

From Search for The Mother to Search for Two Indias- A Study of The Representation of New India in Three Indian English Novels

Rakes Sarkar Assistant Professor of English, Kalna College Kalna, Purba Bardhaman*

Email: rakessarkareng@gmail.com

DOI:

Abstract

*A major theme of recent Indian novels in English is the portrayal of the New India with all its glory and darkness in varied scale. This portrayal has often been criticized as part of the postcolonial exotic or celebrated as the progress of the postcolonial nation. There are many novels which have represented both these aspects of New India—the progress and the darkness—without overt castigation or celebration. This paper is concerned with such three Indian English novels-- Kunal Basu's *Sarojini's Mother* (2020), Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *Secret Daughter* (2010) and Jaishree Misra's *A Scandalous Secret* (2011)—all of which deal with the search for biological roots as major characters come to India in search of their parentage. The argument of this paper is that besides this thematic similarity all these novels expose the two faces of New India—both its light and darkness without any conscious attempt to moralize or castigate. This paper discusses how the search for real mothers turns into search for real India with all its success and failures but the conclusions of these novels put the emphasis on emotional enrichment and maturity rather than on mere fact-finding or exoticizing.*

Keywords: New India, postcolonial exotic, castigation, celebration

One of the diverse themes of the recent Indian English novels is the presentation of two Indias—one of the rich and the privileged and the other of the marginalized. This disparity has been visibly manifested in the marginalization in Indian society, especially in matters of caste and religion. The liberalization of Indian economy in 1991 has added other factors in the equation of that disparity. As Julie Rajan and Phukan observe, “A fact made increasingly clearer in the twenty-first century is that this economic upsurge, while improving some features of everyday life for all Indians, is widening the gap among its socio-economic classes—and in fact this fundamental, persistent inequality...” (8). Factors like social and economic mobility and rapid urbanization leading to the growth of urban marginalization have not failed to attract the attention of Indian English fiction. Indian English novelists’ attitude to and their treatment of the new capitalist economy have been twofold—one of lament and the other of celebration. Criticism of such novels also tends to differ from each other along two diverging lines of postcolonial mourning and nostalgia and post-liberalization glorification of aspiration and achievement. Ulka Anjaria (2019) explains that the depiction of both the deprivation and the aspiration caused by the new capitalist economy are to be taken and interpreted together as constituting what she calls the “contemporary” about Indian English novel of the new millennium. As Lisa Lau puts it:

“With increased global literary interest in Dark India—the defiant retort to India Shining—with literary attention on the underbelly of urban India, the slums, the poverty, the destitution, the marginalization, the crime and corruption, and in fact the many social inequalities, exploitations, and corruptions taking

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place on a daily basis, there has been a corresponding increase in social realism fiction depicting poverty, servitude, and urban marginalization.” (Lau 9)

Kunal Basu, Shilpi Somaya Gowda and Jaishree Misra are three of the prominent voices in contemporary Indian English fiction. Kunal Basu’s *Sarojini’s Mother* (2020), Shilpi Somaya Gowda’s *Secret Daughter* (2010) and Jaishree Misra’s *A Scandalous Secret* (2011) all deal with the search for biological roots as major characters come to India in search of their parentage. The argument of this paper is that besides this thematic similarity all these novels expose the two faces of New India—both its light and darkness. The search for mothers can thus be interpreted as the search for real India with all its success and failures.

In *Sarojini’s Mother* (2020) Kunal Basu captures almost all the aspects of a new city in India just as the views of the “highs and lows of the city in one go” are available from tram number 36 that Saz and Elvis board (Basu 14). The two faces of urban lives are presented in this novel chiefly through references to two women who claim their motherhood over Saz—one of them is Jamuna who hails from the slums and the other one is rich and sophisticated Urvashi. In Gowda’s *Secret Daughter* one can find detailed depiction of two Indias as major characters travel from village to Bombay and from California to Bombay. In *A Scandalous Secret* Sonya Shaw is determined to find and face her mother who gave her away for adoption and therefore comes to India with her friend.

