

Distortion of the Ontological Construction of Gender in Kapur's *Custody*

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Abstract: The paper aims to uproot the male-oriented Indian social culture of colonizing women with a vision of distorting the ontological construction of gender identity and battling against the androcentric culture of India by two major female characters of Manju Kapur's novel, *Custody* (2011), Shagun and Ishita. Shagun and Ishita not only get divorced but also remarry other men to signify how modern women are capable of challenging the patriarchal Indian culture for their liberation and identity. To survey the aftermath consequences of suppression on women, divorce, and remarriage, feminist theory, with special focus on the theorization of French feminists such as Simon de Beauvoir, Christine Delphy, Sheila Ruth, is used as a research tool. And the qualitative, analytical, explorative research method is used to test the hypothesized issues. The major finding of the research paper is that though Kapur is successful to resist the patriarchal society that attempts to subjugate women, patriarchal domination is still stimulating modern society and women are facing problems due to uncertainties of matrimony, infertility. It is expected that researchers intending to probe into the creative world of Kapur with a feminist approach can obtain this work as a reference.

Keywords: Authority; Essentialism; Oppression; Patrilineal; Resistance

Introduction: The contemporary Indian novelists, more precisely, Kiran Desai, Arundhati Roy, Anita Desai, Shobha De, Anita Nair, Jhumpa Lahiri, Bharati Mukherjee, Kamala Markandaya, Santha Rama Rau, Nayantara Sahgal, Manju Kapoor, Geeta Mehta, write from the mentality of protesting male domination (Roy, 2019). Manju Kapur, a noted postcolonial female writer of the contemporary era in India, is remembered for critiquing the Oriental culture and practice of subjugating women by the men, for dealing with "the issues of feminism, socio-economic discrimination, and lesbianism" (Anita & Sharma, 2021, p. 2421). Manju Kapur has proved herself as a freedom fighter, defying against male domination in Indian society. Manju Kapur's novels reflect multiple postmodern issues like a broken marriage, alienation, depression, misery, gloominess, sense of failure, the quest for liberty, and domination through language (Chanthiramathi & Rashmi, 2016). Dodiya (2006) finds the protagonists of Kapur's novels always distanced from the traditional portrayals of the self-sacrificing, enduring, meek, and quiet women. They are the modern portrayals of self-assured, assertive, educated, protesting and ambitious ones, making society aware of their needs, and proving their identities. Her continuous contribution in writing in the favor of females raising the voice against matrimonial problems created by patriarchal culture gave her a dignified and superior position in India and in many other countries. Like her predecessors, Shashi Despande and Gita Hariharan, Manju Kapur portrays the vulnerable condition of women in the Indian society living within the territory of home and society (Jayasudha & Hema, 2020). Manju Kapur is a "well-known name in modern Anglo-Indian literature and widely known as the Jane Austen of India" (Scur, 2009, para.1).

Kapur's novel, *Custody*, published in 2011, depicts how women of different generations have survived in a sophisticated patriarchal society and how they have reacted against it to re-establish their unique significance. Manju Kapur's fifth novel, *Custody*, has presented multiple dimensions of the Indian society related to gender discrimination and sexism. According to Walton (2011), "In some ways, the plot here is almost Victorian" (para. 2). The novel hovers around the story of two central female characters, Ishita and Shagun. Ishita, a young Indian woman, is divorced by her husband because of her infertility. Shagun, who avoids her possessive husband, Raman, though they have two children, and remarries her husband's boss, Ashok Khanna. Ishita also remarries Raman to cherish the familial experience. The chief research question that lies beneath the research is how the women with broken marriages react against the trend of masculine hegemony to find their prestige in upper middle class urban Indian families and society. Hence, the rationale of the paper lies in investigating the causes as well as the effects of women whose identities have almost been suppressed and who fight for their freedom. The adultery, extramarital love, and sexual

freedom, chief discursive elements of Manju Kapur, are also her instruments of resistance to the patriarchal myth and values

Literature Review

This section of the paper surveys the literature and all the critical responses given to the theme, characterization, narrative technique of Manju Kapur's *Custody* in 2011 after its publication. Groups of critics have assessed the theme of the novels from different perspectives. Kapur's novel, *Custody*, was inspired by globalization and economic liberalization (Maji, 2013). In the gripping novel, *Custody*, Kapur has represented the struggle of her protagonists, Shagun and Ishita for their identity and status (Anita & Sharma, 2021). It is intolerable to mark the subject as matrimony that causes emotional tensions to a woman in a wealthy extended Delhi family (Akbar, 2011). Manju Kapur's *Custody* depicts a turbulent city life of two families due to marital tensions, rigid court proceedings, unwarranted child custody, social evils, and injustice (Niteeka & Singh, 2019). Manju Kapur Written with honesty and emotion, *Custody* is "a heart-wrenching tale of infidelity, divorce, and broken hearts" (Sharma & Singh, 2018, p. 1).

