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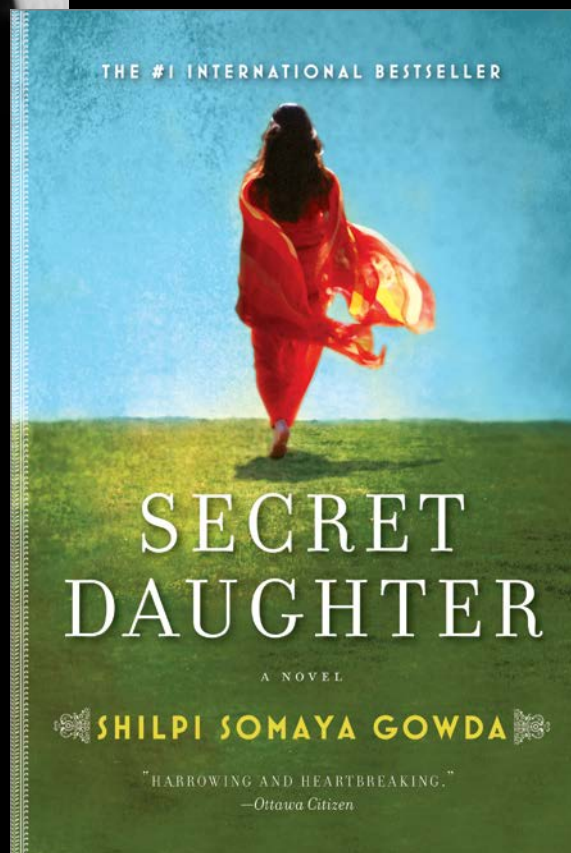


**BOOK CLUB**

**OCTOBER  
2015  
DISCUSSION  
GUIDE**

*Secret Daughter*  
by Shilpi Somaya  
Gowda

Recommended by  
guest reader  
**Heather O'Neill**



## Woman's world

Although women and girls make up more than 50 percent of the world's population, in far too many countries they are treated like second class citizens, denied the rights that men and boys in their societies enjoy.

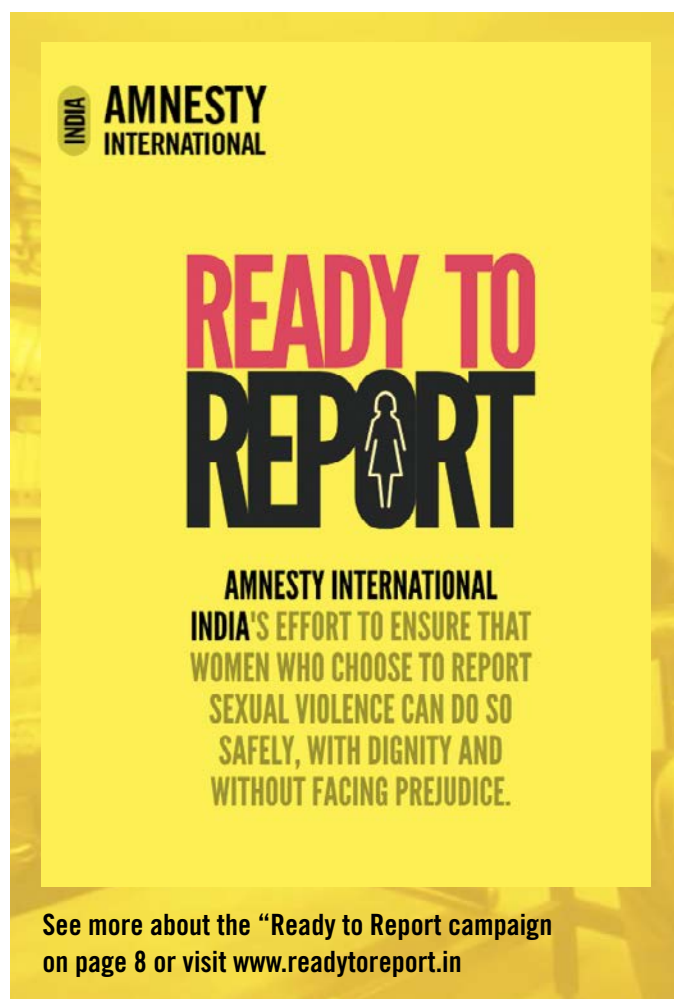
Discrimination, lack of education, violence (sexual and otherwise), control by male family members and forced marriages are common in many countries other than the two we are focusing on this month, India and Burkina Faso.

*Secret Daughter*, by Shilpi Somaya Gowda tells the heartbreaking stories of Kavita, who is forced to give up her baby girl for adoption, Somer, the childless woman who adopts the daughter, named Asha, and Asha's struggle to find her own identity in her complex past.

