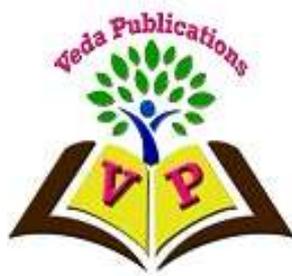


**CULTURES AND RELATIONSHIPS IN ANNE TYLER'S NOVEL*****DIGGING TO AMERICA***

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Anne Tyler's novel *Digging to America* reflects the multiculturalism in the U.S. Tyler manages to introduce social and cultural themes into her staple theme of family life. Two families meet in the summer of 1997 at a Baltimore airport lounge as each awaits the arrival of a baby girl from Korea. Since these children are Korean adoptees, the minute in Baltimore Airport is open and shared, and starts a bond between the Yazdans and the Donaldson-Dickinsons. The two adoptive families form an extended family as the years go by to encompass clashes between cultures. The adoption of conflicting cultures by this extended family resembles how America has encompassed a diversity of cultures. This paper deals with the cultural issues and relationships in Anne Tyler's novel *Digging to America*.

Keywords: *America, Culture, Family, Relations.*



Anne Tyler's novel *Digging to America* reflects the multiculturalism in the U.S. Multiculturalism is defined as:

"...a system of beliefs and behaviors that recognizes and respects the presence of all diverse groups in an organization or society, acknowledges and values their socio-cultural differences, and encourages and enables their continued contribution within an inclusive cultural context which empowers all within the organization or society." (C. Rosado)

Paco Underhill, an anthropologist used a word expat-expats for people who have left their own land to take up residence elsewhere, but settle in an enclave of foreigners like themselves. In her 17th novel *Digging to America*, Anne Tyler reminds us that the United States is home of many such expat-expats. The novel tells the story of two Baltimore families — the all-American Donaldsons and the Iranian-born Yazdans — who become the closest of friends after they both adopt baby girls from Korea. The adoption of conflicting cultures by this extended family resembles how America has encompassed a diversity of cultures. In *Digging to America*, Tyler manages to introduce social and cultural themes into her staple theme of family life. It has its merits to be appreciated in an increasingly intolerant world today.

The United States population was built on immigration from other countries. Despite recent moves to close the U.S. borders to new immigrants and refugees, a new immigrant moves to the United States every 33 seconds, according to the Census Bureau (Alina Bradford). From the earliest explorers and settlers to the modern day, America has been a nation of immigrants. The earliest settlers and colonists came from more than one European country of origin. There were the French, the Dutch, the Spanish, and the English, all vying for control of the new continent and leaving their marks. A vast swath of African cultures, by way of the slave trade, made their way over to the new world early on. Different waves of immigrants have washed ashore in the United States at various junctures, helping to shape and build America in critical ways.

Pretty much every language on the planet is talked in the United States. The bureau divides those

languages into four categories: Spanish; other Indo-European languages, which includes German, Yiddish, Swedish, French, Italian, Russian, Polish, Hindi, Punjabi, Greek and several others; Asian and Pacific Island languages, including Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Thai, Tamil and more; and "all other languages." (Zimmermann, Kim Ann)

Nearly every known religion is practiced in the United States, which was founded on the basis of religious freedom. About 71 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christians, according to information gathered by the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan research group, in 2017. The research also found that about 23 percent had no religious affiliation at all and around 6 percent of the population is made up non-Christian religions. The number of people who identify with no religion seems to be decreasing. According to the Pew Research Center, this category is expected to drop from 16 percent in 2015 to 13 percent in 2060. (Zimmermann, Kim Ann)

Digging to America starts on August 15, 1997, when two babies from Korea arrive at Baltimore airport and meet the couples that are to adopt each of them. Although the two families go their separate ways right after they claim the babies, their lives begin to be deeply intertwined when Bitsy and Brad Donaldson call Ziba and Sami Yazdan. Soon they start inviting each other and the Grand parents on each side to join for gatherings.

