

Modern parenting in Manju Kapur's custody

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Abstract

Modern parenting among the characters *Custody* discusses marriage versus freedom, extramarital affairs manipulation of children in the hands of their divorce parents and the indifference of Indian judicial system. Manju Kapur's *Custody* is an exemplary novel in which all characters Raman, Shagun, Ashok Khanna, Ishita think of their own feelings, emotions, desires, needs, purposes, but no one thinks what the small children want and how they feel. The parents are embroiled in a legal battle for *Custody* of their children. *Custody* is about marriage and divorce with children at the heart of it. Manju Kapur focuses on the women who is not particularly spectacular, ambitions or successful, but what she brings out with sensibility and perception in the conflict that arises when traditional Indian values that women are reached on come in contact with other worlds.

Keywords: custody, parenting, divorce

Introduction

Manju Kapur explores the hollowness of modern parenting life through the characters. Raman, Shagun, Ashok Khanna and Ishita, a childless divorce and two children Arjun and Roohi. The novelist depicts how the marriage set up is disintegrated ending in divorce and legal *Custody*. Raman is a father and a husband but to him his professional career is more important. Shagun the beautiful wife of Raman falls in love with Ashok. Shagun is deep in love with Ashok Khanna. Raman's parents also believe that a woman's selfhood, status and respectability lie in wifehood and motherhood. Arjun the first child is born within a year. Shagun is very happy for her boy child Arjun. She decides she need no other child. She feels that her heir-producing duty is over. And she believed herself that her son has inherited her looks and colors, so Shagun is even satisfied. 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. Her sons had inherited her looks and color a further source of gratification (*Custody* 15). But Shagun conceive again when Arjun is almost eight years old and she gives birth to a baby girl Roohi. But she is not mentally prepared and Roohi's look is like her father a plain featured face. During the divorce of Raman and Shagun Roohi just two years baby and Arjun is ten year boy. In this parent's separation affects both children's life. As children develop from infants to teens to adults they go through a series of development stages that are important to all aspects of their personhood including physical, intellectual, emotional and social. The proper role of the parent is to provide encouragement, support, and access to activities that enable the children's developments, but Shagun didn't care about her children studies and other activities. After the divorce Raman meet his son only at school, Vivekananda Vidyalaya. Arjun don't like this school because everyone in his school knows about his parent's divorce. So he stops going to school. After that he join at the Dehradun Public Academy boarding school. Shagun leaves her children and she focus on her new life with Ashok. This leads to an remind life for both children: "Arjun spent as

much time as he could in his friends' houses and Roohi reflected the brokenness of the family in constant loud wails which grated on all their nerves" (*Custody* 96)

After the divorce of Arjun's parent his life changes and he spends most of his time in his friend's house Arjun starts to lie about his physical illness such as stomach pain and leg pain. He is a brilliant student in the school. But now his performance is poor. Arjun and Shagun meets Dr. Jain and doctor says to Shagun she finds no physical Symptoms.

She says that may be there are some emotional cause then the doctor ask Shagun is anything troubling him? To that she says no. The doctor understands that problems in their family has affected him with stress. Then Arjun's behavior changes badly, He put his mother's signature on his test papers, pinches Roohi whenever he wants his mother's care. "He wanted his mother. If he pinched Roohi she would cry and that would bring her" (*Custody* 141). Arjun tells his father, that he miss him so much so he request him to stay with him and meet his mother. So Raman is ready to forgive her wife for his children's life, but Shagun gone forth don't want to return back.

Modern family life can be stressful and with various pressures on families it's not always easy. Ultimately, parents want what is best for their child and a strong parent child relationship can help lead to better outcomes for children. Ishita is a stepmother of Roohi and Arjun. Ishita a childless divorce marries Raman after his divorce. She is a perfect wife and mother to Raman.

Parents are a child's first teachers and role models. They are responsible for shaping up the child's behavior and implementing positive verges in them. Children listen, observe and imitate their parents so it is important that they should be good role models that the kids would want to follow. Parents must themselves be an example of good behavior for their children. Children are very smart and observant. Divorce badly affects children psyche and future. Arjun stops going to school, because of the Shame that his mother is a divorced and he is the kind of a single parent. He sees other children enjoying their holidays, arriving to school functions or going for outing with both their mother

and father. It's not only the financial loss but a lost home, a lost neighborhood, lost friends; some people think that it is fair to get divorced for self-maturation and to allow families to follow a dream of felicity. But in front it is too selfish an act not to put the children at risk for their own dream of happiness. Parents are supposed to be responsible for children's proper development when they are minors and dependent on them. Dr. Jain Gumbiner, a psychologist and a daughter of a divorced mother, shares her own experience in her article divorce hurts children even grown ones.

