

Marriage and Morals as Reflected in the Selected Novels of Manju Kapur

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Abstract

In this article, the writer presents experiences of married life of three different couples as depicted in three fictional works of Manju Kapoor, viz. *The Immigrant* (2010), *Custody* (2012) and *A Married Woman*, (2002). In all her fictional works, Manju Kapur has delineated problems and experiences of married women especially in the Indian diaspora. The novels present the complexities of married life of men and women, who discover differences and inadequacies of each other and appear to feel estranged.

Introduction

Manju Kapur is a teacher of English Literature at Miranda House, Delhi University. She has been awarded the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for the Best First Book (Eurasia). She presents complexities of married life of her female protagonists in her fiction. Here three of her selected fictional works have been examined in terms of their married life and morality reflected in them. In her *The Immigrant*, we come across the female protagonist, Nina, who discovers sexual inadequacy of her husband, Ananda, and resorts to sexual pleasures outside the married life. Disillusioned with her married life, she decides to leave her husband and chart a new course of life. In *Custody*, by Manju Kapur, again the female protagonist Shagun, abandons her husband even after giving birth to two children, and lives with his boss in the US, fighting the bitter battle for custody of her children. And in *A Married Woman*, the female protagonist Astha, an artist who paints, who has two children, a dutiful, loving husband, but who develops physical relationship with much younger woman, Pipee, at the possible risk for happy married life.

Manju Kapur's fiction boldly portrays the life and experiences and the feelings of married women caught in the uncomfortable married life, which they find oppressive or boring, and explore extra-marital relationship, which may land them even in lesbianism. Manju Kapur has very deftly interwoven the stories of these married women into the fabric of her fiction. Her female protagonists are bold enough to flout the marriage morals, keeping up appearances and sometimes even break up the marriage and engage themselves in bitter conflict in the court of law to claim the custody of the children.

In Kapur's *A Married Woman* (2002), we come across Astha, the female protagonist, who is happily married to Hemant, after her abortive love affair with Rahul. But Astha, though she lives with her husband and children separately, is never at peace, as her in-laws, living upstairs would like to have children with them for some time. She very much resents it. She has a hobby of painting, and two of her paintings are applauded and sold in an exhibition. She comes across Pipilika, Pipee for short, the wife of a social worker and the stage-artist-Aijaz. Astha, despite her marriage with Hemant, is drawn towards Aijaz, who also praises her drawings and even informally invites her to his place. This liaison however, is short lived.

Astha was not much happy in her married life. As a woman of her own means she was not happy with sacrifices to be made in the name of marriage. Talking to her colleagues about marriage, she remarks:

‘It may not be a bad thing..... If a marriage is terrible, it is good to be able to leave’

(P: 168)

When her colleagues look at her with wonder, she explains giving example of her sister-in-law, who has to slave in her house, and cannot complain as her husband sides with his parents. Astha herself finds her freedom threatened when she decides to take part in demonstration outside Rashtrapati Bhavan, and Hemant like a typical authoritative husband tells her:

“You seem to forget that your place as a decent family woman is in the home, and not on the streets. You also forget that this is New year’s Eve, and we are going out”

(P: 172)

Astha does not heed Hemant’s objection. She comes across Pipee, the wife of Aijaz, in Ayodhya, but knows that she is the wife of Aijaz, only later. Pipee asked her in a hotel if she was ever in relationship with a woman. Astha and Pipee, thus, form a lesbian relationship. It does not, however, last as Pipee has her own social work and Astha could not forsake her married life, her children. Astha’s lesbian escapade was the result of her emotional reaction to her husband’s crass materialistic attitude.

