

**Desexing the Crone: intentional invisibility as postcolonial
retaliation in Randhawa's *A Wicked Old Woman* (1987) and
Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997)**

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In both Ravinder Randhawa's 1987 novel *A Wicked Old Woman* and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's 1997 novel *The Mistress of Spices*, the two youngish protagonists exercise the somewhat eccentric choice to appear as crones. Through the canny use of shapeless, secondhand clothes, crumbling makeup and a redundant walking stick, Randhawa's stubborn protagonist Kulwant convincingly adopts the posture and outward shell of a disabled, elderly woman. Kulwant, a second-generation Asian-Briton, resists not only the signifiers of youth, but also the weight of cultural and social expectations thrust upon her as a young woman of the Indian diaspora. Randhawa writes of the women in her novel: 'Women weren't women only, they were also their colours and their national fears' (49). Kulwant represents not just a woman who is resisting the patriarchal gaze, but as a young Asian-British woman who resists the prospect of having a life like that of her mother and aunties. Urbashi Barat suggests that like most diasporic novels, Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* is 'concerned with the shifting boundaries of nation, culture and self that immigrants constantly deal with, and it focuses primarily on the woman's experience as the traditional site of national/cultural contests and a metaphor for the marginality and the dislocations of diasporic condition' (2004: 100). Arguably, when the sense of where one stands culturally shifts – as do those of the characters within these two novels – so too can one use these seismic changes to decentre oneself as the subject of the culturally specific male gaze. It is precisely the fact that these women's experiences are indeed culturally dislocated that enables the women in question to pick and choose the façade of themselves they wish to be seen.

Through a magical realist transformation, Divakaruni's determined young protagonist Tilo decides to commit to becoming a Mistress of Spices, thus opening herself to the possibility that when she walks through Shampati's fire to wake up in a new city in

her fully-stocked spice shop, her chosen destiny may well include inhabiting an elderly 'second skin'. For Tilo, a rather vain first-generation Indian migrant to beauty-worshipping California, this is particularly poignant. Kulwant's and Tilo's decision to reject the physical beauty of youth as well as the commodification of the exoticised, othered Eastern female body by choosing to present themselves as culturally invisible older women can be read as a highly political decentring of self as subject. These rebellious choices arguably resist Graham Huggan's notion of the 'postcolonial exotic', in which 'marginality is deprived of its subversive implications by being rerouted into safe assertions of a fetishised cultural difference' (Huggan, 2001: 24). By choosing 'othered' outward appearances whose only fetishisation is in how they resist the traditionally-valued signifiers of 'femininity,' these young diasporic women reclaim power and agency.

The willing substitution of young, healthy flesh for the appearance of ageing, disabled flesh presents a platform for asking why the desexualised otherness of elderly, disabled bodies is so often negatively fetishised. Why is it that so many othered female bodies – particularly when they are no longer young or perceived as physically healthy – exist in the luminal zones that Gloria Anzaldúa described as 'The Borderlands'? Although she does not specifically refer to elderly, disabled female bodies in her discussion of this phenomenon, Anzaldúa does contend with the cultural and social instability – even disabling nature – of living between worlds. She argues that 'cuando vives en la frontera // people walk through you, the wind steals your voice, you're a burra, bue, scapegoat, forerunner of a new race // half and half, both woman and man // neither, a new gender'. She suggests that in order to survive in such Borderlands, 'you must live sin fronteras // be a crossroads' (1987). Within the context of this discussion, I'd like to consider how the visibly aged crones in *A Wicked Old Woman* and *The Mistress of Spices* actually subvert this idea, and use their supposed desexualised invisibility to trumpet their own voices and ensure they are heard without any undercurrent of sexual objectification. It is as if these women are, by their very decision to appear as culturally invisible, choosing to inhabit an empowered sort of borderlands.

