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“IS MARRIAGE A CEREMONIAL TOY”: CONTEMPLATING CUSTODY IN
MANJU KAPUR’S *CUSTODY*

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ABSTRACT

Custody scales the norms of patriarchal normative which lead to prey-predator equation and structure a site for disintegration of human bond and association. The ugly legal battle of custody is commonly its associative ill as another heart rending consequence. The narrative unfolds “revolutionary changes” in human rights and individual aspirations. In a descriptive mode, the paper also shows the ‘mindset’ of women at cross-roads.

Keywords: Exploitation, Victimization, Patriarchal Ethics, Maladjustment, Non-conformity, Ethics.

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“If Unhappy marriage is the dalchawal of fiction then the adulterous wife is its feisty poster girl” – *Custody* holds much water, indeed deep waters than what Kalpish Ratna says in the article “Soap Duds”, published in Outlook, (28 March, 2011, p-82). Manju Kapur’s expertise in interpreting the family matrix again deserves a loud applause. Being showcased on primetime has added lustre to its quality content by noticeable measure. With two slots of psyches – children and adult put side by side, the reading vibrates with palpitation of concern and contemplation, whereby *Custody* deserves much more than a customary thought. *Custody* is all about marital misery and its consequences on children who are victimized by parental ego battles. Set in the affluent upper-middle class colonies of Delhi in the mid- 90’s against the backdrop of investment climate to make India an attractive FDI destination. The novel also debates the issue of atomistic individualism whereby an individual unhesitatingly asserts his rights irrespective of social and familial responsibilities. It also showcases the fact that women are now rejecting the traditional roles ascribed to them and are majestically occupying “paid work” roles thereby involving in the domain of “productive labour” by stepping out of stay-at-homes domesticity. This change can be easily attributed to the materialistic consciousness perpetuated by the globalizing consumer culture. Consequently “paid work” has taken precedence over family providing social role enhancement with an exchange value. Therefore marriage has become a wealth-creating institution.

This deliberation focuses on universal angst of modern marriage with its ugly shades of envy and non-conformity. Through inversion of patriarchal ethics the institution of marriage is put to sedate contemplation.

For good probe into the content, the book is sectioned into two halves- the first projects the grown-ups and the re-configuration of the adults while the other focuses on the ugly custody where parents stand face to face as envious foes indifferent to the trauma and agony of their children battle. Aradhika Sharma in *The Tribune* writes –

The little ones have to deal with parents who have changed priorities, changed partners, changed characters even. From being the loved kinds of a family, they are changed to pawns on the chess board of the judicial system, the players of the game being none other than their parentsManju brings forth the angst that the system engenders when lawyers step in and counts take over. The joy is over and bitterness prevails. The most battered is the children-(8 May 2011)

Custody is a loud narrative commentary on the ills of maladjustments. Not only do the couple drift apart leading to estrangement or divorce as a form of family disorganization but the distaste of discord 'wrecks' the very being of a person. Kamla Das in her autobiography *My Story* holds "a broken marriage as horrifying as an attack of leprosy." (4)

Kapur has her personal view of marriage which she defines in the novel as –

Marriage is when two people decide to live together forever. Should they change their minds they go to court and get marriage cancelled. Finished. Divorced. They become strangers; sometimes they never see each other again. (341)

Mithu Banerji in *Custody*: Review. The Observer, 27 February 2011.

For Shagun divorce is a change and positive development but for Raman it is an emotional death as he undergoes tremendous stress and uncertainty of future. Though the process of divorce is navigated quite easily yet custody of children leads to unnecessary negative escalations of mistrust in parenting obligations. The issue of 'Custody' expands as an ever widening fissure between the ex-spouses leading to a stagnant climate of overreactions. Raman is sensitive to 'Trigger items' as the loss of the children and memory of Shagun spread all over the house nags him. Here Manju Kapur shows that divorce is highly contaminating to the well-being of a person and a family. Along with its highly stigmatizing nature the damage caused takes a long period to overcome its uncanny experience.

The novel is an expansive commentary on reticent patriarchy also; as exemplified by the fate of Raman. R. Connell identifies three aspects of society which interact to form a gender order – (1) Labour (2) Power (3) Personal/ Sexual relationship. Shagun in comparison to Raman stands superior in all three aspects. With little labour and surrounded by elite luxury, she is the power of authority at home with active dictates on sexual interactions. Psychologically Raman can be placed within the slot called "subordinated masculinity" and this gives enough free will to Shagun to entertain her whims even at the cost of amicability and conjugality. R. Connell classifies masculinity under two heads – (a) Hegemonic and (b) Subordinated. Hegemonic is more assertive much to the extent of being the be-all and end-all voice of command. Contrast to Raman, Shagun falls into the slot of emphasized femininity for she uses her femininity sparingly. Ishita, a contrast to Shagun is the other version of femininity which Connell names as "hyper femininity" – a powerless position until she marries Raman and adopts Roohi as her embryonic child.

Custody also maintains the viewpoint that woman need to break the shackles of "woman- at- home concept". This kind of socializing Shagun and Ishita enjoy, upholding the belief that a ripe- attitude of self – identity would provide woman of a place on the pedestal along with men as a "feel of togetherness". This "womanhood" is well defined by Nayantara Sehgal in her article –"Women's Liberation: The Indian Way" as –

A whole new look of woman not as the property of father, husband or son, and dependent on their bounty but as valuable human material to be brought to full flower and full participation in her life and events(6)-(The Sunday Standard, 6)

The redeeming echo resonant is "my body is not my jail. It is my boat. I will row freedom in my boat". (NarsinhaRaji: *TheSkyChanges*, 47)loudly refuting the Freudian adage "anatomy is destiny". Interestingly Ishita projects Manju Kapur's enterprise to establish the woman as an individual, who breaks the traditional impositions and moulds her identity in accordance with the changed societal atmosphere of the modern times.

