Volume 20 Issue 81
Originally issued as A20



Global Journal of human-social science: a
Arts & Humanities - Psychology
Volume 20 Issue 20 Version 1.0 Year 2020
Type: Double Blind Peer Reviewed International Research Journal
Publisher: Global Journals
Online ISSN: 2249-460x & Print ISSN: 0975-587X

Cubist Cognizance: Calibrating Chaos, Collating Complexities

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GJHSS-A Classification: *FOR Code: 420101*



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Cubist Cognizance: Calibrating Chaos, Collating Complexities

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I. Introduction

The pursuit of propinquity in portrayal of life across florilegia has been an evolving enterprise along the cline of literary depiction. As a pulsating palimpsest life defies certitude, concord and its limn demands a punctilio sans perplexities. Such a comprehensive concept obliterating colossal complexities in representation emerged through the medium of cubism in the realm of painting. The instrumentality of cubism enabled a paradigm shift in perspective – from unidimensionality to polydimensionality. This article ventures to examine the execution of cubism in the fictional space through the novel *The Mistress of Spices* penned by Indian-American author Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni. The theoretical trellis to explore the technique of fragmented fullness in "literary cubism" (jcrewman 2011) shall be Deleuzean assemblage theory. The essay looks into plausibility of literary devices substituting for the collage of an array of geometric patterns like cubes and cones in cubist artistry. Analysis of the narrative seeks to unravel conformity to and contravention of the consuetude of cubism in literature.

II. Paradox as a Literary Polygon

In *The Mistress of Spices* Tilo the tellurian's tale is of an existence trammelled by life's tumultuous tempests and tempered by triumphs wrought by resilience and the thaumaturgical touch of benign fate, constituting a fragmented yet cohesive lifescape akin to a cubist configuration of life offering multiple perspectives of the subject. The myriad aspects of life imbricate and their convolution can confound comprehension. To allay the emerging obnubilation, the agglomeration of diverse dimensions can be perceived as an assemblage. The glossary of Deleuzean philosophy of rhizome defines an assemblage to be "any number of things or pieces of things gathered into a single context." Elucidating on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) assemblage theory, Levi Bryant states:

> Assemblages are composed of heterogeneous elements or objects that enter into relations with one another. These objects are not all of the same type. Thus you have physical objects, happenings, events, and so on, but you also have signs, utterances, and so on. While there are assemblages that are composed entirely of bodies, there are no assemblages that are composed entirely of signs and utterances.

The materialisation of an assemblage is a tripartite process involving – "coding, stratification and territorialization." (Smith Daniel and John Protevi).

> Coding is the process of ordering matter as it is drawn into a body. By contrast, stratification is the process of creating hierarchal bodies, while territorialization is the ordering of those bodies in "assemblages", that is to say, an emergent unity joining together heterogeneous bodies in a "consistency." (Smith.D and John Protevi)

Accordingly Tilo's course of life is interspersed with intrusive social determinants like gender, skin tone, class which are at variance with her notion of unconstrained haecceity. A swarthy daughter is an outcast in domestic and social circles. Her impecunious parents are dismayed at her birth because she is another daughter – "… this one coloured like mud" (9) would only compound their misery. Tilo's parents receive her with rejection. Her father commands the midwife to, " Wrap her in old cloth and lay her face down on the floor. What does she bring to the family except a dowry debt" (7). As an infant she is christened "Nayan Tara, star of the eye" (7). Her name also meant "Star-Seer" (8) and "Flower that Grows by the Dust Road" (9). Her appellation is indicative of her psychic powers and she proves her competence in clairvoyance by cautioning the village headman of the impending flood. This results in the propulsion of her presence from being the rejected to the revered. She says:

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> My fame spread. From neighbouring towns and beyond, from the cities that lay on the other side of the mountains, people travelled so I could change their luck with a touch of my hand. They bought me gifts…gifts so lavish that the villagers talked about them for days. I sat on gold-woven cushions and ate from silver plates studded with precious stones… gold-smiths impressed my likeness on medallions that were worn by thousands for luck…(8, 9).

The narrative draws our attention to the paradoxical assemblage of exclusion and exclusivity wrought by the process of coding and stratification. Tilo draws into herself, internalises the agonizing abandonment she faced for being a dark skinned daughter (coding) and claims an authoritative allegiance and affluence through her adroit magical powers availing a superior status (stratification). "Assemblage theory provides a bottom-up framework for analyzing social complexity by emphasizing fluidity, exchange ability and multiple functionalities" (Texas Theory Wiki 2010). Tilo's progression from egregious exclusion to elite exclusivity serves as a validation of the "fluidity, exchangeability" of divergent elements within an assemblage. The exclusion – exclusivity paradox is also indicative of viewing different aspects of a dimension in a subject through cubist lens – of fragmenting and expelling exclusion as well as the augmenting aspect of exclusivity. All of which coalesce into a united whole as in "territorialization."