Arguably, this between-worlds existence implies that the title characters lack a fixed identity within a single tradition. Jogamaya Bayer highlights how 'Randhawa shows

that the imposition of a moral code on young immigrant women – a moral code that has no contextual validity – could lead to emotional disruption.’ (1993: 338). By refusing to be pigeonholed as mere Orientalist stereotypes, the protagonists in these novels reject this potentially emotionally disruptive moral code – in both cases, a set of unwritten rules specific to first and second-generation Asian-Britons and Asian-Americans. Both wish to break free from the shackles of their diasporic identities, and by appearing older than they really are, they inhabit a borderland of their own design, in which they are not sexualised but find agency. The intentional crones under discussion hover in their own borderlands as they have rejected the commodifiable culture of youth, specifically because of the focus on depoliticised, exoticised sexuality. Instead, we can consider perceptions of the disposability of the signifiers of ageing, non-white, female bodies with reference to Judith Butler’s notion of ‘Bodies that Matter’, in which she asks why how society decides which are ‘bodies that matter, ways of living which count as “life,” lives worth protecting, lives worth saving, lives worth grieving’ (1993: 16). Butler explores this question of how and why society values certain bodies more highly than others by asking how the “materialization of the norm in bodily formation produce[s] a domain of abjected bodies, a field of deformation, which in failing to qualify as fully human fortifies those regulatory norms” (ibid.). Butler appears to be arguing that it is the very *materiality* of the ‘normate’ physical body and its creation that necessarily defines the characteristics of its opposite, the ‘abject’ body. Both *A Wicked Old Woman* and *The Mistress of Spices* serve as highly political examples of contemporary fiction that furiously critique the reductive notion of the ‘normality’ of young, healthy bodies as both desirable and absolute.

Can the aged, female bodies within these two novels serve to interrogate the idea of commodified, exoticised femininity that is a consequence of cultural imperialism? In his *Aesthetic Nervousness*, Ato Quayson arguably reflects Butler’s contention when he suggests that ‘corporeal difference is part of a structure of power, and its meanings are governed by the unmarked regularities of the normate’ (2007:17). Arguably, as suggested by Mitchell and Synder, ‘narratives turn signs of cultural deviance into textually marked bodies’ (cited by Quayson, 2007: 26). I would like to consider Quayson’s idea of the representation of ageing, less than fully-mobile female flesh as the interface with other people. Does this manipulative crossing point serve to

interrogate the commodification of the exoticised female body, or do these characters simply serve as examples of authorial rejection of colonial patriarchy?

It would be useful to begin by considering the significance of skin, particularly as it reflects identity. Claudia Benthien ‘investigates the question of the body surface as the place where identity is formed and assigned’ (1999:1). If indeed identity is in part constructed via the acutely visible surface of our physical bodies, our skin, then it is arguably logical that we perceive the identity of others as reflected in their visible skin. The body itself becomes the site of cultural inscription, a location in which history plays an inescapable role. Yet it is not simply the blatant visibility of skin that renders it essential to identity formation. Skin is vulnerable, soft, and requires protection from the elements and from potential onslaughts such as burning, scarring, cutting or bruising. In her photographic cycle *Lustmord-Zyklus* (1993), American artist Jenny Holzer ‘conjures the theme of skin as a boundary, a fragile parchment unable to protect against violence’ (cited in Benthien, 1999: 3). The violence to which Holzer refers could just as easily suggest aggressive physical attacks as the insidious, subtle violence of racism in which the colonial binaries of us and them are clearly defined through the colour – and the exoticised sexual connotations of – of one’s skin.

Benthien argues that skin is ‘continually read and interpreted in all social situations, that human beings have understood and misunderstood it as an expression of depth, of soul, of inner character’ (11). Arguably, this highlights skin’s inability to serve as an accurate guarantor of interiority. Yet why do pervasive notions of a relationship between brown, Asian, female skin and exoticised ideas of Orientalised femininity still abound? Is there still an assumption of a sexualised, male, colonizer’s gaze upon that which is perceived as culturally ‘other’ when the object of said gaze – as happens in the two novels under discussion – is indeed Asian, but neither young nor traditionally beautiful? Perhaps the signifying practice of relating ‘Indianness’ to commodified sensuality is rather more culturally present than we like to admit, particularly when the ‘Indian’ characters under discussion are seen as migrant imports. This is problematised further through Tilo’s half-Native American admirer, Raven, who sees through the signifier of her crone’s exterior into her signified self.

