

## Socio-Cultural Taboos Of Women's Infertility In The Select Works Of Manju Kapur

K. C. Mythili<sup>1</sup>, Dr. K. Nagamani<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

*Infertility or infecundity is a pressing issue that expels women from the familial structure and invalidates them in the patriarchal set up. In Indian society, the silent struggles of infertile women to experience motherhood are often overlooked and disregarded. This research paper examines the reflections of socio-cultural taboos surrounding women's infertility in the select fictional works of the acclaimed Indian female writer, Manju Kapur. Through comprehensive textual and thematic analyses, the study centring on the key novels Home and Custody, unearths the nuanced ways in which Kapur exhibits social conventions, challenges and stigma associated with women's inadequacies to conceive. By positioning the study within the context of Kapur's socio-cultural milieu, the study explores the instances within the narratives, the societal expectations, familial structures, moral implications and emotional consequences of barrenness in women. A character-centric analysis and the protagonists' responses and reactions to patriarchal strictures offer a deep perspective of the diverse experiences of infertile women. The findings of this study showcase Kapur's works as reflective mirrors of the discriminatory socio-cultural norms on women's infertility. It further facilitates readers' critical understanding of societal attitudes and perceptions, and opens avenues for broader discourses on gender roles, social impositions and the transitional phase of women's identities.*

**Key words:** infertility, infecundity, stigma, motherhood, power dynamics.

### Introduction

Infertility in women is a heart-wrenching struggle that often goes unnoticed and misunderstood by society. Under patriarchy, it has always been associated with women and perceived as a female condition or flaw, victimizing them to life-long torment and anguish. It not only disrupts women's physical and emotional well-being but also subjects them to judgment, shame and societal pressure. Women's bodies, sexualities and gender identities serve as battlegrounds for societal norms of normalcy and social respectability. Motherhood and women's sexuality continue to be heavily intertwined in political and economic discourses that are patriarchal in nature. As the Radical feminist critics assert, women's advancement is fundamentally hampered by the essentialization of reproduction. There is power play, which is being appropriated, and negotiated in the concepts of female sexuality and motherhood.

Evelyn Glenn dismisses the ideology of motherhood as natural and suggests that such "a patriarchal ideology of mothering locks women into biological reproduction, and

---

<sup>1</sup>Department of English and other Foreign Languages, Faculty of Science & Humanities, SRM Institute of Science & Technology, Ramapuram, Tamil Nadu, India.

<sup>2</sup>Department of English and other Foreign Languages, Faculty of Engineering & Technology, SRM Institute of Science & Technology, Ramapuram, Tamil Nadu, India.

denies them identities and selfhood outside mothering” (qtd. in Jackson 87). Shulamith Firestone in *The Dialectic of Sex* regards biological mothering as a weakness and wants women to revolt against it and advocates artificial or assisted reproduction through technology to counter it and reduce its burden on women: “The reproduction of the species by one sex for the benefit of both would be replaced by (at least the option of) artificial reproduction: children would be born to both sexes equally, or independently of” (11).

In Indian society, the challenges and stigma faced by infertile women are particularly grave. The popular culture and religious literature in India, simultaneously elevate conception as the highest honour and regard fecundity as a sign of virility. Women are expected to have children after marriage. If they fail to conceive naturally, they are shunned by their own families and communities. The lack of awareness and support system exacerbate the pain and isolate these women, leaving them feeling helpless and alone. Since infertility and infecundity are accepted only as female problems, the voices of the childless women are suppressed and limited, sometimes to the point of becoming non-existent. In the modern society, power imbalances characterise and shape the experiences of infertility in earlier societies. They show that, despite the fact that popular, legal and medical treatments to infertility have been shaped by ideological constructs of gender, race, and class, the stigmatised and ignored groups have been able to push back and challenge these assumptions in novel ways.

Manju Kapur's portrayal of barrenness in a patriarchal society is a vehement and courageous attempt to raise awareness about the problem. She makes a bold attempt to redefine the narrative around infertility in Indian society and empower women to embrace their journey towards motherhood. The stigma of infertility has been used as a potent weapon against women who are labelled worthless, incomplete and useless. It is degrading human dignity, exposing the powerless women to severe criticism and contempt.

Manju Kapur criticizes how women are handicapped by barrenness and deprived of social dignity and belongingness through her fictional works. She creates an awareness among individuals in similar situations to voice out their concerns and break the taboos that shroud them in silence and shame. Her female protagonists, Sona and Rupa in *Home* and Ishita in *Custody* confront the socio-cultural prejudices born out of patriarchal hegemony. Each one of these women combat preferential treatment at home and in society because of their inability to conceive.

For many married women, becoming a mother is their sole purpose to fulfil their duties to their in-laws and to society, making them complete and purposeful. Adrienne Rich in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution* focuses on the importance of motherhood and states, “Motherhood is not only a core human relationship but a political institution, a keystone to the domination in every sphere of women by men” (112) Indian girls are encouraged to act as mothers to their younger siblings or dolls from an early age, which helps them develop an early awareness of the tasks that mothers play in society. They become aware of their reproductive potential at an early age. If they fail in their responsibilities and roles assigned to them, they are looked down upon with utmost contempt for their failure to become mothers. They become open to criticism of all kinds and psychological pressure from the society at large- physical and verbal abuse, rejection by in-laws, exclusion from social gatherings and ceremonies. Infertility in married couples frequently leads to divorce., Hence, it is consequently vital to comprehend the social and physical barrenness of married life.

