

Chapter-IV

VOICING FOR SPACE: *CUSTODY*

Manju Kapur discloses the deviations, modernity is leading in our society, and the hollowness of modern life. *Custody*, Manju Kapur's fifth novel, exposes the life of Metropolitan cities where people have become the victims of modernity. It is inspired by globalization and economic liberalization. With the initial surge of foreign investment which stormed in India, it was a period of economic and financial boom. The deluge was welcomed by investment bankers, bureaucrats, industrialists whether big or small, along with Government officials. The protagonists quite naturally have materialistic pursuits. The novel is about Raman, a developing marketing executive, his wife Shagun and Ishita. The present research is an effort to focus on a number of key aspects of *Custody*, like- marriage versus freedom, extramarital affairs, infertility, infidelity, manipulation of children in the hands of their divorced parents and the indifference of Indian judicial system. There is the ultimate picture of exploitation, manipulation, victimization and suffering. Each character has a unique mind-set, reflecting the modern virtues that we have been adapting. The author manages to create a sublime atmosphere that exposes the various disasters that a family goes through. The future of the children is at stake. There is screaming, yelling, crying, and all the possible melodrama. This novel proves that Manju Kapur is a great chronicler of the modern Indian family in the true sense-

*“Against the backdrop of a brand-new liberalized world, Kapur sketches out Shagun’s boredom, Raman’s hurt and the confusion of their children, Roohi and Arjun, who are batted back and forth between parents and across chapters. The two new partners in the equation, bossman Ashok and divorcee Ishita, struggle to woo their step kids while supporting their spouses through an endless legal battle. Ashok forges a bond with Arjun by packing him off to his old alma mater, a barely-disguised Doon School, while befuddled baby Roohi clings to Ishita.”*¹

Manju Kapur's main foothold is the exploration of the deep recesses of the human psyche, going beyond the skin into the constant struggles, raging the soul of human beings at the conscious level and describing the atmosphere of mind. She is the pointer of moods and wills of desires and dreams of conflicting choices and inner experiences. She believes that a woman needs something more than just food, clothes and accommodation. In one of her interview, she says-

*“Literature by women about families always has these larger considerations , with years of studying texts, it becomes almost second nature to look beneath the surface- at social and economic forces gender relationships and how they are played out in an arena that, in my writing happens to be the home. But then, all sort of things happening outside do affect what is happening inside the home.”*²

Marriage is a socially supported union between two individuals and is destined to be a stable, enduring relationship. In ancient time, Hindu marriage was considered a permanent institution, and the relationship of husband and wife, once established through proper customs and rituals, was believed to be irrevocable. But with the changing time, the modernity is leading people towards divorce. There are many factors that are responsible for it. One of the most important causes has been found to be the social change. The process of social change sets into motion a series of changes—in values, in customs, in ways of living, and in the roles of different people. Technical changes have led to urbanization. Urban society is highly heterogeneous as well as idiosyncratic. The urban attitude is one of non-interference in the affairs of other people. Thus, the social life of urban people also exposes them to a variety of situations that can retract from the bond of attachment to the family. These situations, therefore, make divorce much easier. The status of woman in the family and

society is another factor to be considered. The modern woman, getting opportunities for education, training and employment, and creative activity, is being developed into a self-dependent and self-confident individual. This leads to difficulties in adjustment in marriages, especially for the woman who desires an independent and creative life.

Infidelity is one of the themes of Kapur's novel, reflected in Shagun's character. She portrays, through Shagun, the image of a woman, voicing for space in post-modern era, who is married to Raman at a really immature age and all her dreams and desires are suppressed. While doing her graduation, Shagun wants to be a model, but her mother (Mrs. Sabarwal), very protective towards her daughter, does not allow her to fulfil her dream. Eventually Shagun feels the constraints of her mother and the community she lives in. In Shashi Deshpande's novel, *Roots and Shadows*, Indu, the protagonist feels her own person lost in her marriage- "*Have I become fluid, with no shapes, no forms of my own. At that moment a savage truth had stared me in the face- without wants there is No I am I On my way to becoming an ideal woman, a woman who loses her identity in her husband.*"³ The same way, Shagun also finds her life monotonous without Raman's presence at home very frequently. As a traditional Indian woman, Mrs. Sabarwal wants her daughter to settle in a marriage with Raman, a good match for her. Their marriage is arranged along standard lines- "*she the beauty, he the one with the brilliant prospects.*"(p.14) Mrs. Sabharwal advises her - "*Do what you like after you marry.*"(p.11) Shagun, after marriage, bears endless responsibilities like claims of her husband, his family and friends, and above all children, which provide no space for her career. The major responsibility is that she is trapped in motherhood soon after her marriage. Mithu Banerjee writes in a review of *Custody*-

*“Although marriage is well-trodden territory for Kapur, here her possession of the subject is complete. In the accumulation of detail, and her tone of emotional restraint, Custody becomes something more than just a social commentary, but a novel that is true to the universal angst of modern marriage, with its burden of individualism.”*⁴

