

Multiculturalism and the Other : A study of cultural intersections in Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*

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Abstract: Our globalized world is marked with intense cultural encounters of all kinds leading to the dismissal of the ideas of class, caste, religion and culture as artificial constructs. Here one remembers Perry Anderson's quote of quotes about post-modernity being the celebration of "the crossover, the hybrid, the pot - pourri". This is true for some post-modern writers who share the same post-colonial diasporic identity. Thereby multicultural literature emerge seeking to challenge the idea that "good fences make good neighbours", and to celebrate the cultural hybridity. Cultural intermingling results in redefining the borders of nation and ethnicity, class and religion, as well as foregrounding the marginalized voices.

This paper proposes to study the various aspects of cultural intersections which challenge the monolithic notions of WASP culture, in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's debut novel *The Mistress of Spices*, by using the textual analysis method. It seeks to examine how the novelist legitimizes the subaltern voices forming an integral part of the mosaic of the multi-cultural and multi-ethnic American society. The focus of the narrative is on the lives of the Indian diaspora who struggle hard to realize their immigrant dreams. Their encounters and bonding with other marginalized voices have also been wonderfully explored by the novelist, who creates a 'salad bowl' of cultural intersections and cross-sections defying the notion of the 'melting pot' in culture theory. The author has successfully revived certain aspects of an ancient culture which have been pushed to the periphery by the effects of a global culture.

Key words : cultural encounters; post-colonial diasporic identity; cultural hybridity; cultural intermingling; marginalized voices; cultural intersections; subaltern voices.

In the post post- colonial era the socio-economic scenario across the globe is fast changing. Globalization has paved the way for a greater cross- cultural symbiosis. The centrist, white-centric dynamics of power is on the decline. The dichotomy of West/East, high/low, Us/Other which has so long segregated the whites from the numerous ethnic populace is fast losing its significance. This has resulted in the evolution of new concepts like 'hybridity', 'dialogism', 'integration', 'cultural diversity' and 'tolerance'. Multiculturalism is an emerging phenomenon in the contemporary society. It challenges the colonial notion of the centrist, universal culture of the Whites as being the only legitimate one. It privileges the validity of other cultures as well, and recognizes multiple voices as legitimate. The term 'multiculturalism' came into usage after the idea of a 'melting pot' was criticized by minorities as both assimilationist and white-dominated. It does not insist that cultures should merge with each other: rather it believes in preserving one's own position. Roy Jenkins, a former Home Secretary of Britain advocated 'integration' as an important aspect of multiculturalism, defining it as 'not a flattening process of assimilation but as equal opportunity, accompanied by cultural diversity, in an atmosphere of mental tolerance' (Brah 226). Multiculturalism in the British society was aimed at the 'cultural integration of minorities.' An

understanding of multiculturalism requires knowledge of the subtle difference between 'assimilation' and 'integration'. While 'assimilation' is a process whereby ethnic minorities adopt the customs and traditions of the majority community, by giving up their own, so that they become similar to the majority culture, 'integration' is the process of absorption into a majority culture. It requires an acceptance of the laws and ways of the host country by the minority community without giving up their own identity. Integration is a two-way process where there are cross influences from both cultures. As a social phenomenon multiculturalism seeks to preserve cultural differences and erase the dichotomy of high/low culture. Distinguishing between 'boutique multiculturalism' and 'strong multiculturalism' Stanley Fish says, "The politics of difference is what I mean by strong multiculturalism. It is strong because it values difference in and for itself rather than as a manifestation of something more basically constitutive . . ." (378).

In academic discourse multiculturalism informs post-colonial literature, especially diasporic writings. Multicultural literature emerged as a sub-genre of diasporic literature, revaluing the experiences of different ethnic and marginalized communities. It portrays racial or ethnic groups without bias, alongside the white Anglo-Saxon

majority. To attempt a basic and generalized definition of multicultural literature would be to say that it is literature that reflects ethnic or regional groups whose cultures have been less represented than European cultures in the past. The discourse of multiculturalism emerged as a subversive exercise to canonical literature which promotes Euro centrism, thereby marginalizing and misrepresenting the cultures of the Africans, Native Americans, Latinos and Asians. Multicultural literature refers to the corpus of literary works that embraces many cultures and where culture is an integral part of the story. The study of multicultural literature is a gradually emerging phenomenon. Multicultural elements inform the works of such writers as Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, Toni Morrison, Bharati Mukherjee, Monica Ali, Bapsi Sidhwa and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni among others. Sharing a common post colonial diasporic identity these writers depict the cultural diversity in a cosmopolitan setting in all its richness.

