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Marital Discord and its Consequences:

A thematic analysis of Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman and Custody*

Abstract

Marriage is the foundation of the family, a social group consisting of parents and children. It is the oldest and most powerful social institution that has withstood the test of time in binding people in various relationships such as husband and wife, mother-in-law and daughter-in-law, sister-in-law and brother in law and so on. In the past, marriages also did the task of uniting two kingdoms. In our country, woman is considered the centre of family which shows how domestic life is interwoven with the life of a 'woman'. The theme of marriage and the consequences of marital discord find exquisite manifestation in the texts under study. Marriage is one of the most prominent themes in the fictional world of Manju Kapur in which various shades of relationship get projected, evaluated and experienced. In the novels *A Married Woman* and *Custody* Kapur deals with the intricacies of marital discord and its consequences. The collapse of marriage is explored in these two novels from multiple angles making for a nuanced rendition of the situation. The present study under this title also questions the status of married women in a traditional bound social order that sees women exclusively in the role of an obedient and docile wife and a breeder of children. This paper is an attempt to bring into focus the thematic analysis of Marital Discord and its consequences in Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman and Custody*.

Keywords: marital discord, consequences, domestic life, intricacies, nuanced rendition, breeder

Come; let us walk together, with this guiding lamp between us

... I am the word and you are the melody,

I am the melody and you are the word. (80)

Thousand Faces of

Night

Gita Hariharan

The quotation cited above, manifests harmony of marital bliss in order to bring out the consequences of marital disharmony shown in the texts under study. The institution of marriage is the central feature of all forms of human society. It is the deepest as well as the most complex of all human relations. A marriage partner should be everything: best friend, terrific partner, sympathetic confidante, good provider. Failure of this results in broken relationships. India has the history of 'Swayamvara' as well as arranged marriages. In the past, marriages also did the task of uniting two kingdoms. Till today, marriage has been an institution which is respected in India and the status of being a married woman has its own privileges. If the 'essence' of marriage in India or as in some of the Asian countries, is compared to that of the west, it gives altogether a different aura and appeal.

John Stuart Mill in his *The Subjection of Women*, refers to an ideal relationship in marriage when he writes:

What marriage may be in the case of two persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinion and purposes, between whom exists the best kind of equality, similarity of powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority over them- so that each can enjoy the luxury of looking up to the other, and can have alternately the pleasure of leading and of being led in the path of development...I maintain with the proudest conviction that this, and this only, is the ideal of marriage. (235)

Traditionally in our country, arranged marriages have been preferred, and are considered the fortunate destiny of a person following or celebrating the maxim, "marriages are destined in heaven." The feminist Simone de Beauvoir also opines almost similarly in the following statement, "Marriage is a destiny traditionally offered to women by society." (1) The relationship of a man and woman is acknowledged in society through arranged marriage. Two different persons, brought-up in different environment, customs and temperaments, are thrown together, and are expected to live in peace and harmony.

Marriage is one of the most prominent themes in the fictional world of Manju Kapur in which various shades of relationship get projected, evaluated and experienced. 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 apparently charming curtains of marriage. Almost all of the Kapur's novels either revolve around the issue of marriage or a married life of a woman is discussed. Manju Kapur has an aptitude to deal with the intricacies of marital discord and its consequences. As the title implies, Kapur's second novel *A Married Woman*

centers upon the married woman, Astha. It deals with the theme of marriage and shows marital discord and its consequences forged in a land of turmoil. In the very beginning the novel throws some light on the proper age of marriage for girls. Astha's mother uses fruit image to describe the maturity of her daughter. Here is a brief dialogue between Astha's parents:

“There is a time for everything,” went on the mother. „The girl is blossoming now.

When the fruit is ripe it has to be picked. Later she might get into the wrong company and we will be left wringing our hands. If she marries at this age, she will have no problem in adjusting.(20)

Astha, disappointed in love, is married to Hemant an MBA from USA. Life seems to be at its best in the beginning. On their honeymoon, Hemant discovers that Astha loves to pen down things and he appreciates her “You certainly have good imagination, you put things well” (42). This little appreciation tickles her and makes Astha feel that she is the luckiest person. She thinks: “Her husband was going to encourage her writing. Maybe she could become poetess as well as painter. Her life was opening up before her in golden vistas” (42). Astha, once back from honeymoon, engages herself into becoming a good daughter-in-law and wife.