Surveying on the characterization of the novel, *Custody*, Janabandhu (2014) states, "All the female characters of Manju Kapur are seen as women struggling against all the odds. The strains of feminism are obvious in her writings" (p. 101). Each character has a mindset, unique in its own way, reflecting the modern virtues that we have been adapting. Manju Kapur is one novelist who takes her protagonist one step ahead of the others with the edge-cutting issues of the modern world varying from infertility, infidelity, divorce to adoption (Anita & Sharma, 2021). All the female characters of Manju Kapur challenge the male domination and patriarchal mechanisms of surveillance and control over women's bodies (Kale, 2010). Kapur has narrated her woman protagonist as a victim of biology, gender, domestic violence, and circumstances. According to Maji (2013), the setting of the story is the globalized and modernized India where women do not suffer but challenge the patriarchy and raise their voices to overcome male oppression towards them. The way divorce and custody following that provokes tragedy in the bourgeois Indian society of the 1990s is keenly observed by Manju Kapur (Akbar, 2011). Banerji (2011) makes the evaluation of the fiction in these words, "Manju Kapur's fifth novel, *Custody* 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" (p. 65).

The critics' reviews on the text, *Custody* from various perspectives, signify that they have noticed the problems of married, divorced, and remarried women in the Indian culture. But this equally hints that the critics have not reviewed the text from the revolutionary attempt of the women in decolonizing the masculine culture of restraining women in India. Hence, this article aims to fulfill the research gap. It is oriented to deconstructing the ontological construction of gender discourse and reconstructing value and respect for married women.

Research Methodology

The paper applies a qualitative approach to research by exploring the primary resource, that is, the text, *Custody* itself from a theoretical modality based on modern feminist theories. And the secondary resources on this text such as literature from journals, websites commentaries are surveyed to note the research gap. It applies the purposive sampling method by taking the data from the textual lines to justify the working hypothesis. Its delimitation primarily lies on focusing on the culture and practice of male hegemony, and women's endeavor to disrupt it in assessing the novel, *Custody*. The problems the study states are what impel divorced women to remarry in a society where it is like a taboo. To analyze these problems, intensive analysis of the text is done from the theoretical modality of feminism.

The most persistent theory around the women's movement centered on attacking the society colonized by patriarchy today is feminism (Tyson, 2006). French feminism is a women's movement that emerged in the late 1960s and was advocated by Simon de Beauvoir, Christine Delphy, Sheila Ruth, and Colette Guillaumin. French feminism is a specific kind of political discourse, a critical and theoretical practice committed to the struggle against the economic exploitation of women by patriarchy (Tyson, 2006; Susan 1995). Patriarchy is probably the oldest form of exploitation of one part of the population by another (Ruth, 1990). Women are regarded as inferior laborers and are forced to work in the interests of males

(Engels, 1902). Delphy (1984) remarks, “The husband’s obligation is to provide for his wife’s basic needs, in other words, he maintains her labor-power” (p. 60). Likewise, Guillaumin (1996) does not like the way women are oppressed by direct physical appropriation. French feminism takes gender oppression as class oppression, and the relationship between man and woman in society is similar to the relations between proletariat and bourgeoisie. The biological, economic, or psychological factors can’t determine the destiny of women in the present society (Beauvoir, 1974). Criticizing sexism, Postmodern feminists also emphasize the social construction of gender and the nature of discursive nature of reality (Delphy, 1984).

The feminist approaches mentioned above are useful research tools used to examine how male members in Kapur’s *Custody* attempt to marginalize women and how they challenge the deep-rooted patriarchal norms and values.

Analysis and Discussion

A feminist analysis of Manju Kapur’s novel, *Custody*, instantly reminds readers how it portrays the contemporary Indian tradition where masculine hegemony still pervades terribly. Feminists predominantly attempt to annihilate and rebel against the economic oppression of the feminine gender (Guillaumin, 1996). The women in India also have been attempting to react against patriarchy. Nevertheless, the patriarchal norms still treat women as inferior beings. In *Custody*, Manju Kapur has endeavored to expose a subtle effect of the modern Indian family divorce and family tussles generated by remarriage. Raman, at the outset of the story, leads a decently content life with his gorgeous wife, Shagun. Working for ‘The Brand’, a leading soft drinks manufacturing company, Raman gets paid handsomely. Society’s motivation is not to make women especially humane, but to make excellent servants (Ruth, 1995). The wedding of Raman and Shagun is set with a patriarchal standard, as narrated in these words: “She the beauty, he the one with brilliant prospects” (p. 14). Shagun is respected when she conceives instantly and gives birth to the boy baby, Arjun: “Her son had inherited her looks and color, a further source of gratification” (p. 15). However, things get changed when she gives birth to her daughter, Roohi. Besides, “Roohi, her daughter, is a carbon copy of her father” (p. 18). The novelist tenderly mocks at the patriarchal norms of Indian societies where the birth of a baby boy is preferred.

