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Children as Connecting Agents to Divorced Parents: A Study on Manju Kapur's *Custody*

Abstract

Parents alone can feel and realize the importance of children. A family without a child will never be a family at all. The growth of a family depends on the availability of a child in it. Marital life aims at having children after the marriage. Children decorate their house and make the family a lively one. The word family enjoys its full meaning only when there is a child in it. One who never hears the musical sound of lispings will not appreciate the music sound of any kind. Hence children occupy a prominent role in families which in turn societies. The expression of children has been the subject of many a writer in all the literatures. The presentation varies -the happy family they contribute to the cruelties meted out to and the agencies of evil forces they become -and their expression create a great impact

in the minds of the readers. Manju Kapur an Indian novelist of the modern times engages children to draw the deplorable nature they are subjected to. In her novel *Custody*, the title itself is self explanatory that it presents the repercussions of the custody battle that the parents fight against each other. It becomes a long-drawn-on battle and the children are tossed in the tumultuous legal waves which do not end. The end itself is heartbreaking to them as the brother and sister themselves are legally separated to live under the custody of single parenting. The novelist realistically portrays the Indian domestic panorama of children under the custody of divorced parents. However, the separated children stay as nodal agencies for the connection of their parents.

Keywords: Marriage, Divorce, Custody battle

Manju Kapur is one of the most famous contemporary writers in Indian Writing in English. Her world of fiction moves around sexual abuse, the politics of arranged marriage, infertility and its stigma, adoption, divorce, infidelity, sexual dysfunction, and custody battles. She has authored six novels. Her fifth novel *Custody* was published in 2011 which deals with a modern lady Shagun who leaves her husband Raman for another man. A bitter legal battle begins. The custody of their two children is at stake. Shagun must decide how much she wants to pay for freedom. Raman's second wife is unable to conceive and finds happiness by being a step-mother to his children. But when the court threatens the security of her new family, she decides she has to fight for it. When the legal battle is over, custody ensures, the separation is complete and the judgement leaves everlasting repercussions of the party involved.

Family is a unit of life. A few members make a family. They need to interact and coordinate for its smooth sail. Everyone in it is respected and cared. Even an infant one is not an exemption to it. Father, mother and children constitute its members. The institution of

marriage expands the family. Mutual consent and understanding with adjustments alone can keep the marriage life run smooth. Both the parents must help each other. If there is a failure in any of the partnership, the system will collapse. In every family, issues arise and lead to miserable scenes. It is a common trend everywhere in the world. Our country is not an exception too. Joya Chakravarty states, "In India, home is the Centre of every family and the importance of home cannot be negated. But home is the site where conflicts take place" (207). The individual rights of everyone in the family must be taken care of. If anything goes wrong in the structure of it, the result is dangerous. Everyone will have to pay for his rights.

I have chosen Manju Kapur's *Custody* to make a study on the expressions of children caught in between the divorced parents. The novel presents the custody battle between Raman and Shagun, a married couple, living with two children. When the first child Arjun was born there was joy in the household, When Shagun got conceived after a long gap, and there arose the problem. The second child was a girl and was named Roohi.

When Shagun gets a chance to befriend her husband's boss Ashok Khanna, she falls a prey to his bewitching way of life and showy manners. He is the CEO of the company in which Raman works as a Manager. Ashok works out plans to expand the business and hence he arranges a party in which Shagun is introduced to him. With a view to winning her heart, Ashok encourages her to act in the advertisement for which both the husband and wife were agree. This gives Ashok and Shagun a chance to come closer. Ashok frequently deposes Raman to undertake long trips to other states in connection with the company business. He travels without knowing what is happening between the boss and his wife. He pays no attention to the protests made by his wife for his frequent absence from the house. Shagun's intimacy with Ashok effects a great change in her personal life. She draws a curtain between her normal life and the secret one. When her mother Mrs. Sabharwal notices the secret affair of her daughter, she warns her immediately. Soon Raman too suspects the strange behaviour

of his wife and he appoints detective agency to confirm it. Shockingly it becomes true. The domestic bliss that they had enjoyed for nearly twelve years was gone forever. Raman's agony knows no bounds. All his persuasions with Shagun have gone in vain. She has left home and children too and lives with her mother. Soon, she serves a legal notice to Raman for divorce. She remains very firm in her illicit affair with Ashok. Raman's pleadings with her do not bring the desired response. She decides to stay with Ashok in his residence. However, the two children were under the custody of their father, Raman.

Shagun phones to Raman for the divorce by mutual consent with visitation rights. Raman refuses to give divorce and so she kidnaps her children. Deciding to seek legal remedies, he files a suit for the custody of his children. He finds that his wife's joining with him is beyond his imagination and hence, he too decides to keep her off from him.

