

# Complexity of Extra-marital Relationship and its Impact on Children: A Study of Manju Kapur's *Custody*



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## Abstract

Extra-marital relationship or love outside marriage is forbidden in most of the civil societies which consider it against the principle of honesty and trust and violation of social and moral codes. On one hand it mars conjugal relationship and spoils the children but, on the other hand it brings freshness and revitalizes one's love life. That is why people enter into extra-marital relationship secretly to seek excitement and fulfilment. In the Indian society, a wife may silently and patiently put up with and ignore her husband's affair with 'other woman' but for a husband, it is not easy to digest his wife's affairs with 'other man' and remain normal. Cuckolds are common objects of fun and laughter in the society. So in the later case, their break-up is inevitable and their children are stranded between father and mother who fight long drawn court battles for divorce and custody of their children. The paper seeks to present the complexities of extra-marital relationship in the context of Indian family and society and highlight the damaging effect of extra-marital relationship on the children.

**Keywords:** Extra-Marital, Conjugal, Intimacy, Custody, Complication, Clandestine, Trust, Suspicion, Intimacy and Divorce.

## Introduction

Extra-marital relationship is as old as the institution of marriage, be it the Eastern or the Western society. It may happen because of the biological pull to taste the ultimate bliss of body, mind and soul but it is regarded as a forbidden and sinful relationship. It is a complex relationship because society does not accept it as normal and desirable like conjugal relationship; rather it condemns and rejects it as abnormal and unwanted, not conforming to social and moral norms. It, being an unauthorised association, brings complications in one's life and relationships and its culmination is always harsh and miserable, badly and directly affecting not only the life of the concerned couple but also their children. Extra-marital relationship goes against the principle of honesty and trust which is a key to any relationship to survive. It originates from one's desire for lust or physical gratification, yet it is thought by many to be an expression of true love which does not follow social norms and man-made bondages and restrictions and is opposed to possessive love which often mars conjugal relationship. The desire for someone other than husband or wife keeps on reincarnating till it reaches its physical and spiritual satisfaction. It is thought to be an affair of the unsaturated soul and an inner urge to break the monotony and drudgery of everyday life to enjoy intimacy with a new and exciting partner. As it is assertion of one's self, freedom of intimacy and a medium of fuller understanding of the opposite sex, it is considered necessary for psychological growth and maturity. According to Simone de Beauvoir, marriage, for a woman, does not promise her growth, fulfilment and happiness; rather "it mutilates her; it dooms her to repetition and routine." Bhagwan Rajnish alias Osho, a great philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, blamed the denial of extra-marital relationship for most of the marital problems and advocated the recognition and appreciation of extra-marital relationship in a better human society. He believed that extra-marital relationship can renew and refresh conjugal relationship and partners may start seeing beauty and a greater intimacy in their old partners. But such things do not happen and apply in case of Raman-Shagun relationship in *Custody*.

**Objective of the Study**

Extra-marital relationship seems to be normal/natural when conjugal relationship, after years of love, companionship and togetherness, becomes stale and boring devoid of visual arousal, sensational touch, fervent kissing, intense love-making and enormous orgasm. The chemistry of mutual love and compassion alters and hormones and bonding chemicals of compassionate love dwindle and sex becomes infrequent, the partners seek to enter the avenue of extra-marital relationship for freshness and revitalisation. It often results from disappointments resulting from the feeling of deprivation and the unreasonable expectation in life and from one's spouse. In the Indian society where a wife is not supposed to participate in all activities and to discuss all issues, she feels deprived and tends to seek power and excitement in extra-marital affair. On the other hand, some people having higher and unusual levels of sex hormones are not made for a long term/life-long relationship like conjugal relationship. Creative people like poets, artists find it hard to maintain a long term relationship as their brain is tuned to a state of perpetual high induced by the brain opioids and they have numerous love affairs outside marriage in search of elusive happiness. They are always in search of certain elusive golden love and pleasure sensation in their new found love. This paper seeks to investigate different aspects of the issue, analyse the complexity of extra-marital relationship and evaluate its impact on the couple's children.