Maryam Yazdan is the mother of Sami and grandmother of Susan. She is a native of Iran and now an American citizen. She departed Iran before she was twenty and her Iranian husband died before she was forty, leaving her to raise her son alone. Now in her sixties, she has survived all the difficulties and is a confident, sober, elegant and, most important of all, independent woman. Maryam has friends both in and out of Baltimore; her horizon extends further than that of Doug Bedloe's. However, although she has lived in America for more than forty years, she feels she is not American: for Maryam, America is "a country where she would never feel like anything but a foreigner" (DA 12). She is conscious of her difference; in other words, she identifies herself as "the Other" in America. Tyler uses Maryam's situation to explore the familiar theme of her novels,



that is, bonds and isolation in family life. Right from the start, Maryam feels a deep connection with Susan—"something around the eyes, some way of looking at things, some onlooker's look: that was what they shared. Neither one of them quite belonged" (p. 13).

In calling their baby Susan, the Yazdani "chose a name that resembled the name she had come with, Sooki, and also it was a comfortable sound for Iranians to pronounce" (p. 10). The Yazdani are more pragmatic. They Anglicise their daughter's Korean name to Susan as they worry about easing her integration. The Yazdani just hope that Susan won't have to endure their experience as outsiders. The Donaldsons keep their baby's Korean name, Jin-Ho. The Donaldsons take their place as upwardly mobile but right-thinking Americans so much for granted that their concern is focused on Jin-Ho preserving her Korean cultural identity. But Jin-Ho is astute enough to sniff out the artificiality of these gestures, and by the time she reaches primary school is insisting that everyone call her "Jo". (Julie Wheelwright)

At a joint family party, Susan overhears her parents quarreling about Bitsy Donaldson's too pushily aired opinions on child-rearing. "Papa?" she asks her father. "Is Bitsy bad?" "No Susie-june," Sami responds. "Never mind, I guess I'm just feeling irritable." It's only as he pauses, searching for the word for "irritable," that he realizes he and Susan are speaking Persian. He's a hyphenated American, born here to immigrant parents and married to an Iranian expatriate, with a daughter adopted from Korea. There's only one way to describe this constellation of identities: A modern American family.

Maryam's closest friends are Turkish, Greek and French and they agree to be different, to be "the Other" in America. They are all excellent cooks and over the years they have taken up the habit of eating at each other's places more and more frequently instead of eating out. On these occasions, the four women cannot help talking about Americans:

"But almost always the subject of Americans came up, in an amused and marveling tone. They never tired of discussing Americans" (DA 259).

Sami, too, likes to discuss Americans with his relatives, but in a considerably different way. His talk on Americans is referred to as "a performance piece that he liked to put on for the relatives" (DA 80). His criticism is directed to the following tendencies that he sees in Americans:

1. Lack of understanding of cultures as old as that of Iran
2. Craze for logic
3. Refusal to accept bad luck
4. Belief that the rest of the world is keenly interested in America
5. Claim to be open when in truth they are not ready to accept outsiders into their lives
6. Claim to be tolerant when in truth they criticize outsiders who break American rules

Sami's audiences seem to agree with him and they provide examples from their own experiences to emphasize the points he makes. As far as his clan is concerned, his observation is not without justifiability. It is impossible to tell whether these observations are Tyler's own or not; however, this kind of reference to a particular society or culture is rare in Tyler's works and therefore noteworthy.

Maryam feels uncomfortable with Sami's critical comments on Americans and says to him:

"You with your Baltimore accent ... American born, American raised, never been anywhere else: how can you say these things? You are American yourself! You're poking fun at your own people!" (DA 82)

Sami soothes her, saying his comments are made in good humor. Maryam cannot let him get away with it.

