

## **Conviction, Conflict and Compromise in Manju Kapur's *Custody***

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Marriage as a societal institution continues to remain hollowed in the Indian society since time immemorial. To every parent, daughters getting married is almost dream fulfilled and they experience the fullest satisfaction once this marriage ceremony is over, but the matter does not end there. The moment the bride becomes the wife, she is viewed as a potential mother and the entire family expects her to beget a child most preferably a male child at the earliest. This kind of expectation has become a deep part of the Indian psyche. So much so the woman fails to attain motherhood and remains barren, even if she is not responsible for this state of affair, some patriarchal traditions make it easy to throw her out on this ground. And some inbuilt humiliations of woman in the Indian laws make life still worse for the poor woman. Seeking legal remedy for maintenance can be a mortifying experience for many women. It is in the light of these observations that this paper discusses the conflicts, confusions and confrontations based by Ishitha, one of the heroines in Manju Kapur's *Custody*. This paper also discusses the courage and confidence with which Ishitha counters the opposing forces and gain inner peace.

Ishitha is the only daughter of the Rojoras, a middle class family. She is brought up with love and care and given very good education. She does not want to get into marital life soon after her education. Her main desire in her life is to become a teacher in a government school, and feel secure in life with regular income of her own. If she is independent, she need not worry about anything after her marriage. With this purpose in her life, she pursues her education. But all her plans for her future go topsy-turvy, when she is made to marry Suryakant. Both are strangers when they get married. After their marriage both begin to love each other. Three years of their marital life pass without any hitch. Even after the period of more than three years of her marital life, Ishitha remains childless. Her barrenness becomes the starting point of trauma to her.

Any unproductive woman becomes the target of all and sundry both at home and in the society. She is neither recognized nor respected nor treated on par with other woman, blessed with children. Palriwala, while writing about women, is of the view:

Marriage is attached with material, social and symbolic meanings and consequences, which are asymmetrical in terms of their implications in human life. Terms 'selfhood, respect and status' are tied to wifeness and motherhood in more exacting ways than they are to one being a husband or father. A single man or a man without children is seen as unfortunate, but a woman in a similar situation is considered to be inauspicious, and possibly dangerous (400-401).

Ishitha is also expected to beget a son or a daughter to be in tune with the existing conviction. Being cursed with sterility, she cannot live up to the convictions and expectations of her husband and in-laws. So she has undergone the painful and tensionful treatment IVF. "More injections. More hormones....Prayer, prayers, more prayers. Please stay, please grow. You are my only chance of happiness. So many people to love you, just come into the world. I beg you."(66-67). But it doesn't work out. As the only one chance of IVF given to Ishitha has gone in vain. Her husband's family forces her to leave the house.

Even though she is in their mist, she feels orphaned because nobody including her mother considers her a human being. Her mother in law calls her shameless, her sisters in law stop talking with her; the father in law and her husband avoid her. She appears very insignificant before them.

“She looks smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in the sunlit air and smaller than drops of dew, caught between blades of grass in the morning” (65).

As a barren woman, she is not allowed to live in peace in her husband’s house. She is forced to go back to her house. Being cursed with barrenness, and having come back to her mother, her mind is greatly affected. The sudden break up of her marital relationship unnerves her:

For nearly three and half years, she has been living with her husband, being showered with love and affection. She has also firmly established her status as the wife and daughter in law in this home. Suddenly being asked to go back to her house from her husband’s house due to her inability to become a mother is really a heart breaking one to her (71).

When she is divorced at last, the merciless act on the part of her husband pains her parents much. However, they brave the situation and help their daughter come out of her mental depression. To overcome her depression, Ishitha starts involving herself in social activities in the flood-affected areas and other social works too. The divorced, socially isolated Ishitha finds the courage to volunteer and teach underprivileged children. She loves children and they love her back. Gradually, she finds hope and in the process. She recovers her lost sense of individuality. She even wants to adopt a baby to gratify her soul longing for love.

Ishitha’s parents, though traditional, prove to be modern in their thought and outlook. As loving parents, they are ready to go to any extent to make their daughter to come out of her trauma as a divorcee and to get her married again. If Ishitha becomes happy, they will certainly feel relieved of their mental agony. But as loving parents, they express their desire to get Ishitha settled in married life. They live with unassailable hope that there will certainly be a man for her to provide marital bliss and security in life. Ishitha is against remarriage. She does not like to enter into marital status to suffer another humiliation. She expresses her desire to her parents about adopting a son.

Ishitha feels happy to meet Roohi, the baby girl of Raman. He also is leading a deserted life because of the elopement of his wife with his boss. As persons sailing in the same boat Ishitha and Raman become very close to each other. And get from each other what they couldn’t get from their respective married partners. Ishitha, without minding her barrenness and as a step mother to Raman’s children returns “to the societal status as a married woman which has been rudely snatched from her by the divorce from her first husband” (303). She also begins to enjoy the status of wifedom and motherhood which endows her with legitimacy. Ishitha’s marital relationship with Raman not only empowers her but also gives her strength to fight for the custody of his children.

Ishitha who wants to adopt a child and brings up the child as her own also gets Roohi to her custody and feels ecstatic to be the mother of Roohi. As a step mother, she attains now the status of motherhood hitherto denied to her. According to Meena Shirwadkar, in *Image of Woman in the Indo-Asian Novel*, “The mother in the Indian tradition is the giver of blessings, the giver and protector of life. She is the creative and protective goddess to be respected and worshipped. To a woman, to be the mother of a son is the goal of womanhood.” (79). These typical attitudes suggest the essential difference between the Indian and western concept of motherhood. In the West, feminists like Adrienne Rich have seen motherhood as a burden, as a weapon for enslaving and oppressing women. Whereas in India, most women welcome motherhood as it accords to them an enhanced status in their families.

Conjugality is the essence of life in the relations between men and women in Western countries. But in India, as far as woman is concerned, conjugality means to attain motherhood. As a result, childlessness has major psychological and social implications for the couple and especially for women in the society where motherhood is highly valued. The conviction of people regarding childlessness is often derogatory and judgmental. Regardless of the cause, social and gender norms often blame the woman for childlessness. As a result, a childless woman suffers from personal grief, frustration, social stigma, ostracism and serious economic deprivation. Childless women may also suffer from physical violence, threats from husbands and family, rejection, abandonment and divorce like Ishitha in *Custody*. But it cannot be expected that every childless woman will get a chance to redefine life as Ishitha got. But the objective and aim of every barren woman should be to redefine life in all possible ways and strive towards that aim. She has to believe that there is life of her own even though she fails to bear a child.

Society also should understand that barrenness is neither a sin nor a deliberate act on the part of a woman. It is the will of nature and one has to obey the laws of nature. Trying to reform society and change its existing mindset towards barren woman is no doubt like chasing one's tail. But persistent efforts to face the challenges and developing a positive attitude by these women will bring about a change for the better, sooner or later. The Novel *Custody* very clearly gives the message that a barren woman has to be honoured and respected as she is also eligible to possess all the rights of the woman. In no way she can be marginalized. The true humanity will be reclaimed if these women too are kept on par with other women on all their glory. Let us be optimistic.

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