



Redefining Womanhood: Personal Autonomy and New Women in Manju Kapur's *Custody*

Mrs Manjula Goel

Associate Professor

Department of English

R.K.S.D. (P.G.) College Kaithal, Haryana, India

Abstract: As India embraces economic liberalization and globalization, the values that once governed familial structures—particularly within middle-class Indian households—are questioned. The rise of consumer culture in India has altered the way of individuals' view towards relationships and family life. In the post-liberalization era, consumerism and materialism have become key drivers of social change, shaping individuals' expectations about personal fulfillment and identity. Shagun's life revolves around attending high-class parties, socializing with the urban elite, and being surrounded by wealth and luxury. Her fixation on material success leads her to distance herself emotionally from her family and embrace a lifestyle focused on outward appearances (Holzer 23).

Key Words: Individualism, materialism, personal autonomy, denial of traditional roles

Introduction: The novel examines how societal changes impact individualism and relationships within a middle-class family. Through the contrasting lives of Shagun and Ishita, two women embodying the shifting roles of women in Indian society, and Raman, the man who is torn between these opposing forces, the story address's themes of New Woman, personal autonomy, marital discord, infidelity, and familial duty. As India undergoes economic liberalization, the traditional family structure faces significant challenges. Manju Kapur's *Custody* effectively captures the essence of this transformation, illustrating how modernity brings with it new opportunities but also new conflicts.

The novel explores the changing dynamics of relationships within the Indian family unit, specifically focusing on the clash between the modern aspirations of new -women like Shagun and the more traditional, family-centric values upheld by Ishita. This shift is emblematic of a broader societal transformation in India, where women, especially in urban centers like Delhi and Mumbai, begin to assert their individual identities beyond the confines of marriage and motherhood. The pressures of modernity are starkly represented in Shagun's pursuit of independence (Banerjee 34-50). Her desire to break free from the constraints of her marriage is symbolic of the individualism that is becoming increasingly prevalent in Indian society, especially in cities that are at the forefront of economic and cultural shifts. In the post-liberalization period, urbanization and individualism are tightly intertwined, as women, particularly in metropolitan areas, begin to challenge traditional roles and seek autonomy. As Dwyer observes,

Urban India's embrace of consumerism, where success is measured by personal achievement and material wealth, creates an environment where individual desires often clash with the familial duties that have traditionally defined women's roles in society (Dwyer 184).

This growing individualism is embodied in Shagun, who as a New Woman yearns to transcend the role of the dutiful wife and mother, which she feels limits her sense of self. Her extramarital affair with Ashok Khanna is not just an act of infidelity, but a deliberate rejection of the traditional expectations placed upon her. Through her affair, Kapur illustrates how modernity reshapes personal relationships, transforming them from duty-bound commitments to transactional and self-fulfilling endeavors. Shagun's rebellion is set against the backdrop of an urban middle-class existence, where materialism and the pursuit of personal success overshadow traditional familial roles (Connor 17). The urban setting in *Custody* serves as a stark contrast to the more traditional, rural spaces where Ishita's character is anchored. While Ishita represents the ideals of domesticity and familial devotion, Shagun represents the urban woman's struggle to assert her individuality in the face of societal expectations. The contrast between these two women reflects the broader societal shifts occurring in post-liberalization India. As the novel unfolds, Ishita's role as the "traditional woman" in the marriage to Raman introduces another layer of complexity to the story. Ishita's character becomes a symbol of the enduring maternal ideal in Indian society, a role that requires immense emotional labor and self-sacrifice.

She accepted the isolation of her position, the loneliness of being a second wife, and the constant reminder of her infertility. Yet, she bore it quietly, for she knew that her role in Raman's life was indispensable. Ishita had made peace with her childlessness, finding fulfillment in her work and her quiet role in the family. Her sacrifice was her identity. It was in the act of giving that she found herself. (Kapur 178).

This passage reflects the deeply ingrained societal expectations of women in traditional Indian families, where fulfillment often comes not from self-expression, but from submission to familial duty.

Ishita's journey is one of emotional resilience and adaptation to new circumstances, as she steps into the emotional void left by Shagun's departure. Despite facing her own challenges—namely, her infertility and her struggle to bond with Arjun, Shagun's son—Ishita represents the stability of tradition in a time of upheaval. Her relationship with Roohi, Shagun's daughter, becomes a symbol of the quiet endurance of traditional familial roles amidst the tensions of modern life (Moor 31). The novel also underscores the impact of these changes on the emotional and psychological well-being of the characters, particularly Shagun and Raman. While the concept of New woman in Shagun leads her to emotional disillusionment, Raman's gradual realization of the emotional costs of his marriage emphasizes the complexity of

navigating gender expectations within the modern Indian family. As Shagun's emotional and psychological state deteriorates, Kapur writes:

She had paid the price of her freedom with the cost of her children's lives, but in truth, there was no one to blame but herself. She had thought she could live her life on her terms, but now she found herself alone, a stranger to the family she had once nurtured, and a stranger to her own heart. The path she had chosen had not led to peace, only to emptiness (Kapur 233).

