



The Desirable Sister

Taslim Burkowicz

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When two members of Vancouver's Gujarati Indian community marry, they have no idea that their daughters, Gia and Serena, are destined to complete the cycle of sororial tension begun in their mother's generation. These sisters come together and fall apart, each grappling with the skin they're in; Taslim Burkowicz's novel *The Desirable Sister* questions what that skin means about who they become and who they're seen to be.

Because of their heritage, Gia and Serena are both desperate to fit in. But the sisters' experiences of desirability, where it comes from, and the communities and spaces it gives them access to or excludes them from are mirror worlds of each other. Passing for white, Gia finds success first as a model, later as an artist exploring the Indian identity she feels invisible within. Serena's a thriving social worker whose stability and financial security have eluded her sister, but her coloring makes her the target of toxic messages about melanin in both white and Indian spaces.

The novel does its best character work when it's digging into tropes. It unearths unique, personal stories that highlight what social expectation veils in terms of individual identity. The sisters' self-interrogations are well realized, bridging the particular experience of growing up first-generation Indo-Canadian in a Gujarati household with universal women's pain: "social pressures, the limits of [the] biological clock" and the "world of boys, success, or beauty." The opportune tidiness of its violent resolution is more flat.

In *The Desirable Sister*, acceptance isn't just about self-love but about the social conditioning that shapes self-perception. Gia and Serena chase a sense of wholeness and belonging that isn't one-size-fits-all, but personhood rarely is, even when there's an issue like colorism compressing all with an almost unbearable weight.

LETITIA MONTGOMERY-RODGERS (November / December 2019)

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