Interestingly, Raven's insistence on the instability of the signifier resists Codell and Macleod's notion that the 'desire for the exotic or erotic, the dangerously sublime, for difference itself, for visual and experiential novelty' (1998: 3). Their study predates Huggan's groundbreaking study *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001) which discusses the depoliticising of 'otherness' within a largely culturally materialist arena. Codell and Macleod discuss how the exoticised 'other' represents an element of the forbidden in which the object of the colonising gaze is often that of young, eroticised Indian women. Here, it is the half-American side of Raven's heritage that would be expected to view Tilo through a sort of 'coloniser's gaze,' although it may be more helpful to consider this simply the gaze of the dominant cultural hegemony – that of a young, wealthy, *visibly* white, American professional male. The cultural and social space between the hegemonic white – and generally patriarchal – gaze and the actual identity of the objects of such a gaze could be described as a 'charged distance between colonised and coloniser that is constantly inscribed and re-inscribed by the inherent instability in the imperialist project' (1998: 3). Instability enters the situation through Raven's heritage as half-*Native* American, and it can thus be argued that both his gaze and Tilo's crone's exterior resist the 'postcolonial exotic' as described by Huggan.

By virtue of its very visibility and universality, the skin of both Tilo and Kuli becomes a form of public property, open to inept, ignorant interpretations by those for whom skin colour is inseparable from colonialist history. Skin is so powerfully – and dangerously – received as a guarantor of interiority that individuals – such as the novels' protagonists Tilo and Kulwant – who wish to free themselves from the historical implications of their skin colour necessarily enter a battleground in which cultural loyalty and national identity come under intense scrutiny. Due to the destabilising influence of choosing to appear both elderly and disabled, traditional colonial assumptions about brown and skins are inverted. The supposedly ageing, disabled crones' skins of Tilo and Kulwant are textually represented as having both choice and agency, due to their rejection of the 'postcolonial exotic'.

These characters adopt what I'd like to call 'second skins', which are imbued with cultural codifications and clues to the formations of identities that are actively chosen rather than passively culturally assigned. The second skins grant permission to behave

outrageously, as if the second skin – rather than the original – itself assumes responsibility for the wearer's actions. Benthien's notion of coloured skin, as opposed to light skin as a 'culturally marked epidermis ... a skin that departs from the neutral norm' (148) can be taken ever further if we consider how the protagonists' skin within these novels is not only visibly Asian, but visibly elderly and disabled. I have entitled this piece 'Desexing the Crone' rather than 'Desexualising the Crone' because the title characters make the active choice to appear as 'desexed' rather than passively to be identified as 'desexualised', which suggests an objectification uncomfortably reeking of colonial patriarchy. This is an active rejection of 'the postcolonial exotic' in which Huggan suggests 'marginality is deprived of its subversive implications by being rerouted into safe assertions of a fetishised cultural difference' (2001: 24). To resist such exoticisation is surely to defy its depoliticising and disempowering tendencies.

In *A Wicked Old Woman*, Randhawa uses the idea of a second skin to provide an 'othered' alibi. The eccentric, thirty-something protagonist Kulwant chooses to costume herself with the second-hand clothes of an elderly matriarch, complete with crumbling face powder and an unnecessary/redundant walking stick, '[masquerading] behind her old woman's disguise of NHS spectacles and an Oxfam coat, taking life or leaving it as she feels inclined, seeking new adventures or venturing back into her past' (from back cover). It is only when adequately armoured with her 'othering' second skin that Kulwant truly comes into her own as a woman. She liberates herself from both perceptions of acceptable femininity and Indianness through her rebellious action. Not only is she divorced and a 'bad' mother, she also chooses to deny her sexual attractiveness as a youngish woman, thus freeing herself from the burdens of others' assigned cultural expectations. Kulwant chooses instead temporary empowerment by manipulating the way in which others are able to visually construct her identity. She controls the gaze, and thus successfully inverts the colonial power structures that Huggan alludes to when he argues that 'the exoticist rhetoric of fetishised otherness and sympathetic identification masks the inequality of the power relations without which the discourse could not function' (2001: 14). Kulwant manoeuvres her womanness, her Asianness, her very brownness into an empowered rebellion against the status quo. She claims the ground of identity formation back

from her oppressors. Kulwant sees her second-skin not as an accurate guarantor of interiority, but as a commodity of power.