This admission underscores the internal conflict that arises when personal autonomy is sought at the expense of familial stability.

In this exploration of family dynamics, *Custody* also reflects the broader societal shifts occurring in India as it enters the globalized world. Economic liberalization and increasing materialism create a cultural backdrop where individual desires begin to eclipse traditional family values (Waldrop 162-183). As Shagun embarks on her affair and navigates her autonomy, she embodies the modern, urban woman caught between the expectations of a patriarchal family structure and the promises of personal fulfillment outside the domestic sphere. Kapur highlights how these modern desires, when pursued recklessly, can lead to profound emotional consequences: "She had thought the world would wait for her, but she was wrong. The world had moved on, leaving her behind, trapped in the mess she had created" (Kapur 189).

In many ways, Shagun's pursuit of personal freedom is emblematic of the modern urban woman's journey. This duality between Shagun and Ishita encapsulates the broader generational divide in India's socio-cultural landscape. As Sklair writes,

In post-liberalization India, the tension between the modern ideals of individualism and the traditional values of familial collectivism becomes stark. Urbanization, coupled with the rise of global capitalism, has transformed the familial landscape, creating new pressures for women to assert themselves in a world that increasingly prioritizes personal achievement (Sklair 215).

This tension is most vividly portrayed in Shagun's interactions with her family, especially in her relationship with Raman. While Raman represents the traditional Indian man, bound by family responsibilities and societal expectations, Shagun embodies the modern, independent woman who seeks to break free from these constraints. In their marriage, Shagun's desires for personal autonomy clash with Raman's commitment to traditional roles, leading to emotional disillusionment and conflict (De 20).

Shagun's affair with Ashok Khanna is a manifestation of her desire for both emotional fulfillment and materialistic pleasure. Her relationship with Ashok reflects how modernity has reshaped personal relationships into more self-serving and transactional engagements. As Kapur poignantly describes, "In Ashok's arms, Shagun found the freedom she had always craved. She was no longer a wife, a mother, or a dutiful daughter. In those stolen moments, she was simply a woman—free, alive, and unburdened by the expectations of others" (Kapur 145). This passage highlights the tension between Shagun's need for freedom and the responsibilities she feels as a wife and mother. Her affair, though emotionally fulfilling, also reveals the hollowness of a materialistic existence that lacks emotional intimacy.

This materialistic mindset stands in stark contrast to Ishita's selfless devotion to her family. Ishita's character embodies the ideal of maternal sacrifice and familial duty. Where Shagun seeks material pleasure, Ishita finds fulfillment in her role as a mother and wife. The impact of consumerism on family relationships is explored throughout *Custody*, with Shagun's pursuit of a glamorous life serving as a metaphor for the emotional emptiness that can result from an overemphasis on materialism. As Belliappa argues,

In the wake of economic liberalization, women in urban India increasingly find themselves torn between material aspirations and traditional familial responsibilities. The rise of consumer culture has shifted expectations, encouraging a desire for individual success and material wealth while simultaneously undermining the emotional connections that sustain family life" (Belliappa 112).

Conclusion: Shagun's apparent success in her material pursuits contrasts sharply with her emotional dissatisfaction. Despite the wealth, social status, and luxury that come with her affair, Shagun remains emotionally unfulfilled. Her disillusionment with her life of material pleasure becomes apparent as she reflects on her failed marriage and the lack of emotional connection in her relationships. As Kapur writes:

What use was all the wealth, all the parties, if it only made her feel more lonely? In the end, it wasn't the clothes or the jewels that mattered. It was the absence of love that she couldn't bear any longer (Kapur 217).

This realization is a critical moment in Shagun's character, where she begins to understand the emotional emptiness of a life lived solely for material gain. The materialism that Shagun chases ultimately leads her to a crisis of identity. As she moves further away from her role as a mother and wife, she finds herself increasingly alienated from her family and, more profoundly, from her own sense of self. "Her life of glamour and social success fails to provide the emotional

fulfillment she longs for, leaving her in a state of confusion about her true identity. This materialistic mindset, although liberating in some ways, proves to be emotionally hollow” (Narain 53).

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