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Questioning the Problematic Interactions between Parenting and Acculturation in Select South Asian Diasporic Novels

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Abstract: Parenting, in diasporic situation, has always been problematic yet engaging inasmuch as it requires acculturative skills from parents primarily on the one hand and it engages parents in challenging encounters posited by acculturation on the other hand. This article is intended to intervene into the contentious interactions between parenting and acculturation as reflected in Roma Tearne's *Bone China* and Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *The Secret Daughter*, with particular reference to theoretical constructions germane to both parenting and acculturation so as to put forward that parenting is contingent upon one's degree of acculturation in diasporic condition.

Key Words: Parenting; Acculturation; Adaptation; Diaspora.

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Parenting has always been a coveted yet challenging responsibility that couples of diverse time and space, across the globe, wish to take up to make much of their post-nuptial engagements. Unlike other telling professional engagements, parenting turns out to be a unique one, for it requires unstinting and untiring efforts from parents who, in turn, usually receive no remuneration as such. Although parenting seems to be an exciting experience, it proves to be a tough one at praxis. The notion of parenting gets problematized when parents have to negotiate with all the odds and ends of parenting while dwelling in diaspora space. In other words, the adverse impacts on parenting are supposed to be determined by the degree to which parents strive to get acculturated to diaspora space. Thus, this term paper is intended to get into the problematic interactions between parenting and acculturation as reflected in Roma Tearne's *Bone China* and Shilpi Somaya Gowda's *The Secret Daughter* in order to explore how easy or difficult it is for parents to parent their children while trying to come to terms with acculturation in diaspora space.



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II

This segment is planned to provide a relevant and succinct overview of the problematic interactions between parenting and acculturation with particular reference to the salient dimensions of Diaspora. In her phenomenal work *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities*, Avtar Brah has pertinently observed: "The word [diaspora] derives from the Greek —dia, 'through', and speirein, 'to scatter'. According to Webster's Dictionary in the United States, diaspora refers to a 'dispersion from' (178). Whereas the notion of acculturation has only been implicated in the above quoted observation of Brah in that being dispersed and displaced from the putative "home", people have to cross over border of a nation-state to step in another nation-state and this journey is culminated, for the time being, through their resettlements in the new found land, getting over the problems of acculturation; much before Brah, John W. Berry is thought to be one of the earliest critics who had initiated to conceptualize acculturation in foreign land following the increasing rate of migration across the world in 1990s. In his seminal essay entitled "Acculturation and Adaptation in a New Society", following Redfield et al., Berry observed:

Acculturation has been defined as cultural change that results from continuous, first hand contact between two distinct cultural groups It is important to note that while changes to both groups are implied in the definition, most changes in fact occur in the non-dominant (migrating) group as a result of influence from the dominant (society of settlement). (70-71) It is quite clear from the observation that acculturation is an interaction between two disparate cultural groups and the culture of the migrating group has to stay subservient to the culture of dominating group in the foreign land. In the same essay, Berry has laid stress on adaptive skills of migrants and has raised the importance to hone theses skills to get past of "behavioral shifts" and "acculturative stress". Berry has further worked out the tenets of acculturation in his subsequent essays. For instance, In "Acculturation: A Conceptual Overview", Berry has modified his

On the other side, Judit Arends-Tóth and Fons J. R. Van de Vijver in the essay entitled "Issues in the Conceptualization and Assessment of Acculturation" has tried to map out varied theoretical approaches to acculturation and while doing so, they have underscored: "In the social-cognition approach to acculturation, . . . cognitive elements such as expectations, attitudes toward

understanding of acculturation.



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members of the new culture, cultural identity, perception, attributions, and changes in values as part of the acculturation process have been investigated . . ." (34-35). It implies that several factors are responsible along with one's adaptability in acculturation. They hold that contextual specificities need to be taken into consideration while an individual or a diasporic group tries to get acculturated to the culture of the foreign land. Acculturation is thus consequent upon either an individual's or a community's willingness to come to terms with the dominant cultural practices. They have underscored the telling importance of "acculturation conditions".

