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Traditional Versus Modern Roles of Female Protagonists in Manju Kapur's Novel; Custody.

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Abstract

The pursuit of women in Indian society has ever been remained a matter of conflict since the time immemorial. A woman is supposed to play so many roles during her entire lifetime. Traditional male-dominated setup of society wants a woman to play the obedient and submissive role throughout her whole life, having no voice or freedom of her own. While some thinkers and social reformers of the ancient times, seems to be in favour of providing women of Indian society with some freedom, where she may be able to flourish herself as an independent individual. But most of the members of male dominated society and even some thinkers are against the freedom of woman. The modern times have been changed towards the liberty of women where the women are working outside their homes to enjoy economic independence and trying to establish their own independent identity within the society, they live in. But instead of this hard fact, the traditional role is also expected to play from the part of women and is considered as the important aspect of the customs and values of society. Therefore, orthodox thinking is yet prevailed in our community even after the modernity has entered in our society and in our daily lifestyle, which is the main cause of clash between modernity and conventional values of the society.

Key Words: Pursuit, Conflict, Immemorial, Traditional, Submissive, Modernity, Conventional, Predicament and Humiliation.

INTRODUCTION

Custody is the fourth novel of Manju Kapur, widely acknowledged for its art of characterization, which reveals the miscellaneous roles has been played by the women of Indian male-dominated society. In this novel, Manju Kapur has represented two female protagonists, to manifest, how the women of contemporaneous age and concomitant civilization are quietly following the conventional rituals of their genealogy and male-chauvinist, that leads them towards their predicament and when these protagonists realize about their plight and humiliation, and its cause, they raise a revolt against the antediluvian praxis and observances of culture. Due to their acute sufferings, embarrassment and humiliation both the protagonists find their own course of life to initiate their own independent identity within their community. Here, Shagun seems to be more ambitious and modern character rather than; Ishita, the other female protagonist of Manju Kapur's novel.

TRADITIONAL ROLE

Both, Shagun and Ishita appertain to the middle-class menage where both of them are speculated to play the traditional roles to appease the ritual demands of their traditional families. Their care and alimentation are done according to the traditional expectancy of society where the female of family is presumed to be expertise in domestic management. The families want to educate their daughter but for the purpose of having suitable life-partners and for the further security in their future prospective life ahead to them. Shagun and Ishita both are graduate but Ishita has a B.Ed. degree also in addition to it. Shagun is desirous to become a model after her graduation but her mother wants her to marriage first. Her mother upholds her traditional viewpoint by saying that she should marry first and if her in-laws permit her, only then she must start her professional life:

“She had wanted to be a model, but her mother was strongly opposed to a career that would allow all kinds of lechery near her lovely daughter. ‘Do what you like after you marry.’” (11)

Ishita, after the completion of her B.Ed. course, is willing to start her professional life as a school teacher. But her parents, want her to be married first, rather than job. According to the conventional thinking of her parents, Ishita must do whatever her in-laws’ family demands:

“Marriage was far from Ishita’s thoughts. She knew it lay in her future but she wanted to work first. Having finished a BA, the family decided she should do a B.Ed., a degree that would always be useful. If she got a job in a government school, she would have security, a steady income, as well as the lighter hours that future matrimony demanded.” (50)

Both the protagonists marry according to the standard lines of prevailed rituals of society and make their first move to play their respective traditional roles skillfully in the house of their in-laws after their marriage. Both of them are married to joint families where all family members have joint interests of conventional perspectives. Shagun, according to the wish of her in-laws performs her duties towards the family household until she moves to a flat with her husband from her in-law’s house ‘Swarg Niwas’. When Mrs. Sabharwal, the mother of Shagun comes to know about the illicit love affair of Shagun with Ashok Khanna, she tries to expostulate Shagun by epitomizing different family and social ethics of traditional contemplations:

“Beti, have you ever thought of the consequences of your actions? Even if you don’t care for Raman, for heaven’s sake preserve some appearances. You think all wives love their husbands? But they stayed married. You are so idealistic, you don’t think about the long term. What about society, what about your children?” (76)

A traditional family’s apprehension and presuppositions are generally about the early child in the household soon after the marriage of a couple. After her marriage, Shagun very soon meets with the expectations of her family. That is why, she is admired by and becomes the centre of all surveillance under observation of the family members. It is considered a matter of great pride for a traditional family, to have the first child, as a male-child in the genealogy as it is the general interpretation of the customary families that boys raise offspring. Consequently, Shagun’s elegance is increased to the great proportions, when she gives birth to her male-child.

“The birth of a boy added to her glory. She had gotten over the duties of heir-producing smoothly.” (15)

When Ishita is engaged to Suryakanta, she is shocked to know about the orthodox traditional thinking of her in-laws. Her prospective in-laws divulge that they want a simple-minded, homely girl only to look after the household administration as per the prevailed customs of the confraternity. Ishita entangles with the prospective jeopardy that if she has to devote her whole life towards the household affairs then what is the utilization of her B.Ed. degree and her desire to be independent. But, being a cultured and civilized girl of traditional genealogy, she sacrifices her yearnings for the aspirations and happiness of her parents and towards the customs of her customary genealogy. After her marriage, the family of her in-laws yearns for the early child to be in the family, as usual the traditional families do believe. It is observed, when the in-laws of Ishita assert before her marriage;

“Suryakanta was their only son, and grandchildren were expected within a year.”(51)

