

Treatment of Infidelity and Infertility in Manju Kapur's 'Custody'

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Female sexuality and maternity, both are rooted in the material, biological, sexed body, yet ultimately are historically/culturally/socially determined, constructed, and “discoursed about”. Women bodies, sexualities and gender identities are sites where cultural notions of normality and indeed social respectability are contested. The constructions of ‘female sexuality’ and ‘motherhood’ are discursive sites in which power fluctuates constantly and is appropriated and negotiated. The discourses surrounding motherhood and women’s sexuality remain deeply engaged with patriarchal- dominant economic and political interest. Maternity is both a site of power for women, as well as a site of patriarchal control and regulation of female sexuality and agency. In a traditional framework there is no space for a woman as an individual, she must be a wife and a mother. Women are forced to conceal silently their bodies and sexuality under the monitoring of family and society. The primary reason is that sex is the culture source of problems and crisis. Control of female sexuality is legitimized, even effectively mystified under the name of tradition. Female sexuality is presented in alleviated terms by glorification of motherhood.

Manju Kapur presents two contradictory aspects of female embodiment, infidelity and infertility in her latest novel ‘Custody’. Infidelity empowers a woman but infertility disempowers her. Infidelity reflects and defends women’s right to desiring, and the pursuit of the fulfillment of female sexual desire is a metaphor for women’s equality politics. Autonomously decided, infidelity permits women to experience their own sexuality as a pleasurable one as they control their gender, their sexuality and their reproductive potential and it challenges the male domination and patriarchal mechanisms of surveillance and control over women bodies. Infertility is culturally and socially constructed in such a way that even though it affects a couple it is the woman who bears the burden. Women’s social status, direction in life, economic achievement, well-being and the very meaning of marital life hinges around their ability to give birth and rear children. As Anderson says, “Motherhood is usually identified as an essential part of being a woman, to an extent that women without children are usually portrayed as unfulfilled and incomplete” (42). So, body is a source of discontentment for an infertile woman.

Manju Kapur treats the two issues of female body from a feminist perspective.

The paper first discusses the treatment of infidelity in the novel. Adultery has always been part of complex human relations- not just in the 21st century but long before that. Its expressions have manifested in art, literature, plays and music; their creators interpreting subversive affairs in diverse ways: sometimes unequivocally condemning its occurrence, others attempting to decode human experience, whose commonality it has been impossible to deny.

Poets, writers, painters and litterateurs have made their creations from the tangled interplay of tragedy and desire. Part of a subversive, creative genre, adultery seems to have become a marker of many responses- personal, societal and political often colliding with each other defiance against orthodoxy, human longing for transgressive relationships, moral outrage over disintegration of the structure of the classical family, the highly conflicted anti-monogamous human tendency. According to patriarchal notion adultery is a 'renegade' relationship because it violates 'tradition'- a question which has also charged discussions of gay and lesbian politics. If the notion of adultery continues to evoke moral indignation and anxiety it is equally an act of exercising personal autonomy. The ethical and emotional tensions inherent in adultery are the main concern of the women writers. In recent years, the subject of female sexuality has aroused heated disputes and arguments in academic circles. The contemporary writers comprehend that if the women want to be empowered and emancipated they have to overthrow traditional sexuality culture and involve themselves in dispute and conflict between sex morality of supremacy (patriarchy) and female sexuality. It is not in its inhibiteness and suppression but in privilege and assertion that the new sexual ideology is structured.

Kapur in her novel examines how woman has begun to grow as an individual and the primary center of collision for her becomes the institution of marriage which has, so far, constituted the limits of her space. The woman now has moved to the center and has become an important entity in the social set up. Kapur presents extramarital love in her novel and uses this sexual freedom as an instrument of resistance to thwart patriarchal myths and values. She portrays a female character Shagun who celebrates her sexuality and re-appropriates its generative principle through a deliberate inversion of patriarchal morals. Her sexuality is an arena of pleasure and agency in which she is empowered to use her body for herself. She challenges the male dominated and patriarchal mechanisms of surveillance and control. Tiefer comments : "What women need is not to learn traditional morality according to official rules but to put forward women's sexuality that has been contained by the patriarchy system in the past" (114).

