

Identity Crisis: An Analysis of Manju Kapur's Female Characters in *Custody*

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Abstract

Manju Kapur deals with the issues pertaining to women in her novels. As the image of women in Indian English Literature has changed during the last few decades, Manju Kapur has presented her educated and conscious women protagonists in *Custody*, who are not satisfied with their lives. Education, changing values, economic empowerment, social reforms, inspirational person, are some of the factors which make the women intellectual and ambitious. Such factors inspire the women to live per as their own wish. Shagun and Ishita, the protagonists of the novel, feel that their individuality and identity is restricted by traditional norms and customs. Their family members create obstacles in their way of freedom and individuality, they are oppressed and feel identity crisis. In her novel *Custody* Manju Kapur delineates the predicament of Shagun and Ishita who are identity conscious feel that their identity is also denied by their own family members. But, both struggle hard in a traditional society to achieve their ambitions. Shagun's desire of modeling career is not encouraged before and after marriage. Ishita, the other protagonist of the novel also faces the problems in her married life due to her infertility. As she is rejected by her husband and in-laws, it raises the question of identity in her mind. Ishita creates her own way out to overcome from this situation. The aim of the research paper is to explore the conditions which become hurdle in their progress and identity and how they struggle to achieve their goals. How educated conscious women in Indian traditional society search their own path for identity and empower themselves denouncing the conventional norms of society is also analyzed in the paper. Manju Kapur has exhibited the reality of Indian society in *Custody*, where a woman is considered only a caretaker of children, husband and family. She is not treated as human being but only a procreating machine. Nobody thinks about her desires. But modern women, Shagun and Ishita defy the norms of society to achieve their own identity and empower themselves.

Keywords: Identity, Individuality, Tradition, Custody, Struggle, Female Empowerment

Introduction

Manju Kapur, a modern woman novelist of great popularity in Indian Writing in English has written six novels. She deals with different themes as feminism, socio-economic discrimination, man-woman relationship and lesbianism. In *Custody*, Kapur has

represented the struggle of her protagonists Shagun and Ishita for their identity and status. Both create their own ways according to their different situations. Women in Indian society is not treated equal to men, so the situation becomes conflicting. As a mute sufferer, she bears the domination of male centered society. But now ,educated and conscious women are not ready to accept their exploitation and subjugation. Shagun is the main protagonist of the novel. She is the only child of her parents like other protagonist Ishita of *Cutody*. Both the protagonist are educated but their families especially mothers are worried about their daughters' marriage. Shagun is brought up by her mother Mrs. Sabharwal, and enjoys a lot of freedom at her home with some restrictions like every girl in a traditional Indian society faces. She is good at studies but never likes reading books as her only ambition is to become a model. Her mother strongly objects to this career by saying, “ Do what you like after you marry”(Custody,11). A daughter is considered a liability for her parents, they want to be free from this burden of responsibility by marrying her. Shagun, a beautiful girl who wants to fly high to fulfill her dreams, but before marriage she is not allowed by her mother. She thinks that marriage is the only way to satisfy her desire or to achieve her career as her mother suggests her after marriage she can do whatever she wants. But reality is different in Indian society, a woman does not get freedom before and after marriage. She is crushed under the burden of responsibilities of home and hearth.

A conflict remains in Shagun's mind about self-identity. She always desires her own recognition and identity in the family and society. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* clearly states the views of women who face identity crisis and want to become 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” (TSS,412). Shagun desires her liberty at any cost to fulfill her ambition of modeling, so she finds marriage as a way to achieve her carrier and become independent. Shagun a free minded modern girl, falls in love with Raman during her college days. Her looks and behavior are so elegant that after marriage with Raman, she becomes her husband's Madona. Their prosperous, happy nuptial life moves efficiently without any hindrance. In the meantime, Shagun is gifted with two children- Arjun and Roohi. Raman is satisfied with his conventional responsibility asa husband, as a father and breadwinner and affords his family with all sophisticated facilities to live a comfortable life. But after the completion of their eleven years of married life, when shagun meets Ashok Khanna, the boss of her husband, she realizes that her ambition of pursuing a career as a model and living a lavish life can be fulfilled only by this person not by her husband. To fulfill her hidden desire Shagun is ready to go beyond the limits of patriarchal norms. Chris Weedon in *FeministPractice and Poststructuralist Theory*, comments in this context, “The process of achieving a new identity is conceived as a journey, which involves breaking with patriarchal perspectives, confronting the full horror of patriarchy and developing and celebrating new organic female creativity”(FPPT,132-33). In a traditional society, it seems very difficult for a woman to cherish her ambition, as they are considered to do household duties being an ideal woman who sacrifices her own desires for the development of family members. But Shagun an ultra modern woman, betrays her husband and creates extra-marital relations with Ashok Khanna. She is over confident about her beauty and wants to live a glamorous