But, Ishita fails to consummate the inclination of her in-laws, because of the fact, that due to the prolonged illness (Tuberculosis) in her childhood, she has the defective fallopian tubes which unable her to became pregnant. After the eighteen months of marriage, when the family finds no sign of pregnancy, they begin to investigate about the matter. Ishita is taken to the doctor where after an HSG test the whole matter reveals to the family. For the sake of welfare and happiness of family, she knows that she has to go through a painful fertility treatment but she gets to grips with it as her destiny. Unfortunately, the dreadful, traumatic treatment of fertilization proves against her expectations. In a traditional, orthodox family environment, an infertile woman has no respect and reputation. Whatever may be the cause, but an infertile woman is entertained with disgrace, abhorrent and bias in such families. She bears all the taunts and indifferences from all her family members silently, having no fault of her own. She is completely ignored by the members of whole family and even by her husband. But she tolerates it all without making any fuss to anybody, because of her digression to the norms laid by her family and by the community. She is optimistic enough, who thinks that everything will be all right some day and she will get her prestige and self-respect among the family of her in-laws' again. On contrary to this, her fortune becomes unfavourable towards her and finally, she is divorced by her in-laws.

MODERN ROLES

Both the protagonists of Manju Kapur suffer mentally, emotionally, physically and psychologically under the tyranny of patriarchal and traditional customs of the community. Both of them, after their profound humiliation decide to exploit no more under such customs of society. Both of them want to choose their own independent course of life. Both of them try to liberate themselves from traditional bounds through different ways. Shagun tries to liberate herself by ending-up her dull relationship with her husband Raman Kaushik who neglects her married life and worried only about his job responsibilities. Raman does not give sufficient time towards his married life with Shagun. Consequently, she gets attracted towards Raman's boss Mr. Ashok Khanna and tries to discover her physical and emotional contentment with this new relationship with Ashok Khanna. She considers that her married life with Raman is only the cause of her humiliation and is only the wastage of time;

“When she turned inwards where her life was waiting to be examined, she blamed Raman for her predicament, thinking of the years she had been satisfied with his lovemaking, tender, attentive, pedestrian, as so much wasted time.” (33)

Shagun's idea of her personal freedom is not only for the sake of her sexual relationship with Ashok Khanna, but to march towards the accomplishment of her secret desire to become a successful model which has been disenchanted. For this, she is ready to leave her husband and even her own children. Finally, she gets divorce from her husband Raman Khanna and marries to Ashok Khanna. She fulfills both of her desires. She fulfills her first desire by becoming a model and then her second desire by doing her second marriage with Ashok Khanna. She gets rid of her boring unsatisfactory married life and leads a successful happy married life with Ashok Khanna. When she moves to USA after her second marriage with Ashok Khanna, she starts there her own business and enjoys her economic independence by becoming a successful business-woman even in foreign country. She fights for the custody of her children with her ex-husband in the court of law. She tries her best to win the case for the custody. Unfortunately, she loses the custody of her little daughter Roohi, but does succeed to win the custody of her son, Arjun at last.

Ishita, after given the divorce by her husband Suryakanta, now strives to establish her own independent identity by getting economic independence within the society, which has been devalued her earlier due to her infertility. She tries to transpire from her pathetic conditions after her divorce from her husband. She tries to liberate herself and to establish her own independent identity by becoming a working-woman. So, she begins to teach for slum children. She fully devotes herself towards her teaching profession. Her parents want her to marry again but she does not want to humiliate again by involving again in married life and the tyrannical practices under the patriarchal system of society. She refuses the proposals for marriage at second time;

“She was married to her work, not one suitor could give her a similar satisfaction.” (133)

Fortunately, Ishita meets Raman, a divorced person having his little cute baby girl, Roohi. This little girl, Roohi becomes dearest to Ishita. Subsequently, Ishita starts to take great care of her as her own child. Through Roohi, she becomes friendly towards Raman and gradually attracts towards him. She begins to move away from home with Raman most of the times. She comes to a decision to live her life with Raman and Roohi. She, no more wants to think about the morality, about the customs or even the bondages of the rituals of traditional family household. She has suffered to a great extent under the customs of traditional family environment. Consequently, now she wants to lead a life decided by her own considerations and through her personal freedom. She once proclaims to Raman;

“I am thirty-two,’ said Ishita to Raman....At my age why should I bother about anybody?” (286)

She enjoys the sexual relationship with Raman before marriage which is the example of modernity within a submissive girl like Ishita. Finally, the modern elements reveal within the traditional members of society, when the parents of Ishita and Raman give their consent and blessings happily to new married couple.

Ishita is not only becomes a modern and bold character at the end but also a person with ultimate will-power, who shapes Roohi’s passions towards her, and against Sahgun, the real biological mother of baby Roohi, through her intense care, love and worries towards little Roohi. Through her strong will-power, she gets everything at last, for which she really deserves.

SUMMERIZATION

Women of Indian male-dominated and orthodox traditional families have been suffered a lot, due to the prevailed rituals and customs of society that demand devotion and sacrifices from women and give less importance in return. Traditional values of our society contemplate women’s position within the household who have little or no right to keep their own viewpoint in front of their own family members. They are educated enough but their family’s rituals do not allow them to raise their voice. They accept their traditional roles silently and act upon them by considering them as their destiny. But after their profound humiliation and inadvertence, their feministic perspective arises, and they try to liberate themselves from the bondage of traditional outlook. They now try to establish their own independent identity by becoming working women and having their own economic independence. They break the narrow line of traditional rituals and customs. They do not want to agonize any more under traditional set-up of society. They move towards modernity by establishing their own independent identity within the society that has once devalued and humiliated them.

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