Shagun and Raman's marriage has been arranged along standard lines, she the beauty, he the one with brilliant prospects. She meets Ashok Khanna, a corporate man who is seduced by her beauty: "In her color, her greenish eyes and her demeanor, she was a perfect blend of east and west" (4). Shagun is also enticed by his loving words and sterling elegance and leaves behind the essential constraints of marriage and flouts its sacredness through sexual transgression. But as a married woman she suffers from her love affair, she worries about being caught: "Guilt sees acquisition everywhere in the glance of a servant, the fretful cry of a child, the stranger staring on the street, a driver's insolent tone ... it was her conscience that made her so uneasy" (1). She faces conflict as she neither upholds the strong stoic and self-sacrificing image of her predecessors nor curbs her dangerous feminine desires. Whether to sublimate herself as social conformist or strike out as rebel is a dilemma for her. Her mother who has internalized the subtleties of patriarchy views her as a sexually erring wife, who must be chastised and brought back into the orbit of conventional social morality. She advises her: "The house rests upon a woman. In your children happiness, your husband happiness, lies your own. Anything else is just temporary" (80). Shagun's mother begs her not to bring shame to the family and be an object to ridicule: "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 the society? What about your children?" (79) Her comments display social attitude and treatment towards a female in extramarital affairs. It

also indicates that the support network for the female is insufficient in physical world as society casts an unforgiving shadow on the female who is infidel.

Kapur shows how Shagun who has lost her individual identity in her 'stupid early marriage' seeks for the lost selfhood in her extramarital relation with Ashok. This affair gives her a delightful experience and teaches her to be self-reliant, confident, powerful, independent and resourceful as she pursues sexuality equality and self-independence. She reflects her character bravely and then creates proper response intelligently. Griffin (2001: 340) has pointed out: "to be a lover, there are more chances to face the reality and the true inner self. Perhaps, being a lover is not accepted by the society, so this kind of person needs to do self-reflection and self-doubt than common people". Shagun defines her desire, choice and sexuality as she inspects, recognizes and accepts herself. She now believes in Ashok who says: "Diana followed her heart and you must follow yours. We have only one life and everybody wants to live it the best way they can" (85). This experience helps her to exercise her body and self-determination emotionally which leads to a re-orientation and self-improvement: "A lover would add to her experience, make up for all the things she has missed having married straight out of college" (86). She does not submit to the regulations of the society but displays her power to overcome problems so as to get delight in her new relationship. The power derived from exploration, interpretation and empowerment of the female sexuality experience leads to self-affirmation and self-recognition as an individual.

Kapur presents the unconfirming affair neither as a sexual perversion nor as a willful transgression, but as a symbolic construct of her freedom and individuality and a strategic posture against rigid conventional institutionalization. Shagun's act of sexual violation celebrates female sexual self-assertion embodied in a new feminist assumption that woman is a desiring subject with an intense longing for sexual expression, satisfaction and fulfillment: "She sank down next to him; she knew she would have a happiness she never had before. If she were to die tomorrow, it would be as a fulfilled woman" (113). Shagun follows her heart and seeks a divorce from Raman and embarks on a new life with Ashok. So, the institution of marriage which in our country is much more than sex and children is thwarted of its sacredness through divorce. Shagun as a 'new woman' realizes the potential of her 'being' through a process of becoming by launching herself on private battle with society on the premise of the priority of natural inclinations over social proprieties. She, as a woman, in this new relationship of her choice is a significant and new literary construct, aware of the choices open to her and awakened to the complex and personalized patterns of living and loving against the hostile and undermining dominant view.

