

Review of Daughters of Empire

by Kenneth Ramchand, Professor Emeritus of English, University of the West Indies, read at the Trinidadian launch of the novel.

Thursday May 3, 2012, Mount Hope, Trinidad.

Daughters of Empire (2012) should be read by women, parents, young adults, teachers and all those who manage the country's system of education. The book is about all of these things.

i. Harmony

The book's deepest concern is harmony: learning to live in civility with other individuals and other communities; seeking a balance within oneself between reason and passion, between knowing and feeling; living a life of courtesy and consideration for others; and retaining a capacity for attunement with the cosmos as exemplified by the experience of the main protagonists on a holiday to the island of Dominica undertaken by at a stressful time:

"There, engulfed in clouds of rising steam and sulphurous fumes - becoming invisible to each other - they experienced uncanny sensations. The numerous mountains, radiant ridges, valleys and caves, the hot mineral streams, the fumaroles and boiling lake, were reminders of the volcanic creation of the island... The following day they joined others to be transported in a hanging gondola through a mile of protected Montane forest, enveloped by the lush growth, the thick canopy overhead, among colourful butterflies, and the occasional hummingbird. But it was the astonishing variety that stirred them. Wherever light or moisture or exposure to the wind varied, nature brought forth something different. Among the buzzing of insects, the play of the wind over the canopy, the piercing cry of an unseen mountain whistler, the Rufous-throated solitaire, they felt they were at the beginning of time. London was another world." (325)

There's a spiritual quality in all Lakshmi's books and it comes partly from oneness in Nature as recognized (see p.164 and p. 324) by the main character Amira.

ii. Cooking

The central metaphor of the book is cooking. This metaphor is a key that opens the novel up to understanding. It touches upon the themes of education, family life, the building of community and suggests that "if we keep thinking imaginatively, and not always traditionally, we can continuously make delicious changes."(54) Change is a major current in the lives of the characters who have migrated from Trinidad to London in this novel.

The meanings are carefully set out in Chapter 9 (50-55), which is called 'The Alchemists of Penal, South Trinidad'. The chapter describes a school that ostensibly teaches cookery and other domestic virtues to girls in the rural South. The teachers are the Penal-born Lily and Palli whose ancestors are from different continents, who are educated abroad and who have work experience with the Canadian Mission Archibald Institute in St Augustine. Ishani, older sister of the novel's main character, supports Lily and Palli financially.

As women became more assertive, however, and fathers could see the pecuniary and marital advantages that came with education, the once closed pattern became an open, ever expanding one of possibilities. It is true to say that today Indo Caribbean women are taking full advantage of primary and secondary schools, national and regional universities. They, like many women of Indian origin in the Diaspora, have entered a wide field of endeavour; a few have attained the pinnacle of their profession and today Trinidad proudly claims a woman prime minister of Indian origin.

There are many asides and discussions in the novel about education and about finding ways to allow the young to express themselves. A serious one occurs in Chapter 4 where a desperate Amira goes around Mill Hill Broadway interviewing passers-by about secondary schools in the area. A slim serious woman hears her quizzing a useless informant:

‘So you’re looking for good schools. You mean, I take it, schools that will stretch your daughter?’

‘Yes’

‘A middle class obsession. Would you like to be stretched?’

‘Living stretches us all. Having to grow stretches us’

‘Precisely. That’s enough stretching don’t you think? Let the children be. No stretching please. No stretching. They’ll learn a great deal from their elders simply by listening and observing.’

An elderly man advised: “You should teach them yourself if you can. A sheer waste of time most schools today.” (31)

The intention of the school in Penal was to use cooking as its medium for teaching the girl children of the poor about life, and about themselves as persons. It chose ‘cooking’ as a teaching resource because cooking was such an inevitable activity of the women and their daughters in such frugal and still male-dominated circumstances.

To win over parents in the economically depressed and underprivileged agricultural communities, Ishani uses the media to project the school as a place that will turn out accomplished young women. Like the Archibald Institute that it pretends to be copying, the Penal school promises the arrangers of marriages that the girls “will become better daughters, fine wives, excellent mothers and memorable grandmothers for they will be taught to live in a way that can change a house of people into a happy home.”

