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## Ecofeminism in Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter: A Panoramic View*

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### Abstract

*The concept of ecofeminism posits a connection between women's subjugation and societal exploitation. They study the oppression and devaluation of women, looking at how it affects their status and goals. The fundamental goal of this essay is to analyze the novel Secret Daughter's ecofeminist concepts. In the book, a few more themes are covered, including female infanticide, miscarriage, adoption, and child labor. This is a literal observation of male chauvinism towards women. Humans relocate from rural areas to urban areas in pursuit of employment, better living conditions, and higher education. Their native land was forced to be abandoned as famine struck due to decreased cultivation and output caused by the lack of rain. This study focuses on the daily problems that women face in slums how they are treated there and how they get over their weaknesses. Ecofeminism is thought to be emphasized by the impact of environmental mystery.*

**Keywords:** *Subjugation, Female Infanticide, Male Chauvinism, Slums, Child labor.*

A subset of feminism known as ecological feminism, or ecofeminism, looks at the relationships that exist between women and the natural world. French feminist Françoise d'Eaubonne came up with the name in 1974. The fundamental feminist principles of gender equality, a reappraisal of non-patriarchal or nonlinear systems, and an appreciation of organic processes, holistic connections, and the value of intuition and teamwork are all employed by ecofeminism. Ecofeminism adds two things to these ideas: a dedication to the environment and an understanding of the connections that are created between women and nature. This worldview specifically highlights how patriarchal society treats women and the natural world. Ecofeminism, a multidisciplinary intellectual and political movement that fused environmental studies and feminism, first appeared in the 1980s.

Krishnan is a highly accomplished Indian expatriate who travels to the United States for education and demonstrates exceptional performance in medical school. During his time at Stanford, he develops a deep affection for Somer, an American woman who shares his academic prowess. Although their marriage first appears to progress serendipitously, complications arise as Somer experiences recurring miscarriages and subsequently learns that she is exhibiting indications of early menopause. Recognizing that their sole opportunity to have a child may lie in adoption, they go on a journey to India with the assistance of Krishnan's mother (Sarla), who urges them to visit a nearby orphanage to adopt a child. The Thakkars are the benefactors of Kavita's decision to "save" her daughter by putting her up for adoption. However, because of administrative errors, the daughter's name is recorded as Asha, which symbolizes the complex challenges experienced by adoptees, particularly the conflicting identities associated with their adoptive and native homes.

Gowda's story excels in both growth of characters and an engaging plot. The book's narrative, constructed by Gowda through fractured "words," made it extremely challenging for me to stop reading. The narrative initially transitions between several parental figures, juxtaposing the views of Kavita with Somer. As the novel progresses, new voices and perspectives are introduced, adding depth to the fictional world. We gain insight into Jasu's thoughts and observations, Asha's challenges with her adoptive heritage, Kavita's enduring memory of her daughter despite having a son named Vijay with Jasu, and the deteriorating marriage of Kris and Somer, partly due to their lack of understanding of each other's lives. Upon Asha's attainment of a prestigious grant to pursue her journalism education in India, both Somer and Kris realize that the long-anticipated and feared time has arrived: Asha is also determined to uncover her biological heritage.

Ushawas born to Jasu and Kavita Merchant, a couple residing in rural India. Due to cultural norms and the necessity of having a son to assist with labor, the first two children of the Merchants, who were both females, faced precarious and unpredictable destinies. The eldest daughter is promptly executed, however, the second daughter survives because of Kavita, she carries the child to an orphanage in Bombay, to provide the child with an opportunity for survival, rather than subjecting her to certain demise. Before relinquishing her baby for adoption, Kavita bestows the name Usha upon her daughter. Following the child's abandonment, Kavita does indeed give birth to a son, which brings great joy to Jasu. However, Kavita always remembers her daughter Usha. Another narrative revolves around Krishnan and Somer Thakkar.