The author recounts how the parents manipulate their kids for the sake of their custody and divorce. The two children, Arjun and Roohi, become the pawns through whom their parents unleash their fury on each other. Kapur gives us effective glimpses of insight into their young and confused minds. Almost half of the novel interprets the manipulation of the children in the hands of their parents. When Roohi questions about the court notice, "Shagun tells her, it is a little message from your father. He is trying to kill me" (*Custody* 144) Shagun's intention is to give an unpleasant and bad feedback.

Against Roman. She says "you must never see him or go to him even if she calls you. He is a bad man" (*Custody* 199).

Throughout the novel, Kapur counts the sufferings and exploitation of children, because of their parent's decision. 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 suffer more psychological problems than children whose parents are not dissociated. Through Arjun the writer depicts the side effect of divorce on the mind and that body of the children.

The separation of parents affects Arjun's life; it is Raman who teaches as Arjun for his class test and examinations. But now Shagun forgets the timetable of Arjun's test because of so many incidents happening in her life. Arjun is jealous of Ashok because he completely possesses Shagun's attention. 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. The whole day, when Ashok has been in his office, Shagun gives her full attention to her

children "But when the man came home, the center of attention shifted." (*Custody* 188) Arjun feels ignored because of his mother's attitude.

When Arjun left the room, his mother's footsteps did not follow him, as they so often had in old house once as he loudly dragged his feet he heard the man say, let him be, he is growing up, you have to give him space. (*Custody* 148)

Arjun's behavior depresses Shagun, he refuses to go to school or meet his friends. His legs are always paining, his stomach is usually paining so he refuses to eat anything, and his face seems pinched and drawn. Shagun insists him to go to school, but he argues "why do I have to? You said your feelings had changed towards papa, well mine had changed about Vivekananda Vidyalaya" (*Custody* 167) Ashok suggests Shagun to send Arjun to boarding school for a change of environment. 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". (*Custody* 171) She tries in every possible way to convince Arjun to attend his classes, but he is determined not to change his mind. Eventually Shagun considers the option, Ashok has suggested her, and conveys her son about sending him to Dehradun Public Academy boarding school.

The idea looks like a sound one to Arjun of going to a place where no one will know his parents' separation: where he will not suffer to read pity and curiosity in the eyes of people around him and tolerate to avoid friends. But he is also insecure to leave his mother in Delhi with Ashok. He was afraid of leaving his mother with that man. Though Shagun behaves as the shifting from Raman Kaushik's life to Ashok Khanna is as natural as changing clothes, but Arjun is not comfortable living with Ashok, a stranger who rarely talks to him and agrees to prepare for entrance exam of DPA.

Divorce creates emotional turmoil for the entire family, the scary, confusing, and frustrating thing. Young children often struggle to understand why they must go between two homes. They worry that if their parents can stop loving one another then someday, their parents may stop loving them too. According to Amy Morin and Jeel Forman says that divorce affects child relationship with the custodial parents most often mothers.

Primary caregivers often report higher levels of stress associated with single parenting. Mother is often less supportive and less affectionate after divorce. Additionally, their discipline becomes less consistent and less affective likewise Arjun's behavior and his attitude changes after his family separation.

For some children, parental separation isn't the hardest part. Instead, the accompanying stressors are what make divorce the most difficult, i.e. changing schools, moving to a new home, and living with a step mother or stepfather and single parents also. Who feels a little more frazzled are just a few of the additional stressors that make divorce difficult. According to the Pew Research Center, many children endure ongoing changes to their family dynamics. The addition of a step parent and possibly several step siblings can be another big adjustment. And quite after both parents re-marry which means many changes for kids. In this novel also explain that Arjun is always stressed because of his parents' divorce, family separation and re-marriage with his parents.

Children from divorced families may experience more externalizing problems, such as conduct disorders, delinquency, and impulsive behavior than kids from two-parent families. In addition to increased behavior problems, children may also experience more conflict with peers after a divorce. Despite the fact that divorce is tough on families, staying together for the sole sake of the children may not be the best option. Children who live in homes with a lot of arguing, hostility and discontentment may be at a higher risk for developing mental health issues and behavior problems. Ergative Effects of Divorce on children and ways to mitigate them by Rohit Garoo. He said that divorce is the most difficult phase of a married couple's life and its effects of divorce can be long-lasting on children and may impact their own relationships.