India of the 1990s was entering the world economy on a more ambitious footing, and in which the idea of family duty had been overridden by individualism. As Shagun says in her criticism of the older world- *“It was part of the Indian disease. Ashok was always going on about stultifying tradition. The great Indian family, which rested on the sacrifices of its women.”* The novelist observes that a woman can easily be manipulated due to her unawareness and illiteracy. Shagun is easily trapped in a relationship with Ashok, who is smart enough to manipulate people and get the best out of them, -*“Ashok’s reputation was based on his ability to get the best out of people.”*(p.9) Raman travels a lot and stays away from home for many days on his job duty which leads Shagun to feel tired and homesick. It is boring for her to stay alone to look after the children when Raman is not at home. In such circumstances, she is attracted to the dashing looks of foreign returned Ashok and his flirting statements. He is appointed at the Brand where Raman has already been working for many years. He also gets attracted towards Shagun because of her extraordinary beauty. They fall in love with each other. Subsequently, when Ashok offers her to act as a model in an ad for the Brand, she agrees hastily, with a hope that it may offer her a chance to be a model and fulfil her dream. Thus Ashok, too much marvelled by Shagun’s looks, begins executing his plan of wooing her -

“Within a few months of arriving in India he saw the woman he knew he had been destined for. In her colouring, her greenish eyes and her demeanour,

she was a perfect blend of East and West. A woman so pretty had to be married; besides, she had the look of someone who never had to compete for male attention. To woo her would thus be that much more difficult: he must first create a need before he could fulfill it. But he was used to creating needs; it was what he did for a living.”(p.4)

Shagun starts the affair with Ashok just to add adventure to her monotonous life, but is dragged more and more into it. He desires to own her from the day he meets her. *“As soon as he possessed her, this strange hiatus in his life would be over”*(p.35) Shagun had 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.86) 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.84) Ashok persuades her -

“Things are moving as fast as it is. Ten years ago you couldn’t get a cake, pizza or burger here. There wasn’t even colour TV for fuck’s sake. And now? Everything.’ ‘What has colour TV got to do with my marriage?’ she asked, lips trembling. Ashok was always seeing connections where none were obvious to her. ‘Traditional versus modern values, individual versus society,’ he elaborated, putting a contrite arm around her. ‘I just want to take you away from here. This narrow social set-up all you know, that’s why you are afraid. But it will be fine, fine. Trust me, darling.”(p.84)

Manju Kapur tenderly mocks upon the gender biased people about the birth of a baby boy in India. A son is considered to be the heir of the family,

whereas daughter is taken as a burden. Shagun gets a significant 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; when a son is born the need for daughter is not felt about, when a daughter is born people keep trying until they are blessed with a son. Hemant insists Astha for keeping on trying till the time they are blessed with a son.

Kapur describes through the following incident, in what manner a person becomes the victim of circumstances. Shagun is manipulated, though she wants to get back to her wedding. She is trapped in circumstances and her whole life changes because of her single wrong decision. She tries to break up her affair with Ashok- *“She had to say good bye in a way that wouldn’t hurt him, then go to her life with Raman”*(p.111)But the intensity of her love drags her towards him to the extent of forgetting her guilt and deciding to divorce Raman. When Shagun visits Raman in the hospital, she feels guilty of spoiling his life. Raman wants her to come back to her life, as he is ready to forgive and forget everything. Shagun realizes her mistake for a moment, but knows she has gone forth and cannot return-

“That evening Shagun walked slowly to the colony Park. She needed to be away from the house, it was too full of her husband. Raman must have struggled to forgive her, how many men would have been so generous? Ashok did not have this gentle, forgiving streak, he would rather kill both her and himself before he let her go. She was a fool for preferring him, a fool. One day she would be punished.”(p.109)

Kapur interprets the bargaining of children for the sake of divorce and constant shifting of the children like commodities. Ashok suggests Shagun to

bring the kids with her, and bargain divorce from Raman in exchange of her kids. Shagun says- *“Don’t make this harder. I have left you the best part of the marriage. Surely my freedom is not too much to ask in exchange?”*(p.114) Raman denies a divorce with a hope of saving his marriage. Shagun kidnaps her ten years old son, Arjun, and two years old daughter, Roohi, for the sake of getting a divorce. Raman is shocked to know the whole incident - *“The fight was on, and any means was fair.”*(p.116) Shagun desires to live her life with freedom and in her own manner. Jaidev explains in the article *Problematizing Feminism-*

*“Indeed, any sophisticated system today operates not by a direct and visible exploitation of people but by making them retain an illusion of freedom and free choice, by making them willingly give into its imperatives, and by subtly ensuring that they do not see that they are dupes or victims.”*⁵

