

MEETING THE OTHER, OR THE EFFECT OF MULTICULTURALISM IN CONTEMPORARY NOVELS

Delia-Maria RADU, Assistant Professor, PhD, University of Oradea

Abstract: The paper aims to show how the encounter with other cultures, conceptions and habits constitutes a trigger for personal development in the case of certain characters by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Marsha Mehran and others.

Keywords: encounter, personal development, the Other, perceptions, misconceptions

Theoretical considerations

Multiculturalism is about cultural diversity or culturally embedded differences. Bhikhu Parekh writes that most modern societies also include several self-conscious communities entertaining and living by their own different systems of beliefs and practices. They include the newly arrived immigrants, various religious communities and territorially concentrated cultural groups. The terms ‘multicultural’ and ‘multiculturalism’ first appeared in countries which found themselves faced with distinct cultural groups. These societies had long assumed that they had a single national culture into which all their citizens should assimilate. They now found that they included groups who would not or whom it could not assimilate and whose presence therefore faced them with new and unfamiliar challenges. (see Parekh, 2000:4-5)

Cultures encounter one another both formally and informally and in private and public spaces. Guided by curiosity, incomprehension or admiration, they interrogate each other, challenge each other’s assumptions, consciously or unconsciously borrow from each other, widen their horizons and undergo small and large changes. Even when their interaction is limited, the very awareness of other traditions alerts each to its own contingency and specificity, and subtly alters the manners in which its members define and relate to it. (Parekh, 2000:220)

For Huggan (2001:126) though, multiculturalism operates as a form of willfully aestheticising exoticist discourse, a discourse which inadvertently serves to disguise persistent racial tensions within the nation, one, which in affecting a respect for the other as a reified object of cultural difference, deflects attention away from social issues – discrimination, unequal access, hierarchies of ethnic privilege – that are very far from being resolved.

From what we can see, multiculturalism is term which implies many shades of meaning and attitudes, but for the purpose of our paper we would like to see how this concept of multiculturalism “functions” in the case of immigrants into a new world, mirroring the personal experiences of the two writers we are dealing with, Marsha Mehran and Chitra Divakaruni.

Case study

Born in Tehran, Marsha Mehran left her country with her parents and now lives in Brooklyn and Ireland, but still remembers her first impressions of being an “outsider” in Ireland: “I was living in Ireland in 1999 with my husband, who is Irish. “Multiculturalism” wasn’t even in the vernacular; I was one of only a handful of “foreigners” living in County Mayo. When I walked down the village main street, people literally came out of shop doors to stare at the “brown girl” passing by! At the local pub, I was often asked if I was Japanese or Chinese (ethnic groups which I do not remotely resemble)”.

This memory, completing others, inspired her to write her first novel, *Pomegranate Soup*, in 2005. The structure of the novel is rather simple. It is the story of three Iranian sisters, who have fled their home country and seek a safe home and open a café in the small Irish village of Ballinacroagh. The townspeople’s attitudes towards them range from reserve, mistrust, preconceptions and hatred towards foreigners to curiosity and the eventual acceptance in their midst.

Talking about the changes that affect the immigrant’s culture, Samuel Scheffler explains them as follows: “(the immigrants) must come to terms with new rules, new options, new neighbours, new history, new ideas, new customs, new values, new modes of dress, new climate, new cuisine, new tastes, new expectations, new language. [...] Their culture will change because change is what cultures do when they confront new situations, and immigration, by definition, presents immigrants with a new situation. But the host communities are also affected by change, as the old residents must come to terms with the presence in their midst of new neighbours, new customs, new ideas, new modes of dress, new expectations, new languages, new cuisine, new tastes. Even if they adopt as radically exclusionary a stance as they can muster, their way of life will now be shaped by the need to exclude *these* neighbours, ideas, customs, modes of dress, expectations, values... (Scheffler, 2007:103)

The café’s first customer, Father Mahoney, enchanted by the ‘divine’ recipes and teas, returns everyday for lunch and for afternoon tea bringing with him more customers. If he is amazed by the café’s flavours, one of the local people’s customs is an amazement for the sisters: “Did you know that they’re allowed to drink, these priests ? No women, but alcohol is fine !” Bahar walked in [...] “They drink beer like water here. Last Saturday I saw an entire family, with young kids, leaving the bar next door. At eleven at night !” Marjan replied with awe. ” (Mehran, 2005:100)

