

RACIAL BIAS: THE DESTRUCTIVE FORCE OF SOCIETAL HARMONY IN AMERICA – A STUDY WITH REFERENCE TO THE WORKS OF CHITRA BANERJEE

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Abstract

*This paper attempts to make a microscopic analysis of racial bias rampant in America and its impact on the life of Indian immigrants there as presented in the *The Mistress of Spices* and *Queen of Dreams* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. As such, it begins with a note on the origin and development of these cancerous diseases through the ages. Also the causes and consequences of this evil which saps the society are discussed in detail. Besides the self-elevated superiority complex of the dominant white Americans the mistaken identity of the immigrants as the usurpers of their rightful employment opportunities and the mistaken identity of the Punjabi Sikhs with turban and beard as the Arabs the suspect terrorists who masterminded the 9/11 attack of World Trade center are cited as reasons by Divakaruni in both of these novels. The fact that from the teen aged school boy Jaggit to the self-made businessmen like Mohan and Jespal fall a prey to racist attack brings to limelight that the consolidated and concentrate venom of racism running through their vein for centuries would not allow the offenders to spare the victims on the ground of age, gender or position. Hence Albert Einstein in unequivocal terms condemns racism as "America's worst disease". Besides diagnosing the disease, Divakaruni prescribes a remedy too. The changed mindset of the immigrants to integrate into the mainstreams of the host country and changed mindset of the host nation to encourage and welcome such a change is, according to Divakaruni, the panacea which, in the long run would prove beneficial to both.*

Keywords: *race, racism, racial bias, racial attack.*

"Racism", according to Albert Einstein, "is America's worst disease" (42). Besides recording these exact words of the Nobel Prize Winning Physicist in his book *Einstein on Race and Racism* Professor Fred Jerome further records his intent not to be quiet about it" [142]. Einstein further remarks that the racial segregation existing in the American society is nothing less brutal than the Nazi persecution of Jews of which he himself was a victim and sought asylum in America. But the acquired status of American citizenship did not, however, prevent him from lashing out against a society which is seemingly civilized but, in fact, barbarian at the bottom. Such pointed observations made by eminent personalities from the Nobel Laureate to the modern immigrant woman writer Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni underscore the fact that American is Janus faced one of which glows like a star as a Champion of human freedom, human rights, democracy and equality while the other is pitch black with unabated hostility towards the non-whites.

Quoting the words of Marshall and Scott, Anthony Giddens defines racism as a system which gives unequal treatment to a population group purely because of its possession of physical or other socially defined characteristics as denoting a particular race. These characteristics are negatively valued as typical social, psychological or physical traits of the race under question (626).

This definition is, in fact, based upon Count Joseph Arther de Gobinen's - popularly known as the 'Father of modern racism' – theory of existence three races namely white [Caucasian], black [negroid] and yellow [mongoloid]. He argues that presumption of possession of unparalleled wisdom, morality and strong will power naturally makes the whites superior race which automatically adorns them with the crown of Supremacy.

As a diasporic Indian woman writer, Divakaruni writes from the margins not only from the perspective of race but also from the perspective of gender. Her own bitter experiences of racial bias, and the first hand information she gathers through her association with MAITRI enable her to delve deep into the problem. She finds three major reasons besides the inherent superiority complex of the whites that increase the intensity and magnitude of racism in America. The wrong assumption of the Americans that the immigrants, though lower in intelligence and calibre encroach upon their working places which leaves them jobless. The problem of acculturation and lack of English knowledge particularly of Indian immigrant teen agers is the second reason. The third reason, is associated with terrorist attack of Twin Towers of World Trade Center. The mistaken identity of Punjabis because of their beard and turban, as the Arabs who were supposed to have masterminded the attack spurred the racial attack on Indians particularly Punjabis.

In the portrayal of the immigrant life adversely affected by the crude racial encounters *The Mistress of Spices* remains unique as it deals not only with the Indian diaspora but also with others margins of American society such as an African immigrant, Kwesi, a Hispanic Juan and even a native American Raven. Through their stories particularly that of Raven Divakaruni tries to establish the fact that the racism in American society does not target the immigrants alone but even the sons of its own soil. The trauma experienced by Jaggit, a school boy, of Indian origin brings to fore the impact of racial bias on the psyche of the teen agers too. As a rustic from India his English is ludicrously poor; as a devout Sikh he cannot appear in public bare headed. His uncut hair, the green turban the identity marks of a devout Punjabi and his lack of English offer his teasers the required background to tease him more and more.

In the playground they try to pull of his head, green turban the colour of a parent's breast. They dangle dangle the cloth from their finger tips and taught at his long, uncut hair. And push him down (38)

The first English words he learnt are the words associated with racism such as 'idiot' and 'asshole' (38) and 'nigger wet back asshole' (39). The language problem, rustic appearance and skin colour of immigrant children add fuel to fire which is summed up by M.R.Gibson in *Accommodation Without Assimilation: Sikh Immigrants in American High Schools*: "Punjabi teen agers are told they stink, to go back to India... physically surrounded by a majority of students who spit at them, refuse to sit by them in class or in buses, throw food at them or worse" [268]. Such excessive racial attacks so adversely affect the psyche of tender minds that they are forced to join an equally strong gang to protect themselves. When the employment opportunities and grabbed by the immigrants they get infuriated at the loss of their rightful jobs. Invariably, all the immigrant employees – are taunted: "Bastard foreigner taking over the country stealing our jobs" [62].

