

The Dynamics of Repatriation in Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to explore the impact of adoption, repatriation and relief on the lives of three women in Shilpi Somaya Gowda's novel *Secret Daughter* (2010). The author has set for herself the difficult task of writing about these issues for two audiences, namely, the Western and the Indian. She does not theorise but seeks out common humanitarian aspects and protective concerns. Her approach is gendered and the three women play out major decision-making roles despite the vast differences in their ages and backgrounds. The repatriation of all three is voluntary and they maintain creative connections which are mutually fulfilling. The challenges inherent in their context refine their sensibilities rather than demotivate them. The restructuring is commensurate with the sacrifices made by all three and does not cause disappointments or loss of self-esteem.

Abstract in Malay

Artikel ini cuba meneliti kesan pengambilan anak angkat, peralihan kewarganegaraan dan perasaan kelegaan ke atas hidup tiga wanita dalam novel *Secret Daughter* (2010) karya Shilpi Somaya Gowda. Penulisnya memilih untuk dirinya latar-belakang yang rumit dalam menulis tentang isu-isu ini untuk dua jenis pembaca; pembaca Barat dan India. Beliau tidak menumpu kepada teori tetapi mencari persamaan dalam aspek-aspek kemanusiaan dan keselamatan. Beliau bertumpu kepada perspektif jantina, di mana tiga wanita berperanan penting dalam membuat keputusan walaupun ada perbezaan besar di antara umur dan latar-belakang mereka. Perubahan kewarganegaraan ketiga mereka adalah dengan sukarela dan mereka meneruskan hubungan kreatif yang sama-sama memuaskan. Cabaran-cabaran yang dihadapi memurnikan perasaan halus mereka dan tidak memudarkan semangat mereka. Penstrukturan semula tersebut sama bernilai dengan pengorbanan ke tiga mereka dan tidak menyebabkan kekecewaan atau rasa rendah diri.

Keywords

Adoption, repatriation, relief, expatriation, race, family

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Keywords in Malay

Pengambilan anak angkat, perubahan kewarganegaraan, bangsa, keluarga

The first decade of the millennium has witnessed the prolific production of novels by young writers that define significant new political, social, economic as well as literary trends. Towards the end of the last century, the great western dream was celebrated with exuberance. The Promised Land would relieve the protagonist of backwardness, poverty and squalor and provide lifestyle, integration and multiculturalism. The homeland would recede into a dream and would be recollected as it were, ritually, only on religious and national festivals. The second generation immigrants would put down roots in the host country and resist the ancestral land. The works of authors like Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai, Monica Ali and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are replete with such themes and conduct deeply felt explorations of the conflicts of expatriation. Issues of violence, racism, restrictive laws, “outsider” mentality, idealisation of the homeland, lack of integration in the host culture predominate in the works of these writers. Alternately, expatriation is recognised as an assertion of global mobility and privilege closely connected with economic benefits. Most narratives, however, focus on the experiences of the common man or woman who identified migration as a fundamental requirement for a global career.

Shilpi Somaya Gowda, along with other South Asian authors like Zaiba Malik and Anees Janee Ali, establishes a reverse trend, namely, repatriation. The debates over belonging, community membership, citizenship, ethnic identity etc. have been affected by postcolonial state formation processes. Reclaiming lost identity at home and reintegration have become relatively easier in the last decade. More and more expatriates desire to return to the home country. Themes of reverse culture shock, isolation, loss of visibility, devaluation of international experience are recurrent in these works. Apart from the practical aspects, repatriation often has emotional implications. Unprecedented stresses and anxieties, irrevocable changes, losses of life and property often hamper the repatriation processes. Freedman writes, “When people have been temporary, transient residents (more than just tourists) and return from the foreign culture to their native culture, they will soon discover that their cross-cultural problems are far from over” (23). Repatriation anticipates changes within the individual as well. The overseas experiences often result in perspective changes that may influence the repatriate’s adjustments.

