



RESEARCH ARTICLE



REDEFINING FAMILY IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION: EXAMINING CHANGING KINSHIP, PARENTHOOD AND INDIVIDUAL IDENTITY IN MANJU KAPUR'S "CUSTODY" AND JHUMPA LAHIRI'S "THE LOWLAND"

Priya Thakran

Independent Researcher, Gurugram, Haryana, India.

Email: thakranpriya70@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT



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This paper examines the changing concept of family in contemporary Indian English fiction through a comparative cultural analysis of Manju Kapur's *Custody* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*. Traditional Indian society has long regarded the family as a stable institution based on marriage, blood relations, and collective responsibility. However, contemporary fiction reflects significant transformations in familial structures driven by modernisation, globalisation, migration, and rising individualism. The study argues that family is no longer represented as a fixed and harmonious institution but as a dynamic and evolving space shaped by personal choices, emotional bonds, and social change. Through the experiences of fragmented households, broken marriages, and transnational relationships, the selected texts reveal the emergence of new familial identities in contemporary India and the Indian diaspora. The paper concludes that contemporary Indian English fiction redefines family beyond biological and traditional frameworks, presenting it as a flexible and negotiated construct that responds to changing socio-cultural realities.

Keywords: *Family, Contemporary Indian English Fiction, Kinship, Cultural Studies, Identity*

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INTRODUCTION

The family has traditionally occupied a central place in Indian society, functioning as a primary institution for socialization, emotional support, cultural transmission, and identity formation. Historically, the Indian family has been associated with collective values, intergenerational bonds, and shared responsibilities, particularly within the joint family system. Family relationships have not only shaped individual identities but have also played a crucial role in preserving social and cultural continuity. However, the rapid socio-economic transformations of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have significantly altered traditional understandings of family. Processes such as globalization, urbanization, migration, modernization, technological advancement, and changing gender roles have reshaped familial relationships and challenged conventional notions of kinship, parenthood, and domesticity. As a result, the family has emerged as a dynamic and evolving institution rather than a fixed social structure.

The changing nature of the family has attracted considerable attention within Family Studies. Earlier sociological approaches often viewed the family as a stable institution responsible for maintaining social order and transmitting cultural values. Talcott Parsons and Robert Bales argue that the family performs essential functions such as the socialization of children and the stabilization of adult personalities (Parsons and Bales 15). While such perspectives emphasize the significance of family as a social institution, contemporary scholars have challenged the assumption that family exists in a single, universal

form. Instead, they argue that historical, economic, and cultural conditions shape family structures.

Anthony Giddens' theory of the transformation of intimacy provides an important framework for understanding contemporary familial change. Giddens suggests that modern relationships are increasingly based on personal choice, emotional fulfillment, and mutual satisfaction rather than solely on traditional obligations and social expectations (Giddens 58). The rise of individualism has transformed attitudes toward marriage, divorce, parenthood, and domestic responsibilities, creating new forms of intimate relationships. Similarly, Judith Stacey argues that contemporary societies are characterized by diverse and fluid family arrangements that challenge traditional definitions of family based on marriage and biological kinship (Stacey 10). Such perspectives indicate that the family should be understood as a flexible social construct that continuously adapts to changing social realities.

The transformation of family structures is particularly significant within the Indian context. Patricia Uberoi contends that the Indian family cannot be reduced to a simple opposition between joint and nuclear forms; rather, it must be understood as a complex institution shaped by social and economic change (Uberoi 18). Likewise, M. N. Srinivas observes that modernization has profoundly influenced traditional social institutions in India, producing new patterns of social interaction and family organization (Srinivas 42). Increasing urbanization, educational mobility, and economic independence have encouraged individuals to negotiate familial relationships in ways that differ



significantly from earlier generations. Consequently, contemporary family life reflects a continuous interaction between traditional values and modern aspirations.

The insights of Cultural Studies further illuminate these developments. Raymond Williams argues that culture encompasses an entire way of life and must be understood in relation to broader social processes (Williams 87). Family, therefore, is not merely a private institution but a cultural formation shaped by historical circumstances and social change. Literary representations of family provide valuable insights into how cultural values are maintained, contested, and transformed across different historical moments. Through literature, it becomes possible to examine the relationship between individual experiences and broader socio-cultural structures.

