



# Motherhood, Migration, and Feminist Ethics: A Transnational Feminist Reading of Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter*

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**Abstract**— This paper examines Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter* (2010) through the lens of transnational feminism, arguing that the novel interrogates gendered oppression, motherhood, and reproductive choice within intersecting frameworks of nation, class, race, and global inequality. Moving beyond liberal feminist narratives of individual choice and empowerment, Gowda's text foregrounds the uneven power relations that structure women's lives across borders. Through the parallel narratives of Kavita, an Indian woman forced to relinquish her daughter due to patriarchal violence, and Somer, an Indian-American adoptive mother navigating infertility and transnational adoption, the novel exposes the ethical complexities of global motherhood. Drawing on transnational feminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Inderpal Grewal, and Nira Yuval-Davis, this study argues that *Secret Daughter* critiques both Indian patriarchy and Western neoliberal feminism, revealing how women's reproductive lives are shaped by global capitalism, migration, and nationalist ideologies. The novel ultimately articulates a transnational feminist ethics grounded in care, responsibility, and contextual solidarity rather than universalist notions of women's liberation.



**Keywords**— Transnational feminism, motherhood, adoption, diaspora, reproductive politics, globalization, feminist ethics

## Introduction

Contemporary feminist literary criticism increasingly turns to transnational frameworks to analyze narratives shaped by globalization, migration, and uneven power relations. Traditional feminist approaches, particularly those rooted in Western liberal ideology, have often framed women's emancipation in terms of individual choice, autonomy, and empowerment. However, such frameworks frequently overlook how women's lives are constrained by structural forces such as patriarchy, nationalism, capitalism, and colonial history. Transnational feminism emerged as a response to these limitations, insisting that gendered experience must be understood within specific historical and geopolitical contexts (Mohanty).

Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter* offers a rich site for transnational feminist analysis. The novel traces the intertwined lives of two women across India and North America: Kavita, a poor Indian woman who is forced to abandon her daughter to save her from infanticide, and Somer, an Indian-American woman who adopts the child after struggling with infertility. Through this dual narrative, Gowda exposes the gendered violence embedded in Indian patriarchal culture while simultaneously critiquing Western assumptions about rescue, choice, and maternal fulfilment.

This paper argues that *Secret Daughter* embodies transnational feminist consciousness by foregrounding how women's reproductive lives are shaped by intersecting forces of class, nation, and global inequality. Rather than presenting adoption as a simple narrative of salvation, the

novel reveals the ethical tensions inherent in transnational motherhood, challenging universalist feminist narratives and emphasizing responsibility, care, and relational ethics.

### **Transnational Feminism: A Theoretical Framework**

Transnational feminism emerged in the late twentieth century as a critique of Western feminist universalism and neoliberal global feminism. Chandra Talpade Mohanty's foundational work argues that Western feminist discourse often constructs "Third World women" as a homogeneous, oppressed group, thereby erasing differences of class, culture, and agency while reinforcing colonial hierarchies (Mohanty 19). Such representations position Western women as liberated subjects and non-Western women as victims, in need of rescue.

Transnational feminism rejects this binary by emphasizing historical specificity, intersectionality, and power relations across borders. Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan argue that feminist analysis must attend to transnational flows of capital, labor, and culture that shape women's lives unevenly (Grewal and Kaplan 14). Rather than assuming a global sisterhood, transnational feminism calls for context-specific solidarities grounded in accountability and difference.

A crucial aspect of transnational feminism is its interrogation of reproductive politics. Women's reproductive labor—childbearing, caregiving, adoption—is deeply implicated in nationalist and capitalist structures. Nira Yuval-Davis notes that women often function as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation, making their bodies sites of ideological control (Yuval-Davis 22). Transnational feminist theory thus provides a critical framework for analyzing motherhood not as a private experience but as a politically regulated practice.

### **Patriarchy, Poverty, and Gendered Violence in India**

In *Secret Daughter*, Kavita's narrative exposes the brutal realities of gendered oppression within Indian patriarchal society. Forced by her husband and mother-in-law to abandon her newborn daughter to avoid infanticide, Kavita's experience highlights how female lives are devalued within rigid patriarchal and economic structures (Gowda). Her lack of choice is not the result of personal failure but of systemic violence shaped by poverty, dowry culture, and son preference.

From a transnational feminist perspective, Kavita's story challenges Western feminist narratives that frame choice as universally available. Mohanty argues that feminist politics must distinguish between "choice" and "conditions of choice," recognizing that agency operates within structural constraints (Mohanty 141). Kavita's decision to give up her daughter is an act of survival rather

than empowerment, underscoring the limits of liberal feminist frameworks. The novel thus situates gendered violence within broader socio-economic contexts, revealing how patriarchy intersects with class and nation to regulate women's reproductive lives.