Rich (1995) was troubled because “Parenthood of women isn’t just a center human relationship, however a political organization, a cornerstone to the control in each circle of ladies by men” (p. 216). A son is considered to be the heir of the family, whereas the daughter is taken as a burden. Shagun receives an impressive status by giving birth to a baby boy: “The birth of a boy added to her glory. She had gotten over the duties of heir producing smoothly; there would be no need to have another child” (p. 15). It’s a bitter fact of our Indian society that when a son is born, the need for a daughter is not felt. The Indian woman is blamed for her inability to produce a male child when scientifically the y chromosome of a man determines the sex of a child (Samuel, 2020). Shagun becomes very depressed because her husband, Raman takes her as nothing more than a housewife, a puppet. He only thinks about his desire and freedom to be fulfilled. Ruth (1995) can’t tolerate why a woman is taken as the incidental and the inessential, and why a man is taken as the essential, the absolute.

Connell (1995) explicates, “Hegemonic masculinity is defined as a practice that legitimizes men’s dominant position in society and justifies the subordination of the common male population and women and other marginalized ways of being a man” (p. 241). The leading character, Shagun determined to defy the canonical masculine hegemony to value her sexuality. Shagun perceives that women now have become a vital part of society in refuting sexism. But men keep on being hypnotized by the body of females. Ashok Khanna, a businessman gets attracted by her beauty. Shagun makes an illicit relationship with her husband’s boss Ashok Khanna to signify her sexual freedom as an instrument of resistance to patriarchal myths and values. Her sexuality is a dome of happiness and an outfit in which she is empowered to employ her body for herself. She does not think of the masculine system of observation and control.

Beauvoir (1974) in *The Second Sex* records the intention of women who aspire to be independent, ‘Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles. Between her and the universe, there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator (p. 412). Shagun has never thought of divorcing Raman or leaving her children to marry Ashok: “When she started her affair she had thought a lover would add to her experience, make up for all the things she had missed having married straight out of

college” (p. 82). But Ashok, smart enough to manipulate people in his life as well as in his job, is determined to marry Shagun and take her with him when posted in New York. Shagun denies “Don’t bother you will finish and go. I have to stay for my children” (p. 81). Ashok persuades her ‘I just want to take you away from here. This narrow social setup is all you know, that’s why you are afraid. But it will be fine, fine. Trust me, darling’ (p. 81). Parallely, we are introduced to Ishita, who although not strikingly beautiful, is wise, kind, and generous. Ishita is diagnosed as infertile which the patriarchal society denies.

According to patriarchal norms, to be a successful woman she should be able to bear a child and make the husband happy (Ghosh, 2010). But her infertility issue makes her married life snowed under her anxiety, social disgrace emotional abuse, and psychological stress. The narrator states:

Ishita was the dear daughter-in-law in the past. Now she was treated as undeserving and infertile. In the hospital she feels smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in the sunlit air, smaller than the drops of dew caught between blades of grass in the morning, while she sat in the gynecologist’s office with her mother-in-law, watching as the doctor sketched out the messages concealed in her body. (p. 65)

The novel describes the bitter reality faced by women in a dogmatic society due to their infertile bodies. According to Greil et al. (2020), “The experience of infertility is shaped by patriarchy, and women are blamed for it” (p. 158). Her husband, Suryakanta is ready to give her divorce. Man always thinks that he is in the right, while the woman is in the wrong; all the negative qualities are assigned to her (Beauvoir, 1974). Meanwhile, Ishita is thrown out of her in-laws’ house. She undergoes mental hurdles as she is penalized for her imperfect body. Her family’s behavior changes instantly and she ends up being a divorcee. She then begins to channel her energies into social work to lead a comfortable enough life. She begins to act like a socialist feminist.

