

*South Asian  
Literature  
in English*

An Encyclopedia

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other Indian protagonists. Tara tries to find her identity in the United States without wanting to obliterate her former identity. She desires to combine her past Indian and her present American selves to invent her own new self, and succeeds in doing so. Like Mukherjee herself, Tara welcomes this painful and difficult process and meets it with poise and strength.

To know herself, Tara traces with pride and affection the story of her ancestors, especially female ancestors. She does not ignore the subjugated position of these Indian women, yet they do not appear as victims, but as intelligent and sensitive people struggling to empower themselves within their limited world and opportunities. This theme arises in the story of Tara's ancestor, Tara Lata Gangooly, a saint and a freedom fighter. Like "each generation of women in [her] family" Tara discovers "in her something new," and uses her story as a source of inspiration and to continue the chain of family unity (*Desirable* 289).

Tara desires to get rid of everything in her past that is false and superficial, whether of culture, class, or caste. This challenging process requires her to reassess her society, which is not easy for her given her privileged background. She stumbles and occasionally falls, but she is determined to look squarely at her own weaknesses and those of her family members. Nor does she allow these insights to dampen or destroy her ongoing search for identity.

Although Tara learns to reconnect with her sisters in new ways, they do not reciprocate, and they continue to criticize her brashly and unjustly, while she remains silent. This unwholesome aspect of their relationship produces a sense of incompleteness in Tara's mission. On the other hand, Tara's ability to communicate openly with Rabi, Bish, and Andy, which is a result of her self-expansion in America, helps to provide some beautiful moments in the novel. Her renewed understanding

of the Hindu concept of dharma helps her to see Bish in a new light, and her love for her son helps her to accept his homosexuality. Her relationships with these three men reflect her peaceful and understanding nature, which help them to reveal the best in themselves.

Once again, for Mukherjee, America serves as a transformational stage for her characters. Free from the authoritarian grip of her father, living in multicultural America, Tara is able to remake herself in a remarkably successful way, unlike her previous protagonists who survive by a costly amputation of the past. She acts out her part with a grace and wisdom that some of the earlier characters lacked.

This absorbing, eloquent, and compassionate narrative, enriched by Mukherjee's sense of history and humor, will be important to readers of many backgrounds.

*Desirable Daughters* has received favorable reviews by most major newspapers. These reviews have noted Mukherjee's sound expansion of her earlier themes, such as the self-transformation of the immigrant and the collision of cultures. She has also been highly praised for her skillful narrative and her artful handling of history and geography.

Sartaz Aziz

#### Further Reading

"Expat Exuberance." Rev. of *Desirable Daughters*.  
by Bharati Mukherjee. *Biblio: A Review of Books* July-Aug. 2002: 15

### Dhondy, Farrukh

Farrukh Dhondy is a filmmaker, columnist, novelist, children's writer, and commissioning editor. Having discovered him as a children's writer when I was teaching children's literature, I interviewed Dhondy in his office at Channel 4 TV in London in 1988. There was general celebration and jubilation that day as a film he had commissioned, Mira Nair's *Salaam Bombay!*,

had just won the Palm d'Or at Cannes. Dhondy was brimming with genuine pride. He has been the first Parsi writer to get serious recognition abroad, especially for his children's and adolescents' books, and the first to be written up in reference works such as Gale's *Something about the Author*.

Dhondy was born and raised in Pune, India, in 1944. He moved to England at the age of 20 to study science at Cambridge, but later switched to studying literature. He later became a dedicated English teacher writing about the students he taught in the East End of London. His first book, *Come to Mecca* (Fontana, 1978), is a children's book in which Dhondy focuses on "Black British" children—not just those racially black, but the Asians and Middle Easterners, all of whom the British lump together as "Black." These were the children on "Free Dinners," (there is a story by that title in *Come to Mecca*), Bangladeshi, Caribbean, living in Brick Lane, eating at "Iqbal's Café," trying to understand Shakespeare, but also trying to adopt him: "I like Urdu poet. Most sweetest language in the world, just next to Bengali and English. Iqbal, Tagore, Nazrul, Shakespeare, all artists, all brothers" (49). One of the little boys he created in the story, "Salt on a Snake's Tail," a Bangladeshi called Jolil, lives in the British elementary school curriculum through a little story taught over and over called "Kiss Miss Carol," an obvious play on "Christmas Carol," where Jolil is asked to play Tiny Tim and does not know how to tell his poor Bangladeshi father who is a tailor and who needs Jolil's help sewing pockets. Besides, his conservative Muslim parents would not want him to act, let alone in a Christmas play. Through a series of misadventures, he ends up acting anyway. While this story may seem foreign to an American elementary school audience, in many ways it portrays the cross-cultural encounter based on language and religion. In this sense it is

similar to Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima*, which focuses on marginalized Chicano gang kids performing in a Christmas play, probably the arch assimilation device in all minority literature, taking its cue from the Christmas recital in James Joyce's *The Dead*.