Kapur negotiates how infertility is experienced as the inability of a woman to accomplish role expectation in a culture where much importance is accorded to motherhood and virility. When a woman is unable to conceive, she is stigmatized and rebuked by family and society which inflicts multiple psychological tortures by labeling them 'incomplete' and 'worthless'. Infertility is viewed as deviance from the cultural norm, rendering a woman helpless; it is also the ground for divorce. So, childlessness is to be understood not only in terms of reproductive health in a physical sense, but more so as a social concern. In Indian culture the role of motherhood is inscribed in the personality of a girl child from early childhood, either by encouraging her to play maternal roles by caring for younger siblings, or by allowing her to play only with dolls around the house. The reproductive role of women is highly recognized in these settings and the onset of puberty is joyously marked, often accompanied by celebrations that declare the girl's fertility and

announce her capability for future motherhood. The second stage, one that further determines the initiation of the girl's role as a mother is marriage. The ritual of marriage is seen as a pathway for the creation of offspring. The rites of marriage and some of its customs are also geared towards fulfillment of this end. Manju Kapur negotiates the stigma of infertility and reconstructs a different reality in which motherhood is achieved through alternative ways of parenting-step mothering. This is a huge step towards eradicating the negative image of biological- childlessness and most importantly, allows for alternative ways in which mothering practices create possibilities to assume the social identity of 'a mother'.

The French writer Simone de Beauvoir argued that women are repeatedly told from infancy that they are made for childbearing. While the splendors of maternity are forever being sung to her, the drawbacks of her situation— menstruation, illnesses, and even the boredom of household drudgery— are all justified by this marvelous privilege she has of bringing children into the world. Beauvoir pointed out that such pervasive socialization shapes women's desire to "choose" motherhood. The institutionalization of the female body is seen to alienate women from their experiences of the body. Motherhood is seen as an institution of patriarchy that ensures the control of women by their imprisonment in domesticity. It is seen to relegate women to the private world of child-bearing and rearing apart from the public world of wage-earning and decision-making and the intellectual and academic world of creative thinking and writing. Woman's status as child-bearer having been made into a major fact of her life and terms like "barren" or "childless" serve as markers of negation with no male analogue like "non-father". The bodies of women become sites for hi-tech reproductive technology. Adrienne Rich concludes that the patriarchal institution of motherhood is not the "human condition" any more than rape. The idealization of women as mothers, the romanticization of motherhood and the attribution of normative quality to motherhood are seen to be dictated by patriarchal power relations. According to Adrienne Rich, "Motherhood is not only a core human relationship but a political institution, a keystone to the domination in every sphere of women by men" (216).

Kapur presents Ishita, who starts off in a subordinate role as daughter; a position that is transferred to her husband in marriage. Her marriage has a functional role with rights and obligations that are legitimized by the production of offspring. Demonstrable fertility has therefore, vital importance for her as "Suryakanta was their only son, and grandchildren were expected within a year" (53). The boy's family criticizes Ishita as 18 months of her marriage pass and Ishita is not pregnant. In Indian culture, infertility is perceived as woman's fault and not the problem of the couple. It is the woman who assumes that she is the one who has an infertility problem in marriage, before the couple even goes for medical investigation. Once the mother-in-law realizes that Ishita could be faced with an infertility problem, what ensues is a frantic search for a causal explanation and a diagnosis. Ishita moves from healer to prophet, herbalist to hospital desperately seeking some resolution, driven by hope, uncertainty and despair. So, the best part of her youth is wasted in the quest to attain motherhood. A gynecologist investigates her and 'severe blockage of her fallopian tubes' is announced and she is confirmed 'an infertile woman'. Ishita "thought it easier to commit suicide than to live" (63). She receives very little sympathy, especially from her in-laws, who consider themselves the aggrieved party. She laments: "From the day of her wedding she has thought of 'this family' as hers, reveling in the togetherness, sharing and companionship. Now instead of love all around her, there was rejection" (63). Her

childless marriage is plagued with tension, social stigma, emotional exploitation and psychological pressure.

Kapur depicts how an infertile woman undergoes negative, individual experiences regarding her infertility. Ishita experiences a lack of identity and feels that she is not fulfilling her role as a woman. Her mother-in-law does not want to waste more money on her and she contemplates painfully: "Had there been something wrong with S.K, 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" (68). There is both a loss of health and self-esteem as infertility denies Ishita recognition: "Hadn't they valued her for herself? Being childless, relegate her to the status of a 'nobody' as she has failed to prove her femininity through child bearing. This is my karma, nothing will break it" (68). Her marital life with Suryakanta is strained and infertility disrupts the loving relationship. Ishita's body makes her vulnerable to society. "She thought of the body that had known so much love and then so much punishment. She hated her body, hated it. Tyranny of biology is what's wrong with the society" (183). She experiences a sense of alienation vis-à-vis her body as she subjects it to rigorous scrutiny. She is haunted by the feelings of self-hatred and inadequacy and experiences relentless process of deterioration which marginalizes her. Inscribed with patriarchal meanings, the body is perceived as the product and property of others. How can she dissociate the body- for herself, from body for others? Her relationship with her body is marked by sense of alienation. "Hatred towards her body filled her. It had let her down in this most basic function and she had to live with the knowledge for the rest of her life" (63).