In *Sarojini’s Mother* Saz Campbell comes to India with the hope to find her biological mother after the death of Lucy, a British single woman who had adopted her from India twenty-seven years ago during the Hindu-Muslim riot. The search brings her to the world of darkness and crime as the orphanage that Saz visits with Elvis near the southern crematorium has Mr and Mrs Shukla as owners who once dealt “with children in the same way as buying and selling vegetables” (24). From the Shuklas Saz learns that a woman named Jamuna had once visited the orphanage in search of her lost girl. With Jamuna the story treads into the world of slum which is frequented by researchers “to find stories for bestsellers and data for their theses” (32). When Raju and Elvis visit the slum once more to find Saz who disappears with Jamuna, a widow speaks out the truth about the marginalization of the slum: “No one comes to the slum unless they have a reason to. They come to ask for votes, to offer dirty work that they wouldn’t do themselves. Some come to take our children and sell them to rich people” (94). The exploitation of the lives of the slum is many-folded. The novel minutely depicts the distress and struggles of Jamuna whose one son Kallu is a hardened criminal and the other son Manu is disabled. Her husband is imprisoned in Bhagalpur jail for armed robbery. When Saz first visits Jamuna the latter frankly shares her daily struggles and problems with her. She earns her livelihood by selling embroidered pieces like napkins to women’s cooperative. In spite of immense hardships Jamuna has lived her life in her own way so much so that Saz later realizes that Jamuna is very much like her foster mother Lucy, “free-spirited, a hippie inside” (108). Going against her parents Jamuna had ran away with Bhanu Majhi and refused staunchly to follow the community customs and religious rituals. She answers the government injustices in her own way: “And she hooks her electricity from an overhead pole, because she doesn’t want to give money to the government that has done nothing to help her” (108).

In Gowda’s novel the portrayal of the dark side of India, especially the distress of the Bombay slums is executed in two different ways—first by the direct experience of Jasu and Kavita and secondly by the observers’ gaze of both Somer and Asha. When Kavita first comes to Bombay with Rupa she is disturbed by its noises and crowds. When Somer first comes to Bombay she

is nauseated by the city's crowd and scent. On her way to Krishnan's home, she is unsettled by the sight of beggars on the street and of hungry women with emaciated child on her lap. When Asha travels in the ambassador in her first visit to India, she is also taken aback by the other India. Not only that, whenever she goes out with Dadima, she is shocked by the prevalence of destitution and squalor outside. She tries to avoid eye contact with people who were openly defecating along the seawall and naked children who were begging. When Kavita and Jasu arrive at Dharavi, they are shocked to discover row of shelters made of garbage with the river of raw sewage running nearby. What Bombay is to Asha and Somer in the beginning, Dharavi is to Kavita as she feels nauseated. Like Kunal Basu's novel, words like 'slum' and 'basti' are frequently used in Gowda's novel and they embody sheer hopelessness for Kavita. Diseases like typhoid break out from dirty water. Kavita discovers that people here fight for basic amenities of life "like animals" (Gowda 109).

