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CONFORMITY AND INDIVIDUALISM IN CUSTODY BY MANJU KAPUR: A STUDY OF
MODERN MARRIAGES

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ABSTRACT

The paper focuses on the theme of marital discord between Shagun and Raman, a young married couple in the novel of Manju Kapur *Cusdoty*. Shagun assumes the role of a 'new woman' and rejects all social bondages conferred upon a married woman. Manju Kapur as a true chronicler of modern family system exhibits her ingenuity in weaving the theme of individualism in the well knit fabric of modern marriages.

Key words: Institution of marriage, individualism, patriarchy, freedom.

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Manju Kapur is one of the prominent writers of 20th century era who has portrayed 'new woman', an image of unfettered woman. The issues taken up by Manju Kapur in her novels are not far from the reach of layman. Manju Kapur has an aptitude to deal with intricacies of modern marriages. The Institution of marriage was considered to be the most sacramental in nature which did not entertain the concept of divorce. According to Manu "A faithful wife, who desires to dwell (after death) with her husband, must never do anything that might displease him who took her hand, whether he be alive or dead" (Bühler 156). One time accepted notion of the sanctity of marital ties receives a serious blow with emergence of a new woman.

Manju Kapoor is the only writer whose heroines succeed in maintaining a complete balance in life by asserting their individualism and throwing off the shackles of social bondages. Manju Kapoor's novel *Custody* is a tale of marriage crippled by a socially unacceptable romance upon which the concept of individualism has been designed. *Custody* revolves around the subject of matrimony at its most intolerable stage followed by the emotional fall-out of a break-up on one wealthy extended Delhi family. Like Manju Kapur's previous novels, *Custody* mirrors the reality of modern society as well as discusses at far dissolution in marriage. Kapur has a characteristic of throwing a deep peep into the lives of married women and then laying bare the harsh and biting realities hidden behind the apparently charming curtains of marriage. Almost all of Kapur's novels either revolve around the issue of marriage or the married life of women is discussed. Kapur denies having feministic

approach in her novels. She is feminist in the sense that she is intensely concerned with the issues related to woman. Sunita Sinha writes Kapur's fiction stresses on the woman's need for self fulfillment, autonomy, self-realisation, independence, individuality, and self actualization (160).

Custody is saga of unfaithful wife who is "sick and tired of being alone" (9) although the marriage of Raman and Shagun "had been arranged along standard lines, she the beauty, he the one with the brilliant prospects" (14), yet she has every reason to justify her unfaithfulness. Shagun like Manju Kapur's other heroines becomes victim of illusion that marriage, by its very nature, casts i.e the freedom followed by marriage but ironically marriage binds one with the fetters and leads, specially woman in the unknown realms of sufferings. Shagun's plight was beyond words. She appears to be the happiest woman on the earth after marriage but she is "unhappier than she realized" (26). Shagun's marriage remains the foremost objective for her mother as she strongly opposed the career of model that Shagun desired to adopt. "Do what you like after marriage" (11). Shagun's mother suggested her, but after marriage roles change with the increase in responsibilities. Shagun's plight as a sufferer after marriage is clear from these lines:

"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).

Shagun's meeting with Raman's dynamic new boss Ashok changes everything. Shagun does not want to give second chance to her marriage. Shagun's indifferent and changed attitude sows the seeds of doubt in Raman's heart as a result of which Raman starts keeping a vigilant eye on Shagun's activities. Shagun's intense desire to have something else in life results in frequent episodes of quarrel between husband and wife:

"I want something else in my life, can't you understand that? We always meet the same people, talk about the same old things over and over. It's boring" (*Custody* 46).

