Akshara: An International Refereed Research Journal of English Literature and Language
ISSN: 0975-5373
Number 14, May 2022, pp. 103-116
Edited by Vijay Kumar Roy
https://www.waor.org/

Redefining and Reinvestigating the Notion of Female Freedom and Power: Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* and *Custody*

*Namita**

Abstract

In the modern era, there is an endless argument between 'Tradition Vs Modernity'. Traditionalists hold the ancient values and customs faithfully whereas Modernists with their own ideologies revolt against such ancient customs and traditions. In a multicultural postcolonial nation like India, the debate between tradition and modernity has gone beyond sociological and cultural divisions wherein the writers have voiced their notions in literary texts with full liberty and have supported the modernism with whole might.

It is now believed that investing in women can unlock infinite potential around the globe. But a question is raised here that how women can walk the line between Western-style empowerment and traditional culture. A woman plays either conventional or unconventional role and unfortunately she suffers. The conventional woman suffers due to patriarchal culture and the unconventional one suffers for her violation of accepted norms of society or questioning them. Indian woman is always placed between two poles: tradition and modernity; between culture and nature; between family and profession. She always finds herself at the crossroads of her life. Postcolonial Indian novels in English mirror such dilemmas, predicaments and conflicts. Manju Kapur, one of the most eminent modern Indian novelists also throws light on the changed scenario of Indian society and disappearance of dependence syndrome. This paper is a study of the above aspects of Indian woman as portrayed in *The Immigrant* (2008) and *Custody* (2011).

Keywords: Tradition, modernity, shift in man and woman relationship, woman empowerment.

* *Plot No. 21, Sector 52, Gurugram – 122001, Haryana, India.*
Email: namitasingh385@gmail.com

Introduction

Marriage – a union between two individuals – is socially supported and destined to be a stable relationship. The relation between husband and wife established through proper rituals and customs was considered to be irretrievable. Now changes are occurring in society. In the modern age, social change is causing people deviating towards dissolution of marriage and relations. The process of social change has brought a series of changes in the ways of living and different roles of people, in values and customs. The social life of urban society – heterogeneous and idiosyncratic – exposes people to a variety of situations that retract them from the bond of attachment in the family. The status of woman in such society is also to be considered. In urban society, a modern woman is being developed into a self-dependent and confident individual after getting opportunities in education, training and employment. In this modernization, difficulties breed in the compatibility between the desires of being independent in life and adjustment in marriage.

Shifting Paradigms of Man-woman Relationships: Redefining Female Freedom and Powers

Manju Kapur in two of her major works – *The Immigrant* and *Custody*, pinpoints the issues which are the pulse of post-feminism – modern woman's urge to reinvent herself, courage to explore the new and unchartered territories, her spirit of experimentation, redefining and reinvestigating her powers and freedom. Kapur attempts to mirror the contours of man-woman relationship which have assumed new dimensions and definitions with a passage of time. Her heroines struggle to make their existence meaningful and work towards controlling their destinies and, in doing so, they choose the untrodden path. *The Immigrant* (2008) by Manju Kapur showcases this facet of post-feminism where the female protagonist, Nina, tries to redefine the notion of female freedom and power in relation to her NRI husband Ananda.

The novel brings out the dilemma faced by women in male dominated society. It explores the adjustment and frustration in modern marriages and delves deep into the study of man-woman relationship. In Indian society, though under the impact of modern education and westernization the face of matrimonial arrangement is admitting changes in which young people have started asserting their rights to choose their life partners. Nevertheless, many individuals feel unable to communicate with their partners, unrelated and isolated. Due to such isolation and inability, woman feels spiritually and economically secluded. In *The Immigrant*, Kapur brilliantly narrates the suffocation of modern woman in arranged marriage in Indian society which ultimately provides her energy to protest against the injustice, rootlessness and marginalization that she faces in her marital relation and emerges as an individual, bold and self-conscious soul.

