

Analysis Of Psychological And Emotional Complexities; Impact Of Marital Discord Upon Children In Manju Kapur's Custody

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Abstract: This research aims to study the emotional and psychological complexities of a modern Indian family navigating the tensions of custody battle in Manju Kapur's novel *Custody*. Set against the backdrop of India's post-liberalization era, the novel examines how societal changes impact relationships within a middle-class family. Shagun, mother of Roohi and Arjun seeking independence and freedom, engages in an extra-marital affair that disrupts her marriage to Raman, while Ishita, the second wife, epitomizes the self-sacrificing ideal of motherhood and wifehood that defines traditional values. Their emotional and legal struggles, particularly in the context of the custody battle over their children, reveal the gendered biases in India's legal system and the psychological toll of marital breakdowns on children. *Custody* critiques the evolving societal expectations of women, questioning the conflict between personal desires and familial obligations in a rapidly transforming India.

Key Words: Custody of Children, Marital discord, Legal and Psychological Complexities

Introduction: At the heart of *Custody* lies the emotional and legal battle for the custody of Shagun and Raman's children, Arjun and Roohi. The custody dispute is not just a personal conflict but also a reflection of the societal and systemic issues that arise in marital breakdowns. Kapur uses this legal drama to reveal the psychological toll on both the children and the parents, as well as to highlight the flaws in the legal system that often favour one parent over the other (Bhatia 8). In India, where family laws are deeply influenced by traditional gender roles, the custody battle becomes a battleground not only for parental rights but also for emotional control and family dynamics. Shagun and Raman's divorce, followed by their bitter custody dispute, exposes the complexities of the legal system in India, which is often ill-equipped to deal with the emotional needs of children involved in such conflicts.

The novel critiques the gender biases inherent in the legal process, showing how Shagun uses the system to her advantage while Raman, despite his emotional attachment to his children, struggles to maintain a fair position within the proceedings. The research brings to light the deep emotional, psychological, and legal intricacies faced by families going through divorce, particularly when the welfare of children is at stake (Fernando 84). The emotional and psychological effects of divorce and custody battles are devastating, especially for the children involved. Arjun, Shagun and Raman's son, is caught in the middle of his parents' conflict. Torn between his love and loyalty for both parents, Arjun finds himself unable to reconcile the emotional turmoil of his divided family. The psychological toll of being forced to choose sides becomes more pronounced as the battle for custody escalates. As the novel reveals, Arjun's struggles reflect a broader societal issue in which children of divorced parents often suffer from emotional distress due to conflicting familial expectations and the strain of divided loyalties.

Kapur poignantly describes the emotional fragmentation of Arjun as he witnesses the collapse of his parents' marriage:

Arjun could not understand why everything that had once seemed so solid and unbreakable was now crumbling around him. His mother, whom he loved so dearly, was no longer the same woman he had once adored; his father, the man he looked up to, seemed powerless and defeated. Arjun felt as though he were floating in a world where nothing made sense anymore (Kapur 211).

This description of Arjun's inner turmoil underscores the profound impact of divorce on children, especially when they are forced to navigate the emotional complexities of parental separation. Roohi, the youngest of the two children, faces a similar emotional struggle, albeit in a different way. She is too young to fully understand the reasons behind the separation of her parents, yet she experiences the emotional distress of being caught between them. Roohi's confusion and anxiety over her parents' fight for custody are intensified by Shagun's manipulative actions. As Kapur writes,

Roohi felt as though she were being torn between two worlds. Her mother, with her constant promises of freedom and new experiences, seemed like a beacon of hope. But her father, despite his stoic silence, offered her the comfort of familiarity and stability (Kapur, 205).

Roohi's internal conflict mirrors the broader emotional toll on children during custody battles, where emotional manipulation often exacerbates their sense of confusion and distress. The novel effectively illustrates how marital breakdowns affect the psychological well-being of children, particularly in the context of divorce-induced trauma (Amirtham 34). The children in *Custody* are not mere bystanders to the adult conflicts around them; they are deeply affected by the emotional volatility of their parents. The stress of navigating divided loyalties and emotional manipulation takes a significant psychological toll, often leaving lasting scars on their ability to form healthy relationships in the future. As Bruze et al. note, "Children caught in the crossfire of divorce often experience long-term emotional effects, ranging from depression and anxiety to difficulties with attachment and identity" (Bruze et al. 145). In *Custody*, these effects are vividly portrayed through the characters of Arjun and Roohi, whose emotional landscapes are deeply shaped by the instability of their family environment.