It is the performative nature of their crone's exteriors that enables both Kulwant and Tilo to maintain their stronghold. While Kulwant can cast off her second skin on a whim, for Tilo to do so would mean to temporarily lose her magical powers as a Mistress of Spices. Tilo can be young, beautiful and politically disempowered or can appear as a desexed crone with the supernatural ability to help the Indian diasporic community in Oakland. Without her disguise of NHS spectacles and shabby clothes, Kulwant is, suggests Bayer, 'caught in the conflict between two different value systems' in which she 'lives in permanent fragmentation of her self' (1993: 340) The moment Kulwant decides to cast herself visibly as a desexed crone, her power evolves from her social invisibility as just another eccentric old Asian lady. The performativity of these adopted crone's exteriors is reminiscent of Bakhtin's idea of the 'carnavalesque' which Wolfreys describes as an 'ongoing strategic interruption of social norms, in ideological containment, and in corporeal order and propriety' (Wolfreys, 2004:28) This supports my idea of Kulwant's intentional invisibility – her donning of the second-skin of a desexed crone – as interrogating the traditional trajectory of the postcolonial exoticism which has been a consequence of long-term British cultural imperialism. Kulwant's rebellion can be read as reflecting Ato Quayson's idea of 'the Machiavellianism of the deformed protagonist' (27). What is perceived by Kulwant's community as her selfishness defies the cultural obedience expected of a youngish – albeit divorced – Indian migrant.

Tilo's adoption of a crone's exterior varies significantly from that of Kulwant in *A Wicked Old Woman*. When Tilo made the decision to become a Mistress of Spices, she knew that the possibility of appearing in the fully-stocked spice shop in the youth-craving city of her choice, Oakland, California, would likely mean she would appear elderly and possibly less than fully able-bodied. Christine Vogt-William describes the Indian spice shop as 'a transcultural space of intersection, meetings, and cultural interaction and negotiation' (2009: 151). Yet Tilo is denied the intimacy of physical connections within such negotiations, but simply enables them to happen. She must maintain distance, but the magical realism of the novel suggests that she has access to the thoughts and feelings of her customers, and thus, can, as suggested by Vogt-

William, 'live vicariously through certain experiences thanks to her magical ability to maintain mental contact ... gaining access to their personal life-spaces and realities' (2009: 158). Tilo is thus able to experience spiritually and intellectually that which she denies herself physically. Tilo's decision to devote her life to the spices by becoming a magically-empowered Mistress necessitates a rejection of appearing physically attractive to those who visit her spice Bazaar. Sacrificing her vanity proves her devotion to her art and prevents her or her customers being distracted by commodifiable, exoticised beauty.

Tilo's diasporic identity is necessarily fluid, as Stuart Hall suggests in his definition: 'Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference ... It is because this New World is constituted for us as a place, a narrative of displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to the 'lost origins' (1990: 235-6). Tilo's customers come to her Spice Bazaar for advice and to try to understand with their second-generation mentalities the longings of their first-generation parents for tastes and smells so redolent of 'home'. Yet she is bound by the rules of the island and the Great Mother. Barat points out that Tilo is

really a young woman who has to disguise herself as an old one as per the rules of her Order, who has to repress her sexuality and her selfhood; she is not allowed to look at herself in a mirror, nor can she think of her own needs and desires. She has to become the conventional Indian woman, who negates herself, her body and her soul, for others, who must bear the burden of caring, ministering, sacrifice. She may be a Mistress of Spices, but not a mistress of her own life.' (2004:101)

Tilo chooses her crone's guise as a clear act of decentring the self as both subject and object – by desexing herself, she can more easily resist the temptations of the flesh and focus on the diasporic crises faced by her customers. In this, she profoundly differs from Kulwant, who chooses her elderly second-skin as a self-indulgent enabler of misbehaviour. Furthermore, Tilo stubbornly insists on maintaining her inner sense of self, even whilst her exterior skin appears dusty and forgettable. It is this sense of holding on to the vestiges of a self-constructed identity that enables Tilo to take the

risky, forbidden path of leaving not only the shop, but her crone's exterior. She does reduce the transgression by choosing to clothe herself in frumpy, unfashionable clothes from a modest department store, but her half-Native American admirer, Raven, instantly sees through this irrelevant disguise. Instead, he presents Tilo (even as she still appears to have ageing, crepey flesh) with a garment that most accurately reflects what he suspects to be her true self.