Right from the beginning, the novel revolves around the life of Nina, a thirty-year-old bachelor, living with her widowed mother at Jungpura Extension, New Delhi. Nina's childhood is spent at Brussels where her father had planned a very comfortable and luxurious life for his daughter and wife but his sudden death at a very young age left Nina and her mother with zero financial footing. Subsequently, Nina's mother Shanti, with Nina had to move to Lucknow at Nina's grandparent's house where they had to endure rude attitude of Nina's grandparents.

> Anger provided the energy in the house. The grandmother resented her daughter-in-law's existence, Nina resented her mother's meekness, the mother put up with everything because Nina's security depended on her patience. Nina obsessively imagined the day when the two of them would leave this small town hall. Lovingly she embroidered multitudinous themes in the farewell speech to her grandparents, single mindedly she visualized the job that would enable her to add to the small monthly pension her mother got from the government. (*The Immigrant* 5)

After the death of Nina's father, unable to survive on her own financially, Nina's mother became dependent on Nina's grandparents and had to endure miseries delivered by them. Here Kapur examines the tribulations encountered by an Indian woman as a widow and a mother of an only daughter and speculates economic dependence on others as the core reason behind such tribulations. Kapur also denudes the fact that it had been the misfortune of woman in Indian milieu to be parasite on man for her economic needs due to lack of education but now this misfortune is fading as the situation is improving day by day.

For seven years Nina stays with her mother at her grandparent's home until she finishes her schooling. Thereafter she migrates to Delhi for her higher studies and does English Honours at Miranda House. Obtaining her master's degree from Delhi University, Nina starts teaching at Miranda House towards the fulfillment of her and her widowed mother's needs. She does not wish to retreat her grandparents' house ever.

Without marriage or husband, a woman can live with dignity and self-respect only when she is financially independent. Nina's marriage happens to be the burning issue in her neighborhood and college since she is attaining her thirtieth birthday. Shanti is always perturbed by the fact that Nina is not married even in her prime thirties. "To see her well settled was her only remaining wish." (*The Immigrant* 6) That is why she has always been in search of a perfect match for her daughter. Nina also awaits the right man for marriage. Her first mature love affair with Rahul, a professor, fifteen years elder to her, has turned out to be a failure. She devotes herself both physically and emotionally to Rahul in the hope that their love would spring up into a more tangible relationship. Ironically, the professor abandons her without any guilt. "Rahul had always made it clear that he wanted to have his

cake and eat it too. Like all cakes this one was chewed, mashed into pulp and swallowed." (*The Immigrant* 6) Initially Nina is heartbroken but with great ability she compromises with her substances. Then Nina receives marriage proposal from Ananda Sharma, a dentist in Halifax, Canada, which put Nina at ease in her turbulence and makes her to bob up from the pain of betrayal. Nina's initial correspondence with Ananda takes place through the exchange of letters. Although Nina is apprehensive of marrying a man who lives in Canada, but she finally agrees to marry him after a prolonged deliberation. Nina, attracted by "a future laced with choices, edged with beautiful snowflakes that glittered through the distance", agrees to "join legions of women who crossed the seas to marry men living in unseen lands." (*The Immigrant* 78) After a yearlong courtship through letters, Nina and Ananda get married but her life in Canada turns out to be a series of disappointment.

Manju Kapur in *The Immigrant* examines man-woman relationship between Nina and Ananda at two levels – physical (sexual) and psychological (emotional). Sex or physical competency as a theme does not generally receive an open treatment in the hands of Indian writers in English. *The Immigrant* marks a break from this trend. The novel dwells at length on the dynamics of marriage and specially the role of emotional and physical aspects therein. Kapur appears to be underlining the fact that among other levels, for fruition of a relationship, physical compatibility is equally important, and therefore, it cannot be underestimated.

