

IS SHAGUN THE CHANGING FACE OF MODERN INDIA?

Mrs. Sanjeevani Hedaoo
Assistant Teacher- English
01, Deonagar, Khamla Road,
Nagpur, Maharashtra- 440015

Abstract

Shagun is one of the central characters of Manju Kapur's *Custody*. The novel mainly deals with the intricacies of the legal-side of the divorce battle between Shagun and her husband, Raman, as well as the impact it creates on their two children Roohi and Arjun. The paper basically attempts to understand the complicated character of Shagun and her different shades!

Where should one draw the line, mainly for himself/ herself is one question that we rarely ponder upon? Be it marriage or other associations, people are easily able to point out what are they being deprived of. But, in that process it becomes even more crucial to analyse our roles, responsibilities along with our interests. If we fail to do so, our life takes a 360 degree turn and that's what happens in Shagun's life too. Although, she is not the one who suffers here!

Shagun, the protagonist of Manju Kapur's novel *Custody* had an arranged marriage with Raman. She was stunningly beautiful, who in her college days had wanted to become a model. But the widowed Mrs. Sabharwal (Shagun's mother) could not take the risk and instead got her daughter married at the age of twenty-two. Shagun was happy to put the books away after graduation because she was not interested in studies, though she had done reasonably well in her academics. She had been looking forward to the freedom marriage was going to provide.

Within a year into the marriage, Shagun had smoothly gotten over with the duties of producing the heir to Raman's family- she gave birth to a boy! A few years later, Roohi was born which completed the picture of a balanced family.

During eleven years of her marriage, many men had shown keen interest in being friends with Shagun, but none had dared "cross the boundary line of matrimony. She had a settled air about her. She was totally engrossed in her family. She had been brought up to marry, to be wife, mother, and daughter- in- law. She had never questioned this destiny, it was the one pursued by

everyone she knew.” (Page 27). At this stage there was no reason to question her destiny because what more could one expect from life? God had bestowed everything upon her.

Raman was an IIT-ian from Delhi, he did IIM from Ahmedabad, got selected from campus by India Think Tank, India’s number one advertising agency with a package of 5 lakhs per annum. He was more of a son to Mrs. Sabharwal than a son-in-law. He took care of her bills, dealt with recalcitrant plumbers, carpenters, electricians, helped with the wedding arrangements. Shagun was happy to get such an understanding husband. After he started on his first job, he did not live with his parents because he thought it would be very inconvenient. Though after marriage his parents were looking forward to staying together. This was but natural. But Raman was aware that this would not be feasible, and therefore decided to visit his parents once a week. “He knew his mother expected respect, deference and respect from her daughter-in-law plus an undisputed supremacy in her little grandson’s heart, all of which she was never going to get.” (Page 24). So, Raman hurt his poor parents for the sake of his wife.

Here, traits of globalization and liberalization can be seen where the key attraction of joint family structure seems to be shaken. We have lost the patience to get adjusted into a joint family, imbibing the values of the elders and bringing up the young ones under the shadow of their grandparents.

Now, Raman was promoted as The Brand’s sales manager increasing his responsibilities and salary. He also started getting good bonus which helped him afford a holiday trip to abroad and fly in business class. Partying in the Oberoi, joining the elite golf club had now become their life.

There was a time, when both the genders were kept at a distance from each other with a lot many limitations and restrictions in our culture. With the emergence of globalization and a strong influence of the western culture, people have started mixing up well with each other. But, the total breakout of restrictions have adulterated the Indian mindset, and has also affected the physical relationships in a major way.

All was hunky-dory till Ashok Khanna, the dynamic boss of Raman was introduced to Shagun. She was a perfect blend of east-west. She was the woman he was destined for. Now her life took a new turn. “She had a husband too, but of late the husband had been seen in altered hues, his irritating aspects rushing to the fore, his sterling qualities and all the years she had thought them sterling hurtling towards oblivion.

Every day she practised thinking badly of her spouse.” (Page 2). She clung to reasons to justify her unfaithfulness.

Marriages have lost their values. It is very much evident from the increasing number of divorce cases and the extra-marital affairs reported now and then. Marriage today is like a professional bond or a so-called commitment to share life without compromising with self-interests.

Shagun was ready to put her one-and-a-half-year daughter in a playschool. She was now totally under the influence of her lover who advised her to think ‘out of the box’. Since the ‘Mang-oh’ sales had increased, Raman was forced to be away long hours which thinned the connection between the husband and wife. So, the caring Raman asked his parents to stay with Shagun and the children so that she must not feel lonely. But Shagun drove them unceremoniously lying that she was going to see a film and that the children and her mother had already reached the theatre which flummoxed the in-laws.

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Mrs. Sabharwal (Shagun's mother) was the first to recognize that something was amiss. It started with Raman's departure which was a usual event, but one of deep concern to the mother-in-law, whether Raman had managed to catch a plane.

"Why are you always so worried about Raman? You should be the one married to him, not I", was Shagun's answer. (Page 36)

Raman's constant touring was a blessing in disguise for Shagun. She invited her mother to stay with the children telling her that she would be out of town (giving her some lame reason for the same). But two days later, Shagun returned with a glowing face.

Mrs. Sabharwal's uneasiness made her ask many questions which naturally irritated Shagun. ---"Am I to stay married because you love him so much?" (Page 40).

After a few days, Raman too started doubting. Though he tried to sort out the matter, Shagun was recalcitrant. How many times did Raman wish that suspicion had not entered him, but like poison it seeped through his heart. He worked hard to give her a good life. They would be proceeding to England for the World Cup. How many women had what she had? "They both had to want a successful relationship, he was sure they both did." (Page 48)—was what Raman thought...believed!

Shagun's lack of interest in the family and the household was gnawing Raman's heart so, naturally he expressed his concern to his mother-in-law who properly conveyed it to Shagun. "What a bastard" (Page 78) was Shagun's reaction. Mrs. Sabharwal wanted Shagun to see some sense. But throughout the conversation Shagun spoke disrespectfully about her husband. "Nonsense, he is too stupid, ---- just because you love him doesn't mean I have to," ...so on and so forth.

All the unjustifiable things that she was doing made her "schizophrenic: one minute madly concerned with her children's well-being, the next abstracted, the next excessively attentive to Raman, the next absorbed in her private world." (Page 81)

Passion and love for Ashok, and his power made Shagun oblivious to everything else including the maternal instincts. All this lead to divorce. And the divorce proceedings in India are extremely murky and ignominious.

Shagun's selfishness created an unholy mess in both the families. This behaviour of Shagun depicts the changing face of India of 1990s, where the attitude was inclining towards individualism with no respect for family duty.

CONCLUSION:

The custody battles in India are gender biased, this is what the writer- Manju Kapur is trying to imply through her novel. But nowhere, does the writer generalize her perception or questions the morality of the Indian mindset! She believes that the judiciary system is not fair to either party. Her focus on Shagun's character is limited to how it affects the other characters of her novel without being judgmental. Although, we as readers can sense the concept of family shame in the backdrop.

REFERENCES:

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