This paper seeks to attempt a multicultural reading of Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. Divakaruni is a diasporic writer of Indian origin based in the USA. A prolific writer, Divakaruni has won several awards for her volumes of poetry and fiction. Her area of interest lies in delineating the experiences of the migrant population, and the predicament of women both in India and abroad. In her award winning novel *The Mistress of Spices* Divakaruni explores the diasporic condition against a multicultural backdrop. The term 'spices' and the charm associated with it immediately conjures up images of the Orient. Spices play a significant role in the novel to symbolize Orientalism. The novel propounds deep rooted multiculturalism in its portrayal of cultural diversity, hybridity, culture conflict, racial tensions, alienation and integration of the migrant subject into the multi-ethnic American society. The novel is a cultural carnival, representing different communities and the complexity of their intercultural and intracultural relationships. While discussing the novel in an interview with Morton Marcus for *Metro* Divakaruni said, ". . . I extended my subject matter from dealing exclusively with the Indian-American community to include three other ethnic groups living in the inner city - Latinos, African Americans and Native Americans . . ." (8-14 May 1997). Besides the Indian diaspora these marginalized communities form an integral part of the multicultural mosaic of the contemporary American society as depicted in the narrative.

The story begins with the initial adventures of the protagonist Tilo (short for Tilotamma) in search of an independent identity. After her training as a spice mistress she enters into her new role of administering spices to the expatriate Indians in Oakland. As the owner of the

spice shop she encounters different people. Working under certain restrictions she has to depend solely on her customers to construct a view of the American social life. People of different ethnic and religious backgrounds flock to the store to fulfill their individual needs. Thus she meets Lalita, Jagjit, Daksha, Haroun, Kwesi, Raven, Geeta and the bougainvillea girls. In the process of supplying groceries and other Indian commodities she gleans out their problems, and tries to help them out by dispensing the appropriate spice. Obeying the dictates of the Order of Mistresses she helps only her folks. In this novel Divakaruni adopts a complex strategy for unfolding the diasporic dilemma of the immigrants. It is through the eyes of Tilo that Divakaruni takes the readers to the private realms of her customers to encounter their joys and sorrows, struggles and hardships, hopes and frustrations. As the customers visit the shop again and again Tilo is able to read through their thoughts and communicate it to the readers who anxiously wait to see how the magical power of the spices help to cure their problems.

Divakaruni portrays the cultural diversity without bias and stereotypes. Several subaltern voices emerge in the course of the narrative which are legitimized by the author. Indians residing in the bay area of Oakland exhibit their Indianess unconsciously in their dress, food habits, values and ideology. Tilo herself would never step out of her store to venture into the American society as she has vowed abstinence from worldly desires. A string of plastic mango leaves is hung across the entrance of her spice store to ward off evil. The rich snobbish type like Mrs. Kapadia would "think they're still in India" and treat her chauffeur with contempt and "order this, order that . . . and after you wear out your soles running around for them, not even a nod in thanks" (28-29). Lalita who prefers to be called Ahuja's wife dare not go against her husband's wishes to pursue her vocation. Daksha would not forget to buy ingredients for dalia pudding for her mother-in-law's 'ekadasi', a typical Indian religious rite for a widow. Geeta's grandfather, the ex-army man could never come to terms with his granddaughter's liberal ways. He abhors the fact that Geeta works in a professional setting with men, dines out with her colleagues and comes home late. His patriarchally conditioned mind finds it shocking and prompts him to find a suitable match for her from India. Haroun, true to his cultural moorings, would religiously attend the namaaz in the masjid. Even the stylist Bougainvillea girls clothed in salwars would come to the store for buying spices for biryani, a typical Indian dish. In spite of staying abroad for years Geeta's parents, Ramu and Shiela, cannot brush aside their prejudice against inter-racial marriage. They still believe in the Indian notion of arranged marriage as the only and best possible way of fixing the marriage of their only daughter. Though they do