**Review of Literature**

Manju Kapur's *Custody* was published in 2011 but books and articles pertaining to the topic are available even before the publication of the novel selected for study. Among the full length critical books relevant to the subject are Indu Swami's (2011) *Contemporary Indian Women Novelists in English*, A. A. Khan and Qamar Talat's (2012) *Emergence of New Woman Indian Writing in English*, C .L Khatri and Sandhya Saxena (2013) *Five Indian women Novelists-Feminist Vision.*, K. K. Singh's (2015) *A Critical Companion to Manju Kapur's Novels* and Shalini srivastava's (2018) *Manju Kapur : A Critical Perspective* which are helpful in putting the subject in proper perspective. Among the articles relevant to the subject are Ranu Uniyal's (2004-2005) "Craving for Intensity Beyond Intelligent Survival: Women in the Novels of Ruchira Mukherjee and Manju Kapur", B. S. Jadhav and R. S. Nitonde's (2011) "Matrimonial Discourse in Manju Kapur", Arpita Ghosh's (2013) "Women, Education and the Indian Scenario: A Study of Manju Kapur's Novels", Chaudhary Minaben Jesangbhai's (2014) "Novels of Manju Kapur : A Thematic Study", A Muthu Meena Losini's (2015) "The Disintegration of Family in Manju Kapur's *Custody*", Neelam H. Gajjar and Hitesh D. Raviya's (2016) "Stepping Across the Lines: Recitation of Romance, Modern Marriage and Divorce in Manju Kapur's *Custody*" and M. Aarthi and C. Arul Theresa's (2016) "The Evil Side of Divorce in Manju Kapur's *Custody*" which provide different angles of vision in respect of the subject and lead to a satisfying conclusion.

**Hypothesis**

Human beings' innate desire for lust leads to forging extra-marital relationship which challenges the institution of marriage and structure of family. Extra-marital relationship complicates human relationships and the worst affected one is filial relationship. Extra-marital relationship breaks family, brings about separation and divorce and deprives the children of parental love and care.

**Discussion**

Manju Kapur who is one of the most acclaimed contemporary Indian Women English Novelists and "a master delineator of the complex Indian family life"(JES, 337), presents extra-marital relationship as a recurring phenomenon in modern Indian life. Her heroines are a little bit advance and they represent the changing attitude of the new generation which thinks out of box and does not consider extra-marital relationship a taboo and which is ready to take any step for self improvement and self fulfilment. Her latest novel *Custody* (2011) begins on the 1<sup>st</sup> January, 1998 in an elite colony in South Delhi with the beautiful wife, Shagun, 32, and her lover, Ashok Khanna,..., amid the stained and rumpled sheets of infidelity and left with uneasy thought about "things to do, places to go, lies to tell, the woman particularly".(1)as she is married to a loving husband, Raman, and a mother of two children, Arjun and Roohi.

Twenty-one year old Shagun Sabharwal, a graduate from Jesus and Mary College, Delhi, who disliked studying and looked forward to the freedom marriage would bring, was married to Raman Kaushik, an IIM graduate and gainfully employed as a Market Executive in an MNC, the Brand. It was a love-cum arranged marriage-a meeting of beauty and brilliant prospects, but Raman's mother was apprehensive of beautiful Shagun, "if such a woman really be a home-maker?"(4)She had pinned her hope in living together with her son and daughter-in-law but she remained a spectator of her son's life as Shagun had her own romantic vision of her married life: "the two of them running their house on their own."(21)Her desire for independent and carefree life makes it difficult for her to adjust with her 'traditional' in-laws, particularly the mother-in-law. Raman, an open-minded person, yields to her wishes and sets up a new home with her. But she does not feel happy in her nuclear family consisting of spouse and two children either. She failed to find a soul-mate in Raman. His irritating aspects did not match her sterling qualities. Raman's being in a travelling job, his frequent business trips keeps him away from home leaving her alone most of the weeks. After a few years of marriage, he begins to feel the growing distance between them and returning home from office he was afraid of her bad mood. It was the situation at home when Shagun forges relationship with Ashok, her husband's boss.

Shagun's interest in Ashok was raised by Raman's talking so much of him. She had first met him at the Hritik Roshan Do at the Oberoi Hotel and had a stupendous crush on him. Her ambition caught

fire with this meeting as the older and urban Ashok Khanna- too felt attracted to her and offered her an opportunity to act in a 30 second ad-film of Mang-oh! Their relationship took off and moved forward as they started meeting secretly and having sexual encounters. She shifted her focus from her husband and children to herself and drifted to her soul satisfying relationship with Ashok.