Shagun's indifference and coldness towards Raman took gigantic shape of hatred after knowing Raman's activity of hiring detective to trace her suspicious whereabouts and her lack of interest in family. It is shagun who mentions separation to Raman. Shagun's choices are her own and she is determined to tread the chosen path least bothered of the social dogmas that will not accept the illegitimate relation. Tondon says that,

"Any woman who has broken away from the tethering of normal domestic life becomes liberal in her attitude to sexual freedom. She realizes there cannot be different standards for man and for woman, sexual freedom is more often approved by emancipated women belonging to the progressive younger group, by woman unhappy in marriage, sexually frustrated, widowed, or separated" (165).

Individualism promotes the exercise of one's goals and desires and so value independence and self-reliance. Shagun represents the idea of achieving precedence over the male dominated society and social group, while opposing external interference upon her own interests by patriarchal society and specially the institutions of marriage. Shagun does not take into consideration the anticipated plight of her two innocent children, yet she cannot be labeled as an egoist. Shagun's mother as a true representative of traditional society that demands all sacrifices to be made by woman reminds her daughter:

"The house rests upon us women. In your children's happiness, your husband's happiness lies your own. Anything else is just temporary" (*Custody* 99).

Shagun considers this outlook "part of the Indian disease...The great Indian family which rested on the sacrifices of its women" (*Custody* 99). No doubt Shagun gives preference to other relationship over the relationship in which she is bound by the institution of marriage. Shagun's passion for Ashoka dwindles due to the sudden heart attack of Raman, "the horrible guilt she was experiencing, the children's behavior, her mother's pressure, and Raman's unspoken hopes" (*Custody* 106). One significant flow of thought in the solitary moments that weakens her intense longing to spend her rest of life with Ashok was, "How many times had her lover told her that women had a right to their own lives?" (*Custody* 104). Shagun is confirmed that if she will resume her life with Raman then it would be devoid of any marital relation with her husband. Weakened by such self deliberations, Shagun makes up her mind to say good bye to Ashok. Shagun declares her backing out of the relationship on the eve of Ashok's arrival in Delhi. But the theme of individualism overpowers the momentary obligatory thoughts of Shagun and she feels ecstatic with her reunion with Ashok. Actually, "this

was where she belonged; this was where she was most herself" (*Custody* 106). Ashok declares Shagun her 'little wife' and she was not going back to Raman. Shagun is not unpractical and the imagination of the consequences of her long suppressed decision was not beyond her reach, but at least, "she would have happiness she never had before. If she were to die tomorrow, it would be as a fulfilled woman" (*Custody* 108). It is Shagun who asks for divorce by mutual consent. Tandon holds the opinion that "with growing individualism one thinks of what is acceptable to oneself, not in turns of what is acceptable to society. This attitude obviously makes room for divorce" (156).

Shagun is not fear stricken to talk to Raman after a month of her elopement with Ashok. She expresses her desire to meet Arjun and Roohi, her kids, after she had left Raman. Shagun as the staunch defender of individualism, reminds Raman about not separating him with 'the best part of the marriage'. She is confident in saying 'Surely my freedom is not too much to ask in exchange?' (*Custody* 109). The very word 'freedom' suggests that marriage had become prison for Shagun and she violated all sacred and moral laws that institution of marriage bestows upon a married couple. She overrides all dogmas that a society confers upon a human being as a part of family system and asserts her individualism. Westermarck observes that "The history of human marriage is the history of a relation in which women have been gradually triumphing over the passions, the prejudices, and the selfish interests of men" (550). He believes that the dominant tendency in that history had been the extension of wife's rights and he put forward the modern idea that marriage is a contract that ensures the equality between the sexes.

For Shagun her broken marriage is a past which by its very implications needs to be forgotten. Shagun goes to the extent of taking children along with her in Raman's absence. Here starts a battle between individualism and social bondages. Who will get the custody of kids- that becomes the question for Raman and Shagun. Manju Kapur satirizes upon the idea of family duty overridden by individualism. Written with subtlety, sympathy, and clear-sightedness, *Custody* confirms Manju Kapur's reputation as the great commentator of the modern Indian family. *Custody* becomes something more than just a social commentary, but a novel that is true to the universal agony of modern marriage, with its burden of individualism.

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