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OUT OF THE MARGINS: NEGOTIATING AMERICAN IDENTITIES IN CHITRA BANERJEE DIVAKARUNI'S *THE MISTRESS OF SPICES*

Abstract

The aim of the article is to discuss the discourse of hybridity employed in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices*. It is argued that under the veneer of exoticism (otherness created by culinary images, magic, and cross-cultural desire) the novel displays political engagement: it destabilizes mainstream categories such as white/black, authentic/inauthentic, American/un-American, introduces ambiguity and ultimately challenges the center/periphery paradigm. The nation's margins, represented by an immigrant from the Indian subcontinent and a half-Native American, display a creative potential of dismantling exclusionary narratives of the nation (Bhabha). Accordingly, the novel can be read as Divakaruni's attempt to show the complicated cross-cultural relations in America, thus indicating the need of constant renegotiation of American identity without a discernible center and periphery.

Keywords: Asian American fiction, hybrid identity, authenticity, diaspora

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's magical realist novel *The Mistress of Spices* has been classified, perhaps somewhat disparagingly, as culinary fiction. As such it has enjoyed popularity and wide readership, yet has not received acclaim from literary critics. This is because, as Anita Mannur tries to explain it, the food novel is regarded as an attractive form of writing, "safely ethnic"¹, serving as a narrative of alterity but with no obvious political content: "[narratives about food] have been viewed with suspicion because they are an appealing form of writing that appears to be ethnically affirmative and 'merely' cultural. There apparent lack of 'hard' political content, and attention to the social and cultural, make these thematic interventions 'acceptable' to the mainstream"². The employment of culinary idiom is thus regarded as rendering Otherness. It allows

¹ A. Mannur, *Culinary Fictions. Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*, Philadelphia 2010, p. 21.

² *Ibidem*, p. 21.

a consumption of the difference, which is often presented in Orientalist images, and makes narratives “palatable” for the Western audience. Culinary fictions composed by writers of the Indian diaspora have catered for the “Indo-chic”; that is, a fashion for India and Indian literature³, and have become the “latest commodity in the niche market for ethnicity catering to the notion that Desi cultural practices are consonant with culinary practices”⁴. “Eastern cuisine” is regarded as a “Western exoticist staple”, therefore gastronomic images, through which India is commonly presented, serve as an exoticizing discourse, which becomes a “mode of aesthetic *perception* – one which renders people, objects and places strange even as it domesticates them, and which effectively manufactures otherness”⁵.

Exoticism is classified as a discourse of the margin, which may have a subversive function. According to Graham Huggan, postcolonial cultural production is often “subject to fetishization of cultural difference”⁶, yet, it does not have to be the rule. The metropolitan center’s demand for “authentic” voices results in the appreciation of cultural difference which is easily translatable, but, certainly, it does not mean that all postcolonial writers will try to fulfill this request. The examination of such works as Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* or Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* leads Huggan to state that exoticism is “incorporated into works that challenge – often looking to subvert – metropolitan mainstream cultural codes”⁷. In his view these writers consciously employ “imperialist perceptions of an ‘othered’ India”, that is connect it with a world of magic, mysteries and wonders, forbidden space of cross-cultural desire, site of colonial nostalgia⁸.

Also Divakaruni’s *The Mistress of Spices* under its easily consumable veneer of magic realism, exoticism and the convention of romance displays its concern with the political. Such an observation is already made by Mannur, who counters the popular belief that the food novel is not usually politically engaged, and who in her reading of Divakaruni’s novel examines its involvement with social inequalities: racial politics in the United States and gender politics, the latter being a criticism of Indian society patriarchal culture and restriction of female sexual autonomy⁹.

What is even more conspicuous in the narrative is its attempt to challenge mainstream cultural categories. The novel touches the issue of complex American identities trying to destabilize the binary division into the center and the periphery. It works

³ G. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins*, New York 2001, p. 59.

⁴ A. Mannur, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

⁵ G. Huggan, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 81.

⁹ A. Mannur, *op. cit.*, pp. 89-101.

against essentializing categories which depict identity as fixed, unchanging and pure, thus easily identifiable. In contrast, Divakaruni shows the currency of hybrid identities in an era of globalization and empire, and consequently she postulates the need for the constant renegotiation of what it means to be American.

