

**Decoding Patriarchal Familial Codifications and Shifting Paradigms of Identification of Women: Revisiting the themes of Adultery and Infertility in Manju Kapur's *Custody***

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**Article Received:** 14/02/2026

**Article Accepted:** 15/03/2026

**Published Online:** 16/03/2026

**DOI:**10.47311/IJOES.2026.8.03.223

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**Abstract:**

Manju Kapur studies the change in Indian familial perceptions in her fifth novel, *Custody*. The novel analyses Indian familial values dissecting the intricate and complicated familial issues like adultery and infertility and decodes the fixities of male hegemonic familial codes. The proposed study aims at finding the author's opinions and observations and analyses author's representations of familial issues in *Custody* connecting it with realities of Indian women. Content analysis method is practised in the study. Feminist perspective is applied as theoretical framework of the study. Other literary texts are also referred in developing the argument. The study finds that in the novel adultery and infertility are presented as parameters to judge women in patriarchal society. The author makes her women characters defying these criteria and turn them into a realm to subvert power dynamics. In the novel, Kapur explores the possibilities to widen the limited space of women in a patriarchal society and attempts to liberate them from the shackles of patriarchy by dealing with the intricacies of familial life.

**Key Words:** Paradigms, Hegemony, Adultery, Infertility, Identity.

**Introduction:**

Women are supposed to conform to demands of patriarchy and they are classified as good or bad women according to their degree of affiliations to the expectations of the society. Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* enumerates feminine traits ascribed to women illustrating execution of patriarchal traditions in different stages of women's life. There is a plethora of matrices on which reification of patriarchal hegemony is enacted. According to Kate Millet, as she mentions in her epoch-making book *Sexual Politics*, family is one such institutional agent through which patriarchal hegemony is executed. Within this domain, there are diverse

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dynamics and parameters to judge the characters of women circumscribing them to its boundary. Women sometimes cross the familial limitations by venturing upon the restricted entities of patriarchy. Their bold journeys are captured by women writers worldwide by brushing the complexities with diverse hues in their literary canvas. Manju Kapur is an Indian woman novelist who dwells woman's issues in her works dissecting their struggle for self-emancipation. Her fifth novel *Custody* studies woman's caged life in Indian patriarchal society elucidating various issues related to women. The novel illustrates the codifications of women stereotyping them to their fixed familial roles. Adultery and infertility are major issues presented as the subthemes of the novel through which Kapur discerns women's conditioning and their subversion of this patriarchal positioning. She divulges into patriarchal practices that circumscribe women in a limited boundary and instil into them the values of its traditions. She brings to light verisimilitude of women's life in prejudiced male regime where women are judged according to her conformity or nonconformity to the norms of the society. The paper is an attempt to illustrate the realities of women characters displayed in the novel thereby depicting the intricate familial issues. It elucidates the concept that women can redefine themselves through alteration of the encoded stereotypes of patriarchal society into the domains of self-identification. It addresses concerted efforts of women to safeguard both their individual and familial responsibilities by decoding multifarious decorum under the pretext of family. It objectively studies content of the text and attempts to validate and authenticate the propositions of the author by referring to relevant materials. Feminist ideology is the basic theoretical approach of the study while other related critical essays and literary works are also incorporated to validate the argument of the study.

*Custody* reproduces the themes of adultery, and infertility. Adultery is a parameter where women are judged and monitored to idealise or idolise them as a virtuous woman. There are innumerable contested voices expressed in support of or against to this judgement on women through manifold platforms. Literature mirrors this codification of women in its landscape. *Madame Bovary* is Flaubert's presentation of desperate wife having an illicit relationship with a military man as a response to erase the boredom of marriage, signifying the trite married life grappling in the roles of wife circumscribing with the bond of fidelity. Richard Yates' depiction of the unhappy and disastrous married life and illicit relationships of Sarah and Emily in *The Easter Parade* is an indication of accumulated articulation of deep inner despair. In *Anna Karerina* Tolstoy manifests Anna Karerina's adultery as an escapade from her passionless and monotonous married life while her sad end exemplifies the general outlook regarding infidelity and encoded paradigm to judge her character. In *The Scarlet Letter* Nathaniel Hawthorne illustrates the harsh punishment given to Hester Prynne for her sin of adultery forcing her to wear a scarlet letter as a mark of shame upon her bosom for life. Kapur paints adultery opposite to these writers' interpretation in *Custody*. She discusses

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the theme of adultery in this novel through her extraordinarily beautiful woman character Shagun. Shagun, the first wife of Raman is a glamour loving woman. Raman is a caring and loving husband who performs his responsibilities sincerely. But Shagun is not satisfied with him and always complains to Raman about her boredom at home. She wants to explore a world of her own beyond her domestic roles. Her dream to be a model remains unfulfilled as she got married at an early age to please her mother and after that she is caught in the vicious circle of marriage. But after meeting Ashok Khanna, Raman's boss, she crosses traditional and sacred boundary of being a married woman by having an adulterous relationship with Ashok and challenging the tradition of "the great Indian family, which rested on the sacrifices of its women" (99).

