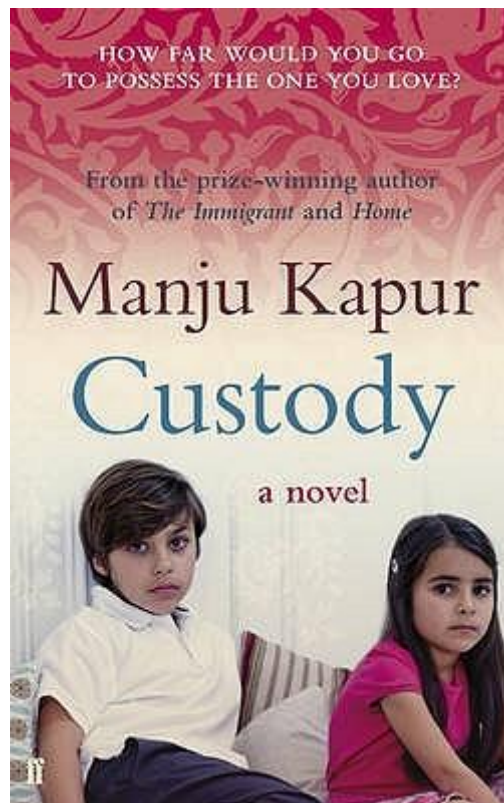


Demystifying 'Mother' and 'Daughter' in Manju Kapur's *Custody*

Jitender Singh



Overthrowing Age-old Conventions

An anti-establishment attitude to overthrow the age-old conventions has gripped the conscience of the contemporary writers. It has become a common motif to look beyond what has been in prevalence. To question and inquire is something which adds critical flavour to creative writing these days. But there are a selected few who do not confine their approach to mere questioning; rather they take a bolder step to subvert what is given on the basis of what might have been hidden during the construction of the text. The other side of the coin is considered more significant than the one present easily before the reader. It is under this kind of perspective that in this paper the changing contours of woman as mother and daughter are studied to unravel the gap between ideology and reality.

Probing Women's Experience

Manju Kapur is one such novelist who tends to probe the deep recesses of women's experience in order to question the conventional modes of perceiving and treating them. But her vision is sometimes found fragmented and lacking coherence. The positions where she places woman as mother and daughter are both traditional as well as modern. Without merging the gap, on the one hand, she tries to preserve the conventional concept of motherhood and on the other, seeks to glorify daughter as an individual self in a modern context. Therefore, to understand and explore the multiple dimensions of 'mother' and 'daughter' a deconstructive approach is needed since deconstructionists believe in exposing the loopholes existing behind the idea of such identities. Nicholas Royle aptly contends:

Deconstruction – which is never single or homogenous, but . . . at least provisionally, be identified with 'the work of Derrida' – is concerned with the lucid, patient attempt to trace what has not been read, what remains unread or unreadable within the elaboration of concepts and workings of institutions.
(160)

Questions Raised

When thought upon from a deconstructive angle, certain questions begin to wobble. Whether to be a mother or daughter is one and the same thing? If not then, is it motherhood that leads to daughterhood or the concept of daughterhood that tempts a woman to be a mother? And if they are two distinct positions, can they be termed as identities or are they mere two roles that a woman has to perform? And finally if these are two different roles, then every woman will play them differently according to her individual characteristics and situations. How can her different experiences as mother or daughter be homogenous? But since centuries, woman's experiences have been confined to a few socio-cultural constructs and sacredness is attached to keep it out from the reach of further inquiry and scrutiny.

Notion of Mother in India

In India, the word 'mother' reverberates with many connotations. "The word 'mother' connotes love, affection, selfless devotion and all that is noble in human nature" (Chaubey 107). The role of the mother has been extolled even in ancient epics and scriptures. Swami Vivekananda has eulogized motherhood in these words:

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The ideal of womanhood in India is motherhood that marvelous, all suffering, unselfish, even forgiving mother. The wife walks behind the shadow, she must imitate the life of the mother; that is her duty. But the mother is the ideal of life, she rules the family, she possesses the family. (58)

Motherhood and Motherly Love

Thus motherhood has been glorified and celebrated since times immemorial. Even the Gandhian movement in India, which had the objective of emancipating women, projected mother as a self-effacing, sacrificing person. Mother is considered a source and fountain-head of incessant love. Motherly love has been represented in both religious and social documents in the limelight, as uncompromising and consistent. Through such representation of woman as mother, a very strong stereotype is born called motherhood.

The ideology of motherhood is to show mothering as innate or natural to women by its ceaselessly glorified representations. The responsibility of mothering and its tenderness are considered as the principal defining attributes of a woman. Such types of stereotypical representations are strengthened by their recurrence in literature and carried out from generation to generation.