The goal of this article is to show how the novelist raises questions about the stability of the binary oppositions of such concepts as American/ un-American, white/black, authentic or inauthentic. By destabilizing these oppositions Divakaruni introduces ambivalence and resists the dominant discourse of presenting a minority as a margin and ultimately undermines the opposition between the center and periphery. Interestingly, Divakaruni refers to two different types of “margins” of American society: members of the Indian diaspora (immigrants) and a half-Native American (descendant of indigenous peoples), and so different contexts of their hybrid identities formation are presented, not to mention the fact that the novel refers to both cultural and biological hybridity. In doing so, the novelist emphasizes her point of the prevalence of hybrid identities which result not only from contemporary global movements of people but may be a present yet muted history within the American nation. In both cases hybridity is ultimately seen as an emergence of new energy that enables the production of something new, and that can be read as the new perspective on the American identity.

Divakaruni’s novel reverberates the notions introduced by the postcolonial discourse about the problematic cultural identities and about the validity of the center and periphery paradigm. Since the 1980s the discourses of hybridity have been trying to destabilize any binary oppositions, those of the colonizer and the colonized, oppressor and the oppressed, center and margin. Homi Bhabha’s notions of hybridity and the Third Space put emphasis on ambivalence, likewise Gloria Anzaldúa’s concept of new *mestiza*. Recently theorists of globalization such as Arjun Appadurai prefer to speak of global culture without discernible center and periphery, characterizing it as a culture of flows and fluid identities, since increased mobility, not only of people but also of goods, images and ideas, enables frequent cultural encounters and leads to homogenization of culture around the world¹⁰. In this context it might be stated that especially diasporic literature shows how identities become problematic when cultures come in contact. It shows how difficult it is to remain culturally pure, and also how marginalized groups become empowered and gain their own voice, registering a desire for the center and the periphery to merge.

The discourse of hybridity becomes a form of contestation of the binary oppositions, a place of productivity and creativity, and a hope for a new consciousness. Its

¹⁰ See A. Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis 1996, and his notions of ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples, which are intrinsically fluid, amorphous and unpredictable.

opposing nature cannot be ignored, as Robert Young states: “in its more radical guise of disarticulating authority, hybridity has also increasingly come to stand for the interrogative languages of minority cultures”¹¹. In a similar manner Homi Bhabha stresses the potential of hybridity to open “new sites”, which “may demand that you should translate your principles, rethink them, extend them”¹². In “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation”, Bhabha argues that diasporic and other minority communities, which may be perceived as the nation’s margins, are highly complex, also flexible and productive, from here various oppositional forces may emerge. They may lead to a dismantling of exclusionary narratives of the nation. The space between the margins, the so called Third Space, which constitutes the space of overlap of cultures and histories, becomes the site from which new narratives of national and cultural identity can be written and imagined. In hybrid identities one can find an element of revolt, an element that challenges authority, in other words, an element that contests any fixed structures, proposing in its stead ambiguity and dissolution of the borders. This may be an inevitable course of events in a world in which cultures more and more frequently come into contact. As Gloria Anzaldua anticipates writing about mestiza consciousness, which is a hybridized consciousness: “the future will belong to the mestiza. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures”¹³. The US is a good illustration of these processes; as a country of immigrants with a constant influx of newcomers and also with the past as a colonizer of the indigenous nations, it needs to continuously reformulate its identity when confronted with a new kind of immigration today or when deeply buried histories are uncovered.

In *The Mistress of Spices* Divakaruni brings together two kinds of hybridity and thus refers to different contexts of identity formation. She introduces a migrant, who initially wants to retain the cultural purity but fails to do so, and a native born American, who turns out to be of mixed origin: his father was white while mother was Native American. He is biologically mixed and he has yet to decide whether and how to embrace his cultural heritage. Accordingly, Divakaruni establishes the so called “margins of the nation”, marginalized minorities, who are on a quest to locate themselves. In each case she refers to the aspect of voluntariness in the formation of identity and therefore addresses the question of the subject’s acceptance of their hybrid identity. Addressing issues such as Americanness, whiteness or authenticity leads towards a destabilization

¹¹ R. J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, London and New York 2005, p. 22.