Opposed to the theoretical insights of Tóth et.al, Jean S. Phinney in the essay— "Acculturation is an Independent Variable: Approaches to Studying Acculturation as a Complex Process" argues that the notion of acculturation can hardly be reduced to mere "acculturation conditions" inasmuch as:

Acculturation is a complex process involving multiple changes that take place following contact among individuals and groups from differing cultural backgrounds. It involves changes in many areas, including attitudes, feelings, beliefs, and behaviors. Like acculturation, human development is a multifaceted process involving many changes that take place over time. For both acculturation and development, changes occur at the individual and group levels and are influenced by many individual and contextual factors and their interactions. (79)

Acculturation is, unquestionably, a historically loaded term and has bearings on South Asian context. South Asian migrants are quite used to acculturation and have been trying to cope up with it physically, socio-culturally, mentally and politically.

On the other hand, as far as parenting is concerned, several theoretical configurations have been constructed over a long period of time to address the problematic dimensions of it. One may ask, in this regard, what is it that makes parenting so intriguing a profession? Simply speaking, parenting connotes a *sui generis* engagement between parents and children over a long period of time, and most interestingly, this sort of engagement entails intricacy in parent-child relationship. It is usually supposed that being parents to a child, a couple is to take full care of their child as much as they can, irrespective of all sorts of constraint. Unfortunately, at praxis, parents encounter a number of problems that put their ethically solidarity at jeopardy so far parenting is concerned. In



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www.daathvoyagejournal.com *Vol.3, No.1, March, 2018* an interesting article entitled "The Ethics of Parenting", Diana Baumrind and Ross A. Thompson have foregrounded the notion of ethical parenting and have put it in this way:

Ethical parenting above all is responsible caregiving, requiring of parents enduring investment and commitment throughout their children's long period of dependency. . . . The ethics of parenting begins, therefore, with the assumption of responsibility for children. (3)

It implies that parenting requires ethical sensibility from parents who are supposed to fulfill certain criteria to bring up their child keeping their individual wishes at bay. But, in reality, parents fail to conform to the requirements of ethical parenting as it has been prescriptively suggested in the above citation. Therefore, the notion of ethical parenting can be called into question following the pertinent observation made by Keith Crnic in the essay— "Everyday Stresses and Parenting": "Stress has long played an integral role in understanding parenting processes and families in general" (243). The issue of stress further problematizes the concept of parenting thereby leading researchers to mull over the problematic attachment between parents and children. In this regard, one may resort to the attachment theory by John Bowlby to explain the psychological association between parents and child. Once again, the notion of parenting can be made more problematic than ever before by arguing that it is far more difficult job to parent child in diaspora space than that of at the 'home' simply because parents can hardly dodge problems pertaining to acculturation. John W. Berry is one of the few critics, towards the turn of the previous century, who attempted to underscore the problematic nexus between acculturation and immigration in the following essay named as "Immigration, Acculturation, and Adaptation". In the same essay, Berry has tried to ease out "acculturative stress" of immigrants by suggesting them to follow certain strategies³ to combat acculturation. The insights of Berry have later been worked out by Marc H. Bornstein and Linda R. Cote while trying to trace out the impacts of acculturation on parenting. In the essay— "Parenting Cognitions and Practices in the Acculturative Process"— both of them have come up with the notion of "parenting cognition" which is symptomatic of some functions that parents are supposed to be familiar with before to take on acculturation.

Marc H. Bornstein has consolidated his stand in another seminal article entitled "Cultural Approaches to Parenting" and has firmly asserted that impacts of culture on parenting cannot be avoided and therefore, should not be disparaged. The role of culture in shaping parenting cognitions



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among parents is immense and thus one's affiliation to certain culture makes it harder for him/her to strike a balance between two cultures on a foreign land. Bornstein seems to have rightly argued: "Culture helps to construct parents and parenting, and culture is maintained and transmitted by influencing parental cognitions that in turn are thought to shape parenting practices" (213). Yet, one can hardly deny that it is quite challenging job for parents at praxis to fit into a foreign culture, leaving their own cultural affiliations behind. This situation gets aggravated when the issue of identity, race, food, dress, history, to name only a few, come into play in this regard. Certain gaps in acculturation process account for the misery and wretchedness that parents experience. This argument can be affirmed by referring to Dina Birman's essay "Measurement of the "Acculturation Gap" in Immigrant Families and Implications for Parent–Child Relationships" straightway. Birman, too, observed: ". . . the acculturation gap is seen as extending across a variety of life domains and aspects of parent—child relationships" (113). In addition to it, Birman has given an interesting perspective to study the interaction between acculturation and parenting:

Acculturation is a developmental process, as children and adults acculturate to a new culture and retain affiliation with the culture of origin at different rates (Birman & Trickett, 2001). As a result, acculturation gaps arise between parents and children, and these gaps are thought to be potentially problematic for parent—child relationships. (113)

Acculturation is thus equated to a developmental process and any lapse in this developmental process entails acculturation gap which triggers sharp blows at parenting. One may here think of drawing David L Sam's view on acculturation as it has been propounded in "Adaptation of Children and Adolescents With Immigrant Background: Acculturation or Development?", as a part of developmental process to reinforce the Birman's postulation: "Whereas acculturation can primarily be conceived of as a learning phenomenon, development entails both learning and maturation. This means that some changes in individuals attributed to acculturation may in reality be developmental changes" (99). The interaction between acculturation and parenting becomes more problematic in the case of single parenting inasmuch as a single parent has to negotiate with a number of socio-cultural restrictions while rearing child. Sometimes, it is pejoratively thought that a child born and brought up by a single parent, is likely to give in crimes but this supposition does not



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seem to be a reasonable argument at praxis. For instance, Arlene Skolnick and Stacey Rosencranz in the essay "The Harmful Effects of Single-Parent Families Are Exaggerated" have critiqued and refuted the earlier proposition and argued that single parents cannot be accused of the depravity of their grown up children in the society as far as acculturation is concerned: "Instead of attacking the values of single mothers, society should focus on protecting children in families of all sorts from harmful social and economic conditions" (62). In fact, foster parents, too, have to strive to bring up their children overcoming varied hindrances germane to acculturation. The succinct theoretical discussion on problematic interactions between acculturation and parenting can be wrapped up, for the time being, by making an argument that just like acculturation, parenthood is not a fixed position, rather, it can be situated in between being and becoming, and thus, the overlapping trajectories between acculturation and parenting are bound to be problematic as well as inviting. The thrust argument of this segment is therefore explicit: parenting is, to a large extent, contingent upon one's degree of acculturation to the culture of a nation-state and how both the parents and children respond to their immediate cultural transformations, taking identity politics into account.

Ш

This segment is designed to provide a succinct sketch of both the novels—Roma Tearne's Bone China and Shilpi Somaya Gowra's The Secret Daughter—thereby intending to facilitate readers to come to terms with the bottom lines of both the tales. Roma Tearne's Bone China is out and out a family saga that is set against the dual backdrop of colonial regime and Sri Lankan Civil War. The Protagonist of the novel is Grace de Silva who is born and brought up in Britain and she has married to Aloysius de Silva who works in British Civil Service when the story begins. Grace's parents belong to Sri Lanka and had settled down in Britain much before Grace is born. As the tale progresses, Aloysius informs Grace that British military needs to employ their sprawling house for military purposes while waging a war against a neighbouring nation, which explains why, all of them decide to leave for Sri Lanka where Aloysius is appointed to take stock of colonial governance. All the five children of Grace and Aloysius find it hard to come to terms with the cultural milieu in Sri Lanka along with their parents. Then a series of interconnected incidents take



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place in this family and finally the novel comes to an end with intense desire of the granddaughter of Grace to return to the land of origin.

On the other hand, Shilpi Somaya Gowra's *The Secret Daughter* explores various problems of parenting faced by foster parents in USA, which is conspicuously pitted against the normative parenting practice in Indian context with special reference to wretched conditions of an orphanage located in Mumbai. The tale simultaneously emphasizes two disparate parenting patterns in different contexts. The story runs as: Krishnan and Somer, a USA couple, decides to come in India to adopt a child when doctor reveals that Somer cannot be pregnant because of some of her gynecological problems. Having landed down in India, they visit an orphanage in Mumbai and adopt a baby girl. After that, they go back to USA and start parenting their adopted daughter Asha. But, when Asha comes to know that she has been adopted, it creates a rift between Asha and them. Neither Asha nor her foster parents can become closer to each other while Asha's stay in USA. They fail to help her get used to the culture of USA in spite of making some serious efforts. Asha then avails a fellowship and takes a decision to visit India where she is actually born to examine the poignant sufferings of orphans in India. Gowra occasionally underscores the problems of acculturation experienced by both Asha and her foster mother who is not a native of Indian. The story is finally brought to a close with the reunion among Asha, her actual parents and her foster parents. The tale, in essence, encapsulates how the issue of acculturation turns out to be an almost irrevocable and invincible reality which does neither let Asha be closer to her foster mother nor the other way round.