Married women are circumscribed within certain dos and don'ts and they are judged according to their compliance to this circumscription. Shagun's journey to selfhood throws light on multitude aspects of women's life. Her adultery is brushed in a positive light even if one sympathises with Raman. She celebrates her female body and exerts her autonomy through her body as a critic states, "Shagun's act of sexual violation celebrates female sexual self-assertion embodied in a new feministic assumption that woman is a desiring subject with an intense longing for sexual expression, satisfaction and fulfilment" (Shaharan 7). In many parts of the world steps to decriminalise adultery are taken up and for India too, the Supreme Court of the country decriminalises it under Section 497 IPC under the argument that:

'The adulteress cannot be punished. If the husband consents there is no adultery. If a married man has sexual relation with an unmarried woman, it is not adultery but if an unmarried man has such relation with a married woman, it is. Thus the woman is treated as the property of the man, which in the modern world is a little bit difficult to swallow. If the husband wants, he can rent out his wife to others or in other word it perpetuates the myth of womb ownership by the husband. Such acts are demeaning to the woman' (Nimai 4).

Kapur portrays Shagun too exercising her ownership of her own body and liberating herself from traditional bondage reverberating this verdict of the apex court of the country. She does not regret like Rosie in R.K. Narayan's *The Guide* who feels guilty of her infidelity to her husband Marco. Instead, she abandons Raman for Ashok prioritising her desires over her assigned duties. It is noteworthy to mention Helene Cixous from "The Laugh of Medusa" in this context:

Woman of course has a desire for a "loving desire" and not a jealous one. But not because she is gelded; not because she is deprived and needs to be filled out, like some wounded person who wants to console herself or seek vengeance. I don't want a penis to

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decorate my body with. But I do desire the other for the other, whole and entire, male or female; because living means wanting everything that is, everything that lives and wanting it alive. (891)

Shagun discards her marital bondage to pursue her desires and live her life in her own way. She even manipulates her motherly role to defeat Raman. She even utilises her children as a means to get divorce from Raman and replaces him with Ashok. Motherhood which seems entrapment for many is an opportunity for her to succeed in her game of power. Gauri in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* is a representation of the motherly ideal of domesticity and purity entrapped in the concept of motherhood. In order to conform to the norms of a good mother she has to self-efface and sacrifice her own wishes. Shagun resists to this imposition and turns the dice in her advantage. Even if she schemes to get divorce from her husband, she never lags behind in bestowing her motherly love and care to her children. Simrit in Nayantara Sahgal's *The Day in Shadow* divorces her husband for her selfhood but never ignores her children's concern and bestows them her devotion without any remorse. Shagun too gets separated from Raman but she plans to get custody of both the children hoping that she can provide a better life and future to them than Raman can do. Her only aim is to escape from the stultifying conformity of married life. Sarah Miles in *The End of Affair* of Graham Greene refuses to divorce her husband Henry and marry Bendrix with a promise to God to end the illicit relationship for Bendrix's wellbeing, but here Shagun chooses another path to unite with her lover even exploiting her opportunities of being a mother in order to get divorce from her husband. In *Women's Perspectives in the Novels of Manju Kapur* Chandra Bhusan Singh aptly observes that Manju Kapur portrays Shagun as a character who prioritises her ambition and materialistic world over her familial values. She asserts her selfhood even crossing the line of fidelity and virtue.