The transition period from rejection to acceptance is not felt the same way by all the three sisters. If the youngest one, Layla, adapts and fits easier and quicker into the new environment, Bahar, the middle one and the darkest among her sisters, is faced more with its negative manifestations:

“...she wasn’t blind to the stares thrown her way whenever she stepped out of the café doors. How could she ignore the obvious cuts of silence, the breaks in street conversations whenever she walked by a cluster of townspeople ? Why, it had happened in the butcher’s just the other day [...] Three crotchety gossips [...] had scanned her up and down with their myopic eyes when they thought she had her back turned. She should have

returned their disapproving looks [...] but all she had done was keep her head bowed as she hurried out of the shop. (Mehran, 2005:144)

Incomprehension and disapproval is followed by verbal abuse. When Layla goes missing and there are no news about her, Bahar decides to go around the village asking people whether they've seen her, only to be met again by hostile attitudes and even offenses:

“Angry embarrassment washed over Bahar’s cheeks and sent her stomach into a spin. Something was very wrong here, not only in this dirty pub but in the bake shop next door as well. Something that went beyond the sad little curiosities of the old women in the butcher’s. Whatever she thought of that kind of small-mindedness, it was nothing compared to the bald hatred before her. It was an exclusion as foul as she had experienced in those scary early years in London, when the whole city was under alert of terrorist threats, and anyone who looked slightly foreign was watched with suspicion. [...] Turning on her heels [...] Bahar pushed through the pub door, anxious to escape the dread that was rising in her chest. Just as the door slammed behind her, a sinister voice called out: “Go back to yer stinking camels !” Raspy smokers’ laughs enveloped the rest of the smarting insult.” (Mehran, 2005:159-161)

One of the characters in the novel who adopt a radical excusatory stance, as Scheffler put it, is Dervla Quigley, a widow who is housebound by health problems and finds compensation and solace in spying the community out of her bedroom window, being Ballinacroagh’s primary gossip with a ‘vicious tongue that knew no boundaries’ and being obsessed with manipulating people.

In spite of the hostility, there are no violent actions against the immigrant sisters in the Irish village, unlike what happens in to one of our second writer’s characters. The key to the villagers’ (just as to a man’s) heart seems to be the sisters’ cooking of exotic dishes. This, in turn, relaxes them reduces their fears that their past will catch up with them, and give them the feeling that “after these lonely years of running and barely trusting anyone, Marjan and her sisters had finally found a home.” (Mehran, 2005:226)

Author and poet, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni was born in India and lived there until 1976, when she left Calcutta for the United States. Divakaruni herself ties her writing to her migrant condition. For her, “living and writing in America is [...] at once a challenge and an opportunity. But the opportunities are more important: to be able to straddle two distinct cultures and depict both with the relatively objective hand of the outsider; to destroy stereotypes and promote understanding between different sectors of the multicultural society in which we live; to paint the complex life of the immigrant with its unique joys and sorrows, so distinct from those of people who have never left their native land. The possibility of achieving even one of these through my work makes me glad to be an Indian writer in America.” (see Rustomji-Kerns, 1995:180)

A lot of her work deals with the immigrant experience, and in her novel, *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), the reader can find more “types” of immigrants within the South-Asian community, each of them trying to adjust to their new situation in their own way.

Haroun, the cab-driver, fled Dal lake where generations of his family had rowed shikaras for tourists. He lands in America as an illegal immigrant, but, like everyone else, dreams of making it in this new land. He seems destined to be a victim. After his family was shot by rebels, after shovelling coal on the ship that brought him to America, working in a car shop and as a road worker, or for a rich Indian lady who treated him as if they were still in

India, he starts working as a cab driver for a fellow Kashmiri, hoping that one day he will be able to own his car.