not believe in imposing restrictions on her, they insist that she understands and upholds their values. Terribly shocked and upset on hearing that Geeta intends to marry Juan, her mother breaks down saying, “I never thought you’d do this to us, is this how you repay us for giving you so much freedom . . .”(90). Ahuja’s male ego is hurt when he says, “Am I not man enough man enough man enough”(15). He reflects the ideology of the Indian male for whom woman is the ‘other’, socially and intellectually inferior to take the right decision about her life. The only place where all these people rush to, seeking ‘happiness’ (78) and remedy to alleviate their pains and sufferings is the SPICE BAZAAR. This store run by Tilo is in itself a microcosm of India. The store with its ‘sacred, secret shelves’(5) functions as a geographical space that is the repository of a monolithic national identity. To the expatriate Indians it is reminiscent of their homeland as “there is no other place in the world quite like this” (3). It is here where they feel mostly at home. They can get all their supplies ranging from grocery to embroidered sarees, from spices to sweetmeats and even mehendi. The homely, nostalgic and magical atmosphere of the store make them confide in Tilo their problems and sufferings. Thus Tilo gets involved in their lives and tries to help them out, for she is the ‘architect of the immigrant dream’ (28). Moreover she was Tilottama, “the essence of Til, life giver, restorer of health and hope”(42). She administers *kalo jire*, *fenugreek*, *asatoefida*, *cardamom*, *ginger* to help her native folks. The magical healing power of the spices and Tilo’s advice help them face life with new challenges and hopes. Jagjit joins Kwesi’s karate classes, Lalita leaves home and an abusive husband to join a battered women’s shelter, Geeta is reunited with her family who are no longer hostile to Juan, and Haroun finds new hope and happiness. Thus they find happiness overcoming their problems and cultural barriers. They are able to create a space for themselves –a common diasporic space. In this way Divakaruni beautifully portrays the minority community’s integration into the American culture.

The role and significance of the spices cannot be overlooked. Spices are the most important characters in the novel. In ancient times it was the spices that lured the West to the East. Actually the whole colonial project started on account of the spices. Thus the spices symbolize Orientalism and exoticism. Divakaruni’s magical treatment of the spices make them all the more alluring. They are invested with a magical power to heal, cure, and to restore happiness and well-being. They belong to the old, magical world as also their mistress. In fact they represent her values in life. Clearly, the spices and their mistress symbolically represent an ancient culture characterized by its complexity and exoticism. The author’s emphasis on the curative powers of Indian ayurveda medicine symbolized through the spices can be

perceived as an attempt to unfold the richness of a culture, marginalized and suppressed by the colonial hegemony as also by the WASP culture. Tilo herself is a metaphor for the young Asian woman caught between tradition and modernity, duty and love. She is faced with the same dilemma as Geeta. She controls her emotions and rebukes herself for being indulgent: “A Sahib like him. Not one of us. Keep away Tilo”(111). The spices manifest a traditional conservatism and prevent her from being wayward. They both empower and enslave her. They speak to her and sing back in her hand. Sometimes they act as jealous paramours. In the course of the narrative the spices reveal their dynamic and universal character; they are accepted by all irrespective of country, religion or sex. Those who visit her shop are not all Indians. The shop is frequented by many non-Indians as well who come in search of spices and other ingredients like ‘fresh coriander seed . . . or pure ghee for a karma-free diet, or yesterday’s burfis at half price’(67). This universality of the spices assign them a certain cosmopolitan character; they act not only as taste enhancers but also cure the maladies of a multicultural society. They help to dissolve boundaries and promote love and understanding among people as Tilo says that we all have the same needs and desires, and on the basis of it a new space is created where different cultures meet and interrelate.

Apart from the immigrant Indians another community that draws our attention in the narrative is the Native American community. The complexity of their intracultural relationship is portrayed through Evvie and her folks. Evvie shuns and hides her native identity and transforms into Celestina who is slim, beautiful, courteous, controlled, well-mannered and is quite a contrast to the “greasy-haired women” with “ugly folds of flesh and fat” (212). Raven was unaware of his Native American roots until his meeting with his great-grandfather. After a disturbing encounter with this old man the truth about his mother’s origin is revealed. As he walks out of the old man’s room with his mother he is quick to notice “Thick-necked men wearing dirt-stiff jeans, some drinking out of bottles, a few eating chunks of fried dough dipped in gravy in paper plates. The women sat like pillars, heavy in hip and thigh . . . one of the women lifted the edge of her dress to wipe a child’s nose” (207). After this day he realised that everything he appreciated about his mother, including her name, was fake. At this point one might run the risk of misinterpreting Divakaruni as giving a negative message through the portrayal of the character of Celestina. But it is clarified only a little later when we see how Raven begins to distance himself from his mother and the values she espouses. He begins to hate his mother for her pretence. The revelation of his fractured identity changes him altogether: “I became a different person. My world was like a bag turned upside

