

Emergence of Postmodern Women in Manju Kapur's Novels

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Abstract

Manju Kapur in her novels examines how woman has begun to grow as an individual and the primary centre of collision for her becomes the institution of marriage which has, so far, constituted the limits of space. The women in the novels of Manju Kapur are not traditional women who think that marriage is their destiny and they are to obey their husbands. They differ from traditional women and break all social taboos and conventions emerging as new women who are aware of themselves. This evolving new image of women has created a crisis in family and society and has shaken the foundations of age-old institutions like marriage and motherhood. Pre-marital sex, fornication, extra-marital relations or divorce are no longer considered to be a taboo. The women in the novels of Manju Kapur are the personification of the 'new woman'. They are projected as convention-bashing new women, subverting the male chauvinism.

Keywords: Manju Kapur, ultra-modern, social taboos, extra-marital, convention bashing, sexual freedom.

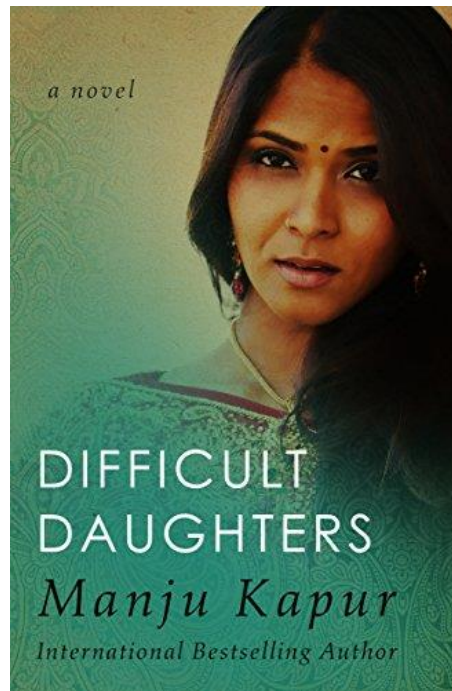
Manju Kapur, a Postmodern Writer

Manju Kapur, being a postmodern writer, gave her protagonists the same postmodern touch which they deserve, breaking down the age-old traditional norms of patriarchal hegemony. They are liberal, bold, outspoken, progressive and radical women creating an identity for themselves. Kapur experiments with new themes like gratification of sex from women's point of view and uses this sexual freedom as an instrument of resistance to thwart patriarchal myths and values. The first striking feature of post-modern Indian fiction in English is its broadening of the thematic range. The post-modern woman possesses certain distinctive qualities that distinguish her from the rest of women kind. She embodies certain traits that present her in a different light, strikingly different from common image of woman. In the first place, the postmodern woman is well educated and is quite aware of the changes that take place in society from time to time; She is economically independent; when she is confronted with a problem, she thrashes it and arrives at certain conclusions, and acts on her own; she chooses her own life partner and, she actively participates in politics and social work; her views are generally progressive and embraces a catholic vision of life and in this process, she fights tooth and nail to overcome any stumbling blocks of traditional nature and sets aside all conventions that might stifle her personality or render her identity hazy and indistinct. She plays a dynamic role of an abolitionist of woman-servitude in any form either in domestic domain or in society and never ceases to fight for the rights of women.

Women as Individuals

Manju Kapur in her novels examines how woman has begun to grow as an individual and the primary centre of collision for her becomes the institution of marriage which has, so far, constituted the limits of space. The women in the novels of Manju Kapur are not traditional women who think that marriage is their destiny and they are to obey their husbands. They differ from traditional women and break all social taboos and conventions emerging as new women who are aware of themselves. This evolving new image of women has created a crisis in family and society and has shaken the foundations of age-old institutions like marriage and motherhood. Pre-marital sex, fornication, extra-marital relations or divorce are no longer considered to be a taboo. The women in the novels of Manju Kapur are the personification of the 'new woman'. They are projected as convention-bashing new women, subverting the male chauvinism.

Ida



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Ddigital-text&field-keywords=Manju+Kapur+novel+Difficult+Daughters

Manju Kapur creates Ida, the daughter of Virmati in *Difficult Daughters*, as distinct from any other woman character in the novel. Ida belongs to a new generation of free India and imbibes the spirit of the new times. There has been a generation gap between Ida and those who preceded her. It is quite natural that the change of time brings about a change in the view point of the present generation. The new woman is clearly manifest in the character of Ida.