Kapur describes the inconsistency of relations through the incidents narrated in the novel. For getting his kids back, Raman can go to whatever extent, thus he files the lawsuit according to Nandan’s instructions. Raman feels brave and buoyant *“Let Shagun see he too could fight back, that he was no longer Mr. Nice Guy.”*(p.126) Nandan makes it clear that the case may go for a long period, but at least he will have visitation rights after filing the case and he will be able to meet and pass time with his children. A court notice is sent to Shagun on her mother’s address. Manju Kapur also explores how people vary in different circumstances. Shagun’s mother who loved Raman as her own son, behaves as if he is an enemy -

“Her daughter was not to be cowed into anxiety. Taking the children had been Ashok’s idea, if only to bring Raman to the bargaining table. She had asked nicely for a divorce, been prepared to sacrifice, but the man refused to

admit the marriage was over, slammed the phone down on her, what other choice did she have?”(p.141)

Divorce badly affects children’s psyche and future either they are young kids or grownups. Arjun stops going to school, because for him, it is shameful that his mother is a divorcee and he is the kid 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 neighbourhood, lost friends and also the lost of entire joint family. Divorce extremely hurts children, 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 fact, 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 their children’s proper development when they are minors and dependent on them. Dr. Jann Gumbiner, a psychologist and a daughter of a divorced mother, shares her own experience in her article *Divorce Hurts Children, Even Grown Ones* -

“During the 70s, when the psychological literature first discussed the effects of divorce on children, the general view was that divorce doesn't have to harm children. But, it does. Children, even intelligent ones or older ones, often think it is their fault. There is a lot of self-blame. Grades suffer. I lost my motivation in school. My grades went down. Not studying was a form of rebellion, anger, and apathy. I really didn't care what became of me. Perhaps, the kid is stuck with a depressed mother who can't leave her room, clean up the kitchen, or take the child to school. This child is ashamed to invite friends home from school and friendships suffer. My brother couldn't play Little League because there was no one to drive him to games. Extra-curricular activities suffer.”⁶

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.*"(p.144) Shagun's intention is to give an unpleasant and bad feedback against Raman. She says- "*You must never see him, or go to him even if he calls you. He is a bad, bad man.*"(p.144)

Throughout the novel, Kapur counts the sufferings and exploitation of children, which 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 suffer more psychological problems than the children whose parents are not dissociated. It is not sure how far these problems precede the divorce and are related to disharmony between the parents or to the conduct of one or both parents that contributed to the conclusion of divorce. Through Arjun, the writer depicts the side-effects of divorce on the mind and the body of the children. The separation of parents affects Arjun's life. Arjun starts complaining about his stomach pain, leg pain and refuses to go to school. His performance also falls in school, though he has perpetually been a superb student, but at present he is faring poorly in his academics. Shagun holds Raman responsible for all the suffering of her kids -

"Of course it was the recent disturbances that were causing her son stress. If only Raman could see things rationally, there was no reason why they both couldn't continue as joint careers of their children. They had been so

delighted when she came to get them, throwing themselves on her with hugs and kisses. That scene had replayed itself in her heart many times, even though it had been a little spoiled by Arjun's assumption that she had come to stay. No she had to explain, they were all leaving papa, they would never stop loving him of course but things had changed and living together was out of the question. Some day he would understand. Now would he please be a good boy and help her pack his stuff?"(p.145)

Raman used to teach Arjun for his class test and examinations. Shagun forgets the timetable of Arjun's test because of so many incidents happening in her life. Arjun. Arjun's behaviour changes badly, he forges his mother's signature on his test papers, pinches Roohi whenever he wants his mother's care. He knows if Roohi cries, his mother will come to their room. Arjun is jealous of Ashok because he completely possesses Shagun's attention. Arjun's behaviour 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 centre of attention shifted."*(p.148) 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."(p.148)

Arjun's behaviour 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, 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 have changed about VV."*(Vivekananda

Vidyalay)(p.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.”*(p.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. Arjun shows no interest in any suggestion, related to his studies and school.

“Arjun turned his head away. She stared at his back Ashok had said, don’t push, just drop the idea in his head, this is not going to work if he doesn’t want to go. And leave him alone, don’t entertain him, don’t mollycoddle him. Someone else was determining, directing, deciding. It felt strange but her own method had failed.”(p.172)

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.”*(p.173) Though Shagun behaves as the shifting from Raman Kaushik’s life to Ashok Khanna’s 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.

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.”*(p.254) Roohi is sent with Raman

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 Impact of Divorce on Young Children and Adolescents-*

“Divorce introduces a 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 event. 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's independence; it often elicits a more regressive response in the child and a more aggressive response in the adolescent. Consider why this variation may be so.”⁷

Manju Kapur intensely narrates the emotional state of a father who is excluded suddenly from his children's life. Once, while talking to his son Arjun, Raman starts weeping- *“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.”*(p.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.”*(p.201). A child can't understand a father's pain, and too much attention and eagerness makes the child feel strange just like Arjun.