The aftermath of a divorce causes the child to become tense, nervous, and anxious. Young children are more prone to it than the older ones since they are heavily dependent on both the parents. An anxious child will find it difficult to concentrate on his studies and may lose interest in activities that he once found enticing. According to the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry, many children falsely consider themselves the reason behind their parents' divorce and assume the responsibility to mend the relationship. This can lead to immense stress and

pressure on the young mind, which can have several repercussions like negative thoughts and nightmares. Children of divorce may feel hopeless and disillusioned because they do not have the comprehensive emotional support from their parents. This situation can become worse if the child is looked after by a single parent with no access to the other parent.

The separation of parents also affects Roohi, who starts sucking her thumb and wetting the bed at night. Shagun very well knows the reason behind the changes in her daughter's life, but is helpless. "In all the recent upheavals, let the thumb at least be constant." (*Custody* 254). Roohi is sent with Roman according to the deal and Shagun is free to go to New York to stay with Ashok. Dr. Carl Pickhardt narrates the effects of divorce on children's psyche in his article, *The Important of Divorce on Young Children and Adolescents*.

Divorce introduces massive change into the life of a boy or girl no matter what the age. Witnessing loss of love between parents, having parents break their marriage commitment, adjusting to going back and forth between two different households, and the daily absence of one parent while living with the other, all create a challenging new family circumstance in which to live. In the personal history of the boy or girl, parental divorce is a watershed even life that follows is significantly changed from how life was before. Somewhat different responses to this painful turn of events occur if the boy or girl is still in childhood or has entered adolescence. Basically, divorce tends to intensify the child's dependence and it tends to accelerate the adolescent independence: it often elicits a more regressive response in the child and a more aggressive response in the adolescent consider.

Manju Kapur intensely narrates the emotional state of father who is excluded suddenly from his children's life. Once, while talking to his son Arjun, Raman starts to weep "Tears threatened Raman's voice, and he struggled against them. He did not want to frighten his son, God only knew what he had been through." (*Custody* 201).

Manju Kapur brilliantly understands the human psychology. While talking to Raman, Arjun realizes as if some stranger is on the phone line "Arjun began to wish he hadn't made this phone call" (*Custody* 201). A child can't understand a father's pain, and of much attention and eagerness makes the child feel strange just like Arjun.

Kapur emphasizes on the weary judicial system of India through the custody of two young children. Raman contacts Nandan Raman's cousin to look for advice about his idea to kidnap his children from their own mother, but Nandan suggests of filling a strong custody case against Shagun. "We need as much evidences as you have, diaries, letters, witnesses, that will prove she is on unfit mothers exposing the children to influences. Raman finds the whole process disgusting why do I have say all this? Half of it is not even true." (*Custody* 125). Nandan tells him that courts work like this in India.

Shagun also files a divorce case against Raman because she has to go abroad with Ashok, she needs to be divorced first to get of visa as Ashok's wife. Madan a lawyer and Ashok's school friend, assures him to assist, but also warns that divorce case may extend for lifetime until the other side agrees to mutual consent. Ashok wants a divorce at any cost, hence he is ready to often bribes, he has heard about in India. Madan tells him "The case has to come to that stage

first you can try and terrible the judge, you can bribe for delays but what else? Bribes won't make the system speedy and efficient." (*Custody* 155) Kapur illustrates the evil of corruption in judicial system in India, which is the biggest obstacle in the development of India.

Raman informs Nandan about Arjun who is leaving VV, one of the best school in Delhi and going to DPA, a boarding school. Nandan enquires whether Arjun is willing to go, but how can Raman explain "How to explain to Nandan the variations of his son's breath, the quality of his silence, the visual image of a frightened eleven year old getting in touch with his father after many months." (*Custody* 204) But Raman is too sensitive about his children to expose them to any odd situation.

To develop a bonding between Ashok and Arjun, Shagun insists Ashok to help Arjun in preparing for the entrance test and also to share some moments of Ashok's DPA years. Ashok seems uncomprehending. "Once he laughed and said my time I am not an instant father, you know." (*Custody* 212) His only concern is Shagun and not to hurt the kids.

Raman files a case against Shagun for sending Arjun to DPA with a complaint that Shagun wants to keep the child away from his father. Shagun, determined to send Arjun to DPA. She prepares Arjun for the questions he may be asked in court.