Ida represents the third generation and also emblems vigorously the spirit of post-independent modern generation. Unlike her mother, she appears to be very strong, determined and clear-headed radical. Like her mother, Ida is in a quest for self-identity and in her journey of

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life, Ida struggles against the badge of marginality which society imposes upon her, by assuming the role of the omnipotent creator.

Ida's role in the novel is very significant as she narrates the whole story of her mother from her point of view. She voyages into the past in order to reconstruct the biography of her mother from the facts gathered from different sources.

Ida is a radical modern woman embracing new ideas of her time. To understand how modern she is one must compare the life of Kasturi and her daughter, Virmati. There has never been any harmonious relation between the mother and daughter. Reflecting on their mother-daughter relationship Ida in *Difficult Daughters* says, "I could not remember a time it had been right between us, and the guilt that her life had kept in check now overwhelmed me." (2)

In the course of Ida's brief conversation with her mother, the reader is given to understand that she is very much against the patriarchal system. When Ida refuses to show any signs of intellectual brightness, Virmati tries to fashion Ida as a model daughter and tells her that she must not disappoint her father. Against this background Ida protests saying, "Why is it so important to please him?" (279) though by the time she grew up she was not sure what self she had to please. This shows the female assertion of individual identity that refuses to submit to the dictates of patriarchy. As Ida grows up, she struggles to be the model daughter. She feels that her freedom is curtailed and constantly searches for escape routes: "My mother tightened her reins on me as I grew older, she said it was for my own good. As a result, I am constantly looking for escape routes." (279)

Here the restlessness and impatience of Ida, as her mother controls her, show that she is craving for freedom. One of the features of a postmodern woman like Ida is to rebel against any kind of imposition on her person. Thus she proves to be a difficult daughter to her mother, Virmati.

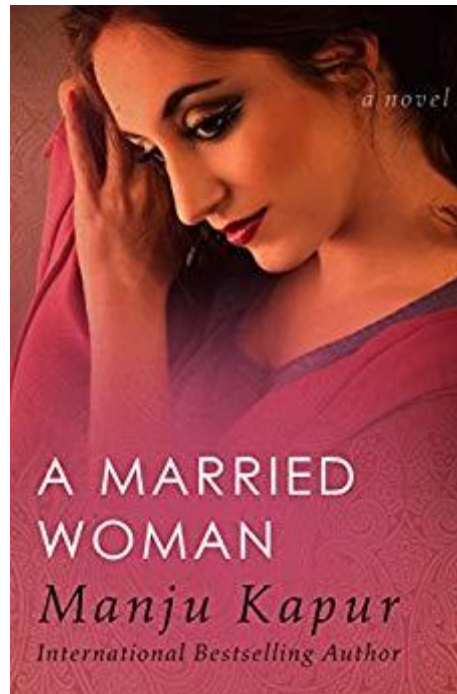
Life seems to be deceptive; one cannot conclude looking at the surface. It is much deeper and complex as it goes on unfolding layer after layer. Virmati is deceived as she thinks that an academician with many accomplishments like Prabhakar would make her daughter's life a kind of heaven. Life reveals, to one's painful surprise, the ugly side of it at an unguarded moment. This has what exactly happened in the case of Ida when Prabhakar (her husband) insists on her undergoing an abortion which leads to the breakup of their marriage. Ida becomes divorced and childless; though she could not escape herself from the agony and anxieties that Virmati had gone through, she exhibits that strength which Virmati lacks. By severing the marriage bond she frees herself from male domination and power and also from conventional social structures which bind women.

