

Contextualizing New Woman in Manju Kapur's *Custody*

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Abstract

New woman is a concept which addresses and accentuates women's capabilities and struggle in patriarchal society. The term is referred to women who exercise control over their own lives in personal, social and economic matters, and pursue their own desires. The concept as a consciousness emerges due to social and cultural changes, rise of urban centers, increased immigration, industrialization, growing influence of consumer culture and changes in the structure of labour force. The concept appeared in late Victorian fiction with the intention to focus on women and about woman from the standpoint of woman. Chiefly New Woman expresses their dissatisfaction with contemporary position of women in marriage and society. Manju Kapur's *Custody* registers significant aspects of new woman i.e destigmatizing infertility in the novel. She presents this as newness in woman in her thinking and to lift the social disparity between men and women. The paper attempts to explore the concept of new

woman and theoretically to understand 'home space' and 'public space' of woman that kills and diminishes the status and position of woman in a traditional Hindu society.

Keywords: New Woman, Infertility, Patriarchy, Education, Individuality, Motherhood.

New woman concept is a late nineteenth century concept. In feminist writings the concept is although used in a synonymous way but it differentiates in certain ways from feminism. New woman breaks free from the traditional female roles and prefers free love, idealize social and professional independence. To fulfill her liberty and independence she explores her higher faculties of thinking the possibilities of progress through her educated mind. It is believed that "New Woman was born in the 1880's, and it was the second generation English feminists, those women who had profited from the educational and vocational opportunities" (Jordan, "The Christening of the New Woman", May 1894) The new woman concept presents women with their revolutionary attitude as they establish themselves through their education to find an escape route from the restrictions of home, society and familial responsibilities.

Manju Kapur's *Custody* presents the perspective of New Woman by destigmatizing the infertility taboo in the Indian context. Motherhood is one of the powerful forces that make a woman feel and understand about the anxiety and discomfort of her child. She is considered as a comforter through whom the blood line of a family is carried ahead but when she fails to continue the bloodline she is being stigmatized in the Indian society. She is being reduced to a womb whose importance is associated to procreate and fulfill the demands of the family. In other words, "Woman? Very simple, says those who like simple answers: she is a womb, an ovary, she is a female: this word is enough to define her." (Beauvoir, "The Second Sex" 41). Indian society has always idealized the role of a wife till she is a mechanism to fulfill the interest of her family as a wife and daughter- in- law. Under the pretext of maintaining a family tree it is the wife who suffers if she fails to conceive. Infertility according to the

scientific study is a problem that is found both in male as well as female which affects both husband and wife in married life. In Indian society husbands are always considered as faultless superior because “ He is the Subject; he is the Absolute. She is the Other.”(Beauvoir, “ Extracts from The Second Sex” 7) and being the absolute it is the woman who is forced to carry the social stigma of barrenhood . The patriarchal society is so blinded by power structure that a women’s value outside her home is relegated and associated with the demeaning of her name.

Kapur examines the growth of Ishita as a human in the patriarchal society .Her growth as an individual with a complete newness is studied through her character. Kapur herself in an interview says

I think all issues are grist to the writer’s mill. Depends on what inspires you, what pushes the narrative forward. In my case it has been the things you mention, but rather than focus on the divorce, infidelity etc, I look at the consequence of these actions, which I find more interesting. Not what propels a divorce, but what the long term consequences of this are for everybody concerned.(Penguin India Blog,29 March 2011)

Marriage has always limited the space of women and through this institution Kapur has tried to rework to change the concept of women’s space and individuality. In the beginning of the novel *Custody* Kapur has presented Ishita in a very weak and subordinate position like any women in Indian Society. Ishita’s marriage with Suryakanta was conditioned by her would be mother- in- law with the functional role of producing offspring. Her expectation from Ishita, that she should conceive within a year of their marriage is something that is forceful on her because “ Suryakanta was their only son, and grandchildren were expected within a year” (Custody 51). This kind of obligations for women’s body becomes a matter of talk in the society, for her role as a human is regarded only for her

reproductive organ. Ishita's failure to conceive till 18 months of their marriage puts her mother to worry. Her mother out of worries says "The couple was young but it was better to prove that the machinery worked early on in the relationship. Producing grandchildren was a moral obligation"(52). The marriage is now under scrutiny of the boy's family as Ishita has not conceived. Ishita goes through a painful process to prove her infertility and the amount of psychological and physical pain she undergoes is not felt by her mother-in-law and her husband. She feels rejected and lonely "smaller than the ant 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..."(62). The feelings of being insignificant among the ones whom she considers her own has relegated her to the position of an ant, motes and dew that no one notices. Her existence has nothing to contribute in the family as she is medically found to be infertile; the gynecologist investigated that there is a 'severe blockage' in her fallopian tubes.