The return home has always been a significant theme in literature. The genre has distinguished itself right from the epic return of Odysseus. Early European novels like *Don Quixote* and *Robinson Crusoe* dealt with the theme of travel and return:

... it must be noted that amongst all the literature of migration the highest proportion deals in some way with ideas of return, whether actualized or remaining imaginary. To return may be to go back but it may equally be to start again: to seek but also to lose. Return has both a temporal and a spatial dimension. For the individual returning to their 'own' past and place it is rarely fully satisfying: circumstances change, borders in all senses are altered, and identities change too. (White 14)

In Gowda's novel, the need for repatriation occurs in the life of a twenty-year old Indian girl adopted by a doctor couple in America. It also affects her birth parents who migrated from the village to Mumbai. Asha's adopted father, an Indian by birth, does not visit his motherland for years but when he watches his daughter locating her identity in India, he too yearns to do the same. His white wife, Somer, feels isolated and alienated in her native country within her Indian family and worries about losing her daughter to a shadowy figure in India. She follows her family to this exotic land in search for peace. Relief comes to all after trials and tribulations. The anxieties of the world recede and the primeval bond of maternity prevails. Though the birth mother and daughter never meet, they communicate through words and also through silences. The birth mother and the adopted mother bond through the instinct to protect the child. Asha finally realises and appreciates the magnitude of the sacrifices made in the process of giving up a child and also those made in adopting one.

The novel deals with a gamut of complicated emotions. The three women live in different worlds. Somer's self-contained, secure, world ensures her financial security, medical education, social security, a prestigious job and a suitable marriage. Her world falls apart when she is told that she would never be able to have a baby. The "defect" in her system, as she views it, plunges her into the depths of despair. She finds herself bitter and resentful. She envies all women who have babies and hates the babies who visit her in her paediatrician's office for not being her own. Somer's life as a white woman in the United States provides her with the best of health care and counselling. However, ironically enough, relief comes only in the shape of an abandoned, malnourished Indian girl from the rural backwaters.

Kavita, Asha's biological mother is a victim of circumstances. Confined to a patriarchal society of a backward Marathi village, she has grown up with the deadly knowledge that girls are an undesirable burden and that female foeticide and infanticide are treated as no great sins in her society. In fact, female health is not an issue that is ever considered. Deliveries take place in a dismal, dirty hut supervised by a self-trained midwife who works with rags and rusted instruments of sorts. The only positive energy is in the bonding of women in understanding each other's pain. Kavita's first-born daughter is buried alive by

her husband and she is cursed and abused. At the birth of her second daughter, she resolves to save the baby's life and submits the new-born to an orphanage in Mumbai. The patriarchs are informed that the baby passed away and they think no more about the issue. Kavita, on the other hand, thinks about her daughter every day and imagines her with two thick plaits, playing in the orphanage.

Asha, the daughter of two Californian doctors, has always known that she was adopted from an orphanage in India. The thought did not disrupt her life in any way during childhood. However, teenage years brought many questions that were not answered. Confrontations became frequent between mother and daughter. Somer often wondered whether the racial difference was behind the impasse that was slowly but surely building up between the two. Asha, finally, reveals that she will be going to India for a year on a scholarship to research the conditions of underprivileged children. Somer gets a rude shock when she realises that Asha, in truth, wants to locate her biological parents. The two part in animosity.

Asha's investigation reveals the horrifying fact that the right to be born and live is being denied to the girl child in India. In a land of dichotomies like the north-south divide, diet, language, religions, class, caste, creed etc., this social phenomenon transcends all divisions. Girls are looked upon as unwanted burdens and liabilities. A woman who produces daughters has an inferior status in the family and is often ill-treated on this account. The attitude has its roots in a complex set of socio-economic and cultural factors. "There are alarming reports of baby girls being murdered even in areas where this practice did not exist earlier. Poverty, ignorance of family planning, cost of dowry, etc. have been reported as the possible causes for this crime" (Tandon 46-57).