Ida finds it very difficult to compromise to the thought that her mother who has the courage to defy all the norms of her tradition-bound family where marriage is acceptable but not independence, could not assert to be herself. Ida wished that her mother said to her father, "I am my own mistress. I will relate to you with dignity or not at all." (255)

After reconstructing her mother's past, Ida realizes that Virmati too had protested against her mother, much like herself. The novel opens with strikingly captivating statement by Ida. It is

clearly revealed through the opening and the closing lines of the novel that she never wanted to be a victim like her mother, saying, “The one thing I had wanted was not to be like my mother.” (1) Ida who fails to understand her mother all her life can be seen as Virmati herself born into the next generation. There exists an incompatibility between the mother and the daughter. All that Virmati tried to inject into Ida is ‘Adjust, Compromise and Adapt’ as her female inheritance which Ida abhors. Ida’s declaration echoes that she does not want to follow her mother’s footsteps but to assert her own identity. As a product of modernism, Ida strongly flouts the word ‘simple’ when her aunt, Parvati tells her that Virmati was a simple girl at heart, she says, “I hate the word ‘simple’. Nobody has any business to live in the world and know nothing about its ways.” (224)

Pipeelika



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/Married-Woman-Novel-Manju-Kapur-ebook/dp/B00JW4EZ2O/ref=sr_1_1?s=digital-text&ie=UTF8&qid=1537082451&sr=1-1&keywords=Manju+Kapur+novel+A+Married+Woman

Pipeelika Trivedi in *A Married Woman* is introduced as a social worker, working in an N.G.O named *Ujjala* dealing with alternative education for slum children. She is the wife of Aizaz Akhtar Khan, a strong woman of the world, a woman living in Delhi. Manju Kapur brings out the postmodern traits in Pipee saying, “Sufficiently isolated from conventional society to believe her choice of partner concerned only herself.” (117)

She is a woman of unconventional views from the beginning; she falls in love with Aizaz as they have the same set of interests regarding social work. Her marital life is short lived since her husband meets with ghastly death in the hands of Hindu fanatics against the background of Babri Masjid — Ram Janambhoomi incident.

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Manju Kapur very tactfully develops a casual acquaintance between Astha and Pipeelika into further intimacy through one particular incident. Pipeelika Khan is truculent in temperament. Pipee makes surreptitious assaults of lovemaking on Astha and they are so subtle that Astha almost without her knowledge comes under her wheedling persuasions. Pipee, by slow degrees, initiates Astha into the terrain of lesbianism. One sees that Pipee is a past master at this art when, “she pressed the tips of Astha’s fingers into her mouth, sucking each one gently before letting them go.” (222)

Pipee ultimately triumphs over Astha’s body and makes the latter completely surrender herself to the former’s lovemaking by subtle masterful touches. They were enclosed in a circle of silence and the only sound they could hear is the sound of their breaths mingled together closely. Both Astha and Pipee show the split in their personalities; they long to experiment something unusual to satisfy their suppressed ego. The urge to lead their own lives and the impulse to galvanize them drive them ultimately to disappointment.

As Gnanamony puts it:

The heroines take the uncommon path (lesbianism) — hitherto a taboo and socially unacceptable relationship in the Indian context. Their activities prove to be liberating and affirmative of their identity. They don’t seem to be bothering even if they would be put into a zone of exclusion. Such a change of attitude in them moves us to understand that it is possible to transcend established reality and convention. (117)

Pipee is indeed a travesty of the moral edifice that society has built for itself as a code of regulating conduct. She is beyond all shade of doubt, a moral anarchist. Manju Kapur presents the caricature of a character that is a monstrosity of evil. She is an anathema to the moral well-being of society. Her views are radically opposed to the healthy norms on which human society is founded.

Astha naturally feels repugnant at what she hears from the very lips of Pipee when she encourages lying to her family about their relationship. She expresses such shocking ideas that Astha should disclose or divulge about their relationship to Hemant saying, “He is not your owner, you know, he’ll have to face up to his inadequacies” (234) at which Astha is horrified.

Pipee strongly prevails on Astha that she (Astha) should follow her way of thinking since she (Pipee) tells her in the interest of her own happiness.

Pipee, the ultra-modern, unconventional, too practical, a total contrast to the conventional model of Indian woman, esteems Astha and gives her a significant place in her life and endows her with the feeling of completeness. The relationship gradually moves to the next level where the individualistic and unconventional Pipeelika begins to demand commitment from Astha and says, “We have to struggle for acceptance and the right to love as we feel. Don’t you think so, Ant?” (237) It may be noted that the restlessness that Astha and Pipee felt is due to the stigmatization and surveillance of sexual perversions.

