
Negotiating Gendered Identity in the Diasporic Narrative of Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter*

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Abstract

Through a gendered viewpoint, diasporic identity often reveals the complex negotiation between self-definition, belongingness, and cultural displacement. Gender, when it intersects with diaspora, creates a unique space where identity becomes a platform of constant reconstruction and resistance. Shilpi Somaya enlightens this concept in her work *Secret Daughter*, which explores the human consequences of gender discrimination, cultural conflict, and diasporic identity, framed by a powerful emotional journey of separation and reconciliation in depth. Central to the novel are two women: an Indian mother, Kavita, forced by patriarchal norms to give up her newborn daughter as an act of both love and resistance, and an American doctor, Somer, who, after facing infertility, adopts the child, Asha.

The story begins with maternal separation, rooted in sacrifice rather than rejection; hence, it highlights societal systems that devalue girls. While Somer fulfils her desire for motherhood, she faces internal conflict in transiting racial and cultural differences with Asha, creating emotional distance. Meanwhile, Asha, raised between two cultures, experiences alienation from both her American upbringing and Indian heritage. Asha's search for her birth parents becomes a metaphor for the deeper struggle for identity in the face of gendered and cultural dislocation.

Ultimately, the analysis demonstrates how the emotional strain of gender discrimination extends beyond national and cultural boundaries, shaping the lives of mothers and daughters. This study further explores how diasporic experiences reshape gender roles and identities, challenging the binaries of tradition and modernity at home and abroad. Through its portrayal of separation and reunion, *Secret Daughter* offers a powerful reflection on identity, motherhood, and the enduring resilience of women across different cultures.

Keywords: Gender discrimination, cultural conflict, Diasporic identity, gender inequality, motherhood, Cultural dislocation.

1. Gender Discrimination and female Infanticide.

1.1 Kavita's Moment of grief.

The novel opens with Kavita, an expected woman in rural India, who thinks back about her last pregnancy while going through her present contractions with a sense of dread and unease: "A sudden fear grips her, the same suffocating fear she has felt throughout this pregnancy." (6) She recalls the tragic experience of her first pregnancy in which her husband Jasu enters the hut moment after she gave birth to her first newborn baby girl. Still suffering with the post-Labor pain, Kavita could not resist when father of new born tore from her arms to dispose the child off, a common practice for poor rural families in India at that time: "like so many baby girls, her firstborn would be returned to the earth long before her time [...] whether she was drowned, suffocated or simply left to starve, Kavita hoped only that death came quickly, mercifully." (7)

In the time of deep grief, she didn't receive any emotional support from her family as well as the community members rather she was given scornful glances and number of counselling for the way of conceiving a boy next time.

In *The Second Sex* (1944), Simone de Beauvoir argues: "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman." (267). Hence suggesting that it's the society creates "otherness" of women, limiting them to reproductive roles. In cultures where girls are seen as burden and sons are valued more, results in making infanticide a tragic expression. Kavita's baby is rejected not because of who she is but to the patriarchal belief that she symbolizes - dowry, economic loss and social burden.

1.2. Kavita's powerful choice

The pain intensifies and after few pushes she gives birth to another baby girl. Jasu's joy turns into sorrow and shouts at Kavita: "Arre! Another girl? what is the matter with you? Let me see!" (15) blaming his wife for being responsible behind the gender selection of newborn baby, rather forgetting the fact that it's father and not mother who logically decide the gender of the fetus. Germaine Greer an Australian feminist writer analyses in works like *The Female Eunuch* (1970) that how women are held responsible for family outcomes and are even blamed for the things outside their control. She critiques on how the patriarchal system blames and controls women's bodies and reproductive roles. A leading feminist economist and development scholar Naila Kabeer in her work *Reversed Realities* (1994) addresses how social attitude and development policies blame women for fertility decisions often ignoring the science or structural gender biasness.