Arjun's study is not encouraging due to the parental conflicts. He scores only poor marks and is not at good in his studies. He goes to the extreme level of forging the signature of the mother. He is mentally shocked in the presence of a totally changes mother. Shagun thwarts all the attempts of Raman to contact the children saying they are afraid of him. Hence, he takes the matter to the court for legal remedy. There are three or four adjournments for the case due to various reasons. There was no progress in the studies of Arjun and suddenly he stops going to school. Ashok suggests taking him to Dehradun Public Academy where he is an alumnus.

When the court proceedings begin again, Raman is hopeful of the visitation rights of the children. Shagun is pressing for the divorce while Raman is pressing for the custody of the children. The court permits Arjun to go to the DPA school. Raman is awarded the visitation rights in every weekend from Friday six to Sunday six. Again half of the school holidays, the children can spend with their father. The judgment is satisfying to Raman whereas Shagun becomes aggrieved.

Soon Ashok gets a transfer to the US and Shagun wants to speed up the process of divorce and custody of the children. Raman is not in a mind to respond positively. Hence he decides to drag-on the issue. On the day of hearing in the court, Shagun presses for a divorce on mutual consent. They appear in the court and swear that it is impossible for them to live together. However, the divorce petitions are signed and the decree awarded. In the next month Shagun marries Ashok and leaves for New York. Before leaving, she sends Roohi to Raman's custody.

Shagun initiates a few steps to get Roohi to her and even files a petition from the States to take custody of her. Her petition presently demands both the children to be under her custody. She further hopes that being a girl child, the court may be pleased to allow her to go with her mother and hence she files the case. In the meantime Raman comes into contact with a girl Ishita, who is divorced for not bearing child. All the attempts made by her parents to find another husband for her have gone in vain. Raman decides to make her as stepmother to Roohi. In fact, Roohi is very much in attachment with Ishita, for she has taken care of her for more than four years. Raman and Ishita are much worried about the recent petition in the court taking that this may separate Roohi from them. In the counter petition, his advocate Nandan narrates all the circumstances under which Roohi becomes a growing child under the custody of Raman and Ishita. He too files another case to have Roohi her option. Ishita has educated the girl to openly tell the court that she opts to stay with her father and not with anyone else. Her heart will break if she leaves her in the court and hence she has taken adequate steps to retain the child at any cost and entices her towards her. But being agitated, Raman has not allowed her to enjoy such a chance. He want to have his daughter at any cost even at the cost of his life. The judge, on hearing the child, allows the custody of Roohi to Raman and Arjun to Shagun.

This novel highlights the battle of custody of the children by their parents. It also describes the painful emotional conflicts of those who involved in the battle. From humanistic point of view, they suffer from the deprivation of their basic rights. Raman marries Shagun with all aim to have a blissful life. Being a dutiful husband, he gets two children and pays all attention to the respectable life of them. He is a bit ambitious like any other human being and hence goes after promotions and increase in his salary. But the right to enjoy the family life is denied to him. His wife goes with his boss leaving the husband and the children. She has paid scanty regard to all his efforts to reunite the family and draws him to legal battle. He loses his peace in life, becomes a heart-patient and undergoes traumatic moments all along his life. When Shagun phones to him for the divorce on mutual consent, “he felt like a pitiable beggar, bewildered by circumstances” (109). The request itself echoes his mind for days together.

The novel presents clearly the mental attitude of the children due to the parental conflicts. Even though they are in the childhood, they feel the situations. They are frequently shifted from family to family, school to school, country to country and father to mother. The worst of it is that they are taken to the court for trial and hearings. They have the basic right to enjoy a life with their parents. But the separation of the parents compels them to live under the custody of caretakers. Arjun has to believe and adjust with his mother's second husband, Shagun slowly compels him to accept Ashok as his father. As a result, he loses his interest in his studies and at one stage, he stops going to school. “All his friends had their parents firmly in their background... Nobody consciously thought about them. Now he was different one” (159,160). When he pretends a leg pain, his doctor tells his mother, “I can't find any physical symptom. Sometimes there is an emotional cause” (161). The child is mentally upset and tortured about the new school he is going to be admitted. Kapur presents it as, “His own departure began to preoccupy him, and soon not a day passed when he did not visualize a

different setting for himself” (167). His sister Roohi also undergoes similar painful experiences. The shift in the parental love and care has torn the emotional life of the children to pieces. They are compulsorily trained and taught to accept unrealities in their life. Even at the time of Roohi’s appearance in the court, she is being taught to present matters suitable to the wishes of her parents. Thus, the children have lost their basic rights to live a happy and peaceful life together under the custody of the parents. The worst is that the court itself separates the brother and sister allowing them to go one with each other and thus bringing an end to the custody battle. Though the legal battle is over, we can imagine that the real emotional battle begins between the children only after the court verdict.

