

Review of Daughters of Empire

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Daughters of Empire is a rich book that can be read in multiple ways, though it is only possible to suggest a few of them here. It can be read, for instance, as part of a body of work that whilst not autobiographical in any direct sense, follows a trajectory of life stages from the focus on childhood and coming of age in *Butterfly in the Wind*, to the focus on young adult life in *Sastra* and to the passage from mature adulthood to the first intimations of ageing in *Daughters of Empire*. In each novel, the focus is, essentially, on the changing choices that women must make, chiefly within the context of the family. In turn these novels focus on a character who is passing, as Kamla does, through the stage of being a child and adolescent who knows she is being warmly nurtured but must decide where she stands in relation to the traditions she has been born into; then, in the case of *Sastra*, of having to choose between adult separation and the risks that involves, and the comforting security of attachment to her extended family; and, in the case of *Daughters of Empire*, dealing with Amira's need to balance her responsibility to herself and to the family she is committed to nurture (a balance she cannot achieve); and then with her situation as a mature woman who is observing her own children making their acts of separation and independence. She knows that whether one has a still surviving and still attached partner, or whether one becomes an involved and needed grandparent are matters of chance and she comes to see that the quality of the rest of her life depends so much on the resources of the self.

There is a beautiful scene at the end of the novel where we see Amira and her husband Santosh in a loving and contented companionship, but it is a scene where Amira is essentially alone in her thoughts. The passage of time and how one responds to it is always a significant feature of Lakshmi Persaud's novels, and particularly in this one. Perhaps there is something deeply Hindu in that apprehension of life's stages.

Now I want to say straightaway and very clearly that Lakshmi Persaud has not been writing a series of self-help books, but novels that repay careful and rewarding attention to their structures, to the stories they tell, to the development of characters and to the pleasures of the texture of paragraph and sentence. But each of these books, and perhaps *Daughters of Empire* in particular, offer us rewards that reach through the literary to go beyond the literary. They immerse the reader in questions of personal and ethical choice: about how one can lead a good life and what that good life might be, about the relationship between the duty to realise one's self and one's duty to others, about how even in some small capacity we have the opportunity to leave the world a better place for our passing through it. The ending of one of the very finest novel's ever written, George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, is one that moves me more than any other, and it is one that both fits the character of Amira in *Daughters of Empire*, and the spirit of Lakshmi Persaud's work. This is George Eliot's summation of the life of her heroine, Dorothea Brooke:

“But the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive: for the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and that things are not so ill with you and me as they might have been, is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”

When you reach the end of *Daughters of Empire*, I'm sure you will feel that Lakshmi Persaud arrives a comparably fine point of rest, though not of closure, for her characters.

The art of good fiction is in provoking the reader to thought, without being didactic and this I think *Daughters* achieves. Now I happen to think that this kind of seriousness about life's purposes is a highly desirable quality in fiction, though only when it is attached to fiction's capacity to give us emotional and intellectual pleasure and involve us imaginatively in other people's lives. So seriousness for me is a positive quality, though I will also try to show you that alongside the seriousness in *Daughters of Empire* there is also a rich vein of humour that is integral to its vision.

Again, looking at '*Daughters*' in the context of the earlier novels, we can see a developing narrative that explores the passages individuals make between places and cultures. In particular her novels explore what it means to be an Indian woman in the Caribbean, and what of that heritage can be carried from Trinidad to elsewhere – to Canada in *Sastra* and to Mill Hill, London in *Daughters of Empire*. This is never a simple binary opposition between fixed cultural points, because the novels deal with the making of identities that are constantly moving in the flux of time. As Lakshmi's first book, *Butterfly in the Wind*, makes plain, there are not only different kinds of Indianness (we see Kamla reflecting on her Muslim and Madrassi neighbours), but even for the child located at the heart of a securely self-confident orthodox Hindu Trinidadian family, there are many negotiations to make – with the colonial, with the creole, with issues of gender, with different structures of faith in a plural society. It is her characters' recognition of this complexity of origins that shapes both their openness (which is sometimes vulnerability) and strength.

As Professor Kenneth Ramchand, founding father of Caribbean literary criticism recognised - he gave a far more eloquent introduction to '*Daughters*' in Trinidad - what this novel is most essentially about is how you can make home somewhere other than the place where, metaphorically speaking, your navel string is buried. '*Daughters*' looks at that question by exploring the relationships within a family where the parents and eldest child have memories of Trinidad, but the two younger daughters know only Mill Hill and what their parents tell them; for them Trinidad is a place for holidays – always interesting – but elsewhere.