Female infanticide is usually carried out within the first year, tragically enough by the midwife or the caregiver. The methods are brutal and primitive. The baby may be starved or fed a poisonous substance, throttled or buried alive. Women are pressurised to become the agents of the crime. This is more common in rural areas where the deliveries take place at home and no accurate records are maintained. They regret being born as women and relent because of the physical and psychological pressure that weighs them down for bearing daughters. In certain cases, cash compensations may be required from the father of the woman who produced a daughter. Srivastava states that,

... the spectre of domestic violence chokes their voices and silences their opposition to attitudes and practices derogatory to their dignity. This social reality does not allow women to protest against any suggestion or coercion to get the female child aborted. It is unthinkable that any woman would readily agree to be a party to the crime. They do so under male pressure,

coercion and domination. Thus willingly or unwillingly they become party to the crime for they have no control even over their bodies. (7)

The Indian Penal Code 1860 permitted abortion, without criminal intent, for the purpose of saving the life of the mother. The Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act was passed in July 1971 as a step towards population control. This was, however, misused and women were forced to abort the female child. The social norms fostering the male child preference encouraged the mushrooming of sex-determination test clinics. In order to control this trend, the Pre-natal Diagnostic Techniques (Regulation and Prevention of Misuse) Act was passed in 1994. The Act made the registration of such clinics mandatory and defined punishments for violation. The true picture, in spite of legal provisions, remains dismal. Sen estimates

... that about 30 million women were missing from the Indian population. Such violent criminal acts have attacked the dignity of women as human beings and have left them more vulnerable and fearful.... The twin process of 'elimination of unborn daughters' and the 'slow killing' through neglect and discrimination of those that are born has become a matter of concern. (123)

Given these circumstances, women have resorted to abandoning their baby daughters in the hope that they would be adopted by affluent childless families and get a chance to live and be loved. Adoption becomes a channel that ensures a dignified survival and positive development without discrimination. The orthodoxy persists in harbouring the notions that the male heir will carry forward the lineage, provide security in old age, and provide *moksha* or salvation by lighting the funeral pyre. Gowda inverts these concepts when Sarla, Asha's grandmother, requests Asha to light her grandfather's funeral pyre. Vijay, Asha's brother, chooses the path of crime to make easy money and is unable to visit his mother on her deathbed. It is Asha's letter of acknowledgement that brings a smile to the dying woman's face.

Secret Daughter dispels the conventional code of secrecy surrounding adoptions. Self-consciousness and fear of stigmatisation create a need for privacy. Childless couples, thus, are forced to conduct such negotiations away from the public gaze. Controversial aspects like mental health, illegitimacy and race have been suppressed rather than addressed. Acknowledgement of these problems represents the first step towards their redress. Adopted children face more issues, challenges and grey areas than those raised by their biological parents. Similarly, adoptive parents need to handle more complications than biological ones. Post-adoption mental health is a recent concern. Adopted children may incur grief and loss of self-esteem about not growing up with their

birth parents and may lament the loss of not growing up with siblings and other family members. They may idealise the birth parents and demonise the adoptive or vice-versa. They may brood about why or to whom they were given away. Development issues are common in the lives of most children but they surface in quite another manner in adopted ones. The emotional ramifications also include the problems faced by the parents whose children were forcibly given away, and the adoptive parents whose child suddenly turns hostile.

Gowda transports herself into her characters and experiences the pain of each one. She presents adoption as a three-way process of shared faith and shared losses. The biological parents go through the loss of giving away their child, the adoptive parents go through the trauma of not being able to bear one of their own and the adopted child loses its birth parents. The biological parents surrender the child to someone more competent and caring than themselves, the adoptive parents now have a child to nurture and foster and the child gains love, home security and privilege. Each of the three needs to acknowledge, understand and appreciate the role of the others in this complicated and little-explored relationship. The two sets of parents carry the additional anxiety of rejection by the child. Gowda's sensitive portrayal clears confusions and removes unnecessary embarrassments.