### **Transnational Adoption and Neoliberal Feminism**

Somer's narrative, set primarily in the United States and Canada, offers a contrasting yet interconnected perspective on motherhood. As an Indian-American woman struggling with infertility, Somer initially views adoption as a solution to personal loss. Her journey reflects neoliberal feminist ideals that prioritize individual fulfillment and choice. However, Gowda complicates this narrative by exposing the ethical implications of transnational adoption.

Transnational feminism critiques adoption practices that replicate global inequalities, where children from the Global South are transferred to affluent Western families. Grewal notes that such practices are often framed as humanitarian acts while obscuring the structural conditions—poverty, patriarchy, lack of social support—that produce adoptable children (Grewal 52). *Secret Daughter* resists this simplification by maintaining Kavita's presence in the narrative, refusing to erase the birth mother. Through Somer's growing awareness of Kavita's pain, the novel destabilizes rescue narratives and emphasizes relational responsibility rather than ownership.

### **Motherhood as Transnational Feminist Ethics**

In *Secret Daughter*, motherhood is not represented as a natural, instinctive, or universally fulfilling role; rather, it is portrayed as an ethically charged, politically regulated, and emotionally fragmented experience shaped by patriarchy, class inequality, and transnational power relations. Gowda's novel challenges dominant representations of motherhood that privilege biological ties or idealize maternal sacrifice by situating maternal experience within global systems of gendered oppression. Through the parallel narratives of Kavita and Somer, *Secret Daughter* constructs motherhood as a transnational feminist ethical practice grounded in care, responsibility, and relational accountability rather than ownership or fulfillment.

Transnational feminist theory has long emphasized that motherhood is a critical site where gender, nation, and power intersect. Nira Yuval-Davis argues that women are positioned as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation, making their reproductive capacities subject to intense social regulation (Yuval-Davis 22). Kavita's experience exemplifies this dynamic. Her pregnancy and childbirth are controlled by her husband and in-laws, who view the female child as an economic burden rather than a human life. Kavita's forced relinquishment of her daughter

is thus not a maternal choice but a survival strategy enacted under patriarchal coercion. From a transnational feminist perspective, her motherhood exposes the violence embedded in systems that devalue female lives while exploiting women's reproductive labour.

By contrast, Somer's experience of motherhood is shaped by diaspora, infertility, and global privilege. As an Indian-American woman living in North America, Somer initially understands motherhood through a liberal feminist framework that emphasizes desire, choice, and personal fulfillment. Adoption appears as a solution to infertility, framed within legal and humanitarian discourse. However, Gowda gradually complicates this perspective by revealing the unequal global conditions that make transnational adoption possible. Inderpal Grewal critiques such neoliberal frameworks for obscuring structural inequalities by presenting reproductive solutions as individual consumer choices (Grewal 52). Somer's evolving consciousness reflects this critique as she begins to recognize that her maternal fulfillment is linked to another woman's loss.

Importantly, *Secret Daughter* refuses to construct a hierarchy between Kavita and Somer, resisting narratives that portray the Western adoptive mother as savior and the birth mother as disposable. Instead, Gowda maintains both maternal presences within the narrative, highlighting what transnational feminism identifies as relational ethics. Chandra Talpade Mohanty emphasizes that feminist solidarity must be rooted in mutuality and accountability rather than abstract sisterhood (Mohanty 243). Motherhood in the novel becomes an ethical relation that acknowledges unequal power while resisting erasure.

Motherhood in *Secret Daughter* is also deeply affective, characterized by grief, longing, and ambivalence rather than joy or completion. This emotional complexity challenges dominant cultural ideals that equate motherhood with fulfillment. Transnational feminist scholars argue that such idealization often masks women's suffering and silences maternal ambivalence (Tong 117). Kavita's enduring grief and Somer's persistent sense of incompleteness reveal motherhood as an ongoing emotional labor shaped by structural constraints rather than a resolved identity.

Moreover, the novel situates motherhood within global circuits of care, where children, emotions, and responsibilities cross national borders. Adoption does not sever maternal bonds but reconfigures them across space and time. This transnational reconfiguration aligns with feminist ethics that prioritize care over possession. Rather than asserting exclusive maternal rights, the novel proposes a model of shared ethical responsibility—one that

recognizes multiple maternal claims without collapsing them into competition.

Through this framework, *Secret Daughter* advances a transnational feminist understanding of motherhood as an ethical practice that demands attentiveness to inequality, power, and loss. Motherhood becomes a site of feminist resistance not through empowerment or liberation but through sustained care under conditions of injustice. Gowda thus reframes maternal love as politically significant, revealing how intimate emotions are shaped by global systems of oppression and connection.