"It doesn't sound so good-humored to me. And where would you be without this country? I ask you! You take it for granted, is the problem. You have no idea what it feels like to have to watch every word, and keep every opinion to yourself, and look over your shoulder all the time wondering who might be listening. Oh, I never thought you would talk this way! When you were growing up, you were more American than the Americans." (DA 82—83)

Digging to America is the second Tyler novel published after 9/11 incident. The arrival of Jin-Ho



and Susan is set in the summer of 1997; but when the same crowd gathers again at Baltimore Airport to welcome Xiu-Mei, the Donaldson's second adopted daughter, it is after 9/11. Sami cannot help mentioning an experience of his friend who was stopped just before boarding an airplane because of his Middle-Eastern looks: "Ever since September eleventh, every Middle Eastern looking person is a suspect" (DA 169). Maryam feels the same way, too and says that "that's what it's been like ever since September eleventh" (DA 179). Maryam may not be as aggressive as Sami, but she, too, complains that being foreign is "a lot of work and effort" and that she never quite manages to fit in" (DA 179). She is conscious of her differentness:

"She was not American... She was a guest, was what she meant. Still and forever a guest, on her very best behavior" (DA 15).

The way she dresses shows her self-recognition. She dresses "with the utmost care even just to babysit" (DA 15) and makes sure to wear her hair neatly with the gray streaks tinted away. Just as houseguests would not make themselves at home, she thinks it is "important to keep up appearances" (DA 15). She admits to herself that if she had lived in Iran, she would dress more casually. Maryam's dressing is juxtaposed with that of Bitsy Donaldson whose plain clothing and makeup give Maryam the impression that it is a certain statement. Bitsy's slackness shows that she feels at home but Maryam is always on the lookout. However, Maryam believes that Sami does belong to America. "Her son belonged. Her son didn't even have an accent; he had refused to speak Farsi from the time he was four years old, although he could understand it" (DA 13).

Maryam, who left Iran in order to be "free thinking and forward-looking" (DA 155), became an American of her own accord, whereas Sami has been one all his life. It was not his choice to be an American. For Sami and Ziba's generation, Maryam's coming to America is more of a fairy tale than an exile. Maryam sees that this has caused a rift between Sami and herself. Parenthood for Sami and grandparenthood for Maryam forces them to reevaluate their identity as hyphenated Americans. When it came to adopting a baby from Korea, Sami was not sure if he would be able to love the child as

his own. He confessed his doubt only to his mother, saying that he was worried that the child would "feel out of place" because he or she would "always look so unmistakably foreign to other people" (DA 92). Maryam's only response is a bemused look. Who are "other people" and what does it mean to be "foreign"? Apparently, Sami does not think that he is "foreign"; he looks at himself as one who belongs to America. However, he imagines that his foreign-born daughter-to-be would not. He also worries that because the child would not bear any physical resemblance to him nor his wife, it would be too obvious that they were not "the true parents" (DA 93).

Maryam recognizes her ambiguous feeling about her son's identity. She is glad that he belongs to America in a way she never did but at the same time regrets his disloyalty to Iranian language and culture. Because she has, at least in theory, a strong desire to value independence more than anything else and understands that one's own child is an independent being and not part of the parent, she has not willed him to speak Farsi. In order not to press any expectation on him, she is suppressing her desire to maintain the link with her native culture. Yet Sami's Americanness is by no means simple. As a youngster, he imagined his future family would be like the one in a popular TV sit-com:

As a child he had longed for a Brady Bunch" family — a father who was relaxed and plaid shirted and buddy-buddy, a mother who was sporty rather than exotic. He had assumed that his schoolmates enjoyed an endless round of weenie roasts and backyard football games and apple-bobbing parties, and his fantasy was that his wife would draw him into the same kind of life. (DA 83)

In Sami and Ziba's case, it was adopting a baby from Korea at the same time as the Donaldsons that drew them into a Brady Bunch style of life. When Sami and his family first visit, it is Brad Donaldson in corduroy pants and woolen shirt that welcomes them in a casual, friendly, "buddy-buddy" manner. Bitsy in her jersey, slacks and jogging shoes is far from exotic but not quite sporty, either. It is as if Bitsy and Brad are a faded, therefore more realistic, version of Brady Bunch. They show that the vision of a perfect American family that Sami longed for in his



boyhood is fantasy and is not available in real life. Even with their “ultra-American” family name (DA 22) and the array of getting-together occasions such as the annual “Arrival Party” to commemorate the babies landing on American soil, the leaf-raking party, or the “Binky Party” contrived to encourage the baby to give up her pacifiers, Tyler makes the readers aware that there is no such thing as an ideal American family and the reality is not as bright as the iconic TV version.