IV

This segment is intended to intervene into the problematic yet intriguing interactions between parenting and acculturation as represented in the select novels thereby trying to understand how and to what extent acculturation impacts on parenting. Textual references are planned to be drawn from both the texts simultaneously here in terms of the degree of this term paper's engagement with the problematic interactions between acculturation and parenting. The notion of "home" is unequivocally a contentious issue in Diaspora Studies. The fluid notion of "home" further problematizes one's individual identity because identity is usually determined in terms of



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one's association with a particular culture that shapes up his conception of "home", thereby leading us to take into consideration the plural signification of identity. This conflict among home, identity and culture has been brilliantly portrayed in both the novels in consonance with the intricacies of parenting. For instance, in *Bone China*, Grace and her husband, at first, take some time to get used to Sri Lankan cultural ambience because of their sheer inability to stay indifferent to the cultural baggage that they are carrying. It becomes all the more difficult for Grace to get used to the culture of Sri Lanka when she finds lacuna between her expectations and experiences:

Aloysius's news had not come as a surprise. Grace had always known that one day they would have to leave the valley where she had been born In Colombo, she would take charge of her life; manage things herself In Colombo, things will be different, she told herself firmly. When the war was over they would come back. To the house at any rate. Of that she was certain In this way the de Silva family, cast out from the cradle where they had lived for so long, moved to Colombo August was a dangerous month, when heat, reaching unbearable proportions, created an oasis of stillness. Every flutter, every breeze, vanished, leaving an eerie calm She poured a glass of icy water from the fridge, gasping as she drank The heat in Colombo was intolerable. She missed the cool greenness of the hill station where she had been a governess She missed the order and calm of the English children she had taught. (Tearne 15-21)

Acculturation thus seems to Grace a terrible and invincible reality which slowly but surely impacts on her parenting. For instance, Grace starts to pay unequal heed to the problems of all her children. When Jocob, one of her sons, alleges Thornton for indulging in music, Grace readily dismisses his allegation and gives him a clean chit. Being a parent, Grace is quite aware of that she has certain responsibility to her children but she fails to give ethically correct parenting to them following her crumbling marriage and failure to adjust herself to the new culture. For instance, Grace shows unusual inclination to her daughters and consciously or unconsciously starts to keep distance between her sons and herself. For instance, while engaging a fling with Vijay, a Sri Lankan national, being tired of her unhappy conjugal relationship with Aloysius, Grace conceals the fact that she is the mother of three sons along two daughters: "I have two daughters', she had told



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Vijay" (Tearne 23). On the other hand, Aloysius has absolutely been an uncaring and irresponsible parent to his children.

In *The Secret Daughter*, Gowra explores two distinct parenting models practiced in different time and space. When Somer, the would-be mother of Asha, comes in India to adopt a child officially, she stands dumbfounded, as it were, experiencing the cultural gaps between India and USA:

On her first morning in Bombay, Somer wakes with an upset stomach. She rolls over to a different position, but it doesn't help. Damn. She tried to be careful at dinner last night with Krishnan's family, but clearly she couldn't handle the spicy food. That wasn't the only rhing that made her fee out of place. Everyone else ate with their fingers while she sheepishly asked for a fork. She could only understand part of the dinner conversation because Krishnan's relatives kept laspsing into Gujrati She was stranded, and Krishnan didn't bother to interpret for her. (14)

The cited excerpt conspicuously makes it quite clear that she has to work harder to get acculturated to Indian culture. Interestingly, she cannot be oblivious of her own cultural baggage while staying in India and exacerbates her misery when she goes to posit her 'experience' in India in contrast with her 'expectation'. The following dialogue between Krishnan and Somer can be drawn to substantiate that Somer strives harder to come to terms with Indian cultural ambience:

They kept us waiting an hour, that guy clearly hadn't even read our file, and then he barely even talks to me!" "That's because you're—". "I'm what?" she snaps at him. "Look, things work differently here. I know how to handle this, just trust me. You can't come here with your American ideas—".... (Gowra 62)

