The Return of the Native, but Not Alone!: Tishani Doshi's *The Pleasure Seekers* and Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter*

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Abstract

Transnationalism has failed to become an unqualified boon because of the threats of neo-colonialism ingrained in it. This has put the Expatriate Indian novelists in an even more uncomfortable position lately, as a feeling of otherisation continues to haunt them at both entry and exit points. Hence, to resist the threats of neocolonisation and xenophobia, to overcome feelings of aloofness and loss incurred by the diasporic movement, and finally, to reaffirm their closeness to India, a clutch of contemporary Expatriate novelists have "returned" to the site of Indian family. In most cases, the presented picture has been utopian, but in its exhilarating nature and expansiveness, the site can, as the writers have attempted in showing, be effectively projected as a succour to the fractured life of the West. Consequently, the site has always remained an object of desire to all those who have been dislodged from it. My paper aims to read Tishani Doshi's *The Pleasure Seekers* (2010) and Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter* (2010) to explore this issue.

Abstract in Malay

Transnasionalisma gagal untuk menjadi berfaedah disebabkan ancaman neo-kolonialisma yang mendalam. Ini telah meletakkan pengarang novel berketurunan India yang tinggal jauh dari negara asal mereka dalam keadaan yang tidak selesa kebelakangan ini kerana perasaan mereka yang lain terus menghantui mereka di permulaan dan di hujungnya. Oleh itu, untuk menepis ancaman neokolonialisma dan ketakutan yang amat sangat terhadap orang asing, untuk mengatasi perasaan jauh diri dan kerugian kerana pergerakan diaspora, dan akhirnya untuk memastikan dekatnya mereka dengan India, beberapa penulis novel ekspatriat semasa telah "kembali" ke isu keluargaan India. Dalam kebanyakan keadaan, gambaran yang diberikan membayangkan kehebatan yang amat sangat, tetapi dalam keriangan yang meluas tersebut, isu itu boleh, seperti yang cuba ditunjukkan oleh para penulis, di

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bayangkan sebagai penyelamat kepincangan hidup di Barat. Disebabkan itu, isu itu sentiasa menjadi suatu yang dikehendaki oleh semua yang telah dipisahkan darinya. Artikel saya bertujuan meneroka *The Pleasure Seekers* (2010) tulisan Tishani Doshi dan *Secret Daughter* (2010) tulisan Shilpi Somaya Gowda tentang isu ini.

Keywords
Indianness, alienation, neo-colonial, expatriate, family, utopian

Keywords in Malay
Neo-kolonial, ekspatriat, pengasingan, menjadi India, keluarga, utopia

An ideal postcolonial age has proved to be a mythical concept. The lesson that every erstwhile colony and now "free" nations have learnt is that true freedom is elusive, and they are still handcuffed to one or the other avatars of colonial powers. As Edward Said put it almost two decades ago, "Imperialism… lingers where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic and social practices" (Said 8). The latest of these avatars is surely the economic imperialism of the West, the talons of which have gripped developing nations so firmly that there is hardly any escape from them. The boom in communication and information technology, has ironically, only facilitated this neo-colonial tendency of the West to make markets of developing countries. Consequently, the phenomenon of transnationalism, which we have been celebrating for the last 10-15 years, has exposed its flipside and "liberalisation" of the market in the post nineties has not proved to be an unqualified boon. One consequence of liberalisation is that hybridity has become the order of the day.

No other country has perhaps reeled so uneasily in this problematics of postcolonial experience as has India. While we have, of late, gone gaga over "shining India," the fact is we have only changed our masters. The cherished dream of erasing difference has hardly been realised with globalisation. Otherisation has always remained the aim of the coloniser, its strategies being constantly reconfigured but ruthlessly implemented in manifold ways.