In the very beginning of *A Scandalous Secret* there is detailed description of the mansion and the lavish lifestyle of Neha and Sharat in Delhi. Even while describing their upper-class world of parties, meetings and enjoyments the narrative does not miss to mention that such lives are very 'difficult' without "favours and preferential treatment" which ensure "magical opening of doors" (Misra 6). These are some of the loopholes of the New India. When Sonya broods over the effects of the letter that she sent for her biological mother Neha she recalls what her Indian friend Priyal had told her about the poor condition of Indian postal system. As soon as Sonya and her friend Estella pass the customs, she is "overwhelmed by the surging crowd" (118). When Sonya was travelling to Mahajan homestay in Delhi she is shocked to see a beggar-woman with a "scrawny baby" tapping on the window of their car. Both Sonya and Estella are saddened and confused "at the sight of such abject poverty" (113). Sonya continues to think about her failure to give anything to the beggar and she compares her lot with that of the beggar woman realizing "how fortunate she was" (113). She feels pity for the poor citizens of "a poor country" who are "so much more unfortunate than her" (113). While visiting Red Fort, Sonya is again "saddened" to think about the poor people of India tortured by the British: "Quite unexpectedly, Sonya felt very close to the soil she was standing on and touched to tears by the suffering of its people" (205). Even after Keshav's deceit Sonya feels considerate towards him by thinking about the predicament of one "who is desperately poor and lacking opportunities..." (331). Such humanitarian perspective, however, cannot hide the unfortunate state of the poor in India. And Sonya's attachment with Keshav makes her think of India as an "exotic land" which is always able "to baffle and confound" as she recalls the story of *A Passage to India* (220). While making her first visit to Prithviraj Road, Sonya encounters the "choked and potholed streets", excessive noise and 'stench'— "a most unpalatable mix of diesel and petrol and smoke and rubber" (124). Later when they travel to Old Delhi in Keshav's car, Sonya is once more disturbed by the smell generated by "musty clothes and unwashed bodies" and the "open drains" (203). At the Mahajan homestay Sonya is unable to sleep properly due to unfamiliar and disturbing sounds.

In her study Ulka Anjaria notes that in contemporary Indian novels in English the resistant voices to exploitation caused by capitalist economy are more often ambiguous and small-scale rather than politically prominent, thus falling short of the expectation of the yardsticks of postcolonial criticism. But she opines that a deeper reading of these novels can unveil stories of little resistance coming out of everyday and the commonplace. Basu is able to avoid the trap of the expected exotica of marginality by foregrounding both the struggles and deprivation and the dreams and aspiration of the marginalized, thereby taking into

consideration both the dimensions of neoliberal economy. The appearance of Saz kindles Jamuna's dream of a better living: "We can now take him to a proper doctor, pay for his fees, not beg like a beggar... We can give him chicken to eat every day. And buffalo milk" (Basu 57). When Jamuna and Saz disappear for a while during their visit to Bhagalpur jail Kallu tells Elvis his mother's innate ambition: "My mother says everyone has a house and a car over there. Saz too. She has a machine that can wash dishes by itself. Everyone can eat meat. You can drink water from a tap. Boys and girls go to school together..." (88). In Misra's novel Sonya is often taken aback by the immense wealth of the Chaturvedi household: "...she couldn't help imagining what life would have been like for her had she not been given up: the wealth and the luxury, the servants waiting hand and foot on her, the cavalcade of fancy cars..." (Misra 157).

The stories of little resistance are ample in Gowda's *Secret Daughter* also. After the loss of her first girl child Kavita, overcoming her usual surrender of will to Jasu revolts in her own way by mixing extra chilli in his food. When she gives birth to her second girl she vehemently resists Jasu's attempt to take her away from her. After her visit to the orphanage she openly displays her "resentment and distrust for her husband" (Gowda 40). She realizes that she is successful to make Jasu aware of "the depth of her strength" in her own way (40). The novel depicts how the lives of these poor people are shaped and destroyed by the dream of better life if not for themselves at least for the next generations.