Besides the character assassination, female body is treated as an object to be exploited through multilayered patriarchal codes and the compulsory motherhood is one such which worsens the appalling situations of married women. Motherhood is a blessing and every woman would wish to be blessed with this eternal joy. But many struggle to attain this boon and when they fail to produce children, they are questioned for their infertility and their values of existence are devalued. Walker and Tobler define infertility as a medical condition that can cause psychological, physical, mental, spiritual, and medical detriments to the patient. The unique quality of this medical condition involves affecting both the patient and the patient's partner. But the criticism and compulsion are to be borne by woman only as she fails to meet the requirements of patriarchal society. Irigaray in *Thinking the Difference: For a Peaceful Revolution* expresses that motherhood is taken as the only worthwhile destiny for women as it is exercised to perpetuate male power. Kapur disseminates this imposition by

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divulging into the theme of infertility through her another woman character, Ishita who is married to Suryakanta, in the novel. Ishita's in-laws demand that she should have children within one year of her marriage. She is often reminded of her obligation in the family. "For us money is not as important as family ... it is essential that Suryakanta have a child. As the only son, he has to make sure that the bloodline of his forefathers continues" (66). But she is unable to meet the expectation of the family i.e. producing children of her husband as she is infertile. So, when Ishita cannot fulfil this demand of the patriarchy she is rejected by her family. She is treated as if she has no value as a human being. Ishita feels this non-existence and discrimination in every moment at her marital home. She feels humiliated in every routine examination of her body by the doctor. "Smaller than the ants on the ground, smaller than the motes of the dust in the sunlit air, smaller than drops of dew caught between blades of grass in the morning was Ishita as she sat in the gynaecologist's office with her mother-in-law..." (62). The female body which is a source of power for Shagun is a reason of torture, shame and desperation for Ishita.

Ishita's husband maintains distance from her making her feel the pain of abandonment and ostracization, "he even didn't touch her any more. In bed all she saw was his back. And last night, he moved into his parents' bedroom. She felt degraded, a non-person, certainly a non-woman" (68-69). Later, her fate is decided by the family and she is forced to divorce her husband. At that moment also her parents and in-laws quarrel over the compensation to be given to her treating her as an object. Her parents too, instruct her to remain there until the settlement of her divorce is accomplished. At that point, Ishita asks her parents fighting for her self-esteem, dignity and sanity, "Five lakhs is the price they are willing to pay. And it is me they are paying it to. If you do not want me to come home I will live as a tenant... I will die or be killed if I continue to stay here, is that what you want? A corpse? You can have it today" (71). Her parents decide to agree with the compensation amount given by her in-laws after considering her determination. Traditionally, a marriage becomes meaningful for the wife only when she gives birth to a child, preferably a male child as Beauvoir states in *The Second Sex*: it is precisely the child that according to tradition should assure to woman a real independence in which she is relieved of devoting herself to any other end. If as wife she is not a complete individual, she becomes such as mother: the child is her happiness and her justification. Through the child she is supposed to find self-realization sexually and socially; through childbearing, then, the institution of marriage gets its meaning and attains its purpose. (501)

This reality can be perceived in Ishita's life in the novel. When she cannot fulfil this demand of the patriarchy she is rejected by her family. She is treated as if she has no value

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as a human being. Ishita feels this non-existence and discrimination in every moment at her marital home.

Manju Kapur studies these multifaceted issues of women divulging into complications of familial life in *Custody* (Singh 2006). *Custody* disseminates infidelity and infertility (Kumari 2016) of Shagun and Ishita and both of them use their motherhood as a realm to broaden their domain of individualism. The study finds that in *Custody* Kapur reproduces the issues of adultery, infertility and motherhood disclosing its intricacies and complexities. She dissects the lives of a plethora of women characters providing a vibrant and larger scope of studies. It can also be conceived that the novelist deconstructs patriarchal hierarchy through subversion and resistance to the hegemony by making her women characters reclaim their identity altering the patriarchal codes for familial functioning. Kapur elucidates the revolution of women against the stereotypes of familial traditions. Presenting an acute discussion on the issues of adultery and infertility she illustrates how women are maltreated in the society and how they can transform themselves channelising their routes to their advantage and reclaim their identity. Shagun fulfils her individual desires through her adulterous relationship claiming her autonomy in sexuality and freeing herself from her monotonous married life while Ishita rejects her inability and lack and claims her motherhood in her new world. Kapur contends for the liberation of women from their fixed features and urges them to explore possibilities in their given limited spaces to broaden their scope and expand horizon of selfhood. She negates their confinement codifying them with imposed facades which mask their originalities. She prefers a family which foregrounds on equality and mutual understanding among its members for its well-being. She argues that women should not be trapped in the name of family which only deteriorates familial relation turning it into power play of binary opposites. She nullifies family built on patriarchal hegemony by marginalising women in familial structure, blatantly enacting gender discrimination. She promotes gender equilibrium in familial matrices for harmonious existence of its members.

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