Kapur emphasises 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 kidnapped children by their own mother. He suggests filing a strong custody case against Shagun- *“We need as much evidences as you have, diaries, letters, witnesses, that will prove she is an unfit mother exposing the children to nefarious influences.”*(p.122) Raman finds the whole process disgusting- *“Why do I have to say all this? Half of it is not even true.”*(p.123) Raman is unwilling to reveal his personal life publicly, but for the sake of his children’s custody, he proceeds. Nandan tells him that courts work like this in India. If an agreement is not in the picture, he has to fight-

“Initially they all wanted to fight. He had seen it happen time and again. Fight, despair, compromise. The courts defeated everybody cases like this could take years, but clients need to be disillusioned slowly.”(p.123)

Shagun also files a divorce case against Raman because she has to go abroad with Ashok, she needs to be divorced first to get a 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 a lifetime until the other side agrees to mutual consent. Ashok wants a divorce at any cost, hence he is ready to offer 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.”*(p.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 schools 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.”(p. 204) Nandan suggests Raman to file a stay order against removal but Raman doesn't want to drag Arjun in any uncomfortable situation, so he refuses to do so. *“That was the trouble with Raman. He lacked the killer instinct. Are you want the child, you have to assert such things.”*(p.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, give me time. I'm not an instant father, you know.”*(p.212) His only concern is Shagun and not the kids which hurts Shagun.

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, manipulates him - *“He had to tell the judge he hated, VV, she had a letter from school to prove that he hadn't been attending for months.”*(p.213) 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 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. 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, though it was so obvious that he was part of her, he looked like her, everybody said so.”(p213)

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.”*(p.215) 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.

“That night again he dreamt of a large playing field this time he was running in circles, sweat dripping from his body. All around him were impenetrable hedger, and beyond those were boundary walls with iron-barred gates, guarded by men in sentry-type kiosks, Arjun was smart enough to see that he dreamt when he was troubled by his parents, and this disturbed him. No one he knew dreamt, but then no one he knew had separated parents. His father, nothing his pale morning face, asked him what the matter was, but he couldn’t say. He didn’t trust his father to understand anything in his new life.”(p.224)

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.”*(p.240) 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?”*(p. 243) But Raman refuses to divorce by mutual consent.

Shagun is frustrated by Raman's such attitude and sends a message through her mother that Roohi is ill and can't see him on weekend. Kapur points out one more feature of corruption in India- "*They both knew medical certificate was not worth the paper it was on, any quack doctor would sell you one.*"(p.243)For three weeks he has been sent the same message. Roohi makes Raman's life complete and he can't live without seeing her anymore. Eventually he has to agree to a divorce by mutual consent and then he will be provided the custody of children but still Shagun will have visitation rights because she is their biological mother. Shagun leaves all the property claims and returns all the jewellery because she only wants a divorce, nothing else. This way the divorce papers are signed and both of them are free to marry anyone they like.

Kapur deals with the issue of infertility in her novel through the sufferings of Ishita. The female experience is both complex and painful and generally characterized by episodes of intense feelings of isolation from her spouse, her social circle and society. Females feel unsupported and misunderstood throughout the experience, which adds to their despair and isolation. Pregnancy and motherhood is inseparably wrapped up in perceptions of femininity, and infertility can evoke a pervasive sense of failure as a woman, and, in cases of female factor infertility, she can feel that her body has failed her. All this can have a distressing effect on woman's self-esteem. The result of this can be that treatment is pursued without pausing to consider the impact of this route on them, their body, their partner and their relationship. Treatment can be an unpredictable, long drawn-out roller coaster of hoping, waiting and disappointment, which may or may not result in the birth of a child, and which can take a serious toll on females in a number of ways. Ultimately the experience for females can be one of grief.

The analysis of Ishita's life is an attempt to illuminate questions related to woman's quest for identity, self-fulfilment and her path towards autonomy. Manju Kapur relates the life of two women of the same generation, but having totally different lives and viewpoints. Ishita has to face rejection because of her infertility, while Shagun is accustomed to love and appreciation. Ishita's parents are neighbours to Raman's parents; Mrs. Kaushik likes Ishita for her sweet behaviour. Though Ishita is not much beautiful, but she possesses a beautiful smile with lovely even teeth. After completing her BA., her parents decide she should do a B. Ed- "*If she got a job in a government school, she will have security, a steady income as well as lighter hours at work, that future matrimony demanded.*"(p. 52) Ishita wants to settle in a job before she gets married- "*Marriage was far from Ishita's thoughts. She knew it lay in her future but she wanted to work first.*"(p.52) Therefore, when she finishes her B.Ed., she applies for teaching job. But at the same time, her parents find a proposal of marriage very suitable for their loving daughter. They insist her for marriage, as everything else can wait, but a good proposal can't. Ishita hesitates to accept the proposal because of the demands of in-laws-

"The prospective in-laws said they wanted a homely family- minded girl, dowry was not a consideration they had enough money of their own. Suryakanta was their only son and grand children were expected within a year."(p.53)

