

## **Infidelity in Manju Kapur's *Custody***

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**Abstract**

Female sexuality is rooted in the material, biological, sexed body. Women sexuality remains deeply engaged with patriarchal- dominant economic and political interest. In a traditional framework there is no space for a woman as an individual, she must be a wife and a mother. Control of female sexuality is effectively mystified under the name of tradition. Manju Kapur presents one of the aspects of female embodiment, infidelity in her latest novel *Custody*. Infidelity empowers a woman. Infidelity reflects and defends women's right to desire, and the pursuit of the fulfillment of female sexual desire. Kapur examines how woman has begun to grow as an individual and the primary center of clash for her becomes the institution of marriage which has constituted the limits of her space. She portrays a female character, Shagun who celebrates her sexuality through a purposeful inversion of patriarchal morals. Her sexuality is a stadium 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. This paper discusses the treatment of infidelity in the novel, *Custody*.

**Keywords:** Manju Kapur, *Custody*, Patriarchy, Infidelity, Adultery, Domination.

Female sexuality is rooted in the material, biological, sexed body. Women bodies, sexualities and gender identities are sites where cultural notions of normality and indeed social respectability are contested. The construction of 'female sexuality' is in which power fluctuates constantly and is appropriated and negotiated. Women sexuality remains deeply engaged with patriarchal- dominant economic and political interest. 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 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 effectively mystified under the name of tradition.

Manju Kapur presents one of the aspects of female embodiment, infidelity in her latest novel *Custody*. Infidelity empowers a woman. Infidelity reflects and defends women's right to desire, and the pursuit of the fulfillment of female sexual desire. 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 scrutiny and control over women bodies.

Manju Kapur treats infidelity from a feminist perspective. This paper discusses the treatment of infidelity in the novel, *Custody*. Adultery has always been part of multifarious human relations from the dawn of civilization. Its expressions are evident in art, literature, plays and music.

Poets, writers, painters and litterateurs have made their creations from the tangled relationship of tragedy and desire. Adultery seems to have become a sign of many responses- personal, societal and political. According to patriarchal notion adultery is a 'renegade' relationship because it violates tradition. If the idea of adultery continues to induce moral fury and anxiety, it is equally an act of exercising private autonomy. The moral and emotional tensions inherent in infidelity are the main concern of the women writers. In recent years, the subject of female sexuality has aroused heated disputes in academic circles. The contemporary writers figure out that if the women want to be empowered, they have to overthrow traditional sexuality culture and involve themselves in dispute and conflict between patriarchy and female sexuality. It is not in its restrains and suppression but in privilege and assertion that the new sexual ideology is structured.

Kapur in her novel, *Custody* examines how woman has begun to grow as an individual and the primary center of clash for her becomes the institution of marriage which has constituted the limits of her space. The woman now has moved to the center and has become an important being in the social set up. Kapur presents extramarital love in her novel and uses this sexual freedom as a tool of resistance to spoil patriarchal myths and values. She portrays a female character, Shagun who celebrates her sexuality through a purposeful inversion of patriarchal morals. Her sexuality is a stadium 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.

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 lured by his loving words and genuine style and leaves behind the essential restraints of marriage and breaks its holiness through sexual misbehavior. 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 controls her dangerous feminine desires. 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 conservative 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 laughter: “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 inadequate in physical world as society casts an unforgiving darkness on the female who is unfaithful.

Kapur shows how Shagun who has lost her individual identity in her ‘stupid early marriage’ seeks for the lost selfhood in her extramarital relationship with Ashok. This affair gives her a delightful experience and teaches her to be self-reliant, confident, powerful, independent and inventive as she pursues sexual equality and self-independence. She reveals her character bravely and then creates proper reply intelligently. Shagun defines her desire, choice and sexuality as she examines, 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 that 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 distortion 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 feministic assumption that woman is a desiring subject with an extreme 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 association of marriage which in our country is much more than sex and children is frustrated 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 basis of the priority of natural inclinations over social proprieties. She, as a woman, in this new relationship of her choice is a major 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 aggressive and undermining dominant view.

Kapur discovers and writes about the tangles 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

consciousness. She uses women's body as an abstract tool to examine certain obliquely constructed social determinants that deny a woman of rights over her body.

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