Gowda also highlights the phenomenon of Asian adoptions. The number of white children available for adoption is almost negligible and in recent times it has dropped even further. However, the market for adoption is growing with the increase in the number of parents either incapable of or unwilling to bear children. Somer, too, willingly adopts an Indian girl. The adopted children are granted temporary orphan visas until the formalities are completed in the United States. Apart from the economic, social and cultural reasons for adoption elucidated earlier, the Asian governments have been streamlining their overseas adoption procedures as encouragement to affluent white families and non-resident Indians. The interracial adoption brings its own complications that assert themselves even during the first meeting between the Thakkars and Asha:

When the assistant returns to the office holding the baby, everyone in the room stands at once. Krishnan is closest and reaches out for her. The baby goes easily into his arms and immediately begins playing with his eyeglasses, 'Hi sweet girl. Hi there, Asha.' He speaks slowly and softly as he cradles her head, and she moves on to pinching his earlobes. Somer walks over, and all three of them embrace. She reaches out her arms to hold Asha, but the baby turns and clings tightly to Kris's neck like a koala. (78)

The baby's unfamiliarity with the white skin induces fear. It expresses itself as a rejection that Somer never forgets. Somer's life with Kris has very few Asian aspects. They live together as an American couple, governed by their

common passion – medicine. Kris integrates effortlessly into her American family and Somer does not find the need to integrate. The arrival of the Asian baby brings a new anxiety for Somer. She wonders whether the acknowledgement of racial difference would interfere with the process of integrating the child into the American community.

Asha's childhood is a usual American one. Racial differences are not mentioned in the nuclear family and Asha is not aware of them. Somer unconsciously brings her up her to be white and to see the world from a white perspective. As a white mother, she is not prepared for the racial prejudice and discrimination that backlash on her daughter. She cannot shield her from this inevitable process and also is not able to adequately understand and support her feelings. Asha's ethnic identity defined by her appearance makes her the recipient of racial prejudice by schoolmates, strangers and even relatives in her adopted family. The social exclusion ignites in her a desire to investigate her roots and to connect with her ancestral culture and biological parents.

Asha's repatriation ultimately helps her to construct multiple racial identities. Harris and Sim argue that:

... boundaries of racial groups vary both over time and across social contexts... people need not have a single racial identity that they carry with them from birth to death [but] rather people may be born one race, live as a second race, and have yet a third racial identity at death. (4-5)

Asha assimilates the positive elements of both her birth and adoptive heritage. She is able to achieve this by adapting to various sub-settings within society, for example, she identifies with her American friends in California but she experiences a strong empathy with the girl in the Indian slum who has never been to school or eaten a proper meal. She develops a positive sense of self by using other parameters like how much the foster families love her, how well she has done at college and how much she has achieved in her career as a journalist. Zastrow aptly comments:

Empirical evidence in support of trans-racial adoption has found that despite some difficulties, trans-racial adoptees can grow up with a healthy racial identity provided they are raised by racially sensitive families in multicultural settings. (33)

Secret Daughter opens to a short prologue that captures a moment of truth. Jasu, Asha's biological father appears in a touching cameo. The Pater, now grown old, defeated by life's circumstances and by his cherished male heir, peers at a worn piece of paper that will lead him to the daughter he believed he had

killed at birth. Thoughts of his unknown daughter flood his face with deep feelings and he appears vulnerable and pathetic.

The lives of two women separated by race, class and continents intertwine with the birth of a baby girl. Kavita, a dark-skinned, hazel-eyed, malnourished young woman from Dahanu, Maharashtra, India has carried a pregnancy to its full term. When the labour pains set in, she arrives at an abandoned, unhygienic hut set aside for the purpose. In the light of a flickering oil lamp, midst thunder and lightning, Asha is born. In order to save her from the unfortunate fate of her sister and hundreds of other girls before her, Kavita undertakes an arduous journey to the orphanage at Mumbai. The initiative is born out of desperation to revert the child's destiny, to save her from the savagery of her own people and from the faith that if given the chance to live, Asha will find her place in the world.