The school run by Lily and Palli does indeed teach practical skills for immediate use but it believes equally that a great deal of education is the planting of seeds for the future:

"We learnt that if you wanted the benefit of more than one flavour, it was common sense to reduce the quantity of the strong , like cumin, relative to the less strong , like cardamom. And we saw how in a family discussion we had to make sure the voices of the weak, like children and women , were heard and not drowned out by powerful male voices. Though at that time few of these girls would have been able to bring this particular idea to fruition. Lily and Palli were content to plant such seeds in their thinking." (53)

The founders of the school knew that they were sowing the seeds of a quiet revolution . One graduate of the school tells us that she realized that “Lily and Palli wanted us to begin to think. They were laying the foundations for us to reinvent recipes as well as ourselves”. The same graduate also reflects that the school was aiming at alchemy or transformation for the girls, not only as individuals and members of a family, but also as members of an island community rich in cultural diversity. In the

making of kachouries from split peas and spinach, for example, the school led them to the concept of transference: “If we can bring together grains and leaves, two entirely different ingredients to make a delicious dish, likewise, with an understanding of the situation, people with varying cultures and backgrounds can also come together to form a strong community.” (52)

iii. Literature of Migration

Lakshmi Persaud’s *Daughters of Empire* (2012) set in England is something new in the literature of migration. It begins around 1974 with the arrival in London of a professional woman with her three daughters (Anjali aged ten, Satisha six, and Vidya two) to take up occupation of a house, 14 Apple Grove in Mill Hill, London NW 7 “where new arrivals were virtually unknown”. The house has been selected for the family by her Guyanese husband, Santosh Vidhur who has a high profile job in London with an international organization. These migrants are middle-class and they intend to make their home in England.

The author prepares us for the family saga and the theme of cultural exchange by telling us that “the Vidhurs had bathed in several streams of history’s flow, and were inheritors of several sensibilities and ways of thinking”. (14) They were inheritors also of “the language literature and institutions of Britain” and were susceptible to “the seductive modernity blowing in from their large prosperous American neighbour”. (14) They will preserve what matters to them and what still sustains them in their heritage but they are open to absorbing later influences.

These migrants are not refugees and they are not looking for economic opportunity. These descendants of indentured Indians are making another long journey “full of hope of fulfilling themselves, in search of something not fully articulated, yet felt and in that way understood: a good life”. (14) They have a long history with England as descendants of Indians and as people from a West Indian colony. As brown-skinned invaders of an area not usually approached by immigrants, they also have problems in the present with people in London who do not understand that the world is meeting in their city.

The novel readily accepts that there is much to learn from Britain. However, it rejects the fate of being assimilated (becoming British); and instead of the one-sided multiculturalism proposed by a teacher (one should not indulge in it at an early age and it is better for migrants to start with a good English foundation), the novel envisages and encourages a process of borrowing from one another that could lead to new formations.

The immigrant woman with the three daughters and a husband is called Amira. She puts the headmistress of the children’s prospective school in her place with the declaration, “We are making London our home”. This declaration is really an acceptance of all the challenges involved in both nurturing her daughters and her husband, and in a creative enterprise: the novel shows her combining her traditional and native resources with selections from all that may be available to her in the foreign land to create something new for her family to belong to. For most readers, the appeal of the novel lies in the narrative attached to this project- the evolution of the Vidhur family, daughters and parents, over a period of twenty-eight years. The main character is Amira and she starts off as the narrating character it seems; but the author does not restrict herself. Other characters narrate in the first person as well. The narration is not so much indisciplined as flexible and its purpose is to offer a range of perspectives on complex issues over an extended period that includes life in two places, Trinidad and England.

Living outside the culture that formed her, Amira cherishes her memories of Trinidad and stays in touch through her sister Ishani. But she has made up her mind to belong to the new land. As the children become adults and begin to move away Amira accepts that for her, “Trinidad, the place of her birth, had become a faraway place”. Anjali who was largely formed by Trinidad where she spent the first ten years of her life is affected by her life in England but not as much as Vidya who had come when she was only two years old. Satisha who had come at age six is in-between. Anxious that the children should have the choice of absorbing Trinidad influence, especially that of Palli and Lily, Amira is willing for them to make visits to Trinidad to their somewhat controlling but well-intentioned and helpful Aunt Ishani who wants them to retain their Trinidad roots.

Sibling rivalries and jealousies between the girls point to the different ways in which they combine Trinidad and England as they grow up. In a fierce outburst against her mother, Vidya claims that her parents’ focus on Anjali who was more like them prevented them from really knowing Vidya. Satisha and Vidya make fun of Anjali as “Madam Proper”. In a bitter mood triggered by the spirited and teasing behaviour of Satisha now 16, and the twelve year old Vidya, Anjali at age twenty thinks she has outgrown her younger sisters, that the three of them have now become individuals “with tastes, dispositions and thoughts too far removed from one another”, and that the other two enjoyed greater freedom in England since they had not been brought up under “the strict regime that had surrounded her.” In this angry mood she claims that nobody cared about her welfare, and that her parents “had wound her up tightly in the folds of their culture and expected her [but not Satisha and Vidya] to walk the stipulated walk”. Over the years, moreover, “her parents had grown soft and pliant so that her sisters did exactly as they pleased.” (138-139) The case is exaggerated but the younger girls do have more leeway, and claim more right to make choices for themselves than Anjali was willing or able to do.