Tilo's boredom with her life makes her yearn for excitement and she wishes to see pirates, of whom she had heard stories in childhood. Her calling thought brings destruction to her village for the pirates arrive, pillaging the residents, murdering her father and abducting her. Tilo's desired destruction makes her subordinate to the chieftain of the pirates who names her "Bhagyavathi, Bringer of Luck" (20). The contradiction in desired destruction also points to the eclipsing of her opportunity into oppression. She soon transforms her deprivation into acquisition when in an act of revenge, overthrows the commander of the pirates and declares her supremacy as "Bhagyavathi, sorceress, pirate queen, bringer of luck" (19).

Bhagyavati's disenchantment as the queen of pirates makes her yearn for an elusive power. She gets to know of the island of spices whose suzerainty is wielded by a woman in her senescence, addressed as the "First Mother" (34). The sea serpents who divulge to her about the magical island also caution her of the entry to the island being forbidden to ordinary mortals unless the First Mother willed it. As soon as she ventures into the waters reigned by the old sorceress she is appalled at her dispossession of her powers. She says:

> …the chant died in my throat. My arms and legs grew heavy and would not obey. In these waters charmed by a greater sorceress, my power was nothing. I struggled and thrashed and swallowed brine like any other clumsy mortal until at last I dragged myself onto the sand and collapsed…"(32).

The clash of supremacy and subordination in specific spaces can be elaborated vis-à-vis Deleuze and Guattari's concept of "smooth space" and "striated space".

> Smooth space exists in contrast to striated space – a partitioned field of movement which prohibits free motion. Smooth space refers to an environment, a landscape in which a subject operates. Smooth space is filled by events or haecceities, far more than by formed and perceived things…

Therefore in the "striated space" that Tilo has set her foot on she faces her fragmented self – stripped of power and cast asunder, helpless and at the mercy of the First Mother. The facticity of her vanquished pre-eminence which she enjoyed in her "smooth space" as the queen of the pirates dawns on her. When she becomes an accomplished mistress of spices under the tutelage of the First Mother, she must pursue her vocation with a curtailed carte blanche. The First Mother asks the mistresses trained by her:

> 'Are you ready to give up your young bodies, to take on age and ugliness and unending service? Ready never to step out of the places where you are set down, store or school Or healing house?'
>
> 'Are you ready never to love any but the spices again?'(40).

Tilo *The mistress of spices* in California willfully indulges in thoughtful transgressions of all the restrictions she had to abide by to remain obedient to the spices – the real repositories of power. She risks the obliteration of her puissant privilege by heedlessly harnessing spice power for her novaturient pursuits. These select snippets from the fictional narrative demonstrate the efficacy of paradox as a device in literary cubism, to infuse polymorphic perspectives of a subject, akin to the geometric configurations in a cubist painting effacing ambiguity and explicating varied points of view.

III. Literary Cubism –Points of Convergence and Divergence

Scott Neuffer enumerates the characteristics of "cubism in writing" and states that "cubists were more concerned with the internal landscape of the individual than the external landscape of the objective world." Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in *The Mistress of Spices* preponderantly probes the train of thoughts of the protagonist Tilo and presents a multitude of facets of the choices she makes in life and this is in concurrence with Neuffer's "various planes and angles of perception…A stark collage of images revealing the subjectivity and relativity at the heart of human experience." "Fragmentation of the individual (where) the individual (is presented) as an assemblage of broken images" is yet another technique in cubism which he puts forth. Tilo's narrative chronicling her life bears testimony to fate ripping her life asunder. The analysis of the events

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earlier in the essay within the framework of assemblage theory converges with Neuffer's tenet of cubist writing. Jcrewman in his article "The Rise of Literary Cubism" posits "using different narrators for different chapters or even different paragraphs, so as to describe how each character views the others, put in the words, thoughts and feelings of the characters themselves." Here lies a point of divergence in the narrative chosen for analysis wherein Tilo is the sole narrator.

IV. Conclusion

The cubist mode in the novel selected for study reveals that despite the depiction of splintered self – the multiple points of view assert the existence of amoeboid acuity in individuals and this is not in any way barmecidal. Like the biological amoeboid, independent in its motility with its cytoplasmic concurrence, each human being must agnize the need to develop hexicological aptitude by depending on ourselves in times of crisis and move towards an empowering independence to reconfigure our fragmented selves so plangently portrayed in cubist works of art.

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