Socialist feminism argues that women’s liberation can only be achieved by working to end economic and cultural sources of women’s oppression (Ehrenreich, n. d.). When Ishita is officially working with Mrs. Hingorani and her NGO, she encounters some poor women, battling for many things with empty stomachs, drunken husbands, semi-literate children, with no chance of escape from their poverty. This encourages Ishita to revolt against male-dominated society: “Ishita along with Mrs. Hingorani march to Parliament House to protest the nuclear device tested in the Pakharan desert. Drawing parallels between herself and the woman involved in the freedom struggle: they too had courted arrest” (p. 136). Although marriage in Indian culture connects two souls till the end of life, in reality, it is usually problematized by separation or divorce (Neetika & Singh, 2019). Ishita marks a purpose in her life, but still, her parents wish to find a good match for their daughter to secure her future. But Ishita is not very much interested in marriage. That is why Ishita intends to focus on her work and help the poor children.

Jaidev (2013) criticizes any sophisticated system which is operating not by direct and visible exploitation of women but by making women retain an illusion of freedom. She can rather be lonely instead of marrying such a person who can’t even let her go anywhere without him. Mrs. Hingorani suggests Ishita adopt a child to fulfill her monotonous life and also introduces her to a couple who has just adopted a child. Ishita finds the mother, beaming with happiness: “Her husband instead of looking for a new wife was content to beam with her” (p. 182). Ishita thinks that she has been divorced just because she can’t produce children. Patriarchy subjugates women to the position of labor if they can’t bear a child (Delphy, 1984). She thinks how she is not a human being but only a child-producing machine. Saharan (2018) is critical to the way motherhood regulates “women to the private world of child-bearing and rearing apart from the public world of wage-earning and decision making and the intellectual and academic world of creative thinking and writing” (p. 69). She knows right now there is no use in desiring anything. Ishita, like a militant feminist, is determined to fight for her rights, for the meaning of her life. This finally impels Ishita to adopt a child. She even happens to share her wish with her parents. Mrs. Rajora wants her to marry for the security of her future, but Ishita doesn’t want to wait for a proposal to come: “I wish you could understand how sick I am of this whole marriage business” (p. 188). She rather would not wish to see any possessive man. She says, “At least it will be nice to choose my fate, instead of just waiting for some husband to appear” (p. 189). The independent lifestyle provides Ishita a sense of utmost satisfaction as observed by her father. Parents do not expect any men to exploit their daughters. He wants to see his daughter be happy, without caring what people think of her if she adopts a child.

During and after the divorce process, the point of view of the family and the society to the divorced women can have impacts on the decisions and lives of the women who are going through a divorce (Singh, 2013). But very soon she meets Raman, she gradually begins to like her and marries him. Somehow women are shown very radical in their actions against suppression. When Shagun moves abroad for some official work with Ashok Khanna, Raman refuses to divorce her and the case is dragged to court, with each party trying to defame the other. The innocent children feel trapped, and troubled in a serious tussle for the guardianship of their children. Raman files a case against Shagun for sending Arjun to school with a complaint that Shagun wants to keep the child away from his father. Shagun, “had a letter from the school to prove that he hadn’t been attending school for months” (p. 213). A true mother is more than a feminist. She does not intend to lose Arjun whom she prepares for some questions he might be asked in court:

The court did not understand that people could change, no; they had to go on living with the same person till they died. They had the power to take away her children, put her in jail. This was a very hypocritical country narrow-minded and censorious. The judge would probably ask him who he wanted to live with. (p. 213)

In this way, Kapur not only exposes the ontological construction of gender practiced in the court in India but also raises her voice to protest such practices.

Defiance against Feminine Attribution

Shagun is determined to react against a creed of attributing women as feminine, demure. Delphy (1984) believes that the biological existence of a female is socially covered as a demure creature. To develop bonding between Ashok and Arjun, Shagun insists Ashok help Arjun in preparing for the entrance test and also to share some moments of Ashok’s school years. His only concern is Shagun and not the kids, and this hurts Shagun. Arjun’s behavior hurts Shagun, she knows the reason but she can’t help him with that. Arjun has to learn to live without Raman. Shagun is hurt about everything Ashok says about Arjun: “She understood he could never feel for the boy, it was her fault for leaving the child’s father, she would pay for her sins for the rest of her life” (p. 171). The marital stability of a family may be shaken when divorce occurs, and the disruption causes the children to feel negatively towards the family and parents (Jackson & Fife, 2018). Manju Kapur depicts the impacts of divorce on the mind and the body of the children through Arjun. The separation of parents has adverse effects on Arjun’s life. Arjun starts complaining about his stomach pain, leg pain and refuses to go to school. He does not perform well in school, in his academics though he has been a diligent student. Roohi might not feel disturbed moving from one home to another because she is too small to understand anything, but it creates more disturbances to Arjun. No one he knew dreamt, but then no one he knew had separated parents. His father, noting his pale morning face, asked him what the matter was, but he couldn’t say. But “He didn’t trust his father to understand anything in his new life” (p. 224). Raman, angry with Shagun, blames her for deserting Roohi at such a tender age and pretending to love her. All of them are called by the judge inside the chamber for questioning. The judge asks some questions to the parents. Roohi tells the judge that Ishita is her mother and she wants to live with her. Ishita has already prepared Roohi for such questions in the court. Eventually, “Roohi’s custody is provided to Raman and Ishita, and Arjun’s custody is given to Shagun, till the time the kids become eighteen years old and decide on their own” (p. 225). Ishita is happy and confident after the court’s decision.