Simultaneously, far away in California, Somer suffers the trauma of miscarriage, followed by the terrible knowledge that she can never conceive or bear a baby. The agony of the two women runs parallel through the symbolism of flickering tapers, unwashed hair, sweaty, bleeding, injured bodies and disturbed minds. Though Somer is not Asha's biological mother, she undergoes enormous physical trauma at the time when Asha is born. Significantly, her mourning for the loss of her baby coincides with Kavita's admission of Asha to the orphanage:

Today was to be her due date. It was to be a day of celebration for her and Krishnan, but instead she will mourn alone. The expression of concern from other people trickled off a few weeks after her miscarriage. The only proof of the baby she lost is the home pregnancy test she now holds in her hand, and the persistent hollow she has not been able to fill. (43)

Kavita's agony is enhanced as another pregnancy occurs and she is put through a sonography for sex determination. Despite becoming the mother of a healthy baby boy a few months later, Kavita continues to mourn the loss of her daughters:

Kavita wipes away her own tears. These rituals that she shares with Jasu and their baby are beautiful and touching, but cannot transcend her grief. For years she has longed for this moment. Now that it has come, it is laced with sorrow from the past. (50)

Somer's heightened awareness of the world as a first world citizen and as a qualified professional and an empowered woman and Kavita's oppressions, suppressions and subjugations recede into the background as the two women experience the pangs of maternity. As a parting gift for her daughter, Kavita puts her own silver bangle on her ankle. Somer, in a potent symbolic gesture,

removes it before putting on new *jhanjbars* or anklets for Asha. “I’d hate for them to get tangled,” she says (82).

Somer’s motherhood experiences at California bring surprises. At the park, a conversation with another woman minding a child, gives her a rude shock:

‘She’s lovely,’ says a woman sitting on the bench next to her.
 ‘Yeah, Asha loves it here too. I’ll have to pry her away soon.’
 ‘You should come by here at noon on Fridays,’ the woman says. ‘I get together with some of the other nannies from the neighborhood every week for a picnic...’
Nannies? After a polite moment, Somer stands and collects her belongings.
 ‘I am not her nanny,’ she says, ‘I’m her mother.’ (99)

Somer watches Kris and Asha bond and integrate. The racial similarity makes them appear like a unit whereas Somer feels like the adopted one in her own family. As Asha grows older, and out of the dependence zone, she interacts with other Indian girls. They talk about their visits to India and about exotic things like iced *paan*, sandalwood soaps *Raas Garba* and large, loving families waiting to receive them. This arouses in Asha a deep longing to find out more about the country of her birth and bitterness against Somer for her indifference towards India and her inability to learn Marathi. Asha secretly writes letters to her biological mother and gives them to Kris to mail. When her father tells her that the address is not known, she stores them in a box along with her birth mother’s modest, silver bangle. Things spiral to a head when Somer insists that she should improve her grades in her science subjects and apply for admission in the Medical School. The confrontation gets ugly and Asha shocks her parents with an outburst:

‘It’s just not fair,’ she says quietly between snuffles, ‘I have spent sixteen years not knowing, sixteen years asking questions, nobody can answer. I just don’t feel like I really belong, in this family or anywhere. It’s like a piece of me is always missing. Don’t you understand that?’ (138)

Kavita and Jasu, in the meantime, migrate to Mumbai in search of better prospects. They find dwellings in one slum after another and somehow make ends meet. Kavita often finds her way to the orphanage and stands for hours by the iron gate in the hope of catching a glimpse of her daughter. She finds work as a domestic help and takes Vijay with her to help with odd jobs after he returns from school. Vijay, a year younger than Asha, grows up to be an angry, rebellious youth frustrated by chronic poverty. He slowly turns to a life of crime and controls his parents by terrorising them. He buys an apartment for them and tells his mother, “You don’t need to worry about me anymore” (143).