Custody represents the emotional and legal battle for the custody of Shagun and Raman's children, Arjun and Roohi. The legal and emotional intricacies of the custody proceedings bring to light the complexities of the Indian legal system, which is often inadequate in addressing the emotional needs of children caught in the middle of their parents' conflict.

The court seemed to make decisions that were more about legal strategy than the children's well-being. It was as though the children themselves had become the pawns in a game played by adults who cared more about victory than the emotional scars left behind (Kapur 285).

This critique of the legal system reveals the flaws inherent in the Indian family law system, particularly its failure to prioritize the psychological needs of children during custody battles.

Kapur critiques the biases inherent in the legal system, which often favours maternal custody in cases involving children, despite the emotional turmoil and manipulation that can accompany this process. As Rajkotia argues, "The Indian family law system remains entangled in traditional values, often failing to account for the psychological complexities that arise in cases of marital breakdown" (Rajkotia 157). The custody battle becomes more than a legal proceeding; it serves as a battleground for ideological and cultural values, with each character seeking to shape the future of their children according to their own desires and beliefs (Rajesh 20).

Another critical dimension of the custody battle in *Custody* is the portrayal of the gendered legal system in India, where biases often favour mothers in child custody cases. Shagun, aware of the legal system's inherent bias, manipulates the situation to her advantage. Despite her emotional instability and questionable motives, she uses her position as the children's mother to gain an upper hand in the legal battle. "The legal proceedings in *Custody* expose how gendered assumptions and patriarchal ideologies shape decisions regarding child custody, often neglecting the emotional and psychological needs of the children involved" (Aiyer 640-658).

Kapur critiques the legal process through Shagun's strategic use of the custody system. She seeks to gain control over her children by using them as pawns in her broader battle against Raman. As the narrative unfolds, Shagun's actions underscore the manipulative nature of divorce proceedings in a patriarchal society. In one of the court scenes, Shagun reflects on her power:

I know the court will always side with me. After all, I am the mother. That is all I need. No one can take my children away from me, not even Raman. Not when I can claim their love, their loyalty. I will make sure they never forget me (Kapur 289).

This statement highlights how Shagun leverages her maternal status to manipulate the situation, showing the gendered dynamics that play out in Indian family law. Rajkotia emphasizes that Indian family law is often entrenched in patriarchal values that are biased toward the mother, even when the emotional needs of the children may be better served by the father. As she argues,

The Indian legal system, while ostensibly neutral, is still deeply rooted in patriarchal principles that position the mother as the natural custodian of the child. This bias perpetuates gender inequalities within the family and ignores the complexities of emotional and psychological well-being in the custody process (Rajkotia 217).

This legal bias is evident in *Custody* as Shagun's manipulation of the system ultimately highlights how the law can be exploited to further personal agendas, rather than prioritizing the children's best interests. On the other hand, Raman, despite his emotional love for his children, struggles to navigate the emotional and legal terrain of the custody battle. While Raman's love for his children is unquestionable, his role as a father is undermined by the legal and societal biases that favour Shagun. The court's ruling against him, despite his genuine concern for the welfare of his children, underscores the gendered nature of the legal system, which often devalues the emotional capabilities of fathers in child-rearing. As Tulsian and Pandey point out, "The legal system in India, though increasingly more inclusive, remains marred by gendered assumptions about parenting. Fathers are often seen as secondary caregivers, even when their emotional and financial involvement in their children's lives is substantial" (Tulsian & Pandey 203). Raman's struggle throughout the custody battle reflects this imbalance and highlights how the system fails to recognize the evolving roles of fathers in contemporary family life.

Summing up: Kapur's portrayal of the custody battle also underscores the emotional toll that the legal system has on the individuals involved. As the conflict drags on, both Shagun and Raman find themselves emotionally exhausted by the protracted legal process. The legal system, rather than resolving the conflict, exacerbates the emotional strain on the parents and their children. This is especially evident when the characters begin to question their roles as parents and the moral costs of their actions. As Raman reflects, "In the end, it is not the court's decision that matters, but the toll it takes on all of us. What have we become in the pursuit of what is right? Can the law truly define what is best for my children?" (Kapur 310). This moment of reflection highlights the moral ambiguity that pervades the custody battle and questions the adequacy of legal systems in addressing the emotional complexities of familial conflicts.

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