custody 15).

Here at this point the dilemma of an educated and professional woman who encounters competing ideologies of traditional femininity and empowered femininity has also been depicted. Shagun's act of sexual violation celebrates female sexual self-assertion embodied in a new feminist assumption that woman is a desiring subject with an intense longing for sexual expression, satisfaction and fulfillment. Shagun follows her heart, and seeks a divorce from Raman, and embarks on a new life with Ashok. So, the institution of marriage which in our country is much more than sex and children is thwarted of its sacredness through divorce. The battle lines are drawn, and both parties are ready to fight to its end. Battle for custody is initiated from Shagun's side, "you know I hated all this hole-in-corner stuff. If you have to get a divorce, fight for the custody, let's start now" (Custody 16).

Deciding to be separated she roused herself to bid farewell to her intense secret world, with its perilous edge of desire and its hours devoted to subterfuge. The cycle of rage between them not only fuels itself but is complicated by the new stepmothers and fathers acquired through second marriages. Perhaps this lack of social judgment stems from the period of an India of the 1990s which is entering the world economy on a more ambitious footing, and in which the idea of

family duty has been overridden by individualism. As Shagun says in her critique of the old world,

"It was part of the Indian disease. Ashok was always going on about stultifying tradition. The great Indian family, which rested on the sacrifices of its women" (Custody 17).

Result was Raman's undergoing a severe heart attack. But this also failed to bring Shagun close to him. It did not matter to her even an ounce. In order to reveal his anguish he decides instantaneously to reject Shagun's request of divorce and any amiable negotiation or dialogue to solve matters. Owing to his childish attitude and his wounded-male ego he lacks goodwill to solve things rationally, and avoid the suffering of the children, even if he insists that he loves them a lot. One wonders what kind of love this is, but selfish and self-seeking. Rather he treats his children as his instrumental weapons to battle Shagun, restore his good name, and subtly let it be called 'love'. After all she is the one who has abandoned 'her home' for another man. On the other hand Shagun herself does not want to sacrifice her own life and happiness. She wills to be a satisfied career woman, and to build her own space in the world. She also determines not to repent and come back to him.

Bereaved from Shagun and in sheer dismay he remained sobbing in the night cursing his marriage that turned out to be more than a dismal nightmare. Now he felt the only respite in his life in the form of separation. Divorce was certain but the custody of the children was to be decided, and one evening adding the fuel to fire Shagun took the children stealthily. The children became just playthings. Whosoever willed, took them. They became the most unfortunate ones. The legal fight began but neither of them knew that, "the law was a cut-and-dried business, once you got swamped in outrage, indignation, grief and anger, you are nowhere" (Custody 18).

Though she took the children with her but with Ashok it was not certain that they could find conducive living conditions as Ashok came off worst of all the possessors. A business school degree rendered him incapable of thinking in non-business terms, and his marketing job filled his head with cliché. The children become the family's material stakes. Within no time the sign of this estrangement, and its consequence erupted in the form of Roohi's, the daughter, becoming victim of slight nerves disorder, and as such she seemed to be quite withdrawn. Similar was the condition of Arjun, the son. His performance in studies suffered quite evidently. As he remained

with his mother, he also underwent brainwash on the part of his mother. Consequently he became almost indifferent to Raman. The worse happened in the form of his admission in a boarding school which left Raman at the back seat. The court also did not do much favour to Raman other than the right of visitation every weekend. Finally both of them divorced, and for Raman his obsession about his life with Shagun ended. For him,

"It would be prudent to forget her existence as quickly as possible. From now he would devote himself to his children"(Custody 19).

A new chapter in Raman's life began with the advent of an unfortunate divorcee who was thrown into Raman's path by his parents. Raman's marriage is not the only one that failed. Dissolution of Ishita's marriage also gives new implications which became her misfortune. Her marriage collapsed because she could not have children of her own. In this connection it is said that,

"Marriage continues to have material, social and symbolic meanings and consequences which are asymmetrical in terms of their implications for females and males in at least three significant ways. Firstly, selfhood, respectability and status are tied to wifehood and motherhood in more exacting ways than they are to being a husband and/or father. A single man or a man without children is seen as unfortunate, but a woman in a similar situation is inauspicious, possibly dangerous" (Palriwala400-01).