Commenting on this, R. Saradha and N.Velmani observe that:

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Fundamentally Pipee was self-willed who realized and claimed her rights on her body and mind. She was bold enough to ascertain her autonomous state and declare her lesbian status candidly to the society. She was prepared to encounter and challenge that questioned her autonomy and individualism. (6-7)

Pipee through her subtle insinuations tries to present a negative image of Hemant telling Astha, “You allow yourself to be shut up by that man, who neither knows nor appreciates you, and for what? I do not understand.” (242) and she blames Astha for not taking a decision regarding their relationship, instigating her to walk out of her family life. She says that maintaining relations with married people is troublesome, “Why did I think with a woman it would be different?” (243) and whenever there is a least opportunity, Pipee tries to hammer this thought into Astha’s mind. The repetition of the same thing acts like an auto-suggestion.

Pipee hits on a plan to take Astha with her for three weeks under the pretext of *Ekta Yatra*. When Astha tells Hemant that she is going on *Ekta Yatra* for three weeks, Hemant, in a fit of anger tells her that a married woman’s place is family and children and in his anxiety, he warns her that she might be raped. When Astha tells Pipee the same thing, Pipee’s reaction to this reveals some basic traits of her character. She expresses her anger saying, “Tell that sod to stuff his fantasies of rape up his ass” (249). She says that it is Hemant’s style of scaring Astha and keeping her at home. Pipee indirectly lures Astha to come out of her oppressive domestic life so that she can live a fuller life saying, “Leaving a marriage, even like yours, could not be easy. I do feel that away from that house and those people you will be able to lead a fuller life.” (243)

She, above everything, wants to fulfill her own selfish desires to the total exclusion of the interests of Astha. And this also reveals one particular aspect of Pipee as an anarchist as far as social obligations are concerned. Anita Bala Krishnan aptly says that, “Pipee is as controlling as Hemant, with Astha merely exchanging a lover of one gender for another.” (111)

Pipee feels jealous of the natural intimacy between Astha and Hemant. Hemant’s shadow hangs before her whenever she thinks of Astha. It is because she feels that Astha is notionally a part of her property. When Astha informs her about their prospective trip to the U.S.A, Pipee bursts out in a mood of vexation saying, “One should never have affairs with married people, they are the worst.” (268)

At this juncture, Nilanjana S. Roy opines that:

Pipee’s gender is almost irrelevant except as a convenient plot device. Her role in the relationship is masculine, classically butch change the ‘she said’ to ‘he said’ and surprise, it’s a conventional man-woman relationship. (80)

When Pipee receives a letter from her brother, Ajay asking her to pursue her Ph.D. in the States, at a time when the relationship between Astha and herself grows very tenuous, she decides to leave for the States. Pipee is seen as a highly pragmatic, time-serving individual. She looks upon her relationship with Astha, as her intimate partner in their lesbianism, only as a stop-gap arrangement. For all their intimacy for a considerable time, Pipee does not show the least sentiment of regret on the eve of her departure to the States. The author makes Pipee abruptly

leave for the States to pursue her Ph.D.Hence Pipee manifests herself as an ultra-modern, unconventional and too practical woman of the world.

Nina

Manju Kapur projects Nina, the protagonist in *The Immigrant* by subtle touches as a postmodern woman. Nina is introduced in the novel when she is at the heyday of her youth, working as a lecturer in English at a local college in Delhi. Delhi, one can imagine, it is extremely difficult to make both ends meet with such a pittance. But Nina is clever, sensible and pragmatic in her attitude to life.Nina’s widowed mother is preoccupied with the nagging thought of Nina’s marriage and she feels that it is her sacred and bounden duty as a mother to perform her marriage at the earliest. But Nina is rather reluctant to get married since her marriage will leave her widowed mother all alone. Nina’s mother, Mrs. Batra’s prayers have been duly answered by God and a very suitable Indian bachelor dentist, now in Canada for the last seven years, comes to marry her. Mrs. Batra feels greatly relieved as her daughter’s marriage has been performed quite becoming of the status of a Canadian dentist.