Whatever the differences in cultural influence, the girls remain very much part of the family and they all turn out to be highly educated, independent and headstrong women ready to make their way in the world. In the event Anjali and Satisha will return to the island with their Trinidadian husbands and their professional skills. The youngest girl Vidya will live in England with her English husband. How the lives of these awakened young women will differ from that of their mother we do not quite know. All we can be sure about is that they are technically equipped and emotionally whole enough to face any challenge and adventure.

iv. Daughters of Empire

At its heart, this is a book about women, and all of them, whether in the colony or in the metropolis, are daughters of Empire shaping lives and ringing in change in both places. The list of women is long and varied: Amira’s enduring mother; her vibrant and business-oriented sister Ishani; Lily and Palli with their revolutionary school for young women; the daughters Anjali, Satisha and Vidya who stand up in the world as independent women (their love stories add charm to the book); the worldly-wise and intelligent Kamla Devi who is released by her parents’ deaths to leave Maharashtra and go to London where she feels she belongs: “It is the freedom for women, especially single women, that makes it the place for me.” (58) But greater than all of them is the mother and homemaker Amira.

At the time of her marriage, Anjali offers an appreciation of the enlightened parenting the girls have experienced, and especially of the part Amira played in the creation of her daughters of Empire:

‘You’ve been the nicest possible Mummy to all of us. Your background was so different from ours; you accommodated so many changes so quickly. New country, new neighbours, new schools, new ways. Later, teenage daughters with perceptions of life that must have seemed daring to you, that must have pained you. You bore it all so well, so calmly, so self-contained. You stood up to everything. ...Look at the beautiful garden you have given us . It had no soul when we came; you’ve made it sing. I once told you that Lily and Palli were full of praise for you ; they said you were quick to see what they were getting at, long before most. I know that if things had been different you would have been able to do far more of what you actually wanted to do . No one knows what that is. That alone tells a lot about you.’ (235)

Amira devotes herself entirely to her duties as mother. There are countless scenes depicting her unselfishness, her warmth, and her unconditional and nourishing love for her children. Her sister commends her for “battling with three daughters, no family, no community”, for managing even though she has “never had to run a house on her own” and especially for being able to cope with a husband: “Don’t be harsh on Santosh. A man’s brain is not like ours. It is something we have to learn to live with.”

In the early years (see especially p.35-36), Amira wonders at the insensitivity of Santosh about Amira’s loss of a professional career and complains about his seemingly male complacency about her staying home in the traditional role of mother and care-giver. But as they work together at a parenting made more complex by the absence of familiar and community support and by the new forces to which they and the children are exposed (see Chapter 16 ‘Talking It Over’ 87-92), husband and wife draw closer together. Santosh grows. In an important discussion about how they might help the girls to be and become in their society and in the world, Santosh and Amira do a conversational dance matching each other in resolutions to expose the girls to the dangers of the world and still to protect them from it; to make them aware of goodness in the world and alert them to how power behaves; to show them the dark closed cupboards and the best light of their new country (145-146). The shape of this particular conversation is a good illustration of how their dialogues on parenting bring the couple closer and closer to each other. The quality of the discussions in the book makes *Daughters of Empire* seem a suitable textbook on parenting for group discussion among parents in our society today.

v. The real Amira

There is a more intimate issue than parenting in *Daughters of Empire* . it is plain enough to the reader that Amira’s professional career has been abandoned and her personal growth limited by her dedication to domesticity and to the growing needs of her children. To put it like this might seem like making the case more stringently than the reticent author. But make the case she certainly does.