The biggest drama in *Digging to America* comes towards the end when Maryam is romantically involved with Bitsy's widowed father Dave Dickinson. When Maryam first becomes intimate with Dave, they have a conversation on Maryam's foreignness and what it is “to belong.” This conversation is made in her car as Maryam gives him a ride from Baltimore airport where everyone gathered to welcome the Donaldsons' second adopted baby from China. Without showing any sentiments, Maryam confesses that she has this mind-set that her life is “defined” by her foreignness and that she tends to think “everything would be different if only you belonged” (DA 181). Dave assures her by saying: “You belong. ... We all think the others belong more” (DA 181). They hold hands for the first time when Dave urges her to come inside the Donaldsons' house instead of just dropping him and driving home, saying: “Come in, Maryam. Come inside” (DA 182). This urge appeals to Maryam's need to “belong” and she is drawn not only into the house but into intimacy with him. Dave makes a proposal to get married, which she first accepts and then changes her mind and declines. After she decides to stay separate from him, she recalls their conversation bitterly: For the sake of feeling needed she had linked herself to a man so inappropriate that she might as well have fished his name out of a hat. An American man, naïve and complacent and oblivious, convinced that his way was the only way and that he had every right to rearrange her life. She had melted the instant he said, “Come in,” even though she knew full well that inclusion was only a myth. And why? Because she had believed that she could make a difference in his life. (DA 266)

Her desire for inclusion and fear of losing independence clash within herself, and she chooses

to remain foreign and therefore “the Other” to Americans. However, her inner voice sounds pained rather than confident, thus revealing her need to belong and to be included despite her attachment to her native culture.

Schillinger points out that the novel came shortly after Tyler lost her mother who had been a political and social activist all her life. That and the shock of nine-eleven with the subsequent antagonism that was turned towards Middle-Easterners may well have influenced Tyler to untypically deal with international and cultural clashes. Liesl Schillinger in her review of *Digging to America* points out that Tyler's own experiences and needs are reflected in this novel. Tyler's late husband Taghi Modarressi was an Iranian-born psychiatrist and it would be natural to assume that Tyler had first-hand knowledge of Iranian Americans and their cultural clash with, and adaptation to America.

The final scene in which the whole Dickinson-Donaldson clan come to Maryam's place to urge her to join the annual Arrival Party, Maryam cannot resist her inner need and run out of the house to be received into their arms. It resembles the closing scene of *Dinner at the Homesick Restaurant* (1982) in which Ezra Tull urges the whole family to go out onto the streets to find the father who slipped away from the family dinner. Would this be considered as another “nutrasweet” ending? *Digging to America* is saved from presenting an overly rosy view of life thanks to Tyler's characterization of Bitsy Donaldson. Bitsy, as Sami in his outrage described *Culture Clash* in Anne Tyler's *Digging to America*, can be “pushy, and self-righteous, and overbearing” (DA 103). Bitsy's insistence on keeping her daughters' original names rather than giving them new, American names, and to clothe them in pseudo-traditional attire of their native countries exemplifies her shallow understanding of cultural heritage that the Yazdans roll their eyes at. Yet Tyler turned Bitsy into one of the most memorable of the characters she created by making her a vulnerable and even pathetic person who has known many disappointments in life: her first marriage that didn't last, her failure to pursue a career, her unfulfilled wish to bear a child, and her fight with cancer. Always having felt insecure and never reaching



maturity, adopting a baby was a means to anchor herself in life.

Over a decade after its publication, *Digging to America* needs to be read in the time like today at the point when words communicating racial, ethnic, and cultural bias or even contempt are heard, and new rifts are created between peoples not just in the U.S. but all over the world.

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