

## TRAUMA AND QUEST OF A MOTHER IN SHILPI SOMAYA GOWDA'S SECRET DAUGHTER

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Marry me, love me, above all, look after me. somebody had to be responsible for her, besides herself. That was what women had been led to expect and hardly any price was too high. Loneliness, heartache, denial, all grist to the mill. ( Manju kapur *The Immigrants*)

Indian Women writers articulate the unarticulated realities that prevail across varied social order. These writers register their history and culture in their fiction. Indianness is predominant in their works. The major themes that are discussed and documented by women writers centre on the trauma encountered by women in the patriarchal and double standard society. Singh in his book titled *The Indian English Novel Today* states,

Women writers are fearlessly giving full and candid expression to female consciousness and experiences exploring the secret spaces of women and the difficult terrains of their lives, their love and betrayal, melancholy and anger (at times bursting defiantly into 'slut walks' for social protest (9).

Contemporary Indian Women Writers like Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahiri, Kiran Desai and Manju Kapur capture a range of quandaries like love, hate, and marital discontent, social discrimination, conflict of children, acculturation, assimilation, culture and history. In their works the reader gets a vivid picture of the culture, identity and the divergence stumble upon by their characters. Singh rightly remarks 'The nuances of the transition in Socio-cultural realities are being captured quite well by the new intelligentsia'(4). With this new intelligentsia a new woman writer Shilpi Somaya Gowda is widely appreciated by reviewers and critics for her debut novel *Secret Daughter*.

The **Secret Daughter** is the maiden novel of Shilpi Somaya Gowda. She was born in Toronto to Indian Parents. For her first novel, she received positive reviews for her brilliant craft. It is the story of an adopted daughter's conflict between her biological mother and her foster mother. In this novel Gowda registered several issues like women's place in India, their quest for identity, pathetic condition of girl child and female infanticide, preference for a boy child, trauma of a biological mother and foster mother, poverty and richness in India. The issues the author documented in her debut novel are widespread in India. India is a mixture of both rich at

one level and poverty at another level. She even perceived the double standard norms that persist in India.

This paper is an attempt to analyze and explicate the trauma of the biological mother Kavita, who yearns for her secret daughter Usha in Gowda's *The Secret Daughter*. The word 'trauma' is a *Greek* word which means 'a wound', 'originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body' (16 qtd in Caruth). Caruth also explicated trauma from Freud's text, that is, 'the term trauma is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind' (16). In the same way the trauma that Kavita encounters is inflicted upon her mind. The wound that inflicted the minds makes the person fragile both physically and mentally. The conflict that is encountered by Kavita, after she loses her name and identity post marriage. Her parents named her as Lalita, but her husband's family changed it to Kavita, as it is suggested by their family Astrologer as it is good for their family. Her identity crisis and yearning starts from that point. When she delivers her first girl child, she was left alone with her girl child and no one was there to take care of her and her new born baby.

Kavita's second delivery also failed to give her a sense of solace, because again she delivered a girl baby. But this time she decided to save her baby from the clutches of the inhumane society. With the help of her sister Rupa, Kavita decided to leave her born baby in an orphanage. When Kavita and Rupa reach the Orphanage, Rupa reaches Kavita's arm to get the baby from her hand, the little warm girl baby screamed suggestively or unwittingly for her separation from her mother within few hours of her birth. "Kavita can hear is screaming. As she feels Usha pried from her hands, she hears only the screaming inside her head, then the shriek, coming from her own mouth. She hears Usha wailing" (34). Even after taking her girl baby, her arms were still stretched out but empty, "Kavita's arms are still outstretched, but they hold nothing" (34).

After this traumatic experience and during her daily prayer she always, "sees her lost babies faces, their small bodies, their cries and she feels their tiny fingers wrap around hers" (41). She is the mother of two girl children, but now she is barren. "She hears the sound of Usha's desperate cry echoing behind the closest doors of the orphanage,....she tries to envision the babies at peace, wherever they are" (41). She even imagines Usha as a little girl with two braids tied with a white ribbon. Her secret daughter's image was perfectly clear in her mind. She visualizes her girl child playing, smiling, eating and sleeping with other children in the orphanage. This picture gave Kavita a sense of relief that her girl child lives somewhere in the world with food and shelter. With these images of her secret daughter she carries out her rest of the day. She left her silver bangle as an anklet for her girl child. That was the only asset that she could leave for her daughter. This incident made her silent. She became voiceless and her hopes gone astray due to her suffering caused by the society. "Suffering is voiceless in the metaphorical sense that silence becomes a sign of something ultimately unknowable" (27 Morris).