‘Look.’ He is opening a package. ‘I brought you something.’ It spills across the counter, gossamer and spiderweb, spangled like dew [...] The loveliest dress I have seen. First Mother who warned us, who watched sorrow-eyed as our bodies twisted into age in Shampati's flames, did you foresee this moment. This regret raking me inside and out.

‘I can't wear it,’ I say.

‘Why not?’

‘It's too fancy. A young-woman dress.’

‘No,’ he says. ‘A beautiful-woman dress. And you are that woman.’

‘Can't you see,’ I cry. ‘I'm ugly. Ugly and old. That dress on me would be a mockery. And you and I together, that too is mockery.’

‘Put on the dress,’ he says. ‘This body, I know it's not the real you.’

‘How do you know? You, the one who earlier said it's not easy to know the real self one is.’ He smiles.

‘Perhaps we can see each other better than we can ourselves.’ (191-193)

What both Tilo and Raven seem to forget is that other people cannot see beyond visible signifiers into the signified identities of the other, in the way that they can. This is highlighted when an insensitive onlooker comments, ‘Some people --- I guess there's no accounting for taste. It's pathetic what some women will do to look young’ (221). Although the Native American Raven insists he can see beyond the physical into Tilo's true, young, beautiful inner self, Tilo herself gives into the temptation of using her spice-magic to temporarily regain youthful beauty. Yet the guilt induced by this single forbidden act not only disrupts Tilo's diasporic, spiritual identity as one who rejects the signifier for the signified, but also reduces her to embracing the idea of the postcolonial exotic. As suggested by Vogt-William, this rejection of cultural

loyalties appears to ‘permit dynamic female self-positioning ... for Indian women in diasporic spaces’ (2009: 164). Tilo must actively ignore her cultural programming as a Mistress of Spices in order to be able to appear young and beautiful. The implications of this are problematic, as they appear to suggest a clear opposition between East/West cultural values in which there is no room for a new, hybridised, diasporic identity that would allow her to inhabit both a physically beautiful form and serve as a culturally loyal Mistress of Spices in her newly adopted country.

My aim in this paper has been to encourage us as readers and postcolonial scholars to consider how the decision to represent young, healthy women who choose disabled, elderly skins can, as Quayson suggests, ‘lift our eyes from the reading of literature to attend more closely to the implications of the social universe around us’ (2007:31). Why is it that even though these tough migrant protagonists embrace the self-empowerment released by resisting the postcolonial exotic, they both eventually relent and decide to re-adopt their real, youthful bodies? Surely the very nature of diasporic identity is fluid and ever-changing? Do their decisions serve as cynical reminders that the attempt to escape culture and history is rarely successful, or can we read these as positive attempts to renegotiate the space inhabited by young, migrant women in which resistance to erotic objectification is not only necessary, but encouraged? Interestingly, these transgressions of ‘biological certainties’ are often later reversed in fictional narratives, as they are ultimately coded as part of the imaginative bubble that enjoys subverting the norm. Bakhtin reminds us that within the performativity of the carnivalesque, ‘life is subject only to its laws, the laws of its own freedom’ (1984: 7). The performative actions of Tilo and Kulwant to appear publicly as desexed crones reflects this anarchic freedom and surely result in the protagonists’ increased political agency. Finally, I’d like to suggest that the arguably conservative, disempowering decisions to re-embrace beautiful physical bodies can be read as a new dynamic in the continual negotiations of what it actually means to be young, beautiful and sexually desirable as opposed to elderly, ugly and ‘abject’ in today’s profoundly consumer-oriented society.

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