Courtesy: https://www.amazon.com/s/ref=nb_sb_noss?url=search-alias%3Ddigital-text&field-keywords=The+Immigrant++Manju+Kapur+novel

When Nina’s marriage has been duly solemnized at Arya Samaj followed by the nuptial night, her first night has been quite uneventful contrary to her expectations of that memorable night. Though marriage has brought them physically together, there is no emotional union between them; even their physical union is not complete in its fullest sense. Ananda, the bridegroom has turned that ceremonious occasion out to be an act of disappointment through his premature ejaculation. Nina’s reaction has been quite empathetic towards the whole situation, “Togetherness was the important thing. To be critical of how it was achieved was against the spirit of marriage.” (89-90)

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It takes very little time for Nina to painfully discover that Ananda suffers from a grievous flaw namely premature ejaculation. Ananda is not unaware of his own drawback which gradually causes breach unto their domestic harmony; for in the absence of sexual gratification in the couple concerned, no other factor however invaluable in a material sense will hardly contribute to the sustained happiness of a family. Sex, which is the sustaining elan of young married couple, is sadly lacking in the life of this newly married lady. It is against this dull, dreary, unexciting backdrop that Nina takes refuge in reading books — since she is very fond of reading books and watching television to pass her idle hours at home. Of course, they give her a pleasant diversion — but how long?

Nina is over anxious to know whether there is any deficiency on her part to conceive and so she goes for a checkup. Unlike traditional wives, Nina talks boldly of sex matters and she suggests that he should undergo sex therapy; for the postmodern women, sex or talk about sex is no taboo. But Ananda is dead opposed to having himself examined. Firstly, he does not like any kind of invasion of his privacy; and secondly, it involves exorbitant expenditure. Whatever be his reasons, this causes a rift between them. Ananda, instead of approaching any issue or situation in an amicable way, opposes Nina in a downright manner.

It is not easy to understand that deep sense of yearning for a child unless one has a mother's heart. Ananda's unsentimental tone, when he says that he is not much after a child, pierces into the core of Nina's being. At least, he should be empathetic towards his wife under the circumstances. A perceptive reader discerns a nameless rift gradually widening between the man and the wife. Ananda, to be frank, gives expression to certain facts that he is over worked at the hospital standing all through almost to the point of getting back ache and so he needs more rest at home and the implication that he cannot indulge in sex act is too much beyond a particular point. The way he talks to his wife reveals male chauvinism on his part. The denial of passionate love from him leaves her dissatisfied as he refuses to address the issue of having children. Her sense of isolation keeps growing as she finds her man wanting in understanding her need to mother a child.

No woman's life is more miserably pitiable than the one who is reduced to masturbate herself almost as a habit while the husband is alive and so close to her. Self-pleasure is a physical expression of her frustration caused by sex failure. Nina is tragically deprived of the right of conjugal bliss or happiness because of the animal indifference of her husband who has failed in his duty towards his wife. Primarily, the very purpose of their marriage has been defeated and the rest is hollowness. Nina is disillusioned due to her desperation of not being satisfied with Ananda in her sexual life. In a mood of self-pity she reflects gazing at herself thus:

For years and years Nina had masturbated, hoping the day would come when a loving partner would circumvent the furtive, dissatisfied feeling this left her with ... Having a husband should not have meant such lonely desperation ... And Nina would feel humiliated at what seemed a reversal of gender roles; she the monstrous cornucopia of appetite. (179)

When she is introduced to a feminist support group that discusses matters concerning empowerment of women, she hopes to find some solution to her problem. Co-counselling group

has become a proper platform for Nina to express her hitherto repressed feelings. As for Nina, her immediate objective to realize is her motherhood. She shared with them her sense of loss and frustration in her marriage, her husband's sexual inadequacy, her sense of betrayal, her mother, Zenobia, her loneliness and gave a kind of legitimacy to her own feelings. In a particular context when Ananda objects to Nina's joining the group of feminists, consciously or unconsciously, Nina gives expression to postmodern tendency when she says, "I need to find my feet in this country I can't walk on yours." (213)

She joins library course and this opens new avenues of acquaintances and her world in Halifax grows wider and new places introduce new faces and new romantic experiences, outside her married life; and she does all this with little sense of guilt or feeling of compunction; even the last vestiges of moral fear are relegated to the realm of oblivion. The postmodern woman in Nina emerges slowly, but surely, the reader perceives the emergence of the postmodern woman in her; when she encounters situations that she opposes, her postmodern attitude manifests itself which is her inevitable reaction. One of the unmistakable traits of a postmodern woman is to consider that to compromise with anything much against her will is defeat or death in a spiritual sense. A postmodern woman would not do or say anything just to please others; even when Nina goes with Anton, her library science classmate, it is not because she wants to please him but she finds something romantic about him and his talk has a captivating trait that Ananda sadly lacks. Her initiative to go with Anton appears in the form of her 'willingness' in sharing the bed with him.