At Xmas 1986 during a visit to Trinidad, the author allows Anjali to come across photographs of Amira as a seventeen year old at the school in Penal. She is disquieted: “So young, slim, quietly composed, sure even then of what was important, with such attractive eyes. She must have been fun to be with, no wonder Daddy married her. She was so different now. What happened to those curious engaging eyes? Now they were gentle, softer, motherly looking. Time, marriage, a husband and three of them, and everything to do with the house, garden, their education and Daddy’s welfare had re-shaped her face, her eyes, her body.” (183) Even before this, the author had used Anjali to comment

on Amira's single-mindedness about family and her loss of zest for life, and to point to a dilemma that Amira would not articulate: "She wanted to be more but was hemmed in by her understanding of her role". (p.141)

One of the strengths of Lakshmi Persaud as a writer is her ability to suggest inner turbulence beneath outward calm and this she does brilliantly with Amira. In the opening chapters Amira thinks several times about how she had lost out by the migration of the family, giving up a career that gave her self-realization. This sense of loss is suppressed but it never leaves her consciousness. The reader is always aware of the dissatisfaction in the life of the outwardly successful and focused mother and wife.

Right after Santosh's confession of his passionate affair with a young woman on one of his trips to Malaysia, Amira begins to confront a reality she has so far managed to evade. She suffers through to a clear resolve: "For my daughters' sake and my own self-worth, I had to awaken my former self, indeed a self I had never really developed." (p.168)

Through Amira's story Lakshmi Persaud assesses the notion of 'selflessness' and looks at the price that is paid if there is no balance between personal growth and serving others. She does so with a delicacy that shows she has no ideology.

With Santosh's confession, Amira's growth paradoxically begins again. The worldly-wise and free-thinking Kamla Devi tells her what she knows only too well but was too much her mother's daughter to say: "In coming here Santosh and the girls have benefitted but not you. You sacrificed a career. The part of you that is crying out feels deceived, badly let down, you drank from a bottle that says: 'Family first' and it has made you feel smaller and smaller." (p.171) The good, beautiful and wisely patient person that Amira is cannot bring herself to be bitter, or to leave Santosh, or to shatter the good that came out of her sacrifice but she takes the point that she has sold herself short.

Her recovery from near insanity begins when she realizes that she has the power within herself to ignore and thus disarm the debilitating images of Santosh and the other woman. Then her recovery begins. She wants to renew the participation in nature that is almost lost to her, she seeks once more the solitude that energized and directed her life when she was a girl in the bush in Tunapuna (165). At the same time Kamla Devi is guiding her back to her femininity (171-172); and as Amira ends her shopping from Madame Varekova's International Lingerie Collection she is exultant. Her decision to awaken her former self "indeed a self I had never developed" and her femininity animate her: "I think how much lies with us, how we have the ability to remake ourselves if we wish; we are born with infinite possibilities; evolution tells us so. I peeped at my purchases and smiled. There was electricity in my steps"

This is a book for men as well as women, for Amira's rebirth takes place alongside the process of change that had been stirring in Santosh even before he was moved to confess. Amira's beginning to forgive Santosh and to find back her self is accompanied by Santosh's own growth in respect and sensitivity. Amira can feed on Anjali's acknowledgment of her supreme gifts as a mother to her children (235) without deviating from her return to selfhood. And Santosh's wise and conciliating spirit brings her back to her self when Vidya's rash but momentary repudiation (320) threatens her self-belief. To the new Santosh, Amira confesses: "I think there is just one thing in my life I have done that I have no cause to regret and that is marrying you, despite warnings from my family". (323)

So much is happening so fast in the Part Three that we might miss the return to the metaphysical and the confirmation of the necessity of human union. In the moving final chapter, set in Ishani's garden on the hillside, cosmic forces are at play and Amira senses the past and present merging within her. She remembers telling the nine-year-old Anjali that "we were once stars in the heavens, offering streaks of light to perpetual night" halving the darkness.

In the early time at 14 Apple Grove when Amira is pre-occupied with the children Santosh had warned Amira about the need to prepare for something more than the children leaving them: "We both need to loosen up a bit, lose ourselves sometimes; enjoy each other's company more. A time will come when we have to leave our children, leave the house, leave the world behind... In the long run it's our friendship that matters and doing the best we can all the time." (39) Even as he wonders why she could not have "this life with my family and my teaching career", a tune comes from the ocean of her memory to renew for Amira a promise of transcendence, constellation above and beyond earthly care. Husband and wife awake to the truth that all they always had was one another:

'Soon we will be alone, Santosh; time for another beginning.'

'Look, it's a full moon; let's use its light to find our way to the house. Come Amira.'

I am reluctant to leave. He offers me his hand. 'Come, come now, Amira.' His presence makes the coming silence comforting; the sound of our footsteps is soon lost to the night. Only the wind-chime plays. (332)

On the morrow they will return with their new understanding and quiet strength to the house in Apple Grove that will no longer be alive with the actual voices of their children, the street in Mill Hill from which the oldest of their new friends will have departed.