Perhaps the worst victims of this latest form of neo-colonialism are contemporary expatriate novelists writing from their foreign geographic locations. Caught up in the vortex of Eastern and Western whirlwinds, these novelists face a precarious situation since they are subject to a two-forked otherisation at both entry and exit points. In India the Non-resident Indians (popularly referred to as NRIs) are never considered to be *pucca desi*, and hence they fail to be assimilated without qualification within the

mainstream of Indian life and culture. In the West, too, in spite of their endeavour to be incorporated in Western discourse, they are often marginalised as immigrants. Therefore, at the end of the day, they can remain perceived as "exotically brown!" Despite their transnational mantra, expatriate novelists have tended to remain with one foot in India and the other at the doorstep of the West; consequently for these expatriate writes, the struggle to consolidate their identity can be difficult even when they want to do so as they fight, so to speak, neocolonialism from the front row. Finding it difficult to narrate from their location in the West about their country of residence they have resorted to narrating India, often showcasing a confident and buoyant country. This strategy has helped these expatriates to become a bit more acceptable to their roots, for in them India finds new emissaries of Indianness. Such a strategy has also helped the expatriates to overcome feelings of aloofness and loss incurred by the diasporic movement. In the last five years, we have received a clutch of new novels not many of which portray an impoverished India. Rather, there has been an unmistakable tendency towards depicting an India empowering itself, opening up a new chapter of neo-resistance, as it were, in the age of neo-colonialism.

Quite a few of these expatriate novelists have visualised the Indian families as unique markers of this superior India. They have tried to locate Indianness in familial space – showing how in its exhilarating nature, in its expansiveness, in the firm bonding of love, trust and empathy that it nourishes, the Indian family can be projected as an antidote to all the dislocated and fractured lives of the West, and a site that can amply replenish all that is lost in Western modes of living. This is of course construction of a utopian space, and for these expatriate writers, this move is both a necessity and an inevitable choice. It is a necessity, for it boosts the expatriate writers' struggle to overcome aloofness and losses incurred due to dislocation on the one hand, and on the other, to resist xenophobia of the country they have immigrated to. It is an inevitable choice too, as has been pointed out by Rimi B. Chatterjee in "The Debate over Authenticity: How Indian is Indian Writing in English, and How Much Does This Matter?" Chatterjee points out in her essay that most of the expatriate novelists writing from foreign geographical locations have brief or no contact with India, and have hardly ever lived in India for a period of time to let them have first-hand experience about the country. Their knowledge about the country is often confined to family lore, childhood memories, gossip, and stories or legends that have been handed over to them by their earlier generations. Imaginatively stitching these snatches of information together, they end up, imaging utopia. The result, however, has undoubtedly been very positive for Indian Literature in English which has been enriched

considerably over the last few years by some captivating family sagas exploring this basic social unit as an object of irresistible desire for all those who have been dislodged from it.

Tishani Doshi, born of Gujrati and Welsh parents, left India at the age of eighteen to study Business Administration at Queen's College in North Carolina. She published her first novel *The Pleasure Seekers* in Great Britain in 2010. This family saga is woven around the lives of one Babo who is sent by his Gujrati family to study in the U.K. and who is very keen on embracing London as his second home. In this, Babo represents the agony of all wilful emigrants, who struggle to be incorporated into the story of the West. And ironically, the disillusion starts very soon. Babo realises that he is quite lonely in a place which is so very different from the London he (and all emigrants, for that matter) dreamt of as they flew to this country. Babo's anxiety is poignant but typical:

> How could he begin to describe his new life… to anyone in his family, for that matter? It was all so *utterly different from what he'd expected*; nothing at all like the English movies he used to cut classes for and watch with his college friends in Madras. There were no Alec Guinnesses or Humphrey Bogarts walking around in London. No Gina Lollobrigidas. At least none that he could see in the London City Council hostel in Wands worth where his cousin Nat had dumped him. (17; emphasis added)

The anxiety is even reflected in the advice that Nat gives to Babo – Nat who is only a few years more experienced than Babo and determined to forget everything "Indian" and catch up with the ultra-modern, West, vainly trying to believe in what he praises as its "non-Indian" ways:

> … this is England, Babo. In this country, they don't live like sardines, *not like back home where it's all family-shamily all the time*. Day in and day out, eating, sleeping, shitting in each other's faces. You know what I mean? No privacy, only lunacy. I tell you, it's the best thing about this country. (18-19; emphasis added)