¹² H. K. Bhabha, *DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation*, [in:] *idem*, *The Location of Culture*, New York 2004, p. 216.

¹³ G. Anzaldua, *Borderlands/La Frontera: the New Mestiza*, San Francisco 1999, p. 102.

of the opposition between the center and the periphery, the mainstream and minority, and ultimately it becomes a call for reinvention of the American identity.

The narrative plays with the concepts of center and periphery from the very beginning, reversing them, in other words, giving the members of the Indian diaspora the central position. Moreover, initially it stresses the need for separation of cultures. The Indian community located in Oakland, California, is in the focus of attention, presented from an even more central point, that is, the shop with Indian herbs, run by Tilo, the Mistress of Spices. Tilo uses the magical powers of the spices in order to help people in distress. The centrality and significance of this ethnic community is clearly marked, Tilo is allowed to help only her own people, as the Old One commanded her: "To help your own kind, and them only. The others, they must go elsewhere for their need"¹⁴. The boundary between "us" and "them" is established; "they" or "others" are all of the people who are not of Indian ethnicity. That means that also people from the so called mainstream America, most visibly recognized as white and constituting the majority of American society, from the perspective of the shop are the periphery, and the centrality of the Indian community is thus confirmed. Those "others" obviously visit the shop but are of no interest for the Mistress:

It's not as if I haven't seen Americans. They come in here all the time, the professor types in tweed with patches on jacket elbows or in long skirts in earnest earth colours, Hare Krishnas in wrinkled white kurtas with shaved heads, backpack-toting students in seldom-laundered jeans, leftover hippies lankhaired and beaded. They want fresh coriander seed, organic of course, or pure ghee for a karma-free diet, or yesterday *burfis* at half price. They lower hoarse voices *Hey lady got any hashish*.

I give them what they want. I forget them¹⁵.

The Mistress is required to maintain the purity of her culture and magic is at work to assure of the fulfillment of her duties. If she breaks any of the rules guiding the Mistress's conduct she will be destroyed in Shampati's fire. And so Tilo is confined to the location of her shop, does not have a permission to go beyond its borders. What is more, she promises to live in solitude and not to fall in love, which she believes is easy to fulfill: "I need no pitiful mortal man to love"¹⁶. In order to resist temptations she has traded her youth and beauty for a body of an old woman. From the moment of her transformation into Tilottama, her shop becomes the center of her universe, with "its protective shell around [her]"¹⁷. At the same time her special powers of clairvoy-

¹⁴ C. B. Divakaruni, *The Mistress of Spices*, London 2005, p. 68.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 67.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 43.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 58.

ance (she can read the minds and hearts of her visitors) enable her to probe the world outside, to examine the lives of people who visit and ask for advice.

Initially, the narrative presents a desire, quite frequent among diasporans, to maintain a separation of cultures. In a strange land, in America, surrounded by the foreign culture, Tilo draws strength from the rootedness in the homeland traditions, symbolized by the powers the Indian spices offer her. She falls in one category of diaspora women, whose aim is to preserve the homeland culture:

[W]omen in diaspora remain attached to, and empowered by, a “home” culture and tradition – selectively. Fundamental values of propriety and religion, speech and social food, body, and dress protocols are preserved and adapted in a network of ongoing connections outside the host country¹⁸.

Tilo cannot reach out to the world outside and to people who are not of her kind, for her role is to maintain and strengthen the Indianness of the members of her community. Even though she accepts that America may influence Indians and that it sometimes may be positive, she herself must remain uncontaminated, intact by another culture, and this is the source of her empowerment, enhanced by the mystery and wonder which constitute her world.

However, as the narrative develops it transpires that a total separation of one culture from another is not possible. Borders are both lines of separation and lines of contact, and it would be utopian to think they are impermeable. Cultures come in contact and start to influence one another gradually blurring the boundaries between them. This is represented by the romance between Tilo and Raven, an American customer who visits her store. Although Tilo pronounces her indifference towards Americans focusing on the needs of her own folk and promises never to fall in love, she unexpectedly begins to feel attraction to a stranger, to the “other”, who enters her shop one day. With his following visits the attraction grows and turns into a mutual affection. Tilo is willing to break the rules of conduct of a Mistress, to fall in love with a mortal man and also to reach beyond her culture, to transgress the border, even though she expects severe punishment for that – destruction in Shampati’s fire.

