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Redefining Motherhood in Manju Kapur's *Custody*

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Abstract

Manju Kapur's fifth novel, *Custody* redefines motherhood by delving into its dualistic conceptualisations. Many theorists claim that motherhood, the glorified position and sacrificial role of women is also treated as a site where gender roles are encrypted. Mothering is a role through which enforcement of male regime is materialised. It is an institution to reify patriarchal hegemony. *Custody* examines the role of mothers in familial functioning. It also retraces the nuances of motherhood in consolidating societal norms. It interrogates the very system which questions the perfection or imperfection of women under the prism of motherhood. The novel mainly focuses on intricate familial issues where mothers play a pivotal in maintaining equilibrium in familial power structure. It projects two generations of mothers- traditional and modern, and analyses the connotations of motherhood by disseminating the dichotomised perspectives of these mothers. The paper is an objective and critical analysis of the contents of the text. It aims at finding the author's observations and manifestations of the definitions of motherhood. While attempting to authenticate the writer's arguments the paper incorporates different critical essays, theories, and literary texts.

Keywords: Individualism, Hegemony, Motherhood, Patriarchy, Redefinition.

Motherhood has been assigned with double connotations in manifold works. In *Encyclopedia of Motherhood* Andrea O'Really describes that motherhood is not for biology only but it is also "a social institution that functions ideologically and politically" (571). Jeffner Allen's description can be considered here: "If woman, in patriarchy, is she who exists as the womb and wife of man, every woman is by definition a mother: she who produces for the sake of men. A mother is she whose body is used as a resource to reproduce men and the world of men" (315). Motherhood "affects everyone, both women and men, but differently. Even women that have no children" (Chodorow 277). Nnu Ego, the protagonist of Buchi Emecheta's *the Joys of Motherhood* is a representative of the victims of compulsory motherhood in the Ibo Nigerian culture. Deshvidesh in "Hinduism on Mothers" finds dual interpretation of motherhood in Manu's instruction given in *Manu Smriti*. In the essay he mentions that Manu proclaims to bestow more reverence to mother than father appreciating the role of mother in one's life. Raja Rao glorifies motherhood in

Kanthapura. Nissim Ezekiel in "Night of the Scorpion" valorises the self-effacing and sacrificial nature of an Indian mother. R.K. Narayan in *The Dark Room* demonstrates polarised state of Savitri who rebels against the norms as a wife but yields to the system as a mother. *Custody* manifests the dualistic meanings of motherhood and repositions it in a novel perspective. In the novel Kapur discerns her two women characters reclaim their individualism through motherhood. *Custody* exhibits the complicacies of parenthood especially demonstrating the sacrificial and self-effacing role of mothers.

The novel delves into diverse roles of mothers from traditional to modern depicting a wide range of mothering. Mrs. Kaushik, Mrs. Sabharwal and Mrs. Rajora are representations of mothers of older generation who seek their authority and autonomy within the framework of patriarchy. Mrs. Kausik is the mother of Raman Kaushik who marries Shagun. She is not in good terms with Shagun and because of that Shagun decides to live separately from her in-laws and Raman agrees to her demands. Even if she has grudges against Shagun, she never lags behind in safeguarding her son's life. So, when she finds out Shagun's infidelity she tries to protect her son. She even bribes the servants to remain vigilant and spy on Shagun and inform her at once if any suspicious or unnatural thing happens. She also warns Raman against his tenderness to his manipulative wife and insists him to exercise his authority of being a householder - "I named you after Ram, because I thought you would grow up with his qualities, but too much of patience is not appropriate in a householder" (98). "Mrs Kaushik went on putting her heavy feet unerringly into the wounds in her son's heart, her mother's instinct showing her exactly where they were. Her son, the family breadwinner, was being denied his central place. Her advice was doled out with enough tactlessness to make it totally unacceptable" (98).