Ultimately, *Secret Daughter* demonstrates that motherhood cannot be understood outside the structures that govern women's bodies and reproductive labour. By foregrounding maternal experience as transnational, relational, and ethically complex, the novel contributes to feminist debates that seek to move beyond biological essentialism and neoliberal individualism. Motherhood, in this text, emerges as a feminist ethics of responsibility—one that demands recognition of unequal power relations while affirming the enduring human capacity for care across borders.

### Silence, Voice, and Feminist Solidarity

Silence in *Secret Daughter* operates not merely as the absence of speech but as a complex gendered and transnational condition shaped by power, fear, and survival. Kavita's silence is imposed by patriarchal authority—her husband, mother-in-law, and socio-economic dependency leave her with no legitimate space for resistance. Her inability to speak openly about her grief reflects what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies as the condition of the subaltern woman, whose voice is systematically excluded from dominant discourse (Spivak 287). Kavita's silence, therefore, is not passive but symptomatic of structural oppression rooted in gender, class, and nation.

At the same time, Somer's silence functions differently. As a diasporic Indian woman in North America, Somer experiences emotional silence born from cultural dislocation, infertility, and unspoken expectations of motherhood. Her reluctance to articulate her pain reveals how even privileged women are constrained by normative ideals of femininity and success. Transnational feminism recognizes that silence can be both a strategy of survival and a sign of emotional labour, especially for women navigating multiple cultural worlds (Mohanty 142).

The novel's narrative structure itself becomes an act of feminist solidarity by holding both silences together without collapsing them into equivalence. Gowda does not allow Somer's voice to overwrite Kavita's suffering, nor does she romanticize Kavita as a symbol of pure

victimhood. Instead, the text creates what Mohanty terms a “feminist solidarity based on difference and accountability” rather than sameness (Mohanty 243). Solidarity in *Secret Daughter* emerges through ethical recognition—acknowledging unequal power relations while refusing erasure.

### Critique of Universalist Feminism

One of the most significant contributions of *Secret Daughter* to feminist discourse lies in its critique of universalist and liberal feminist paradigms. Liberal feminism often conceptualizes women's liberation in terms of individual autonomy, choice, and self-realization. However, Gowda's novel exposes the limitations of such frameworks by demonstrating how “choice” is unevenly distributed across socio-economic and geopolitical contexts.

Kavita's decision to relinquish her daughter is frequently misread through a liberal feminist lens as maternal sacrifice or tragic necessity. A transnational feminist reading, however, reframes this act as one produced by structural coercion, not free will. Mohanty emphasizes that feminist theory must distinguish between “having choices” and “having the power to choose” (Mohanty 141). Kavita's lack of access to education, financial independence, and social protection renders liberal feminist notions of agency inadequate.

Similarly, Somer's initial understanding of adoption reflects Western feminist assumptions that motherhood can be fulfilled through individual desire and legal processes. Gowda gradually destabilizes this perspective by foregrounding the unequal global conditions that make transnational adoption possible. As Grewal argues, neoliberal feminism often masks global inequality by framing transnational practices as personal solutions rather than political problems (Grewal 52).

Through these parallel critiques, *Secret Daughter* resists feminist universalism and instead advances a contextual, relational feminism attentive to power, privilege, and responsibility across borders.

### CONCLUSION

*Secret Daughter* offers a nuanced and ethically complex articulation of transnational feminist consciousness by centering motherhood, migration, and reproductive politics within global systems of inequality. Through the intertwined narratives of Kavita and Somer, Gowda demonstrates that women's lives cannot be understood through singular feminist frameworks detached from history, class, and nation. The novel insists that feminist analysis must move beyond empowerment

narratives to confront structural violence and unequal access to agency.

By refusing to privilege one maternal experience over the other, the text redefines motherhood as a relational and transnational practice, grounded in care, responsibility, and emotional labour rather than biological or legal ownership. This reconfiguration aligns with Yuval-Davis's argument that women's reproductive roles are deeply entangled with nationalist and global power structures (Yuval-Davis 29).

Ultimately, *Secret Daughter* contributes significantly to transnational feminist literature by offering a model of feminist solidarity rooted in ethical witnessing rather than rescue, recognition rather than appropriation, and accountability rather than abstraction. The novel challenges readers to reconsider feminist politics in a globalized world, emphasizing that meaningful solidarity emerges not from shared identity but from sustained engagement with difference and inequality. In this way, *Secret Daughter* stands as a powerful critique of both patriarchal oppression and neoliberal feminist ideology, affirming transnational feminism as an essential critical framework for contemporary literary studies.

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