Even on social front, the nation is perceived as a motherland and the society showers more respect on a woman as mother than as a daughter. The individuality in a daughter is thought to be a severe threat for the concept of motherhood which demands a sense of devotion, care, submissiveness and obedience. Therefore, there has been an ongoing conflict between society versus individual, and in case of woman, this conflict proliferates with more divergences.

Changing Representations of Motherhood and Daughterhood

But with the emergence of intellectual and philosophical revolutions, especially in the second half of the twentieth century, representation of motherhood and daughterhood has also radically changed. Recent observations of feminist writers have questioned and challenged the socially constructed phenomenon called motherhood. It is realized that such sacrificing image ties women to the role of a mother and she herself is expected to forget her individuality. The fact that the mother is an ordinary human being with her daughterhood

wrapped around her unconsciously is miserably ignored in the patriarchal society. In this context, K.R. Sujatha and S. Gokilavani hold the view:

The nature of motherhood is dependent on the cultures and societies that have moulded them. Indian motherhood is inculcated in the woman from the day of her birth. She is raised to look forward to nothing else and she rates her worth by her efficiency to fulfil this role. (147)

Motherhood as Source to Access Respect in Male-Dominated Indian Culture

Therefore, sometimes, mothering is considered a woman's sole way to access respect and status. But do all women want to be mothers? Perhaps the answer is no. In that case, the halo around the motherhood shrinks to a mere blink. The sacredness is shattered the moment a woman begins to detest her status as a mother. This is because women's experiences of motherhood are profoundly alienating from their experiences of daughterhood within patriarchal societies. Moreover, mothers are seen as goddesses and goddesses are seen as mothers. "It is this idealization of women's child-bearing capacity that has not translated itself into rights and entitlements for women as mothers in society" (Poonacha viii). It raises an important question: is mother really a goddess or an individual trapped in goddess figure?

Manju Kapur's Nove *Custody*

Manju Kapur's recent novel, *Custody*, sheds light on many such complex issues regarding motherhood and daughterhood as identifying mechanisms when they fraught with various drawbacks. The mother is considered a goddess for the goddess neither speaks nor reacts. But the moment a mother in human form raises her voice for her certain basic rights, the image of goddess begins to lose its hold and her existence becomes complicated. This duality of experience towards motherhood is the aftermath of the divorce which exists between ideology and reality. Though, the novelist is, at places, critical of this dual attitude but sometimes it seems that Manju Kapur herself attempts to preserve the all forgiving, loving and caring image of the mother, simultaneously presenting an individual counterpart in the form of a defiant daughter. As in the context of deconstruction, According to M.A.R. Habib:

While Derrida himself has insisted that deconstruction is not a theory unified by any set of consistent rules or procedures, it has been variously regarded as a

way of reading, a mode of writing, and, above all, a way of challenging interpretations of texts based upon conventional notions of the stability of the human self, the external world, and of language and meaning. (240)

Multiple Meanings in any Text

According to deconstructionists, there are multiples meanings of texts, ideas or concepts, and it is in the wake of this multiplicity that the final or absolute meaning is rendered complicated. The critic witnesses uncertainty to claim the one as the final meaning of something. In the same way, this novel of Manju Kapur tends to present a variety of mothers and daughters who are trapped in these false identities in their different respective ways. Thus making is difficult to seek a homogenous phenomenon either of motherhood or daughterhood.

A Story of Law - Intrigues and Family Disputes

The novel *Custody* seems, at the first instance, a story of law intrigues and family disputes. But between the lines, there is a large chunk of images and arguments that claim it to be a book concerned with the question of what it means to be a mother or to be a daughter, and both mother and daughter at the same time. What this paper intends to do is to critique such categorization of women as ‘mother’ or ‘daughter’ not opposing them with each other, but by examining their effectiveness in the ways they fight against the social relations of inequality and hierarchy. Steph Lawler aptly remarks:

Knowledges about the self, about mothering, about childhood, about mother – daughter relationship, do not, as it were, fall from the sky: rather, they are produced and reproduced in specific relations of social and political power, and in response to specific social and political preoccupations. Some knowledges gain their status as ‘truths’ through the ‘expert’ status of the individuals and the disciplines which produce them. (3)

Knowledge Ties Us in Ever More Closely with the Workings of Power

What this observation of Lawler hints at is a very crucial realization: knowledges or ideas behind the formation of categories like ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’ may be motivated by some expert individuals who hold a seat of authority or by the institutions. If this remark is viewed more critically then it results in a path breaking conclusion that for this matter

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‘mother’ and ‘daughter’ are social and political categories rather being some objective truths about women. These are merely two ways to categorize, divide and rule them. And thus Lawler makes a similar blunt statement that “Further, it is my argument here that these knowledges, while claiming to liberate us by revealing the ‘truth’ about human nature, actually tie us in ever more closely with the workings of power” (3). In this context, the mother – daughter relationship thus gradually becomes a site of contest where both social and individual interests raise conflicts and any possibility of reconciliation is subsided just to keep the show goes on for it renders women divided and vulnerable.