Shagun’s marriage with Raman is an arranged one on standard lines. She is much known for her beauty and he for better prospects. Shagun is only twenty-two at the time of her marriage. When she gives birth to a male child, there is joy in the family. When the Brand enters India, Raman is ready for the change. “He wanted more challenge, more prestige, more salary” (16). It is this situation in life which creates rupture in their family life. Shagun begins to protest his frequent travels to distant places. Kapur describes his plight as, “In his new job Raman was in charge of mang-oh! a duty that took him up and down the country. It was a huge leap in status and responsibility, but as his time away from home increased, Shagun began to protest” (16).

Shagun's sudden pregnancy again after eight years causes much alarm to her. There are pretty bickering between the husband and the wife. In fact, she has left her studies expecting only freedom in married life. Due to Raman’s frequent travels, she has been befriended to Ashok, the boss of Raman. Their frequent meetings bring so much of intimacy and hence she has become very much attached to Ashok. They love each other dearly and plan to marry after obtaining divorce on mutual consent. On falling a prey to Ashok, Shagun loses all her peace in life. She finds it very difficult to manage her children. On the one side,

she has to maintain the interest of Ashok and on the other side, she has to initiate legal steps to obtain divorce from Raman. The imaginary charges that she has to level against her husband too torture her mind. Then new life that she chooses is not of the one she wishes to have. At the end, after marrying Ashok, she plans to take custody of the two children. Her preparations and expectations torture her mind and she becomes restless. When Raman legally enjoys the visitation rights, she becomes melancholic and silent. When Ashok becomes calm and silent, her mind agitates as, “The upset she felt about Raman’s visitation rights would not be shared by him, nor the pain of her impending separation from her son” (209).

Shagun feels that she is a victim of husband’s professional career. She finds him married more to his profession than to her. He does not seem to know about what his wife wants and how she feels. Even prior to her marriage, she has been put under the vigilant custody of her parents. She is not able to decide her life but her parent, family and customs. Originally she wants to be a model but her mother is strongly opposed to it. “She had wanted to be a model, but her mother was strongly opposed to a career that would allow all kind of lechery near her lovely daughter”(11). When she finds her marital life straining, she goes for a divorce which is instantly rejected. Her plea for the custody of the girl child under her care also is rejected. Thus, she is subjected to too much hardship which amount to the violation of her basic rights. Though her second marriage is a self-inflicted one, her sufferings are brought about by the external forces working against her.

. Ishita, a widow finds chances to move with Raman. Her parents pave the way for their affair to develop. Ishita at first ignores it and remains indifferent. Soon she is very much attracted towards Roohi and begins to be sympathetic. She consents for her marriage with Raman and visualizing the well-being of Roohi. She prepares Roohi for her education and nurses her well without any prejudice. But she is afraid of the sword that hangs over her head.

She fears that Shagun may take Roohi back through court. The very thought upsets her very much. So, she prepares the child very much to give positive statements in the court to stay with her father. Till she gets the news about the judgement of the custody case, Ishita has experienced the greatest pain in her mind. She volunteered in the court, “Ever since my marriage, I have put her welfare above everything. I think of her as my flesh and blood” (393). As soon as she hears the positive judgement, she reaches her first. “She took the child’s hand and started leading her out the court room” (395). In this regard Azhar states, “Ishita’s union to Raman empowers her and provides her stamina to fight for the common thought: the custody of his children” (44). Thus, all her emotional turbulence has come to a stay.

Kapur presents the domestic conflicts in the first part of the novel and in the second, the picturesque portrayal of the battle of custody. “The novel takes us through a series of events and incidents with separation, divorce, and remarriages of the four adults and with it follows a series of ugliness with the legal procedure or the custody battle with the emotions of the children at stake” (Pew Maji). She makes all her characters entangled in it and undergoes emotional repercussions. Though she brings an end to the battle, the psychological tremor that the characters have undergone will continue to rock them forever. In this regard Sangeetha says, “Shagun even though enjoys the whole rights over her son misses her daughter because of this marital failure. The children born in a same family for same parents starts to lead two different kind of life” (53).

Children born of the same parents get divided due to the parental conflicts. Shagun’s attempts are all against the interest of the family and in turn the children. Her affair with Ashok only poses great blocks to the growth of her children. The way she behaves with her husband is only irritating to the children. When they learn that they are tossed in the marital conflict of their parents, they become mentally upset. Separation after the custody battle only

adds fuel to fire. What is already damaged is further aggravated by the pronouncement. The egoist legal battle in the presence of the children make them feel the worst in their life. They are tested unnecessarily to be with the mother or the father. The judgement also might be against what they might have wished. Thus, they are torn apart both in mind and in spirit.

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