

CROSS-CULTURAL CONFLICTS IN SHILPI SOMAYA GOWDA'S *SECRET DAUGHTER*

D. Abel Tittu, Ph.D. Research Scholar, PG & Research Department of English, Mannar Thirumalai Naicker College, Pasumalai, Madurai [Tamil Nadu]

Dr. V.P. Rathi, Asst.Prof., PG & Research Department of English, Mannar Thirumalai Naicker College, Pasumalai, Madurai [Tamil Nadu]

Abstract:

Cross-culture is a notion that acknowledges the differences between people from other countries, cultures, and ethnicities and the significance of building bridges between them. It deals with two or more different cultures and their differences in language, religion, communities, and other customs. It helps to understand the language of other cultures for communicating verbally to exchange emotions, information, and thoughts. In the novel Secret Daughter, the characters dealing with Indian and American cultures are evident. Somer is American, whereas her husband, Krishnan, is Indian. Somer and Krishnan visit India to adopt a child from Bombay, but she finds it hard to cope with the Indian culture. After adopting the child, they take their daughter Asha back to America, where she grows up, in America where she finds it hard to adapt to her mother's American culture. Her identity is questioned because she belongs to the Indian race. The present paper focuses on Cross-cultural conflicts and the characters facing challenges in both countries in Shilpi Somaya Gowda's Secret Daughter.

Keywords: Identity, Ethnicity, Adoption, Race, Cross-Culture.

Introduction

"If we are going to live with our deepest differences, then we must learn about one another." (Levine 2013) Francesco Loriggio, in his essay *"History, Literary History, and Ethnic Literature"* (1989), explains that the process through which people identify with a group that attributes specific traits to itself or has been assigned by others, and that is perceived as holding a particular place concerning other groups, is known as ethnicity.

"Secret Daughter" is Shilpi Somaya Gowda's debut novel. In this novel, the main characters are from India and America. There are two families, one is Somer and Krishnan, and the other is Kavita and Jasu. The former is from America and India, whereas the latter is from a village in Dahanu, India. Kavita gives birth to Usha under difficult circumstances, so she gives her daughter to an orphanage for survival. At the same time, Somer had a miscarriage. After visiting a doctor, she found out she could not produce a child. After a suggestion by her husband, Krishnan, and his mother, Sarla, they decided to adopt. Krishnan and his family are from Bombay, so they planned to adopt from there. Sarla sent information about the adoption procedures and a picture of Usha, whose name was changed to Asha. The couple came to India with lots of happiness.

Objectives:

- I. To find out cross-cultural trends in the novel.
- II. To explore gender based cultural conflicts.
- III. To highlight the role of cultural memory and heritage.

Cross-Cultural Intersections: An American in India

Somer, the American, finds it hard to cope with Indian culture as she faces so many problems. It all started with a fork; except for her, everyone else had dinner with their hands. They spoke little English and mostly Gujarati, which Somer could not understand a single word of, and no one interpreted it for her. She felt like she was stranded. After a while, she convinced herself. "Stay focused. Don't worry about the rest of it." (60)

In the adoption office, the couple arrived ten minutes earlier and were still asked to wait forty minutes. This made Somer perplexed. Krishnan tried to convince her by uttering that this is how things

work here in India. He knew that things were quite different in America. She could not understand a single word as the civil servant spoke in Hindi. After reading the file, the civil servant said, 'No babies,' looking at her face. This made her sad and flush with shame since fertility is celebrated in India. The couple was asked to come the next day. Somer asked him what all that was about, to which Krishnan replied that this was typical of Indian bureaucracy, and that everything was like this in India. After hearing this, Somer got very annoyed. "What happened back there? They kept us waiting an hour, that guy hadn't even read our file, and then barely talks to me!" (62). Krishnan tries to convince them that he can handle this and adds that he is asking her not to come up with American ideas.