However, the first physical encounter between Nina and Ananda happens with no restraints and self-consciousness in their relationship. Nina "pressed herself closer. Gone was the awkwardness of words. With his free hand he turned her face towards him and nuzzled her lips. Her mouth opened, his tongue slipped in to meet in eagerness by her own." (*The Immigrant* 76) But after sexual intimacy, Nina comprehends Ananda's selfishness of being concerned about himself alone and feels disappointed. Ananda conveniently shuts his eyes to the demands of gratification of his wife. This act of Ananda, though involuntarily, prompts Nina to compare Ananda to Rahul. Nina, a passionate woman, is not disturbed by the discovery of sexual dysfunction of her husband. It is evident when "she lay in bed she tried to transform reality into a scenario that would not confuse or upset her. Togetherness was the important thing. To be critical of how it was achieved was against the spirit of marriage." (*The Immigrant* 91) But she is miffed at his ignorance of the emotional needs of Nina in a distant land. She is deeply affected by a sense of loneliness and uprootedness. It is garrulous discourse on importance of money, drawbacks in India as a country and bragging about his success that agitates her most and makes her to regret her only identity of being Ananda's wife. She critically protests, "The immigrant who comes as a wife has more difficult time…. At present all she is, is a wife and a wife is alone for many, many hours." (*The Immigrant* 124) Nina here becomes the voice of the predicament of numberless wives in India and those migrated to other countries who are homemakers and have a yearning for the attention and time of their husbands.

On one hand, Ananda turns sex a mechanical exercise to prove his strong sex drive and potency. On the other hand, he seeks pleasure with other women in order to overcome the distress of his physical inadequacies and to satiate his male ego too. He feels, "what kind of a man would make him, with his masculinity so limited?" (*The Immigrant* 151) Nina feels more forlorn when Ananda only focuses on the act of sex as a mechanical and futile exercise only to establish himself as a virile man. She becomes desperate to taste motherhood which does not materialize with Ananda. So Nina's marriage with Ananda comes on the verge of breaking down and turns out to be a disappointment and failure. Gradually, the frantic desire of bearing a child converts into a wish to be self-dependent and to carve her own identity.

In a foreign land, she has no one to turn to and that adds to her misery. "With Ananda gone, Nina had even less to do. Alone, her thoughts grew darker. The hollowness of the landscape reverberated inside her, with no people, no conversation to even glaze the surfaces. Hours after hours, day after day could pass without a single word uttered" (*The Immigrant* 186). And also,

> the temperature had dropped a zero. The trees waved stark black branches against an unremitting pallid sky. The wind was icy. Occasionally the sun shone but that meant nothing. It would have been nice to be able to step out without tons of clothing, to see blue skies, to experience a warm sun rather a cold one, thought Nina self-pityingly as Ananda prepared to leave for San Francisco. (*The Immigrant* 185)

So she starts working in a library to lend meaning to her life.

Later she enrolls herself in a library degree course where she meets Anton, a fellow in the university with whom she later falls into an extramarital love affair. For Nina, her admission to Library Science course opens up new vistas to be explored: "Library school assumes an excitement for Nina that she had never anticipated. Everybody was so nice and friendly. By now she and Anton had fallen into a bantering relationship. They were both married and to keep things clean, she made frequent references to his wife and her husband." (*The Immigrant* 249) In the company of Anton, Nina transcends all the boundaries culturally set for Indian woman. She starts eating meat, smoking, consuming liquor, having sex with another man. This is how Nina feels liberated and free from the shackles of conventions.

Eventually, both Nina and Ananda fall into extramarital affairs – Ananda with Mandy and Nina with Anton. They believe that extramarital relation is not a kind of deceit and infidelity but "purely meeting of bodies; a healthy give and take." (*The Immigrant* 269) The marriage of Nina and Ananda thereafter becomes a trial of deceptions. Nina finishes her course in Library Science. Revelation comes when she returns to Canada after performing the last rites of her mother. She is badly hurt to find a wavy blonde hair next to her pillow: "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. She did not blame him. His body spoke, when his tongue could not." (*The Immigrant* 324) After receiving a jolt from her husband in her marriage, once again she feels shattered when she is acknowledged of Anton remaining committed to his wife even when she surrenders herself completely to him. Time makes Nina realize that it is futile and inappropriate too for a woman to search world of joy and happiness in the company of her husband or in the arms of a lover. So she decides to be separated from Ananda and leaves for Halifax in the hope of getting a job at the University of Brunswick after appearing in an interview. "She was heading towards fresh territories, a different set of circumstances and a floating resident of the western world. When one is reinventing oneself, anywhere could be home." (*The Immigrant* 330)