Shagun's extra-marital affair with Ashok puts her under severe strain. She is full of fear and guilt after her clandestine meetings with Ashok: "She believed that the universe at the service of betrayed partners were tracking her movements, keeping note of incriminating times and places...Guilt sees accusation everywhere, in the glance of a servant, the fretful cry of a child, the stranger staring on the street, a driver's insolent tones."(1) Her pricking conscience makes her quite uneasy: "All her energy was spent in keeping secrets. She had to be constantly vigilant, continuously invent excuses and convincingly justify absences from home, phone calls, even a preoccupied expression."(33)It affects her conjugal relationship. Now her heart fully occupied by Ashok, Raman is pushed to the margin. She now refuses Raman's overtures and declines his initiatives to make love to her. Her behaviour puzzles Raman. He gets disturbed and becomes suspicious when he finds her dazzling but indifferent and repulsive. He finds her distanced from him and feels unhappy. He does not repeat his overtures and avoids her. They tell each other so much without a single word. Raman's behaviour terrifies Shagun. Ashok, unlike Shagun, remains "untroubled by the consideration of being spied upon"(2) but he too feels burdened. The feeling that he had something to hide made him vulnerable. As Raman was his subordinate in the Brand, "his position would be hard to explain, once the secret came out in the open, as it inevitably would."(34)

For Shagun, her extra-marital relationship is casual and temporary. She never thought of leaving her husband and children: "When she started her affair she had thought a love would add to her experience, make up for all the things she had missed having married straight out of college. She had heard of other women who took lovers- their whole life didn't change."(82) She wants to have the cake and eat it too. She never thinks of divorce. When Ashok wants to inform his Company about his relationship with Shagun lest it should be taken as exploitation of junior and his wife by the Boss, she asks him not to bother saying, "You will finish and go. I have to stay for my children. How will they like it when they grow up and realise their mother is a divorcee?"(81)She wants to keep her extra-marital relationship a secret, not because it will hurt her spouse but because it will affect her school-going children.

But for Ashok, his affair with Shagun is not a chance encounter and his interest in her was not sparked by the excitement of the forbidden; rather he felt committed to this relationship which, he superstitiously thought, was a divine purpose behind his two year assignment in the Brand's second venture in his home country, India. The moment he had seen Shagun, he had realised that she was the

woman he had been destined for: "...She was a perfect blend of East and west."(4) He is possessive of her. He does not want to share Shagun with anybody-her husband or children. She has just one life to live and she should live it the best possible way she can. He dismisses her fear of society and tells her, "I just want to take you away from here. This narrow social set up is all you know-that's why you are afraid."(81)

Ashok's attitude to their extra-marital relationship make Shagun realise that she would have to give up something and suffer accordingly in this relationship. Her initial boldness and matter of fact attitude have now given way to fear not of her husband but for her children. She tells Ashok, "My life is a nightmare. It is hard to be a wife when your heart is somewhere else. If only I were not a mother, how easy it would be. To leave him, to live with you, just be happy."(84-85)She may not bother for her husband but it is not that easy to leave her children behind and forget them later: "It was her children who dragged her back to the reality of the past 12 years, standing like sentinels in the way of what her whole being craved, a life with Ashok Khanna. She owed it to them to try and save her marriage."(77-78)But Ashok dismisses her apprehension saying, "By the time your children grow up, the whole world will have changed...Things are moving so fast as it is."(81) He wants her to follow her heart as Diana, the Princess of Wales did.

Raman's suspicion had grown and he had commissioned a private detective agency-The Lovely Detective Agency-to know the truth. On 20-05-1998, the Detective Agency revealed the truth with adequate proof and their marriage was over. Arjun was 10 and Roohi was less than two at that time. As their estranged parents become hostile to each other, things become bad and difficult for children. When the environment at the home becomes tense, the sibling bonding grows stronger between them but they suffer and their distress causes anxiety, depression and even health problems. Two year old Roohi, according to her teachers, has become quite withdrawn after the event. The maid takes care of her; she feeds her and put her to bed. Arjun feels stressed without his father who used to teach him science and guide him through many practice sums. He does badly in Maths and Science examinations and secures less than 50% marks in them. He does not show his Report Card to his mother and forges her signature on it to return it to his class teacher. He is also reluctant to go to school.