Stuart Hall's theories of cultural identity are especially relevant to the present study. Hall argues that identities are not fixed or essential categories but are continuously produced through cultural and historical processes (Hall 225). Family serves as one of the most important sites through which identities are formed and negotiated. As social conditions change, familial relationships become spaces where individuals confront questions of belonging, selfhood, and cultural continuity. Literary narratives frequently depict these tensions, revealing how family functions as a site of both stability and transformation.

Contemporary Indian English fiction has increasingly engaged with these changing familial realities. Unlike earlier literary representations that often idealized family as a harmonious and stable institution, contemporary narratives portray fractured households, marital conflicts, emotional

estrangement, migration-induced separations, and alternative forms of caregiving. Such representations challenge the assumption that family is naturally cohesive or permanent. Instead, they depict family as a negotiated space where individuals struggle to balance personal aspirations with collective responsibilities.

Within this context, Manju Kapur's *Custody* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* offer significant explorations of changing family structures in contemporary Indian and diasporic settings. *Custody* examines the consequences of marital breakdown, divorce, and child custody disputes, exposing the emotional and social complexities underlying family relationships in urban India. The novel reveals how changing gender roles and individual desires challenge traditional expectations regarding marriage and parenthood. In contrast, *The Lowland* explores family through the lens of political violence, migration, and transnational experience. Lahiri demonstrates how displacement and cultural transition reshape kinship, belonging, and identity across generations.

Although existing research has extensively examined issues of gender, migration, and identity in the works of Kapur and Lahiri, comparatively less attention has been devoted to a comparative study of changing family structures in these texts. By combining insights from Family Studies and Cultural Studies, the present study investigates how *Custody* and *The Lowland* redefine family in response to contemporary socio-cultural realities. It argues that both novels challenge traditional definitions of kinship and parenthood, presenting family as a flexible, negotiated, and evolving construct shaped



by emotional bonds, individual choices, migration, and social change. Through their representations of fractured households, alternative caregiving structures, and evolving identities, the selected texts demonstrate that family remains a vital institution, but one that is continually reimagined in contemporary Indian English fiction.

CHANGING FAMILY STRUCTURES, PARENTHOOD AND IDENTITY IN "CUSTODY" AND "THE LOWLAND"

Contemporary Indian English fiction frequently reflects the transformation of family structures under the influence of modernization, globalization, migration, and individualism. In both Manju Kapur's *Custody* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland*, family is no longer represented as a stable institution governed by traditional norms and collective values. Instead, it emerges as a dynamic and contested space where relationships are continuously negotiated in response to personal desires, social expectations, and historical circumstances. Through their exploration of marital conflict, parental responsibility, migration, and identity formation, both novels challenge conventional understandings of kinship and reveal the changing nature of family in contemporary society.

FAMILY BREAKDOWN AND THE CRISIS OF TRADITIONAL KINSHIP IN "CUSTODY"

Manju Kapur's *Custody* presents one of the most compelling literary explorations of family breakdown in contemporary Indian fiction. The novel revolves around the disintegration of a marriage and the resulting custody battle, exposing the emotional and psychological consequences of divorce for parents and children alike. Unlike traditional narratives that

portray family as a harmonious and enduring institution, Kapur depicts family as vulnerable to individual desires, emotional dissatisfaction, and social change.

The breakdown of marriage in *Custody* reflects broader transformations occurring within urban Indian society. As Giddens argues, modern relationships are increasingly sustained by emotional fulfillment rather than social obligation (Giddens 58). This shift is evident in the novel, where marital stability is undermined by personal dissatisfaction and competing aspirations. Marriage is no longer presented as a permanent social arrangement but as a relationship subject to individual choice and emotional negotiation. The characters' decisions challenge traditional expectations that prioritize familial duty over personal happiness.

The custody dispute at the center of the novel further reveals the changing nature of parenthood. Traditionally, parenthood in Indian society has been associated with clearly defined gender roles and collective family responsibilities. However, Kapur portrays parental relationships as deeply contested and emotionally complex. The child becomes the focal point of legal, emotional, and social conflicts, highlighting how divorce reshapes familial bonds. The novel demonstrates that parenthood extends beyond biological connections and involves ongoing negotiations of care, responsibility, and emotional attachment.