What makes such observations much more than perceptive ethnography is that one gets from Lakshmi Persaud's fiction a strongly visualised sense of place, and '*Daughters*' is no exception: from the acutely described pleasures of the bourgeois solidity of the house into which the young Vidhur family move, from Amira's and Santosh's attempts to locate themselves imaginatively in the residues of an older Mill Hill that speaks of other times (shades of VS Naipaul and Wiltshire in *The Enigma of Arrival* – and I'm sure that as scholars have compared Naipaul's and Persaud's Trinidad, they will compare their Englands). For Amira in *Daughters* there is invariably a complexity of responses to place. Memories of village Trinidad are both about the status of the teacher she used to have but has lost, the support of family and domestic help she enjoyed (this is a well-to-do family), a comforting sense of human scale, but also about a constriction of vision; Mill Hill (and you sense from reading the novel that you could find your way round it) is a place where neighbourliness is eventually won, but only with much effort to overcome discreet little Englander racism; and for Amira, the city of London is the place that dauntingly proclaims the continuing power of financial empire, but it also offers access to the museums and galleries with their vision of wider human possibilities. Let me read a little from *Daughters* to illustrate this point. (p. 41)

She felt intimidated, overwhelmed by the imposing architecture, the circuses, radiating exits and entrances, a merry-go-round. The self-confidence felt excessive: the grandeur of the Bank of England and Mansion House, the Georgian palace of the Lord Mayor. Santosh showed her St Paul's, Westminster Abbey, Whitehall, the Royal Albert Hall, Parliament and Buckingham Palace. She felt disconnected from them all. They made her feel foreign and small.

However, in the spacious halls of museums and art galleries, she felt more at ease. Here was a purpose to being: to see, to think about what was before her, to learn. She felt delight and thankfulness that these artefacts had been created by men and women from far and wide, all with a vision, wanting those who would see their work to understand from whence it had come, from whence a part of humanity had come.

But this man-made landscape of the metropolis was so unlike the soft textures of the village of her childhood where she could see and feel the earth. Here was the strength of wealth and power: a mass of inner steel covered by a façade, where grand style told a tale. Here memories were cast in stone memorials, of wars, kings and queens, lords and prime ministers – those chosen to be remembered. [...] There was something about the seductive nature of power that seemed to unlock the basest desires for aggrandisement and plunder.

When Amira sees the statue of Nelson, she is carried back to poem learnt at school in Tunapuna, and reflects on the “deft workings of her colonial education all tucked away in her memory” (p. 43)

What I will focus on in the remainder of this introduction are three things: the richly multi-layered role that food plays in the novel, what the novel suggests to us about the meaning of origins and, in particular, Indian ancestry and, because I want to celebrate it as essential to its vision, the quietly comic voice that runs throughout the novel.

Any reader of Lakshmi's previous novels will know how important food is in her fiction. *Daughters* is no exception. For the reader there is sensuous writing about the taste, smells and appearance of food (editing '*Daughters*' invariably made me feel hungry); for the Vidhurs as a twice transplanted Indian family, finding the vegetables and spices of India in neighbouring Burnt Oak is a day of joy, of connections restored. Both within the family and between the Vidhurs and their neighbours, food is a gift, the communicative exchange that opens hearts and reinforces love. But food also becomes a vehicle for what the novel has to say about true learning and the regeneration of human culture. We see this in the episode where Amira remembers the school of Lily and Palli in Penal in South Trinidad. In the relationship between these women, African and Indian, nurse and teacher, food is the bridge between cultures, but far more importantly it is what they teach about the making of food that provides the novel's vision of how a good life can be made. What they teach is a “way of thinking” about the relationship between understanding and invention, freedom and necessity, respect for tradition and the courage to make innovations. What Lily and Palli do is not simply to teach their pupils how to cook, but enable them to discover the means of learning and thinking and to apply that reflectiveness to all aspects of life. If that sounds solemn, it is not, for in this episode of memory, we also discover aspects of Amira's character that reverberate through the rest of the novel. The young Amira is only too ready to demonstrate her understanding of what she has learnt, imperfectly:

Looking back, Amira saw a familiar person, though even then she'd realised that she should have allowed this provocation to pass, but she'd been riled and said with some relish, ‘Whenever we bring large differences together, like ground split peas and spinach, we need a go-between, something that will hold dissimilar ingredients together. It could be a little flour which does just that, but a grated potato improves the taste and the texture of the mix as well; it is less doughy. The difference between

flour and potato happens to be a well-known fact amongst experienced cooks. Why not try it before judging; that would certainly show good sense – one of the pillars of knowing how.’ She had delivered this addition with panache.