In keeping with our focus on women's rights (or the lack of them), this month's action hones in on the struggle of women in Burkina Faso to gain and retain control over their bodies through access to contraception, sexual education and healthcare. We hope you will take action on their behalf on page 9.

Thank you for being part of the Amnesty International Book Club. If you have any questions, suggestions or comments, we'd love to hear from you. Just send us an email at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).

– The Book Club Team



## About Amnesty International

Amnesty International is a global movement of more than three million supporters, members and activists in over 150 countries and territories who campaign to end grave abuses of human rights.

Our vision is for all people to enjoy all the rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights standards.

We are independent of any government, political ideology, economic interest or religion, and are funded mainly by our membership.

Until everyone can enjoy all of their rights, we will continue our efforts. We will not stop until everyone can live in dignity; until every person's voice can be heard; until no one is tortured or executed.

Our members are the cornerstone of these efforts. They take up human rights issues through letter-writing, online and off line campaigning, demonstrations, vigils and direct lobbying of those with power and influence.

Locally, nationally and globally, we join together to mobilize public pressure and show international solidarity.

Together, we make a difference.

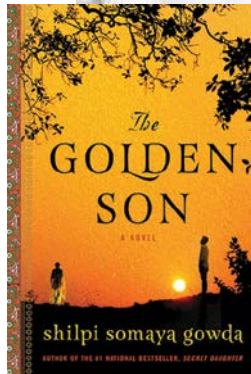
For more information about Amnesty International visit [www.amnesty.ca](http://www.amnesty.ca) or write to us at:

**Amnesty International, 312 Laurier Ave. E., Ottawa, ON K1N 1H9.**

About this month's author  
**Shilpi Somaya  
Gowda**



Shilpi Somaya Gowda was born and raised in Toronto to parents who migrated there from Mumbai. She holds an MBA from Stanford University, and a Bachelor's Degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In 1991, she spent a summer as a volunteer in an Indian orphanage, which seeded the idea for her first novel, *Secret Daughter*. A native of Canada, she has lived in New York, North Carolina, and Texas. She currently makes her home in California with her husband and children. Her second novel, *The Golden Son*, will be available on October 20, 2015.



About this month's  
guest reader  
**Heather O'Neill**



Heather O'Neill is the author of *The Girl Who Was Saturday Night*, which was a finalist for the 2014 Scotiabank Giller Prize. Her first novel, *Lullabies for Little Criminals*, won CBC's Canada Reads and the Paragraphe Hugh MacLennan Prize for Fiction. It was also a finalist for the Governor General's Award for Fiction and the Orange Prize. O'Neill is a regular contributor to CBC Books, CBC Radio, *This American Life*, *The New York Times Magazine*, *The Gazette*, *The Walrus*, and *The Globe and Mail*. She was born in Montreal, where she currently lives.



Her latest novel is *Daydreams of Angels*.



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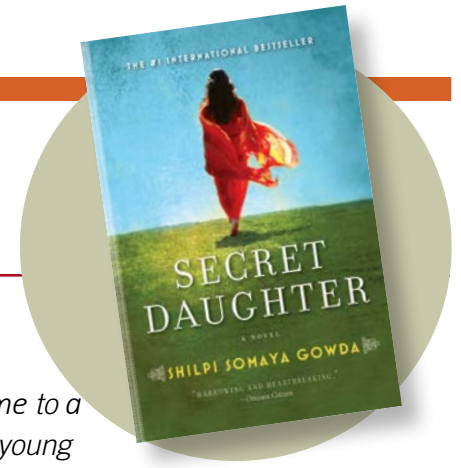
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## Heather O'Neill on *Secret Daughter*



*“Secret Daughter is a thought-provoking testament to how women survive despite the horrors and injustices of the sexist worlds in which they are born and live. The story begins when a mother clandestinely travels to an orphanage in Mumbai to save her tiny baby girl from being murdered. She is not allowed to be a parent to her own child. Both mother and daughter are refused the wonderful new roles that should have been their human right. The mother Kavita, refutes this lack of agency by a noble and dangerous act of tragic renunciation.*

*We also follow the story of a woman who is longing for a child. We witness her struggle with her own body’s refusal to acquiesce in her desire to be a mother. She goes to great lengths to find this wonderful tiny girl. She travels to Mumbai, a world that is alien and often threatening to her in order to find her child. She brings*

*baby Asha back home to a society that allows a young girl protection and the ability to pursue her own dreams and fully become herself.*