The Immigrant reflects a picture of contemporary middle-class woman. The novel encompasses the understanding of vivid shades of man-woman relationship and social hypocrisy. Kapur in this novel foregrounds changing face of woman – from tradition to modernity, who risks the safety of marriage, family and household in the quest of autonomy. Kapur denudes the reality that the woman who would once succumb to the cultural trap of honour and acceptance in the society has now gone through transition where she shows the courage to abandon her relationship with her lover and husband whenever she undergoes any dilemma regarding her relationship with her male counterpart. Joya Chakravarty writes:

> With the advancement of education women started taking up jobs in addition to their household duties. However, the upshot of all these changed conditions was that women started realizing their individuality and learnt to establish their separate entities not only in society but also in domestic circles. This social and economic uplift in their status resulted in a change in their behaviour pattern. Their attitude towards sex and sexuality also underwent a notable change. Now there was more of self-expression and a far less inhibited assertion of their inner volitions in their sexual roles. All this was unimaginable in pre-independence India. (133)

Man-woman relationship in modern Indian English novels has acquired varied dimensions. The hidden meanings and the sexual innuendoes in the dialogues point to a rapidly changing society in which conventional values are crumbling. Social norms and conventions have now been thrown to the winds. The modern Indian man and woman have now been acquisitive – the age of "go-getters" has now set in.

After *The Immigrant*, in her fifth novel *Custody,* Manju Kapur mirrors the changing definitions and dimensions of marriage and love and the shifting tenets of man-woman relationship. Sudista Prasad Singh rightly observes, "Manju Kapur has

raised a very pertinent question of women's identity especially after marriage." (qtd. by Sanyal vii) In both the novels, Manju Kapur reflects the awakened sensibility of women in closed society. In her latest novel *Custody*, Manju Kapur explores two contradictory aspects of female embodiment – infidelity and infertility. While infertility disempowers a woman, infidelity empowers her.

> Infidelity reflects and defends women's rights to desiring, and the pursuit of the fulfillment of female sexual desire is a metaphor for women's equality politics. 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 surveillance and control over women bodies. Infertility is culturally and socially constructed in such a way that even though it affects a couple it is the woman who bears the burden. Women's social status, direction in life, economic achievement, wellbeing and the very meaning of marital life hinges around their ability to give birth and rear children. (*Saharan* 66)

Anderson also says in this direction, "Motherhood is usually identified as an essential part of being a woman, to an extent that women without children are usually portrayed as unfulfilled and incomplete." (42) Manju Kapur treats these two issues of female body – infidelity and infertility, from a feminist perspective.

Infidelity is reflected in the character of Shagun who harbors a dream in her eyes to be a model but her marriage to Raman at a really immature age suppresses her dreams and desires. Eventually marriage, children and household responsibilities do not allow her to fulfill her dreams and she feels constraints in the surrounding she lives in.

> For a very long time it has been ingrained in the mind of an Indian woman that marriage is the ultimate goal of her life and her husband's home is the only abode. However, the modern educated Indian woman finds that marriage allows only an outward semblance of freedom. Indian society is still very conventional in its approach to marriage and despite numerous contradictions, husband and wife strive to maintain an outward show of balance and harmony. In the career-graph of man and woman (husband and wife), it is always the woman who must curb her individuality so that her husband's career remains open to meteoric rise. (Chakravarty 135)

Through the portrayal of Shagun, Manju Kapur verbalizes a woman voicing for space in post-modern era. Like a traditional woman Shagun's mother, Mrs. Sabarwal makes her daughter settle in a marriage with Raman. Shagun and Raman's marriage is an arranged one along with standard lines – "She the beauty, he the one with the brilliant prospects" (*Custody* 14). After marriage, Shagun is caught in endless responsibilities which provide no space for her modeling career. The major

responsibility is the responsibility of mother. Mithu Banerjee writes in a review of *Custody* –