In another novel Custody (2011), Manju Kapur, presents her female protagonist, Shagun, who abandons her husband, Raman, to go with her husband’s boss, Ashok. She has two children, a daughter and a son, and yet she abandons her husband and fights him for the custody of the children. Manju Kapur presents Shagun as a beautiful but an unfaithful woman locked in a ruthless battle with her husband for the custody of her children. Shagun, the mother of two children began, to hate even the touch of her husband. “To have anything to do with him physically made her want to scream” (P: 47)

Shagun, as a modern woman, little thought of moral question. She of course, felt guilty and tried to hide her immoral goings-on, but it did not stop her illicit relationship with Ashok. Even her mother made her feel guilty, but Shagun became morally depraved so much that she retaliated to any kind of moral argument from her mother or anyone else. She became almost impervious to any plea. Even when Raman was hospitalised, she remained cold and aloof. Eventually, Shagun filed a case in the court to get divorce. Raman had to hire the services of his cousin, Nandan, a noted lawyer in divorce cases. Shagun had already taken possession of children when Raman was in the company. In this bitter battle for the custody of children both, the wife and the husband, try to use every means to malign each other through their lawyers. Raman is made out to be a cruel husband by her lawyer, and Shagun is made out to be a cheap, merciless woman, not caring for children and the household. To make out a strong case, the truth is always sacrificed, painting the adversary as a villain, a wicked being.

Shagun, as a wife, knows very well how Raman is a very caring and loving husband, who agreed to live separately from his parents for the sake of his wife. But Shagun became infatuated with Ashok, and thought little of the feelings of her husband, as she decided to forsake him. She hardly felt any moral qualms when she clandestinely visited Ashok in her illicit relationship with him. Even as the divorce case was in progress, she did not leave any opportunity to influence her children against Raman. On the other hand, Raman promises his son, Arjun, that he would always allow Arjun to visit the mother. Shagun flouts not only the marital morality but also resorts to lies as she prevents her children from visiting their father. Shagun's mother tries to teach her daughter what a wife's duties are towards her husband, that it is her responsibility to keep her household happy and not breaking it. But old notions of marriage morality appear to become obsolete in the eyes of Shagun, who becomes infatuated with Ashok in her extra-marital relationship with him, though she is the mother of two children.

In her novel *Custody*, Manju Kapur presents Shagun as portrait of a married woman who goes astray even after giving birth to two children, a girl and a boy. Shagun is an ambitious woman, who is ready to break up her marriage to go with Ashok who is the boss of her husband and Shagun has prospects of going with him to the US. The husband and wife are locked in bitter battle for the custody of the children. Meanwhile, Raman marries Ishita a divorcee like him, but the one who proves to be a loving mother for Roohi. *Custody* presents Shagun as an unfaithful, crass materialistic woman, who is hard-hearted enough to abandon her ailing husband and carry on a clandestine affair with another man. Manju Kapur has portrayed here the character of an ambitious woman, who flouts all moral considerations to achieve her own objectives.

In the character of Ishita, Manju Kapur presents the story of Ishita, who is infertile and is divorced because of it. Her mother-in-law would not spend money on her treatment, but takes an easy way out to ask her son to divorce her. As Germaine Greer (P: 106) points out, a woman's body becomes 'the battlefield where she fights for liberation. It is through her body that oppression works reifying her. Her physicality is the medium for others to work on-----' Shagun is given with the custody of her son, but she cannot get Roohi as the child clings to her new mother Ishita in the court room.

Manju Kapur's novel, *The Immigrant*, presents yet another female protagonist, Nina, who becomes immigrant, going to Canada, after marrying Ananda, the practising dentist in Halifax, who finds in Nina, the Indian bride, who has only her mother as a relation. Nina, in her effort to find a job, tries to qualify herself as a librarian. But Nina, at thirty, is still childless. She longs to be a mother. She pensively requests Ananda to consult someone. She is afraid of being declared as infertile. Ananda, on the other hand, considers it backward thing to have a child as soon as you get married. He does not approve of Nina's worrying about having a child, and her visit to the association of nursing mothers. But Nina wants a child, because that is what she believes is necessary to settle down in marriage. Ananda, begins to get angry at her insistence to consult someone, and very harshly talks to her, telling her that she should have suggested a fertility test before they got married. Both of them exchange hot words on this subject. Ananda is himself anxious about his own inadequacy. Despite Ananda's reluctance and non-cooperation, Nina continues her efforts, consulting gynaecologists and doctors. Nina once cautiously asks him if he is satisfied with their

sex life. (P: 180) and continues the topic telling him it is too short, not even five-ten seconds. She says how frustrated she feels afterwards and suggests that they should go to see the doctor together. But, Ananda is typically unresponsive. Sexual life is one important way of communication between a husband and a wife, but Ananda is very unresponsive to her in this vital matter in their conjugal life. However, Ananda finally decides to consult an expert therapist in this matter, without telling Nina about it. He says he is attending a conference in California for two weeks, but actually goes for a sex therapy from Dr. Hansen.