Despite of all blames she took courage and threatens Jasu for ruining herself if he tries to hurt the baby girl. She names her baby Usha which means "'dawn' in Hindi. Disheartened and confused she decides to give Usha is an orphanage offering her the silver bangles from her wrist onto Usha's ankle considering: "Usha will never know her parents, but she has a chance at life, and that will have to be enough" (26). It's a difficult stage for a mother to handover her child to someone strange and so is Kavita consumed with dread "who will take care of my baby? This woman? will she love Usha? Kavita's mouth feels dry and dusty" (32) signifying the pain of losing a child. Sometimes, the hardest decisions are taken out of love for the children and so does Kavita by handing over her baby.

1.3 Transformation through inner strength

A Thousand Splendid Suns by Khaled Hosseini demonstrates the suffering of Mariam and Laila, the same way Kavita suffers under patriarchal structure yet discover resilience and inner strength. Mariam being illegitimate is denied legitimacy and love by her father and community, therefore is married off at 15 to abusive Rasheed. On the other hand, Laila, though educated and loved by her parents is forced to marry Rasheed after the loss of her family in bombing. Both the females reflect two side of coin as have totally different background but faces the same domestic violence, systemic gender inequality and loss of autonomy. Despite the initial tension both girl develop a sisterly bond and supports emotionally to each other.

Similarly, Kavita is caught in a traditional Indian village where sons are ever preferred. Her first daughter is killed by her husband and family-a brutal grip of patriarchy and reflection of female infanticide. She courageously defies this by taking Usha to an orphanage in order to save her life although it can result in lifelong grief and separation but still, she never regrets her brave act. She nurtures her son Vijay with love,

carrying along the memory of her departed daughter. The Loud violence of patriarchy fades in front of her quiet, enduring maternal strength. She depicts how females in oppressive systems create resistance through small and steady acts of courage and sacrifice. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak in her influential work "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) argues about how the subaltern women are doubly silenced - by colonial / postcolonial structure and by patriarchy. Just like same way Kavita represents many other women who is voiceless in society. Although she acts out of silent resistance but in the broader discourse her voice remains unheard. Hence female infanticide is not only the outcome of cultural tradition, but a symptom of poverty, global inequalities and systematic neglect of women's voices.

2. Motherhood: Biological Vs Adoptive

2.1 Emotional Contrast between Kavita and Somer's experiences.

The two main character of the novel, Kavita and Somer, faces their personal struggle to becoming a mother. Each woman comes from different backgrounds - Kavita, an impoverished Indian woman residing in small city of the country while Somer, a wealthy white physician living in San Francisco, Kavita not only gives birth to one, Reut two girls, to whom she is unable to keep while Somer on the other side struggles with infertility. After looking her first child, Kavita painfully gives her second girl child to the orphanage allowing her a chance to live life. After handing over Usha, she completely disassociates from herself, as the sadness consumes her fully: "All Kavita can hear is screaming. As she feels Usha pried from her hands, she hears only the screaming inside her head, then the shrieks coming from her own mouth, she hears Usha wailing." (34).

She is disheartened after handing over Usha and can still hear her crying as she deals through the metal gate out of the orphanage, back onto the street. Meanwhile, Somer goes through deep depression followed higher latest miscarriage; while attending baby shower of her colleague Gabi, she flees the party with heavy heart when someone asks her plan of having children. She sinks back on her infertility history when Somer and her husband Kris were not ready for children at the time of miscarriage during her first pregnancy, they told themselves that is was "for the best" (29). With the passing years, Somer now yearns for a child and is deeply frustrated for not able to maintain a pregnancy. "With each passing year and every negative pregnancy test, that void in their lives has grown until it has become an unwelcome member of their family, wedging itself between her and Krishnan." (30) After being in regular consultation, her fertility specialist, suggests her that she will no longer be able to have children. Kris reminds Somer for other options so that she can get the privilege of motherhood. He asks her for a thought about adoption at an Orphanage ins Bombay, where his mother Sarla is a patron. Somer is confused and hesitant, but she emphasizes that "all kinds of families" are there, regardless the ones who are related by blood ties. (37) Somer discusses the idea of adoption with her mother and cries when her mother tells her that its a "wonderful idea" and she will be a wonderful mother. This shows that age is not a factor for priceless bond between mother and daughter. One needs the blessing of their mother in every step of life and it can't be replaced ever. After returning home, she looks the adoption paper again and thinks the way she will be saving a child's life: "Maybe there was a reason for all our pain. Perhaps this is what we're meant to do" (47). Toni Morrison in her work 'Beloved' deals with the theme of trauma, love and intense bond between daughters and mothers, especially within Black womanhood which reflects the desperate and possessive love of a mother who has endured loss parallel to Kavita's sacrifice and heartbreak in the novel.