down, with all the certainties shaken out of it”(210). He is now faced with a difficult choice of either passing as a mainstream White American or embracing the ‘different’ culture of his native folks. After much mental conflict and soul searching, he re-Christians himself as Raven, a symbol of the Native American culture. His dream visions of the raven urge him to seek his true identity. He turns away from the materialistic world symbolized by the American culture to the spiritual world represented by his rich aboriginal culture. He embraces his Native American identity without any hesitation. Thus Divakaruni forcefully foregrounds the marginalized voice which had remained so long unheard. Moreover his final identification with the mythological bird eventually helps him to find his spiritual counterpart in Tilo. Again Tilo, who had so long adhered to the strict rules of the Order of Mistresses finds herself in a terrible mental turmoil, being unable to choose between duty and desire. Her conflict is between the real youthful self, and the outer, aged, powerful self. She ultimately renounces her magical powers to become an ordinary woman who finds her new space in her union with Raven. Like Geeta who is all East and West mixed up, Tilo emerges as a cosmopolitan character. Breaking free from the fetters of tradition she re-discovers her true self in ‘Maya’.

Racial tensions and conflicts surface at various points in the narrative. Divakaruni skillfully interweaves tolerance and cosmopolitanism with racism and marginalization to reveal the ambivalence and complexity in human relationships in a multi-ethnic, multi-racial society. The 10 year old Sikh boy, Jagjit, is regularly bullied by the white boys of his school. Since he knows no English, they make fun of him and try to pull his turban off his head and push him down :

“Talk English sonofabitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole.” (39).

Misbehaviour and assault arising out of racism are not uncommon among the white population who regard the non-whites with contempt. Haroun, the taxi driver, falls victim to their wrath. Mohan, the food vendor, is beaten up and crippled for life. The note of contempt rings loud when they attack Mohan :

“ Sonofabitch Indian, shoulda stayed in your own goddamn country” (170).

This racist attitude of the dominant culture is a challenge to a multicultural society which subverts the stability of the monolithic white structures. Divakaruni seems to provide a remedy by recognizing the different marginalized voices and advocating a coalition among them.

On the one hand the communion between Geeta and Juan, and Tilo and Raven reflects the

inevitable cultural intersections of globalization, on the other it establishes the subaltern voices as legitimate. Both Juan and Raven belong to marginalized communities. Without giving up her Indian values altogether, Geeta accepts Juan. Their bonding gives rise to a particular kind of hybridity which becomes an integral part of the American culture. Sharing a common spiritual worldview as against the rational and materialistic worldview of the host culture, Raven and Tilo are able to associate with each other mentally and can easily build up their earthly paradise. The earthquake towards the close of the narrative symbolizes the destruction of the established order and a crumbling of the geo-political-cultural world where the hegemony of the West prevails. Thereafter Tilo transforms into Maya, her new identity and they both create a new space. This interracial consolidation can be seen as a tool to combat racism and to resist the dominant, homogenizing culture of America. It also indicates that the subalterns who have a shared consciousness of subjugation can form an alliance to dismantle the existing order in order to create a new space.

For Geeta, Tilo and Hameeda it is not a simple case of assimilation into the mainstream American culture. It is a process of integration whereby they accept the ways of the host country while still retaining their individual culture and identity. Overcoming their diasporic dilemmas they assume a cosmopolitan character. Here it may be mentioned that Divakaruni’s other female protagonists like Jayanthi in ‘Silver Pavements and Golden Roof’ (*Arranged Marriage*), Sudha and Anju in *Sister of my Heart*, Uma and Malathi in *One Amazing Thing* find their true identity through integration and hybridization. Speaking about gender portrayals of Divakaruni K.S. Dhannam writes:

‘Divakaruni’s books are directed to women of all races and faiths who share a common female experience. All her heroines must find themselves within the contrasting boundaries of their cultures and religions . . . it includes the Indian American experience of grappling with two identities. She has her finger accurately on the diasporic pulse, fusing eastern values with western ethos . . . Her sensitivity to contemporary voices, today’s issues are threaded through an ongoing search of identity beyond anthropology, beyond sociology and beyond academia”(62).