Arjun, being a grown-up boy, suffers emotionally as well. He does not like his mother talking to Ashok in the next room. He feels the absence of his father: "In his father's place there was instead this stranger hovering around Shagun. It made Arjun uncomfortable, the man's finger running up and down her arms, his hand reaching out to pull her close, the little kisses he dropped on her forehead."(141)When Ashok came home, the centre of her attention was not her children but Ashok whose look was directed only at her ignoring the presence of children. He rather tells Shagun to leave Arjun alone, "Let him be, he is growing up, you have to give him

space.”(141)Mrs. Sabharwal sees the children's plight when they visit her with their mother: “They came, withdrawn children, waifs in the marital combat zone, Arjun's face pinched, Roohi pale with wisps of hair across her eyes.”(143)

Arjun again fares badly in the exams and forges his mother signature to complete the formality. He feigns illness and refuses to go to school: “All his friends had their parents firmly in the background-to be lied to over minor matters like home-work, to be avoided over bath, to be coaxed when something was wanted, to be obeyed when it came to tuition, to be pleased by doing well in the tests. Nobody consciously thought about them. Now he was the different one.”(160)According to Ashok, “The child was reflecting his mother's guilt...He was basically a good kid, the right circumstances would make a man out of him.”(163) Shagun realises that it was her fault to leave the child's father and “she would pay for her sins for the rest of her life.”(163) She wants to send him to a boarding school. Arjun too wants to go to a place “where no one would know his parents had separated, where he would not have to avoid friends who had once visited him at home, where he would not have to read pity and curiosity in the glances of the people around him.”(165-166) But at the same time he was afraid of leaving his mother with Ashok in Delhi. He felt bad when he found them spending a long time in the drawing room after dinner, both of them drinking and smoking. When finally he shifts from Vivekanand Vidyalaya, Delhi to Dehradun Public Academy, Shagun reflects while looking at a magazine: “She saw her son's face in the pages, saw his eight school-going years, contended successful, from which he was now being torn because of the complication in her life.”(200)

At DPA, Dehradun, Arjun's problems are not over. He did not like his father visiting him because he was introduced and admitted there as the son of Ashok, his mother's lover. When he introduced Raman to his school staff as his father, they asked who was the other man with his mother last month and he did not know what to say. The children are confused what to do with their father. Their mother tells them if they talk to their father, she would never see them again. “Arjun was smart enough to see that he dreamt when he was troubled by his parents, and this disturbed him. No one he knew dreamt, but then no one he knew has separated parents.”(214)

Shagun leaves Raman and children to live with her mother. She does not listen to her mother's advice to give her marriage a second chance. She chooses to follow her new found love rather than staying within the safe bonds of her family as she is not for ‘staying alive’ but for ‘living a life. She thought her traditional mother was not able to visualise a companionship beyond the mundane of domestic life: “That soul, that body that had flowered with Ashok could not now be asked to fold its petals and return to its budlike state.”(96)But when Shagun asks Raman for divorce, he refuses to admit that their marriage was over. Seeking divorce on the ground that one loves someone else was not a good reason. One has to invent lies like cruelty, physical and mental torture,

denial of money, insult in public place, or other valid reasons to get divorce to be able to marry one's lover. So, at the behest of Ashok, she demands the custody of the children to bring him to the bargaining table. Raman too petitions for the custody of his minor children to save them from the evil moral influences of their mother who is in an immoral relationship with Ashok Khanna. The children are thus used as pawn and are real sufferers of matrimonial dispute arising out of extra-marital relationship. Where will the children go in to wake of their parents not living together, their divorce not in sight and the long drawn court battle for their custody?

The extra-marital relationship of Shagun badly affects her relationship with her widowed mother who was the first to get the scent of her extra-marital affair. A diamond ring gifted to Shagun by Ashok had raised her suspicions. She, however, chose to keep silent and became an accomplice to the crime: “It was her daughter that was beyond comprehension, the child to whom she must remain ever faithful. Her fate was hard and she felt sorry for herself.”(95)But it is now impossible for her to hold her head high in the community. She begins to avoid her neighbours. When the court notice of divorce and custody of children are served at her address, she is all the more disturbed. No one in her family had ever been involved in a court case. She also fears for the children: “Suppose there were problems between them and Ashok? What would happen?”(134) When Raman inquires from her about the children and threatens to file a criminal case against her, she gets scared and worried for her daughter's safety. She neglects herself as she is upset with happenings in her daughter's life. She wants Shagun to stay with her till the things are settled. But Shagun remains defiant. Nilam H. Gajjar and Hitesh D. Raviya observe in this context: “Kapur represents on extra-marital love of Shagun in her novel and utilizes this sexual autonomy as a device of confrontation to thwart patriarchal traditions and principles ( 2016: 4)