A proper understanding of each other, a sense of wisdom and love for each other make conjugal lives successful. . In *A Married Woman* the lack of understanding and adjustment between Astha and Hemant leads to the disintegration. Hemant and his family welcome Anuradha, their daughter. Astha, therefore, begins to feel that theirs is a complete family but Hemant unfolds his plans about future at which Astha is surprised when Hemant says “I want to have my son soon; I want to be as much a part of his life as Papaji is of mine”(61). He continues “Of Course we will have a son, and if we don't we needn't stop at two” (61). Astha always thought that Hemant was educated abroad and so such things didn't matter to him much but she was greatly mistaken. Hemant, like a typical Indian male, defends himself saying, “I was so pleased Anu was a girl. But that doesn't mean we should not try for a boy. I am the only son”(61). These realities about her existence as only a wife, a daughter-in-law and a mother kill Astha as an individual. The narrator depicts the situation thus:

Between Anuradha's birth and Himanshu's, Hemant changed from being an all-American father to being an all-Indian one and Astha changes from being a woman who only wanted love to a woman who valued independence. Besides there was the pleasure of interacting with minds instead of needs. (72)

This change gives rise to conflict and dissatisfaction in their married life. The death of her father and the distance that her mother makes from Astha by going to the Ashram so that she may not be a burden on her daughter also puzzles Astha. Being the only child and not being able to take care of her mother makes her feel guilty. Astha is disillusioned by her so called happy married life and finds the superfluity of relationships. Hemant, though a good husband as far as taking the responsibilities of the house are concerned, does not respect Astha's opinions and often belittles her. Astha meets Aijaz, who comes to her school for the street drama rehearsals and she is drawn towards him. What she likes in him is the respect and appreciation that he gives her for her talent which she never receives at home from her husband.

In *A Married Woman* Astha turns towards same sex love as the consequence of marital discord. Astha exerts her agency and interrogates socio- cultural construct and discovers 'many facets of the relationship between her husband and herself reflected power than love'(233). She understands:

She had a good life, but it was good because nothing was questioned. This boat could not be rocked. She should paint that on a canvas and put it up on the wall, and stare at it day and night. . . Hands that had grasped money, and felt it pass through their fingers were the ones capable of rocking the boats. Hers were not. (100)

Astha realizes " A willing body at night, a willing pair of hands and feet in the day and an obedient mouth are the essential prerequisites of a married woman"(231). Astha breaks the laws of nature and even society, in her relationship with Pipeelika. Against all social norms, the friendship between the two women develops into a fully intimate same-sex relationship, clandestine but deeply intense as "they were enclosed in a circle of silence, the only sound, the sound of their breaths, close together and mingled"(230). Astha and Pipee not only satisfy their homoerotic desire but they too feel homoemotive bond with non-sexual acts of togetherness.

A Married Woman ends up with Astha as a dissatisfied married woman who loses her sense for home, duty, wifhood and motherhood. Kapur traces the actual process by which woman is 'womanized' by locating and foregrounding the overt and covert means of women's bondage by ideologies, stereotypes, limited choices and marital discord.

Kapur's fifth novel *Custody* is a tale of a marriage crippled by an extra marital affair which is completely and socially unacceptable. It revolves around the subject of matrimony at its most intolerable stage followed by the emotional fall-out of a break-up. It discusses dissolution in marriage and resultant divorce which lead the battle of the custody of the children. The novel is true to the universal angst of modern marriage. The novelist stands unrivalled in her skill and portrayal of love, loss and betrayal. The novel opens in an ironical situation on New Year night when Ashok and Shagun are enjoying in the inner lanes of South Delhi. It is not a love making scene between a husband and her wife but between a wife and her husband's boss:

January 1st, 1998, The couple lay among stained sheets and rumped quilts, eyes closed, legs twisted together like the knotted branches of a low growing tree. . . Eventually they dragged each other off the bed and into the bathroom. They hated this, they . . . they they washed and dressed, simply hated it. But they had kept their promise, they had heralded the New Year by making love. (1)

Kapur highlights adultery as the extra- marital relations at the very first page of the novel as to bring out the consequence of marital discord. From the beginning of the story one perceives that a marriage like this is bound to fail as the author states: "Raman and Shagun's marriage had been arranged along standard lines, she the beauty, he the one with the brilliant prospects"(14). The marriage of beauty and brain seemed to be a wonderful one. Raman is the stereotypical depiction of the hard-working man. At the beginning of the story we see him in his traditional role of father and husband; of the head of the family who goes out to the world to fight and make money for his family. His professional career seems to have screened his familial life in the clouds of uncertainty. It made Shagun realize that there was nothing promising in this married life. When Shagun reaches her thirties, she again gets pregnant. Being of independent nature, she never wants to be bound again, "It's not that. I will be thirty. Arjun is just becoming independent; I don't want to start all over again. Always tied to a child, is that what you want?"(17).