When the subjugation of males reaches its climax, the enlightened women go against the hegemonic masculinity (Peterson, 2003). The protagonists of the novel, Shagun and Ishita are the prototype of the female revival to challenge the masculine hegemony. The conflict between the parents for the possession of their children and modern Indian women aspire for independence is the evidence of enlightened women. She protagonist sounds bold enough to choose her lifestyle so that she can create her own identity. Feeling bored, alienated, and attracted towards modernity, Shagun, the mother of two children “develops an extra-marital affair with Ashok Khanna” (p. 14). Since her teens, Shagun had an infinite number of boys and she was looking forward to the freedom marriage would provide. Females’ attitude towards society and its rules is not driven by patriarchy but rather their new coming thought of equality and equity. Selden et al. (2005) regard, “Patriarchy subordinates the female to the male or treats the female as an inferior male” (p. 137). Female characters are shown free and not abiding by patriarchal norms and values. Throughout the novel, the sufferings and exploitation of children arise because of their parents’ decisions. An increased rate of

depression is noticed in the children, separated from their parents, because of marital problems and divorce. The children of divorced parents confront more psychological problems than the children whose parents are not distanced despite having some conflicts between them.

The notion of a generally shared conception of women has been much more difficult to displace. The masculine/feminine binary constitutes only the exclusive framework. Indeed, the premature insistence on a stable subject of feminism inevitably generates multiple refusals to accept the category. By conforming to a requirement of representational politics, feminism thus opens itself to charges of gross misrepresentation. Through her novels, Kapur raises the seminal issues of Indian women; she advocates the plausible reality that education brings dignity, honor, and power. Hence, the progress and development of a society depend on the emancipation and empowerment of both sexes. Women of 1990s India were going against the patriarchal institution and had started to live a life of free will, independence, and self-decisiveness. Females in the last decade of Indian society were gradually advancing towards radicalism and de-contextualizing the females' attribution which was imposed upon by the so-called patriarchy.

Conclusion

Manju Kapur exposes the culture and practice of masculine hegemony in Indian society. She makes ontological constructions of the feminist identity very strong through her narrative. In *Custody*, Kapur delineates highlights how women in the Indian society are deprived of proper education in their orthodox society. Lack of education makes them dependable and vulnerable to both the inner world and the outer world. *Custody* is not only about the disruption of masculine hegemony but also the freedom of women and children from the custody of a stereotypical gender-biased society. The issues of divorce, the dichotomy of modern society, and the relationship between parents and child and aspires for freedom are boldly addressed by the writer. It is an entire representation of an Indian Modern woman, who tiles a new path in the peripheral world. Her novel denounces the Indian women's sociocultural predicament caused by their subjugation in the male-dominated society. This novel shows that woman should make an effort to realize and detain herself as a human being and not just as an attachment to some male life. It discloses the hollowness of modern life. It also exposes the life of Metropolitan cities where people have become the victims of modernity. *Custody* has depicted the issue of infertility, the issue of divorce, incongruity of modern society. Kapur's new women appear rising in modern Indian society from their revolutionary spirit. This novel demonstrates that a woman should make an effort to realize and detain herself as a human being and not just as an attachment to some male life. Manju Kapur's *Custody* stimulates South Asian women to resist social and family restrictions and constraints pervading since long in the patriarchy in the tradition. As far as women are concerned, in Indian culture and heritage, individualism, the quest for identity, protests, and concepts of resistance have often remained alien ideas. Women, who are not supposed to raise voices against unjust customs, rituals, and superstition, have found their spaces for equality. In the patriarchal system, women have to merely exist. This custom is protested here. The writer is successful to give us a message that women can no longer be quiet, submissive, and passive. It is strongly recommended that research scholars intended to study contemporary Indian women's struggle for freedom can take this exploration as a reference.

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