Shilpi penned this novel to bring into the limelight the pains of women's survival. It has always been against the growth of the opposite sex. Today many feel proud that women have proved themselves efficient in all the fields. Still, on earth, there is a race that dominates over women. The first and foremost important issue is female infanticide which is the starting point for everything. In this novel, Kavita, the mother of the protagonist gives birth to a baby in a hut, when her husband Jasu found out it was a girl, he voluntarily plucked the baby and handed it over to his cousin. "She did not see him pounce toward her until it was too late. But she was not quick enough to stop him from grabbing the baby out of her arms." (7) Eventually the baby was killed.

A slight change in behavior of Kavita after her baby is gone can be sensed. "She put an extra chili in her husband's food when she was angry with him and watched with quiet satisfaction as he wiped his forehead and nose all through dinner." (8) Kavita gives birth again to a girl for the second time, due to what happened

the last time, Kavita never allowed her husband to take away the child. "I won't let you take her this time. I won't. If you try, if you even try, you will have to kill me first." (15) She saves the child, and after naming her daughter gives her to the orphanage. Jasu considered the child a burden because it was a girl. "She will become a burden to us, a drain on our family." (15)

Kavita was pregnant for the third time, to know the gender of the unborn child he forced her to visit the clinic and wants to know the gender with the help of an ultrasound machine. He thought of aborting the offspring if it were a girl. When he came to know it was a boy he was overjoyed and took great care of his wife.

As the level of harvest reduced and the yields were considerably worse, Jasu suggested to his wife to migrate to Bombay, so that they could have a good job, education, and live a better life. But after reaching Bombay they lived in a slum with great difficulty which made Kavita have a rising sense of resentment towards her husband Jasu. "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)

In slums, the women were treated very badly, wives were beaten by their husbands, and the children went missing frequently. Many were drunk, the people lived here like animals. They were packed to live in small spaces and they fight over the necessity of life. Very often women scream so loud and laced with tears. Many people who lived here in slums accepted and considered it as their fate. Criminals, victims, toilet cleaners, scavengers, and rag pickers were living in this place. Policemen came in search of a person who stole from a factory, they could not find him but then they saw his daughter and brutally raped her in front of his family. This made Jasu, Kavita, and Vijayso frightened to live there. They moved out of the place after finding a job in a few months.

Krishnan, an Indian from Bombay, whose wife is Somer, an American faces miscarriage so many times that she was unable to give birth which forced her to adopt a child from India under the suggestion of her mother-in-law, Sarla. They adopted the baby given by Kavita, through Shanti orphanage. They renamed the baby from Usha to Asha. They took her to America and educated her. She became a journalist and with the help of her father's support, she came to India.

According to Vandana Shiva, women's everyday encounters with the environment have given rise to a unique relationship that has gone unnoticed. She claims that "these alternative modes of knowing, which are oriented to the social benefits and sustenance needs are not recognized by the capitalist reductionist paradigm, because it fails to perceive the interconnectedness of nature, or the connection of women's lives, work, and knowledge with the creation of wealth." (23) We started fighting against male violence against women in our homes, cities, countries, and the entire world before realizing the close relationship that exists between women and the environment. In this domain as well, we began with action, from which we derived our theoretical understanding. Violence against women was the first global issue to organize women. As a result, "real" violence against minorities and women has escalated and become more savage than it was previously. Examples of these groups include migrants from colored backgrounds. Even more people believe that male aggression towards women is innate.

After joining the *Times of India*, she visited the slum to undertake a project on the people and children living there. She came to know about young brides doused with gasoline and burnt alive since they were unable to pay the dowry. She met Bina and Yashoda who are twelve and three, respectively. They were forced to work as child laborers' and were not allowed to go to schools, whereas their brothers were allowed to schools. The slum was islanded with stench of the sewage and human waste. Asha met another woman, who carried her crippled daughter wherever she goes. She met another woman with charcoal bruises on her body, who revealed about herself after receiving a sum. Her husband lost his job so she makes her living through prostitution where she earns a hundred rupees as daily wages and feeds her family.