As it was a monsoon season, the rain started to pour down heavily. They stayed in the flat with other family members. They felt they had been trapped inside the flat. Somer had never seen rain like this before. She felt like the smell was overpowering her. She also felt powerless in the face of Indian bureaucracy. In the flat, fourteen people stayed. The relatives were polite to her, but she noticed a few things and understood that. She tried so hard, but still got uncomfortable with them. "She notices they stop talking when she enters the room, no matter how much of an effort she makes." (63)

Cultural conflicts and their impact on the family:

The picture she had in her mind about India became contrary, and her hopes and expectations seemed to diminish. She cannot believe her husband, who has completely changed to fit into Indian culture. She began to think about him as a different person and felt like she did not know him at all. A servant came with a tea tray and knocked on the door in the early morning. Krishnan opened it as he was awake, whereas Somer was still asleep. When she saw the servant inside the room, she felt annoyed and buried her face in the pillow. Krishnan asked her to try tea. Somer was frustrated but did not show because it would bring chaos and destroy peace in the family. "Is there nothing off-limits here? Any corner of that isn't subject to intrusions by your family or servants?" (68)

Somer saw a sandwich shop, and she ordered two mutton burgers. She ate one; it tasted good, so she saved the other one to have later. She walked towards the ocean; the place became crowded. Men walked in packs, chewing paans, and they spat on the sidewalks. She saw a man staring at her breasts and commented on it with his friends, and when she tried to cover them with her arms, they laughed at her. Some made kissing gestures towards her with stained teeth. Somer felt bad and afraid. Slowly, her fear turned into anger, and she thought these men were pathetic and wondered how her husband Kris could come from a place like this. She thought that since she belonged to a different ethnicity, people in this country were treating her so badly. She wished to convey this to her husband once he returned home. Ethnicity fosters togetherness and diversity rather than separation. It is apt to remark: "Ethnicity should enrich us; it should make us a unique people in our diversity and not be used to divide us." (Hudson 2023)

After keeping the remaining burger in the fridge, Somer took a bath and cleaned herself, and she lay down. Her husband's family members are vegetarians, and they never eat meat. Once they find the mutton burger in the fridge, Krishnan starts to yell at the servants and then at his wife. "What the hell were you thinking bringing meat into this house? You know my parents are strict vegetarians. You polluted the entire kitchen." (71) Kris understood how his mother felt about this matter. "My mother practically had a heart attack. She wanted to throw out every single dish and pot, but I convinced her they could be (71). Somer apologized and started crying, meanwhile Krishnan reminded her of when his parents visited them abroad. He asked her to apologize, which she did, and started to convey what happened the same day. "I went out for a walk and had a disturbing experience. This man or two men, I am not sure, touched me on the boardwalk." (72)

Somer is upset, and her bitterness towards this country keeps growing. She felt everything was tainted: the biased adoption process, the cultural rules, and the weather, too. She thought that she would feel at home with her husband's family, but it was quite the opposite. She also thought that after the adoption, her daughter would look like her, but she looked like her father, and she also felt she would be from this country, only she would be foreign. It is apt to remark about identity and culture:

The culture of the native community differs from that of other cultures. People either migrate to other countries in search of a better life, or they are forced to move from

their native place. This results in an identity crisis for an individual in a foreign land. Identity refers to a person's classification according to their gender, race, religion, ethnicity and nationality. Identity plays a great role in a person's life. An identity crisis is mostly associated with migrants who are trapped between two cultures, languages, and races. (Tittu & Rathi 200-201)

After the adoption process, the couple took Asha with them to America. Asha was put in a school for her studies. Her complexion was dark because she belonged to a different race, like her father, and her language was different from others. Asha felt like she belonged to the minorities as she was born in India. Her friends asked about her exotic eyes and where she got them. She finds it hard to answer that; she knows that she was adopted, but she does not know where she is from or who her real parents are. She hates the word exotic, which people use to signify the people and their attributes from other cultures. Her identity was often questioned. "I hate that 'exotic' thing we always get from people" (133). It is apt to remark: "It is not easy to be stranded between two worlds; the sad truth is that we can never be completely comfortable in either world." (Penman 2008)

Asha wanted to visit India for many reasons. She wanted to know about her real parents. She often felt like she did not belong in America and its culture, but after visiting Indian slums and seeing how the lives of little children are entirely different, who did not have proper homes and no proper school education. Since she was adopted, she considered herself privileged, or else she would also face the same situation as the other children in the slums. Zastrow (1977), in his book *Outcome of Black Children: White Parents Transracial Adoptions*, describes that "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)