Daughter-centric with Focus on Mother

Though a daughter-centric text, the present novel does have an aura of motherhood gleaming throughout the book. Shagun is the single daughter of her mother referred as Mrs Sabharwal. She brings up Shagun single-handedly as a single parent. There is no one else to look at and look after; Shagun becomes the centre of her attention. This aspect of their relationship turns Mrs Sabharwal from a protective mother to a fond mother of her beautiful looking daughter when Shagun enters adolescence. In the beginning of the novel, Manju Kapur clearly states, “When he first knew Shagun she had wanted to be a model, but her mother was strongly opposed to a career that would allow all kinds of lechery near her lovely daughter” (11). But to Shagun all such attempts of her mother to protect her from the outside world seem unfair since society demands from a woman as daughter a pinch of anger towards her creator, so that the conflict persists and the gap keeps on widening. Unconsciously conditioned in the patriarchal milieu, Shagun feels revulsion when her mother asks her to respect her husband. “Such useless questions. That was the trouble with mothers. Their eyes were like those of a lynx, their gaze tried to pierce your being, their interference in your life knew no limits” (Kapur 36). But this is the result of the ambiguous personality of the mother. She pretends to be protective but her fondness of her daughter overpowers her when she comes to know Shagun’s relation with Ashok Khanna outside her wedlock. And this leaves her wretched:

What choice did the mother have? She had to agree to keep silent, without having accomplished her goal of making Shagun follow the path of virtue. Now she was an accomplice to the crime. Society could point its finger at her and say, she knew and did nothing. (Kapur 41)

Mother as Nuisance

This act of fondness leaves Mrs Sabharwal merely as a nuisance in the life of her daughter. Her individual interest to see Shagun happy breaks down the web of motherhood and from that point, it is the daughter who guides and controls their relationship. Their social roles change and turn their categories upside down. Now Shagun looks like more of a dominating mother to her obedient daughter, Mrs Sabharwal. “In the meantime she had five clear days in which to indulge herself. And nights, nights that she would ask her mother to come and spend with the children. Only a few hours, she would be back in the morning. No matter how disapproving, she knew her mother could not refuse her” (Kapur 50). This is one instance of how ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’ are not stable identities but mere roles which may change according to situations and anyone may play them, no matter who is called mother and who is called daughter. These are intersecting categories based on social or political foundations which try to keep women away from the realization that they are one at the core.

A Contrast: Essentially a Daughter in Every Mother

The sub-plot in the novel concerning Ishita’s life and her brave encounters with both daughterhood and motherhood are in sharp contrast to the relationship shared by Shagun and her mother, and thus more informative and enlightening. Like Shagun, Ishita is the single child but unlike her, Ishita is brought up by her both parents. She is in direct contrast with Shagun in matters of looks as well as in daughterly and maternal qualities.

Whereas Shagun lives a life of secrets, Ishita clearly states, “How am I supposed to keep this information from my in-laws? My husband? I don’t keep secrets from him” (60). Shagun’s womb is fruitful; it delivers her a son and a daughter. But Ishita lacks this ability to bear children to her husband. One is full of maternity and the other is replete with the mothering instinct.

On the one hand, Shagun neglects her children to have a life of her own, and on the other Ishita longs to have a baby to feel the bliss of motherhood. Along with such diversified aspects of motherhood and daughterhood, the novel also challenges the categories like ‘biological mother’ and ‘biological daughter’.

Shagun being the biological mother of Roohi rarely identifies herself with her daughter. “Right from the beginning it was clear that Baby Roohi was a carbon copy of her

father” (Kapur 18). For her, Roohi seems more of a burden than her own replica in flesh and blood. But later in the course of the novel Ishita takes care of Roohi and becomes the foster mother of the neglected child.

This shows that mothering ability and mother’s love cannot be confined between categories like being biological or not. The instinct to mother a child is too vast to be summarized within the biological sphere. When Ishita proves herself a woman with a mother’s heart even without being the biological mother of the child she is taking care of, it emphatically brings forth the view that the qualities of being a mother may gush out from a daughter too. Without giving birth to a child, one may be a caring and loving mother. Therefore, to categorise women as ‘mothers’ and ‘daughters’ is just a systematic way to keep them apart from their shared experiences.

Essentially, there is always a daughter in every mother and every daughter carries the traces of her mother’s self within her attitude and behaviour. Rather than being contradictory, they are complementary to each other. What makes this relationship unique in its own right is the fact that mothers and daughters are usually seen as having a closer social, psychic or emotional identification than mothers and sons. Moreover, ‘mother’ and ‘daughter’ may be the same person. All mothers are also daughters. Even if the mother is absent, her very absence is likely to assume significance in the daughter’s life.

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