He gets robbed and wounded one night, barely makes it to his room, yet in the end finds in his neighbours friends who are like a real family to him, and even true love awaits for him: “Haroun who has so much to live for, for whom the immigrant dream has come true in a way he never thought.” (Divakaruni, 1997: 284)

Jagjit is a ten-and-a-half-year old boy when he makes his first appearance in the story. Tall as “wild bamboo”, shy and very attached to his mother, he still speaks only Punjabi and he is made fun of in school by the other children because of his accent, his traditional clothes and his turban which covers his uncut hair:

“In the playground they try to pull it off his head, green turban the color of a parrot’s breast. They dangle the cloth from their fingertips and laugh at his long, uncut hair. And push him down. [...]

‘*Chhodo mainu*’.

‘Talk English sonofabitch. Speak up nigger wetback asshole.’ (Divakaruni, 1997:39)

Alone, with no friends in this new and cruel world, he stays awake at night, staring at the stars and thinking about his grandmother, left behind in their country.

With parents “too worn with work and worry in a strange land to hear him, Jagjit who went home each day from America to a house so steeped in Punjabi [...] who held his cries in until red swam behind his eyelids like bleeding stars” (Divakaruni, 1997: 121) is an easy pray for the members of a street gang, confusing their interest in him for friendship.

Finally feeling that he has friends, [“they’re like my brothers, better than my brothers” (Divakaruni, 1997: 121)], he is lured into the gang by gifts. “...sullen in his T-shirt and baggy Girbaud jeans and untied laces, the uniform of young America, speaking its staccato rhythms already”, he is asked to do small favours in return, and he dreams of being older, wearing the gang members' jacket, carrying the same switch-blade and maybe, one day, even being given a gun, which he considers to be his “passport into real America” (Divakaruni, 1997: 121).

The initial hopes of gathering a fortune while working in this country are contradicted by the reality of the poorly paid jobs, hard work, and discrimination:

“No one told us it would be so hard here in Amreekah, all day scrubbing greasy floors, lying under engines that drip black oil, driving the belching monster trucks that coat our lungs with tar. Standing behind counters of dim motels where we must smile as we hand keys to whores. Yes, always smiling, even when people say 'Bastard foreigner taking over the country stealing our jobs'. Even when cops pull us over because we're in the wrong part the rich part of town. We thought we'd be back home by now, in Trichy, in Kharagpur, in Bareilly. Under the sweet whirr of a ceiling fan in a mosaic room with a seagreen floor, leaning back on satin pillows, and the servant bringing ice-cold lassi with rose petals floating in it. But the landlord keeps hiking up the rent, last week the car wouldn't start, and the children grow so fast out of their clothes” (Divakaruni, 1997: 62).

In the city, violence is more common than in the countryside, and the reader is faced with several cases. There's the case of the street vendor, who sells Indian food from a cart and who is severely beaten by two pro-Nazi young people, in their late teens, not much more than boys: "he hears one of them spit, 'Sonofabitch Indian, shoulda stayed in your own god-damn country.' [...] the young man is kicking at the cart until it comes crashing down [...] So many kinds of pain – like fire, like stinging needles, like hammers breaking. Pain, which is ultimately only like itself. ('Fucking turd, bastard, piece of shit, this'll teach you.')

He thinks he shouted for help, only it came out in the old language, *bachao, bachao*." (Divakaruni, 1997:171) Mohan represents the countless immigrants broken "in body and in mind" by America, and due to the kindness of his neighbours - who gather the money for their plane tickets - he is sent home, together with his wife, as there's nothing for them anymore in this country.

Then, there are others: the man who finds his grocery windows smashed by rocks, picks up one to read the hate-note tied around it. [...] a woman with her *dupatta* torn from her shoulders as she walks a city pavement, the teenagers speeding away in their car hooting laughter. The man who watches his charred motel, life's earnings gone, the smoke curling in a hieroglyph that reads *arson*. (Divakaruni, 1997:173)

While older people stick to their values and traditions, the younger ones are more open to change in order to fit into the society. Geeta's grandfather, whose Indian values are outdated in this foreign country, is disturbed by the way she behaves. She works late in an office, in the presence of other men, is sometimes brought home after dark by colleagues, has had her hair cut so short that her neck is showing (thus losing the essence of her womanhood, in her grandfather's opinion) and wears make-up (as only Englishwomen and prostitutes were doing in his days!).