Kunal Basu's novels often make his characters as well as readers come face to face with the so-called 'ugly' or tabooed words like 'hijra' in *Kalkatta* or 'slum' in the present novel and then go on to strip such word of their normalized mechanism of exclusion. Elvis reiterates the usual attitude of hostility towards and distaste of slum: "Slum is an ugly word. It makes you think of other ugly words. Like dark, dirty, dingy, dangerous. Like an invisible island, it doesn't exist on the map. My mother taught me to avoid walking through a nearby slum on my way to school and avoid playing with slum boys; to wash my hands thoroughly if the football we were kicking should bounce its way into the slum" (Basu 53). It is because of a sense of this naturalized ugliness of slum that the food at Jamuna's house makes Elvis worry about health. Because of this same snobbery it is easy for Monty and Urvasi to accuse the poor people like Jamuna of fraud. Monty even asks Elvis to make an out-of-court settlement by paying Jamuna money: "She will agree, you'll see. Poor people need money; it's all that they want. That's the basic truth" (85). Later on, we find that Jamuna is easily imprisoned on the charge of stealing the box of alms from a temple though everyone knows that Jamuna is innocent and that the priest has been bribed. Jamuna later decides to sacrifice her claim over Saz as she realizes that she is too weak to fight Urvasi because the latter is "rich and powerful" (153). She even plans to make Manu a Christian and hand him over to the missionaries: "Who cares about the religion of a poor man? Let him live with some dignity" (153). When Kallu finds that his mother and Saz are missing, he cannot file a report to the police because he knows that police will hold him culprit: "No one believes poor people", Kallu sighed, "that's the truth" (88). The suffering of the helpless and hapless people is revealed again during Elvis' visit to the Bhagalpur prison where a person called Nasir who was arrested for ticketless travel, repeatedly tries to commit suicide as he is imprisoned for ten years without trial for his inability to pay lawyers.

Opposed to the world of slum Basu presents the clean face of the city through another woman Urvasi Gupta, a boutique owner, who, contrary to Jamuna's case, has herself looked for her

lost daughter and contacted Saz over the net. The world of Urvashi Gupta with all its sophistication and luxury stands in direct contrast to the one of Jamuna: “The roads smelt of lavender from perfumeries. Art galleries spurted cooling jets... Not a beggar in sight, it’d disappoint the poverty tourist. Private security guards kept a close watch, eyes darting like African cheetahs” (Basu 68). Elvis therefore thinks that Saz will naturally fit into Urvashi’s world of spa and Mercedes. The gulf between the two worlds is manifest prominently whenever they come into contact. For example, when Urvashi visits the community fair at the invitation of Saz, Urvashi complains about the narrow lanes and is keen to avoid the dirty drains. During the celebration of birthday party of Saz at Governor’s Club both Monty and Urvashi are unable to accept the presence of Jamuna’s disabled son Manu. Interestingly enough, there is no mercy at this high-class party for the middle-class Elvis who distastes the ugliness of slum and envies the lavishness of Urvashi’s world. Elvis is here treated as an outsider as Monty is worried about his dress: “True to high-class etiquette, the opening piece was all about me, the outsider” (82).

In contrast with Basu’s novel, Gowda’s *Secret Daughter* delineates the process of the growth of slums like Dharavi that stands as embodiment of expectations and disillusionment. Agriculture in the village is not sufficient to provide for growing families and so persons like Jasu and Kavita leave Dahanu and come to Bombay for better opportunities: “Bombay beckons to him like a glittering jewel, promising a better life for them, and particularly for their son” (Gowda 90). Meena later explains to Asha that Mumbai “draws people like a magnet” (187). About this impact of Mumbai on common lives Priyamvada Gopal observes, “In its capacity as an industrial, financial, and commercial centre, it has attracted waves of largely rural migrants from elsewhere in the subcontinent, escaping rural poverty and looking for work...” (117). However, the stories of this movement to the city in this novel end in disillusionment. Jasu, looking at the newly arrived workers in Mumbai, finds echo of his own life: “They have all come here, as he did, with the expectation this city would bring riches and abundance, but they have found something else entirely” (Gowda 231). Much later Kavita ponders over the justness of their decision to leave the village as Vijay is finally lost to them.

The simultaneous existence of two Indias is manifested in Asha’s realization of the industrial excellence of Mumbai on the one hand, and her fearful knowledge of bride-burning and untouchability in India, the story of the success of steel-industry tycoon on the one hand and that of corruption and bribery on the other. Meena Devi, a renowned field reporter represents India to Asha as a bundle of contradictions, caught up between extremes of good and evil, rich and poor: “Some people like to demonize India for her weaknesses, others only glorify her strengths. The truth, as always, lies somewhere in between” (Gowda 186). When Asha walks on the Bombay pavement she is once again disturbed by the marks of insecurity, poverty and squalor everywhere. Meena brings her to Dharavi to discover real Mumbai. Meena categorically points out that the space and luxury of the home of Asha’s father are in contrast with the crime and filth of Dharavi’s world. The novel portrays in detail the lavish wedding of a girl of the Rajaj family that owns almost all the motor vehicles in India. Through Asha the narrative exposes the hypocrisy of the industrialists as Manjula Aunty talks about the pollution of Mumbai in spite of knowing it well that the vehicles of their factories are one of the major causes. This dichotomy between opulence and distress is evident later when Krishnan visits India to meet his daughter and family. He is surprised at the developments of American companies throughout the city but pained to notice the drawbacks of this