2.2. Sense of Incomplete

Months later, Kavita again is expecting a child and with the fear of carrying another girl she informs Jasu about it. He suggests her for further check up to confirm the gender of the child, as if it was a girl again he may force an abortion or else throw her out of their home. It clearly portrays the gender discrimination of the society to which Arundhati Roy puts light in her work 'The God of Small Things' where she highlights the gender and caste oppression in Indian Society, including the limited sides available to women.

Finally, she gives birth to a baby boy and watches Jasu cradling to him with a joy of relief along with the sadness over what happens with her two-girl child: "For years, she has longed for this moment. Now that it has come, it is laced with sorrow from the past." (50) Even after becoming a mother to a son, named Vijay, she feels a deep sense of incompleteness. Though she performs her maternal duties with devotions and care towards her son but a persistent guilt shadows her for not being able to raise her daughter, Asha. Every celebration with her son is accompanied by a silent ache for the daughter she could nurture. The desire to see her daughter play, grow and blossom under her care remains unfulfilled. This emotional void stems due to the weight of societal pressures and familial expectations that ultimately shaped her choices. As a result, motherhood becomes a bittersweet experience- one marked by both fulfilment and regret.

After all the paperwork done successfully, Kris and Somer adopt Asha. The baby is handed over to Kris, Somer joins them and all embrace among themselves. While returning back to San Francisco, she stays awake to watch Asha. Even after being at home she struggles with the baby crying up late night, thus resulting in many sleepless nights- she faces struggle is adjusting to life as a mother and it seems that her motherly instincts towards Asha are off. She wonders that she was actually not fated for motherhood: "Nature already deemed she couldn't be a mother, and now she wonders if they made a mistake. The rational explanations she strains to hear in her head cannot drown out the doubt welling in her heart." (85) Her struggle is not just about being an adoptive mother but being a white mother to a brown-skinned Indian child, creating tensions in their family dynamic. She is left with the feeling an imposter, just posing to be someone's mother. With passing time Somer returns to her work, with a fear that investing in her career can result in de-vesting in motherhood and the fact that she might not form the relationship with Asha properly, Nancy Verrier, a psychologist and adoptive mother in her work 'The Primal Wound' argues about the feeling of an infant being separated after birth, they have an unconscious sense of disconnection and lose known as "primal wound". Somer's anxiety about not being "enough" for Asha reflects this theory. Despite receiving love and efforts from her adoptive mother, she senses a missing cultural and emotional bond, particularly with her biological mother and Indian heritage, resulting is a sense of incompleteness. Even after loving Asha so much, there is an incomplete Somer that still yearns for a biological Child: "Asha arrival into their lives brought many things - love, joy, fulfilment- but it didn't erase all the pain caused by the miscarriages, nor did it completely eliminate her desire for a biological child" (100)

2.3 Sacrifice in Motherhood

The theme of sacrifice is central to the novel, particularly embodied through both mother Kavita and Somer. Despite having different cultural and socio-economic backgrounds, they are united by the psychological and emotional sacrifices, each shaped by forces of tradition, gender, and identity. An Indian village woman, Kavita depicts the harsh realities of many other Indian mothers who are forced to face gender