In fact, having adopted Usha, later renamed as Asha, Somer rushes back to USA and begins to parent her. The situation gets worsened when Somer comes to know that adoption merely resolves "childlessness, not infertility" (Gowra 99), Somer develops a sort of inhibition within herself to her adopted daughter. She starts to think, ". . . Asha's arrival into their lives brought many thing—love, joy, fulfillment— but it did not erase all the pain caused by the miscarriages, nor did it completely eliminates her desire for a biological child" (Gowra 100). Even the skin colour and the



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physical appearance of Asha do not correspond to that of her foster mother and thus gradually Asha starts to feel a lack of parental care from Somer conditioned by Somer's failure to safeguard Asha from racial discrimination: "One of Asha's thin brown legs is perched atop a pedal, while other barely touches the ground. Her black pony tail is peeking out from the back of her pale blue ladybug helmet. Somer looks at her daughter, who looks nothing like her daughter (Gowra 100). In fact, Asha has to bear with the bullies hurled at her by her American friends because she looks different: "God, Asha, you don't need eye makeup", one of the girls says "I know, I would kill for eyes like that. They are so exotic. Did you get them from your mom or your dad?" another asks . . ." (Gowra 133). In another occasion, Somer's subjective anguish and wrath for having failed to produce a baby biologically gets reflected through her admonition of Asha for her poor performance in Math and Chemistry. Rough and tough parenting of Somer leads Asha to call into question Somer's real intention behind parenting her: "Why don't you ever tell me about my real parents? You're scared they 'll love me more than you do" (Gowra 136). Somer's uncouth behavior to Asha is lashed out in the following terms by Asha herself:

And why don't you ever take me to India? Every other Indian kid I know goes all the time. What is it Dad— are you ashamed of me? I 'm not good enough for your family?" "I wish you never adopted me. Then I wouldn't be such a huge disappointment to you" I just don't feel like I really belong, to this family (Gowra 137-138).

So far, the interaction between parenting and acculturation is concerned; socio-economic issues cannot be disregarded. In *Bone China*, Tearne shows that it is because of financial constraints, Grace employs her male children to earn for the family: "Since leaving their old home, since he had turned sixteen. Jacob had been working for the Ceylon Tea Board" (Tearne 31). Though Vijay, Grace's illicit paramour, unveils the role of "history" while caressing her in one of their trysts, the sheer silence of Grace on the other end, in a way, upholds and attests to the fact that Grace has been undergoing through tremendous "acculturative stress" triggered by "history", which explains why, Grace's parenting does not live up to the mark: "For all of us' he told Grace, are doomed in our different ways. Both rich and poor, it makes no difference. We care caught, in the wheel of history' (Tearne 45). The issue of Identity politics in the process of acculturation plays a crucial role and is



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thought to be vicious to parenting at large. It is Jacob who reminds Thronton, the father of Anna-Meeka, of the significance of identity in relation to parenting: "Don't have too many hopes, men. In this country ambition alone isn't enough. You need much more than ambition here'. Unable to say what was needed he paused. 'You have no idea what being a foreigner in Britain is like, men', he said . . ." (Tearne 196-197). The notion of intergenerational parenting has to be considered in this regard because *Bone China* exposes that the daughter in law of Grace, Savitha, finds it easier to mix up with the foreign culture and consequently, Savitha turns out to be a more capable and caring parent to her daughter Anna-Meeka. The well-adjustment of Anna-Meeka to the culture of London is suggestive of Savitha's good and positive parenting that she enjoys: Savitha, like a positive parent, advises: "It's too early to say what she'll become. We're from another culture; we have to settle first,' she told Thornton 'I want her to be happy', she said slowly. 'That's what's important 'I want her to sing again', she said abruptly . . ." (Tearne 198). Many such instances could be drawn from both the novels to substantiate that acculturation certainly impacts on parenting, and in some cases, it alters the usual course of parenting thereby inflicting pain on children.

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Finally, at the close of this discussion, it can be tenably put forward that one's degree of acculturation to the cultural heterogeneity of a particular land leaves impact on his/her parenting exercises. Thus, although parenting seems to be a trouble-free and unproblematic act, it proves certainly to be a difficult one for parents while negotiating acculturation.

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