Thus Babo also learns that in order to survive in England, he will have to master the "art of waiting" – patient waiting to be assimilated in the West. A sense of alienation, however assiduously he may try to fight it, seizes him early because "all his life (in India) he'd been surrounded by people – family friends, neighbours, servants" (23). The only thing he can fall back on is a Hitachi transistor in order to resist the silence that starts overcoming him. It is almost out of the sheer necessity to fight this alienation that he falls in love with Sian, a Welsh teenager. Gradually they realise that it is not a mere teenage crush and Babo is even ready to disown everything Indian in him and embrace Europe as his home if that helps him to marry Sian and settle

in Europe. But it does not prove so easy. Babo's father, quite predictably, reacts strongly to this prospective marriage and tries his best to terminate the relation between Babo and Sian. At first, Babo is trapped into staying in India by his father, and then Sian has to go to India to join him and prove the strength of her relationships with Babo to his parents. Finally they marry in India. But when it is time to go back to London of their dreams, as was planned previously, it is Sian who hesitates as she realises that it is much easier for a dislodged foreigner to overcome the sense of alienation in the homely ambience of India. While in both the nations, Sian observes poignantly, if a brown and a white marry, they will be stared at; however, the difference between the gaze directed at the other in these two nations lies in the fact that in India, people will stare at foreigners more openly and even shamelessly on occasions, but more often than not out of simple curiosity. It is a never menacing gaze, and never as shattering an experience as it is when people would look at such a pair in England – their furtive glances, in spite of their show of civility, cannot hide a disturbing feeling of otherisation. Being adopted by an Indian family therefore proves to Sian, with all its threats to her privacy, much easier. In fact over the days it proves to be a wonderful experience for her, as the familial space where she slowly relocates herself, helps her to consolidate her identity as a mother.

The novel is emphatic in its portrayal of familial relationships and love as means to overcome all upheavals of life, and throughout celebrates the openness, the warmth and reassurance that constitute Indian tradition – qualities with which it embraces Sian, helping her to overcome all her feelings of being the odd figure out in Babo's family. The springhead of this warmth is Ba, Babo's grandmother. She remains as an inexhaustible source of calmness and reassurance throughout the novel. The Indianness that the novel celebrates is defined precisely around her and the space she creates in the rural setting around her; she has been rooted there from time immemorial, as it were, with her extended arms to receive all suffering souls and replenish them with new sources of sustenance. By projecting her thus, Doshi has almost created out of her a mannequin figure of Mother India. There have been pictures of ugliness, dirt, poverty, India's unmanageable population throughout the novel – to be fair to her, Doshi does not avoid the real picture of India – bumpy and dusty roads, street dogs, beggars, and the snobbish upper middle class – but all these shortcomings of a developing nation ultimately dissolve in a transcendental vision of India. Ba's small house in the village of Ganga Bazar with peacocks dancing on its tin roof, its shadowy garden full of mango trees and the cool water in the well, is an utopia and a paean to the human spirit that sees through all human tragedies, ups and downs.

After Babo and Sian relocate themselves successfully in Indian soil, building up a robust family, a home in a "place you've never been to" (91) around them, the novel turns to Bean, who leaves for London as she grows up and engages herself in a quest for love like her parents. She too fails to realise her love in that country in spite of her readiness to accept everything foreign. Disillusioned and threatened with a pregnancy outside the bond of marriage, she too has to come back to the utopia of her Ba's village home for redemption. The earthquake described towards the end of the novel which causes massive destruction and dislocation can also be a trope to suggest the trauma that threatens Bean's very existence. But Ba's utopia relocates Bean so effectively, that she overcomes the trauma, lives through the real (and the symbolic) earthquake and realises her *self* in the love and care that Ignatius gives her unasked. After all the ups and downs, everybody is back home. Doshi zealously creates this utopian home as a binary opposition to the dystopic West. This, Doshi unambiguously seems to propose, is what India has still to give to the West; this is where she locates Indianness in all its preciousness.