Judith Stacey's argument regarding the emergence of diverse family forms is particularly relevant in this context. Stacey suggests that contemporary families increasingly challenge traditional definitions of kinship and domesticity



(Stacey 10). In *Custody*, the family no longer functions as a unified entity. Instead, it becomes fragmented and reconfigured through separation, legal intervention, and shifting parental roles. The novel thus illustrates the instability of conventional family structures in contemporary society.

Gender also plays a crucial role in the transformation of family relationships. The novel depicts women negotiating between traditional expectations and modern aspirations. Economic independence and changing social attitudes enable female characters to challenge patriarchal structures that historically defined family life. Such developments reflect broader social changes identified by Patricia Uberoi, who argues that Indian family structures are constantly adapting to changing social and economic realities (Uberoi 18). Through its portrayal of women seeking autonomy and self-determination, *Custody* reveals how gender relations influence the redefinition of family.

The emotional consequences of family fragmentation are equally significant. Divorce not only alters legal relationships but also affects the identities of family members. Children, in particular, experience uncertainty about belonging and emotional security. Stuart Hall's concept of identity as a process of continual formation provides a useful framework for understanding these experiences (Hall 225). The characters' identities are shaped by shifting familial circumstances, demonstrating how family serves as an important site of identity formation. When family structures change, individuals must renegotiate their sense of self and belonging.

Consequently, *Custody* challenges idealized representations of family by exposing its internal tensions and contradictions. The novel portrays family not as a fixed institution rooted solely in biological ties but as a complex network of emotional relationships shaped by changing social conditions. Through its depiction of divorce, custody disputes, and shifting gender roles, Kapur demonstrates that contemporary family life is characterized by negotiation, adaptation, and uncertainty.

MIGRATION, ALTERNATIVE PARENTHOOD AND IDENTITY IN "THE LOWLAND"

While *Custody* focuses on marital breakdown within India, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* examines family through the lens of migration, political violence, and diaspora. The novel traces the lives of multiple generations whose identities are shaped by displacement, loss, and cultural transition. Through its exploration of transnational experiences, *The Lowland* challenges traditional notions of kinship and demonstrates how migration transforms family relationships. Migration introduces physical and emotional distance into familial relationships. Family members are separated across geographical boundaries, forcing them to renegotiate their connections and responsibilities. Vijay Mishra argues that diasporic experiences often produce fragmented forms of identity and belonging (Mishra 14). This fragmentation is evident throughout *The Lowland*, where characters struggle to maintain emotional connections despite geographical separation. The novel reveals how migration disrupts traditional family structures while simultaneously creating new forms of kinship and attachment.



One of the most significant themes in *The Lowland* is alternative parenthood. Traditional understandings of parenthood are based on biological relationships and clearly defined family roles. Lahiri complicates these assumptions by depicting caregiving relationships that transcend biological ties. Parenthood in the novel is represented as an ethical and emotional responsibility rather than merely a biological fact. Characters assume parental roles under circumstances shaped by political tragedy, migration, and social obligation, demonstrating the flexibility of familial relationships.

The novel also explores the impact of historical and political events on family life. Political violence disrupts familial continuity and forces individuals to make decisions that profoundly affect subsequent generations. Family is therefore inseparable from broader historical processes. Raymond Williams argues that cultural institutions are deeply connected to social and historical conditions (Williams 87). Lahiri's narrative reflects this insight by demonstrating how political events reshape intimate relationships and family structures. Identity formation occupies a central place in the novel. Characters constantly negotiate between multiple cultural worlds, creating hybrid identities that challenge traditional notions of belonging. Hall's theory of cultural identity is particularly relevant here. According to Hall, identities are not fixed but continuously reconstructed through cultural experiences and historical circumstances (Hall 225). The diasporic context of *The Lowland* illustrates this process vividly. Characters navigate competing cultural expectations while attempting to maintain

meaningful familial connections. Their experiences reveal that family plays a crucial role in shaping identity, even as traditional family structures transform.