Sona in *Home*, and Ishita in *Custody* become victims of the taboo associated with barrenness. As a staunch upholder of patriarchal values, Sona views the institution of marriage as a means of procreation. Ishita, though educated, feels conditioned and

pressurised by the rigid customs designated by the masculine world. Their inability to bear a child makes them vulnerable to physical, psychological and verbal abuse, transfiguring them into absolute failures.

It is believed that patriarchal power dynamics govern how mothers are idealised, romanticised, and given normative characteristics. When society encounters the non-emancipatory and docile representations of infertile women, it constructs or modifies their lived reality. They may support beliefs that women's primary role in life is motherhood. Failing to conceive naturally is a sign of failing womanhood. Women are accountable for their infertility and reproductive decisions, that they must be willing and able to control their lives and bodies while undergoing infertility treatment. In their desperation to conceive with the help of technology, they are willing to subject themselves to any amount of suffering.

Sona's marriage to Yashpal, the eldest son of the wealthy cloth merchant, Banwari Lal, is one of a blissful and fun-filled life. When Sona fails to conceive after two years of marriage, she, as any other married Indian woman, faces rejection and humiliation from her family. Sona could clearly read "how her mother-in-law had to struggle to even talk to her. Every gesture suggested the daughter-in-law had no right to exist, and if she had to live, why was she doing it in their house?" (Home 11) Kapur highlights the distress of the biological inadequacies of women, who are forced to perceive themselves as insignificant creatures. The *Danger of Gender* points out that "A woman cannot exist outside the boundaries of married life and motherhood, otherwise she is perceived as useless and unworthy according to traditional Indian views." (Nubile 12)

When Sona's sister Rupa suggests her about consulting a doctor, Sona

side-stepped, not wanting to reveal how humiliating it would be to be seen as a flawed creature, whose body needed expensive medical aid to perform its natural functions. If her family had wanted it, how willingly she would have put herself in the hands of modern medicine, suffered a thousand tests. But strangely, her in-laws had never suggested this. Perhaps they wanted to punish her, perhaps they felt she was not worth the money" (Home 23-24).

In the context of infertility treatment, women are shown as being able and willing to discipline themselves by managing and standardising their lives and bodies. Not only is motherhood seen as a crucial role for women, but it is also portrayed as deterministic. Sona is willing to undergo any physical torment to get pregnant. In a society governed by socio-cultural and religious customs, women, her insecurities and fears multiply in unimaginable proportions. "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 have been ordained (Greer, 106)

Kapur exhibits the cruelty meted out against the childless women by the family and the society. Sona sighs out comparing her own plight with her childless sister Rupa, who "accepted her fate, she didn't spend every Tuesday fasting, she had no one to envy, no one to rub salts in the wounds, no one to keep those wounds bleeding by persistent hurting comments." (Home 16)

Sona's sister-in-law Sunita's tragic death and her own infecundity bring home Sunita's son, Vicky. Sona is expected to revel in the 'borrowed child' and find comfort in the role of a mother to the little boy. Her longings for a child of her own grows intense and her prayers get answered finally. She gets conceived, relieving and freeing her from all hurt and humiliation, expulsion and hatred from family and community at large.

Like Sona in *Home*, Ishita in *Custody* also falls a prey to the social conventions and conformity bias. When she receives the proposal of Suryakanta, her would-be mother-in-law makes it very clear that “dowry was not a consideration, they had enough money of their own. Suryakanta was their only son, and grandchildren were expected within a year.” (*Custody* 51). Right before the wedding, Ishita is put under pressure to fulfil her role as a wife and most importantly as a mother. Like Sona, Ishita too, soon after the wedding, feels desperate to bear a child to validate her motherhood. Her frustration intensifies as she resorts to nothing but prayers. Her happiness depends only on her conception. But despite all the pain she subjects herself to conceive with the latest technology, her body fails her.

Ishita's perceives herself as an utter failure and also useless when she learns about her faulty tubes. Her body becomes a source of discontentment for her. She feels “hatred towards her body. It had let her down in this most basic function.” (60) As Reber comments, “Child bearing has been viewed as a valuable gender-specific role to women. Therefore women who are unable to bear children, experience a pervasive sense of personal failure.” (674). She feels that it is “easier to commit suicide than to live. From the day of her wedding she had thought of this family as hers, revelling in the togetherness, sharing and companionship. Now instead of love all around her, there would be rejection.” (61) It distorts her marital bliss, which she had assumed as permanent. She even prefers death to living such a meaningless and degrading life.