So the element of voluntariness to undergo transformation is highlighted – despite the harsh punishment that may occur to Tilo she makes a decision to go beyond the borders. But it is not only her romance that pulls her out of the store. The narrative introduces also an element of inevitability, the reader feels that Tilo’s transgression of the border of her culture, represented by the threshold of her store, is only a question of time. From the very beginning Tilo is presented as a rebel who wants to be autonomous in her actions. She feels she could help people more effectively if she could physically

¹⁸ J. Clifford, *Diasporas*, “Cultural Anthropology” 1994, vol. 9, no. 3, p. 314.

leave her store, and the restriction generates a feeling of dissatisfaction. As the sense of frustration grows in her she decides to violate the order and pays visits to Geeta and Haroun, who are in need of her assistance.

Tilo's free will in stepping beyond the border is contrasted with Raven's situation. His mixed roots were a secret for him, because his mother did not reveal her Native American background for many years, while his appearance would not be in any way questionable, but would actually posit him as a white man. When he finally learns about his background, he is shocked and disappointed. The knowledge of his hybrid identity (biological) is thrust at him and it is beyond his power to deny it, the only decision he has to make is what relation he should have to the cultures of his ancestors. He decides to embrace both of them. Raven's story reveals that it is always possible to discover breaches in one's identity, some forgotten or hidden histories, which may lead to the renegotiation of one's identity. Identities are complex and do not have to be comprehensible at first sight. What is believed to be mainstream – Raven is considered to be white by Tilo, which will be discussed later in the article – can turn out to have a peripheral position, and certainly, also the reverse situation can be true.

The characters' agreement on their cultural hybridity is manifested with the adoption of new names. The act of choosing a name, a "true-name", for oneself and not being given one symbolically represents the characters' empowerment. Thus an act of questioning the center/ periphery paradigm, which takes place in hybrid or hybridizing identities, is additionally reinforced by the act of the characters' re-naming themselves. The way in which it is presented in the novel refers the reader to the problem of the subaltern, who cannot represent himself/herself but has to be represented, thus invoking the marginal position of both Tilo and Raven. The power of one's "true-name" lies also in its appropriateness. It is the name the subject gives him/herself on the basis of all the available knowledge he/she has about his/her own position, in other words, the knowledge of one's roots, as well as a recognition and coming to terms with one's actual position.

The act of naming is an expression of the conscious and free activity of the subject, and symbolizes breaking away from some kind of oppression and consequent empowerment on various levels. Tilo flees from patriarchal control and an image of an Oriental female¹⁹; in the case of Raven it is an escape from his life immersed in lies, which concealed the fact of his mixed origin. Tilo's first name was the symbol of

¹⁹ Grace Daphne notes the double oppression of the heroine: as a woman, and as a black woman and claims that Tilo's shifting identities (represented by the different names of the woman) help Divakaruni to "reposition woman within [...] dichotomized existence, with the aim of bridging divides and accessing empowerment" (G. Daphne, *Relocating Consciousness: Diasporic Writers and the Dynamics of Literary Experience*, Amsterdam, New York 2007, p. 118).

patriarchal dominance. In her family village in India she was Nayan Tara – Star of the Eye, Star-seer, but probably the old meaning of the name, that is, Flower That Grows by the Dust Road²⁰ describes her condition in the best way: an unwanted baby-girl, rejected after her birth: “Wrap her in old cloth, lay her face down on the floor. What does she bring to the family except a dowry debt”²¹. As a girl, additionally with rather dark skin, she is not a desired progeny in an Indian household, which favors boys and light skin. The circumstances of acquiring a second name show her progress into a liberated subject, free of the patriarchal control but still attached to Indian culture. After her transformation on the island the Old One is going to give her a name suitable for the Mistress. The young woman, however, objects, for she has her own choice – Tilo, short for Tilottama, which means “the essence of *til*, lifegiver, restorer of health and hope”²². Her third transformation takes place in California and is a consequence of her falling in love with Raven and her willingness to embrace another culture. When she decides on the name Maya it is clear that in this way her double belonging will be expressed, as she explains to Raven her name will be “[o]ne that spans my land and yours, India and America, for I belong to both now”²³.