independent life. Khushbu Mahendra Kumar Swami in *Struggle of Modern Women in Manju Kapur's Fictions* aptly comments, “ Manju Kapur writes about personal experiences, problems, spaces and identity crisis. She writes what today’s woman can easily relate to and can see her novels as an extension of their own life. She deals with intermingling spaces of traditional and modernist ethos, women trying to grapple with it to find their identity. Her writing steadily and firmly argues for the values like freedom of thought and expression, liberation from oppression and marginalization, and equality as a quest for identity” (SMWMF,101). Shagun’s mother never supports her to fulfill her dream of modeling, she is permitted to pursue her desire after being labeled as a married woman. She feels alone and helpless in this condition and thinks to create her own ways. Over burden of responsibilities arise a deep hidden desire in her to live a free and autonomous life like an ultra modern woman of West. She clearly says to her husband, “ You don’t wish me to have a life of my own?”(Custody,10). Moreover, she complains to her husband, “Her life would have been different if she too had had a job. I am sure you will succeed. I can feel it in my bones”(Custody,43). Shagun is confident about her feminine strength, charm and beauty. She wants equal opportunities like her husband to make her an individual, independent personality. Shagun is different from other protagonists of Manju Kapur who dare to enjoy fully out of her marital life.

Modern woman of today, denies her emotional role and fidelity to challenge the masculinity of male centered society for her identity. Shagun meets Ashok Khanna frequently without any hesitation and speaks lie to her husband, mother and other members of family. Through the character of Shagun, Kapur has presented the new woman in her novel, who is ready to achieve her ambition of life denouncing the virtues of womanhood considered by Indian patriarchal society. The modern new woman is ready to snap the tie of those relations which have shackled her in a male-dominated society and never allows freedom.

Shagun’s keen desire of identity grows the seed of rebelliousness in her mind. Now an educated woman wants equal status in home and society. The identity crisis at different levels are presented in Kapur’s novels. Modern woman Shagun, who has highly paid husband and two lovely children is not contented in her married life. Under the burden of responsibilities she realizes, “She had been brought up to marry, to be wife, mother and daughter-in-law. She had never questioned this destiny, it was the one pursued by everyone she knew” (Custody,26). Dr. V Jaisre in his research paper “Quest for relationship remedies in Manju Kapur’s Custody” comments, “ Rarely does he (Raman) become conscious the worth of his wife to him and her delicate feelings and desires in life He is of the estimation that his wife’s duty is to take care of his children and the domestic needs and his responsibility is to endow with them money to look after the family and the house”(p.22).

But Shagun desires her own independent identity and for this she even dares to separate from her husband who has provided her all the comforts of life but never cares for her feelings and emotions. Shagun gets offer of modeling, but disappointingly narrates to her husband, “ She had been paired with a child she instinctively disliked, her screen test had been disappointingly short and they had given no immediate assurance. What she really needed was a portfolio” (Custody,29) Raman does not show any interest

or attachment in Shagun's dream ambitions, he only trusts his wife for the upbringing of children. Shagun irritates and asks Raman, "You don't wish me to have a life of my own?" (Custody,31). A husband like Raman thinks that a wife needs only comfort of material things but new woman gives priority to her self-respect and identity than amenities provided by her husband. Shagun feels pain and complains to Raman, "All these years there was nothing I particularly cared for" (Custody,30). Shagun does not accept her subordinate status, she does not want to become her partner's shadow. She wants her separate space and status at which she tries to achieve according to her own terms and conditions. Raman remains busy in his business tours, "By now she had understood that he was a man of narrow and intense passions; one who lived, slept and ate business" (Custody,32). No heed is given towards Shagun's desires being a woman. She feels like a slave, fulfilling her duties under prescribed norms for woman. At last, Shagun acquires divorce from Raman and stays in life of Ashok Khanna as a life partner. Ashok allows Shagun to meet her children to keep her relations with them. The moment they become real life partner, Ashok promises her, "no further sorrow will ever distress her in her relationship with him" (Custody,2). In this discriminated society ultra modern woman like Shagun adopts unique path, away from domesticity to pursue her identity and individuality. Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* appropriately comments, "For woman, as for man, the need for self-fulfillment-anatomy, self-realization, independence, individuality, self-actualization-is as important as the sexual need" (Friedan,282).