Generational differences further highlight the changing nature of family. Younger generations often hold cultural perspectives different from those of their parents, leading to tensions around identity, belonging, and responsibility. These conflicts reflect broader debates concerning tradition and modernity within diasporic communities. The novel demonstrates that family is not simply inherited but actively negotiated across generations.

EMOTIONAL DISLOCATION AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF AFFECTIONAL BOND

Beyond structural breakdowns of family, both *Custody* and *The Lowland* foreground the emotional dislocation that accompanies changing familial forms. In Kapur's *Custody*, emotional relationships are repeatedly destabilized by legal procedures and marital rupture, suggesting that affective bonds are no longer guaranteed by institutional marriage. The novel highlights how love, anger, resentment, and attachment coexist in fragile configurations that shift as individuals renegotiate their roles within broken families. This emotional instability reflects what Giddens describes as the "pure relationship," where intimacy is sustained only as long as emotional satisfaction persists (Giddens 62). Kapur's characters embody this conditionality of relationships, where emotional continuity is constantly under pressure from individual dissatisfaction and social expectations.



In contrast, Lahiri's *The Lowland* represents emotional dislocation through absence, silence, and long-distance separation. Family members often remain emotionally connected despite geographical and psychological distance, yet these bonds are marked by incompleteness and unspoken grief. The novel suggests that emotional attachment in diasporic families is mediated through memory and imagination rather than physical proximity. Such representation aligns with Stuart Hall's argument that identity and belonging are constructed through "the narratives we tell ourselves about ourselves" (Hall 225). In Lahiri's narrative, family becomes a narrative space where memory sustains relationships even when physical or emotional rupture threatens cohesion.

FAMILY AS A SITE OF NEGOTIATED IDENTITY (COMPARATIVE SYNTHESIS)

When read together, *Custody* and *The Lowland* reveal that family in contemporary Indian English fiction is best understood as a site of negotiation rather than stability. Both novels demonstrate that familial relationships are shaped by intersecting forces such as gender, migration, law, memory, and emotional labor. While Kapur focuses on the urban Indian context of marital dissolution and legal intervention, Lahiri explores diasporic fragmentation and transnational belonging. Despite these differences, both texts converge in their portrayal of family as a fluid and evolving structure. Stuart Hall's concept of identity as a continuous process becomes particularly significant in this comparative framework. Family, like identity, is never complete but always in formation (Hall 225). Both novels illustrate how individuals continuously reconstruct

their sense of belonging through changing familial configurations. The family, therefore, is not a static institution but an ongoing cultural process shaped by negotiation, conflict, and adaptation. Ultimately, these texts suggest that contemporary Indian English fiction reflects a broader cultural shift in which fixed biological or patriarchal structures no longer define family. Instead, it emerges as a flexible and relational construct shaped by emotional bonds, historical forces, and individual agency. This reconfiguration of family underscores the central argument of the study: that kinship in contemporary literature is best understood as a dynamic and culturally produced phenomenon rather than a stable social given.

FAMILY, IDENTITY AND NEGOTIATION IN "CUSTODY" AND "THE LOWLAND"

A comparative reading of Manju Kapur's *Custody* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* reveals that both novels significantly reconfigure the concept of family in contemporary Indian English fiction. While both texts emerge from distinct socio-cultural contexts—urban Indian domestic life in Kapur's work and diasporic/transnational experience in Lahiri's narrative—they converge in their representation of family as a fluid, unstable, and continuously negotiated structure. In both novels, family is no longer portrayed as a fixed institution grounded in biological kinship and patriarchal authority. Instead, it becomes a dynamic site where identity, emotion, gender, and social expectations are constantly reworked through conflict, separation, and adaptation.

In *Custody*, the breakdown of marriage forms the central axis around which familial restructuring occurs. The novel foregrounds the disintegration of



marital relationships and the subsequent legal and emotional struggles over child custody. This transformation reflects Anthony Giddens' argument that modern relationships are increasingly shaped by emotional satisfaction and individual choice rather than traditional obligation (Giddens 58). Marriage, once understood as a permanent and socially sanctioned institution, becomes, in Kapur's narrative, a fragile arrangement contingent upon emotional compatibility. The dissolution of marriage leads not only to the fragmentation of the family unit but also to the reconfiguration of parental identities, as motherhood and fatherhood are renegotiated in legal and emotional terms.