Raven’s identity also shifted several times, which was reflected in the changing names. Although he never mentions what his previous names were he suggests their great number: “My true-name, that’s what you want? Well. Maybe I *can* figure out which one it is”²⁴. When finally he reveals his “true-name” to Tilo he confesses: “All the other names were given to me, but this one *I* chose”²⁵. “Raven” is the name the man gave himself only after he learnt that he is a descendant not only of white, but also of Native Americans. It reminds him of the encounter with his greatgrandfather and a spiritual vision in which he saw a bird – raven, which is a symbol used by many Native American tribes, it may symbolize creation or transformation and healing power. The choice of the new name shows Raven’s desire to accept the part of identity which has so far been unknown. It helps him to find integrity and displays his wish for empowerment. With his new name Raven dismisses his mother’s act of hiding the truth about her Native American roots. He discards also her feeling of shame of her ancestry; Raven, in contrast, wants to embrace and cultivate his double-belonging. The narrative shows that what for mother felt marginal and represented helplessness, that is, being a Native American, for Raven becomes a way to find wholeness – his roots turn out to be of central importance for self-understanding.

²⁰ C. B. Divakaruni, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 42.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 316.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 163.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

The act of naming may be important for the individual and symbolically express a wish for empowerment, nevertheless, learning one's "true-name" does not guarantee the full knowledge of the subject. The motif of naming continues the play with oppositions of the center and the periphery and maintains ambiguity. When Tilo asks her American customer for his name, which, she believes, will reveal his self to her, he tries to undermine her enthusiasm and asks: "Is it so easy, then, to know what one is?"²⁶. Indeed, the name introduces complication, for Tilo interprets "Raven" as an "unAmerican" name: "In tender amusement I see that my American is embarrassed, a little, by his unAmerican name"²⁷. This interpretation is quite problematic because it situates the man outside Americanness. Yet, as a descendant of indigenous people, who lived on the American continent long before the Columbian colonization, Raven has even more claims to being called "American" than any descendant of European settlers.

Further destabilization of the center/periphery paradigm occurs through the interrogations of whiteness. Whiteness is associated with the American mainstream, in other words, with the center. People of color, those who belong to ethnic minorities, constitute the peripheries. Yet, the novel puts forward an idea that the color of skin often misleads when one wishes to discover the identity of an individual²⁸. Although Raven's skin is white, he belongs to the margins of society, for he is a descendant of the native peoples of the North American continent. His ancestors were colonized by European settlers, and oppressed for centuries. Before learning about Raven's roots Tilo is impressed by his whiteness, she admires his skin, and somewhat fondly calls him "my American". Tilo is misled by the man's whiteness and locates him in the center, implying that he might be a descendant of the white majority. This feeling is reinforced by Tilo's repeated mention of her own "brownness", which seems to put her in the margins, not only in America but also in India. Since her birth her darkness generated a condescending attitude from others, made her feel inferior and on the point of exclusion from social structures. She recollects her parents' sadness at seeing her as a newborn: "another girlchild, and this one coloured like mud"²⁹. She calls her own folk, who just like her emigrated from India to the US, "a brown people who come from elsewhere, to whom real Americans might say *Why?*"³⁰. The awareness of her dark skin creates in

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 151.

²⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 163.

²⁸ Lindsey Claire Smith states that because of the complex cross-cultural encounters in Americas "evaluating American Indians as defined by color or 'race' is ineffective", since "blonde-haired, green-eyed Cherokee-speaking Indians in Northeastern Oklahoma claim authenticity just as 'full-blood' individuals living on reservations in New Mexico or Arizona do" (L. C. Smith, *Indians, Environment, and Identity on the Borders of American Literature: From Faulkner and Morrison to Walker and Silko*, New York 2008, p. 4).

²⁹ C. B. Divakaruni, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

her a feeling that she does not belong to “real America”, which she, for the most part, associates with the light-skin majority.