On the otherhand, Ishita the second protagonist of the novel is also brought up under the lovely shadow of her parents' love and care. She wants to do B.Ed. to achieve her dream of a teacher's job and live an independent life. But as she completes her graduation, the proposal of Suryakant comes for Ishita. Her parents feel happy to find a suitable match for her daughter. Ishita is happily married to Suryakant who is the only son of his parents with good business. In a traditional society a woman's world is considered inside the home where she is expected to perform her duties perfectly. Playing the role of care taker for others, a woman hardly gives importance to her dreams. She finds contentment in the happiness of others, but a hidden conflict of identity remains beneath her smiling lips to maintain the harmony of relations in the family. Ishita's in-laws expect grandchildren to run the bloodline of the family. Ishita hesitatingly thinks about her unfulfilled desire, "The women of the family didn't work, daughter-in-law were obviously expected to devote themselves to home. What about her B.Ed., her desire to be independent?" (Custody,51). A woman is considered only for household work and care of the family members, nobody thinks about her growth and progress in life. Because of her parents' word of promise, Ishita compromises to marry with Suryakanta. But after eighteen months of her marriage, she cannot live up to the expectations of her husband and in-laws because of her infertility. She believes that she is the queen of her husband's heart and snapped to her mother, "How am I supposed to keep this information from my in-laws? My husband? I don't keep secrets from him...I am not like you, what kind of lies do you want me to go on living? If I can't trust my husband, it is no marriage" (Custody,58-59). Ishita believes that transparency is required in fair relationship but her open mindedness leads to her humiliation and loneliness. Innocent Ishita does not know that an unproductive woman is not only considered a curse on society but she becomes the target of all and sundry, inside and outside the home. She is

not treated on par with another woman, blessed with children. Rajni Palriwala in *Beyond Myths: The Social and Political Dynamics of Gender Writings of the Women's Movement*, comments,

“Marriage is attached with the maternal, social and symbolic meaning and consequences, which are asymmetrical in terms of their implications for human life. Terms ‘selfhood, respect and status’ are tied to wifedom and motherhood in more exacting ways than they are to one being a husband or father. A single man or a man without children is seen as unfortunate, but a woman in a similar situation is considered to be inauspicious, and possibly dangerous” (400-401).

Ishita, being cursed with infertility feels alone and dejected in her in-laws house because nobody considers her a human being with feelings and emotions. She boldly confesses her infertility before her husband and her in-laws. She had firm belief in her husband. But, her strong belief shatters, when her husband neglects her rudely. Her in-laws feel cheated. She appears very insignificant before them, “She looks smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the notes of the dust in the sunlit air and smaller than the drops of dew, caught between the blades of grass in the morning” (Custody,65). Ishita acknowledges that her husband is not able to take any decision by himself. She is compelled by circumstances to get divorce from her husband lawfully. Ishita being an educated conscious girl keeps her self-respect above than living an insulting life in her in-law's house and firmly decides to give opportunity to her husband to marry again by divorcing him. She retorted, “I can't go on living like this, he does not look at me any more... He is determined there should be nothing left between them... The mother began to call her shameless, the sisters refused to talk to her, the father and S K avoided her” (Custody, 68-69). The constant neglect of family members and her husband's emotionless behavior pinches her badly. Finally, her marriage collapses bearing the stigma of infertility. When she departs from her in-law's house after spending valuable eighteen months of her life in their service, nobody comes to say goodbye at late night. A woman's condition remains miserable before and after marriage. Jyoti Singh in *Indian Women Novelists; A Feminist Psychoanalytical Study* says, “...these women are devoted and caring. They are subjugated. Their virtues become an instrument of domestic and social exploitation, putting others before self results in compromise and tolerating injustice silently” (IWN,46). Ishita's mother Mrs. Rajora, is worried about her divorced daughter. She meets Raman's mother Mrs. Kaushik, who lives with her husband in the same building, but both never discuss their children's problem with each other because of insult. Raman and Ishita's parents want their children's settlement in life. Ishita's mother searches a divorced person for her but Ishita frustrated from her previous married life says, “I can look after myself. You think all married women have their husbands caring for them. Look around you” (Custody,168). Ishita's past traumatic experiences never make her able to think again for marriage. At her parents' house, Ishita involves herself in different activities to come out of the traumatic situations of her life. Facing the harsh reality of life she becomes bold to create her own separate image. She joins NGO to overcome her depression and helps poor children of slum area by teaching them. Socially isolated Ishita finds courage to be a volunteer and teach underprivileged children. She thinks about her husband, “What does he want? A housekeeper or