When Geeta's parents try to arrange a match for her in India, she announces rebelliously that she is going to marry a Chicano, Juan Cordero. According to her parents, Juan [who has made it out of the *barrios*, so he is of a modest origin but has been trying to work his way up, acquiring the status of a project manager] is even more of an outcast because he is not white. Thus, we see intolerance manifested even by migrants towards the outsiders of their communities.

What meeting the Other does for the mysterious American whom Tilo, the main character, ends up dating, is opening himself and remembering about his family facts that he had long buried deep inside his soul. Raven's white complexions "hides" a native American, an identity brought to the surface of his consciousness by his chance encounter.

Then, Tilo's several names represent, in fact, several identities, which is exactly what happens to people who migrate. There is an old self, left behind in the country of origin, there's a new self, within the family and the shelter of the home, and there's the self which interacts with the new community, in school, at work, a.s.o., the one that emulates the peers' attitudes, way of thinking or speaking, habits, dress codes, tastes in order to fit in.

In the second novel we don't get to see whether the newcomers, the outsiders, change, in a way, the city in which they live. The close-knit community of a village has been replaced by a vast city, and the story does not follow that path.

Conclusions

In spite of those whose stories show us that not everybody can adapt and makes it in a new land, what we do see, in both novels, though, is the fact that meeting the Other, as we have entitled our article, the encounter with other cultures, conceptions and habits constitutes a trigger for personal development in the case of certain characters.

In the small Irish village, Marjan, the elder of the three sisters, forced by circumstances to become, at 17, more a mother to her young sisters, realizes that all three of them will be alright and that she needn't worry so much anymore. Bahar, the middle one, learns to face her fears and not feel the need to run of an abusive husband anymore. And Layla, the younger of the sisters, finds out what love is.

Tilo, the spice mistress, disguises her real self under the appearance of an old lady meant to help her community by providing spices, recipes and understanding the customers' needs, reminding them of home: "a bent woman with skin like the color of old sand, behind a glass counter that holds *mithai*, sweets out of their childhoods. Out of their mothers' kitchens. [...] It seems right that I [...] should understand without words their longing for the way they chose to leave behind when they chose America." (Divakaruni, 1997:4).

Her life is full of rules and interdictions which she starts breaking when she starts caring for those who cross the threshold of her store. In order to speak with Geeta, on behalf of her grandfather, Tilo "attires herself for America" in street clothes. She "steps into America", or better said into American consumerism, by filling her shopping cart. And, getting dressed in a public rest room, sees her image in the mirror as "this new clothed self, I and not-I" and refers to it in the third person: "Outside a bus stop crowded [...] she will get into the line, will marvel that no one even raises his eyes, suspicious at her moving through the air of America so awkward-new." (Divakaruni, 1997:131)

Her change culminates when she falls in love with Raven, for whom she is ready to lose herself, to lose everything. Raven, who for many years has been numb to feelings, and who finally opens his heart and home for her.

Bibliography

- Amoia, Alba. Knapp, Bettina L. (Editors). 2004. *Multicultural Writers since 1945: An A-To-Z Guide*. Greenwood Press. Westport.
- Divakaruni, Chitra Banerjee. 1997. *The Mistress of Spices*, Black Swan, London.
- Huggan, Graham. 2001. *The Postcolonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins*. Routledge, London.
- Mehran, Marsha. 2005. *Pomegranate Soup. A Novel of three Sisters, Two Countries, and the Language of Food*, Fourth Estate, London.
- Parekh, Bhikhu. 2000. *Rethinking Multiculturalism. Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, Palgrave, Basingstoke.
- Rustomji-Kerns, Roshni (Editor). 1995. *Living in America: Poetry and Fiction by South Asian American Writers*. Westview Press, Boulder.
- Scheffler, Samuel. 2007. *Immigration and the Significance of Culture*, in *Philosophy and Public Affairs*; Spring, Vol 35, Issue 2. www.mit.edu/~shaslang/rprg/Scheffler consulted on November 24, 2013.

http://www.bookbrowse.com/author_interviews/full/index.cfm/author_number/1191/marshamehran consulted on November 24, 2013