The custody battle in the novel further highlights how family has become intertwined with institutional frameworks such as the legal and judicial systems. Parenthood is no longer solely an emotional or biological function but is subject to legal definitions of ownership, responsibility, and entitlement. This shift demonstrates how modern family life is increasingly regulated by external institutions, which redefine private relationships through formal categories. The emotional complexity of parental relationships is thus reduced to legal arguments, exposing the limitations of institutional attempts to define human intimacy.

Judith Stacey's observation that diverse and flexible family arrangements characterise contemporary societies is clearly reflected in *Custody* (Stacey 10). The novel dismantles the notion of a unified family structure by presenting fragmented households in which parental roles are redistributed and redefined. Children become central figures in this fragmentation, caught between competing parental

claims and shifting domestic environments. Their identities are shaped by instability, emotional uncertainty, and divided loyalties, reflecting Stuart Hall's argument that identity is not fixed but continuously produced through social relations (Hall 225).

Gender plays a crucial role in this process of familial transformation. Kapur's narrative exposes the limitations of traditional patriarchal family structures, where women are expected to prioritize caregiving and emotional labor over personal autonomy. However, the female characters in *Custody* increasingly assert independence, challenging conventional expectations of marriage and motherhood. This reflects Patricia Uberoi's argument that Indian family structures are constantly evolving in response to socio-economic change (Uberoi 18). At the same time, male characters also experience identity crises as their traditional authority within the family is destabilized. Thus, both masculinity and femininity are redefined within the shifting framework of modern family life.

In contrast, Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* situates family transformation within the context of migration, political violence, and diaspora. Unlike Kapur's focus on domestic and legal conflict, Lahiri explores how geographical displacement and historical events reshape familial relationships across time and space. Migration introduces both physical separation and emotional fragmentation, disrupting traditional kinship structures and creating new forms of relational complexity. Vijay Mishra's concept of diaspora as a condition of "permanent displacement" is particularly relevant here, as the novel's characters



exist in a state of continual negotiation between homeland and hostland identities (Mishra 14).

In *The Lowland*, family bonds are sustained not through physical proximity but through memory, imagination, and emotional attachment. However, these bonds are often unstable and subject to reinterpretation over time. Memory becomes a fragmented narrative that different characters interpret in different ways, leading to divergent understandings of shared familial history. This reflects Raymond Williams' idea that culture is a lived and evolving process shaped by historical change (Williams 87). In Lahiri's narrative, family history is not a stable inheritance but a reconstructed memory shaped by distance, silence, and emotional rupture.

Parenthood in *The Lowland* is similarly transformed. Rather than being defined strictly through biological ties, parenthood is represented as an ethical and emotional responsibility shaped by circumstances. Characters often assume parental roles in response to loss, absence, or necessity rather than traditional family structures. This reconfiguration challenges conventional definitions of kinship and aligns with Judith Stacey's notion of flexible caregiving arrangements (Stacey 10). In this sense, family is no longer restricted to biological reproduction but also encompasses emotional and ethical relationships formed through lived experience.

Both novels also highlight the role of generational conflict in shaping family identity. In *Custody*, children are positioned at the center of parental conflict, symbolizing both continuity and rupture within the family structure. In *The Lowland*, generational differences are intensified by migration,

as younger generations develop hybrid identities that differ significantly from their parents'. These generational tensions reflect broader cultural conflicts between tradition and modernity, continuity and change.

A significant point of convergence between the two novels lies in their representation of emotional instability within family structures. In *Custody*, emotional bonds are frequently disrupted by divorce, legal disputes, and shifting expectations. In *The Lowland*, emotional connections persist despite physical separation but are marked by silence, grief, and unresolved trauma. In both cases, emotion becomes a central site where family is constructed and reconstructed, revealing the instability of intimate relationships in contemporary society.