The women of in-laws family don't work and they are expected to devote themselves to home. Ishita feels uncomfortable to agree upon the proposal- "*What about her B.Ed., her desire to be independent?*"(p.53) Her parents convince her that her degree will help her if anything unexpected happens in her marriage. They preach her - "*Stubbornness was not prized in daughter-in-law.*"(p.53)

Suryaknata is an Engineer from Delhi College of Engineering. Ishita, married to Suryakanata, finds marriage liberating and enjoys the bliss of marriage in the beginning. But this joy doesn't last long - "*As the months wore on, there were no signs of a pregnancy*"(p.54) Mrs. Rjora is worried about her daughter's future and asks her whether she is doing something to avoid pregnancy- "*Producing grandchildren was a moral obligation.*"(p.54) Ishita's mother-in-law also inquires why she is not conceiving. Ishita herself also becomes conscious about it and shares her problem with her mother, who suggests to follow her in-laws' instructions - "*You must do whatever they tell you.*"(p.56) Mrs. Rajora wants her daughter to fit as an obeying daughter-in-law in her in-laws' house for the sake of the security of her marriage.

The writer exposes the blind religious beliefs of Indian society that lead to starving and suffering of a woman. Ishita obeys her mother-in-law's instructions without any question as her mother has suggested her. She "*fasts on Tuesdays*"(p.56) and does "*the special jap 108 times a day*"(p.56) Kapur also narrates the incident of God's drinking milk all over India. Eventually, all the temples are crowded with devotees to offer milk to God and in return demand to meet their desires. Ishita's mother informs her about this miracle and Ishita also goes to offer milk to God. But nothing helps her to conceive.

Finally, she decides to visit a gynaecologist with her mother. Ishita is told about her T.B. during her childhood, which was recovered after treatment. Ishita's mother advises her not to share all this with her husband and in-laws, but Ishita trusts Suryakanta more than anyone in the world and she is too much devoted to him that she can't hide anything from him. She snaps at her mother- "*What kind of lies do you want me to go on living? If I can't trust my husband, it is no marriage.*"(p.61) Suryakanta behaves kindly when Ishita shares with him about her meeting with the doctor and her T.B. during infancy- "*he had said*

she was the queen of his heart, he would die without her.”(p.61) He assures her that every problem has a solution, and suggests to tell everything to his parents. For the first time, Ishita feels annoyed to see her husband behaving like a child even at the age of twenty seven. Suryakanta clarifies *“that ‘our’ meant the complete joint family”*(p.62). Ishita pleads not to tell anyone in the family about her visit to the doctor and he promises that he will not.

Suryakanta tells his mother about the meeting with doctor-*“Papa and Mummy will know what to do.”* Ishita is too much depressed because of her body which has let her down in this most basic function. She can’t dare to face anyone after the whole incident. She has not expected such response from Suryakanta who pretends to be very caring.

“Oh how far from the truth. At that moment Ishita thought it easier to commit suicide than to live. From the day of her wedding she had thought of this family as hers revelling in the togetherness, sharing and companionship. Now instead of love all around her, there would be rejection.”(p.63)

On her next visit to the doctor, Ishita’s mother-in-law goes with her instead of Suryakanta, because she wants to know what exactly the problem is and what the remedy is. On the way to the doctor, her mother-in-law scans her HSG report and medical papers. They don’t talk about anything on the way. When they reach the hospital, the nurse calls them inside the doctor’s chamber-

“Smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in the sunlit air, smaller than drops of dew caught between blades of grass in the morning was Ishita as she sat in the gynecologist’s office with her mother-in-law, watching as the doctor sketched out the messages concealed in her body. Here were the tubes, here the eggs, here was where conception occurred.

The loss of normal anatomy meant fertilization couldn't take place without intervention.”(p.65)

The doctor suggests Ishita either to go for IUI i.e. intrauterine insemination, or IVF, fertilization that take place in a culture medium outside the body, with egg and sperm extracted from respective donors. Ishita's in-laws decide to go for an IVF treatment, but even after two trials Ishita is unable to conceive. After two trials her mother-in-law gives up trying any more-*“The doctor might have told her that repeated attempts don't increase the chances of success.”(p. 68)* Ishita wonders that if there has been something wrong with Suryakanta then also her mother-in-law has given up so easily-*“They would have moved heaven and earth to get a sons defect corrected.”(p. 68)* But for daughter-in-law, they are not much concerned, instead they are now trying to get rid of her-

“It didn't take long for the loving atmosphere around Ishita to grow so thin that it becomes hard for her to breathe. Was it possible for them all to change towards her, SK, Chandra Kanta and Tarakanta? Hadn't they valued her for herself?”(p.68)