Above all, no information about their private life nothing about uncle officially they stayed with Naani in Alaknanda. 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 him children, put her in jail. The judge would probably ask him who he wanted to live with. In this unfair system, fathers had greater rights over male children so he had to say very, very clearly he wanted to live with his mother, and even then they would consider, through it was so obvious that he was part of her, he looked like her, everybody said so (*Custody* 213)

Raman gets hurt to realize the ignorance of his own son. He knows that all this is because of the manipulation and deviousness of Shagun. This was the corrosive game his wife had elected to play. Shagun wants to send Arjun permanently away from Raman to take revenge because of his denial of divorce. Ashok has stolen the essence of his family and Raman hates Ashok for this, as well as Shagun. Raman has always been a good father and thus he is granted visitation rights by the court. Raman is partially relieved that he at least can meet his children on weekends. Moving from one home to another is ok for Roohi because she is too small to understand anything but for Arjun it creates more trouble.

Shagun has to go abroad with Ashok and a divorce is must for her. She once again bargains for divorce, "so take the children and give me a divorce. Raman can't believe her after her betrayal. She kidnapped the children once, she can do that again and take them abroad and never return. Shagun requests him to trust her "Raman? Are you listening? We can both benefit is that so hard to understand?" (*Custody* 243) But Raman refuses to divorce by mutual consent.

Kapur adept at dealing with this complicated family reconfiguration and the insecurity it brings to stop parents as well as children. In Ishita's plight, we see the second wife's desperate struggle to replace the biological mother, while Ashok parents a more ambiguous mind of care. Ishita goes to see Raman and Roohi, plays with her and feeds her. Raman notices all this and feels pity for Roohi because she

is not getting the motherly care and love. He again thinks of Shagun and hates her for what she has done to his children. "He was dependent on strangers for a motherly touch that was what she had reduced them to" (*Custody* 267) Ishita is not that much beautiful as Shagun, thus Raman doesn't find her attractive in the beginning but gradually she starts liking her because of her sweet behavior with Roohi.

Arjun and Roohi visit Shagun, who has recently been settled in New York. Arjun finds the place interesting and adventurous and enjoys parties with his mother and Ashok. Their experiences of DPA bring Arjun and Ashok closer, because Ashok has also studied in the DPA and Arjun can share his experiences with him, after his visit to America, Arjun's behavior has changed towards Raman. He can't provide him glamour and adventure of foreign countries like Shagun but he can give him stability and love. But Arjun is not able to understand his father's emotions because of his young age Raman is hurt due to Arjun's reluctance and he feels an unknown distance has filled the air between him and Arjun

Ishita is absorbed in the bliss of love and fulfillment. Now she is also a part of a complete family, i.e. a husband and a child. She has struggled a lot to get this status and can never take this for granted. The situation is stressed when Arjun comes home during his vacation. He doesn't like Ishita, thus he always tries to manipulate Roohi not to call her Mamma and stay away from her. Ishita is hurt to hear all this from the boy. He attempts to remind Roohi about Shagun and to take away from her. Ishita can't tolerate such manipulation to a little child's ear. She tells Roohi that though she is not born of her, but all the same they are mother and daughter.

Let's go and tell Arjun that, shall we? Perhaps he doesn't know there are two kinds of mothers. The one who give birth to babies and then forget about them and the other ones who look after the babies for the rest of their lives. (*Custody* 329)

Raman request Ishita to give Arjun some time to accept her as Roohi's mother, because he doesn't want his children to suffer any side effects of his marriage. Raman's main concern is his kid's happiness. Raman can do anything to see his children happy. Sometimes Ishita feels ignored because of Raman's attitude though a good person at heart but too much obsessed with his children. Raman is too much afraid to lose Arjun that he constantly has to remind him of his love and care "I love you, son, you are my own flesh and blood, I want you always to commemorate that." (*Custody* 335) This is the feeling Shagun has reduced him to insecurity, pain and sorrow.

When Arjun is with them, Ishita makes it a point to announce and discuss the dates of interviews in different schools, so that the information may be conveyed to Shagun through Arjun that Roohi can't visit Shagun during holidays. Raman doesn't like this idea. "We can't really make messengers out of the children" (*Custody* 343) Ishita doesn't want to send Roohi to visit Shagun, ever in her life. Because it may confuse and distract the child Roohi, as once Roohi under Arjun's influences, ask Ishita "Are you sure you are my mother" (*Custody* 341) Ishita does not want her repeat the same question. She doubts if she keeps visiting her biological mother, she will be confounded. Eventually Roohi is not sent to America with Arjun.

Next time when Arjun comes home during vacations Ishita and Roohi, goes to Ishita's parents house leaving Raman alone with Arjun. Ishita decides to send a medical certificate

to deny Roohi's visits to Shagun. If Arjun finds Roohi fit and sound, he may tell his mother and one may file a contempt of court against them. On the contrary, Raman wants both children to spend time with each other to establish the bonding of brother and sister relationship. Ishita convinces Raman that it is not in their far out to let Arjun meet and see that Roohi is well.