Conclusion

The comparative study of Manju Kapur's *Custody* and Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Lowland* demonstrates that contemporary Indian English fiction fundamentally redefines the concept of family. Moving beyond traditional representations of family as a stable, unified, and biologically determined institution, both novels present family as a fluid, fragmented, and continuously evolving construct shaped by socio-cultural, historical, and emotional forces. The analysis reveals that in *Custody*, family transformation is primarily driven by marital breakdown, legal intervention, and changing gender roles within urban Indian society. In contrast, *The Lowland* situates family transformation within the broader contexts of migration, political violence, and diasporic displacement. Despite these contextual differences,



both novels converge in their portrayal of family as a site of emotional negotiation, institutional influence, and identity formation.

Drawing upon theoretical insights from Anthony Giddens, Stuart Hall, Judith Stacey, Patricia Uberoi, and Raymond Williams, this study highlights that family is not a fixed structure but a culturally constructed and historically evolving institution. Giddens' concept of the transformation of intimacy explains the increasing centrality of emotional fulfillment in modern relationships (Giddens 58). At the same time, Hall's theory of identity emphasizes its continuous formation through cultural and social processes (Hall 225). Stacey's notion of diverse family forms further supports the argument that contemporary familial arrangements are flexible and pluralistic in nature (Stacey 10).

One of the most significant findings of this study is that both novels reposition family from being an institution of stability to a process of negotiation. Instead of functioning as a space of certainty, family becomes a domain of emotional uncertainty where individuals constantly redefine their roles. This shift reflects broader socio-cultural changes in contemporary society where individual autonomy increasingly intersects with traditional expectations. The novels thus mirror a larger cultural transition in which authority within the family is no longer absolute but distributed across emotional, legal, and social domains.

Another important implication of this study is the redefinition of parenthood and kinship. Both *Custody* and *The Lowland* demonstrate that parental roles are no longer strictly determined by biological ties or traditional gender expectations. Instead, caregiving

becomes situational, adaptive, and often emotionally negotiated. The study also highlights how identity formation is deeply embedded within familial structures. As both novels illustrate, individuals do not develop identity in isolation but through continuous interaction with family members and social environments. Whether through divorce, migration, or generational distance, characters are compelled to reconstruct their sense of self in response to shifting familial conditions. This reinforces Stuart Hall's idea that identity is always "in process," never complete or fixed, but continuously shaped through lived experience (Hall 225).

Furthermore, the comparative approach adopted in this study underscores the importance of reading Indian English fiction within both national and transnational frameworks. While Kapur's *Custody* reflects the changing dynamics of urban Indian family life, Lahiri's *The Lowland* expands the discussion into the diasporic and global context. Together, these texts reveal that the transformation of family is not limited to a specific geographical or cultural space but is part of a broader global reconfiguration of intimacy, belonging, and identity.

This study also suggests that literature plays a crucial role in documenting and interpreting social transformation. Fiction becomes a space where abstract sociological changes are given emotional and narrative form. In a broader sense, the findings of this research contribute to ongoing debates in Cultural Studies and Family Studies regarding the nature of contemporary kinship systems. The shift from fixed familial roles to negotiated identities reflects larger transformations in modern society, including increasing individualization, mobility, and



cultural hybridity. Raymond Williams' understanding of culture as a "whole way of life" becomes particularly relevant here, as family emerges as one of the most dynamic sites where cultural change is experienced and expressed (Williams 87).

Ultimately, this study reaffirms that family in contemporary Indian English fiction cannot be understood through rigid or traditional frameworks. Instead, it must be seen as a continuously evolving institution shaped by emotional, cultural, legal, and historical forces. By foregrounding the instability and adaptability of family structures, these novels challenge readers to reconsider conventional definitions of kinship and domestic life. They reveal that family is not a fixed destination but an ongoing process of negotiation, conflict, and reconstruction. In doing so, they contribute meaningfully to contemporary literary discourse and offer a nuanced understanding of how modern life reshapes the most intimate of human relationships. Finally, this research highlights the continuing relevance of interdisciplinary approaches in literary studies. By combining Cultural Studies and Family Studies, it becomes possible better to understand the complex interplay between literature and society. Such an approach not only enriches textual interpretation but also deepens our understanding of how cultural institutions evolve.

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