Suryakanta's mother conveys to Ishita's mother that they desire a divorce for their son by mutual consent. Suryakanta is also ready for divorce, *“Ishita sat as though a mountain of stones were pressing upon her.”(p.69)* Neglecting Ishita, Suryakanta starts sleeping in his parent's room. For three and a half year Ishita has been surrounded by Suryakanta's tender love and the thought of being expelled from it, is heart breaking for her. She knows she is twenty-six and she can look for her job, but meaning of her life come from SK and the thought of life without Suryakanta is painful-

“But staying was not easy. The mother began to call her shameless, the sisters refused to talk to her, the father and SK avoided her. In the dark watches of the night Ishita thought they were right, she was shameless. Who stayed where they were not wanted? When she looked in the mirror she saw a plain unloved face, eyes without expression, dull skin and dry lips. She had lost all the weight she had put on since her marriage, her collar bones stuck out, her breasts had shrunk. Even the beggars at the street crossings looked more lively than she was this the person holding out for happiness.”(p.72)

Being with her in-laws’ house with such ignorance has become a compromise against her dignity because of the conduct of her in-laws. Ishita wants to go away from all of them, but Mrs. Rajora insists her to live with them to save her marriage. But Ishita feels it disgusting to live in a place where she is not needed. Asha Saharan highlights Ishita’s sufferings in her article *Treatment of Infidelity and Infertility in Manju Kapur’s ‘Custody’-*

“Ishita undergoes ‘internalized exile’ where the body feels disconnected from it as though it does not belong to her and she has no agency. She is considered a failure by her culture, and worse, since this failure is internalized, she believes it herself. She is doubly exiled from her body- once as a woman, an outsider to patriarchal power, and next as an infertile woman who cannot fulfill her biological destiny. So, this problematic ‘natural and essentialized assumptions of motherhood’ is imposed on her body.”⁸

Ishita tells her mother angrily that if her parents don’t want her to come home, she will live as a tenant somewhere else but not in her husband’s house. *“I will die, or be killed if I continue to stay here, is that what you want?”(p.74)*. Eventually a divorce is agreed by mutual consent with five lakhs for alimony. Ishita goes to her parents’ house and mourns over her failed

marriage. Asha Saharan describes in her article the mental state of Ishita, as an infertile woman-

“Kapur reveals the truth that in a traditional society woman is disempowered due to her barren body. When Ishita is thrown out of S.K’s house she feels disembodied as she is punished for her substandard body. Divorce fills her life with angst, misery, depression, dejection, gloominess and sense of failure.”⁹

Divorce affects the couple economically, mentally, emotionally, and physically. It also acts upon the current and future relationships of the couple. Studies show that divorced individuals exhibit higher degrees of depression and anxiety than the people who are married, and those divorced also tend to have poorer self-concepts and display more symptoms of psychological hurt. Relationships and social networks are determined in various ways by divorce. Divorced individuals generally have more social isolation and have smaller social networks than do married persons. This is explained in terms of them having less in common with married friends, following divorce. Mr. Rajora usually finds her daughter in bed in her grief. He tries to console her that brooding is not good for anyone. And she should think about some job. Angrily she answers *“I wanted to work, you got me married.”*(p.129) Realizing his mistake, Ishita’s father feels guilty of spoiling his daughter’s life by marrying her at a very early age-

“Head buried in the pillow, she thought of the body that had known so much love, and then so much punishment. Stubbornly it had remained barren despite the many spent, the hormones, the injections, the painful procedures. She couldn’t conceive, whereupon SK had decided he could not love her. If only she could tear out her whole reproductive system and throw it on the road. She

hated her body, hated it. Everybody in the building must know why she had come back. Return to sender. Receipt for 5 lakhs attached.”(p.127)

Gradually Ishita tries to get over her grief and move on and face the world with her truth. Mrs. Hingorani, her neighbour, offers her to work in her school and teach the slum children. Ishita’s mother suggests her not to waste her qualification on such places and find any better job which can help her financially. But Ishita decides to teach the slum children. Mrs. Rajora fears that it may expose her to different infections, and insists Ishita to look for another job. Mrs. Rajora’s attitude further depresses her - *“It weighted her down, she with her broken wings, who longed to fly.”(p.133)*

Ishita wants to move on in her life and she finds it suitable to be with so many children because she can never have one of her own. She wants a life with some purpose, so she starts teaching in Mrs. Hingorani’s school. *“A drop of ink gets lost in a bucket of water, and here in the bucket of Mandavali her grief receded.”(p.135)* During PTA meetings Ishita meets those poor women, battling a thousand needs with empty stomach, drunken husbands, semi-literate children, with no chance of escape from their poverty. Working with Mrs. Hingorani and her NGO fills Ishita with confidence. Her father feels proud to look at the brightness of her face.

“Ishita along with Mrs. Hingorani marching 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. Contradicting her father, no it was not necessary for India to assert herself as a world power, not when she couldn’t feed her children, making the man think his daughter had grown more in the NGO than in her years of marriage.”(p.136)

Ishita gets 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 no more interested in marriage- "*She was married to her work, not one suitor could give her a similar satisfaction.*"(p.139)She wants to focus on her work and help the poor children.