The tension arising from wife's extra-marital relationship, divorce and managing with the children equally upsets the filial relationship of Raman Kaushik with his parents. He does not invite his parents living nearby to spend their time with him and his children lest it should add to the prevailing tension. It leaves him feeling so insecure that he thinks it impossible to trust any woman in his life, particularly when he faces Ishita, a divorced young woman in his neighbourhood. Another male character in the novel, the 40 year old IPS Officer who is the brother of B-3/106 in Raman's neighbourhood and a divorcee with one issue, also suffers from his inability to trust a woman and wants to marry Ishita on the condition that she will not go anywhere without him. Ishita's mother tells her daughter, “He does not want you to travel without him because his first wife had affairs...”(169)

But the most devastating effect of the extra-marital affair, estranged relationship between husband and wife, their separation and their nasty divorce is visible on their children. Children, the unfortunate off-springs of warring parents, suffer and become ‘nowhere children’ when their parents seek

new partners and become part-time parents. A man may leave his wife to marry another woman and vice-versa but leaving behind the children from their previous marriage is not that easy. The divorced or estranged partners do fight for and seek custody of their children but maintaining the filial bond and harmony with those children while living with the new spouse is very difficult and it is almost impossible to keep both the children and the spouse equally happy. One thoughtless word causes much pain and one thoughtless action causes much damage. B. S. Jadhav and R.S Nitonde remarks: "Arjun and Roohi-children of Shagun and Raman-suffer for no fault of theirs. "Roohi's crying fits, Arjun's traumas and sleepovers at friends' house, Raman coming late, late late, this was the norm"(105) (2011:193) Even their remarriage bringing step-father and step mother to the children add to the existing complexity and misery. Being too much a father causes distance from his new wife as it happens in case of Raman; being too much a mother can cause tension from being not enough a wife to her new husband as it happens in case of Shagun.

The situation that develops in *Custody* ultimately leads to the inhuman division of the children between their biological parents- Arjun goes to his mother and Roohi remains with her father. Whoever celebrated any occasion with them, they had one parent missing. They are not able to understand the change in parental structure. Even after divorce, Roohi draws the picture of a happy family-mother, father, brother and sister. Even after Shagun marries Ashok and Raman marries Ishita, their messy first marriage keeps intruding into their second conjugal life. Ishita, the actual mother, fight with Shagun, the biological mother, for Roohi. A Muthu Meena Losini makes an important observation in this context: "*Custody* by Manju Kapur is an excellent example of a broken marriage and its consequences on children who are played like pawns in a game of legal chess. The disintegrated family has separated or divorced parents where children under the pretence of legal rights and parental ego battles are shuttled between those two individuals, who in a very first place were supposed to give them a happy, carefree and contented childhood (2015:201)

#### Findings

Extra-marital relationship is forged by married adults and they suffer both the physical and emotional consequences of their actions. But their children suffer pains and humiliations for no fault of their own. It is impossible for children to choose their parents and it is equally impossible for parents to break their matrimonial bonds but maintain their filial obligations. Attempts can be made to justify woman's extra-marital relationship as an act of self-assertion against patriarchy and seeking gender parity as extra-marital relationship is considered to be male privilege, but children's sufferings can in no way ever be justified. Society needs to consider the problem and offer solution in the interest of such children.

#### Conclusion

Though *Custody*, according to Gillian Wright, draws "a composite picture of one side of

contemporary middle-class India" and shows that extra-marital affair, divorce, remarriage and custody of children have their own responses and repercussions in the Indian Middle Class families with traditional parents and rebel children, yet it offers a new perspective in respect of this problematic relationship. Shagun, once she crosses the threshold, does not recoil herself back and return to her nest as Astha does in *A Married Woman*. She breaks her conjugal bonds but maintains her filial bonds with her widowed mother and children. Manju Kapur does not seem to favour extra-marital relationship in Indian social context; she uses this relationship in order to present the intense quest of the New Indian Woman for every kind of pleasure and happiness and its impact on the family members, particularly the children.

#### Suggestion

Marriage is a social institution and stepping stone of family life. Its foundation is mutual faith, trust and loyalty of the couple. But extra-marital relationship is also the fulfilment of one's passion and when it happens, it may leave the mark of a broken family like that of Raman and Shagun. As the children are the worst victims in such cases, there is need to create a safety valve for them for their material and emotional well-being. Keeping in view the increasing cases of divorce and fight for custody of children, the social security network and children welfare schemes must be widened to take care of such children with the active cooperation of their estranged parents.

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