Nina justifies her extramarital relationship with Anton reflecting,

That she liked. She had lived. Who can feel guilty about living? Judging from the evidence and the sexual therapy centres, every citizen in North America regarded good sex as their inalienable right. It was her right too. (260)

She has a new perception of herself — a sense of autonomy and independence. Strangely enough her extramarital sex does not make her feel guilty and she even felt it easy. Kapur brings out this element in Nina in her tongue in cheek style: "Her first lover had taken her virginity and her hopes, her second lover had been her husband, her third had made her international." (261)

Later, Nina disillusioned of Anton's indifference reflects herself that she does not have any right to expect anything. That was the beginning of her doing away with all taboos and traditions. She felt her beliefs were false and her Hindu faith meant nothing to her as she never practiced it. After having sex with Anton, Nina feels that it is "hypocritical to hang on to vegetables. Down with all taboos" (266). Her relationship with Anton is purely a meeting of bodies; just a healthy give and take and they are not having any other relationship. She felt liberated in sex life and considered it a force of life. She knew of the immense possibilities open to her as, "Her body was her own — and that included her digestive system and her vagina." (268)

Nina has all the traits of a postmodern woman; these qualities are revealed as and when the occasion demands; her exposure to Western culture and simultaneously distancing from her Brahminical cultural moorings, with the least sense of compunction or guilt she rationalizes her affair with Anton as it is not taking anything away from her husband reflecting that, "All around

her she heard of open marriages, of no bonds but the voluntary, of no living according to the rules of others. Her life was her own; she didn't owe anybody any explanations. (270)

After performing the obsequies of her mother at Haridwar, India, she returns to Halifax. With the death of her mother, she feels that she has lost connections with her native country. Now she is a full-fledged immigrant, she naturally realizes that there is none but Ananda as her support in this alien land.

As they return home from airport, their sentimental talk emotionally brings them closer to each other; as wife and husband, they have never learnt to see eye to eye on most things and there has been some emotional distance between them in the background. The reader is quite aware of it; but in time, situation at home turns to be ironical, especially when Nina detects by accident a blonde wavy hair near her pillow, she takes it as concrete evidence of her husband's adulterous nature; and to her, that blonde wavy hair has proved to be the last straw. Manju Kapur with her subtle strokes brings out the climax of the novel thus:

The hair explained much — the distance, the silence, the ticket for two months in India, his strange indifference interspersed with tenderness, the shifty look that skittered about her ... His body spoke, when his tongue could not. (324)

She thought of confronting Ananda with evidences of his infidelity but that would mean confessing her own infidelity and they would have to examine why they had betrayed each other. Naturally, this incident rips open the old sores and it leaves Nina greatly disillusioned and deeply disgruntled. She becomes moody and stubborn behaving like a deprived immigrant reflecting that their "marriage was based on more than one person's lies. Discovering this made it worse." (324)

When she is about to leave Ananda for good, there is a brief dialogue between them and Nina tells him that she needs to be by herself. Ananda sharply blurted out "Away from me. Why don't you say it?" (329) Nina has lost no time to snap out to him saying, "Yes, away from you." (329) And the dye is cast. Thus Nina goes out of Ananda's life and emerges a full-fledged postmodern woman.