The collapse of marriage is explored in *Custody* from multiple angles making for a nuanced rendition of the situation. From the beginning of the story one perceives that a marriage like this is bound to fail. Things look fine till Shagun meets Ashok Khanna, Raman's boss. Within a few months of arriving in India, he develops liking towards Shagun and feels that, "A woman so pretty had to be married; besides, she had the look of someone who never had to compete for male attention"(4). To overcome the dull life, Shagun finds Ashok as a source of

identity, enjoyment, communication and belongingness, which ultimately lead her to have affair with him. With her husband going out of station most of the time, she comes closer to Ashok and their relationship grows to the extent that Shagun is ready to leave Raman to find happiness with Ashok. Shagun's life is divided into two parts - inner and outer. Raman works hard to give his wife and children a comfortable living. She has all that a woman of her status craves for. And yet she is not satisfied. One day she tells her husband that she wants something else in life. From that point onwards he begins to suspect her activities. One day Raman tells her about the distance that causes him unhappiness. Shagun mockingly says, "Distance?" she laughed as she drew her hand away. it is you who keep travelling. How can you talk about my distance?"(49).

Kapur has clearly exposed the marital discord in this materialistic world where children become victim and suffer to a great extent. The novel *Custody* also encapsulates how the children are socially affected by the divorce. The novelist has shown not only the suffering of the children but also the changes that occur as the consequence of marital discord. According to Meera Shirwadkar:

Children of divorce experience the loss of their identity as a member of an intact family, along with the loss of daily interaction with one of their parents. They get less help with homework and at school and elsewhere they may suffer from the cultural stigma of being from a "broken home". (552)

The children feel guilty, depressed and anxious. They appear worst in terms of their psychological adjustment. For example, Arjun starts to spend as much time in his friends' houses as possible. Similarly, Roohi reflects the brokenness of the family in constant long wails during her sleep. Arjun shows his disgust feelings through poor performance in his studies, by being irregular to school, complaining about his leg hurts, ill health and by avoiding food. All these are results of emotional cause of his parents' separation. Kapur states: "The child was reflecting his mother's guilt" (171). Arjun finds differences in his mother's behavior. Initially she gave the centre of attention when he came home. But after the arrival of Ashok, his mother's attention gets shifted and he finds in his father's place a stranger hovering around Shagun. It makes Arjun uncomfortable. He feels disturbed when his mother talks to Ashok. His sister Roohi shows the classic signs of insecurity through thumb sucking, and bed wetting etc.

In the novel *Custody*, Raman's marriage is not the only one that failed. Dissolution of Ishita's marriage also gives new implications which became her misfortune. Her marriage collapsed because she could not have children of her own. Alladi Uma has observed:

Marriage continues to have material, social and symbolic meanings and consequences which are asymmetrical in terms of their implications for females and males in at least three significant ways. Firstly, selfhood, respectability and status are tied to wifeness and motherhood in more exacting ways than they are to being a husband and/or father. A single man or a man without children is seen as unfortunate, but a woman in a similar situation is inauspicious, possibly dangerous. (20)

Ishita had an arranged marriage but as soon as her husband and in-laws discovered that she could not conceive, despite the many painful and tedious medical treatments she had undergone, she felt small and psychologically distorted and- "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" (21). Ishita, as an Indian girl suffers multiple psychological tortures due to infertility. Frustrated on the failure of all her innumerable prayers, she hated this baby, which was incapable of living even for few months. Stress, which Mrs. Rajaro instructed as the enemy of pregnancy, now sat heavy upon Ishita. It pressed her down to the ground. All she longed was for a very normal life of children, husband and happy elders. . The mother-in-law soon left to meet Ishita's mother, while Ishita stood back tensed. She enquired the purpose with her husband, who just merely grunted. But her disheartenment could not insist on an answer as she feared it would further make her miserable. Unable to face the truth she decided to wait in dark. Mrs. Rajaro called, after her mother-in-law left home and uttered "they want a divorce" (69). Fortunately and finally she remarried Raman and rests her life by caring Raman and his two children Arjun and Roohi.

To sum, Kapur has vividly captures Marital discord and its consequences in these two novels. Like Jane Austen, Marriage is one of the most prominent themes in her novels. She became apotheosis in her approach to marriage and marital discord. The novelist in these two novels, has caught the flux of a representative group of middle-class Indian women trapped in wed locks in different types of families. Her thematic approach to marriage also reveals all possible reasons to marry through her protagonists. In *A Married Woman*, Astha's parents want to marry her because they consider it as their duty. In *Custody*, for Shagun and Raman it is the standard line of beauty and brain, for Ishita and Suryakanta to be happy, for Shagun

and Ashok to follow the passion, lastly to Raman and Ishita it is the adjustment. The roots of suffering and the consequences of marital discord are also varied in nature. In *A Married Woman*, Astha suffers because of her husband's negligence to her. In *Custody*, Shagun and Ishita both suffer for different reason - one for passion and the other for barrenness.

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