The novel underlines how sex-problems, between husband and wife can be of importance in their marital relationship. Nina is ready to understand her husband, Ananda, and quite willing to cooperate with him, but his own ego does not allow him to open his mind to her. Nina and Ananda both eventually discover that they both are quite normal. But, whether they can still be blessed with a child is not certain. A child is supposed to be the effective bonding between the couple. However, their marital life takes different turns. Nina, who joins a course in the library science, comes across Anton, a fellow student, and forms a temporary sexual alliance with him. Her infatuation with Anton could be the result of her dissatisfaction in her own married life. But, she undergoes traumatic experience with Anton, who forcibly has sex with her. With this experience her confidence takes a beating. Though she does not have moral compunctions, she is terribly affected by this experience which, to some extent, affects her waywardness.

It is surprising how Nina, born and brought up in Indian middle-class life, succumbs to the physical passion and almost goes to the brink of disaster of her married life. To some extent, Ananda's inadequacy is responsible for this, but the real problem with them was wide gap between their attitude to life. Ananda lives his life on the surface, but for Nina there is life beyond things material. Ananda does not understand her emotional needs. She could not explain to him how material comforts were not enough, how she could not like him 'float on the surface'. But she could not explain this to Ananda. And Ananda himself could not understand her need to be herself to go away and think. She undergoes a kind of immigrant experience, of a sense of temporary relations. She chooses to move on, leaving Ananda unsure whether she would be back or not. She embarks on a new life, a new morality, which permitted her to move on, without forming any lasting relationship. She discovers how her marriage has shallow roots and finds it easy to move on. In Canada, she came as an immigrant, and in her married life also she proves to be an immigrant, escaping her past, to find fresh avenues, new set of people and different circumstances.

Nina's was an arranged marriage, and Ananda himself chose an Indian wife because he depended on his sister to check the details of a girl, like family background, age, education, etc. For Nina, it was a good offer. But after their marriage, she discovers the truth about Ananda's sexual and emotional state. When she joins a course in library science, she comes across Anton and has an affair with him, which is aborted after an unpleasant experience. But, Nina gradually drifts away from Ananda, and she decides to find a job away from Halifax, away from him and drifts away from her married life.

To conclude, it can be seen that both Ananda and Nina are responsible for the disastrous end of their marriage. Ananda does not confide with Nina of his own problem, but tells her lies about where he goes. He actually goes to get a treatment from an expert in the field. And Nina, too, goes on an escapade violating marriage morals. She drifts apart, which is, in a way, forsaking the bond of marriage. Ananda himself clandestinely maintains physical relationship with his own assistant in the dispensary.

5.7 Conclusion

Manju Kapur, in her fiction, mainly deals with the family life of the men and women in high middle-class families, who are well-educated and have aspirations about their life. The writer delineates in these novels the life and experiences of her female protagonists, who are dissatisfied with their married life. Being educated and often being economically independent, they flout morality to seek happiness, which brings their marriages to the point of breaking or it actually breaks as in *A Married Woman*. In *The Immigrant*, the protagonist Nina has a reason for flouting morality as her husband, Ananda is sexually inadequate, and as an emancipated woman, she seeks her pleasures elsewhere. Similarly, in *A Married Woman*, Astha explores pleasures of sexual relationship in her lesbian relationship with Pipee, though she has two children in her married life. For her it is an emotional need. In *Custody* the marriage morals take a beating because the female protagonist in it is economically and socially ambitious, and breaks the marital bond. In these novels the female protagonists flout the marriage morals because they mainly obey a pleasure principle in their life. Their high middle-class society and their education as well as the economic status make them bold enough to flout the marriage morals.

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