> Although marriage is well-trodden territory for Kapur, here her possession of the subject is complete. In the accumulation of detail, and her tone of emotional restraint, *Custody* becomes something more than just a social commentary, but a novel that is true to the universal angst of modern marriage, with its burden of individualism. (http://www.theguardian.com)

Shagun meets foreign returned Ashok Khanna, a corporate man appointed at Brand where Raman has already been working and whose "reputation was based on his ability to get the best out of people." (*Custody* 9) Ashok is seduced by Shagun's beauty: "In her colour, her greenish eyes and her demeanor, she was a perfect blend of East and West." (*Custody* 4) As Ashok is also smart enough to manipulate people so Shagun is also infatuated by his sweet words. Ashok's sterling elegance evokes Shagun to leave behind the constraints of marriage and trap in a relationship with him. They fall in love with each other. Ashok manipulates Shagun and executes his plan of wooing her by offering her an ad to act as a model for the brand. "To woo her would be that much difficult. He must first create a need before he could fulfill it." (*Custody* 4) Shagun is deliberately trapped in Ashok's plan thinking that it may offer her a chance to fulfil her dream.

Shagun's affair with Ashok starts as an adventure to her monotonous life but she is dragged more and more into it until she flouts sacredness of marriage through sexual transgression. "When she started her affair she had thought a lover would add to her experience, make up for all the things she had missed having married straight out of college." (*Custody* 86) As Ashok is determined to marry Shagun, he skillfully handles her. He persuades her, "Traditional versus modern values, individual versus society, he elaborated, putting a contrite arm around her. I just want to take you away from here. This narrow social set-up all you know, that's why you are afraid. But it will be fine, fine. Trust me." (*Custody* 84) In the love affair with Ashok which started from monotony, Shagun seeks adventure in the beginning but soon she suffers because of the same 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." (*Custody* 1) Shagun faces a conflict because she never tries to curb her dangerous feminine desires nor she upholds the stoic and self-sacrificing image of her predecessors. She is caught in a dilemma whether to strike out as a rebel or sublimate herself as a social conformist.

Shagun's mother engrossed in the patriarchy sees her daughter as a sexually erring wife. She wants Shagun to be chastised and brought back into the orbit of conventional social morality. She warns her that happiness of children and husband will make her happy. Indeed the mother pleads her not to be an object of ridicule by

putting her bond of happy marriage at stake and bringing shame to the family: "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?" (*Custody* 79) Treatment and social attitude towards a female in extramarital affair is displayed in the comments of Shagun's mother. It also highlights society casting an unforgiving shadow on the infidel woman. It also points out the insubstantial and substandard support network in physical world.

Though Shagun wants to get back to her wedding, she is manipulated and trapped in circumstances of combat between individualism and social conformism. She pragmatically tries to discontinue her affair with Ashok – "She had to say good bye in a way that wouldn't hurt him, then go to her life with Raman." (*Custody* 111) But the intensity of infatuation pulls her to Ashok overlooking her guilt and deciding to divorce Raman. When Shagun visits Raman in the hospital who is also ready to forgive and forget everything, she becomes the hostage of guilt but for a moment. She knows that she has gone forth and can't return.

> That evening Shagun walked slowly to the colony Park. She needed to be away from the house, it was too full of her husband. Raman must have struggled to forgive her, how many men would have been so generous? Ashok did not have this gentle, forgiving streak, he would rather kill both her and himself before he let her go. She was a fool for preferring him, a fool. One day she would be punished. (*Custody* 109)

Manju Kapur puts forward the affair not as a willful transgression nor as a sexual perversion but as a symbolic construct of her individuality and freedom against rigid conventions. Shagun's act of violation of social conformism celebrated female self-assertion incarnated in a new assumption that woman is a desiring subject with an intense longing for sexual expression and satisfaction: "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." (*Custody* 113) Shagun listens to her heart and after taking divorce from Raman, embarks a new life with Ashok.