A similar keenness in presenting a utopian Indian familial space and its underlining homeliness can be traced in Shilpi Somaya Gowda's novel *Secret Daughter* published in 2010. Shilpi was born in Toronto to parents who migrated there from Mumbai. Brought up in Toronto, she is a citizen of Canada at present. But even this long association with the West has not turned her blind to the sense of disillusion and consequent alienation that haunts many South Asian immigrants in the West. This, she illustrates through Krishnan who has never been able to uproot himself completely. Once, like Babo in *The Pleasure Seekers*, but with much more confidence and agility, he "had fallen in love with the American dream" (114), trying to point out to himself enthusiastically all the small and big advantages of America, which are so lamentably absent in his homeland – its "clean streets, huge malls, comfortable cars" (114) and of course, its "superior career opportunities" (115). But even after a long, successful pursuit of his dream where India has little role to play, India did not become irrelevant in his life to the slightest degree. At times, even when Asha, their adopted daughter from India, fills their house with laughter and chatter:

> … it never feels as full and rich as the family get-togethers he remembers from childhood. This is the life he envisioned, the life he hoped for, but somehow the American dream now seems hollow to him. (116)

And in such moments of frustration, his only succour lies in the mental journey that he takes to his home and by reliving the festive nights of Indian

Diwali. In this, he perhaps represents much of the diasporic community. Hence, Gowda too, celebrates the Indian family as the object of desire in the heart of most emigrant.

But still, *Secret Daughter* is not merely a story of the return of the native. The Indian familial space does not merely embrace its diasporic citizens back, but it is a powerful site from which India can offer solutions to the problems of fractured families of the West. Therefore, *Secret Daughter* is more a story of Somer, the typical Westerner and how she is eventually overwhelmed and won over by the Indian family, which helps her evolve into a mother, and thus realise her lost self. Somer is a Canadian child specialist stationed in San Francisco, wedded to Krishnan, an immigrant NRI neurosurgeon, blessed with all professional success and marital bliss. However, after having several miscarriages, she finds out that she will never be able to conceive successfully. Then they decide to adopt a child from India. The proposal comes from the husband who at first looks at the problem only clinically. After initial indecisiveness, Somer agrees, for she is finally overcome with two feelings at the same time: the first one is of course that of the yearning mother in her and her instinctive desire to create a family. That instinct is stimulated by the description she hears of her husband's large Indian family full of siblings, something she missed all along being the only child; and secondly, the agency, the power, the sense of responsibility that would be given her as she would mother a child adopted from an orphanage:

> Somer looks through the materials from the Indian adoption agency, focusing on the earnest faces of the children. It would be a powerful thing to change the course of one of those lives: to create opportunity where none exists, to make someone's life better. (47)

At once, she finds a meaning, a reason for all her pain – a meaningful human bond where she would be allowed an active role of mothering by virtue of which she can save a life, if not create one. Finally, the couple flies to India, to adopt a girl child. The specific problem of Somer is much deeper, for her challenge is not only to switch over to this new role of a mother, but to straddle cultures, for it is her maiden visit to any South Asian country. She has to fight a stock series of cultural shocks that begins with her almost traumatic experience with a crowd of beggars in tattered clothes surrounding their car, and then her feeling almost lost within an endless number of family members in Krishnan's (the husband) family, the spicy food that she finds difficult to manage, the lethargic bureaucracy through which she has to go to complete the formalities preceding the adoption – all

these, not unexpectedly, makes the idea of "mystic India" evaporate from her mind soon.