*This coming into her own includes a need for Asha to embrace and understand the world that she came from. Asha returns to her country, one whose social rules and customs almost killed her, in order to find its riches. She carries in her the fight of her biological mother, the wonders of her culture and a need to return to the place of her birth for redemption.*

*This is a celebration of the girls who are born in India, their travails, their tragedies, and their right to fully be part of their country’s history. This book is about the miracle that is their will to become women.” —Heather O’Neill*

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

### Questions from Heather O’Neill:

1. In what ways does Kavita’s defiant act change her husband and her relationship with him?
2. What do Kavita’s sons’ bad life choices symbolize or say about India’s attitude towards sons?
3. Do you find Somer’s experience as an adoptive mother typical?
4. Is Asha unduly unkind to her adoptive mother?
5. Is Asha’s return to Mumbai necessary to her understanding of herself?
6. Did the ending of the book give you a sense of closure?

### Further discussion questions:

7. Several characters have their names changed in this novel – Usha to Asha. What role do names play in establishing our identity?
8. Kavita faces difficult choices in the novel. Would you have made the same decisions she does?
9. For both families in *Secret Daughter*, the act of migration brings changes. What is the significance of those changes?
10. Both Kavita and Somer have powerful feelings about motherhood. In what ways are their feelings similar? In what ways different?



# BACKGROUND



Amnesty International India

Women protest in Bangalore after the gang rape of a female student in Delhi in November 2012.

## Gender discrimination

*Secret Daughter* offers powerful insights into how Indian society values women and girls. Honour, morals and values too often lead family members to make decisions about a woman's body and her life. Women should be empowered to make their own decisions guided by rights, not morality.

In a culture that favors sons, minutes after the birth, Kavita's husband takes her first born daughter away. Kavita dares not ask what happened to her baby; whether she was drowned, buried or simply left to starve. She only hoped the death came quickly. In the home she shared with her husband's family she was given scornful glances and uninvited counsel on how to conceive a boy the next time. Kavita saves the life of her second daughter by secretly giving the infant up for adoption. Her husband has made it clear that they cannot afford to raise a girl. During her third pregnancy, Kavita is made to undergo an ultrasound to determine

the sex of her unborn child. Should it be a girl, she could be forced to have an abortion, or be cast out of her husband's home and left to raise the child alone as an outcast.

## A tale of two cultures

On the other side of the world, another woman, Somer, has undergone successive miscarriages and is unable to carry a healthy pregnancy to term. In spite of having lived a privileged life and becoming a doctor, Somer feels that she is missing something so immense and powerful that it overwhelms everything else in her life. She wants nothing more than to have a child of her own, but her medical condition has made this impossible. Somer assumed she had control over her body and that when she decided to have a child, her body would comply. She lives in a society where her right to decide if and when to create a family is generally respected. And yet biology trumped these rights. So Somer decides to pursue international adoption.



French street artist Kashink has created murals with young people, challenging attitudes about the female body to support Amnesty International's campaign, My Body My Rights.

## Gender discrimination

Women, men, and transgender people in India are not treated equally by the law or Indian society.

Discrimination against women and girls is widespread and starts in the womb—boys are often seen as more desirable than girls, and parents may selectively choose to abort female fetuses. In childhood, girls are less well-nourished and have lower education than boys. Girls may be forced to marry at a young age, and may not be able to choose who they marry.

Things don't get any easier with age. Rape within marriage is not recognized as a crime if the wife is over 15 years of age. Rates of violence against women are high, and laws bringing perpetrators to account for their actions are rarely enforced. And a number of public officials and political leaders have made statements appearing to justify crimes against women, contributing to a culture of impunity.

India granted legal recognition to transgender people in 2014. However, cases of harassment and violence against transgender people continue to be reported, and India continues to criminalize consensual same sex relations.

## A question of honour

In India (and a number of other countries), some actions or situations may be seen to bring shame or dishonour on a family. Kavita giving birth to girls, not boys, brought shame on her family. Having sex outside marriage, choosing your marriage partner, seeking a divorce, being raped, dressing “provocatively,” engaging in same sex relations, or otherwise stepping outside the boundaries of what it means to be a woman in Indian society can lead a family or a community to feel shamed or dishonoured.

Illegal punishments often referred to as “honour crimes” may be carried out to restore a family or a community's reputation and honour. These crimes are usually committed against women and girls, often by members of their own family, and are deeply rooted in gender discrimination. Honour crimes include shunning, physical and sexual assault, and homicide.

## Our bodies, our rights

Under international law, everyone has the right to have their sexual and reproductive rights respected and protected. What are sexual and reproductive rights?