Asha leaves home for her sophomore year at Brown. The separation reduces the hostility between her and Somer to a large extent. Her internship at the *Daily Herald* and the guidance of Professor Cooper empower her and furnish her with a voice to express her thoughts, feelings and experiences. She builds up the capacity to negotiate and re-negotiate until she is understood. She is granted the prestigious Watson Fellowship to go abroad to India for a year to work with underprivileged children. Asha's decision unleashes multiple fears for Somer:

"I am afraid of her leaving college and going halfway across the world by herself. I am afraid of her being so far away we won't have any idea what's happening with her... I am worried about her safety, being a girl over there. Going into those slums... Do you think she'll try to look for... them?" (162)

Asha arrives in Mumbai and is received amidst warmth and affection by Krishnan's large and sprawling family. Cousins of every age group ensconce her and introduce her to the luxurious and glamorous life of Mumbai. Asha is pleasantly surprised to find that Thakkar is a very common name and she no longer has to spell it out. She merges with the crowd and no longer has to answer questions about her "exotic" eyes. She discovers the exquisite delight of pampering her body according to traditional *shringaars* or beauty rituals like applying henna, and the matchless grace of draping herself in nine yard rustling silk sari. The glitter of Indian weddings takes her breath away as she loses herself in these fairy tale settings and the unbelievable cuisine. The pampering of her grandparents brings to life her early fantasies about her Indian relatives.

When work begins, she is associated with *Times of India*. Escorted by Parag and Meena, she conducts the first set of interviews. She is appalled at the plight of the slum dwellers. Twelve year old Bina and three year old Yashoda stay in the slum and do not go to school. A mother helps her ten year old crippled daughter to crawl to school two miles away. A woman whose husband does not have a job goes to the brothel every night. Asha comes away feeling dizzy with the realisation that "Mother India does not love her children equally, it seems" (229).

Jasu and Kavita now enjoy a prosperity they have never known before. Kavita loves the occasional Hindi film Jasu takes her to. She, however, worries about Jasu's frequent nightmares that leave him exhausted and panting:

He knows he can't undo the sin he's committed. The nightmares stopped for a while when everything was finally going well. Then came the terrible night they came home to find the police ransacking their home.

The nightmares started again and have gotten worse since Vijay's troubles, with Jasu's realization that what was once his main source of pride will instead end up as his life's disappointment. (233)

Kavita is diagnosed with breast cancer and her health deteriorates rapidly. On her deathbed, she waits in vain for Vijay to visit her. Hiding from the law, he is unable to do so. She also longs for her secret daughter Asha. The revelation of the truth brings relief to Jasu.

Searching for her parents, Asha finally arrives at their apartment. The discovery that they have a son a little younger than her brings home the realisation that they had been gender-selective in their abandonment. The magnanimity of the white woman who gave her a home, fostering and nurturing now communicates itself. Asha flees without meeting her birth parents in order to protect herself from a second rejection. She now misses Somer terribly and longs to meet her. The sudden death of her grandfather brings her adoptive parents to India and Asha exults in the reunion.

The intrinsic work on her project clarifies the terrible truth of two parallel Indias – the rich and the poor. As she delves deep into the issues, she realises her displacement was the outcome of forces that her biological parents could not control. At a point, forgiveness comes naturally and effortlessly. Before departing from India, Asha leaves behind a letter for Kavita and Jasu. Jasu collects the letter from the orphanage but is unable to read it. As the clerk on duty reads it, Jasu memorises it. He recites it verbatim to the morphine-intoxicated Kavita and watches her tired face relax with a smile, "My name is Asha..." (339).

Shilpi Somaya Gowda, along with contemporary authors like Zaiba Malik and Anees Janee Ali, establishes a reverse trend, namely, repatriation. She probes the desire of the expatriate to return to the homeland and reintegrate. Gowda highlights a host of issues involved in this exercise. These problems so far have not received the attention they deserve. Repatriation often originates in idealism that gradually turns sour. The recent novels penetrate into the psyche of the protagonists and provide valuable insights. They create a new space with new dimensions and new awareness.

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