An important aspect of multiculturalism is its linguistic aspect. An analysis of the language structure of the novel will bring to light its multilingual character. The narrative is peppered with Indian terms ranging from Bengali to Urdu, thereby giving it a multilingual flavour. The narrative opens in Oakland and its primary object of focus is the Indian diasporic community hailing from Bengal, Punjab, Orissa, Kashmir and U.P.

Haroun's use of the Urdu term 'Subhanallah', Ahuja's wife addressing Tilo as 'mataji' and saying 'Namaste', the dissatisfaction of Geeta's grandfather in expressions like 'Che Che', 'Hai Bhagaban', 'Arre baap', 'uff', Daksha's preparation for 'Ekadasi' (a ritual performed by Hindu widows), Hameeda's use of terms like 'Khala', 'talaq', 'Bhaijan', and Jagjit's frantic cries 'Chhodo mainu'- reflect the rich linguistic diversity of the Indians. Again, a significantly recurring register pertains to the culinary. A non-Indian reader may have never heard of 'rasamalai', 'burfi', 'gulab jamun', 'kheer', 'chena besan', 'pulaos', 'rajma', 'roghan josh', 'methi paranthas' and 'chapattis'. Moreover, the entire narrative is designed like a cook book, each chapter being named after a particular spice: 'Turmeric', 'Cinnamon', 'Fenugreek', 'Asafoetida', 'Fennel', 'Ginger', 'Peppercorn', 'Kalo Jire', 'Neem', 'Red Chillies', 'Makaradwaj', 'Lotus Root' and 'Sesame'.

The Kashmiri Muslim immigrant, Haroun, always addresses Tilo as 'Ladyjaan'. This unusual lexicon is a significant hybrid coinage; 'Lady', the English term for a dignified woman, and 'jaan', an Urdu term meaning 'very dear'. This reminds one of Amitav Ghosh's 'Achha Hong'(187) in *The River of Smoke*. The term is a Hindi-Chinese hybrid coinage; 'Achha' is the Hindi term for 'all right', and 'Hong' is the Chinese word for 'trading house'.

Another notable feature of this narrative is the weaving of Indian terms into an English syntactic matrix as is evident in the following extracts:

'... Their aroma like the long curling notes of the shehnai, like the madol that speeds up the blood with its long beat ...' (23).

Or 'She comes every week after the payday and buys the barest of staples: cheap coarse rice, dals on sale, a small bottle of oil, maybe some atta to make chapattis ... Sometimes I see her hold up a jar of mango achar or a packet of papads ... I offer her gulab-jamuns from the mithai case ...' (14).

Again Geeta's grandfather's use of grammatically incorrect sentences and Bengali terms while communicating is just a celebration of linguistic hybridity arising out of cultural hybridity. Other writers of international repute like Amitav Ghosh and Vikram Chandra also share these linguistic features in their writings. A multilingual glossary is an important aspect of Vikram Chandra's *Sacred Games* and Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies* and *River of Smoke*.

It should, however, be finally pointed out that any reading of multicultural elements in a work of art should take into cognizance the politics of the globalization vis a vis multiculturalism. It is the predominant tendency of the global civilization to create an intellectual-economic environment where all other civilizations define themselves with reference to globalization. This implies a surreptitious and sinister design to swallow up all cultures, underneath the umbrella of a progressive, civil, urban, rational, analytical, scientific knowledge system which is elitist and is broadly termed high culture. The consequence is somewhat horrible. Some societies do not any longer have a workable concept of sustenance of their cultures in the future. They have a past and a present and someone else's present as their future. "The entire East", Tagore said more than seventy years ago, is "attempting to take into itself a history which is not the outcome of its own living." (64).

It is, therefore, the dominant global consciousness always trying to drag all cultures and belief-systems towards the political ultra elite which is fully emersed in the global mass culture of politics. This would slowly but inevitably tend to subvert, weaken, and ultimately decimate all cultures which do not cater to the terms and conditions laid down by the mass global culture and economy. It is here that Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni has successfully tried to underscore the multiple cultural nuances of the so called unheard of cultures and societies of which the ideal symbol is the shamanistic mistress of spices.

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