Ishita had an arranged marriage but as soon as her husband and in-laws discovered that she could not conceive, despite the many painful and tedious medical treatments she had undergone, she felt small and psychologically distorted and, "Smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in the sunlit air, smaller than drops of dew caught between blades of grass in the morning" (custody 21).

Ishita thought as she sat in the gynecologist's office that she could not conceive, whereupon SK had decided he could not love her. So "asymmetrical" are the negotiations and terms of marriage in her family based on material acquisitions (or possessions) that even her mother said,

"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"(Custody 22).

Life gave her a second opportunity as a social worker in Mrs. Hingorani's NGO, and she considered adoption even, but her psychological feebleness and her constant exposition to the subtle ideology that regards women as procreators and guardians of the family, community honour and purity made her hate herself and her own sexuality:

"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" (custody 23).

She was a victim of "spineless husband, pressurized into divorcing a wife just because she had a womb that did not function." (24)

As Reber comments: "Child bearing has been viewed as a valuable gender specific role to married women. Therefore, women who are unable to bear children, experience a pervasive sense of personal failure" (Reber 674).

In her fiction Kapur treats the gendered body as both Empowered and disempowered, subject and object, a source of rejection and celebration in socio-political culture. In her new life she tried to find some satisfaction and a sense of identity in social work but she abandoned it when she met the divorced Raman. Since she was drawn to him she believed she could be happy as a stepmother to Roohi. Perhaps this was an only option to render some meaning to her fragmented life.

In Ishita, Roohi got a new caring mother but this could not be tolerable to Shagun who still kept her fight for the custody of the children which Raman determined not to make quite easy for her to claim. He himself was victimized by the separation from his children. In fact both of them were troubled owing to the custody of both the children which they were denied. The divorce failed to render them the tranquility they sought to cherish. Raman had Roohi which Shagun missed, and Shagun had her dominance over Arjun who still was not in complete fascination of Raman. In this awkward fight it was Ishita who even after getting married with

Raman had neither Raman as a whole nor could create a place in the heart of Arjun because of whom Raman did not devote himself to her completely. Though Ishita left no stone unturned in order to be a replica mother to Roohibut the nagging doubt of her being snatched away tormented her immensely. She revealed her desperation when she said,

"I think my heart will break. I cannot bear this half-here- half-there. I have given her everything - not because of you, but because of her I feel this constant tension in my head with the fear of losing her"(Custody 26). Both Raman and Shagun could not realize the simple fact that solving family problems in court was not a justified and approved commonly.

"Adult should behave like adults, not like the children they were fighting over. Really, why did people have babies if they were going to the messes of their own desires?" (Custody 27)

In the novel Raman's family turned out to be a site for constraint, oppression, violence, possessiveness and disintegration which was conceived as a unit for emotional and economic security, sense of community, identity and social status. Marriage without quibbles is incomplete. With accordance to ShobhaDe's views, where there is love there is disagreement. Without annoyance and pamper as a consequence, love cannot thrive No marriage is only romance and romance all over. It has its demerits, troubles and turmoil too. One has to balance the carriage of marriage on the wheels of romance and logic. However in the absence of which the dissolution of Raman's family, which was followed by the ruthless process of formal divorce and guardianship/ possession of the children, have asserted to the frivolity and hollowness of 'modern' life and 'modern' marriage with its burden of individualism.

Works-Cited

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. Random House UK, New York 1997.

Kapur, Manju. *Custody*. Random House Publication India, New Delhi, 2011.

Palriwala, Rajni. *Beyond Mythos*. "The Social and Political Dynamics of Gender: *In Writing the Women's Movement*." A Reader edited by Mala Khullar, Zubaan Publishing House India, New Delhi, 2005.

Reber, A.S. *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*. Penguin Books UK, London, 1995.