Women hold a candlelight vigil after a gang rape in Delhi in November 2012

They are the rights to:

- Make decisions about one's own health
- Ask for and receive information about health services
- Decide whether and when to have children
- Choose whether or not to marry
- Access family planning, contraception, safe and legal abortion and maternal healthcare, among a range of other healthcare services
- Live free from rape and other violence, including forced pregnancy, abortion, sterilization or marriage.

But these rights are too often violated. If Kavita had become pregnant with another girl, her family could have forced her to have an abortion. Forced abortions are a violation of a woman's sexual and reproductive rights. According to a United Nations Population Fund review of data from India's 2011 census, "Selective abortion of girls, especially for pregnancies after a firstborn girl, has increased substantially in India. Most of India's population now live in states where selective abortion of girls is common."

Largely because of sex selective abortions, the number of girls being born in India continues to decline. According to UNICEF, "The child sex ratio defined as

number of females per 1000 males, in the age group 0-6 years consistently shows a declining trend, from 962 in 1981 to 945 in 1991, 927 in 2001 and now to an alarmingly ratio, as low as 914 in 2011."

## Violence against women

The 2012 gang rape of a female student on a bus in New Delhi led to an international outcry. It was a key factor leading to changes made in 2013 to India's penal code sections related to physical and sexual violence. Since then, there have been more high profile cases of violence against women and girls.

Violence against women and girls remains widespread in India. Of particular concern are high rates of violence against women and girls from marginalized castes and communities, including Dalits (so-called 'untouchables') and Adivasis (Indigenous people). Dalit and Adivasi women and girls continue to face multiple levels of discrimination and violence. Members of dominant castes are known to use sexual violence against Dalit women and girls as a political tool for punishment, humiliation and assertion of power. Police are also known to collude with those from dominant castes in covering up crimes by not registering or investigating offences against Dalits.

# READY TO REPORT



Activists working with Dalits and Adivasis say that the systemic bias against the groups make it less likely that crimes against these women and girls will be reported, investigated and prosecuted effectively. A 2005 study of 500 cases of violence against Dalit women in four states found that two out of five women who had experienced violence did not seek legal remedies, primarily out of fear of the perpetrators, social stigma, ignorance of the law, or the belief that they would not get justice.

## Changing attitudes and laws

India has an obligation under international and national laws to promote non-discrimination and gender equality. But this is not enough. Laws must be enforced, and accompanied by changes in beliefs and attitudes about the role of women and girls in Indian society.

India joined the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Under this treaty, India is obligated to prevent discrimination against all women and girls, repeal laws which discriminate and enact laws which promote gender equality.

In 2013, India amended its penal code provisions related to violence against women and girls. “The new law does have some welcome features,” said G. Ananthapadmanabhan, Chief Executive of Amnesty International India. “It commendably criminalizes several forms of violence against women including acid attacks, stalking and voyeurism. It is more sensitive to the needs of disabled persons, provides for certain victim-friendly evidentiary procedures and removes the requirement of government permission for prosecution of public servants accused of rape and some forms of sexual violence.”

But the law didn’t do enough to meet its CEDAW obligations. It reduced access to healthcare and legal support for victims. It introduced the death penalty and life imprisonment without the possibility of release for certain offenses. It failed to criminalize marital rape, and offered relative impunity for members of the security forces who commit rape.

In April 2015, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women drew attention to the inability of the

authorities to ensure accountability and redress for survivors of violence. And in July 2015, the CEDAW Committee recommended the government allocate resources to set up special courts, complaints procedures and support services to better enforce laws.

India must do more to amend its laws and ensure they are fully enforced to help end violence against women and girls and promote gender equality.

## Responding to gender discrimination

Amnesty International India is taking action to end gender discrimination. They are running a campaign called “Ready to Report,” which encourages women and girls who have experienced sexual violence to report incidents to law enforcement. The campaign highlights the multiple challenges survivors of sexual violence face in reporting what happened to them. By addressing these challenges, the campaign aims to educate women and girls about their rights and India’s laws with the goal of reducing the fear women and girls have about reporting sexual violence.

Statistics show that for every woman who reports sexual violence to the police in India, there are another 99 that do not. Law enforcement is part of the problem. All too often the police will dismiss gross violations as casual incidents. One woman reported that her application to the police to make a complaint was rejected three times because she was told “trying to kiss a girl is not molestation.”

Amnesty International India is also cooperating with the Bengaluru City Police to encourage women and girls in the city to report sexual violence with safety and dignity. Ten police stations in the city have taken a pledge to adhere to a set of guidelines when registering cases of sexual violence.