Both the names and the skin color lead to the question of what it means to be a real American, in other words, an authentic American. Yet, the narrative reinforces from the very beginning the view that there is ambiguity hidden behind certain labels, such as an “un-American name” or “white”. Who is a real American – a descendant of white Europeans or a descendant of indigenous peoples, who have been pushed to the margins of the American nation?

The question of authenticity touches also diasporans. Who is more authentic, that is to say, true to the original culture: a newly arrived immigrant who preserves and cherishes customs of the homeland or an individual who lets the culture of the host-land influence him, and thus gradually undergoes hybridization? The narrative poses this question but seems to discredit any definite answer. In the novel Tilo examines a group of Indian girls who visit her store in search of traditional Indian products. These bougainvillea girls have lived their whole life in America, and their cultural hybridity is quite conspicuous: they wear American clothes (not saris), behave in an American way (are noisy and self-confident) and “look like they’ve never cooked a meal – certainly not an Indian meal”³¹ (while tradition demands from an Indian female that she should take care of the household, most importantly prepare the food for the family). So bougainvillea girls are very far from what a traditional Indian woman should be, and what, initially, Tilo represents in the novel. Tilo envies their youth and beauty and is jealous of Raven, who politely engages in a conversation with them. The man misinterprets Tilo’s reaction and assures her: “You’re authentic in a way they’ll never be,” and these words stir Tilo: “*Authentic*. A curious word to use. ‘What do you mean, authentic?’”. Raven answers: “You know, real. Real Indian.” This is not a satisfactory answer for Tilo, who reflects: “the bougainvillea girls are in their way as Indian as I. And who is to say which of us is more real”³². Despite her earlier attempt to establish somewhere a point of reference when she spoke about “real Americans” confronted with immigrants³³, in the end Tilo realizes that it is impossible to state with certainty who is “real”, or, who is “authentic”. As it was with the white/black opposition, also the borders between the categories authentic/inauthentic, or between Americanness and non-Americanness, become blurred.

Consequently, hybrid identities impose a need to reformulate the concept of American identity, which is emphasized also by the imagery used in the novel. The fault lines of the national identity should be crossed, and bridged but not in a way

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 254.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 255-6.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 5.

that will suggest any fixedness of categories. Furthermore, it is by no means a peaceful process. Divakaruni uses the trope of an earthquake and destruction of the city as the background of Tilo's changing identity, her transformation into Maya who wants to embrace both cultures – her native Indian and adopted American. More generally, the earthquake suggests a wish for re-establishment of American identity. The use of this trope by Bharati Mukherjee in her novel *Leave It To Me* has been similarly interpreted by Jopi Nyman: “the destruction of San Francisco is not the final end of the Western civilization but a call for, and a sign of, the reconstruction of Americanness, both individual and cultural”³⁴. The metaphorical fault line of identity is translated into a physical and realistic experience of an earthquake, which may happen as a result of Californian San Andreas Fault.

Divakaruni's presentation of negotiating identities in *The Mistress of Spices* is an attempt to show the ambiguities of American identities. They are a result of globalization, the mass movements of people which lead to the dispersal of many peoples around the globe who, even though often maintain the ties with their countries and cultures of origin, alter the shape of nations which receive them. It is certainly true of Asian immigrants to the US:

Regardless of cultural attachments or the unique conditions of their arrival, Asian Americans today are dispersed across the national landscape, crossing its fault lines, and negotiating multiple contact zones that make their own cultures and hegemonic national culture susceptible to mutual influence³⁵.

Thus it is possible to read the novel as an expression of the view that the formation of American identity is a constant process, in the effect of which the essentializing notions of identity cannot be held as valid. Divakaruni strengthens her point by referring to the history of indigenous American peoples, which was also marked by cross-cultural contacts, and which therefore contributes to the complexity of Americanness.

³⁴ J. Nyman, *Imagining Transnationalism in Bharati Mukherjee's Leave It To Me*, [in:] *Cultural Identity in Transition: Contemporary Conditions, Practices and Politics of a Global Phenomenon*, eds. J. Kupiainen et al., New Delhi 2004, p. 416.

³⁵ G. H. Muller, *New Strangers in Paradise: The Immigrant Experience and Contemporary American Fiction* Lexington 1999, p. 173.