But at the same time, Somer experiences something very new and positive in India – the vibrancy in its familial space. Her experience with Sarala, her Indian mother-in-law, is also a beginning of a process of slow transformation within her. She is fascinated by her skill in the art of mothering and the centrality that it has given her in the family. She gradually learns what mothering means in India – how "being a woman in India is an altogether different experience. You can't always see the power women hold, but it is there, in the firm grasp of the matriarchs who still rule most families" (59). And what precisely is the source of the power of these Indian mothers? It is the labour of love with which they create around them a successful family and nourish it, protecting it through all challenges of life. It is such an expansive space, as it would never let one feel alone or ignored – and its bonding is so strong that it helps the family thrive amidst all individual differences of its constituents. Sarala is such a typical Indian matriarch. She has spent her life in reigning the familial space that she created around her and has been sustaining all these years – raising her son, looking after her busy doctor husband, providing utmost care for them – all of which give her immense satisfaction and power. In fact, it is Sarala, we are given to understand, who has arranged the entire adoption process. After Somer goes back to San Francisco, she finds it difficult to cope with the act of mothering alone, and starts missing the Indian family and the mother-in-law in particular, whose helping hand and tips she initially considered to be intrusive and annoying.

A new struggle begins for Somer as their adopted child, Asha, gradually grows up. The rest of the story is about Somer's evolution in Motherhood and her becoming wiser in the art of creation of a perfect family. Initially she tries to grasp Asha firmly, shielding her from all possible Indian connections, lest she should become more and more interested in India, her original home and should try to trace back her roots, which she actually does. Her feeling of insecurity intensifies as she finds Krishnan siding with her daughter on this issue. Gradually the chasm between Somer and her daughter widens, and almost reaches the breaking point as Asha wins a scholarship for a project in Journalism and travels to India, nestling herself in her father's family. She also uses her stay in India for the difficult task of tracing back her biological mother.

Meanwhile, Somer breaks up with her husband because she finds that the relationship was not working and was becoming increasingly suffocating. This is primarily because she feels that all her power over her familial space, which she has laboured to build up around her in raising her daughter and making compromises with her career as a promising doctor in the process is

gradually slipping out of her hands uncontrollably. She moves to a separate flat – desperate to find back the "freedom" she thinks she has lost, to give her career a little bit of push, restore the old friendships – striving to gain back a room of her own, as it were, and resisting "India" and everything that has been "Indian" in her life. But she fails to realise the *self* in her in the process and ends up in a void.

Somer understands in the end that the intimate human relations alone can give a sort of meaning to her life, and in order to recuperate her *self*, she will have to nourish these relations back to life. Finally she comes back to her husband, and with him, to India, trying to revive her space within her family. She realises that in her desperate attempt to secure her daughter as her own, and in her attempt to eliminate everything Indian in the process, she has only succeeded in letting India, and even her own family, marginalise her. In a Gujrati joint family in Mumbai, therefore, begins her new struggle to gain power – power not coming through coercion this time, but through love, empathy and nourishing. She casts a new look at Asha now, trying to befriend her, to establish a deep bond with her by accommodating her within a more expansive, embracing motherhood. She understands that it had been foolish to distance Asha from her roots, from the Indian family, and that she can be a successful mother only when she accepts her in Asha's familial space and rather adapt herself to this new familial space. This new motherhood therefore, proves to be redemptive for her and the Indian family, far from being dystopic, reveals itself to be a cherished Utopia for her, a way of finding the *self* that was lost to her for years.

Ultimately, Somer declares that her place is with her Indian family, and now she knows this in the deepest part of her being. Asha too, for her part, realises that she has not been denied the bliss of a real mother in her life as she used to think, for motherhood hardly implies biological mothering alone, but it is an immensely bigger idea that she has received from Somer. Consequently, she goes back to her adopted mother with a much more open heart and eagerness and the final picture of Asha cuddling up herself like a child to Somer and Krishnan on the airplane seats as they fly back to California, is a really moving picture of a complete family. The novel ends with the promise she would return to India again and again.

One serious malaise of today's fast life of the West is alienation. The exploration of the site of Indian family, where the interpersonal bonds are continually strengthened through mutual love, empathy and sacrifice, may prove to be particularly relevant in this connection. The Indian family, ideally, can provide a robust space where the threat of alienation can be effectively resisted. This perhaps explains why the representation and exploration of Indian family in fictions (as the two novels discussed in this paper shows) is becoming a popular trend with the expatriate Indian writers

in English. This trend will of course add a new dimension to the existing corpus of Indian Writing in English.

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