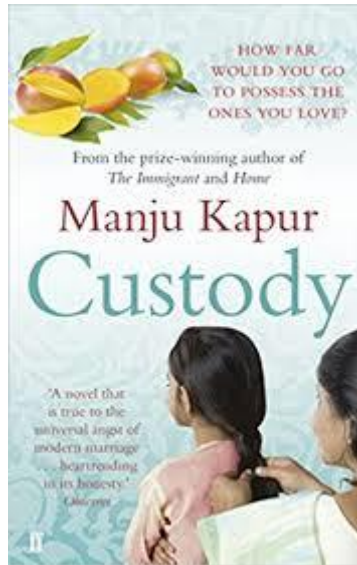
Once she takes the decision, there is no looking back and she is hell-bent on translating it into action; and it is in the concluding pages, Nina grows to the full stature of a postmodern woman, bids good bye to her home, husband and to her past only to start her life anew with supreme self-confidence in her and with unflinching courage, determination, sanguine hope and robust optimism into the vast world of opportunities; for it is the philosophy of a postmodern woman that when one thing fails, it is a signal to move and never does an immigrant look backwards; their gaze leads them forwards. Nina now is reinventing herself and so, anywhere could be her home. It is how Kapur, with her inspiring, rejuvenating message, delineates a postmodern character through Nina, the protagonist of her fourth novel *The Immigrant* saying: "When one was reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home. Pull up your shallow roots and move. Find a new place, new friends, a new family. It had been possible once, it would be possible again. (330)

Shagun

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The best example to illustrate a woman with a modern zeal is Shagun, the protagonist in *Custody*. The reader must learn to evaluate these characters of modern women through a new code of morals and standards that change with the passage of time. Willy-nilly, one must accept that a world of new values is gradually emerging out of the old.

Custody is a very unfortunate story of a hard working, honest, business executive, Raman, who has a very charming wife and two lovely children. It could have been a little Eden or paradise on this side of the grave if things went on normally. But his wife, Shagun the bewitchingly beautiful lady after a period of twelve years of her married life abandons home, husband and children and runs away with Ashok Khanna, her husband's dynamic boss, a business wizard of the international soft drinks organization called 'The Brand'.

Shagun is the protagonist of Manju Kapur's fifth novel, *Custody*. In fact, Shagun who is self-willed and self-absorbed is the most radical of all her protagonists. She is a paragon of beauty and the cynosure of the neighbouring eyes. Shagun enters Raman's life like the mythical siren that ultimately destroys his otherwise happy family. To judge Shagun by common norms of human conduct, she is a possessive, diabolical being; but in literary parlance, such a woman is described as a 'New Woman' since no such woman as her so far appears in our literature.

Shagun is projected as an independent woman who has dared to stray for her lost identity. She, who has lost her individual identity in her 'stupid early marriage', dares to come out of the protective environment of the peaceful family set-up embarking on an extramarital relationship. To a critical reader, her character appears to be bizarre and somewhat out of the way.

Shagun emerges as a 'New Woman' on the present literary scene and to understand her thoroughly one must anatomize her character and the components that her being is made up of. One prominent trait in her character is selfishness that craves for self-aggrandizement. Basically she is hedonistic in her attitude to life and hedonism, to the exclusion of everything craves for

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self-fulfillment and in a physical sense it does not take into consideration the moral or spiritual aspects of life.

The fact of the matter is that there is a constitutional flaw in Shagun's character; there is that element of romanticism to a point of superabundance. This is Shagun's besetting weakness. This element of romantic disposition in Shagun is so strong that it breaks up the sacred ties of marriage and eclipses her mother instinct to the point of criminality. Here, it is Shagun's 'selfishness' that is at the core of her action and at the base of her being; such a woman as she can easily obliterate all moral demarcations, only to fulfill her diabolical selfishness. So, one must treat Shagun as an exceptional character and having little knowledge of such abnormal characters till now she can conveniently be called a 'New Woman'. One may dub her as a postmodern woman as it has become popular in literary terminology.

Sex and sexual activity are the most important factors in society although they are least talked about. As such, they cannot be ignored or overlooked. If one turns back the pages of human history, much of it is the result of a man's effort to conquer or possess a woman of his choice; from Homer's Iliad down to the present day, woman has been the centre and the bone of contention between two hostile forces. Though on a smaller scale, it appears in most of the stories. Shagun's story is one such example. In the case of Shagun, it is she who offers herself to the man that loves her. Since she is a woman of the postmodern era, her views about human relationships are also postmodern. From traditional view point, the grossest flaw in Shagun, the married woman is her act of infidelity.