Ishita joins Jeevan, an NGO which works for poor and slum people. Her mother is in search of a suitable groom for her daughter to look after her, but Ishita already has enough of the marriage business, - "*I can look after myself. You think all the married women have their husbands caring for them. Look round you.*"(p. 176) Mrs. Rajora finds a divorced IPS officer, with two kids. Because Ishita can't produce children she has to marry a man who already has children. Mrs. Rajora requests Ishita not to talk too much but Mr. Rajora can't support his wife's request. "*Mr. Rajora thought of his first encounter with his own bride, and how he had to strain to hear the few words that had barely passed her lips. How much had India really changed, that a silent woman was still considered more desirable?*"(p.176) Ishita doesn't find the suitor interesting and refuses to marry him. And even a lonely life is the consequence. She can rather be lonely instead of marrying such person who can't even let her go anywhere without him. If he can't trust her then there is no point of marrying him.

Mrs. Hingorani suggests Ishita to adopt a child to fulfil her monotonous life and also introduces her to a couple who has just adopted a child. Ishita finds the mother, beaming with happiness instead of being punished for her barrenness like Ishita- "*Her husband instead of looking for a new wife was content to beam with her.*"(p.182)Ishita thinks about herself, how she has been divorced just because she can't produce children as if she is not human being but only a child producing machine. She desires - "*May be she and SK should*

have fought for the right to decide the major issues in their marriage, fought not towards the end when all she saw was his back.”(p.183) She knows right now there is no use of desiring anything, but she dreams.

Ishita struggles to fight for the meaning of her life, i.e. why she is born *“If she had a wish in life it was to be a homemaker, with husband and children, something every girl she had ever known effortlessly possessed.”(p. 185)* Eventually Ishita decides to adopt a child and shares 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 snaps at her mother, she doesn't want to see any ridiculous man. - *“At least it will be nice to choose my fate instead of just waiting for some husband to appear”(p. 189)* Ishita's father wonders to see the glow and confidence on his daughter's face, she has achieved with her independence. He wants to see his daughter to be happy, without caring what people think of her, if she adopts a child.

Mrs. Kaushik and Mrs. Rajora become good friends because of the parallel destiny of their children, both divorced and betrayed at the hands of their winning partners. They exchange talk about their children and their broken marriages. Mrs. Kaushik suggests Mrs. Rajora to bring Ishita to see Raman when he comes with Roohi at Swarg Niwas. May be they like each other's company and exchange their feelings which may lend to get over brooding. After all, they both are facing the same circumstances somehow.

Kapur is adept at dealing with this complicated family reconfiguration and the insecurity it brings to the step-parents as well as children. In Ishita's plight, we see the second wife's desperate struggle to replace the biological mother, while Ashok presents a more ambiguous kind 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.*"(p.267)Ishita is not that much beautiful as Shagun, thus Raman doesn't find her attractive in the beginning but gradually he starts liking her because of her sweet behavior with Roohi-

"But how long can a lonely, jilted man resist a woman so totally opposite from his wife? A woman who has entertained his child and done her hair? And fed her when she fussed, and seemed to enjoy it? A woman who has been divorced, who has known rejection, misery and unhappiness? A woman who is casually thrown across his path by mothers who are working in tandem without a word exchanged."(p.269)

Mrs. Rajora wants to be the first in line for any match that may come for Raman. Mr. Rajora scolds his wife for behaving like an idiot. He doesn't think that a divorced man, already having two children, is as though such a big catch for Ishita. Mrs. Rajora knows the reality of the world. "*The reality of the world was that all men were catches and only some women.*"(p.270)And this realization makes a daughter's mother constantly watchful. Ishita is not one of those lucky women who are good catches.

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 behaviour changes towards Raman. "*Arjun was reluctant to share his experience; he had learned enough to*

depress him thoroughly.”(p.284) Raman can't provide him glamour and adventure of foreign countries like Shagun but he can give him stability and love, and consistently trying this. But Arjun is not able to understand his father's emotions because of his young age and the influence of his mother's manipulation. Raman is hurt due to Arjun's reluctance and he feels an unknown distance has filled the air between him and Arjun. Raman shares his grief with Ishita-

“When I am alone with him it's fine. But when Roo is there, he just lashes out, I don't know why, though I imagine it has to do with the divorce I can only trust it won't cause any lasting damage.”(p.287)

Kapur introduces us to another image of woman, who shares everything equally with her husband, either it is drinking. Ishita feels completeness in the company of Raman and Roo. She always yearns for such a caring family to look after, and who will love her in return. Ishita and Raman like each other's company and share their grief. They start meeting each other frequently. Raman takes Ishita to his home to help him in caring Roo, and offers her a drink and she approves to have one. She tells him that her parents don't know about her drinks, *“We used to drink sometimes when we went to friends' houses when the elders were not around.”*(p. 290) Raman proposes for marriage and gifts her diamond ring.