Ishita's feminine self finds its roots in Raman's home through re-marriage whereas Shagun goes beyond the niceties of femininity in order to find fleeting happiness and fun. Shagun's deviation from the ideal image of womanhood and motherhood is condemned where as Ishita's conformity to the standards of conduct and decorum provides recognition and adds to the solidarity of her new found home. Ishita is the 'woman of today', educated articulative and intensely aware of the injustice heaped upon her by her first marriage. She holds up the belief that there is more to life than passive dependency on husband and parents. Her tools for battle against exploitation are self- assurance and self –reliance as well desire for holistic solidarity. Coming out of the confinement of marriage she concentrates and labours for meaningful affirmation of the dignity of a woman. Her later life is a ceremony of the full development of varied faculties like physical, emotional, moral and intellectual.

Shagun- the mother and the wife, is too preoccupied with glitter and pleasure that she overlooks the serious things of life which Ishita does. As a perspective, Shagun is current values, reflective of urban and global cultures and noncommittal to ethics and duties. This makes Shagun a socialite and contrastively a less cerebral person. On the other hand Ishita has clarity of domestic contentment and seeks the stability of a loving committed relationship.

Shagun and Ishita represent two types of family – Shagun shatters her family from intact to non-intact and Ishita reconstructs a 'non-intact' family to 'intact'. As builders of domesticity, Shagun prioritises sensuality over motherhood whereas Ishita holds motherhood of paramount importance than marital romance. Much interesting are the factors that wreck their diminishing conjugality.

Violence is the common strand in parallel plots, if Shagun lashes Raman with "spouse abuse" Ishita groans under "emotional abuse". Shagun is 'destructive' in the sense that her adultery causes erosion of family function and obsession with 'romantic love'. Ishita's impaired reproductive ability deprives her of eternal enduring friendship with Suryakant- her first husband. As soon as she is fed with portions of love and admiration of her being she eloquently expresses her gratitude to Raman – her second husband and blossoms as image of unselfishness.

Shagun and Ishita show variations in love too – the former is a prey to passionate love while the latter practices compassionate love. David G. Myers defines Shagun's 'weak- love' as –

If we experience passionate love, we express it physically, we expect the relationship to be exclusive and we are intensely fascinated with our partner Passionate love is emotional, exciting, intense. (453)

Elaine Hatfield in *The Psychology of Love* says –

"...a state of intense longing for union with another. If reciprocated one feels joyous; if not, one feels empty or despairing."(193)

Passionate love is spiced with features like physical affection, an expectation of exclusiveness, obsessive infatuation and intense fascination with the loved one. Unlike the wild fire of passionate love, compassionate love is 'lower key' but deep and affectionate bond. M. Shostakin Nisa: *The Life and Words of an Ikung Woman* says –

When two people are first together, their hearts are on fire and their passion is very great. After a while the fire cools and that's how it stays. They continue to love each other, but it's in a different way –warm and dependable.(456)

Psychologists Clyde Hardrick and Susan Hardrick (2003) identify three primary love styles –

- (a) Eros – self – disclosing passion
- (b) Ludus – uncommitted game
- (c) Storge – dedicated playing and reciprocal friendship

Of these three, Eros and storge exude high relationship satisfaction but ludus is 'low' on the scale of satisfaction.

Shagun is ludus – incarnate whereas Ishita – a storge – incarnate exhibits mature love – “... love that sustains marriage and family as it creates an environment in which individual family members can grow”. (412)

Shagun is a victim of ‘want’ and not of ‘need’. She wants Ashok though Raman is there for her ‘need’. Unlike Shagun Ishita needs Raman because her motherhood ‘needs’ to be satisfied and the stigma of barrenness ‘needs’ to be eradicated. But then where does ‘Ashok’ stand – can he be exempted of the blame though we know that he knowingly becomes intimate with a woman married happily.

The adage that ‘Man errs, and woman takes the blame’ well illustrate the relationship between Shagun and Ashok, for Shagun deviates as much knowingly as does Ashok. Consequently divorce is their erroneous refuge.

Derived from the Latin word ‘divortium’ ‘divorce’ means “to turn apart”. Divorce is classified as

- (1) Fault Divorce – when ‘grounds’ for divorce is identified as a particular reason.
- (2) No Fault Divorce – when marriage is terminated without any reason but with the consent of the spouses.

Manju Kapur underlines the disadvantages of ‘Divorce’ as – a traumatic experience, a marital breakdown, agonising parenting or co-parental divorce, uncertain binuclear pattern of family, isolation from emotional supports- friends and relatives and challenge to emotional endurance. Manju Kapur also weaves a ‘binuclear’ slot to define a post- divorce family structure – two ex- spouse parents now located in separate households. From one rises two ‘nuclei’ to which children as well as others must relate ‘afresh’. It is from these elements that M. G. Goldzband calls ‘Divorce’ as the ‘ugliest litigate’. (Quality Time: Easing the Children Through Divorce). In this sense Custody is a pronounced illustration of ‘ugly litigation’.

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