The objective for which she has left her former husband and children has not been completely achieved. She has fought a long legal battle and returned home losing her little child. If one questions what it is that she has achieved, the answer is that she has lost more than what she has gained, if she really honours motherhood. One may say that in the infinite variety of human characters and in their endless combinations and permutations, such characters as Shagun emerge once in a way. The chief complaint of Shagun against the pattern of her dull, drab routine life is: "I want something else in my life, can't you understand that? We always meet the same people, talk about the same old things over and over. It's boring." (46)

This so far unexpressed grudge bursts out with twelve years of accumulated force; and at this juncture, Ashok Khanna, the charismatic boss with rare business acumen who with his passionate assurances, inspires confidence in her that he would accept the whole responsibility of her life including her children, enters her life and this adds fuel to fire. Shagun needs a radical change and she has a stubborn will to translate her wish into reality.

It is Shagun who mentions separation to Raman. Shagun's choices are her own and she is determined to tread her chosen path and is least bothered about the social norms that will not accept the illegitimate relation.

Commenting on this, Tandon says that:

Any woman who has broken away from the tethering of normal domestic life becomes liberal in her attitude to sexual freedom. She realizes there cannot be different standards for man and for woman, sexual freedom is more often

approved by emancipated women belonging to the progressive young group, by woman unhappy in marriage, sexually frustrated, widowed or separated. (165)

Shagun seems to be schizophrenic. She does not seem to have debated seriously about the pros and cons of the decisive step she is going to take, namely, going to live with Ashok Khanna. This shows that her self-interest dominates her interest about the safety and security of her children. The mother is made subordinate to the romantic lover in her. Shagun as a woman, strong, self-willed, determined is quite indifferent to what Mrs. Grundy says. No mode of logic and no code of ethics can ever justify her act, viewed from humanitarian grounds.

In this context, it is apt to quote Gajendra Dutt Sharma's observation:

Shagun's act of sexual violation celebrates female sexual self-assertion embodied in a new feministic assumption that woman is a desiring object with an intense longing for sexual expression, satisfaction and fulfillment. Shagun follows her heart, and seeks a divorce from Raman and embarks on a new life with Ashok. (4)

She makes a ludicrous travesty of the concept of marriage when she feels that it is a kind of imprisonment. It is to be observed that whatever Shagun says is markedly tinged with her selfishness. She despises the old stultifying tradition which preaches that the great Indian family rests on the sacrifices of its women. She looks upon the institution of marriage from a perverse angle and therefore she attaches no moral significance to it. In a sense, she pooh-poohs the very concept of marriage.

Shagun may be regarded as the emerging representative of the 21st century educated middle class family. Shagun is a law unto herself and an individual of this type will have dictatorial tendencies, for its implication is that her will is law. In the light of the emergence of postmodern woman like Shagun the present society has to be reconstructed and reoriented with a change of radical outlook towards oneself and towards others; in other words, a new pattern of society is in the offing and one must regulate one's behaviour and attitude to harmonize with the inevitable changes in the society. From the traditional point of view she is a rebel and anarchist that turn all the moral values of society topsy-turvy. She flouts the sacred norms to be followed by a married woman and reveals herself to be a dare devil that is prepared to meet the worst if the worst comes. Shagun has been unfaithful to her husband, Raman, when she has her first extramarital sex with Ashok Khanna. Without the least scruples or any sense of qualms, she divorces her husband and walks out of her picture-perfect married life, proving herself to be an identity-oriented, self-willed 'New Woman'. The term 'chutzpah' aptly and comprehensively describes Shagun's character. It is apt to quote Simon De Beauvoir's observation in this context, "Once she ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator." (412)

Manju Kapur creates a postmodern woman of the 21st century through the character of Shagun. Beneath the veneer of her bewitching beauty, there lurks that ugly element of aggressiveness coupled with vindictive attitude. Thus, Shagun is portrayed as an ultramodern woman who likes to live her life in the fullest sense.

Asha Saharan comments that,

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Shagun 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. (68)

Conscious of Their Self-worth

Thus, postmodern women are sensitively conscious of their self-worth and under no circumstances do they like to compromise with anyone where their identity is involved. They detest being economically dependent on others; they are lovers of freedom in thought and action; one of the traits of postmodern women is that they do not do anything just to please others. And then, it becomes hypocrisy; and it is tantamount to self-deception. When they are determined to do anything, they go ahead without second thought; they rivet their eye on the goal, and give little thought to what the consequences may be; come what may, they want to realize their objective. From a traditional point of view, there seems to be a streak of dare devilry in their acts.

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