Ishita is both a product and prisoner of her reproductive system and her body becomes "the battlefield where she fights for liberation. It is through her body that oppression works, reifying her. Her physicality is a medium for others to work on; her job is to act as their viceroy, presenting her body for their ministrations, and applying to her body the treatment that have been ordained" (Greer 106). Ishita undergoes 'internalized exile' where the body feels disconnected from it as though it does not belong to her and she has no agency. She is considered a failure by her culture, and worse, since this failure is internalized, she believes it herself. She is doubly exiled from her body- once as a woman, an outsider to patriarchal power, and next as an infertile woman who cannot fulfill her biological destiny. So, this problematic 'natural and essentialized assumptions of motherhood' is imposed on her body.

Kapur reveals the truth that in a traditional society woman is disempowered due to her barren body. When Ishita is thrown out of S.K's house she feels disembodied as she is punished for her substandard body. Divorce fills her life with angst, misery, depression, dejection, gloominess and sense of failure. After the stressful and negative life experiences, with the support and care of her natal family, Ishita builds her self-esteem and despite her feelings of inadequacy starts a new life. She resumes her life from where she has left off five years ago. She takes her maiden name and embarks on a new journey. Ishita overpowers her inability and showers her motherly love on Roohi, a motherless and abandoned girl. When she encounters divorced Raman, a rapport is established between the two broken hearts. Till now her body was in a state of self-exile, self-censorship, outsidership and unbelonging to itself within indigenous patriarchy but now she takes autonomy over her body. Ishita, who as an individual has denied her sexuality for long, who has stifled the passion for sex, exercises her desire and enjoys erotic moments with Raman. Raman satisfies the physical needs of her female body. Her motherly instincts are

fulfilled as she enjoys an intimate emotional bonding with Roohi. Kapur mentions: “She thought of the little arms around her neck, her weight on her lap, the smell of her breath. For those moments in the car she had allowed herself to feel she was the child’s mother” (293). As Ishita’s and Raman’s bodies and thoughts synchronize they get married in a court to start a life afresh leaving behind the bitter scars of their previous ruined marriages. Ishita exercises her personhood and herself chooses her life partner and enjoys the marital and motherly bliss in her new home. Her motherly instincts fructify into love, care and affection for Roohi and her well-being is Ishita’s first priority. She confidently speaks before the Judge in the court: “Ever since my marriage I have put her welfare above everything. I think of her as my flesh and blood. If anybody is like a stepmother it is this lady. To be a mother you need a heart” (412). The judge interrogates the child and Roohi rewards Ishita by speaking in her favor and claiming her to be her mother. Though Roohi is a minor but her custody is given not to her biological, but to her stepmother, Ishita.

So, Ishita negotiates infertility, decodes its very meaning and de-stigmatizes it by being the caring stepmother to Roohi. She gets back her status as a wife and a mother. She views the infertility problem separately from her identity by externalizing it rather than internalizing it. She no longer defines herself as inadequate or incomplete woman and resolves the feelings of hopelessness and loss and attains an acceptance of life as an individual. She as a childless woman fills her empty space with Roohi and achieves motherhood though not biological and enjoys experiential and emotional benefits of motherhood. Her body which was disempowered by her infertility becomes empowering for her and she experiences a triumphant liberation.

Kapur explores and writes about the labyrinth of a woman’s bodily/sexual experiences in order to decode the many tropes of violation that effect the body’s materiality as well as its psyche. She uses women’s body as a conceptual tool to examine certain discursively constructed social determinants that deprive a woman of rights over her body.

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