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 premise of the priority of natural inclinations over social priorities. She, as a woman, in this new relationship of her choice is a significant 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 hostile and undermining dominant view. (Saharan 68)

Manju Kapur shows how Shagun seeks her individual identity and selfhood lost in her marriage at early age, in her extramarital relationship with Ashok. In this affair she attains a delightful experience and learns to be self-reliant, independent, powerful, and confident but also pursues sexual equality.

Shagun expresses her desires and choice and believes in Ashok when he 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." (*Custody* 85) Her emotional determination leads her 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." (*Custody* 86) She refuses to yield to the social regulations and displays power to overcome problems. The power she derived from interpretation and empowerment of the female sexuality leads a woman to self-affirmation and self-recognition as an individual. Shagun becomes the representative of the modern India women in which the concept of fulfillment of duties towards family has been over ridden by individualism.

Experiences of infertility in Indian cultural and social setting where importance is given to motherhood and virility, peep through the character of Ishita. She experiences infertility as her inability to accomplish role expectation in family and culture she is surrounded by. She is labeled as incomplete and worthless. Kapur, through the portrayal of Ishita, negotiates how a woman is stigmatized and rebuked by society and family as well when she is unable to conceive. Like infidelity, infertility is also seen as deviance from cultural norm and a ground for divorce. In Indian culture motherhood or childlessness is understood more as a social concern than in terms of reproductive health in a physical sense. In these settings, the reproductive role of a woman is recognized when the puberty of a girl is celebrated joyously in some parts as it declares the girl's fertility and her capability for motherhood. The rituals of marriage and customs are also done towards the creation of offspring. In fact, women are taught right from infancy that their existence is meant for childbearing.

Ishita is presented in a subordinate role of a daughter – a position she is transferred into her marriage. The functional role of her marriage is legitimized by childbearing by her in-laws and fertility is demonstrated vital for her as "Suryakanta was their only son and grandchildren were expected within a year." *(Custody* 53) In Indian culture, barrenness is not perceived as man's fault but this fault is credited to woman only. A woman is assumed to be only one in the couple holding an infertility problem in marriage. When Ishita's mother-in-law feels uncertain about Ishita's fertility, a frantic search for explanation and diagnosis ensue that uncertainty. Ishita readily moves from herbalist to hospital, from healer to prophet in the hope of seeking some solution but receives uncertainty and despair as gynecologist has announced severe blockage in her fallopian tube and infertility in her biological structure.

Ishita's best part of her youth is wasted in the quest of attaining motherhood. She "thought it easier to commit suicide than to live." *(Custody* 63) She is suggested by the doctor to go for intrauterine insemination (IVF) – a fertilization that takes place outside the body, with egg and sperm taken from respective donors.

Unfortunately, after two trials of IVF Ishita's situation remains the same and her in-laws give up trying any more. "The doctor might have told her that repeated attempts don't increase the chances of success." *(Custody* 68) Ishita wonders at her in-laws and Suryakanta giving up so easily. "They would have moved heaven and earth to get a sons defect corrected." *(Custody* 68) As her in-laws consider themselves as aggrieved party, they do not show any sympathy to Ishita. She laments, "From the day of her wedding she has thought of this family as hers, reveling into the togetherness, sharing and companionship. Now instead of love all around her, there was rejection." (*Custody* 63) Her childless marriage is inflicted with emotional exploitation, tension and psychological pressure. She is conveyed by her in-laws that Suryakanta, her husband desires a divorce by mutual consent. "Ishita sat as though a mountain of stones were pressing upon her." *(Custody* 69)

Ishita undergoes negative experiences because of her infertility. She experiences a lack of identity and individualism and contemplates painfully: "In an ideal world the same resources would have been put at the disposal of a daughter in law. But this was not an ideal world." *(Custody* 68) She does not want to live in a place any more where she is felt unwanted and unnecessary element. She feels disgusting at the loss of her health and self-esteem and recognition denied by infertility: "Hadn't they valued her for herself. Being childless, relegate her to the status of a nobody as she has failed to prove her femininity through child bearing." *(Custody* 68) Asha Saharan highlights sufferings of Ishita in these words:

> Ishita undergoes 'internalized exile' where the body feels disconnected from it as though it does not belong to her and she has no agency. She is considered a failure by her culture, and worse, since this failure is internalized, she believes it herself. She is doubly exiled from her body- once as a woman, an outsider to patriarchal power, and next as an infertile woman who cannot fulfill her biological destiny. So, this problematic, 'natural and essentialized assumptions of motherhood' is imposed on her body. (70)

Infertility or barrenness disrupts Ishita's marital life and is made vulnerable. "She thought of the body that had known so much love and then so much punishment. She hated her body, hated it. Tyranny of biology is what's wrong with the society." (*Custody* 183) Feeling of self-hatred and inadequacy cause her to feel marginalized. Her possession of her body is marked by sense of alienation. "Hatred towards her body filled her. It had let her down in this most basic function and she had to live with the knowledge for the rest of her life." (*Custody* 63) Greer Germaine says that "It is through her body that oppression works, reifying her. Her physicality is a medium for others to work on; her job is to act as their viceroy, presenting her body for their ministrations, and applying to her body the treatment that has been ordained." (106)

In a traditional society, a woman due to her sterility is psychologically hurt and disempowered. When Ishita is thrown out of Suryakanta's house she exhibits higher

degree of depression and anxiety that a divorced individual faces in Indian social and cultural setting. Her life is filled with dejection, sense of failure and gloominess. Mrs. Rajora tries to console her by suggesting her to think about some job. Ishita answers angrily, "I wanted to work, you got me married." (*Custody* 129) Ishita gradually tries to overcome her grief and resumes her life after the stressful episode of divorce and negative experiences of life. She accepts the offer of Mrs. Hingorani, her neighbour, to teach slum children in her school. Despite her feelings of inadequacy, Ishita builds her self-esteem. "A drop of ink gets lost in a bucket of water, and here in the bucket of Mandavali her grief receded." (*Custody* 135)

Working with Mrs. Hingorani and her NGO, Ishita embarks on a new journey with a bundle of confidence.

> Ishita along with Mrs. Hingorani marching to Parliament House to protest the nuclear device tested in the Pakharan desert. Drawing parallels between herself and the woman involved in the freedom struggle: they too had courted arrest. Contradicting her father, no it was not necessary for India to assert herself as a world power, not when she couldn't feed her children, making the man think his daughter had grown more in the NGO than in her years of marriage. (*Custody* 136)

When Ishita encounters divorced Raman, son of her mother's friend living in her neighbourhood, she eventually starts visiting Raman and his daughter Roohi. Ishita plays with Roohi and feeds her. She showers motherly love on motherless and abandoned Roohi. Here, Ishita overpowers herself of being a mother. When Raman notices all this, he feels attracted towards Ishita and a rapport is established between two broken hearts.

> But how long can a lonely, jilted man resist a woman so totally opposite from his wife? A woman who has entertained his child and done her hair? And fed her when she fussed, and seemed to enjoy it? A woman who has been divorced, who has known rejection, misery and unhappiness? A woman who is casually thrown across his path by mothers who are working in tandem without a word exchanged. (*Custody* 269)

Until Ishita meets Raman and Roohi, her body remains in the state of self-censorship, sense of non-belonging to itself and self-exile within indigenous patriarchy. But when she meets them, she takes autonomy over her body. After her divorce, Ishita has denied her sexuality as an individual and stifles her passion for sex but now new relationship with Raman helps her in exercising and enjoying her desires and satisfying the physical needs of her body. With Roohi, she enjoys an emotional bonding and feels her motherly instincts fulfilled. "She thought of her little arms around her neck, her weight on her lap, the smell of her breath. For those moments in the car she had allowed herself to feel she was the child's mother." (*Custody* 293)