a mother for his child?” (Custody,167). Kapur depicts the strong efforts of Ishita in such delicate situation. Although she is passing through the difficult phase of her life, but she believes in helping others in need. Gradually, she recovers her sense of individuality and identity. One day Ishita meets Raman with his daughter Roohi. Ishita loves Roohi as she has a tender heart for children, Roohi also likes her. Raman and Ishita talk about their shattered life. Ishita tells him the reason of her divorce and Raman also narrates painfully, “If you are married for longer, the roots are deeper, there is more violence in plucking them out” (Custody,276). Raman is happy to see his daughter’s tuning with Ishita. Now Ishita becomes friendly with Raman, their intimacy bring them close to each other. Ishita never felt such joyful moment with her ex- husband. Mrs. Rajora also wishes a man like Raman for her daughter. She feels a special shine on Ishita’s face with some hidden secrets. Raman and Ishita’s love affair goes on secretly. At last, Raman proposes Ishita for marriage and after a month they get married in court. Both the families feel happy. Mrs. Rajora’s eyes filled with tears, “ It was a miracle that her daughter had got this chance returning to the status so rudely snatched from her” (Custody,289). After meeting Raman Kaushik Ishita’s deserted and divorced life becomes more meaningful than ever. Dr. Khushbu in *Struggle of Modern Women in Manju Kapur’s Fictions* describes Ishita’s condition, “ She is hurt and feels identity crisis when she is condemned by her in laws due to her infertility. But she fulfills her biological defect through her caring nature towards her step daughter” (S M W,128). Since both are sailing in the same boat, they intimate with each other and promise to give solace to each other which they could not get from their married life such as love, understanding and mutual adjustment. Ishita is a self-respecting and conscious girl who is confident about her ability. She wants to go ahead in her life without minding her infertility, she accepts happily the status of a step-mother of Raman’s child and returns “ to the societal status as a married woman, which has been insolently rushed from her by the divorce from her first husband” (Custody, 303). Internally, Ishita has immense agony of her previous marriage, but she does not want to be a burden on her parents. The painful incidents of her life pricks her which ultimately leads her to question her identity. Manju Kapur presents that identity has different meaning to every person. Ishita is rejected because of her barrenness, but she achieves her identity as a married woman and a mother by her own efforts and fulfills her empty spaces.

A woman’s positive thinking towards life makes her different from others. Besides, Ishita’s relation with Raman not only gives her identity but provides her strength to fight for the custody of his children. Through her women characters Manju Kapur has presented the women’s predicament in Indian society, where they are not given opportunity to raise her status and are not treated as human being. A well known feminist critic R.R. Prasad in *Women Novelists in India* writes, “The female protagonists of her (Manju Kapur) protest against male dominated and marginalization of women. Man has subjugated woman to her will, used to promote his sexual gratification but never has the desired to elevate her to genuine rank. He has done all he could do to depress and enslave her mind” (WNI,154). Women feel identity crisis, when they are discriminated on the basis of sex and their desires are not cared and they are insulted in a family or society. But Kapur’s protagonists Shagun and Ishita create their identity by using their own strategies and get success. They are modern new women of twenty first century who are ready to sacrifice their deep relations to attain her self-respect, identity, freedom and satisfaction. They defy all conventional norms of society which are not in favor of women’s progress. They are ready to accept any challenge in their life to maintain their self-respect and identity like Shagun and Ishita. Kapur’s protagonists Shagun and Ishita are no longer silent sufferers or obedient

subordinates but they are women of new era with firm determination. Above all, they are action oriented and conscious women. While Ishita is a modern woman Shagun is an ultra modern woman in her attitude. Both fulfill their desires and achieve their identity by creating their own paths denouncing the traditional norms of patriarchy and live an independent life on their own conditions without any pressure. Juliet Mitchell comments in this connection, “ Women have to organize themselves as a group to effect a change is the basic ideology of human society” (Psychology and Feminism, 414).

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