“modernization” as “the familiar sight of the seashore” was “obscured by the haze of pollution” (248).

In Kunal Basu’s novel the city of crimes and violence threatens everybody. Rocks are thrown at the windows of Elvis’ house at night and an attack and snatching happen to Elvis’ mother in broad daylight. Elvis is openly attacked by Kallu in the railway shed. The connection of crime is not only with seasoned criminal like Kallu but also with people like Monty as confirmed by DC Jasprit Singh. Saz falls an easy prey to Bobby, a dealer of heroin at Ghalib Bar. The two different sides of the city are contrasted more when the issue of DNA matching comes up to clarify the doubt and debate of motherhood among Jamuna and Urvashi. The test brings to light the difference between private and government hospital. Elvis recalls his earlier experience of visiting a government hospital where doctors frequently are on strike. When Elvis and his companions stay at the Calcutta General to guard the hematology department they witness the sad spectacle of the patients: “Without a night-shift doctor or nurse in sight, the corridors came alive with curses. Everyone was busy sharing stories about callous doctors, rotten medicines, botched operations and rats stealing patients’ rations” (Basu 192). Vastly different from this is Dr Lobo’s private clinic with its cleanliness and luxury: “A far cry from the dingy cubicles of Calcutta General, it was a full-fledged suite with luxurious amenities” (221). Dr Lobo describes government hospital as a “zoo” (176). Elvis, however, knows that Dr Lobo is a doctor of the rich: “Like all successful doctors, Dr Lobo didn’t bother with government hospitals. His rich patients sidestepped the zoo to arrive at a spa” (176).

The underworld activities of the city like Mumbai are mentioned in Gowda’s novel as matters of serious threat to otherwise peaceful lives. Bhaya’s husband informs Kavita and Jasu that the gang of Chandi Bajan are actively operating throughout Mumbai and running the drug trade. Vijay, the only son of Jasu and Kavita, upon whom they built an absolute trust and expectations, is associated with this gang and arrested by police also. Police brutalities in Dharavi are also witnessed by Jasu and Kavita. Somer and Krishnan, on the other hand, experience the stings of Indian bureaucratic machinery at the adoption office that unnecessarily delays the proceedings. The darkness of New India is prominently manifested in the plight of Indian women. As Jasu reminds Kavita, girls are considered to be “burden” and “drain” on family (Gowda 15-16). Quite unexpectedly Asha comes to know about the frequent incidents of bride-burning and forced crippling of beggars. Later she comes across articles covering the rapid decline in the number of girls in India caused by the easy availability of ultrasound machines used for sex-selective abortions. In fact, Kavita and Jasu utilize this in their village to be sure of the sex of their child.

In *A Scandalous Secret* Sonya is seriously uncomfortable with the stench, waste and poverty on her way to Prithviraj Road. She “felt sicker and sicker” as she moved on (Misra 124). But the moment she arrives at Prithviraj Road, she realizes that she has dropped into a different world altogether. In a few hours she witnesses the pit of distress and acme of riches of New India. Quite early in his stay in India Sonya becomes aware of the “bubbles in which the wealthy in India lived...” and the “disparity” between the rich and the poor (239). She understands it well that the “natural order of things” here is an “us-and-them” equation (240). Her visit to the home of Keshav’s friend Gopal makes us take a close look at the sheer distress of poverty-stricken people in contrast with the opulence and grandeur of the Chaturvedi household. While sitting at the Coffee Bean Café Sonya tries to think what might be the thoughts of the large number of poor people in India about their experience of being

surrounded by so much wealth. She has already discussed this with Keshav who castigated the government's support for the rich at the expense of the poor.