Another representative of mothers of older generation is Mrs. Sabharwal, Shagun's mother. Mrs. Sabharwal wonders at Shagun's extraordinary wishes to abandon family for her adulterous relation. She cannot comprehend Shagun's dream of a liberated being to be achieved in her relationship with Ashok. Shagun's complaint of boredom and trite seems trifle to her. She finds it illogical when Shagun takes extreme decision for her uncertain relationship with Ashok risking her familial integrity. So, when she senses the breakdown of Shagun's married life, she tries to rebuild it by instilling the value of family into Shagun's mind: "Beti, have you ever thought of the consequences of your actions? Even if you don't care for Raman, for heaven's sake preserve some appearances. You think all wives love their husbands? But they stay married. You are so idealistic; you don't think about the long term. What about society, what about your children?" (76). She further reminds her of traditional values: "The house rests upon us women. In your children's happiness, your husband's happiness, lies your own. Anything else is just temporary" (99). It is incomprehensible for her of what Shagun imbibes to as modern values of women's autonomy and liberation. She cannot also perceive rationality behind Shagun's taking extreme steps to erase boredom from her life. She finds nothing wrong with Raman who is a kind hearted, loving and caring son, husband, father and son-in-law. While Shagun conceives Raman's extreme concern of her mother as unnatural Mrs. Sabharwal finds solace in this abnormality of Raman, as what Shagun terms it, because it eliminates her emptiness of not having a son. When Shagun blames Raman for being crooked as he hires a detective to spy on her Mrs. Sabharwal finds no objection to Raman's action. She says - "With Shagun doing what she was doing, Mrs. Sabharwal could imagine Raman's trauma,

saw easily the pain behind his actions. It was her daughter that was beyond comprehension, the child to whom she must remain ever faithful. Her fate was hard, and she felt sorry for herself" (95). As a mother she wishes for Shagun's well-being so she has to support her, even if she knows that "Nothing could come of a mother giving up her children, but to continue to live with Ashok without marriage would in the long run be even worse" (242). She obliges to the very belief that "The physical and physic weight of responsibility on the woman with children is by far the heaviest of social burdens. ... the mother's very character, her status as a woman, is in question if she has failed her children" (Rich 52). Unwillingly and unreasonably, she takes side of Shagun and supports her in her plans to defeat Raman in the child custody case.

Mrs. Rajora who also embodies mother of older generation in the novel, is different from Mrs. Kaushik and Mrs. Sabharwal. She is an independent, determined, financially self-reliant woman who has clarity of insight as an individual. It is also true that her mind is preoccupied with her daughter, Ishita's marriage. The imposition of compulsion of marriage of her daughter lurks in her mind and she persistently endeavours to find a match for her daughter even after the latter gets divorced from her first husband. But her obligation to societal norms does not hinder her from following her conscience in reshaping her daughter's life which gets derailed by her unfruitful first marriage. She encourages Ishita in her social works by actively participating in her slum activities.

Ishita and Shagun are representatives of mothers of modern generation upholding modern values and also safeguarding traditional motherly roles. Kapur exhibits a different concept of motherhood in her portrayal of these two characters. Both the characters reclaim their identities in the domain of motherhood. Shagun even exploits Raman with her motherly opportunities in claiming divorce from him. Raman refuses to divorce Shagun amicably and as a deal to solve the problem and to avoid hardships in the court proceedings Shagun offers the custody of both the children to Raman in return for divorce. She 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?" (109). Attempting to acquire her freedom Shagun utilises her motherhood in her strategies of getting divorce. "Right now we just want to get as many dates as we can. Let him see how it feels. All I asked for was my freedom, willing to let him have the children, still he tried to blackmail me. Bastard" (153). Her motherhood is not a chain that clutches her life but is a state that empowers her to subvert the hierarchy of patriarchy. Through her motherhood she decentres the centre and exercises her dominance over Raman, a man. So, she puts her proposal to Raman: "She is willing to give up all the claims to his property, all maintenance for herself. All she wants is divorce by mutual consent, the custody case dropped and visitation rights. Half the holidays and weekends. Just what the father had" (231).

Shagun faces innumerable challenges from the society in transcending the normal route of a married woman even from her own mother who as "A woman with her values was incapable of visualizing a companionship beyond the mundane of domestic life. That soul, that body that had flowered with Ashok could not now be asked to fold its petals and return to its budlike state" (96). She cannot convince her mother regarding her fulfilment with Ashok: "Everything was magic the moment she stepped into the airport, the intensity of the last minutes of waiting, the ecstasy of reunion. This was where she belonged, this was where she was most herself" (106). Her mother reminds her of her familial