“She goes to the brothel in the evening, there's one just down the road. She can make a hundred rupees a night, for a few hours' work, then she comes home. She says she won't take her children. She leaves them with a neighbor. She doesn't want them to see that place, to see what goes on. She doesn't want them to know.” (228)

In the *Times* database, Asha found the decline in the birth rate of girls in India in an article. “The corresponding line graph shows both the precipitous decline for girls and the increasing gap between girls and boys” (286). In the next article, she talks about the lightweight ultrasound machines which were heavily criticized because they lead to sex-selective abortion. Then she comes across the infanticide of baby girls. She recollects about the little girls: Bina and Yashoda not attending school. She felt her life would be the same if she was not adopted. “Is that what my life would have been like in India?” (286)

In the end, she gives garlands and kulfi pops to the women in the slums with whom she spoke. Asha felt she was fortunate to get adopted. She also realized the sacrifice of her mother Kavita, whose bangle she has in remembrance.

“Her mother loved her enough to give her a silver bangle. She was a brave woman. She must have been quite dedicated to getting you here. Her mother loved her enough to travel from some village to take her to the orphanage. She loved her enough to give her away. She loved her enough. She loved her.” (287)

Discourses on the environment began to emerge while feminism was growing. The politics and discourse structures surrounding ecological issues were taken by the feminists. The main idea behind the identity politics of feminism is that women and nature were exploited by men. Noel Sturgeon gives an insight into the understanding of identity politics. “Ecofeminism as a term indicates a double political intervention, of environmentalism into feminism and feminism into environmentalism.” (Sturgeon 1997:169)

The housewives found in slums managed households both voluntarily and involuntarily, whereas the men worked in the shops and factories. So, she was not able to meet any men in the slum. She thought the only hope, for the children born in poverty and desolation, were their mothers. Amidst the hardships they encounter in the male chauvinistic society, they still can live with courage and survive in the environment. In Shilpi's other novel “*The Golden Son*” a character named Leena was humiliated by her husband Girish and his family.

She was injured brutally and was forced to leave their house at one point. Then she was with her mother Nirmala, she made baskets at first and then she made pots for a living.

Kavita is the birth mother of Asha. She lives in a rural village in India and faces the societal pressure to have a male child. Due to economic and cultural reasons, she makes the heart-wrenching decision to give up her daughter for adoption. Kavita's character is marked by strength and sacrifice. Her narrative revolves around the challenges she faces as a woman in a traditional Indian society and the emotional toll of parting with her daughter. Kavita's perspective provides insight into the cultural and social context of the story. These characters are central to the novel's exploration of identity, cultural differences, and the complex dynamics of adoption. Their individual stories intertwine to create a narrative that spans continents and generations, delving into the emotional complexities of family relationships and the impact of cultural and societal expectations.

Jasu is Kavita's husband, and their relationship is explored within the context of cultural expectations and gender dynamics in their village. Jasu's character plays a crucial role in Kavita's decision to give up their daughter for adoption. His expectations and desires for a male heir contribute to the pressure Kavita feels, highlighting the challenges faced by women in traditional societies. Jasu's character provides insight into the cultural norms and values that influence the characters' decisions. Kavita's sacrifice and Jasu's role in the family dynamics contribute to the complex emotional landscape of "*Secret Daughter*." Their characters help shed light on the challenges faced by individuals within the cultural context of the story, making them integral to the overall narrative.

Rosemary Radford Ruether put forth that "Women must see that there can be no liberation for them and no solution to the ecological crisis within a society whose fundamental model of relationships continues to be one of domination." (Ruether, 1997) Ruether in her book traces the development of beliefs and ethics that define our relationship with each other and the earth.

"If dominating and destructive relations to the earth are interrelated with gender, class, and racial domination, then a healed relation to the earth cannot come about simply through technological 'fixes'. It demands a social reordering to bring about just and loving interrelationships between men and women, between races and nations, between groups presently stratified into social classes, manifesting in great disparities of access to the means of life. In short, it demands that we must speak of eco-justice, and not simply of domination of the earth as though that happened unrelated to social domination." (Ruether, 1992)

The very consequences that race, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation have on a woman's social status must be acknowledged in the development of contemporary eco-feminism. To include local cultures and spirituality, a celebration of their roles as mothers and caretakers, and an understanding of how Western colonization compromised those beliefs, women involved in environmental justice issues and women representing minority cultures have worked to establish their sense of eco-feminism.

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