A view from the street outside the entrance to a shelter for women and girls in Kaya, North Eastern Burkina Faso. The shelter currently supports around 60 girls in different situations of risk including forced and early marriage.



## TAKE ACTION

When their rights are ignored, the health of women and girls is put in jeopardy.

Like India, in the West African country of Burkina Faso, many young girls are forced into early marriage and give birth to children when they themselves are almost children.

While gender equality is protected under Burkina Faso's constitution and law, in practice, female genital mutilation, forced and early marriage and domestic violence are widespread. Women and girls told Amnesty International that decisions about pregnancy and marriage are often taken by male family members.

Burkina Faso has the sixth highest rate of early marriage in Africa, with 52 percent of girls married by the age of 18 and nearly half already mothers at that age. Burkina Faso has one of the lowest rates of contraceptive use among women (17 percent) and one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world.

Malaika was 15 years old when her parents wanted her to marry a 75 year old man. He already had three wives and several daughters her age. Malaika wanted to finish her education. She did not want to get married. She ran away from home but was picked up by the police and told to go back to her parents.

It is very common for men to prevent their wives from using contraception with threats of violence. Therese, a 23 year old fruit seller and mother of three told Amnesty International, "Since I gave birth to a second child, I hide to take my contraceptive pills, which are also cheaper for me than other methods. My husband does not know about contraception. He thinks that it brings diseases and he threatens to lock me up if I fall ill because of it."

Young girls also lack of access to comprehensive sex education. Mariama, a 24 year old mother of three, told Amnesty International how lack of education can lead to unwanted pregnancy. "When I had sex and got pregnant

for the first time, I didn't know that I could get pregnant. I didn't know anything about contraception. After my first child was born, I got pregnant again. I did not use any method of contraception because I still didn't know what to do."

Women and girls are entitled to the same human rights as men and boys. But in Burkina Faso, they are often discriminated against and denied their rights to make decisions about who they marry, and about whether to have children and how many. Access to contraception is central to preventing unintended pregnancies, reducing the number of abortions, and enabling women to time their births. But women and girls in Burkina Faso are denied access to contraception because of cost, lack of information, travel distances, and men's and boys' attitudes. Denying access to contraception denies human rights.

## Act now

Using your own words, write to the Minister of Justice and the Minister of Social Action and Solidarity in Burkina Faso.

I urge you to break the barriers to contraception for women and girls by:

- Making contraception free for all women and girls in Burkina Faso
- Improving the accessibility of sexual health information and services for women and girls
- Guaranteeing their right to decide if and when to have children and if so, how many.

Send to:

Minister of Justice AND Minister of Social Action  
c/o Jackie Hansen  
Campaigner for Women's Rights  
Amnesty International Canada  
312 Laurier Avenue East  
Ottawa, ON  
K1N 9Z9

Or email: [jhansen@amnesty.ca](mailto:jhansen@amnesty.ca)

## For further reading

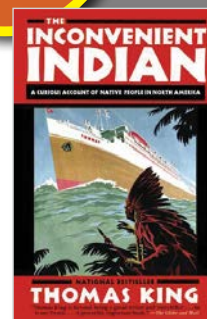
- Amnesty International India: <https://www.amnesty.org.in/our-work/stop-violence-against-women>
- Ready to Report campaign: <http://www.readytoreport.in/>
- United National Population Fund, Laws and Son Preference in India: A Reality Check. <http://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/jahia-news/documents/publications/2013/LawsandSonPreferenceinIndia.pdf>
- United Nations Population Fund, Gender Biased Sex Selection. <http://www.unfpa.org/gender-biased-sex-selection>

COMING UP  
IN NOVEMBER

2015  
READERS'  
CHOICE

## *The Inconvenient Indian* by Thomas King

Readers' choice, voted on by you,  
members of the Amnesty Book Club



What does it mean to be an Indian? Well, Thomas King has a few opinions on that. *The Inconvenient Indian* is at once a "history" and the complete subversion of a history—a critical and personal meditation on Aboriginal issues that Thomas King has conducted over the past 50 years.

With wit, pain, anger and hope, King examines the relationship between non-Natives and Natives in the centuries since the two first encountered each other. By refashioning old stories about historical events and figures, by taking a hard look at film and pop culture and relating his own complex experiences with activism, King presents the cumulative effects that ever-shifting laws and treaties have had on Native peoples and lands.

This book has never been more timely, offering all of us, Indian and non-Indian alike, insights and understanding of how we might tell a new story in the future.

The discussion guide will be sent out in early November. In the meantime, if you have any questions or comments, please contact us at [bookclub@amnesty.ca](mailto:bookclub@amnesty.ca).