Raman and Ishita send a medical certificate to inform Shagun that Roohi can't visit her because of her ill health. As a result, Shagun pretends that Arjun too cannot visit Raman on medical grounds. If Raman is keen to see Arjun, he has to send Roohi to Shagun, But Ishita is determined not to send Roohi ever to visit Shagun. After a great deal of sacrifices her life is complete with the love of a child and husband, and right away, she can't let anybody snatch her happiness from her. Shagun warns Raman either to visit Roohi to her, or to face contempt of court as well as a *Custody* case for her children. Ishita can't let Roohi suffer between the trauma of two mothers, two homes and two countries. Ishita herself feels unsettled in her second marriage.

On the other side, one can notice that Shagun is unhappy with Ashok's attitude towards her children. She feels as if she is a single parent. Ashok is interested only in Shagun, not in her children. He has put his best efforts to get divorce because he needed Shagun; but when it comes to the visitation rights, he is apathetic. Whenever Shagun shares her feelings about Roohi he gets frustrated. Shagun feels burdened because of the sin she has done.

Raman and Ishita, therefore, file a lawsuit requesting that it will be psychologically damaging to force that little child against her wish to visit her biological mother. As Roohi loves her step mother. As Roohi loves her step mother, separation will be cruel on the hearing date of custody case, Ishita, Raman, Roohi and Shagun reach to the tees Hazari court. Shagun tries to interact with Roohi but gets no response, instead Raman, angry with Shagun, blames her of deserting Roohi at such a tender age and pretending to love her. All of them are called by the judge side the chamber for questioning.

The judge asks some question to the parents. He wants to know about Shagun's husband's absence in the court. Therefore the judge calls them for a few questions. Roohi tells the judge that Ishita is her mother and she wants to live with her. "The judge looked at the girl.,Why do you not want to visit your mother? Roohi said nothing,You went twice? Didn't you like it? " asked the judge. Roo shook her head"(*Custody* 394) 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. Ishita is happy and confident after the court's decision finally the worst feeling of losing Roohi.

Arjun and Roohi shows, how a perfect childhood can get messed up because of the parents ego and their expectations work upon the innocent minds of the children without taking in to consideration the children would be in. Shagun rebels to fulfill her desires as she had been much oppressed and suppressed in the patriarchal set up since her childhood. But fact remains that the unscrupulous domestic dispute ruins the lives of the two innocent children. They are torn between two mothers, two homes and two countries but Shagun cares for social propriety nor does she conceptualize

family shame.

Manju Kapur has brought out in a realistic manner the lack of understanding of the views of children by the insusceptible parents to Raman reaping the benefits of economic boom of the financial market costs him his wife and the separation of children. Kapur states: The family is where I see the impact what is happening in Indian society. In my earlier novels it was who negotiated this relationship. Here it is everybody the children, the father, the wives. If you live here, you pay the emotional price. How pathetic it is when the couple becomes strangers to each other in the novel. It brings to surface the hollowness the modern families experience in the materialistic world. Manju Kapur has well portrayed the pangs and the loneliness of the two children in the novel.

In the novel all characters Raman, Shagun Ashok Khanna, Ishita think of their own feelings, emotions, desires, needs, purposes, but no one thinks what the small children want and how they feel. The parents are embroiled in a legal battle for custody of their children; they do whatever is possible to make the children feel worse. As Aradhika Sharma writes,

The little ones have to deal with parents who have changed priorities changed partners, changed characters even. From being the loved kids of family they are changed into pawns on the chessboard on the judicial system the players of the game being none other than their parents (Dr. Farzana S Ali) Ishita and Shagun manipulate both their kids for the sake of custody and for their welfare. Ishita needs Roohi as she can never bear a child of her own. Shagun, being the biological mother of Arjun and Roohi, claims their custody. The novel reveals the unimagined uncertainties of marriage. The parents bargain with each other for their children for the sake of divorce this is not merely a story. It is a battlefield of sorts that tears your heart and soul apart because of its masterful narrative and honesty. Read it but be ready to cry. Jasbir Jain, in her article *Gender and Narrative Strategy*, says that Women's narrative strategy differs from those of men. She further says- Women do write about the responses of women, of the shadows which they alone can see and the anguish they alone can feel. Manju Kapur gives us an insight to go deeper into the heart of children who are torn between the crude and shrewd battle of their custody. In this battle of egos, she has successfully presented the sufferings of innocent children, the complexities of life and different structures of values in her novel.

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