responsibilities which she perceives as an entrapment – “My life is a nightmare. It’s hard to be a wife when your heart is somewhere else. If only I were not a mother, how easy it would be. To leave him, to live with you [Ashok], just be happy” (83-84). She expresses her anger in the words: “No – it is only me that is wrong. Me, my whole life, from this stupid early marriage, too- to having Roohi so late” (94). She wants to end her non-existent syndrome in her family behaving as a stranger to Raman with whom she maintains relationship for outward appearance only detaching herself physically and emotionally from him – “Although his wife now remained in the house, she was adamant about staying out of the bedroom, spending the nights with her delighted daughter instead” (100). She declines Raman’s open call to begin their relationship again forgetting her infidelity and decides to end her marriage in pursuit of her union with Ashok. She denies Allen Jeffnar’s concept that “Motherhood is dangerous to women because it continues the structure within which females must be women and mothers, and conversely, because it denies females the creation of a subjectivity” (315). She even manipulates her motherhood and mothering role moulding her children to attune to her wish. She plans strategically even by using multiple lies to insist Raman to give her divorce with mutual understanding. Later, Raman agrees to her terms and gives her divorce. Even if she divorces from him, she insures of shared parenting with him so that their differences will not affect their children’s lives. Thus, motherhood which she feels as imprisonment earlier provides her opportunities facilitating in her pursuit of her dreams. Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri’s *The Lowland* is a representation of the motherly ideal of domesticity and purity entrapped in the concept of motherhood. In order to conform to the norms of a good mother she has to self-efface and sacrifice her own wishes. Shagun resists to this imposition and turns the dice in her advantage. Even if she schemes to get divorce from her husband, she never lags behind in bestowing her motherly love and care to her children. Simrit in Nayantara Sahgal’s *The Day in Shadow* divorces her husband for her selfhood but never ignores her children’s concern and bestows them her devotion without any remorse. Shagun too gets separated from Raman but she plans to get custody of both the children hoping that she can provide a better life and future to them than Raman can do.

In the case of Ishita, the concept of motherhood is displayed in a different perspective. Ishita’s first marriage has a sad end due to her infertility. “Patriarchy could not survive without motherhood ...” (Rich 43). So, her unfulfillment of the patriarchal demands negates her very existence. Despite this setback she marches forward and redefines herself. She joins an ashram and showers her motherly affection to the orphans reshaping their life. When she marries Raman and becomes stepmother to Roohi she expands her horizon of potentialities. At the custodial case of Roohi, she conspires and strategically schemes to win the case succeeding in convincing the judge to give the verdict in her favour. Despite being biological mother Shagun fails to manifest her care and concern of her daughter Roohi in front of the judge. In fact, what Raman fails earlier against Shagun can be compensated with his success over her in this case only with the rigorous and incessant effort and support from Ishita. Initially, motherhood is a cause of subordination for Ishita. But in her battle of motherhood against Shagun, she outwits her. Thus, in the lives of both Shagun and Ishita motherhood opens wide the horizon of their world expanding their life beyond limitations. They are not blind followers of traditional concepts of motherhood like

their mothers. Rather they celebrate both their individualism and familial responsibilities disseminating that parenting can go with selfhood.

Thus, the novel studies the concept of motherhood from different dimensions. Through the characters like Mrs. Kaushik, Mrs. Sabharwal and Mrs. Rajora Kapur portrays traditionally bound mothers who veer their outlook with the changing time and space. Even if they adopt patriarchal concepts of motherhood and conform to the set traits, they transform themselves for the welfare of their children, though unwillingly. Kapur's prominent women characters like Shagun and Ishita redefine themselves through their state of motherhood. They assert themselves within the context of motherhood in their own course. Family is not grounded on the sacrifices of the wives like what Shagun's mothers believes but it should be built on mutual respect and love of what Shagun and Ishita cherish. These wives do not worship their feminine mystique, borrowing Friedan's term, to safeguard the so-called perfect family in cost of their individual spirit rather subvert patriarchal familial structure through their fixed roles of motherhood. Motherhood embodies a range of symbols like nationality, boundary, integrity, nature, earth, etc., and is glorified and valorised with the innate qualities like sacrificial, self-effacing, enduring, caring, etc. What feminists claim is that in order to maintain such institutional tenets mothers subdue their individualism and self-denial is neutralised in the realm of motherhood. Kapur, though has no objection to motherhood, rejects compulsory motherhood or motherhood grounded on discrediting individualism. She professes that mothers can maintain an equilibrium in between her responsibilities to others and self too. Depiction of dual representation of motherhood in *Custody*, clearly manifests Kapur's disquisition regarding motherhood. The novelist discerns that the older generation of mothers limit themselves to these fixed concepts of motherhood while younger generation of mothers cross the patriarchal parameters of motherhood navigating themselves to a course of selfhood without defying the underlying essence of motherhood. She reproduces the concept of mothering what Andrea O'Reilly posits that "motherhood consists of the strict expectations determined by a social order, while mothering is an individual woman's approach to the experience of being a mother" (571).

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