Kunal Basu in *Sarajini's Mother* presents the twin facets of the city with all its glamour and gloom. There is no conscious effort on the part of the novelist to resolve the conflict or dilemma. It is true that Jamuna and Urvashi wrestle with each other for their claim of motherhood. Jasprit Singh, the DC and Monty compete over the issue of being the heir to Urvashi's vast property. Kallu tries his best to retain Saz as a golden goose. But the conflict between the world of deprivation and distress and the one of aspiration and wealth is often made volatile. For example, Elvis's group includes Suleiman the bookie, JJ who was once in jail and Ladly, an ex-criminal. The central conflict in the novel ends with one of the mothers consoling and comforting the other: "...Jamuna stroked Urvashi's cheeks, temple and chin in one fluid motion. She cradled her firmly in both arms and kissed her forehead" (Basu 222). The conflicting stories of Jamuna's life at the slum and Urvashi's high-class decorum are ultimately foreshadowed by the humanitarian hug of two competing mothers. In *Secret Daughter* also Gowda paints both the light and darkness of contemporary India without any conscious attempt to criticize or condemn. The life and work in the city eventually improve the economic condition of Jasu and Kavita, but take away the future of their only son Vijay. The competing anxiety of mothers over daughters are evident in *Secret Daughter* also. Somer cannot allow Asha to visit India due to her persistent anxiety of losing her adopted daughter. Even after the arrival of Asha in her life she feels the pangs of the loss of her miscarriages just as Kavita is never able to get over the traumatic memory of losing her daughter Usha. Such anxiety is dissolved in the most human way possible as we find that Kavita prays for her lost daughter and feels happy at the news of her prosperous life post-adoption. Both Somer and Asha are matured through the novel so that in the end they can also embrace one another far more positively. In *A Scandalous Secret* both Neha and Sonya are mature in the end. Sonya's experience in India enables her to "identify with Neha's predicament": "Sonya had learnt a lot in these past few days, not least that no one had the right to blame anyone else for the circumstances of their own life" (342). Sonya becomes aware of her maturity ("she felt years older") and learning "useful lessons" in India (332). Neha too is able to face the dramatic and seemingly traumatic revelation of her secret with immense maturity.

Though the basic theme of the three novels is the search for biological mother, the stories end not merely with the celebration of results. In Basu's novel, Elvis alias Chiru Sen repeatedly asserts the search for conclusion. When Saz accidentally departs, he feels sorry that Saz's story ends "without a proper ending and a clear result" (Basu 92). When Saz decides to leave towards the end of the novel Elvis cannot accept the fact that she can leave without solving the "puzzle" or reaching a definite "conclusion" (229). In the end Elvis' own words come to be true that for Indians life is "more philosophy than algebra" as it helps "to keep on thinking forever without coming to a conclusion" (17). Throughout the novel the idea of interest recurs. Initially when Elvis warns Saz not to believe Jamuna completely, he says that Jamuna may be driven by self-interest. His mother repeatedly told him that his dead father was a failure due to his lack of self-interest. Monty explains to Elvis that everybody is guided by self-interest: "It's the norm that drives behavior, from going to the gym to committing murder" (Basu 155). The tug-of-war of self-interest evaporates at multiple points in the novel, like when Jamuna and Urvashi meet each other or when Chiru is finally comforted by her mother with the assurance that Saz promised her to come back. Same is the case with Gowda's novel. Asha comes to India to know about her real parents but leaves without finally meeting them.

In Misra's novel Sonya and her biological mother Neha are reconciled and even meet later but the novel ends with Neha's suppression of another secret—the identity of Sonya's biological father. Thus, in all these novels the search factor recedes in the background and what comes out prominently is varied perspectives about the New India where the mothers live and the daughters arrive and depart.

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