When Kavita became pregnant for the third time, she did not affirm her pregnancy to her husband. She did not allow herself to feel about her new baby because of her past bitter experience. "Kavita does not let herself think about this baby, in the same way she has before" (42). She even did not share about her pregnancy with Jasu. So whenever the new life within her comes to her mind, she just tried to keep away from the thought. "Like the dust she sweeps from the floor each day" (42). All these changes happened in her mind after her visit to Bombay Orphanage.

When Jasu decided to find the sex of their next baby, Kavita agreed but the traumas encountered by Kavita are painful. She feared, "...if the test shows another girl growing in her

womb”(42), then the remaining result, she knew and she experienced it earlier, that either Jasu ask her to abort or he could abandon her. But the most devastating pain is, she could not bear again, “agony of giving birth, of holding her baby in her arms, only to have it taken away again “(42). Still this kind of inhuman action prevails in the rural part of India. Women are forced to abort if they find girl baby in their womb or killing the baby within few hours of its arrival. But Kavita was sure if her past repeats in her third pregnancy she could not survive in this brutal inhumane society.

When Jasu and Kavita came to know that, Kavita’s womb carries a healthy boy baby, Jasu shouted and laughed, whereas for Kavita it just gave relief from her stressful frame of mind of losing her babies. Her third pregnancies experiences was new, everyone in the family eagerly anticipated the arrival of their son, which was considered as glory to their family. “Kavita is fed and pampered up until her first labor pains, and mid wife is called right away to provide her support” (50). All these experience were new to Kavita, she was never paid heed or attended by anyone during her first two pregnancies. The support that she received during her third pregnancy, that was because of her still born son. Even after giving birth to their son, the joy that felt by Jasu was not felt by Kavita, she could not, “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).

### **Naming Ceremony**

In India, naming a baby is celebrated by inviting relatives, friends and neighbours. Kavita and Jasu invited their relatives for their baby’s *namkaran*, his naming ceremony. Their relatives delighted with the entry of their first son. They all showered Kavita with new clothes, new clothes for the baby, fennel to bolster her milk supply. Kavita was stunned by the sudden attention and care from her relatives. “They have showered on her all the traditional gifts, as if this is her first baby, their first child”(65). But in her mind so many questions raised to shoot at this merciless society, “What about the other times I’ve carried a baby in my womb, given birth, held my child in my arms?”(65).

The double standard culture of India is documented by the author in this novel. The society acknowledge a woman only if she gives birth to a boy baby. Though all celebrated the ceremony, but for Kavita, “an aching candy in her heart for what she’s lost” (65). She notices Jasu’s pride by holding his son. Kavita prays, “She will be a good mother to her son, prays she has enough maternal love left in her heart for him, prays it didn’t die along with her daughters” (65).

They named their son as Vijay, which stands for victory, with an approval from their family pandit. After naming a child, it is the custom to repeat the name of the child by all the relatives and friends. So after naming the boy baby, everyone repeated their son’s name. In that resonance, “somewhere in the noise of the crowd, Kavita hears a lone voice, an infant’s piercing cry” (67). It was not her son’s voice or her relatives’ offspring. But it was the voice of her girl baby Usha, shattering cry of the new born baby still haunted Kavita even after past many months. “For a moment, she is strude with the disturbing thought that everything in her son’s life might be bittersweet for her” (67).

### **Journey towards Bombay**

Jasu decided to leave his home town, because they were not getting enough profit from their crop field. So he convinced his wife to move from their village to Bombay. He believed that they can lead a sophisticated life, he also stressed Kavita that she no need to work hard in Bombay, as she

did in their field. “Bombay beckons to him like a glittering jewel, promising a better life for them and particularly for their son” (90). But kavita was not convinced with his conviction and dreams. Finally she decides to leave the village on the advice of her mother. Already after marriage, kavita loses her identity by changing her name from lalita to kavita, now both Kavita and Jasu were not aware of city life, but left their village with big dreams. Through their entry into Bombay, Gowda brilliantly pictured the two faces of Bombay as well as India. Poor invariably remains poor, rich constantly are rich and healthy.

Kavita again lands in Bombay after six years but this time with her husband and her only son. Her first visit was most unforgettable and painful moment. Till now she could hear the voice of her girl child somewhere in her mind. Kavita bears a grudge against her husband for his two wrong perceptions; she felt that, “He forced me to give up my baby. And now he’s forced me to come to this city, to leave everything I Love” (102). These predilection of Jasu made Kavita’s life despondent.