Manju Kapur portrays abuse and expulsion that the childless women experience in the domestic sphere. When Ishita's mother-in-law understands her daughter-in-law's infecundity despite several treatments, she spurts only hatred. Ishita wonders, “Had there been something wrong with S.K, they would have moved heaven and earth to get a son's defect corrected. 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.” (65) Her husband chooses to move into his parents' bedroom to avoid any interaction with Ishita. She feels completely shattered and “degraded, a non-person, certainly a non-woman.” (69) Anderson draws attention to the plight of barren women, who get stigmatised by the society: “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).

Ishita puts in efforts to save her marriage and revive her tender and romantic love with her husband. But to her utter disbelief and shock, her mother-in-law “began to call her shameless, the sisters refused to talk, the father and SK avoided her.” (*Custody* 69) For Ishita, the pain of rejection seems more intense than the pain of being infecund. Patriarchy programmes women to believe that they are to blame for their failure to bear a child. Ishita is concerned that she has let everyone down, including her husband, her own family and her in-laws. She initially confides her worries in her husband, but as time goes on, she realises that it is her problem and she should learn to deal with it all alone. Barrenness in a man is pitied with; whereas the same in a woman is perceived as dangerous. A childless woman is being a considered as one who brings illnesses and disasters to the family.

Marriage continues to have material, social and symbolic meanings and consequences which are asymmetrical in terms of their implications for females and males in at least three significant ways. Firstly, selfhood, respectability and status are tied to wifeness and motherhood in more exacting ways than they are to being a husband and/or father. A single man or a man without children is seen as unfortunate, but a woman in a similar situation is inauspicious, possibly dangerous. (Palriwala: 400-401).

Motherhood elevates women and renders them autonomy and dignity in the personal and public space. On the contrary, their sterility disfigures them into worthless

creatures, leading to several psychological issues. “The most frequently mentioned effects are distress, raised depression and anxiety levels, lowered self-esteem, feelings of blame and guilt, somatic complaints, and reduced sexual interest.” (Greil, 1997).

Manju Kapur deals with the shame associated with being barren and creates a new scenario in which step-mothering, an alternate kind of parenting, is used to obtain motherhood. This is a significant stride in the fight against the stigma associated with biological childlessness and, more importantly, it opens up new avenues for mothering practises that enable people to fall in line with the established identity of ‘mother’ in new and positive ways. Simone De Beauvoir in her seminal work *The Second Sex* observes, “either she sadly resigns herself to her childlessness or both adopt a child or the one who desires motherhood asks a man for his services; the child is sometimes a link, sometimes also a new source of friction.” (497)

After her divorce with Suryakanta, life introduces Ishita to the married man Raman, who has been fighting a legal battle for divorce from his wife, Shagun and the custodial claim of his two children Arjun and Roohi. Ishita’s motherly love for Roohi abounds in great measures. She asserts to 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 393) Ishita finally wins the love of her step-daughter by negotiating infertility, unravelling its underlying meaning, and de-stigmatizing it by being Roohi’s adoring stepmother. She externalises her infertility from her identity rather than internalising it. She gets over her feelings of helplessness and grief and stops seeing herself as an inadequate or unfinished woman. She fills the void left by being childless with Roohi, by becoming a mother, though not biologically, but reaping the physical and emotional rewards of parenting.

### Conclusion

Manju Kapur points out the stigmatisation of childlessness or barrenness in Indian society and its deeper impact on the physical and psychic nourishment of women. Her female characters navigate the rough path of sterility to attain motherhood. Through her female characters, she articulates and amplifies the feeble voices of helpless, childless women. She analyses their struggles to decode infertility and instils a sense of awareness to shed the stigma that revolves around infecundity. By empowering infertile women in Indian society, by providing them with comprehensive resources and education, the stigma surrounding infertility can be shattered and a more inclusive society can be created where every woman’s dreams of having a child are respected and supported.

In the last few decades, the number of women seeking help for infertility has increased significantly. Women who are unable to conceive in the first year after conception are now referred to as “infertile” rather than “childless”. This shift reflects a growing deeper understanding that infertility is just temporary rather than a permanent one.

### Works Cited

1. Anderson, C.M. *Flying Solo: Single Woman in Midlife*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1994.
2. Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books, 2011.
3. Firestone, Shulamith. *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. New York: Bantam Book, 1972. Revised ed. Print.
4. Germaine, Greer. *The Whole Woman*. London: Transworld, 1999.
5. Greil AL. “Infertility and psychological distress: A Critical Review of the Literature.” *Soc Sci Med*. 1997; 11:1506–1512. [PubMed] [Google Scholar]
6. Jackson, Elizabeth. *Feminism and Contemporary Indian Women’s Writing*. London and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. Print.
7. Kapur, Manju. *Custody*. UP: Random House Publishers, 2012. Print.
8. ----. *Home*. Haryana: Penguin Random House, 2007. Print.

9. Nubile, Clara. *The Danger of Gender*. New Delhi: Sarup & Sons, 2003.
10. Palriwala, Rajni. "Beyond Myths: The Social and Political Dynamics of Gender" (ed. Mala Khullar) *Writing the Women's Movement. A Reader*. New Delhi: Zubaan.
11. Rich, Adrienne. *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*. New York: Rutgers University Press, 1995.
12. Reber, A.S. (ed). *The Penguin Dictionary of Psychology*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed), London: Penguin Books, 1995.