Ironically, the mother-in-law takes the decision to proceed for IVF and Ishita was shared about the decision by her husband Suryakanta. Ishita had no voice but to allow performing the painful procedure on her body. Ishita is injected with fertility drugs to increase the hormones so that she can conceive. Although the procedure is painful she allows to perform it on her as that is the only way which can help her to attain the motherhood and retain the position in her family. This reflects the Indian orthodoxy mindset and their views on women and their role in the patriarchal society. The painful procedure brings hope in Ishita's life and she starts to whisper to her embryo "prayers, prayers more prayers. Please stay, please grow. You are my only chance of happiness. So many people to love you, just come into the world. I beg you."(64). Her happiness is shattered with her bloody period as it takes away all her dreams and hopes. Through Ishita Kapur has shown the miserable state of an Indian woman, where her existence, recognition and identity are associated with her procreation.

Ishita is now defined for her failure to conceive. Her mother –in- law has lost her hope in Ishita and does not want to spend more money uselessly on IVF procedures. On learning this Ishita contemplates “Had there been something wrong with SK, they would have moved heaven and earth to get a son’s defect corrected. In an ideal world, the same resources would have been put at the disposal of a daughter-in-law. But this was not an ideal world.” (65-66). On the declaration of Ishita’s failure to conceive the mother-in-law and Ishita’s husband want a divorce, Ishita has been thrown out from her husband’s house only because she fails to conceive. The consequence of divorce is heavily felt by Ishita when she starts to take sleeping pills to overcome the trauma of the insult and rejection she has to go through to meet the expected role of women in the Indian context.

Kapur has presented a complete new life of Ishita after her divorce from her husband. She tries to live her life by joining a NGO school for slum children owned by Mrs. Hingorani. Among the unknown she finds an escape route “It is natural for women to try to escape this world where they often feel unrecognized and misunderstood...”(Beauvoir, “Extracts from *The Second Sex*” 61-62). Ishita finds happiness with the eager children of the slum. She learns to gain self confidence from the parents of the children during the PTA meet organized by Mrs. Hingorani. These poor women represent courage and hope despite being the underprivileged

“ these women, battling a thousand needs, empty stomach, drunken husbands, semi-literate children, with no chance to escape from their poverty, looked at the world with hopeful, though somewhat weary, eyes. If they had the wherewithal, a quiet tubectomy put an end to the baby stream- otherwise they were doomed to procreate, with little say over their bodies, their lives, or their money.”(129).

As a working woman Ishita’s individuality grows. Her associations with different walks of life help her to build her self-esteem which she has lost in her marriage space. She

participates in the protest against the nuclear device tested in the Pokhram desert. Her participation signifies her rational mind that stands for the benefit of the human race. In the NGO her contribution as an educated woman is immense, people are made known of the purpose of the NGO and through that she can raise funds for the NGO. Her management is excellent as she manages the money for rent, salaries for workers, copies, books and shoes for the students. Here her capability as a good manager is appreciated.

The body that matters for a woman is defined by her mother-in-law and husband as infertile. She realizes that it can shelter an orphan or a needy as she learns in the NGO that infertility certified woman only can adopt a child and help in contributing in building the life of a child. Kapur brings out a new concept of woman that she is not dependent rather independent in her thinking, living and achieving the goals of life. Ishita, as a new woman decides to adopt as a single parent and to give the best to her child, she decides to continue her higher studies. She says “ At least it will be nice to choose my fate instead of just waiting for some husband to appear.”(180).

Kapur revolts in her creative self against the obligatory biological motherhood that is expected from a woman after her marriage. Ishita's second marriage with Raman who has two children from his first marriage becomes the solution to her Problem. Ishita becomes Kapur's metaphor of challenge to the traditional concept of marriage and motherhood as she step parent Roohi, her second husband's daughter. Ishita enjoys sexual life with Raman after their marriage dispensing the concept of conceiving as a compulsory role of a married woman with their erotic moments. She celebrates her identity as a mother by giving much love and care to Roohi. In her creative endeavour, Kapur has tried best to focus her reformative zeal to make Indian society and patriarchy realize/ understand the plight of a married woman under the strict rules of family expectations and societal tradition.

To conclude, it is observed that Kapur intends to convey the concept of New Woman that as and when woman thinks and acts deviating from tradition, taboos and customs she achieves her newness. Kapur's *Custody* brings out the newness in women by revealing woman's search for liberty and happiness while choosing to become a step parent of a child from her marriage. Ishita in *Custody* is a new kind of woman who breaks the traditional concept of motherhood by achieving newness in contemporary India. She is projected as a new woman. This approach adds more values, means and prospect of a woman which feature in the concept of New Woman in the Indian context. Kapur succeeds in dismissing the idea that regards women only when they procreate and hold the family tree.

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