The sight of self-employed immigrants gives them eye sore. The venom racism is spilled at those who run a business of their own – that too, a lucrative business like a restaurant or food cart. The story of Mohan in *The Mistress of Spices* is a typical example of this kind. Mohan, earns his livelihood by running a food cart "Mohan Indian Foods" wherein he sells homemade *Samosas* and *Kebabs* cooked by his young wife Venna. The business is so flourishing that he plans "to hire a helper and to put another cart on the other of town" [169]. But his dream is shattered by a

sudden and unforeseen racial attack. Two whites "in their late teens, not much more than boys" whom Mohan mistook to be late customers showed themselves on the custodians of white culture and all of a sudden began to attack both verbally and physically. Shouting at him "Son of a bitch, Indian, shoulder stayed in your own goddamn country" [170] and "Fucking bud, bastard, piece of shit, this'll teach you" [171] they kicked him at the ground and dragged his face through gravel" [171]. Of the racial attacks in this novel, the attack on Mohan remains unique as Divakaruni elaborates two cases of irony in this case, Mohan saw 'red tattoo of Swastika sign on the forearm of the attackers. Swastika as the symbol of Nazism connotes racial intolerance. But Mohan remembers that in same *Swastic* sign is painted on the village homes in India as harbinger of good luck [171]. What an irony! The bringer of good fortune in India is the sign of ill-men in America. The second irony is still more poignant. The tables are turned. The offenders plead in the court of law 'not-guilty' on the ground that they were forced to retaliate in absolute self-defense and the stone-bruise on the face would substantiate their argument (170). Though Mohan was acquitted, the damage done to his body and mind was irretrievable. Once again the story of Mohan who is "broken in body broken in mind by America" [172] is not an isolated one as Divakaruni enumerates other similar stories through the recapitulation of Tilo.

The man who finds his growling windows smashed by rocks, picks up one to read the hate-note tied around it. Children sobbing outside their safe suburban home over their poisoned dog. Woman with her *Dupattora* from her shoulder as she walks a city pavement, the teen agers speeding away in their car looting laughter. The man who watches his charred motel, life's earning gone, the smoke curling in hieroglyph that reads arson.

A short story 'Silver Pavements, Golden Hoofs' in the short story collection *Arranged Marriage* (1997) contains a description of a racist attack similar to that of Mohan. The harassment and racial abuses and humiliating treatment meted out to Jayanti and her aunt while going for a walk are reminiscent of Divakaruni's personnel experience in the initial years of arrival at America. The angry outburst of Bikram on the loss of business and life's savings on account of racist arson is but the collective voice of the victimized immigrants: "Things here aren't as perfect as people at home like to think. We all thought we would become millimaires but it's not so easy" [43] and his assessment of America sounds a clear warning to those

who imagine America a 'Utopia', a heaven on earth: "this damn country, it pretends to give and then such as everything hade" (54).

If in *The Mistress of Spices* it is the first generation immigrants that fall a prey to racist attack in *Queen of Dreams* the second generation immigrants face the same fate. Rakhu, a Bengali and Belle a Panjabi jointly run a 'Chai Shop'. Belle is the westernized name of Indian Belmont Kaur and they, as the second generation immigrants call themselves American Indians. But their Chai House could not compete with the Coffee Shop run by a green eyed blonde whom Divakaruni projects as a racist. Mrs. Gupta sends a timely warning to the American Indian girls: Following her advice to change the Chai Shop into "Something Authentic" [89] for survival they make it "Kurma House" wherein they serve all Indian snacks. Moreover it becomes a meeting place of all Indians to share their joys and sorrows. The time of writing of *Queen of Dreams* coincides with the terrorist attack on Twin Towers of World Trade Center. The turbaned and bearded Punjabi's were mistaken to be the Arab terrorists. Rokhee's bold refusal to shut down the shop because "allowing weathering to come to a standstill would give the terrorist the required victory (257) and her proud declaration. "I am American already, I love this country. But I'm not going to be pressured into putting up a sign to announce that love to every passerby" "fell on a deep ear. Another pleading of Jespal". We are American, just the way you are. We all feel terrible about that happened" vanishes into thin air. Their credentials are questioned by an angry mob of white Americans who are misled by physical appearance. As in the case of Mohan's attack in *The Mistress of Spices* physical attack on Jespal in *Queen of Dreams* is preceded by verbal attack: 'you aren't the American. It's suckers like you who planned this attack on the innocent people of this country" [267]. They are

nonplussed and the question repeatedly torments them: "If I wasn't American then what was I" [271].

In both of these novels Divakaruni looks at racism from the societal point of view and argues that cultural differences are at the base of these attacks not only on individuals like Mohan and Jespal but also communities such as Native Indians of which Raven is a part. Racism, thus effects the victims in more than one way – it gauges their freedoms; it hampers the economic progress; by negating their employment opportunities; above all it keeps them in constant fear of being abused verbally, physically, mentally and psychologically. After diagnosing the malady, Divakaruni prescribes the remedy to cure the ills of society. Elimination of ethnic hostility, according to her, largely depends on the changed mindset of both the natives of the host country and the immigrants. The willingness of the immigrants to assimilate into the mainstream has to be welcomed and encouraged by the hosts which alone would ensure the creation and sustenance of a peaceful and harmonious society.

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