Ishita and Raman's thoughts synchronize. They feel comfortable in each other's company in grief. Ishita feels completeness with Raman and gets married to him in court. Both of them start a new and fresh life leaving behind bitter past of their ruined marriages. After striving hard and bearing complications in life Ishita receives back the status of a wife which has been so rudely snatched from her. She feels victorious as she is now absorbed in the bliss of love. She finally exercises her individuality and autonomy when she chooses her life partner and resettles in a marital life in which she enjoys motherly bliss. Her motherly instincts fructify into care, love and affection for Roohi. Roohi's wellbeing becomes her top priority. She confidently speaks before the judge in the court: "Ever since my marriage I have put her welfare above everything. I think of her as my flesh and blood. If anybody is like a stepmother it is this lady. To be a mother you need a heart." (*Custody* 412) Roohi also speaks in her favour on being interrogated by judge in the court. She rewards Ishita by claiming her to be her mother. Custody of Roohi is not given to her biological mother Shagun, but to her stepmother Ishita.

In this novel, Manju Kapur not only decodes the very meaning of infertility and de-stigmatizes it by presenting Ishita as a caring stepmother but also explores the empowerment and attainment of triumphant liberation, individuality and autonomy of a woman who was disempowered by her infertility. Ishita gets back the status of a wife and a mother only when she views her infertility problem separate from her identity. She attains life as an individual and resolves the feelings of hopelessness. She no longer thinks herself an incomplete woman and a sufferer of inadequacy rather with substantial boldness and assertion of individuality she achieves motherhood, though not biological and fills empty space in her life.

Conclusion

In the view of patriarchal notion, extramarital relationship, also called adultery is a 'renegade' as it breaches tradition. But it is an act of exercising individuality and autonomy if this notion of adultery continues to evoke anxiety and moral indignation. According to Asha Saharan:

> The contemporary writers comprehend that if women want to be empowered and emancipated they have to overthrow traditional sexuality culture and involve themselves in dispute and conflict between sex morality of supremacy (patriarchy) and female sexuality. It is not its inhibitiveness and suppression but in privilege and assertion that the new sexual ideology is structured. (67)

Kapur, in both of her novels – *The Immigrant* and *Custody*, presents adultery and uses its component of sexual freedom as a weapon to resist and thwart patriarchal myths. She examines how woman has stepped forward to the centre and has become an important entity in social set up. Manju Kapur tries to define

new woman - how woman in the modern era fights for herself, for self-identity and for independence from conventional boundaries of society. The first phase, the women's question emerged essentially in the context of the identity crisis of the new educated middle class. The writer addresses many issues that are related to the middle class women who have the right to make their own choices in life. Facing assault from the chauvinists who declare that woman's place is inside the house, and the feminists who condemn the idea of taking the husband's surname after marriage, the idea finds a middle path here. There is after all a difference between possessing and protecting. Yet writing in 1998, Manju Kapur, in her novels presents women who try to establish their own identity.

Works Cited

Anderson, C. M. *Flying Solo: Single Women in Midlife*. W.W. Norton and Company, 1994.

Banerjee, Mithu. "*Custody* by Manju Kapur – Review." *The Guardian*. 27 Feb. 2011. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/feb/27/custody-manju-kapur-review. Accessed 20 Jan. 2022.

Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. 1953. Translated and edited by H. M. Parsheles, Penguin, 1983.

Chakravarty, Joya. *Indian Writing in English*. Atlantic Publishers, 2003.

Germaine, Greer. *The Whole Woman*. Transworld, 1999.

Kapoor, Manju. *The Immigrant*. Random House, 2008.

_____. *Custody*. Random House, 2011.

Saharan, Asha. "Treatment of Infidelity and Infertility in Manju Kapur's *Custody*." *The Journal of English Language and Literary Studies*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2012, pp. 66-71.

Sanyal, P. S. "Foreword." *Women's Voice in Indian Fiction in English*, edited by Vijay Kumar Roy, Adhayan Publishers, 2011, pp. v-viii.

❑❑❑