*East End at Your Feet* (1976) and *Trip Trap* (1982) gave birth to the generation of literature about the characters Hanif Kureishi has called "cockney-Asians"—Asians meaning mostly Indians and Bangladeshis (not Chinese and Japanese). Dhondy created and legitimated characters that would then appear in the fiction of Hanif Kureishi or Zadie Smith. Assimilation and fitting in are the themes of these stories. "I don't know much Hindi, but I have to speak to my granddad in Hindi 'cause he don't know nothing else," the character tells us in "East End at your Feet," the title story. "I used to pretend I couldn't speak Hindi when I was with the lads" (*East End* 52). "The Lads," on the other hand, are deciding whether to "roll" a "Paki geezer." In *Trip Trap*, one of "the lads" justifies himself:

I knew you used to think I was right prejudiced, but that's because you only joined our school in the fourth year and I was a skin at the time. We had to do it. I'll tell you, I don't think you teachers knew what was going on down there. We was in the minority, right, and it was our country, but you wouldn't allow us to say it. And the Asian kids, they came flash, "Sikhs rule," and all this, and there was so many of them you only opened your mouth if you wanted a taste of knuckle sandwich. (15)

This quotation reinforces what Kamala Markandaya had once said to me about her book *Nowhere Man*: "Hybridity: they won't allow it." These themes of culture clash and of culture conflict in the schools now outdated in Britain are surprisingly contemporary in the United States today and are ideal for teaching tolerance and

showing how the world changes with the influx of immigration. *Poona Company* (1982) on the other hand is juxtaposed with these works, because almost in an R. K. Narayan-like fashion, it portrays the more peaceful, lighthearted conglomeration of young men in the bazaars and boys going to Catholic schools, a world wide apart from that in "East End." Salman Rushdie, quoted on the book blurb, says, "It's a beautiful collection, full of affection, malicious exact detail, dialogue perfectly caught; and it is an extremely funny book."

But Farrukh Dhondy is a Parsi writer, raised in a Westernized, British school, who, though he writes about Parsis in *Bombay Duck* (1990), turns to his Western education, specifically the Parsi love of English literature to write about Shakespeare and Marlowe in *Black Swan* (1993). While addressing a group of students Dhondy said, "*Black Swan* is an attempt to get truly away from the Asian subject." When one student asked about nationalism, Dhondy joked, "I think it was a literary mistake. I say characters can have it, but writers can't. There is a writer who wrote *Mein Kampf*, very nationalistic." But he added, "I think it is a non-sequitur to think of *hybridity*."

Dhondy's career can be divided into three stages: college lecturer, school teacher, and novelist (at Leicester College and teacher and Head of the English department at Archbishop Michael Ramsay's school, 1968–84), who was writing about his students; commissioning editor at Channel 4 TV, U.K. (1984–97) who made possible award-winning films such as *Salaam Bombay!* (Dir. Mira Nair), *Immaculate Conception* (Dir. Jamil Dehlavi), *Mississippi Masala* (Dir. Mira Nair), *Bandit Queen* (Dir. Shekhar Kapur), and playwright; and now, 1997 onward as a columnist, independent filmmaker, literary critic, and theorist writing about the Carib-

bean socialist, C. L. R. James. His debut as a screenwriter was in *Split Wide Open*, which was produced and directed by Dev Benegal. His plays include *The Bride and other Plays for T.V.* (Faber and Faber), *Vigilantes* (Hobo Press), *Mama Dragon* (stage play, Arts Theatre and ICA, London), *Shapsters* (Cottesloe at the National Theatre), *Film, Film Film* (Shaw Theatre, London). His TV series include *Come to Mecca*, *No Problem*, *Tandoori Nights*, *Empress and the Munshi*, *King of the Ghetto*, and *Annie's Bar*.

In an E-mail to me, this is how Dhondy characterized his current work:

I quit Channel 4 at the end of 1997 and have been writing since. My latest books are a biography of C. L. R. James (Weidenfeld) and *RUN* a novel for young adults, about a boy called Rashid Rashid, whose grandfather dies and leaves a boy with a dual identity (Bloomsbury 2002). I have since gone on to writing films: the *Alexandria Quartet* based on Lawrence Durrell's books—three films are yet to be produced, the first is out—and *The Rising*, a story of the Indian Mutiny (1857) [on which the critical theoretical term *subaltern* is based], with Ketan Mehta directing and Aamir Khan acting. Have finished another children's book called *BAD*. Tara Press in India has published a collection of short stories *Adultery and Other Stories*.

Dhondy's life of his Caribbean friend C. L. R. James entitled, *C. L. R. James: Cricket, the Caribbean and World Revolution* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2001) and *C. L. R. James: A Life* (Random House, 2002), have been published to great acclaim especially since there is so much interest in James's notion of "crossing boundaries"—those metaphoric and literal, as on a cricket field. Dhondy first met James at a Black Panthers' movement meeting in the late 1960s. In the 1970s, James lived with Dhondy and the two be-

came good friends. In two recent columns, one before 9-11 and one after, Dhondy seems to have run afoul of the Black British Muslims he struggled to help and support in the 1970s and 1980s. In July 2001, he wrote in *The Guardian* that an Islamic academy was needed in Britain to address the needs of Muslims in Bradford and Brick Lane. He then criticized the British for their policy of anglicizing Muslim natives of Britain. In "Our Islamic Fifth Column" (Autumn 2001, Vol. 4), he wrote of radical Islamic clerics recruiting British teenagers, causing much consternation in the Islamic community who thought that because his name sounds Muslim that he was betraying them. He was not in fact betraying them and has undertaken a commission from YTV to write a script portraying the racism involved in the brutal attack on Sarfraz Najeib in Leeds by two soccer players, Woodgate and Boyer. But Farrukh Dhondy is a Parsi Zoroastrian from India, a "pukka sahib," a true gentleman, who in fact has assimilated in Britain as "the good Parsi," as the British said in the nineteenth century, a term used flatteringly to describe the accomplishment and success of such Parsis as the industrialist, J. R. D. Tata.

*Feroza Jussawalla*

#### Further Reading

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