discrimination and deep-rooted patriarchal norms. After delivering her daughter Usha, she very well knows that keeping her would mean a death sentence, similar to her first daughter who was killed by Jasu and his family. Her act of surrendering the new born to an orphanage is a powerful act of love and sacrifice: "She names her Usha, 'morning', and kisses her once before placing her in the cradle. Her heart cracks open as she walks away." (21) Kavita left with no option than to live her life with the pain of separation to ensure that Usha gets a chance at life-signifying her motherhood as a self-effacing, silent and deeply emotional sacrifice. Somer, on the other hand, suffering from infertility, becomes a mother through adoption. Despite her professional success and material comforts, she experiences an emotional void that she feels can be filled through motherhood. But eventually she faced internal turmoil and cultural insecurities after being an adoptive mother, especially when Asha shows interest in her Indian roots. "She had imagined that once they brought the baby home, everything would be perfect. But she hadn't imagined feeling so foreign, so removed from the Indian culture her daughter belonged to." (165) Somer's sacrifice is much more psychological - giving up the illusion of complete belonging in Asha's life. She grapples with the fear of not being complete and enough, moreover when Asha gets closer to her Indian heritage and biological origins.

Though both the ladies never meet, but the through Asha they share a contrasting connection of motherhood. Kavita's sacrifice is Societal and external - giving up her child to save her life while Somer sacrifice is emotional and internal-raising another woman's child along with battling personal insecurities. Their sacrifices challenge the belief that motherhood is solely about nurturing. Rather Gowda emphasizes that motherhood can often mean: letting go when necessary enduring pain silently and reframing identity through love. Thus, the motherhood can be redefined through sacrifice and resilience, and not my biology and tradition.

3. Identity and Belonging

3.1 Identity Conflict in diaspora

Identity conflict in diaspora refers to the deep cultural, emotional and psychological struggle faced by individuals who stays away from their Country of origin, most oftenly caught between two or more cultural identifies. This theme is central to diasporic theory, where individual can be seen negotiating between their traditional roots and the norms of new homelands. The conflict, hence give rise to feelings of alienation, fragmentation and eventually a constant questioning of belonging. The second-generation immigrants especially face the dilemma of being neither here nor there, as they are not able to relate them fully to their parents' culture, nor are wholly accepted in dominant society. Hamd K. Bhabha, a postcolonial theorist influential work, "The Location of Culture" where he refers the third space as a space in between dominant and the marginalised, past, and present identities of home and host cultures. The space is considered as a zone of negotiation where immigrant forms their hybrid identities, shaped neither by host nation nor by their homeland. This duality is famously captured Jhumpa Lahiri's 'The Namesake' where protagonist Gogol struggles with his name symbolising his in-between identity: "He hates that his name is both absurd and obscure, that it has nothing to do with who he is." (123). Similarly, Bharati Mukherjee is her novel 'Jasmine' portrays a woman who recreates herself from Jyoti to Jasmine to Jase, with each phase of migration. She notes "We murder who were so we can rebirth ourselves in the image of dreams (Mukharjee)(138). Which reflects the violent as well as painful transformation of immigrants in order to assimilate and survive.

3.2 Asha Identity Conflict.

The theme of identity conflict in context of the Indian diaspora is richly portrayed through the character of Asha, the adopted daughter of Krishna and Somer. Since, being born in India and raised in the United States by an Indian father and American mother, she struggles to reconcile her bicultural heritage which results in the formation of emotional backbone of the novel. Her journey clearly reflects the cultural, psychological and emotional dissonance, which is also faced by many second-generation immigrants trying to recover who they are in society that labels them in fragments. Asha's inner conflict starts when she senses a disconnect between her origins and her present environment. Aging up in an American background with least exposure to Indian culture and traditions, she experiences an unspoken void. Despite her good intentions and love, her adoptive mother, Somer, who is an outsider to Indians culture, struggles to bridge this gap. The cultural divide becomes impossible to avoid when Asha is grown up and begins questioning her identity and wishes to know her birth parents as she thinks they would love her more and want the best for her. Somer reacts, "well, Asha, at least I tried to be a parent for you. More than those... people in India who abandoned you. I wanted a child, and I've been here Asha. Every single day" (137) Asha rushes in tears and internalizes this divide which further fuels her desire to discover her roots of origin. She later confronts to Somer, "It's not fair. Everyone else knows where they come from, but I have no idea. I don't know why I have these eyes that everybody always notices." (137)