Raman decides to marry in the court, without any fuss and without telling anyone. Mrs. Rajora is relieved to know that finally Ishita is settled. She is happy to see her daughter, returning to the status of a wife, which has been so rudely snatched from her. Ishita shows her parents, the court papers of approving her marriage with Raman, *“that was the way he wanted it.”*(p. 309) Her parents are satisfied because the most important issue is her happiness, not

the process. Ishita is absorbed in the bliss of love and fulfilment. 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 vacations. 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 manipulations to a little child's ears. 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 ones 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.”(p.329)

Raman requests 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, and other relations are less important to him now *“not fulfillment with some woman.”(p.308)* 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.

“For the first time Ishita began to think it had been a bad idea to give up her job with Jeevan. It meant that in times of stress there was never any relief from the torment. And wasn't it better to devote oneself to many children than to obsess about one little girl.”(p.336)

It's strange that a father has to assure his own son that he loves him and insist him for conversation. 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."*(p. 335) This is the feeling Shagun has reduced him to insecurity, pain and sorrow. Raman pines to make Arjun realize how much he loves him.

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 these ideas- *"We can't really make messengers out of the children."*(p.343)Ishita doesn't want to send Roohi to visit Shagun, ever in her life, because it may confuse and distract the child. Roohi, under Arjun's influence, asks Ishita *"Are you sure you are my mother"*(p.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 she 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 stronger. Ishita convinces Raman that it is not in their favour to let Arjun meet and see that Roohi is well. Raman agrees, but is partially hurt- *"Why was not it possible to have everybody he loved under one roof? Thought Raman. If he was another sort of man, perhaps he would have handled such things better."*(p.365)

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-

“Day by day she enveloped Roo in a fierce and fearful love. The child was hers, if there was justice in the world she would remain hers. To this end she fasted, to this end she turned religious, to end she surreptitiously visited astrologers and numerologists. Her fingers sprouted myriad gems glinting from which gold settings: topaz, moonstone, ruby and amethyst. She, who had objected to the pearl her mother, had forced her to wear during her first marriage.”(p.381)

Shagun warns Raman either to visit Roohi to her, or to face a contempt of court as well as a custody case for her children, and she also threatens him that he will never be able to see Arjun. Raman tells Ishita about the conversation with Shagun, but 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, which she has attempted to seek fulfilment-

“Over the next few days her sense of danger intensified. She saw a sword dangling over the family life she had created so painstakingly. That sword must be cut down, assiduously blunted, so that it never had the power to threaten.”(p.389)

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, because Ashok is interested only in Shagun, not in her children. She expects Ashok to help her resolve the matter of visitation rights of Roohi, but he is not interested. Instead he gets angry, when Shagun mentions that when he is posted to Singapore, she will be able to deal with Roohi's issue. Shagun has a major fight with Ashok about the issue. He has put his best efforts to get divorced 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. She mentions her fight with Ashok and her grief to her mother in her letter to her mother-

"Perhaps I was foolish to believe, but he did promise to keep me happy for ever not that I have reproached him with anything. Our life together would not have been possible if I had regretted my past still. What happened to that promise? I guess when you are in love, you experience some momentary delusions, then the glow fades and things look ordinary again. Of course, I adore my life here, but sometimes I feel its foundations are fragile."(p.391)

Raman gets information that Ashok is coming to South-East Asia as head of the region. He, as the CEO, will stay in Singapore and Shagun may accompany him. She may file a case of contempt of court against him because from Singapore, it will be easy for her to come to India for legal formalities. Nandan suggests him to lodge a case before Shagun does it. Raman and Ishita, therefore, file a lawsuit requesting that it will be psychologically damaging to force the little child against her wish to visit her biological mother. As Roohi loves her step mother, separation will be cruel.

Ishita meets Mrs. Hingorani when she visits Swarg Niwas. Mrs. Hingorani finds her withdrawn and sad. Ishita shares Roohi's case with her. Mrs. Hingorani helped Ishita to get rid of her grief, when she was divorced from Suryakanta. Mrs. Hingorani reflects a real modern woman in the true sense. Through Mrs. Hingorani, Kapur expresses her views-

“Now it was Mrs. Hingorani's turn to look sad. Solving family problems in court was not something she approved of Adults should behave like adults, not like the children they were fighting over. Really, why did people have babies if they were going to subject them to the messes of their own desires?”(p.404)

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 inside 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. 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, is over-

“Ishita's thoughts were with her husband as they slowly negotiated the evening traffic along the stretch of Ring Road leading to South Delhi. Somewhere in the depths of the lower courts, he was mediating his past and present lives. This was something he had to do alone. Meanwhile she was

carrying most precious part of the marriage with her. She stretched out a hand and clutched her daughter's first firmly in it."(p.415)

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.*"¹⁰ 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.*"¹¹ 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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