Tradition versus change: Krishnan's Perspective

The character Krishnan was fascinated by American culture, so he went to America for higher studies, and he married a girl named Somer, who is an American. He visited his classmate Jacob's home, and there were many people. Krishnan worked along with them in the yard of the house. Jacob's sister brought her boyfriend to her home, and everyone started teasing her. This seemed new for Krishnan because in Indian culture, the parents' and relatives' approval is the foremost thing, whereas in American culture, it is the last thing. Krishnan started to like and admire everything. "The beautiful house, the sprawling yard, the pretty blond girl. He wanted it all. He had fallen in love with the American dream." (114)

He appreciated clean streets, huge malls, and comfortable cars in the United States. He also started to like French fries and pizzas. When he came back to India, he began to miss America. The life there seemed good, and the career opportunities were great and superior. After becoming a surgeon and marrying a blonde, pretty girl, he has achieved the American dream, which he thought. But after fifteen years, at the time of Thanksgiving, Krishnan realized that even though the house was large, spacious, and beautiful, he felt that everything in his life was not good enough. His perspective towards American culture has changed drastically. Asha's talking and laughter might have been a relief for some time, but then he felt it was what it was; the fact cannot be changed. "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 seems hollow to him." (116) Freedman states that, "When people have been temporary, transient residents and return from the foreign culture to their native culture, they will soon discover that their cross-cultural problems are far from over" (23).

During the time of Diwali at his parents' house in India, people gathered in dozens, and he was the only one missing there. He talked to them on the phone happily, but after hanging up the call, he sat motionless in sadness. He realized that he had never understood Americans and their culture. He missed his parents and family in India during festive times. He also recalled the things that happened at home at that time. Hall in *Beyond Culture* (1976) suggests that the only way to learn the internal culture of others is to actively participate in their culture. Only the most overt behaviours are apparent when one first enters a new culture. As one spends more time in that new culture, the underlying

beliefs, values, and thought patterns that dictate that behaviour will be uncovered. Only by doing so can we uncover the values and beliefs that underlie the behaviour of society.

Conclusion

The goal of migration is always upward mobility and material improvement, whether from one country to another, from a village to a city, or from a smaller to a larger city. The immigrant does his best to fit in and become part of the new environment. He then learns that adopting the new nation is not only for him; it is also for the new nation to adopt him. Any group of immigrants attempting to establish their diaspora in a new location faces the challenges of adjusting to a new environment and a new world, as well as feelings of loneliness, alienation, and hostility. The cross-cultural differences and traditions are highlighted through the experiences of characters who move between India and the United States.

References

1. Francesco, Loriggio. (1989). *History, Literary History, and Ethnic Literature*. Canadian Review of Comparative Literature/ Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée.
2. Freedman, A. (1986) "A Strategy for Managing 'Cultural' Transitions: Re-entry from Training." Cross-cultural Re-entry: A Book of Readings. Ed. C.N. Austin. Abilene, Texas: Abilene Christian University, 23.
3. Gowda, Shilpi Somaya. (2011). *Secret Daughter*. William Morrow.
4. Hall, Edward T. (1976). *Beyond Culture*, slredglobalhealth.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/beyond-culture.pdf.
5. Hudson, Kimberly J. (2023) "Exploring the Distinctions: Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality." *Politics Sphere*, 25 Nov. www.politicsphere.com/exploring-the-distinctions-race-ethnicity-and-nationality/.
6. "Matrix Model Management System Quotes by Deborah J. Levine." *Goodreads*. Goodreads, n.d. <https://www.goodreads.com/work/quotes/24337461-the-matrix-model-management-system>.
7. Penman, Sharon Kay. (2008). *Devil's Brood: Book 3 in the Henry II & Eleanor of Aquitaine Trilogy*. Michael Joseph.
8. Tittu, Abel D., and V.P. Rathi. (2025) "Quest for Identity and Inner Turmoil in Abdulrazak Gurnah's *Theft and Gravel Heart*." *Alochana Journal*, vol. 14, no.11, pp. 200-201.
9. Zastrow, C.H. (1977) *Outcome of Black Children: White Parents Transracial Adoptions*. San Francisco: Reed & Eterovich, 33.