Gradually, Asha's sense of being caught between two world's deepens-- the one she is biologically tied to and the one she lives in. Through her appearance, she has a different image in America, while her values and upbringing distance her from fully merging into Indian society while her stay in Mumbai. This duality results in a liminal space of identity, where belonging is elusive. "Sometimes I feel like I don't belong anywhere. Not fully Indian, not fully American." (223) During her stay in India, by these words she underscores the tension between cultural heritage and alien upbringing. It echoes the diasporic experience in wider range, where individuals struggle with fragmented identities and a deep negotiation of self. Asha's visit to India is symbolic rather than just a physical journey, its spiritual one that leads to self-reclamation. Her work as a journalist provides a platform to explore questions of culture, class and identity in the Indian context. By spending time with her extended family members, she begins to recount the two halves of her identity. "In India, I finally began to understand myself-where I came from. It's like I'd been living with a missing piece." (287) Thus, her journey, serves as a healing process. Beyond the need to choose between being Indian or American, she learns to live both identities – accepting hybridity with her strength rather than confusion. A nuanced exploration of identity conflict is crafted by Shilpi Somaya Gowda through the lens of diaspora. Through Asha, she highlights the emotional complexity, of dwelling between cultures, the urge to understand one's origin, and the resilience it takes to forge a cohesive sense of individual from shattered parts. The story hence reminds that identity is not stable category but a mosaic shaped by upbringing alongwith heritage and personal choice. Asha's gradual reconciliation with her hybrid identity shares a hopeful message for individuals wandering the similar diasporic crossroads.

Conclusion

With respect to this novel, family can be referred as malleable concept which can be reshaped by circumstance (biological vs adoption) as well as cultural forces (American Vs Indian), and can be explored Asha's course of adoption. If compared, Somer's white family is insular and small whereas Kris's Indian family is large and sprawling. Gowda gives a deeply layered narration by exploring the multifaceted meaning of identity, family and belonging across generations and continents. Throughout the context, story deals with non-blood related kinship but Asha's desire to find out her biological mother makes it sense that learning one's heritage is important to define a part of family. Parallely Asha remarks to Sanjay, that she is highly

surprised and grateful to the family members of her father's side in India for welcoming her with open arms, despite the fact that they haven't met before. Sanjay further responds: "that's family" (316). Asha's desire to know her birth family is incredibly powerful as she continuously holds the silver bangle, the tokens of love given to her by her mother Kavita at the time when she was given up for adoption. She is at peace after learning about Kavita and explains Sanjay, how she has been searching for her, the whole life, the desire to understand her Indian heritage never alleviated, despite the love and affection she gained from Somer and Kris. She confesses to Sanjay, that after learning everything she is grateful towards Somer and Kris: "And now, I know where I came from, and I know I was loved. I know I'm a hell of a lot better off now than I would have been otherwise" (315). This moment acts as a turning point of Asha's emotional resolution, who felt torn between two families and two identities from a long period of time. She realizes that it's not a matter of choosing between her biological or adoptive families, rather she is shaped by both of them eventually. The quote encapsulates: the satisfaction of reconciliation with her past, the happiness of recognizing her adoptive parents' love, the gratitude for the painful decision of her birth mother and gradually her emotional maturity with integrated identity. Asha's journey hence mirrors that family is not fixed or singular—it is dynamic, layered and fragmented. The unresolved separation and emotional reunions in the novel emphasize that healing within families is an uneven and time-taking process, yet possible with understanding and compassion, thus family is defined by love, and not just blood. This level of understanding can surely bring peace rather than division, with a greater understanding of her biological family and a new found respect for Somer, her adoptive mother, Asha returns to California for reuniting her adoptive family. Back in India, Kavita finds peace not by meeting Asha personally but when Jasu hands her a letter from Asha: "Jasu hands her the letter. A small smile breaks through on Kavita's face. She peers at the page while she recites from memory" (339). She experiences a profound sense of relief to know her "secret daughter" is alive and thriving in her life.

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