There was a hollow silence. She’d been tempted to go further and say there was another lesson to be gleaned: that if we keep thinking imaginatively, and not always traditionally, we can continually make delicious changes. But she hadn’t, recognising that the quantity of her input was already excessive for this sizzling hot discussion pot. She knew she was the only one there doing the Higher School Certificate; she was anxious not to appear a Miss Knower-of-all-things. She had failed miserably in the concept of knowing how with respect to quantity. What she had also learnt was the extent to which one’s personality can be a hindrance or an asset when it came to relationships. (p. 52)

I think, too, that the episode with Lily and Palli, provides us with the clues about how we should read what the novel shows us about what Indianness comes to mean for Amira and the Vidhur family. It is first of all an Indianness that has undergone a Caribbean transformation, which has responded to the fact of living in a highly competitive multi-ethnic society, and recognised that Indianness can both be a constricting boundary when it becomes the issue of solidarity with “people like us” and suspicions about people who are “not like us”, and a source of strength, of knowing who you are. It is a heritage which, for the Vidhurs, cannot be hide-bound by tradition, though they enjoy the awareness of being part of a vast and culturally rich tide of history. For the Vidhurs it is a heritage that orients them in the here and now, but if they are not located in any religious narrative of sin, salvation and the judgements or rewards of an after life, they are equally not in thrall to the kind of materialistic commodification of life that has become a stereotype for Western secularism. Duty, ceremony and altruism are at the core of a meaningful life, though when Amira thinks to praise one of her English neighbours for being quite Indian in her concern for her parents and her domestic economy, the neighbour gently rebukes her for the arrogance of the assumption, well meant as it is.

Amira is a richly portrayed character, admirable in so many respects, but also flawed (in both comic and sometimes moving ways) when she forgets the lessons of the school and meets life in rather inflexible and literal ways. We see the triumph of the lessons she has imbibed from Lily and Palli’s school in the making of her garden where she adapts, creatively, to what will grow in a suburban English garden, but we also see her at a moment of great vulnerability to her tendency to literalness in her relationship with her youngest daughter, Vidya, when she tries to teach her not to nod her head in an “Indian” kind of way, when this breach of Englishness is brought to Amira’s attention by Vidya’s punctilious head teacher. (pp. 71-72)

That literalness surfaces again in the “ogre” incident when Vidya, now a spirited and independent young woman, contemplating marriage outside the clan to an Englishman, has a spectacular falling out with Amira: “Food, food, food. It’s all you ever think of, Mummy. You’re such an ogre... You make my life hell with constant questions, filling me with doubts and anxieties. You have answers to everything...” (p. 320). After Vidya has flounced out, Amira’s response, before her collapse into tears, is to pick up a dictionary: “Ogre. She should have said ogress, but I plainly didn’t manage to teach her everything...” (p. 321)

As this episode shows, the touching and the comic meet close together. We see that in the warm but sharply observed portrayal of Amira’s bossy and super-competent older sister Ishani with her inner sadness of being childless, and we see it in the chapter when Amira, driven to the point of breakdown by her discovery of Santosh’s mad moment of infidelity, is directed towards the healing clutches of the Madame Varekova, the “philosopher in the department of intimate wear” by her worldly friend, Kamla Devi. Let me read a little.

Madame Varekova's accent is unfamiliar – from somewhere between Europe and Asia? It has a melody that holds me.

'Art is alive everywhere in nature; we wonder at the magic of the clouds bringing the first monsoon rains when the earth dances and sings its welcome. We ask how to enfold the beauty of a flight of swallows as their tail streamers and their wings wave to the sunset. Such enchantments we'd wish to have at the fore of our being, where it can be felt by others. Yes?'

It is a rhetorical question; nevertheless I am nodding again like a mare in blinkers. There is only one way to go. I was not expecting a philosopher in a department of intimate wear. (p. 175)

Madame Varekova goes on to tell Amira that:

Our lingerie is the human voice, the accessories are the accompaniment of violin, oboe or flute; it depends on the circumstance, of course, the place and the feelings flowing yes? This is crucial, Madam. The motivation is everything. We approach the exuberance that produces life with imaginative abandon.'

'Abandon? abandonment?' It is involuntary; the teacher in me is never far away.

'You're so right. It is such a joyous affair that I forget myself. I am an artist; I was born with an artist's disposition.'

'Of course, Madame.' What is happening to me? Why am I mimicking her? Has she hypnotised me?

The note of comic sadness returns a good many years later after the falling out with Vidya, when Amira takes herself upstairs to get ready for bed:

She was about to put on one of the beautiful nightgowns Santosh had bought her. But she returned it to the drawer, where it lay beside the fine pieces from Madame Varekova's caravan on the old silk road. She closed the drawer gently, her eyes streaming. (p.321)

We know, without being told, that Madame Vareskova's silks have lain there undisturbed, when Amira chooses instead "the monastic comfort of soft white cotton with a high collar and long sleeves". It is so often through such small details that we reach to the heart and depth of the novel's emotions.

You may be thinking that the title of the novel is *Daughters of Empire*, and I have focused almost entirely on one. But I am of course a publisher as well as an editor and occasional critic, and it is with my publisher's hat on that I invite you to find out for yourself the fortunes of Anjali, Satisha and Vidya.