After reaching Dharavi, both Jasu and Kavita were shocked to see the place, which was not what they expected. The place was surrounded by row of shacks, trash, scurrying rodents. It was thorny for Kavita to assimilate with the filthy place, she could not get fresh air, which she had in her village. When she opened the door to get some clean air, she covered her nose immediately with her sari, because of the dirt and smog. “Unlike the village she has known, people here live like animals, packed into small spaces, fighting over every necessity of life” (109). She found difficult to accustom in that mucky place. When Kavita went for a walk with her son in the streets of Bombay, she remembered the day, she and Rupa walked those streets with her girl child. The mother’s quest for her secret daughter prolongs. It haunts her and when she saw a girl child in the crowd with Usha’s resemblance, Kavita just followed the little girl, by pulling her son, to get the glimpses of the little girl’s face, but the girl’s face faded among to crowd.

Kavita’s Bombay life made her to work in a house as a maid and took care of her only son as a compassionate and affable mother. Whenever she went to pick her son from the school, she tried to find out the orphanage where she left her secret daughter few years back. After finding the orphanage she stopover it, by standing near the gate, she watched children’s playing, she longed to get the glimpses of her secret daughter.

At times Jasu’s failed life in Bombay made Kavita to think that all his decisions were wrong, from “giving up her daughters, leaving their village, trying to survive in this city that will never feel like home” (140). Kavita’s yearning for her secret daughter is apparent when Jasu saved a mentally retarded girl from rogues, Kavita hold the ‘girl’s frail body in her arms’ she sang for the girl as her own mother, for a while Kavita imagined that she was singing to her own daughter. (155).

Gowda through her characters and situations she registered, that rate of boy baby is many compared to girls, when Kavita’s neighbour’s states that countries like Bangladesh pay money to get brides, when Kavita hears this, “Kavita’s fleeting smile melts away as the raw the raw feeling in her chest returns. So many boys. Not enough girls. The raw feeling escapes her body and surrounds her” (193).

Jasu and Kavita totally devastated when they came to know their son’s illegal involvement against the Government. Jasu lost all his hopes, he was the person who strongly believed that by raising a son, it shows him the way to wealth and instead it brought only a bad name. For the first time in his life he realized that his notion was misconception and wrong belief

“.....Jasu’s realization that what was once his main source of pride will instead end upon his life’s disappointment” (233).

As a mother Kavita everyday prays for her secret daughter and for her son. “She prays for Vijay’s safety and his redemption. She prays for Usha, wherever she may be, picturing her, as she always does, as a little girl with two braids”(281).

Though Kavita rejoiced her motherhood, she always dredged up her memories of her secret daughter. “In all these years, she has never been able to imagine what her daughter would look like as a grown woman, so this is the image she keeps in her mind, a young child frozen in time. (281).

She mourned for all things that she lost, when she returned back to her village. She lost her two daughters, lost her son’s innocence, been away from her family, now at last lost her parents.

Kavita’s heart was filled with emptiness, the quest for her secret daughter travelled through out her life. At this stage, she did not have answers for many questions like, “where her secret daughter is,..... where she went wrong with vijay. She doesn’t know whether Bapu will remember her today or tomorrow”(327).

At last she got an answer about her secret daughter, Jasu collected information from the Shanti Orphanage that, their daughter name was Asha now, she was adopted by American - Indian Parents, they are doctors by profession, and settled in America. After hearing this, “Kavita closes her eyes and a tear drops down the side of her face and into her ear. So far from home. All this time, she ‘s been so far from us” (339). Even Jasu was haunted by his past, for killing of his new born girl baby. After knowing about his second daughter, he praised his wife for what she had done. It was a good thing and Kavita’s decision gave their child a new, healthy and affluent life, unlike the children in dharavi slums. He even felt that his wife gave their daughter a dignified life. He showed Asha’s hand written page, which carried, “My Name is Asha....”. She broke down after knowing that her daughter came to orphanage to get information of her biological parents.

Gowda both as a writer and as a mother of two children captured the trauma of a poor and helpless mother from a rural village who struggles to survive in the society by losing her identity, name, two daughters, village and her parents. Kavita felt completed when she learned about her secret daughter’s safe and secured life. Women writers are not just giving us a fiction; they document the major issues that predominate in the rural part of India. Shilpi Somaya Gowda explored the trauma and suffering of a susceptible uneducated rural woman’s pitiable state in phallogocentric society.

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